

Fighting the Boss Battle: How Does Gaming Affect Relationships?

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Video gaming (also called, gaming) is a contemporary topic that affects individuals, as well as romantic partnerships. Many studies have found that gaming has a detrimental effect on romantic partnerships. With a small body of literature and most of the research focused on the depreciative side, it seems that the current literature does not tell the whole story about the impact of game play on partnerships. I recruited partners in which all individuals in the committed relationship(s) identified as gamers. Semi-structured interview data was analyzed using transcendental phenomenology. There were two themes related to how gameplay interacts with the participants partnerships, with ten and three subthemes respectively. Clinical implications and future research will be discussed.

*Keywords:* Couple relationships, video game, technology

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Get off the computer, I’m talking to you!” a partner yells, from somewhere in the house, while the other grits their teeth and exits out of the video game. Video gaming has become a popular pastime for many people, evidenced by the over 2.69 billion gamers worldwide (Gilbert, 2020). Game revenues continue to climb, generating over \$159.3 billion, with people of all genders enjoying games (Gilbert, 2020). Due to the popularity of video gaming for all genders, frequent and continued video game play as a hobby while in an intimate relationship has been noted as a source of contention and aggression for some couples (Coyne et al., 2012). Further, some couples even report that video game play has contributed to relationship dissolution (Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015).

### **Study Focus & Importance**

In this study, I sought to examine the experiences of partnerships that share video gaming as a hobby. Most research on the effects of video game play on partnerships have historically focused on Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), and although some studies acknowledge small, beneficial effects of video gaming (Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015), most studies focus on the detrimental effects of video gaming on relationships. Games have a reputation for being highly interactive and time-intensive, often leading players to become absorbed in the game. Problems identified include lack of time spent with family and partners (Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015), relational aggression caused by excessive media use (Coyne et al., 2012), and attachment avoidance (Limke-McLean, 2018). Overall, the common themes of time playing video games and the violence levels of the chosen game(s) were prominent in negative impacts on relationships in some older studies (Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018).

While there may be negative impacts of video game play for some couples, there may also be positive effects (Ahlstrom et al., 2012). Studies show contradictory findings to Coyne and colleague's (2012), assertion that gaming may not be associated with relationship quality or aggression (Bradford et al., 2019). Further, researchers have found that partners may learn communication skills from in-game interactions, which may be useful in fostering connection to their partner outside the game (Hertlein & Hawkins, 2015). However, the number of studies that support the negative impacts of technology and partnerships overwhelms the number of studies that identify positive effects.

Existing literature on gaming in romantic partnerships sample white, cisgender, heterosexual, married couples, narrowing the generalizability of the results (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018). A broader, more inclusive perspective on gaming and romantic partnership research is needed, not only to expand the literature, but to offer a holistic, systemic understanding of gaming in romantic partnerships. An inclusive study on the relationship between gaming and partnerships offers findings that are more generalizable to LGBTQIA partnerships and/or polyamorous partnerships, who are typically underrepresented in research of intimate relationships. This study sought to remedy that gap by purposefully recruiting an inclusive sample of participants so that the research was more applicable to different relational structures.

### **Inquirer's Stake**

This project is meaningful for me as a video gamer who is currently in a partnership. I have been involved in the gaming community for years, and the negative perceptions of video gaming has been overwhelming. Video gaming has been blamed for mental health problems, lack of socialization, and many relational issues present day. I have found a great community

through video gaming and know others who have as well. As a queer, polyamorous, neurodivergent gamer, I wanted to develop this study from the viewpoint of a person who is in the population.

### **Inquiry Framework & Study Boundaries**

Using transcendental phenomenology, I sought to understand the lived experiences of people who are in a partnership and play video games. Transcendental phenomenology allows for a greater richness of participant experience, building a new perspective on video gaming that gives this community a more prominent voice (Moustakas, 1994). This research was guided by general theory on relationship satisfaction and functioning, as well as theory related to technology and relationships. I kept the lens more general to invite a variety of experiences from the participants related to gaming and their relationship(s). Potential biases in previous literature may have contributed to the researchers finding primarily detrimental effects of video gaming on romantic partnerships. This study was intentionally created with the recognition that video gaming could have many different impacts on relationships.

In this study, I sought only to examine partnerships in which all partners played video games. As previous literature has focused on relationships in which gaming was not a shared hobby, this study was created to focus on gamer partnerships. I also invited LGBTQIA+ and polyamorous participants to participate to gather data from multiple relationship types. This was important to have more generalizable results among different gender identities, sexual orientations, and relationship types. This study did not address any intersections between infidelity and technology, nor did it seek to understand individual gaming behavior. This study focused on gaming in partnerships, as a relational experience.

## **Summary**

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of gamers in partnerships. Previous literature addressed discrepancies in partnerships where gaming is not a shared hobby for primarily cisgender, heterosexual, married couples. This study explored the experiences of partnerships where gaming is a shared hobby, to better understand their experiences and build a foundation for further research into this area. Such findings will contribute valuable insight to the growing literature on gaming and relationships, and to couple therapy treatment providers.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### General Technology Outcomes

Technology is an integral part of daily life, as most people spend an average of almost seven hours a day using devices that connect to the internet (Eira, 2019). More than three-quarters of the world's population use smartphones, making the internet handheld and easily accessible by everyone, everywhere (O'Dea, 2022). As a result of widespread usage, there has been a growing body of literature on the effects of technology on people. Technology has been shown to have benefits in several arenas, especially for neurodivergent people (Ringland & Wolf, 2021) as assistive technologies. Some studies have shown that the use of social media may help young adults calm down when they have high stress levels in general (Griffioen et al., 2021). Other studies note that some technologies also help increase physical activity in children (Biddiss & Irwin, 2010).

One of the most common topics in social technology research, "phubbing," which is a combination of "phone" and "snubbing," is a phenomenon where someone ignores a person who is in their physical company by using a technological device, usually a smartphone. Phubbing often results in distress for the person who is being ignored or "phubbed," as they experience a lack of attention from the person on their phone (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018). There is also a concern for teenagers and young adults, as to the effects of social media on their lives. Phubbing and fear of missing out on new, exciting developments are also associated with higher social media use in the workplace, which also has effects on workplace civility, creativity, and exhaustion (Tandon et al., 2022).

The impact of these phenomena has been studied in terms of couples' relationships (Drouin & McDaniel, 2021; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; McDaniel & Drouin, 2019)

and parenting (Lippold et al., 2022; McDaniel & Coyne, 2015; McDaniel et al., 2017; McDaniel & Radesky, 2018; Newsham et al., 2020). The term for technological interference in interpersonal relationships is, “technofence” (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Technology, especially phone use, has been shown to increase depression for mothers (Newsham et al., 2018), which impacts the quality of their relationship with their child. Technofence has been shown to increase the child’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). More technology interference decreased coparenting quality and lowered relationship satisfaction for couples, which creates a concern for the couple’s relationship (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; McDaniel et al., 2017).

### **Romantic Partners and Technology Outcomes**

Many studies investigate the negative impacts of technology use in couple relationships related to technofence (Drouin & McDaniel, 2021; McDaniel et al., 2017; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; McDaniel & Drouin, 2019). Greater interference from phones has been connected to higher conflict over technology use and lower daily relationship quality (McDaniel & Drouin, 2019). Partners may use technology individually at routine times during the day where both partners share the same space, such as bedtime, which is often not an ideal scenario for partners, as technology can capture their partner’s attention (Drouin & McDaniel, 2021). Technology use can also increase distrust in one’s partner, as phones especially have become a common avenue for cheating and an easy way to access pornography (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). Others are uncomfortable with the confusion that comes with communicating via text and the feeling of a superficial connection (Murray & Campbell, 2015).

Technology use has been a pervasive issue that younger generations had to face early in their lives. Many younger people may have implicit rules surrounding technology use, given that

they have grown up with technology, and thus technoference may not be as much of an issue in their relationship (Pickens & Whiting, 2019). These implicit rules may lead to greater ability for partners to use technology to benefit their relationship(s). The greatest beneficial impacts of technology seem to come from shared technology use in the partnership, which can increase relationship satisfaction, along with the partners having more sex and greater sexual and life satisfaction (Drouin & McDaniel, 2021). Technology is also highly beneficial in long-distance relationships, as technology makes it easier for partners to connect with one another during periods of separation (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Murray & Campbell, 2015). Shared use of technology during leisure time has been found to benefit relationships, instead of interfering (Drouin & McDaniel, 2021; Hassenzahl et al., 2012; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Murray & Campbell, 2015). One of the most popular shared leisure activities, which has great potential for benefiting relationships of all kinds, is video gaming.

### **Individual Gaming Research**

“You’re dead buddy,” he said, fingers moving furiously over the controls as he fires his gun at the other player, whose character drops to the ground, dead. When people think of gamers, the image that comes to mind is a teenage or young adult man, playing a game on a gaming console that requires skill in eye-hand coordination, and where one of the only objectives is killing enemies (Williams et al., 2008). Gaming is a popular hobby, with thousands of games available, and over 100 planned to be released in 2022 (Sirani, 2022). Players range in age, ethnicity, race, gender, and ability, with those who have a higher income being more likely to play games (Statista, 2021). Games can be played on a smartphone and popular gaming-specific devices such as XBOX, PlayStation, and Nintendo Switch consoles. The most popular platform is Windows-based desktop or laptop (PC) (Statista, 2018), many of which contain updated

computer parts that allow for faster game downloads, less lag in-game, and the ability to play games with ultra-realistic graphics. These benefits allow players to become more immersed in game worlds.

Games fall into a wide variety of genres, with some of the more popular ones being Massively Multiplayer Online (MMOs), single-player open-world role-playing games, or games with multiplayer functions that allow small teams to play together to reach an objective (Ingram, 2022). Many of these games have storylines or world lore, which makes several games like an interactive, virtual, visual novel where players can decide the direction the story takes. Although many games, such as the Assassin's Creed franchise, have a large focus on objectives that require players to kill non-player characters, there has been a growth in popularity of more "peaceful" games such as Animal Crossing, which focus more on building, decorating, and/or farming (Ingram, 2022). Gaming provides many avenues for connection in-game, with many multiplayer games featuring text chat and voice chat functions. However, despite the large number of gamers and the potential for connection in game worlds and in multiplayer games, a large amount of literature is concerned with the negative impacts of gaming on individuals' social opportunities.

**Popular Gaming Research.** Many people are concerned with the amount of time people spend gaming, where a player could spend hours at a time in game (Hyunsuk, et al., 2020; King et al., 2017; Király et al., 2017). Gaming is an attractive option to overcome boredom, and neurodivergent people are more likely to spend more time in game, as it offers an easy source for rewards (Hyunsuk et al., 2020). These rewards, from beating levels, to earning a new rank, to defeating a difficult boss battle, are meant to engage the gamer and bring them into the game world, causing to them losing track of time, similar to when people become absorbed in reading

a good book. When in-game, players can experience time-blindness, as many rewards are earned by leveling up or completing quests in-game, which could take hours, depending on the game (King et al., 2017). However, this is not the only concern researchers have about gaming.

The growing body of research on the social impacts of gaming has expanded to focus on over involvement in games and game worlds, includes gaming disorder. Gaming disorder has been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an addiction-based disorder but has not yet been incorporated into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders (DSM) by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2022; WHO, 2020). However, many studies related to the social impacts of gaming focus on gaming disorder (Jeong et al., 2020; André et al., 2020) or identify a connection between gaming and aggression (Anderson et al., 2010; Jeong et al., 2020; Prescott et al., 2017). Many of these studies sample men in their study, who are more likely to be addicted to gaming and be aggressive in-game (Anderson et al., 2010; André et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2020; Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015; Prescott et al., 2017)

**Gaming and Gender Minorities.** Stereotypically, gaming has been seen as a male-oriented hobby, with the depiction of a man, on the couch eating potato chips and drinking soda, a controller in hand, as the default image of a gamer. This impacts not only societal views on gaming and potential researcher bias in gaming studies, but also influences people who do not identify as men in-game (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015; Paaßen et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2016). Although almost half of gamers in the United States identify as women as of 2021, it is extremely common for women to hide their identity while playing multiplayer games, especially MMOs (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015; Statista, 2022). This can include having a masculine-sounding username, a masculine-character, and not engaging in voice chats in-game with strangers. In-game, women are stereotyped as poor gamers at best, and harassed at worst, which

can include verbal and sexual harassment from male-identifying teammates and opponents alike (Kasumovic & Kuzenekoff, 2015; Paaßen et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2016). These outcomes discourage many women from playing multiplayer games or MMOs, as the environment could become potentially contentious or even unsafe if the game involves playing with randomized teams (Kasumovic & Kuzenekoff, 2015).

Additionally, the LGBTQIA+ community has been studied far less than women as gamers. The game industry has routinely left out LGBTQIA+ representation in their games (Kohlburn et al., 2023), as such, LGBTQIA+ gamers have not been studied. Many of the available studies on the LGBTQIA+ community and games largely focuses on representation in video games (Pozo et al., 2017; Ruberg, 2017; Ruberg, 2018) and the consumer behavior in corporations that create video games who do or do not have LGBTQIA+ supportive policies (Parshaknov et al., 2022). There is also no research at all on polyamorous video gamers, which could be due to polyamory not yet being accepted in the larger United States culture.

### **Gaming and Romantic Partnerships**

Gaming has previously been studied in the context of couple relationships, notably with heterosexual, cisgender couples where the male partner is the primary gamer (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018). There are cultural stereotypes of men in cisgender, heterosexual relationships who game excessively and neglect their partner in the process, which may influence bias in the literature that currently addresses gaming and romantic partnerships (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015). World of Warcraft is a popular MMO that many previous researchers examine as MMOs often take hours of in-game time to advance and complete quests (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015). This time intensive type of gaming has led to studies that

connect gaming to lower relationship satisfaction, less intimacy between partners, and more conflict (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018).

Studies often reference the large amounts of time spent gaming to support the idea that gaming increases relationship conflict, and increases aggression particularly for men (Coyne et al., 2012). While men are more likely to become addicted to gaming (André et al., 2020), and are typically blamed for too much time spent gaming, casual gamers are not as likely to experience the negative effects of gaming on their relationships (Bradford et al., 2018). Studies report that gaming causes people to neglect their partners and family and increase conflict about time spent gaming (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015). However, many of these results were obtained from a focus on one partner, usually male, who games excessively while the other partner does not game at all (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018). In contrast, gamers in partnerships who play for different amounts of time had more positive reports of gaming on their relationship (Ahlstrom et al., 2012).

Recent studies indicate gaming holds potential benefits for couple relationships. When all partners in the relationship are gamers, even when there is a difference in the amount of time they play, gaming does not seem to have a negative impact on the relationship (Ahlstrom et al., 2012). Many studies that have focused on technology use have also noted that shared leisure activities can benefit the relationship, which can apply to gaming, as there are many games that have a multiplayer option or where players can join a team together (Drouin & McDaniel, 2021; Hassenzahl et al., 2012; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Murray & Campbell, 2015).

## **Purpose of Study**

Many studies that investigate gaming and romantic partnerships, and even those that examine technology, have previously focused on how gaming and technology worsen a relationship (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Drouin & McDaniel, 2021; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2017; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; McDaniel & Drouin, 2019; Murray & Campbell, 2015). These studies identified neglect of romantic partners and family, and participants reportedly become so absorbed in the world of technology that they forget the relationships outside of the game (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015). There are also positive impacts that technology can have, however, this body of research is small (Hassenzahl et al., 2012; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Campbell & Murray, 2015; Murray & Campbell, 2015).

Many relationally focused studies have also had participants who were monogamous, cisgender, heterosexual couples in middle-age, where one partner games while the other is not a gamer at all (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018). As LGBTQIA+ and polyamorous gamers have been underrepresented and under researched, this study provides new insight for both LGBTQIA+ game studies and relational literature. The present study aims to provide an inclusive perspective on gaming and romantic partnerships, first by providing an inclusive study structure that allows for LGBTQIA and polycule partnerships to participate, as they are underrepresented in the research. Second, this study seeks to set aside assumptions about the benefits or consequences of gaming and romantic partnerships to give the participants the chance to tell their stories. The research question that guided the present study is, “What are the shared, lived experiences of partnerships who have gaming as a shared hobby, and how do these experiences affect their relationships?”

### CHAPTER III: METHOD

I interviewed relationship partners about their lived experiences of video gaming in their relationships. Participants were recruited using multiple social media sites, including gamer-specific websites (e.g., Twitch and Discord). To be eligible for this study, participants were adults over 18 or over, in a committed relationship, and all partners in the relationship must identify as current gamers. When potential participants emailed the researcher, they were given an online link to the consent form, and a pre-interview survey after the researcher confirmed that they met the inclusion criteria. Once completed, the researcher scheduled the Zoom interview. All participants who confirmed that they met the inclusion criteria completed the pre-interview survey and the interview, except for one partnership who completed the pre-survey and was unable to schedule an interview. The participants were unable to schedule the interview due to technology and distance issues that prevented a partner from being able to access Zoom. The interview was semi-structured, with standard questions, as well as probing and follow-up questions. For the semi-structured interview guide, see Appendix A. Interview questions related to how gaming is involved in their relationship and everyday life. The interview was recorded using Zoom, transcribed using Zoom, and edited by a member of the research team. The research team used Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenology to analyze the data, which reduces researcher bias and privileges participants' voices. During the process of interviewing and data analysis, the research team kept memos and an audit trail to ensure trustworthiness and rigor. Memos were kept to reflect on biases that the interviewer and research team may have had about relationships and gaming. An audit trail was kept detailing all methodological decisions throughout the study duration.

## **Researcher Reflexivity**

I am a Master's student in a Couple, Marriage, and Family program, and identify as neurodivergent, partnered, genderfluid, and White. I identify as a gamer and play a wide variety of games. I have extensive knowledge of common gaming platforms and related applications. As a long-time gamer, I am familiar with gaming culture, which gives me a more personal relationship to much of the research and the literature used in the study. I enjoy playing video games with my own partner. In this study, I hoped to find similar joy among my participants, but deliberately created the study to allow for any experience for that reason. I recognize that my experiences are not the same as others, and that experiences are never entirely positive or negative. Being aware of my own bias from my experiences, I took many precautions to ensure that my bias would not interfere with the participants experiences during the interviews and data analysis. One of these was reminding myself of my bias during memos, in order to continually remind myself of my bias, and not become complacent during the collection and analysis of data. I also reviewed literature related to gaming, both for individuals and relationships, as well as more general relationship satisfaction and functioning, especially in how they relate to technology. In this study, I also used a rigorous, established qualitative method that encourages reflections on researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Participants**

There were 24 participants in this study across ten relationship structures. In this study, we use the term relationship structure to describe a constellation of people who are in relationship with each other, as we had polycules and dyads participate in this study. I recruited relationship structures in which all partners within the partnership(s) identified as gamers. Participants were recruited by using social media and gamer-specific social media websites

including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitch, and Discord. Twitch is a popular streaming web application that allows people to stream video games, craft-making procedures, and other activities. Discord is a chat application specifically designed for gamers but can be used in a variety of contexts. Individuals or groups create “servers,” which typically include chat and voice channels. Once a server is created, people can be invited to join the server and form a community. Both sites are frequently used by gamers to form a gamer community. This community component makes Twitch and Discord ideal places to recruit gamers to participate in the study. Recruitment took place over seven months, with multiple posts across all recruitment sites.

When I recruited participants for this study, I largely relied on my own visibility as a queer and polyamorous gamer to encourage a more diverse sample to reach out to participate. I used my own accounts on various platforms to promote the study, and as I am a content creator who is openly queer and polyamorous, many participants felt more comfortable to participate in the study. On these social media sites, participants could check my account and previous content to ensure that I was part of these communities. Many of my friends, who are also openly queer and/or polyamorous, shared the study as well. I also encouraged LGBTQIA+ and polyamorous partnerships to contact me to participate in the advertisement, ensuring that they did not assume that I was only looking for cisgender, heterosexual, monogamous partnerships. TikTok, a newer social media platform, had the highest engagement for my posts. The app’s algorithm is well-known among users as being incredibly accurate in finding audiences who will be interested in niche content. This may have contributed to the higher numbers of LGBTQIA and polyamorous participants in this study.

As with any recruitment strategy, this strategy has limitations and strengths. Limitations include the possibility that some gamers may not be reached through these sites and may use in-game chat rooms and voice channels which are inaccessible to me. Another limitation includes the possibility that the convenience sample may be more like me in terms of gaming habits and relationship composition. However, there are many strengths to convenience sampling strategies, including the potential for snowballing and being able to screen for information-rich participants (Patton, 1990). I asked participants to share my recruitment document with other partnerships they may know. Potential snowball sampling may have reached participants who are information-rich and fit the eligibility requirements. This eligibility criteria allowed me to screen for information-rich participants among potential participants, which added more impact to the study (Patton, 1990). A potential limitation of this strategy is that it may have resulted in a homogenous sample for race and education.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

The inclusion criteria for the present study were adult participants (over age 18), who self-report as being in a committed relationship, in which both partners identify as current gamers. For the study, I defined a committed relationship as three months or longer, with an intent to continue the relationship in the long-term. The minimum of three months allows for time for the partners to get to know each other and develop their relationship to gaming as partners. I included partnerships that cohabitated and those who were not cohabitating, to allow for partnerships that engaged in long-distance relationships and polyamorous partners that did not live together. I recruited and sampled individuals who are in a partnership in which all partners identify as current gamers. This provides insight into partner functioning where all partners have intimate knowledge of gaming and understand various aspects of gaming that a

non-gamer partner may have difficulty understanding. Emphasizing “current” gaming ensured that participants’ experiences of gaming, and the effects on their relationship are current rather than in the past.

In the present study, the definition of “gamer” was intentionally broad. I have a broad definition of “gamer,” including a wide range of platforms (i.e., XBOX, PC, phone, etc.) and a wide range of game genres (i.e., life simulators, platformers, first-person shooters, etc.). Many people who identify as women tend to play games that are more peaceful in nature, or primarily play on their phones, and thus does not typically fit the “gamer” stereotype (Williams et al., 2008). The broad definition of “gamer” ensures that multiple genders can identify with the “gamer” identity. Much of the gaming research has sampled heterosexual couples with discrepancies in gaming frequency (i.e., one partner does not game, while the other is a regular gamer) (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018). Intentionally broadening this definition allowed me to recruit a more diverse sample that is inclusive of all genders and relationships to gaming.

## **Instruments**

**Pre-Interview Survey.** Participants who confirmed that they met the inclusion criteria were asked to complete the study consent form, and a pre-interview survey using Qualtrics. The pre-interview survey provided a space for each participant to give me a pseudonym to use during the interview to protect their anonymity. Each partner in the partnership(s) were asked to provide demographic information including age, gender identity, sexual orientation, education, ethnicity, and race, as well as gaming information about the partners. They were also asked about their relationship length with their current partner(s), as well as whether they are married, and if they

are in a long-distance relationship. 26 participants filled out the pre-survey, but only 24 participated in the interview, due to one partnership being unable to schedule an interview.

Each partner answered questions about their gaming habits, including how many hours per week they engage in game play, the platforms they use (i.e., Xbox, PlayStation, phone, etc.), and what genres of games they play (i.e., MMOs, life simulators, role-playing games, etc.). They were also asked if they stream their game play on Twitch, and if they answer “Yes,” were asked how much they stream in hours per week. Each partner was asked whether they play together more with their partner (i.e., as a team in an MMO) or if they engage in parallel play (i.e., both partners are in the same room, but playing different games).

**Interview Guide.** A semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions was the primary instrument used to structure this interview. The interview questions focused on the partners’ gaming experiences together, and the role of gaming in their relationship and daily lives. I asked partners to describe the connections they see between their gaming habits and their relationship. This included questions on how gaming might benefit or challenge their relationship, as well as their own views on skills they may have gained from gaming that transfer to their relationship. I also asked a question regarding specific experiences with cooperative play and/or parallel play. Parallel play, for this study, is defined as partners playing in separate game worlds in the same space, whether that be in-person or via a chat program such as Discord. For the complete interview guide, see Appendix A. Sample questions included: “In what ways has gaming enhanced and/or challenged your relationship?” and “How has gaming affected your relationship dynamic?” Interviews did not last more than one hour.

## **Procedure**

After reviewing the recruitment document posted on video gaming specific websites, interested participants emailed me. I ensured the participants meet the inclusion criteria and emailed the participants a link to the consent form and pre-interview survey using Qualtrics. Once completed, I identified a date and time for all partners to participate in a partner-level Zoom interview. The interview included all gaming partners in the relationship. I chose Zoom to conduct the interviews on because of the accessibility of the platform, and to allow for more geographic diversity within the sample. Zoom also has a “Cloud Recording” service, which enabled Zoom to record and transcribe the interviews, making data analysis much quicker. The Zoom interview lasted a maximum of one hour. Though participants completed the consent form by this point, before recording began, I obtained verbal consent from all partners for participating in the interview, and they consented to being recorded. After beginning the recording, I asked the partners to introduce themselves using their pseudonyms and preferred pronouns. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by Zoom. Members of the research team reviewed and edited the transcript to correct grammatical errors, add notes about body language, tone, and inflection. During the data analysis process (before and after the interviews), the research team and I wrote memos that reflected our positionality to the data to reduce researcher bias.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenology involves collecting descriptive data about a person’s own perceptions and way of viewing the world (Taylor et al., 2015). This approach prioritizes participants’ voices and calls the researcher(s) to ensure that their own bias does not unduly influence the data (Taylor et al., 2015). The researchers also extract themes from patterns that arise from the data, instead of

attempting to fit them against current theories and hypotheses (Taylor et al., 2015).

Phenomenology also seeks to understand participants within their contexts, not just as a set of variables within a particular situation (Taylor et al., 2015).

This methodology supports a holistic and relational view of participants' lives as it relates to gaming. As much of the literature on video gaming and romantic partnerships has focused on detrimental outcomes, a holistic approach allows for findings that add a richer and more nuanced understanding of video gaming and romantic relationships (Campbell & Murray, 2015; Murray & Campbell, 2015; Pickens & Whiting, 2019; McDaniel et al., 2017). As I designed this study, I reflected on my own bias towards gaming and relationships. My own bias leans towards the positive experiences as they pertain to gaming and relationships, as I have had many positive experiences while gaming with my partner and many of my friends. I also tend to hold a more optimistic view of relationships in general, with a preference at looking for strengths and positive experiences within relationships. Transcendental phenomenology is also an excellent fit for minoritized populations, which allowed for our LGBTQIA+ and polyamorous participants to share their experiences, and have the researchers report and represent those experiences with minimal researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994).

To support participant confidentiality and privacy, the interview transcripts were de-identified. The interviews were identified by the date and time the interview took place. For example, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022, at 6:00 p.m. was denoted as 050522600. Researchers reviewed the transcription and compared it to the recording of the interview, to make sure the transcription was accurate. Once the transcripts were ready for data analysis, I divided the transcripts among the members of the research team. I, as the interviewer, coded all transcripts, and each transcript was also coded by one additional member of the research team. Each researcher read the

transcript in its entirety before beginning to code. This process allowed each researcher to become familiar with the participants' experience. The research assistants were only involved in editing the transcripts and initial coding.

The research assistants and I reviewed each transcript and engaged in line-by-line open coding, completing the first two interviews before I created a codebook to simplify initial data analysis. If there were any discrepancies between initial codes, the research assistant and I would discuss the discrepancy to come to an agreement. An example of one of these moments was discussing a line where a partner had referred to their partner as a "built-in mod" when discussing streaming. As "mod" is a slang term for "moderator" in the streaming community, the discrepancy was resolved by making the other person aware of the cultural context of the word. The code was then modified to reflect the cultural context of the word.

The initial step in Moustakas (1994) data analysis is the epoche process, where the researchers wrote memos about their own emotional reactions to the phenomenon. These memos might include their beliefs about romantic relationships, and about video game play and technology use. All researchers, before engaging with any interviews or data analysis, journaled their prejudices or prior experiences with the population under study (Moustakas, 1994). These memos were kept in a folder on Microsoft Teams, with a document for each team member. I assured the research team that I would not look at the memos to encourage more open and honest memo-writing. One brief example of a sentence from memo I completed before an interview was, "I am hoping that these participants have had good experiences with their relationship and gaming, but I want to hear about anything they have to say [good or bad]."

I then used horizontalization to bring out the essences of the participants' narratives and merge them into clusters (Moustakas, 1994). During the horizontalization process, I created

clusters of meaning, condensing repeated ideas and statements into overarching themes (Moustakas, 1994). This was done by taking the data in the codebook from the process of initial coding and highlighting initial codes that matched with each other. These codes were then restructured to better describe the phenomena within each cluster. I then moved through the participant's experiences and wrote them into narratives, or writing textual meaning, a process in which the researchers describe participants' experiences using their own language and their own words (Moustakas, 1994). I then wrote the narratives in relation to the phenomenon, capturing all aspects of how the participant experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). From these narratives, I compiled the essence of the phenomenon to identify the experience concisely. This final step is called writing a structural description, in which I focused on each participants' experience of video game play in the context of their relationship. The results of the integrated textual meanings from all participants were compiled to produce the essence of the research phenomenon as captured in essential themes (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness & Rigor**

Trustworthiness and rigor were ensured through a variety of procedures (Guba, 1981). During the coding process, the researchers wrote memos that reflected their positionality to the phenomenon. Memo-writing supports trustworthiness by ensuring that the personal bias of the researcher does not unduly influence the data (Guba, 1981). The researcher also kept an audit trail throughout the duration of the study. The audit trail describes all methodological decisions made throughout the coding and analysis process. An audit trail supports trustworthiness by supporting credibility, transferability, and dependability (Guba, 1981). Each transcript was coded by the interviewer and another researcher. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved by the research team when they arose.

Because of my own positionality to the phenomenon that was studied, I recognize that my own biases may have caused me to interpret the data in a way familiar to me and ascribe meaning in the way I understand it. To counter this perspective, I kept a journal to be aware of my reactions and biases that arise during the study. I wrote a journal entry after conducting each interview and I also wrote a journal entry each time I engaged in data analysis. I hoped to find positive outcomes for partners who game together, given the large amount of more negatively focused research on video gaming and relationships. However, the study was designed to allow flexibility in the data collected, without an attempt to encourage participants to respond in a specific way. This allowed for positive, neutral, or negative outcomes to come to light without researcher bias influencing the data. Although I hoped to find positive outcomes, I recognize that no situation is all positive or all negative and want to allow for variability in participants' experience in the study design.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

### Demographic Information

Ten interviews were completed, with a total of 24 participants in ten separate relationship structures. The participants' average age was 31 years old, with 33.3 % identifying non-binary/third gender ( $n = 24$ , 29.2% men, 29.2% women, and 8.3% prefer to self-describe). Almost half of the participants identified as transgender (41.7%) and many identified as pansexual (29.2%) or preferred to self-describe (29.2%). Most participants had some college, no degree (45.8%), and were white, non-Hispanic (92%). 79.2% were not in a long-distance relationship, and 12.5% preferred to self-describe, highlighting that some of their partners were long-distance and others were not. Almost a third of the participants (29.2%) described various relationship arrangements regarding multiple partners. Examples include: "Married to one and committed to five others living separately," "Committed, living with one out of two," and "Legally married to one partner, poly-married (had a commitment ceremony) with another partner, and committed and not living together with the three other partners." The average length of relationship between all relationships was 5.12 years. We also asked questions related to gaming habits, with the participants gaming, with hours per week of gameplay ranging from two hours up to 40 hours a week. Most participants played games on the Nintendo Switch (24.7%) and PC (24.7%) and played Open World Role-Playing Games (19.1%). Most participants were not streamers (75%), and for participants in the 25% who did stream, half of those streamed for an hour or less per week. Partners most frequently engaged in parallel play (66.7%).

**Table 1.***Demographics: Descriptive Statistics (N = 26)*

Variable	Range	M or %
Age	20-49	
Gender		
Woman		29.2%
Man		29.2%
Non-binary/third gender		33.3%
Prefer to self-describe		8.3%
Identifies as transgender		
Yes		41.7%
No		58.3%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual		12.5%
Gay or Lesbian		12.5%
Bisexual		4.2%

Table 1 Continued

Pansexual	29.2%
Asexual	8.3%
Questioning	4.2%
Prefer to self-describe	29.2%

Education

High school diploma/GED	20.8%
Some college, no degree	45.8%
Associate’s degree/Technical or Trade school	16.7%
Bachelor’s degree	8.3%
Master’s/Law degree	4.2%
Doctorate (Ph.D./M.D.)	4.2%

Race

White	92.0%
Hispanic/Latinx	4.0%

Table 1 Continued

Asian/Asian-American	4.0%
Long-distance relationship	
Yes	8.3%
No	79.2%
Other	12.5%
Relationship type	
Committed but not living together	25.0%
Committed and living together	25.0%
Married	20.8%
Other	29.2%
Length of relationship (years)	0.5 – 25
Gaming time (hours per week)	2 - 40
Gaming platforms	
Phone	19.2%
Tablet	4.1%

Table 1 Continued

PC	24.7%
Mac	2.7%
Xbox	8.2%
PlayStation	15.1%
Nintendo Switch	24.7%
Other	1.4%
Game genres	
Action MMOs	6.1%
Adventure	14.8%
Survival	5.2%
Open World Role-Playing games	19.1%
Horror	7.8%
Indie	11.3%
Strategy	9.6%
Simulation	11.3%

Table 1 Continued

First person shooter		7.8%
Other		6.9%
<hr/>		
Streamer		
Yes		8.3%
No		75.0%
Sometimes		16.7%
Streaming time (hours per week)	1 - 25	
Engaged more in parallel play or cooperative play		
Parallel play		66.7%
Cooperative play		33.3%
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**Table 2.**

*Themes and Subthemes Highlighting the Interactions Between Gaming and Romantic Partnerships*

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Theme 1: *Gaming is a shared, intimate activity for partners that brings them closer.*

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Subthemes 1-12

1. ***Partners use gaming to engage in shared interests and/or introduce each other to new interests.***
2. *When difficult life periods occur, gaming helps to support the relationship through that time.*
3. *Gaming helps prevent overstimulation and emotional flooding during difficult conversations between partners.*
4. *Partners utilize games as a way to get to know each other and learn the other's emotions and communication styles.*
5. *Games provide a low-effort escape as a routine for partners to escape from daily pressures or sources of stress.*
6. *Partners create humorous and/or happy memories while playing games that they can recall later to provide happiness to the relationship.*
7. *Playing games helps partners to learn and get better at critical thinking, problem-solving, and strategizing together.*
8. *Parallel play allows for partners to feel emotionally close without the pressure of socializing with each other.*
9. *Cooperative play allows partners to support each other in-game and build trust with each other.*
10. *Games help to create unique connections and special relationships for polyamorous partners with more than one partner.*

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Theme 2: *Gaming can lead to an emotional disconnect when there is an interruption in their connection.*

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Subthemes 1-3

1. ***When partners do not share similar game interests, they can feel an emotional disconnect from their partner.***
2. *Hyper-focusing on a game can cause a disconnect for partners when one partner is seeking attention.*
3. *When tense moments occur in-game, they can contribute to disagreements in-game between partners.*

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## Essential Themes

In the following overarching or essential themes, we depict common lived experiences of how gaming interacted with the participants' relationships.

### **Theme 1: Gaming is a shared, intimate activity for partners that brings them closer.**

This theme emerged in all the interviews multiple times. Gaming as a shared activity made participants feel closer to their partners and was something that brought them joy as partners. This is illustrated by Luna (they/them) who said, "Where like with Animal Crossing it has brought us closer in that we both feel connected that we're playing the same game, and that makes us both feel connected to each other." Under this more general theme were twelve subthemes that highlighted aspects of this theme.

#### ***Subtheme 1: Partners use gaming to engage in shared interests and/or introduce each other to new interests.***

All participants mentioned this subtheme, within the context of the formation and continuation of their relationship. Interviewees would talk about being introduced to new games by their partner(s), and how that brought them closer from being able to share an interest with their partner. As put by Luna (they/them):

...there is that that connection of 'oh, I've watched them play this. And now I get to play it.' And that made me excited because I get to understand what they felt when they were playing it that made me feel a little bit more connected [to them].

There was a sense of understanding the other person in the relationship(s) through their game interests, of sharing their experience. Many partners also discussed being introduced to new game genres that they did not typically like, such as horror games, and coming to enjoy them after being introduced to them by a partner. Partners also discussed talking about games

together as sharing their interest, having intense discussions related to game theories or lore inside franchises such as Skyrim.

***Subtheme 2: Gaming supports relationships through difficult life periods.***

This theme emerged in six out of ten interviews. Most participants referenced video gaming helping them survive the pandemic together or be able to cope with long-distance. Many cited gaming as the activity that helped keep their relationship together through the pandemic, and even brought them closer in a time of turmoil. Some participants even attributed their lack of tension with each other during quarantine to being able to play video games at that time. As one of the participants, Mid (she/her), highlights:

We, Diego and I, were working at the same place, and we both actually caught [Covid], got sick, lost our jobs...but we ended up in a place together where...we spent a lot of time playing games together, and it really helped with just dealing with the world on fire... it really was an escape...and it didn't feel like you were running, or anything. It just felt more like you were getting to spend that time with the person and make those memories, and... even when I'm eighty I'm still gonna remember...being bundled up with him when it was f\*cking freezing, and playing games from decades ago that we were just introducing to each other because we had nothing but time.

This was also how some of the participants would utilize gaming during long-distance to help manage the difficulties of maintaining a relationship over distance. Gaming would connect the partners over distance and help to support their relationship. A prime example is the use of gaming to have virtual dates, highlighted by Mis Fyth (she/her) and Trevor (he/him):

Mis Fyth: "...if I'm in the mood, go to a venue, because in the game that, we play Final Fantasy XIV, there's in-game nightclubs and cafes all run by players. And you know, if

I'm in the mood we could, I can be like 'Hey, for a date tonight, let's go to this place,' and it's like, you know we're together going on a date.”

Trevor: “It's essentially the same thing as “Hey, there's a sushi restaurant on the street I want to go check out.”

For long-distance, partners referred to gaming as an experience that made them feel as though they were in the same place, or in the same room, even if they were states away from each other. One participant, Shane (they/them), expressed this when discussing the time that they and their partner, Kit (they/them), spent long-distance:

We also played Stardew Valley as well, and it was a way for us to feel closer together without, you know, having all that distance between us. We could feel like we were in the same room, even though we weren't.

Modes of character expression in different games also allowed partners to replicate in-person activities and behaviors, as told by Shane (they/them):

... I feel like being able to sit together in the games...specifically Final Fantasy for me. Because there's so...many emotes that you can do, and you can embrace each other. You can blow kisses. You can sit in each other's laps... you can do so much through those video games, and it really can help you feel closer to each other.

One set of partners, Remi (he/him) and Calico (she/her), also referenced gaming as what gave them new perspective after a period where their relationship had struggled. This was highlighted by Remi (he/him):

It can change how you start looking at the outlook of not just the game, but the relationship, whatever you might be doing in life and taking it from a different perspective that you may not have thought about before you were gaming.

***Subtheme 3: Gaming helps prevent overstimulation and emotional flooding during difficult conversations between partners.***

Participants in six out of ten interviews mentioned this theme, showing that gaming was a gateway to conversation. Some participants, such as Luna (they/them) and Flick (they/them), utilized games as “icebreakers,” using shared time while gaming as a chance to ease into deeper or more difficult conversations. Since gaming could sometimes be a more mindless activity for participants, it made the activity ideal to ease their way into conversations. The benefits of this for partners is highlighted by quotes from Shane (they/them) and Alex (he/him), respectively:

I would get overstimulated, and it would make me not be able to communicate when I get like that, or start having any type of like episode happen, and but with gaming I don't ever really have that happen for me, because [gaming] is something that doesn't overstimulate me almost ever, and it allows a line of communication to stay there, whereas it could actually like anything else, could create a block.

You know it's just a great way to relieve stress, and ... it allows for the passing of that negative [energy] to open up conversations, to actually allow for an actual clearing of the negative energy. Not just that brief, 'I feel better because I've- I've killed pixels on the screen,' I actually feel better because I've talked out what happened, and why I'm upset.

Along with being used as way to start or have difficult conversations, many would use games as a coping mechanism or to emotionally regulate so the emotions they were feeling did not spill over and hurt their partner, as highlighted by Isabelle (she/her):

(to Richard) If I'm upset I don't want to, you know, like, be passive-aggressive towards you. So I'm like, okay, let's immediately jump into something that we're both doing cooperatively, and I don't have to think about whatever else...but I feel like that really

helps because we've had one argument ever, and it was about something dumb... like some miscommunication.

Many partners also attributed the effects of gaming preventing overstimulation or emotional flooding with a lack of arguments in their relationships. Isabelle (she/her) highlighted this in the quote above, and Michelle (she/her) and Alex (he/him) stated in their interview that they have only had five arguments in the twelve years that they had been together.

***Subtheme 4: Partners utilize games as a way to get to know each other and learn the other's emotions and communication styles.***

In all ten interviews, participants talked about how gaming served as a way for them to understand their partner(s) better. Many participants referenced it to get to know their partner towards the beginning of their relationship, highlighted by Kit (they/them):

I feel like it just made things a lot more comfortable because we were just able to joke around. (Turns to Shane) There was no pressure or anything, and I really got to know you a lot and get to know your personality and your sense of humor, especially while we were playing.

Others mentioned that, while gaming, they were able to see a side of their partner that they usually did not see, illustrated by Artemis (they/them):

And so, we just spent like an evening trying to get through that [level]. And all the while I was just thinking like, oh, he's just like I don't know, I guess like just showing off more competence, and I was like 'Aw, I love him so much. He wants to show me, he wants to like beat this for me, because I can't beat this because I am such a noob (newbie) at this game.' And I think that was a small, tiny little thing that just again shows different sides of a partner, and anytime where I'm able to like, not say like 'Oh, wow,' but like foster a situation in which a partner's strengths can shine and seeing them happy in that regard.

Another common way that participants talked about this was in relation to different gameplay styles in cooperative gaming. Many partners talked about clashing styles of play when gaming together, and in navigating that, learning how to best communicate with each other through those differences. This is highlighted by Chrys (she/they) and Chad (she/they) in the interview with their triad:

Chrys: We do play a lot more parallel than we do cooperative, but I feel like when we play cooperative knowing that, like Aura tends to go for one or two types of characters that can do a lot of damage, whereas I like a bunch of little guys that are annoying and we know how we can work those together to beat the level. So, knowing, not only communicating, ‘Hey? These are the resources that I’m going to be using,’ but ...

Chad: “...knowing each other’s play styles...”

Chrys: “...knowing each other well enough.”

Many participants related these experiences to out-of-game experiences where they used the skills they learned by playing with their partners to understand their partner(s) out of the game, as well as manage conflict in-game.

***Subtheme 5: Games provide a low-effort escape as a routine for partners to escape from daily pressures or sources of stress.***

The subtheme of using gaming as a way for partners to relieve stress from different pressures or stressors in their life emerged in all ten interviews. For most, the sources were work or university classes. Others cited personal stresses, such as children or a medical condition. For all, gaming provided a way for them to relax and engage in an activity they enjoyed, which allowed them to set aside their stress from their day, highlighted by Diego (he/him):

I would say to it gives like, for example, like a decompression like, today at work they know I had to work a little bit extra, so I didn't get off as early, but being able to come

home and know that oh, I can play games and decompress after a long day's work with my partners or partner...that just makes, you know, day to day living much more, you know, enjoyable because it's like...there's an activity, a shared activity. Whether it be parallel or co-op, [gaming] will certainly make the day better.

Gaming as an activity to de-stress was talked about as a regular activity that partners engaged in. Several of the participants emphasized how important this routine was to their relational health. As quoted by Michelle (she/her), "The couple that slays together, stays together."

***Subtheme 6: Partners create humorous and/or happy memories while playing games that they can recall later to provide happiness to the relationship.***

Throughout all ten interviews, partners would share specific moments from playing games that would highlight a time of joy, or would make the partners erupt in laughter during the interview, illustrated by an interaction between Diego (he/him) and Artemis (they/them):

Diego: "There they become cherished memories like for example, another example with the Lego games is Lego: Pirates of the Caribbean. It was..."

Artemis: "The snail?" (laughs)

Diego: "Well, you know Davy Jones riding around a little snail with a black bird... black beard. You know just... yeah, you see, it gave Artemis a smile and laughed about this because it's like it's a cherished memory like we'll always have that memory, and that wasn't possible without video games."

Partners would identify these moments as fond memories that they would look back on multiple times and that fostered fondness in their relationship. Many of these shared moments would be victories from winning a match, beating a difficult level, or winning a boss battle. Others would simply be humorous moments from playing different games.

***Subtheme 7: Playing games helps partners learn and improve critical thinking, problem-solving, and strategizing together.***

For five out of ten interviews, partners would mention how playing video games helped them learn how to problem-solve with each other, both in and out of game. This is highlighted by Luna (they/them):

I think problem solving is another one... right now I'm stuck in RCS because I can't beat the one boss, and it's made me take a few steps back and go, 'Okay, I need to do this before I can go do that because I don't have that, I can't beat them, so it's helped me with problem solving.

Partners talked about how these skills helped them find solutions and gain different perspectives on out-of-game problems. As Luna (they/them) also pointed out a couple minutes later, sometimes the participants had to take the perspective of "Life is a game."

***Subtheme 8: Parallel play allows partners to feel emotionally close without the pressure of socializing with each other.***

In all of the interviews where partners talked about parallel play (defined as playing a shared game, or gaming in a shared space), they described how parallel play brought them closer together from being in the same space or playing the same non-multiplayer game. There was an intimacy from being together and playing games that participants described as bonding experiences, illustrated by Diego (he/him):

Okay, I would say, when it's parallel... it's more like a relaxed, chill environment where you're just kind of hanging out together, you know, still enjoying it during each other's presence but it for me it feels more like it's just bonding time, but it's not necessarily like it's more relaxing environment.

Partners mentioned experiences of sharing within parallel play, where they would ask for affirmation and compliments on their builds in games such as Animal Crossing or the Sims 4, or

achievements in game. Many partners in a shared space while engaging in parallel play also engaged in physical intimacy, such as cuddling. This was highlighted as a comfortable silence that partners enjoyed engaging in with each other.

This subtheme was also highlighted as a benefit to parallel play that was also not connected in any way to cooperative play. Parallel play provided an activity that the partners could do without feeling the need to socialize with one another. This was often connected with the need to recharge their social battery, highlighted by Shane (they/them):

And so if we were to continue to try [to socialize], because I get overstimulated really easily, if I'm not feeling like my social battery is high enough for that. And so I think [gaming] helps me not have like episodes that they then have to like help clean up, which they don't mind, but I we'd rather be not doing that and so I think it like helps with both of our...sanity in general, and but in a...I mean that in a very positive way.

Having time that the partners spend together without the pressure to socialize with one another made partners feel closer to each other, and many also saw the ability to share in silence with a partner as an important milestone in their relationship.

***Subtheme 9: Cooperative play allows for partners to support each other in-game and build trust with each other.***

This subtheme was seen in all interviews where the participants discussed cooperative gaming and for participants who regularly streamed. The three participants who talked about streaming mentioned that their partners would help them with streaming, whether that was being a moderator on their stream or playing cooperative games on stream with them. These participants highlighted this as a sign of support from their partners. Other partners who talked about cooperative play specifically talked about teamwork aspects of support, shown by Chryst (she/they):

I might be willing to go, and crouch along the edge of a ravine to see if there's resources down below with knowing the risk that I could fall and have to respawn. But one of the others might not be willing to do that, because they've got some stuff on them that they need to save. So, being able to manage risks together and calculate the benefits. Weigh the pros and cons of taking different types of risks depending on the game.

Partners would discuss how they would play various roles cooperatively to support another partner's weaknesses. Many of these weaknesses would be gleaned from playing together multiple times, and partners would often compensate for these weaknesses by helping the other partner in a variety of ways. This could include choosing a specific supportive role in-game or completing a task that the partner had difficulty doing. These supports in-game provided a way for partners to learn how to best work together and gain trust with each other.

Partners also shared how gaming helped them build trust with each other, which spilled to out-of-game experiences. When discussing this subtheme, participants would often frame this experience as being in a situation where you had to depend on your partner(s) to succeed, as highlighted by Mis Fyth (she/her):

It's an amazing trust building exercise. (they both laugh). Yes, it really is, with no actual physical detriment if you know the other person doesn't have your back as much as you think. You know, you're rushing headlong. You know...you've got your character rushing headlong into death unless your partner has your back to keep you alive.

This translates to trust out-of-game as well, again illustrated by Mis Fyth (she/her):

I was dead set against poly[amory]. I've had bad experiences in the past. I'm like 'I can't do this. I can't.' But the more time we spent together, the more things we did in-game even, together, the more I started to trust him and fall in love with him. (Trevor smiles)

So I felt safe, taking that leap into poly[amory] with him because I trusted him from our experiences in game, our experiences just talking.

Many of the other participants highlighted similar translation of trust from in-game experiences to out-of-game experiences. One partnership highlighted this trust in connection to their own dominant-subordinate dynamic in their relationship, where the trust in cooperative gameplay translated over to being able to trust one another in their dynamic.

***Subtheme 10: Games help to create unique connections and special relationships for polyamorous partners with more than one partner.***

This subtheme was only seen in the four interviews with polyamorous participants. This is explained by Artemis (they/them):

There's individual games that at one point or another kind of connected with each other, and that's kind of been like “our game,” like the one that we kind of like connect through. So, it's definitely been both a relaxing thing and an enhancement and something that kind of makes a relationship special, because that can definitely be difficult within a poly[amorous] relationship.

Within polyamorous culture, especially for relationships that are set up to be non-hierarchical, there is an expectation that every relationship is special and differs from another relationship in some way. For polyamorous participants, they often had a game that was special between them and a specific partner, and this created an easy distinction between partnerships for the polyamorous participants.

**Theme 2: Gaming can lead to an emotional disconnect when there is an interruption in connection.**

When participants described challenges or feelings of separation in their relationships, they often highlighted that these different experiences were an interruption in their connection with each other. All participants emphasized that even though these instances occurred in their

relationship, they were quickly corrected, usually by utilizing a subtheme under Theme 1. This is illustrated by Alex (he/him):

And that's just sad because it's like you could make the best of it, you could kind of learn to like it, or you could, you know, give it a whirl for their sake, or whatever...and I get that not everybody is going to be into it, fine, cool, but if you don't at least give it a try...if you don't at least try to meet each other halfway in that regard like, what's the point?

Additionally, many of the partners also explicitly stated that they expected these moments of disconnection before they occurred.

***Subtheme 1: When partners do not share similar game interests, they can feel an emotional disconnect from their partner.***

This subtheme was highlighted in all ten interviews, with varying degrees of intensity as to how much disconnect it caused for the relationship. For some partners, such as Jay (he/him) and Isis (she/her), it was barely a concern, as they felt that they could still connect when discussing game theories with each other, even if a partner did not like playing the game they were discussing. For other partnerships, it is more intense, where a partner may feel more disappointed, highlighted by Luna (they/them):

That's one thing for me was there are some games that I would really love to play with them like Sky and it's not exactly their kind of game, so it does make me feel a little sad and disappointed they're not gaming the same games as me.

As Luna (they/them) describes above, there is often an accompanying desire to share a game that makes the partner excited or happy. For most of the interviewed partnerships, this feeling stems from a desire to have a shared experience in playing the same game, along with a shared understanding with each other. These experiences are often accompanied by the other

partner trying out the game in question, in an effort to share that joy with their partner. Outcomes range from enjoying the new game and creating a new shared interest, to deciding that the game does not appeal to them. However, there is no ill will towards the partner, regardless of outcome, illustrated best by Michelle (she/her) “If it’s not your bag, it's not your bag, but we don't bag on it, on each other, like we don't do that.”

Partners would emphasize that they never wanted their partner(s) to feel bad for not liking a specific game or genre. Many expressed in the interview that they expected differences and did not expect their partner(s) to always like the same games as them.

***Subtheme 2: Hyper-focusing on a game can lead to a disconnect for partners when one partner is seeking attention.***

This subtheme was observed in five out of ten interviews. Many of the participants noted that gaming takes a lot of their time, and that sometimes they became too focused on the game. Participants often described the phenomenon as “hyper-focus,” which is a term commonly used by those who are neurodivergent to describe an intense focus on one activity that is difficult to break. However, like the previous subtheme, partners did not see this as a large problem. As described by Cameron Greene (she/they) and Participant (they/them):

Cameron Greene: Oh, wait. They were just not paying attention. (laughs)

Participant: Yeah, yeah, definitely like sometimes feel like, oh, I'm being ignored. But then, like four seconds later, you know, it'll be flipped, and I'll be like “what?” (jokingly exaggerated) So, then I gotta have to like, remember, like no one's ignoring anyone- we're just not paying attention. (light laugh)

None of the participants who expressed experiencing this subtheme perceived the hyper-focus as purposeful lack of attention towards the other partner. It was an expected experience for

the partners, and each had their own way of coping with hyper-focus. Shane (they/them) One highlighted one such experience:

Well, we have an unspoken system, and I'm going to speak it out loud right now, and we have a tap system. We have a tap system where, if I tap their Nintendo in their hand, I want attention, and I don't have to say it out loud. And they do the same thing to me over here too.

Hyper-focus, while recognized as an experience that presents a challenge, often only posed a brief challenge for the participants, and one that they were easily able to overcome.

***Subtheme 3: When tense moments occur in-game, they can contribute to disagreements in-game between partners.***

This subtheme was highlighted in relation to partners who engaged in cooperative play in eight out of ten interviews. As mentioned previously, there is often a difference in gameplay styles when partners play cooperatively. These instances of differing styles can cause brief moments of tension between partners, illustrated by Alex (he/him) "...so I had to get past the 'I don't want to sit here and explore everything, I just want to get to the end boss.' And she knew that I was getting frustrated."

Alex's partner, Michelle (she/her) mentioned a similar annoyance with his gameplay style, and again, they expressed that they resolved the disagreement, shown by Alex (he/him):

Because we wanted to play together, and it was important that we played together, obviously there had to be some give and take on both sides. Compromises had to be made. It was important enough to us that we both play, at the same time, together. That we had to learn how to work with it.

Partners who encountered tension and disagreement resolved issues by utilizing communication skills gained from playing video games together. Some participants also saw these moments as a benefit, as it allowed them to improve their communication.

In summary, these essential themes highlight the interaction between gaming and the participants' relationships. Overall, participants saw gaming as highly beneficial to their relational health, helping with both the formation and continuation of their relationship in multiple ways. Even when the connection was interrupted, the participants expected these moments and coped with them relationally in ways unique to the relationship. These themes provide us with a greater understanding of the interaction of gaming and intimate relationships. In the following discussion section, I will discuss how this data can level up our thinking on gaming and intimate partnerships and its implications for marriage and family therapists.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This study is unique, and investigated the lived experiences of romantic partners who were gamers, in contrast to previous literature that focused on partnerships where gaming was not a shared activity (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018). This study stands in stark contrast to previous studies, as the sample is diverse and inclusive containing queer and polyamorous partnerships as well as heterosexual partnerships. Using transcendental phenomenology, we identified two core themes, along with multiple subthemes from participant interviews.

Gaming was primarily viewed as beneficial to participants' relationships and was an activity that connected partners. Having the shared activity provided many skills and avenues of connection for the participants, which has been seen in previous literature addressing shared leisure time with technology (Drouin & McDaniel, 2021; Hassenzahl et al., 2012; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Murray & Campbell, 2015). The activity of gaming was viewed as an important ritual for relationships, and any interruption in that caused a challenge for the relationship. Previous literature has shown the importance of rituals to couples and families alike for building meaning and connection within the system (Crespo et al, 2008; Fiese et al., 2002). These rituals were important to reduce stress levels in the partnership(s) and to build and maintain relational skills. Video gaming is also a form of play, which has been shown to aid in couple bonding (Vanderbleek et al., 2011). For relational research in particular, this study may encourage Marriage and Family Therapists' inclusion of play in relationships as well as an area to target in the therapy room. In this study, gaming appeared to help prevent emotional flooding and overstimulation during periods of stress or pressure. Emotional flooding has been shown to

negatively impact partnerships and their long-term outcomes (Gottman, 1993), and can impact problem-solving during conflicts (Malik et al., 2020).

When partners discussed challenges during the interviews, these challenges were often expected by the partnerships, and easily resolved by the partners. Many of the relational tools used to resolve these moments of disconnect came from connecting subthemes. When partners could not share a certain game, they would often search for another game to have a shared interest in. The literature establishes that intimacy is an indicator of relationship satisfaction, including more specific kinds of intimacy, such as emotional intimacy (Yoo et al., 2014). If gaming provides emotional intimacy for these partners, as well as a form of play that encourages partner bonding (Vanderbleek et al., 2011), disconnect as a result of gaming could have a large impact. Many of the partners also discussed how gaming together helped them with their communication skills, which aided in resolving tense moments that could occur during gameplay and out of game. There were also expectations in these partnerships that made it easier for partners to cope with moments of hyperfocus on the game, which has also been seen in studies on technology use in younger generations (Pickens & Whiting, 2019). When hyperfocus occurred, the process would often mimic technoferece (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). However, the participants would often note that they also experienced hyperfocus and would be more lenient when it occurred with their partner. Some partners, such as Kit and Shane, even had a way to break the other's concentration for attention in those moments. This data helps to dispel the assumption that video gaming is only detrimental to a relationship; on the contrary, relationships where gaming is a primary aspect could be more beneficial.

Additionally, this research could give insight into potential issues within relationships that do not have gaming as a shared activity. Many of the subthemes related to the disconnect

that partners may feel in their relationship could align with cited issues in other studies, to a less intense degree (Ahlstrom et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2012; Lianekhammy & Venne, 2015; Limke-McLean, 2018), as well as the concept of technoferece (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). The emotional disconnect found within this study could be exacerbated in relationships where gaming is not a shared play activity, to the point where it would cause relational distress. From that, couple's therapists who encounter partnerships where gaming is not a shared play activity could have better understanding of the disconnect the partners are experiencing. This research could also indicate that the lack of a shared play activity or the amount of time spent in play activities together could have a strong connection to relationship satisfaction. Video gaming is unique as a shared play activity due to the large amount of time typically spent playing games, as well as their engaging nature, which could influence the intensity of relational distress.

Many of the subthemes under Theme 1 could be used in different ways to intervene with relationships where this emotional disconnect is occurring. As an example, utilizing the ability to search for a shared interest if there is something that the partners do not agree on could help partners be more flexible finding a shared play activity. These subthemes allow insight into potential driving factors that make these challenges into issues for relationships where gaming is not a shared activity. Additionally, this study aids in theory building surrounding relationships, technology, and video gaming. The data gives another look at video gamers and how they interact in partnerships, including both connecting and disconnecting factors.

## **Implications**

Many of these findings hold implications for clinical practice and training. In a growing age of technology use, and with video games becoming more accessible and popular, there is a higher likelihood than ever of seeing partners in the therapy room who are all gamers. In

training, care should be taken to address biases around gaming, and introduce the connecting properties of video games.

In looking at the connecting subthemes that participants viewed as beneficial to their relationships, implications for clinical practice could create new perspectives on intervention and assessment for partners who may or may not play video games. There is a small amount of literature that has examined the efficacy of video games in treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in veterans (Rizzo et al., 2011) and to assess for PTSD in children (Asnaani et al., 2021). This could lead to more use of video games in therapy, not just for individuals, but for partnerships as well. For example, video games mitigating emotional flooding provides a potential look into how gaming could be used for partners to help them, with therapist guidance, through more difficult conversations in the therapy room. Additionally, many of the experiences in-game for participants translated to out-of-game experiences. For partners who primarily share gaming as a relational activity, these themes can provide ways for therapists to intervene to decrease issues in the relationship(s) and encourage connection.

Many subthemes addressed in the results are also common points that therapists touch on when assessing and intervening in partnerships. Given the translatability of these experiences between video games and other relational experiences that participants reported, therapists could use video games in therapy to recreate and witness the partners' processes in session. As an example, therapists could have partners play a more low-stakes, cooperative game, such as *Stardew Valley*, where the partners work as a team to help their farm grow and succeed. During gameplay, the therapist could observe the partners' processes and how efficiently they work as a team to assess for areas to work on in therapy. Conversely, a therapist could choose a game with higher stakes and more action, such as *It Takes Two*, where partners would have to work

together to beat levels and bosses. This game, and others, could also be an experiential method of intervention, where the partners are able to practice their skills on activities that do not directly relate to their life out-of-game. This provides therapists greater opportunities to directly intervene in relational processes, even for partners who do not share gaming as an activity.

Such use of video games would also help with assessing relational processes, especially through teletherapy services. Some therapists feel as though they are less able to intervene using therapeutic techniques over teletherapy and feel less effective overall in teletherapy (Lin et al., 2021). Video games could be utilized to better engage and intervene with clients over teletherapy, given that many video games have multiplayer functions, closed chat rooms, and are known for their high engagement. With increasing knowledge of use of technology among potential therapists and clients, utilizing video games as relational assessment tools and interventions could become a greater possibility. Future research could examine the efficacy of such assessments and interventions, as well as the potential challenges.

Additionally, some participants reported meeting new partners through video games, which could have implications for non-consensual non-monogamous partners. Previous literature has noted that technology has become an avenue for cheating and pornography, which could easily be translated over to video games (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). There are many games where partners could meet friends or maintain a non-consensual, non-monogamous relationship, as well as several games with mature content that could easily qualify as pornography. Examples include games such as *Carnal Instinct* and *Cloud Meadow*, both of which have sexually explicit content and require a gamer to be over 18 to view the game's page on the store.

Finally, this research addresses a specific gap in the research, as it is the first study, to my knowledge, that examines gaming and relationships, and includes queer and polyamorous

partnerships. Video gaming research, because of the cultural stereotype of a gamer, has historically ignored LGBTQIA+ and polyamorous gamers, especially when it comes to representation in-game (Kohlburn et al., 2023). Relational research often overlooks queer and polyamorous partnerships, with the available research being much smaller than those for heterosexual, cisgender couples. The inclusion of various gender identities, sexual orientations, and relationship styles allows this research to be more generalizable to the broader field of gaming and relational research.

### **Limitations**

The current study had several limitations. First, it is impossible to completely eliminate all bias, as research is subjective because humans cannot be purely objective. Although participants were not homogenous in terms of relationship style, gender identity, or sexual orientation, the sample was mostly Caucasian. While the differences may have contributed to the participants' differences in experience, it would benefit the study to have a more racially diverse group, as well as more current long-distance partnerships, which present a special challenge for maintaining a relationship. There is also a possibility that participants in relationships that may be viewed as healthier would be more willing to participate in a study like this.

As this study was also limited to partnerships where all partners are video gamers, results are likely not transferable to partnerships where gaming is not a shared hobby. This study specifically sought to address the experiences of gamer partnerships, which could have a different structure and have different problems. Another limitation is that, due to the inclusion criteria, I did not interview polyamorous partnerships where some partners in the polycule were gamers, and others were not. However, this could be a rich area of research in the future to gain more insight into gaming and partnerships.

## **Future Research**

There are several ways this research can be continued in future studies. One potential area of interest could be polycores who have members who game, and those who do not. This provides a unique research opportunity to combine previous studies on partnerships that do not share gaming as an activity, and the findings of this study. These polycores could provide invaluable information that could give insight from multiple perspectives within one relationship structure that is not bound by cultural rules surrounding monogamy. Some of the participants also mentioned that they played video games with their children, and while children were not included in this study, others could examine similar questions as they relate to families instead of intimate partnerships, which could provide insights into family relationships when they interact with gaming.

Further studies could investigate the relationship between communication in these partnerships and whether the partners primarily play cooperatively or in parallel. Other potential areas of study for gaming partnerships could examine the impact of the game genre on the ability to help partners de-stress, comparing games such as Sims 4 to League of Legends. Researchers could examine the effect of video games reducing emotional flooding during partner conflict, by having partners play a game while resolving a conflict. Within gaming partnerships, there was also an expectation of gaming interference, similar to the expectations in younger generations with implicit rules around technology use, which could be further studied. Future research could also examine current relational applications advertised by video game companies for games such as It Takes Two. Another avenue, suggested by one of the participants, is the effect of discriminatory messaging in video games that specifically target a minority community. An

example of this is found within the game *A Hogwarts Legacy*, where many have criticized the game for being transphobic and antisemitic.

### **CONCLUSION**

Technology and gaming as a field has provided many new challenges and benefits for partnerships and therapists alike. Research such as this fills a gap in the research in many ways, by looking at partnerships where gaming is a shared activity, and by having a study where many of the participants were queer and/or polyamorous. There are many exciting directions that future research could take, and the implications of this research could provide great benefit to gamers and the field of therapy. When working with partners who share gaming as a primary activity, it would be helpful for therapists to see how well the partners feel they connect through their gaming, and how that connects to their relationship outside of the boss battle. This will improve therapists' work with a technology-saturated world and improve the quality of therapy and research for gamers everywhere.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Guide**

1. Tell me about your journey to becoming a couple and how gaming has interacted with the forming and/or continuation of your relationship.
2. In what ways has gaming enhanced your relationship?
3. In what ways has gaming challenged your relationship?
4. In what ways has gaming helped you feel connected to your partner(s)?
5. In what ways has gaming made you feel separated from your partner(s)?
6. What do you notice about your relationship when you engage in parallel game play?  
(Asked only if the participants mark “Parallel play” on the pre-survey)
7. In what ways has your relationship been challenged when playing together? (Asked only if the participants mark “Play together” on the pre-survey)
8. In what ways has your relationship benefited from playing together? (Asked only if the participants mark “Play together” on the pre-survey)
9. What skills that you have learned in-game are transferrable to out-of-game relationship experiences?
  - a. Discuss/Give an example of a time when you used those skills in your relationship out of game.