

## Reflections on Video Games, Virtual Communication, and Our Pandemic Lives

*Sally Darling and Jessica Keller*

### **Abstract**

Remote work and social isolation required by the Covid-19 pandemic increased the need for communication technology that allows collaboration in business and social contexts. This essay is our reflection on research on communication technology used by online gamers and the impact the research had on our personal and work lives as we adapted to the conditions of the last two years of pandemic living.

### **Keywords**

Gaming, communication, remote work, Covid-19, technology

### **Introduction**

In Spring 2021, we took part in a design anthropology class with Dr. Christina Wasson at the University of North Texas. In an applied study in collaboration with Diana Hubbard from Blizzard Entertainment, we looked at the communication practices of console video gamers as they connected with other players during online games (a report on the study can be found at [www.christinawasson.com/s/Communicating-Across-](http://www.christinawasson.com/s/Communicating-Across-)

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[the-Gap-2021.pdf](#)). While analyzing transcripts and fieldnotes, we realized that, to study communication in online gaming, we needed to grapple with concepts related to personal identity, how people create safe space for themselves in online games, and how boundaries are created or violated in these online spaces. This study prompted a lot of personal reflection for both of us on the place of virtual communities in our own lives. Neither of us would have connected to this research so strongly in non-pandemic times. In this essay, we reflect on the research we did together and the impact that research has had on our personal and professional lives as we navigate life during the Covid-19 pandemic. We consider how researching gamers and their communication methods changed our perspectives on remote workplace culture and the technology available to socialize and collaborate in our work and personal lives.

### **Jessica Keller: Reflections on Gaming Communication and Workplace Technology**

The circumstances under which we conducted the study provided a unique opportunity for me to take a step back and view the gaming world from a different perspective. During our study, our research participants highlighted the need for technology solutions that enable community formation, collaboration, and the ability to express individual identity. As we reflected on what we learned in this study and shared our results with other researchers and designers, we recognized that gamers and people in the workplace share many of the same needs. Though our participants were speaking in the context of online gaming, Sally and I both found that there was also a need for these tools in our own work and home lives as we navigated remote work and school. The need for better technology solutions was present before the pandemic, but online work and limited in-person interactions amplified that need. Unfortunately, there is not an all-in-one tool for either group that works well for collaboration, community building, and communication. Gaming requires all three, but so does an effective remote workforce.

This study really changed my perspective on tools available in the workspace. For many years, I had thought of gaming communication technologies as a little better than other types of collaboration tools used in the workplace. And what was eye-opening for me was how many of these different technologies that I thought were in many ways more effective at establishing a collaborative space for gamers were somewhat ineffective when it came to the actual needs of our participants. Individual tools were unable to adapt to the needs of a variety of players. Most of them were not flexible enough and did not provide layers of protection against toxicity, a feature our participants required to feel safe in online spaces. Many did not even interface with each other, so our participants

had a bunch of technologies doing exciting things and making cool interactions possible, but not in an all-in-one tool. That experience was eye-opening for me because, having been a gamer my whole life, I take for granted that I am doing ten different things at once when I am gaming. Until then, I had never stopped and thought about how many apps I am using, how many tabs I have open in my web browser, and the specific communication channels I am active in, all to communicate with my team during a regular gameplay session. When I saw our participants doing that, I realized that, over time, gamers have gotten so used to getting by or making do with the available tools. The more adventurous gamers among us will bring in all kinds of different technologies and tools because we are so exacting about the type of experience we want. But regardless of our technological skills, gamers have to supplement the communication process and the collaboration process in some way that wasn't designed for within the game or the game platform itself. That was not something I had ever consciously realized before this study.

I started a new role just as we were wrapping up the research study on gaming communication, and I found similarities between my experience as a remote researcher and what we saw with our participants in the study. Our participants had to combine different tools, methods, and platforms to design their collaboration and communication experiences. In my new position, I also needed to use a bunch of different tools, whether to tackle the trove of information accumulated project to project, for documentation, or for instant communication and sharing. But none of the tools available were all-in-one solutions. Just like the participants in our study, my colleagues and I had to piece together solutions from those chosen by the company. They wanted us to have the best technology available, and flexibility in how we communicated with other remote colleagues. We had three principal solutions for collaborative work: one for project management, one for instant communications, and another for meetings. My new role was with a company that approached remote work with excitement. Still, many tools had to be brought together and adapted to meet our collaboration, community, and communication needs. If it is hard for a company that stands 100% behind remote work to find a tool that meets its needs, no wonder so many companies which were forced to work remotely are struggling. I'm in favor of letting people work where and when they are most effective, but I don't really blame companies that remain hesitant about remote work due to what is often perceived as an overwhelming number of technological options. If I had to say to a company like that, "Actually, you have to use these eight different applications, and none of them work together well," I'd have a hard time selling the idea of remote work based on the tools available now. How in the world do you even begin to get people on board when it just looks like a pain and more of a time and financial investment?

Another insight I gained from thinking about online communication while starting a new role was the need within online spaces for individuals to engage both in persistent and temporal communities. Very often when I used workplace communication tools, I wished I could use Discord instead. Discord is an online social platform, and though it is not perfect because it requires communication outside of individual gaming platforms, many gamers use it. It is the best option for both temporal community needs - such as coordinating with other gamers during an online gaming session - and persistent community needs like fostering relationship-building outside of gaming activities. In gaming settings, you need responsive technology to rapidly and effectively communicate in a very fast-paced environment. So you need a platform that will allow quick communication and - since some games match you with randomly assigned teammates (a.k.a. strangers) - you also need the ability to add or remove participants efficiently. But at the same time, many gamers desire the type of persistent community that was provided in the past by online message boards and forums. I think that's sort of the genius behind Discord and a reason so many of our study participants relied on it for building their gaming communities. Discord was developed by gamers who recognized the challenges of communicating and collaborating with the VoIP software available at that time. Discord's creators understood that gamers need a persistent community to revisit previous posts and conversations, reminiscent of the message boards and forums that gamers have always used. We also need to invite and remove people quickly when a game ends or if the conversation veers toward subjects or language that create an uncomfortable or toxic environment. Discord users can use voice chat, video chat, text chat, and even stream games they're playing. In addition to the different types of technology and communication methods built into Discord, what makes it an effective tool is the creators' realization of a need for both persistent and temporal community combined with technology devoted to the immediate needs of a gaming setting. In my personal experience as a remote worker, many workplace collaboration tools are missing features that foster both temporal and persistent communities. For example, Slack is used a lot for workplace collaboration, but Slack seems very sterile, segmented, and rigid compared to the opportunities to connect and communicate on Discord. And I think that it becomes more difficult to openly collaborate in environments where there is more rigidity and less flexibility in communicating and sharing information.

Organizational culture can be shaped by the technology that enables virtual communication in online spaces. Developers of workplace communication tools, as well as those responsible for vetting those tools for use in their workplace, have a great amount of power when it comes to shaping organizational culture. The importance of building functions that allow both persistent and temporal community cannot be overstated. Thinking ahead about the cultural implications of these sometimes

seemingly inconsequential choices is imperative for organizations both new to the realm of remote work and those built upon it.

### **Sally Darling: Reflections on Identity, Boundaries, and Family Life**

When we started to look at video gaming communication, I thought of gaming as primarily low-stakes entertainment and an individual pursuit. However, through this study, those misconceptions fell away, and I started to see online gaming as a collaborative environment where people can connect and find supportive communities in online spaces. I also didn't realize that this research would prompt so much reflection on my life and my family's social situation during the pandemic. Our study on video gaming communication changed my perspective of what was going on in my own house, where my husband and I both worked from home while trying to homeschool our son.

One of the strong themes in our research was the role of identity in communicating and forming community in online spaces. There was an unmet need for simple tools that would enable participants to customize their online interactions depending on personal identity characteristics such as age, ability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and gender. However, our participants were so committed to the social interactions they gained from gaming together, that they went to great effort to cobble together systems that gave them the ability to express their identities and connect with other players. This insight led to another key finding of our research, which was the value our participants placed on creating and maintaining a sense of community with other players. Both shape how our participants experienced online gaming spaces. Thomas Malaby (2009) is critical of scholarship that looks at games as something outside "real" life. This concept was on my mind as I watched my own child's transition from social interactions in "live" situations to the online interactions that were his sole non-parental means of socializing in the early days of the pandemic. My son was almost five years old in March 2021, and before the closure of his daycare, he interacted with and was influenced by a bunch of different kids. He would come home with new opinions, different favorite colors, and outfit ideas he wanted to try. It was the same themes of identity and community we saw in our study but prompted by "live" interactions. When those social interactions were abruptly ripped away, he started playing *Animal Crossing* on the Nintendo Switch console. Sometimes he played alone, and sometimes with his aunt or other family members. As he played more, he began to mimic the characters he interacted with in the game. He tried many different virtual outfits on his avatar but also started to want actual clothes that looked like what his and other avatars wore in *Animal Crossing*. His in-game socializing was influencing his out-of-game identity exploration. Far from being "low stakes entertainment," at that moment

in the pandemic, gaming gave him a forum to do the kind of essential development that comes from mimicking other people and life situations.

One of our research participants reflected on the connections she made gaming during the pandemic. She said, "Gaming... allowed me to hang out with and talk with people that I have not been able to see in a year. It's helped me be stronger with my friendships in general, or my relationship with my brother." Reflecting on her words, I also find that gaming impacted my own relationships. Our study found that participants were using various communication tools as mediators in their connections with other gamers. As I played more games, I realized that the video game itself is a mediator that helped me and my family communicate in a forum set apart from the daily stresses of working, schooling, and living under lockdown conditions. Collaborating within games on complex and sometimes intense tasks strengthened our connections. The three of us have developed an odd and hilarious little social circle, where knowledge of minor tasks in a virtual game gives us some cultural capital in our own insular pandemic world. O'Donnell (2014) argues for the importance of looking at games in the context in which they are played. In my case, gaming during the pandemic took on an importance for our social and emotional health that it would not have played in our lives before lockdowns and social isolation.

In our research, we saw that our participants needed to create boundaries to be able to communicate and share their personal identities without exposing themselves to toxicity. One of our participants said, "So like, in *Overwatch*, people put 'Gamer Girl,' ... she's wanting a girl-based group. So sometimes people make specific groups just so that they don't have toxic people joining, and it's just people in their community." When I reviewed our thoughts on boundaries in video games, I thought about how boundary setting is usually a less concrete action when operating only in the physical world. But when most of our interactions move online, the act of creating boundaries becomes much more intentional. Our participants often created systems to set boundaries. To do that, they had to make active decisions about their comfort level with other people to set appropriate boundaries. The social options available for my son during the pandemic make that boundary setting very real for me as a parent. When you have a child, you do conscious and unconscious boundary-setting all the time. You decide which birthday party feels safe for them to go to, which playdate invitations to accept, and which to decline. You are constantly making decisions about what boundaries to set for their physical and emotional health. You weigh all those things, but in a way that feels a lot more abstract. But when you are in a game or setting up a console, you toggle settings that impact who you or your child is allowed to interact with online. He is a young kid, so he is not ever going to be alone while gaming, but I need to set boundaries so I can tune out a little bit and do my own work. I can set boundaries so he can talk to

family or vetted friends online, but never strangers. The other day he noticed a chat setting in a new game, and he said, “oh mom, I can make friends all over the world now,” and I thought, “ok, I need to turn that setting off immediately.” This sort of thing happens in a lot of virtual communication. I program which telephone numbers he can use on his iPad for a Facetime call. I do a kind of tiered setting of who has unfettered access (immediate family) versus who needs to be screened out or supervised (friends). That is the kind of concrete boundary-setting our participants were doing for their own emotional health. I find myself doing it, too, in a very tangible and recognizable way to protect my son’s social and emotional health. Still, I had not thought about it in that way until we observed different techniques for boundary setting used by our participants.

### **Sally Darling and Jessica Keller: Conclusion**

So here we are, at the end of two years of pandemic living, looking at an uncertain future. On the one hand, we have slightly better tools and methods for working and living in these conditions. On the other hand, we still struggle to piece together systems that work for us. We are trying to do a lot in our personal and professional lives, and we have to contend with circumstances that we could not have predicted and cannot often control. As we put our final edits on this piece, Jessica moved across the country days after watching a tornado destroy her Kentucky hometown. Sally has also moved, from Texas to Illinois, in search of a school system and social circle that feel safer during waves of Covid surges. We do not have an uplifting message or a hopeful conclusion as we look into the future. Regardless of the tools and technology we have, remote work is hard amidst the aftermath of an EF4 tornado, and raising a child is hard during intermittent lockdowns and uncertainty about school closures. So sometimes, we escape to video games and online spaces. It is not a panacea, but like our research participants, we are using the tools we have to assemble flawed but workable solutions to help us communicate and connect so we can find relief and support in virtual spaces.

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**Jessica Keller** is an applied anthropologist and researcher who is passionate about understanding the role identity plays in gaming and entertainment media user experience. She is an M.S. candidate in applied anthropology at the University of North Texas. She currently serves as Co-Chair for the Society for Applied Anthropology Podcast Project and holds a Student Interests Seat on the AAA Members' Programmatic, Advisory, and Advocacy Committee. Jessica strives to improve user experience by centering users' voices, informing inclusive design, and removing barriers to access.