

# People Turning to Social Video Games Amid Social Distancing

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As Hanging Out Gets Difficult, More People Are Turning To Social Video Games

LAUREL WAMSLEY

Some people look at the weeks ahead and wonder how they will keep themselves from going stir crazy.

Across the U.S., new restrictions have limited in-person gatherings in an effort to stem the spread of coronavirus infection, as concern grows from watching its effects on the hard-hit populations of China and Italy, where thousands have died.

But other Americans already have a plan to help combat social isolation: video games. The games offer a solution to some who are looking for a way to hang out with friends and family — while upholding the guidelines on social distancing, including orders to stay at home.

Jackbox Games is a Chicago-based video game company that makes party games, including the trivia game *You Don't Know Jack*. Its games are designed for people in a room to play together.

Last weekend, Jackbox saw traffic "comparable to Thanksgiving weekend, which is a very busy time of year for us," according to CEO Mike Bilder. "Across the board we've just seen a lot of additional activity over a typical weekend."

Bilder says that part of that uptick is people staying at home and enjoying indoor activities together. But others are using the games in non-traditional ways, using streaming software to play together virtually. Last week, Jackbox published a guide to playing remotely with friends and family, using Skype, Zoom or Google Hangouts.

Many gamers use the free voice app Discord to talk to each other while playing online together. The company says its account sign-ups are up 200% over last week — though Discord notes that not all sign-ups are necessarily for gaming, as the app can also be used for distance learning, among other things.

LingLing Lau, 34, is one of those who is moving her gaming online as her normal life is upended. She lives in Chicago and usually meets up with friends every Wednesday to play the five-on-five arcade game *Killer Queen*.

"Before all this, most of my time that I spent gaming was playing at the arcade with people," Lau says. "I'm definitely very extroverted, so it's hard to not be able to see your friends face-to-face and hang out with them."

In recent days, Lau and her friends have been meeting up virtually to play Jackbox games. The games lend themselves to playing remotely, she says, because only one person needs to own the game. She can launch it from her computer, stream it on Twitch, then share the stream so her friends can play along on their phones.

She says that social distancing has motivated her and her friends to be more proactive about staying in touch and planning evenings to play games together virtually.

"It's certainly not the same as being able to see people in person," Lau says. "But I think for me it's been nice. It's brought some lightness to this whole situation."

Game developers are adapting, too — even changing game rules to cater to the new reality of people staying at home.

Niantic, Inc. makes the popular games Pokémon Go and Harry Potter: Wizards Unite. Both games usually reward players for leaving home and walking around to collect virtual items.

But last week Niantic announced it was eliminating walking requirements in its battle games. It also made it easier for players to collect virtual items in their own homes, rather than out in the world.

That's been a boon to Daysha Lawrence, 41, of North Canton, Ohio. A faculty member at the local community college, Lawrence is now working remotely and her 8-year-old son Maxwell is home from school. During breaks they'll play Minecraft or Harry Potter together — and it's easier now that the rule changes allow them to stay indoors.

In the past, they would go to the park to collect items for the Harry Potter game — but now the ingredients they need to make virtual potions are found in their house.

"They're making it so that we're able to access a lot of the same features of the game as we are trying to practice social distancing and isolating ourselves," Lawrence says.

Some serious gamers say that these homebound times are changing which games they feel like playing.

Kat Safreed, 24, and Ryan Childers, 26, live in Somerville, Mass. They got married eight months ago, and both are now working from home due to the coronavirus. "We've lived together for three years, but I don't think we've ever spent this much time together," Safreed says, laughing.

Childers likes to play in-depth strategy games like Gary Grigsby's War in the Pacific. He says that he's found himself seeking out multiplayer online games that involve more social interaction rather than ones where you play alone.

"The games I play are like an hour-long match," he says. "You have enough time to get to know people, you work together as a team. You're getting shot at. You're yelling at each other because you're getting shot at and you don't know where you're getting shot at from. It it gives you enough time to kind of develop good relationships with people and then you move into the next match and you're all on the same team again, so you

get the same squad because you know each other and and so on. It's both casual and not."

Safreed's tastes are very different — she prefers The Sims and Pokémon. Her favorite is Animal Crossing, a game for Nintendo Switch.

"It's kind of escapism," she says. "Right now things are really scary and I just can't wait to go onto an island and be in debt to a raccoon, and not have coronavirus. I can make my island whatever I want it to be. I can have all my villagers and they're all nice. It's just very idealistic."

The couple regularly plays the board game Dungeons & Dragons with a group of friends. But this week they're going to try playing it online together.

"We are a little bit nervous about how that is actually going to work out when we can't kind of keep everyone calm and in control, but I think it will be fun," says Safreed. And it's fine if their D&D game doesn't translate perfectly online.

"The most important thing," she says, is "we're still talking to each other and checking in on each other after a stressful week."



Article Source

## Discussion Questions

### People Turning to Social Video Games Amid Social Distancing

1. Define: Social Distancing, Video Streaming, Boon
2. Why have new restrictions limited in-person gatherings?
3. How do video games combat social isolation?
4. How does streaming software impact traditional video game playing?
5. How has the gaming industry responded to the new environments?
6. How have video games helped parents?
7. Do you play video games as a way of keeping in touch with friends? Why/Why not?
8. Why do you think games are good ways for social interaction?
9. Do you think more people will turn to video games if the quarantines continue?
10. What other ways can people use technology for entertainment and socialization? Explain.