Playing Apart Together: Young People’s Online Gaming During the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic caused countries around the world to initiate societal lockdowns, especially during the spring of 2020. This article focuses on online gaming’s role in young people’s lives during the lockdown in Denmark. Informed by a practice theoretical framework, the analyses of 35 interviews with young people (16–19 years) examine how gaming proved to be something to do in a situation of nothing to do. The analyses find that the young people’s gaming practices were beneficial (a) in allowing the young people to maintain a social life and (b) in providing a legitimate social space for maintaining friendships and/or coping with boredom. The findings demonstrate that young people who engage with online gaming are capable of adapting to fundamental changes to society to fulfil their social needs and aspirations, including during a pandemic.

Keywords
COVID-19, lockdown, gaming, practice theory, temporality, sociability

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic caused countries around the world to a lockdown in their social lives. Similar to other countries, Denmark experienced a complete societal lockdown between March and May 2020. Young people found themselves at the centre of an unprecedented and unpredictable social experiment (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020). Schools, sports centres, libraries, recreation facilities and nightlife closed, reshaping the social processes and relationships in which young people’s

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everyday lives had been embedded. Young people’s social lives changed abruptly when they were restricted to stay at home—together only with their families. Mukherjee (2020) finds that the 2020 lockdown reconfigured social life fundamentally, including in relation to leisure time and social activities (Kahila et al., 2020; Yuen, 2020).

However, young people’s leisure time and social activities are not bound solely to physical social relationships. These can also take place online. The online environment, as demonstrated by Third et al. (2019), is a key feature of young people’s everyday lives because ‘technology articulate as artifacts or devices, and are intertwined with activities and practices and, as well as social arrangements, organizational forms’ (p. 11). Playing has increasingly become a social activity, and playing together can strengthen feelings of social connectedness (Kahila et al., 2020). Although the lockdown almost entirely prevented young people from physically seeing each other for about 2 months, it still allowed them to interact online.

For example, schools and workplaces began using virtual platforms for teaching and meetings. Thus, the societal lockdown created a unique opportunity for studying young people’s online practices without assuming that online social life opposes physical social life. By providing ‘a visceral connection to life’ and a ‘space for them to contemplate and celebrate life while facing the reality of death’ (Fox & McDermott, 2020, p. 6; Marston & Kowert, 2020), online practices like gaming became even more important to young people’s social lives than before the pandemic.

In the current article, we investigate the role of gaming as an online practice during the spring 2020 lockdown in Denmark. We interviewed 35 young people aged 16–20 years about their experiences with online gaming, including during the lockdown. In online interviews about their experiences with gaming, the interviewees related gaming, in general, as a social activity and, especially during the lockdown, as an even more important and sometimes only possible social activity.

In the analysis, we address the significance of playing online games as a social practice in young people’s lives during a societal lockdown. We understand an online game as a ‘contemporary technological medium’ (Bogost, 2016, p. ix) that enables social interaction between players. We use ‘gaming’ in accordance with Bogost (2016) simply to conceive of the practice of playing games on phones, tablets, consoles and personal computers (PCs) and as both single- and multiplayer games.

By focusing on how young people experienced online gaming during a societal lockdown, we contribute new knowledge about young people’s own accounts of online gaming, as well as knowledge about being young during a global pandemic (Mukherjee, 2020). The main research question guiding our analysis is as follows: what role did gaming play in the everyday lives of young people in Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Background: Young People’s Online Practices and the COVID-19 Lockdown in Denmark**

Despite being an increasing part of many young people’s everyday lives, online gaming is almost absent from the field of youth studies. Instead, other fields often relate online gaming to different types of risks—for example, social isolation, aggression, Internet gaming disorder (IGD) and so forth (such as Peeters et al., 2018).
Health-related studies that look at psychosocial health find that a high frequency of competitive gaming is associated with a decrease in psychosocial health, and that gaming frequency is related to increases in internalizing—but not externalizing—attention or peer problems (Lobel et al., 2017). A recent Danish study finds not only lower well-being among young people who spend most of their free time on online platforms but also lower well-being among those who spend minimal time on online platforms (Ottosen & Andreasen, 2020).

Starting in 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) will officially categorize IGD as a psychiatric diagnosis. IGD resembles the already existing gambling disorder (WHO, 2018) and has been criticized for potentially creating a moral panic around young people’s gaming experiences (Enevold et al., 2018). However, while maintaining a focus on the risks of excessive gaming, social studies have started to integrate the potential benefits and positive aspects of gaming on the cognitive, motivational, emotional and social domains of children and young people’s lives. Gaming is an everyday practice that shapes young people’s identities and—when linked to other everyday practices (like sports and education)—enables dynamic social interactions (Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008; Thorhauge & Gregersen, 2019).

The capacity of online practices to engage with or challenge young people has led to an increased interest in the use of online teaching (Beavis, 2015). In many ways, the COVID-19 lockdown amplified the use of online teaching because almost overnight, schools closed down and had to move to online teaching. A survey conducted during the lockdown with children and young people in Danish primary schools (5–16 years) shows not only that most missed their friends and teachers but also that their well-being was not generally reduced (Qvortrup et al., 2020). COVID-19 seriously challenged education financially and caused learning losses around the world (UNICEF et al., 2020). The lockdown created increased vulnerabilities for loneliness, and increased online practices helped many people stay in contact with their friends (Hansen et al., 2020).

Preliminary analyses and reports reveal how the gaming industry experienced a boom in both users and game time during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis (Ipsos MORI, 2020; Jaeger et al., 2020; Sapienza et al., 2020). Gaming has been one of the few industries with a higher growth rate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and one report finds that the pandemic has had two key effects on gaming: (a) a worldwide increase in money and time spent on gaming and (b) a transition towards multiplayer games and streaming (Jaeger et al., 2020). Furthermore, preliminary analyses of data trends during COVID-19 show how the number of concurrent users on platforms like Steam and In-Game increased rapidly in the wake of COVID-19 (Sapienza et al., 2020). Data trends also indicate diminishing differences between weekday and weekend game time and the increasing popularity of strategy games (Sapienza et al., 2020). However, young people’s own experiences of gaming and everyday social life during lockdowns have yet to be explored. To do so, we apply a practice theoretical framework, focusing on gaming as a social activity.

Theoretical Framework: Online Gaming as a Social Practice

For many young people, gaming is an integrated part of their everyday lives. Gaming is a regular and often daily activity. Thus, gaming depends on and must be coordinated
with a multitude of other daily practices, such as school, homework, sports, cooking and romantic relationships. Gaming can be a mundane activity used to fill out spare time, and it can be social when others are involved. Thus, the practice of gaming is not a fixed and uniform practice. Rather, gaming is dynamic and social (Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008). As with other social performances, gaming is formed by habit, tacit knowledge, skills, technology, performance and excellence (see also Meier et al., 2014; Shove et al., 2010).

We define online gaming as a social practice—a set of activities taking place in both the physical and online worlds (Kahila et al., 2020). A whole set of what can be seen as trivial or even meaningless activities is grouped together to form the practice of gaming (Couldry, 2004). Theories of practice conceive of practices rather than individuals as the primary object of investigation and practices as formed by different elements: meanings, competencies, materials and time (Shove et al., 2010; Southerton, 2013). Inspired by Meier et al. (2014), we focus on the following:

- time, for example, timely investments, spare time, school time, play time, lack of time and time coordination;
- symbolic and social meanings, for example, relaxation, isolation, friendship, alliances and recreation;
- materials, for example, platforms, hardware, games and money; and
- competencies, for example, skills, knowledge and technique.

When talking about gaming during the lockdown, the young interviewees predominantly talked about their gaming in relation to the elements of social meanings and time. Although gaming is an everyday consumer-/leisure-related practice relating to broader cultural and structural inequalities (e.g., a decent gaming PC in Denmark costs about €1,500), for the current article, we focus on gaming’s connection to meaning and time, as voiced by the young interviewees.

We use ‘temporality’ both to describe action as a process and to conceive of actions as formed by one’s everyday rhythms (Bengtsson & Ravn, 2019). Collective and personal temporal rhythms frame practices and condition their performance. Different practices, however, also compete over time as a resource (Bengtsson & Ravn, 2019; Southerton, 2013). Thus, ‘temporality’ describes how social action (i.e., practice) intersects with the tacit embodied skills associated with carrying out practical performances during one’s everyday life. As a social practice, gaming depends on both motivations and time. What constitutes the right time and desired skills varies from situation to situation but must be coordinated if gaming is to be upheld as a practice. Put simply, gaming does not occur if there is no time to play, no knowledge of the game, or no adequate skills/experience.

Despite these daily—and, at times, mundane aspects—gaming is also a practice to which young people reflectively ascribe meaning. In this process, they not only draw on their specific context but also on wider cultural understandings of what constitutes gaming (Thorhauge & Gregersen, 2019). In this sense, the practice of gaming can, for some youth, constitute a (sub)culture carrying a leisure-based youth identity and collective aspect encompassing social bonding and solidarity (Bradford, 2012). For other young people, the ascribed meaning relates more directly to the practice of generating fun and pleasure, of relaxing and/or of making new friends (Bengtsson & Ravn, 2019).
Method, Data and Ethics

Because of the societal lockdown, we had to conduct all interviews via phone, Skype or Discord. We are all experienced qualitative interviewers but did not have much experience with phone or online interviewing. However, we experienced the digitalization of the data-generating process as surprisingly unproblematic. The young participants were already familiar with online interactions, and they probably also found it easier to participate in interviews at home, undisturbed, than having to meet face to face to conduct the interviews. The online settings also allowed us a very natural way to begin the interviews, namely the fact that we were not sitting together in the same room because of the lockdown. The interview setting enabled the young interviewees to relate, contrast and reflect on the present situation in relation to their ‘normal’ gaming practices (Irvine et al., 2013).

To recruit interviewees, we designed a poster informing potential recruits about the study and criteria for participating in the project, advertising a free ticket to the movies to each interviewee. The poster was circulated through social media platforms and through different personal networks (both our own and those of students working on the project). The sampling criteria were as follows: different genders, 16–20 years old and experience (even if minimal) with online gaming.

The poster provided a link to a website where we thoroughly described our research ethics and how they adhered to the ethical guidelines of the European Sociological Association, as well as with the European Union (EU) General Data Protection Regulation. At the start of each interview, we obtained informed consent from all interviewees after telling them about their right to abandon the interviews and our confidentiality (including thorough anonymization in all publications based on the interview data). After consulting with judicial experts at (our work place, which is a research institution), we decided that for this age group, we did not need to inform their parents about the 16–20-year-olds’ participation in the research project (we also interviewed younger gamers, and here, we made sure that the interviewees’ parents received information about the interviews).

The sample for the present article consists of 35 interviewees aged 16–20 years. A total of 12 of the young people identified as females and 23 as males. No interviewees identified as non-binary (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex — LGBTQI) and we did not ask specifically about their gender positions or sexual identities.

Before the interviews, our team familiarized themselves with several games, including Hay Day, Episode, the Sims, FIFA, Hearthstone, League of Legends, Counter-Strike and World of Warcraft. This allowed us to match participants with interviewers who had background knowledge about the participants’ favourite game or games.

League of Legends and the Sims stand out as the two most popular games. On average, when not under lockdown, the young participants would spend about 20 h gaming per week. A total of 18 participants (mostly female) estimated that they played fewer than 20 h per week, while 16 participants (primarily male) played 20–50 h per week, and one (male) interviewee played more than 70 h per week. The female participants more often used mobile phones to play, while the male participants preferred gaming consoles and PCs. Similarly, females tended to play mostly single-player games, whereas males played multiplayer games. In relation to the gender differences between gamers, the sample complies with Crawford (2011).
and Thornham’s (2008) thoughts, who conceive of gaming as a predominantly male practice with a tendency towards a stereotypical binary representation of gender. The composition of the sample is also consistent with Thorhauge and Gregersen (2019), who find gendered gaming practices, with females using gaming to relax and males preferring competition and action.

At the end of the data-generating process, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first stage of the analysis, Louise H. Bom read all the transcripts twice, identifying the most prominent themes related to young people’s gaming experiences during the societal lockdown. Next, all three authors read (or reread) the transcripts, paying special attention to the themes identified in the first stage of the analysis. Setting out from each theme, we then collated many provisional subheadings and notes under each theme. With the data structured by themes and subheadings, we then browsed through the entire material one more time, reorganized some of the headings and determined the final form and definition of the two main analytical concepts for the analyses: (a) temporal changes to everyday life and (b) social life during societal lockdown.

By focusing on gaming as an everyday practice, our study design cannot embody young people with no gaming experience. It may be that for young people with no prior gaming experience that gaming during the lockdown was not a relevant option. Furthermore, not all young people have the necessary material resources at their disposal to be part of the popular gaming cultures. Even though a few interviewees touched upon not being able to play specific games because they did not have the required hardware, the data do not include in-depth accounts about this type of social exclusion, and generally, the interviewees condemned gamers who spend large amounts of money to pay for skills (e.g., by purchasing in-game loot boxes or card packs).

**Analyses**

The following analyses focus on the two aspects that were important for the young interviewees’ gaming practices during the societal lockdown. These two aspects became apparent in the thematic coding of the interviews. First, the ordering of everyday life changed, creating physical restraints and new possibilities for gaming. Therefore, we start by addressing how the experience of lockdown influenced the opportunity for gaming during everyday life. Second, the physical restraints also influenced young people’s social lives, making gaming a way for some to maintain or develop social relationships beyond their households.

**Temporality and Time: New Orders for Everyday Life**

Everyday life is characterized by different practices that are often fixed in a repeating order—such as eating, showering, schoolwork, transportation, leisure, cooking and cleaning (Southerton, 2006). Such practices require coordination and co-participation with other people, obligations and personal commitment, and although they take up most of our time, they are often highly routinized and unreflective. The participants told us how, during the lockdown, these everyday practices became less distinctive
because they all took place in the same setting—the home. Time became blurred, and the lines between practices like school and leisure became less distinct, with changes in structure and routine characterizing everyday life (Yuen, 2020).

For some young people, these changes created a sense of new-found freedoms by which they could more spontaneously plan their own time. This proved to be important because it created new gaming possibilities during different and often novel times of the day. Adam, a 19-year-old boy, explained how his gaming changed during the lockdown:

[I play] at other times of the day, I would say. All that time you spend on transport going back and forth from school; you don’t have that anymore. So there is more opportunity to game, where before it was like more late afternoon or night, and now it is maybe also at 1–2 [in the afternoon] and maybe a bit in the morning if you feel like it before [online] school. Therefore, the times are a bit different, I think. You can choose when you want to sit down and play PlayStation when there’s not so much school and work and generally not as many things as you’re used to because of this corona crisis. It gives you some freedom to [decide] when you want to play.

Although many interviewees characterized COVID-19 as imposing limitations on their everyday lives, some of the interviewees also described new possibilities related to the lockdown. For instance, the lockdown enabled young people to disobey traditional school norms and hierarchies. They could go to school while staying in bed, and gaming during school hours (and online classes) was much more common among the young people than before the lockdown. As one girl explained, gaming on the phone during class was a way of ‘making time pass’. Bjarke, an 18-year-old boy, explained this as follows:

I’ve definitely been gaming more because it’s easier. And you’re like at home all day, and all classes are virtual. In our video calls, the teacher likes that our cameras are not on, because we’re all just sitting there with our messy morning hair but also because then you can see the teacher the whole time. In these types of situations, it becomes possible to sit and game during class. It’s not the smartest, but yeah, when the opportunity is there, I seize it.

For Bjarke and others, online teaching created new room for gaming, providing a sense of freedom to escape teacher regulation and supervision. Although this practice of gaming during schooling can be problematic, most of the young people knew, as Bjarke did, that ‘it’s not the smartest’. None of the young people reported that their gaming had serious negative impacts on their learning, but instead, during the limited time period of the lockdown (6 weeks), gaming during schooling was a way of creating a little excitement. Gaming became a way for some to resist the increased sense of boredom brought on by uninspiring online teaching and assignments.

Thus, for most of our participants, the lockdown and blurring of time led to an increase in the duration and frequency of their gaming because they experienced having more spare time during their everyday lives. A number of the young people used some of this extra time on gaming, but some also increasingly used almost all their time on gaming. Not having to go out of the door in the morning created a new sensation, almost of having too much time available for gaming. The interviewees explained experiencing more time to game by referring to less adult supervision
(from teachers and parents) and to the emergence of new routines (because they did not have anything else to do). Tanja, a 19-year-old girl, explained this as follows:

I think [the new possibilities] have been supercool. Before, I played a lot Brawl Stars, but I would never have played it as much as I did [during lockdown]. I really played it a lot. It is just when you don’t have that much else to do, just sitting at home, then I have sometimes been like ‘What! An hour just passed!’ and I have just been sitting there gaming and then: ‘just one more game’….

The lack of other everyday practices created more time for gaming but also protracted experiences of gaming as a practice with no or few boundaries. Thus, several of the young interviewees described how gaming took up almost all their time during the lockdown and how experiences of time would disappear when gaming, with one game leading to another. For some, this could lead to using gaming as an escape, making it tempting to continue gaming to escape reality. For some young people, the experience of continued gaming was a liberating and exciting new experience enabled by the lockdown. For others, the possibility of endless gaming also contributed to worries and anxiety about gaming taking over not just their time but also their mental resources. Philip, a 17-year-old boy, explained this as follows:

Before, I didn’t have as much time for [gaming] since I also had other stuff to do. This meant that I would be ‘pulled away’ from gaming, if you can say it like that. Now, I can sit for hours because I don’t have anything else to do. Every day, I’m locked inside without anything really to do. Sometimes during this lockdown, I’ve been playing Minecraft and I can just feel that I have less energy to do anything else than to game. My days pretty much revolved around gaming, and I started to think a lot about the game, also when I didn’t play. However, when gaming becomes the center of attention, it is damaging, which could have been avoided if I’d had other routines and more structure by going to school or to other activities in my free time—for example, the gym. That would allow me to break free from the games.

Philip had similar experiences with excessive gaming in the past during holidays. He partly saw his need for structured activities as caused by his Asperger condition. He explained how, during the lockdown, he was gaming more, because the game is a safe place that acts as an escape from the lack of structure and uncertainty created by the pandemic. Thus, gaming becomes double-sided, both providing an escape from the worries of everyday life and making it difficult to relate to and be part of daily practices outside the game.

Interviewing young people who spent almost all their time online before the COVID-19 pandemic, Wong (2020), likewise, finds that young people find solace and solidarity in gaming and online communities. Although these findings highlight that gaming and other online activities can contribute positively to young people’s experiences of connectedness, Wong (2020) also demonstrates how having almost all online social interactions can, over time, lead to more general experiences of being alienated and marginalized in society. It is possible that if the lockdown had lasted for longer (than 6 weeks), not only Philip but also other of the young interviewees in our study would have altered their stories towards being less sympathetic towards the lockdown.
Maintaining and Creating Sociability Beyond the Home

Previous research has indicated that online gaming can provide important spaces where young people find a sense of belonging, solidarity and connectedness (Crawford et al., 2011; Quandt & Kröger, 2013; Wong, 2020). Our data suggest that the importance and sociality of gaming intensified during the COVID-19 lockdown. During the lockdown, gaming helped young people create sociability and maintain friendships; it has been something to connect around and a way of hanging out. The young people described online and multiplayer gaming, in particular, as a valid substitute for real-life socialization. Benny (19) explained his experiences during the lockdown:

Yes, I think I’ve been gaming more and been more conscious about that ‘now I’m playing with my friends’ rather than just playing by myself whenever I have a few minutes available, right? I’ve probably been thinking that I’m playing with the mates as a way of hanging out now that we haven’t been able to catch up physically, like we used to.

Interviewer: Has it been cool to have gaming during these weird months, where you haven’t seen each other physically? Has it been nice?

Benny: It’s very nice in the sense that you can connect, you have something to gather around that isn’t just talking together or writing together, but that you can like do something together.

Rather than just facilitating talking with one’s friends, gaming served as a shared activity—something to do together. Playing and having fun together in an online space differentiates gaming from other forms of online interaction, including activities on social media (Kowert, 2015; Marston & Kowert, 2020). Laura (19) explained how she and two friends rediscovered playing the game Minecraft during the lockdown and how the game again created a social space for her and her friends. When asked about the game, she replied with the following:

We played it when we were younger. That is kind of fun, and then we can talk together at the same time so it’s actually very nice and cozy… we can get in there together and then we can play the same mini-games.

Besides playing Minecraft together, Laura and her friends simultaneously talked with each other on other platforms, such as Messenger, during the game, commenting on each other’s gaming or just talking about other everyday things. Other female interviewees also told us that they turned to gaming during the lockdown because that was where many of their friends convened. However, some of the girls expressed that, mainly, boys created servers and played multiplayer games, whereas girls more often played single-player games, like the Sims. According to the interviewees, this gender difference was consistent during the lockdown. Between games, single-player girls sometimes talked with their female friends playing the same game and their gaming experiences.

Some of the young people, who, under normal (pre-COVID-19) circumstances, gamed mostly for shorter periods, told us that during the societal lockdown, gaming provided an opportunity to share an activity with other young people. However, there were also gendered differences; females, in particular, related to how it could
be difficult to join game servers created by males or how their hardware lacked the power of the more experienced male gamers (Crawford & Gosling, 2005). Nonetheless, both genders conceived of gaming during the lockdown as a ‘space’ for social interaction. They did not relate fundamental changes to this space because of COVID-19, but a few interviewees explained that larger servers and new games had emerged during the lockdown and ‘expanded’ the space, enabling even more social activity than before.

Thus, the interviewees, thus, conceived of ‘gaming’ as a ‘third place’ (next to school and home) that could act as a site for young people’s communities beyond locality (Crawford, 2011). Many of the interviewees felt that their need for a third place where they could be social had increased significantly during the lockdown. The interviewees also appreciated that the social space of gaming legitimized the increase in gaming time during the societal lockdown. They thought that catching up with friends online allowed them to game more, and that their parents tended to accept their gaming because of the same social aspect. Gaming became ‘more okay’, as Benny (19) put it:

 […] I just feel that everything is so boring when you’re just gaming by yourself all the time, right? That is also why, during corona, you’ve felt that it was somewhat more okay to be gaming because it had that social aspect that you could even use as a reason for gaming.

Benny felt that he could not justify hours of daily gaming before the lockdown, but during the lockdown, because gaming became a central way of socializing, the legitimacy of the activity became more unquestioned. However, some of the interviewees also told us that parents do not necessarily understand just how social gaming during lockdown actually is. Rane, a 17-year-old boy, reported that during the COVID-19 crisis, gaming had been a way ‘to keep in touch with [friends]’, and that he often played solely to talk to them:

When I’m going down to play with my friends, I usually tell [my parents] that I’m going down to talk to my friends. And they’re always like: ‘You mean, you’re going down to play with them?’ But that’s not what I mean—it’s mostly just to talk to them.

Thereby, gaming became a way of coping with the lockdown—a way of being with your friends in a fun, interactive and recognizable way. Not only did gaming maintain existing relationships during the lockdown, but according to the young people, it also provided an opportunity to create new connections. An experienced gamer, Ronni (17), said that his gaming routines had not changed much, but that he had extended his friend group, that is, that he had started gaming with more people from his existing network that he normally would not talk to.

In particular, the more experienced and habitual gamers expressed a feeling of ease and naturalness by substituting face-to-face sociality with online socializing in online gaming. Those who gamed more sporadically reported rather extensive changes in their gaming practices during the lockdown, often in terms of an increase in their gaming. By comparison, the habitual gamers experienced only minor disruptions in their gaming routines, like switching to other or new platforms or trying out new games. During the lockdown, Noah (15), an experienced gamer, switched to multiplayer games rather than single player because ‘it is a great medium
to connect over’. When asked if gaming helped him during the lockdown, he replied with the following:

Definitely! Discord—that a lot of us uses on PCs, where you can talk to each other—has definitely been used a lot more than I used to. I mean, I would say that being a gamer during the pandemic has been more useful because it made you fell less lonely. Especially, playing games where you gather around without having to sit next to each other. A lot of us gamers are used to doing it that way. So maybe you haven’t felt quite as alone as those who don’t have been gaming.

Being ‘used to doing it that way’ minimizes a feeling of loss and turmoil, and most of the experienced gamers largely gathered in the same groups and in the same familiar ways as before the lockdown. Later in the interview, Noah elaborated on why his socializing had not changed much during the lockdown:

[…] the friendships you create through gaming are friendships that don’t depend on you seeing each other all the time but where it’s enough to just talk. But just because gaming doesn’t require you to [be together physically] it doesn’t mean that those friendships aren’t legitimate. They are just structured in ways that do not depend on physical contact. You’re fine by not being together. This is also why it’s been fine during these corona times for a lot of people who game together because nothing has changed substantially. It’s the same because our social unity is primarily verbal. It doesn’t need to be physical. It doesn’t make that big of a difference, because we are just as fine with either.

Several interviewees indicated that gaming had been central for preventing loneliness during the lockdown, and the habitual gamers, in particular, explicated the benefits of existing online friendships and communities. According to Benny (19), gaming created a sense of being part of a ‘pack’ and of having ‘a people’:

Finally, I just want to add that humans are tribal animals, right? That might be one of the reasons why we are so happy to have a group that we can find ourselves within. And say like: ‘this is my people’. I definitely think that’s important when asking why you would want to spend time gaming.

For Benny and many of the other interviewees, gaming was a way of being part of a group. This group can be a tight friendship group, a group of classmates or just a group put together at random in the game, but it can create the feeling of being part of something bigger. What binds the groups together in gaming are often urges to distinguish one’s own group from other groups—a divide into ‘us’ and ‘them’. A strong solidarity between those in a group can be created through a clear resistance against other groups, but often, games are also crafted so that the players must ultimately give up the social bonds in their group to progress and win as an individual player (Cooley, 2019). Although group formations and maintenance rely on the ideological and architectural constraints of game design, this is not something that our interviewees highlighted as constraints for creating and maintaining socialization in their games.

These findings show how gaming has been a central way of maintaining friendships during the lockdown and creating a sense of community. In an opinion piece, Marston and Kowert (2020) argue that the various benefits of in-game socialization might work to reduce stress, depression and a sense of loneliness, and that gaming could
become a useful tool for mitigating some of the negative impacts of COVID-19 for groups with no gaming experience, like older adults. This suggests that the shift in modes of socializing varied between young people, and that the possibility of using gaming for socializing could be more available for some young people than for others. Although the more experienced gamers experienced a slight disruption in their online social friendships and online socializing routines, other young people had to access new territories and cultures.

Discussion

The data reveal that in relation to gaming, young people use different strategies, maintain different standards and follow different pathways. Some are very determined, while others improvise a lot. Parental guidance (or supervision) and schools’ approaches to online media during school hours vary, too. These variations suggest that to many young people, gaming is a normalized everyday practice that fits into other everyday practices. Gaming takes time and is often a ‘taken-for-granted routine practice’ that does not necessarily need a lot of preparation or reflection (Shove et al., 2010). The impact of societal lockdowns on everyday routines also affected young people’s gaming practices.

The lockdown highlighted young people’s active use of and need for ‘third places’ outside school and home life (Crawford, 2011). Actively engaging in gaming during the lockdown created ‘third spaces’ that allowed young people to develop practices of hanging out with each other and even making new friends. Young people’s gaming activities during the lockdown contain a broad spectrum of different activities with different aims, like being with friends and making time pass in fun and meaningful ways. Thus, our study contributes to the literature finding that gaming activities are not merely about in-game activities but connect to the young people’s everyday lives (such as Kahila et al., 2020).

In some circumstances, the lockdown also provided young people with opportunities to engage more deeply with gaming for more extensive times than their regular everyday routines would have allowed. These opportunities include time to explore new games and create new online friendships (see also Coward-Gibbs, 2020). At the same time, young people experienced that their gaming became a more legitimized activity, challenging the generational micro-politics of gaming. Popular framing of gaming as a problematic leisure escape is challenged by the urge for everyone to be online, using online platforms to manage everyday commitments.

For our participants, gaming during the lockdown created a sense of freedom and escape because it offered meaningful ways of making time pass; it became something to do in a situation characterized by nothing to do. Where adults, as depicted by Yuen (2020), may find it difficult to detach from the chaos created by the COVID-19 pandemic, gaming provided a way to detach for many of our participants. In particular, experienced gamers found that the new timelessness expanded their room for absorption and creativity. However, those who only took up gaming because of the lockdown also talked about how the gaming actively contributed to their well-being. Both groups highlighted the importance of having a shared practice to engage in during the lockdown and how gaming is both a way of passing time while playing and a way of socializing.
Although the interviewed young people were predominantly positive about their gaming practices during the lockdown, these practices entailed potential risks, such as social isolation, displaced sleep, physical inactivity and dietary problems, decreased well-being and conflicts. According to King et al. (2020, p. 185), young people, in more vulnerable life situations, may increase gaming time to relieve pandemic-related stress, but to vulnerable young people, ‘self-isolation restrictions may inhibit help-seeking and present barriers for those in treatment’.

Our analyses suggest that although young people sought a sense of escapism during the lockdown, using gaming as a way of coping, they also found gaming to be a useful way of maintaining friendships. Multiplayer games provide a social platform to meet with friends and friendship groups and even as a way to meet new people (Zhu, 2020). Thus, gaming became a way to continue or establish social contact with each other during the lockdown, and, as such, most young people saw it as a positive practice for reducing feelings of boredom, restlessness and loneliness.

Conclusion

Public discourse as well as research often depict young people’s online gaming as a risk practice related to diverse and dire consequences. Additionally, the increase in gaming worldwide during the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020 ignited adults’ concerns about the potential long-term negative consequences of gaming on young people’s well-being (King et al., 2020). However, as we show in the current article, to a large degree, young people experienced the changes in their gaming practices during lockdown as highly beneficial. Gaming helped fulfil the increased need for entertainment brought about by the ongoing (temporal) restructuring of their everyday lives. For young people confined to their households, gaming proved to be something to do, thus creating a much-sought-for escape from both adult supervision and the concerns and fear instilled by the ongoing pandemic.

Although some young people spent a lot of their time during the lockdown gaming—even to the extent where they would talk about ‘losing track of time’—others found that gaming provided an option to escape boredom. Therefore, the increased time spent gaming was not just a new and liberating experience, it was also a practice for potentially disconnecting from the (boring) enclosure of everyday life during the pandemic.

Despite the potentially negative influence that extensive gaming has on some young people, it first and foremost provides a much-needed, legitimate and familiar social space to create new connections and maintain social life with other young people. During the lockdown, different games proved to be the ‘place’ where young people met and hung out, providing something to do in the face of extensive spare time. For some young people, their gaming practices were expanded, like taking place during school hours, but for other young people, the lockdown led to finding and creating new gaming practices. They tried out new games, rediscovered old games and combined games with social media, using their digital skills to find new ways of maintaining social bonds with other young people. Although there were clear gender differences in the strategies developed by boys and girls, there were also many similarities in how they saw gaming primarily as a positive practice that held great social value. The interviewed boys and girls tended to prefer different
games, playing mostly with same-gender gamers. However, both boys and girls increased their gaming activity and generally saw gaming as a central substitute for hanging out with their friends.

With these findings, we demonstrate that the increase in young people’s gaming during the lockdown should not lead to a moral panic but, instead, to an increased interest in how young people—through their digital skills and playfulness at large—manage to adapt socially and individually to the unprecedented state of emergency created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the success of young people’s gaming practices as a way of mitigating some of the negative impacts of the lockdown, it is possible that gaming increasingly can also be seen as a pro-social practice.

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