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The online gaming community generally receives negative backlash that claims games are addictive and promote violence. However, within the online gaming community, positive interpersonal relationships and group identity emerge from these online interactions. In this paper, I demonstrate that online gaming can lead to friendships and even interacting with users outside of the game, creating a social network that has multiple layers. First, I review past studies on online gaming, and evaluate the gaps missing in the literature. Then, I conduct a case study on how the online gaming community interacts and how relationships can be built beyond the virtual game. By studying the relationships that have developed through online gaming, I argue that there is an actual community that is thriving and creating a bond among users.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some researchers argue that the online gaming community is addictive and a waste of time. The behavioral patterns that often result from online games have been linked to social withdrawal, stemming from lack of real-life social contact and physical inter-action (Blinka and Skarupova, 2016). Cognitive and behavioral problems such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder have also been linked to gaming addiction, especially in individuals prone to depression and lacking impulse control (Zastrow 2017).

However, these studies have overlooked the fact that gamers say online gaming gives them "social support" and makes them feel that they are part of a community (Sundberg 2018). By viewing online gaming only as an "unhealthy dependency" and emphasizing violence, anxiety, and isolation, researchers fail to examine the interactions many players have with one another. For example, individuals on the autism spectrum have developed friendships through online gaming, which gave them a way to engage in social interactions (Gallup and Serianni, 2017) . Online gaming can even decrease loneliness among individuals on the autism spectrum (Sundberg 2018). The emergence of a sense of belonging and the socialization that goes on during play motivates the participants to play online.

Online gaming can be an efficient training tool for individuals who have trouble developing social skills in person. In Gallup and Serianni's (2017) study, the majority of the online games played by the individuals were multiplayer games. Online gamers developed social skills and learned to apply those skills on an everyday basis. (Gallup, Serianni 2017). For example, multiplayer games require individuals to collaborate to advance in the game, developing teamwork skills.

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DATA & METHODS

I used an online gaming forum to recruit participants who are from the United States. I interviewed six online gamers, using a semi-structured interview centered on the relationships that have been developed through online gaming. The six participants consisted of four males and two female players, ranging in age from 20-27 years old. For confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used to identify the participants in the study. The four males will be referred to as Jim, Smith, Mark, Tom, and the two females will be Lisa and Kim. The type of games that each participant enjoyed playing consisted of action packed fast paced games that either involved street fighting or racing. Each participant agreed that they have built friendships through online gaming, and four out of the six participants have met one of their online friends in person.

DISCUSSION

My research participants felt that they have been able to build strong social relationships through online gaming, and that these friendships sometimes continue offline or on social media outside the game. They can interact with different players daily, and the online community creates an easy outlet to interconnect with someone they might not initially be acquainted with. The dialogues among the gamers run freely and naturally. The conversation can range from discussing the next task at hand, to small talk and asking questions of one another's life.

With four of the participants noting they have met online friends in person, this indicates that online friendship can transition to offline encounters. "Jim" shared his experience with meeting online friends in person, including finding a roommate and turning an online interaction into a real-life friendship. The reason they were able to be comfortable with one another enough to meet up and become roommates was through years

of gaming. Jim highlighted the fact that "it was easier to connect because we already had a common interest. "The more you play with them, the more you get to know each other, and this foreshadows qualities they have as a person." This statement indicates that the offline interaction Jim had with his future roommate stemmed from social interactions experienced through online gaming. Jim also shared that they were able to get along in person because "we had a lot of fun in games and enjoyed our personalities and knew that in person it would be the same."

Earlier studies have glossed over the fact that real life interactions, like this example can develop. Previous research has found that online gamers can be caught in a cycle of losing touch with reality, having an "increased desire for closeness and friendships'' (Blinka and Skarupova 2016, p. 110) that may lead to destructive codependence, which then increases time spent playing online. However, I found that participants maintain their everyday lives and use online gaming as a time to interact and socialize. Their interactions are not an unhealthy codependency, but rather a social platform where people can be friendly and helpful, just like in offline daily encounters. The online gaming community can promote real relationships that are not dysfunctional or full of compulsive behavior.

Online forums and social media also helped the research participants interact with other gamers. "Smith" explained that he recognizes usernames and knows a gamer he has interacted with was online. For example, Smith described "getting each other's social media to keep up with each other and see what we are doing outside of just gaming." Even if Smith had never met his online friends in person, there are some participants who have been playing together for years, and interacting outside of the game helps players get to know each other. Smith felt that keeping up with his gaming friends

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helps create "stronger friendships and makes it more entertaining when playing when knowing more about the person."

Research participants worked together and built partnerships through action packed fast paced games with multiple. Many of the games mentioned by participants were either multiplayer or had multiple levels within the game. The participants noted how members within the community can help aid in advancement and build a mutual connection through teamwork.

The online gaming community can connect members from opposite sides of the world in an instant. Players will synchronize the time they log on and make sure they can play with certain individuals. Some participants shared that they were willing to wake up early or stay up late to play with a certain player in a different time zone. For example, a participant once woke up at 3 am just to play with one of his online friends, and said he does this "only with certain games where I can play matches with people across the world!" This participant didn't mind staying up late or getting up early to play since his online friends have done the same for him.

CONCLUSION

Past research has overlooked social interactions among online gaming communities. It is evident that an online game acts as an agent of socialization and creates a common bond among online players. For future studies, a larger case study could provide further input of the magnitude the online gaming community holds and further interactions among users. Further studies can help remove negative stigmas that are often associated with online gaming.

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