



**Queensland University of Technology**  
Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Vella, Kellie, Johnson, Daniel M.](#), & Mitchell, Jo  
(2016)

Playing support: Social connectedness amongst male videogame players.  
In  
*2016 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play Companion (CHI PLAY Companion '16)*, 16-19 October 2016, Austin, Texas.

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/107117/>

**© 2016 The Author's**

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the Owner/Author.

Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

CHI PLAY'16 Extended Abstracts, October 16-19, 2016, Austin, TX, USA

ACM 978-1-4503-4458-6/16/10.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2968120.2987734>

**Notice:** *Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source:*

<https://doi.org/10.1145/2968120.2987734>

---

# Playing Support: Social Connectedness amongst Male Video Game Players

**Kellie Vella**

Queensland University of Technology  
Brisbane, Australia  
kellie.vella@qut.edu.au

**Daniel Johnson**

Queensland University of Technology  
Brisbane, Australia  
dm.johnson@qut.edu.au

**Jo Mitchell**

Australian Football League Players  
Association  
Melbourne, Australia  
jmitchell@afplayers.com.au

**Abstract**

While video games are becoming increasingly social, little is known regarding whether games might also facilitate social support. In tandem, while both genders experience similar overall rates of mental illness [1], men seek and use health services less often than women [2]. A series of interviews (N=15) were held with male social video game players to determine if video game play provides a means for them to access social support. Preliminary analyses suggest that games afford a means of gaining support from new connections, describes how these trusting relationships develop, and demonstrates that gameplay itself offers some emotional benefits. This research contributes to the understanding of how men use technology to support their emotional and social needs.

**Author Keywords**

Social connectedness; social support; video games; social play; well-being

**ACM Classification Keywords**

K.8.0; J.4

**Introduction**

Positive social connections can lead to direct emotional benefits, when these relationships provide the relief of being able to voice troubling thoughts, to gain advice or

---

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the Owner/Author.  
Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).  
*CHI PLAY'16 Extended Abstracts, October 16-19, 2016, Austin, TX, USA*  
ACM 978-1-4503-4458-6/16/10.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2968120.2987734>

#### **Games are played by:**

- 68% of all Australians - and of these 53% are male [3]
- 99% of 8-15 year old children in the U.K [4]
- 63% of U.S. households (at least one person who plays regularly) and 59% of all game players are male [5]

#### **Prevalence of mental disorder in young people by age [6]:**

- Australia: 27% / 18-24 years
- U.K.: 12% / 13-15 years
- USA: 13% / 16 years
- Most mental disorders begin during youth (12-24 years)

reassurance, or simply to realise they are not unique or alone - that other people have experienced something similar. However, a significant proportion of young men, and by default, young men playing games (see sidebar), are both suffering from poor mental health [7] and are less likely than their female counterparts to seek help or communicate their emotional needs to others [2]. This study asks: are online video games a space in which young men provide and receive social support, and what factors may impact on this?

Video games that require cooperative team play, and provide direct communication via text or voice, in theory, provide the ingredients from which players can form playful and trusting relationships with others [8, 9]. However, not all games with these elements result in social connectedness or the emotional benefits that flow from this, and can conversely result in highly toxic environments. It seems likely that factors beyond the need for in-game cooperation and the provision of communication channels are influencing friendship formation. A better understanding of these influences would benefit game designers trying to address concerns around toxicity. It also seems likely that a better understanding of how players have their social needs met in game play and gaming communities could lead to game design that actively encourages help seeking, and help offering, attitudes and behaviours.

This study seeks to establish that games are a space that players use to exchange social support and to identify the factors that impact young men seeking and offering this support in a game play environment. As such, it makes a clear contribution in terms of building understanding of how to facilitate the creation of mentally healthy gaming communities. This research can

also help mental health professionals understand and explore ways in which video game play can be beneficial for young people's social and emotional health. In turn, it may also serve to bridge the 'digital disconnect' [10] in how young people and health professionals use and understand technology. It is hoped that, given the commonplace nature of gameplay, this study will inform the men's mental health agenda as a whole. These findings may also be applicable in non-entertainment domains, e.g. building connections between geographically diverse teams in computer-assisted work environments.

#### **Related Work**

Recent research has indicated that children and young people often choose to play games because they expect it to relieve stress [11]. This expectation can potentially be explained by applying Self-Determination Theory [12] to video game play. For example, games providing experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness are associated with pleasurable shifts in mood and the desire for future play of that game [13]. In addition to the emotional benefits, gameplay has been associated with social capital [14-16].

Social capital describes positive bonds between people and the emotional and practical benefits that result from these networks [17]. It is composed of two forms of capital: bonding social capital (exclusive ties such as close friends and family), and bridging social capital (expansive, but not deep, ties such as those found on social media sites). A study of e-sports gaming found that increased social capital was associated with offline social support, via familiarity, physical and social proximity [14]. Specifically, familiarity (gauged by how frequently players trained together), and social proximity



Figure 1. Screen still from *World of Warcraft*



Figure 2. *League of Legend's* ranking system

(gauged by how involved players were in clan administration) positively correlated with both bonding and bridging social capital. Encouragingly, this means social capital could be created entirely online.

The friendships players form online may also complement their offline relationships. This is supported by Yee's [18] study of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG) players, which found that players under the age of 18 years felt that the friendships cultivated in game play were comparable or better than their non-game friendships. In addition, Cole & Griffiths' [19] study of MMORPG players from 45 countries, found that two fifths of participants said they would discuss sensitive issues with their online gaming friends that they would not discuss with their non-game friends. It seems likely that online relationships provide a chance for players to have their emotional needs met in a way that won't impact on their non-game relationships.

The choice of communication aid may also enhance social connectedness. Williams, Caplan & Xiong [9] found that a mix of voice and text in the play of the MMORPG, *World of Warcraft* (Figure 1), increased liking and trust amongst guild participants, compared to using just text. The authors suggest that the use of richer communication mediums such as voice, produces more social cues, which in turn reduces uncertainty about others' intentions. Additionally, it removes the barrier of anonymity so that a deeper relationship can potentially form. However, toxic communities may forestall the use of voice technology to develop positive connections with others. Others suggest specific game mechanics can

increase conflict and frustration, such as the high stakes of ranked play in *League of Legends* (Figure 2) [20]. Further investigation is warranted to determine if and how voice communication leads to positive relationships.

### The current study

Our research question is whether video games offer a space in which men can give and receive social support, and if so, what factors may impact on this. Additionally, we aim to identify factors that might facilitate these trusting connections. As an exploratory study we aim to produce initial answers to our research question, as well as more detailed questions that can be tested in further research. Using a qualitative method this study produces a rich account of the contextual and personal factors impacting how men interact in game play.

### Method

Ethical approval was sought and granted by a university ethics committee prior to commencement. A series of face-to-face interviews (N=15) were held in a university laboratory, which was designed to mimic a lounge-room. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews ranged from 17 to 64 minutes in length (M=36 minutes, SD = 15.15).

### Recruitment and participants

Participants were recruited via in-class announcements in Game Design and IT classes at a university. Inclusion criteria required participants to be male, aged between 16-35 years, and to be currently playing (in the last month) video games socially. All participants were reimbursed AU\$20 for their time.

**Participant's ID (age):  
current types of game  
genres played\***

**P1** (30 years old): FPS,  
puzzle, MMORPG, MOBA

**P2** (29 years old): action-  
adventure, action role-  
playing, party

**P3** (18 years old): FPS,  
MOBA

**P4** (34 years old):  
adventure, platformers,  
puzzle racing, sports

**P5** (27 years old): FPS,  
MMORPG, MOBA, party

**P6** (26 years old): action-  
adventure, fighting, FPS,  
MOBA, party games

**P7** (17 years old): FPS,  
TPS, sandbox

**P8** (18 years old): FPS,  
MOBA

**P9** (20 years old): FPS,  
strategy

*Continued over page.*

The participants interviewed were aged between 17 and 34 years (M=22.67 years, SE=1.43). They were asked to rate their general level of experience with video game play from 1 to 10. Self-perceived level of experience was very high (M=9.33, SE=.26). See the sidebar, this page and next, for additional detail.

### Measures

Interviews were semi-structured: while questions were prepared, any that were obviously irrelevant to the experience of the participant were excluded. Broadly, discussion revolved around the likes and dislikes of different contexts of play (e.g., friends/strangers, offline/online etc.); communication choices; the social motivation for play; the difference between online and offline friends; how online friendships developed; and whether social support was ever sought or offered. Regarding the last question, participants were asked if they had ever become aware that another player was 'having a bad day' and if this led to talking about it.

### Analysis

Transcribed interviews were sectioned and initial themes noted by the interviewer, following the process set out for applied thematic analysis [21]. As a work-in-progress, the preliminary results are still to be refined via an iterative process with a second coder. Additionally, the analysis at this point only focusses on responses pertaining to online play.

### Preliminary Results

Initial themes include: trust = time + voice; complementary social networks; behaviour reveals mood; catharsis from talking and playing. Responses are reported as they were voiced. -- indicates a pause.

### *Trust = Time + Voice*

When asked what led them to form friendships with other online players or decide to share personal information, participant responses indicated that trusting relationships developed over time, and in tandem with more personal forms of communication, such as voice.

*I had a really good relationship with my guild leader from the other game. But that took months to develop, essentially, raiding together, talking about various things. ... eventually she started talking about ... what was going on in her life, some of the difficulties... (P1)*

Voice was seen as more informative than text. Participants talked about the personal details learnt about other players simply by listening to the environmental sounds conveyed by voice technology.

*So, if ... you know, Skype chat with someone ... then you are sort of encountering their life as well at the same time, because you can hear what's happening around them ... if I'm in a communication with two people who know each other really well ... you learn more about them through that and that gives you sort of a way to broaden your knowledge of them. (P11)*

### *Complementary Social Networks*

Friendships cultivated via online game play provided a safe space in which to discuss personal information or uncomfortable emotions. These relationships were referred to as being non-judgmental and removed from whatever crisis was under discussion, and as such, were seen as offering more perspective.

*I mean sometimes it's even easier to talk with them than someone who's closer to the situation, because they*

**P10** (18 years old):  
fighting, RPG, strategy

**P11** (22 years old): FPS,  
MOBA, RPG

**P12** (17 years old):  
fighting, flight combat,  
FPS, MOBA, TPS

**P13** (17): FPS, MMORPG

**P14** (25): MMORPG

**P15** (22) platformer, FPS,  
MOBA

**\* Game Genres:**

- FPS (first-person shooter)
- MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game)
- MOBA (multi-player online battle arena)
- TPS (third-person shooter)

*have a little more distance from it ... there are some times you don't want people who are involved in a situation, or who are close to you, to know. (P1)*

*I mean, that's stuff that I probably wouldn't have talked about with any of my other friends because it's sort of strange personal things, but you feel like you can tell these people because you are anonymous ... because you're never going to meet this person and so you feel like you can just talk to them about anything, because there's no way that they could really judge you on that... (P11)*

*I might not talk to them all the time but I know that they're there for me whenever I need now. -- I've got friends in real life and I talk to them every day, but sometimes I just can't talk to them about some serious stuff that's going on, whereas I can talk to these people because they have an outside perspective. So they just kind of give that new view on whatever the problem is and they just really help me cope... (P10)*

**Behaviour Reveals Mood**

When asked if they were able to tell if someone was having a 'bad day', participants reported that a poor mood would be discernable through differences in behaviour – which implies that they had spent time with them and knew what normal behavior was. While voice cues were mentioned, some differences were detected purely from game play.

*...you can kind of hear that something's gone wrong, like their voice has changed and then they seem to be in a bad mood. You actually see the way they play the game changes as well. You can kind of tell, okay, this person's*

*angry. And then you just ask them like, "Are you okay? Is something wrong?" (P8)*

*...often if they're like not playing very well, they're often distracted... you can sort of tell because they won't be as good, like they'll be a bit more lethargic. They'll just sort of stand there... (P12)*

**Catharsis from Talking and Playing**

Regarding how players sought or received social support, responses varied between *talking* about an issue, and *playing* - to both avoid thinking about the issue, and potentially shift a bad mood by winning a game. Amongst friendly players, there appeared to be an acceptance of either approach.

*If they want to talk about it then you can sit there and listen and if they don't want to talk about it they're just like, okay... that's fine. Just keep playing. (P8)*

*Yes, it's nice to have someone to vent to. So, like -- I remember definitely like I was just talking about something for like 30 minutes. (P7)*

*...you'd be like, "What's wrong, man? You're not playing that well." And they're like, "Yeah, I just had a bad day." And that happens. But you would ask and "you can talk about it if you want" and they might say "yes". But they will usually just say, "No it's alright, man. Let's just keep playing. Let's win." (P3)*

**Discussion**

The four themes described in the results, while not exhaustive, are revealing of the dynamics that shape social connectedness amongst male players, and establish that they are engaged in both help-seeking and -offering behaviours. It seems that friendly online

relationships provide a complementary function to offline relationships by providing a non-judgmental 'outsiders' perspective. This is supported by studies of MMORPG play, which found that online relationships were both valuable and often subject to sensitive information sharing [11, 18]. Whether the value of these relationships changes when offline relationships are not as accessible or do not provide the support needed will be the subject of further analysis.

It also seems that ongoing gaming relationships allow people to learn how to pick up each other's poor mood from behavioural cues – much like offline relationships. However, while talking about issues was one way that players dealt with troubling thoughts, the potential to win a game and experience feelings of competence and camaraderie was another. The autonomy to choose between either would make social play an attractive option for those who are low in wellbeing and who also have friendly online connections. As such, our findings provides further support for the idea that social video game play potentially satisfies all of the psychological needs described by Self-Determination Theory [12].

Communication using voice was also described as being both a sign of an established relationship and a way of building one. The richer medium of voice [9], in some cases, provided background information on unknown players and may also have created the opportunity to talk about non-game related subjects. The movement towards voice communication and the sharing of sensitive information with online relationships also describes increased trust. In turn this trust was built from multiple encounters – a correspondence with Trepte et al.'s [14] measure of familiarity, which was found to positively impact on players' social capital. The toxicity of

some online gaming communities, however, may dissuade voice communication with strangers even within co-operative play. It has been suggested that this toxicity can result from frustrating and isolating game mechanics [20]. Future analysis will interrogate how game mechanics impact on the development of new positive connections with others, as well as how established relationships operate in these environments.

Finally, our focus on men aged 16-35 years was due to the goals of a larger body of research. Future research could consider how social connectedness in play may operate differently across genders, and at different stages of life. In addition, knowing if different types of social games, e.g. MMORPGs vs MOBAs, impact differently on relationships is also a viable avenue for future research.

## **Conclusion**

The four themes demonstrate that men seek or offer social support in online game play, and describe some of the factors shaping it. The value of ongoing online relationships is highlighted, as are the experiences of competence and autonomy that game play itself can facilitate. Further exploration is required to understand how online and offline relationships interact, and whether game mechanics might influence the development of supportive relationships. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the ongoing project of building healthy online communities.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the participants for their time and honesty, and thank the MindMax initiative (funded by the Movember Foundation) for their support.

## References

1. World Health Organisation. 2003. Gender disparities in mental health. Retrieved July, 2016 from [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/media/en/242.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/242.pdf)
2. T. Schofield, R.W. Connell, L. Walker, J.F. Wood, D.L. Butland. 2000. Understanding men's health and illness: a gender-relations approach to policy, research, and practice. *J Am Coll Health*. 48, 6: 247-56.
3. Jeffrey E. Brand, Stewart Todhunter. 2015. Digital Australia Report 2016. Retrieved November, 2015 from <http://www.igea.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Digital-Australia-2016-DA16-Final.pdf>
4. Internet Advertising Bureau UK. 2014. Gaming revolution. Retrieved June 2016 from <http://www.iabuk.net/research/library/gaming-revolution>
5. Entertainment Software Association. 2016. Essential facts about the computer and video game industry: 2016 sales, demographics and usage data. Retrieved 18 May, 2016 from <http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Essential-Facts-2016.pdf>
6. V. Patel, A. J. Flisher, S. Hetrick, P. McGorry. 2007. Mental health of young people: A global public-health challenge. *Lancet*. 369, 9569: 1302-13. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(07\)60368-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(07)60368-7)
7. Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2007. National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results. Retrieved August, 2013 from [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/6AE6DA447F985FC2CA2574EA00122BD6/\\$File/43260\\_2007.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/6AE6DA447F985FC2CA2574EA00122BD6/$File/43260_2007.pdf)
8. Julia Crouse Waddell, Wei Peng. 2014. Does it matter with whom you slay? The effects of competition, cooperation and relationship type among video game players. *Comput Hum Behav*. 38, 331-338. <http://dx.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.06.017>
9. Dmitri Williams, S Caplan, Li Xiong. 2007. Can you hear me now? The impact of voice in an online gaming community. *Hum Commun Res*. 33, 4: 417-449. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2007.00306.x>
10. Michelle Blanchard, Helen Herrman, Marion Frere, Jane Burns. 2011. Attitudes informing the use of technologies by the youth health workforce to improve young people's wellbeing: Understanding the nature of the "digital disconnect". In *National Youth Sector Conference 2011: Interrupting Transmission*, 14-24.
11. John Colwell. 2007. Needs met through computer game play among adolescents. *Pers Individ Differ*. 43, 8: 2072-2082. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.06.021>
12. Edward L. Deci, Richard M. Ryan. 2000. The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychol Inq*. 11, 4: 227-268. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1449618>
13. Richard M. Ryan, C. Scott Rigby, Andrew Przybylski. 2006. The motivational pull of video games: A self-determination theory approach. *Motiv Emotion*. 30, 4: 347-363. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9051-8>
14. Sabine Trepte, Leonard Reinecke, Keno Juechems. 2012. The social side of gaming: How playing online computer games creates online and offline social support. *Comput Hum Behav*. 28, 3: 832-839. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.12.003>
15. Kellie Vella, Daniel Johnson, Leanne Hides. 2015. Playing alone, playing with others: Differences in player



- experience and indicators of wellbeing. In *Proceedings of the ACM SIGCHI Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play (CHI Play '15)*, 3-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2793107.279311816>
16. Zhi-Jin Zhong. 2011. The effects of collective MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) play on gamers' online and offline social capital. *Comput Hum Behav.* 27, 6: 2352-2363. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.07.014>
17. R. D. Putnam. 2000. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster, New York.
18. Nick Yee. 2006. The demographics, motivations, and derived experiences of users of massively multi-user online graphical environments. *Presence-Teleop Virt.* 15, 3: 309-329. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/pres.15.3.309>
19. H Cole, M D Griffiths. 2007. Social interactions in massively multiplayer online role-playing gamers. *Cyberpsychol Behav.* 10, 4: 575-583. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2007.9988>
20. Yannick LeJacq. 2015. How League of Legends enables toxicity. Retrieved 11 July, 2016 from <http://www.kotaku.com.au/2015/03/how-league-of-legends-enables-toxicity/>
21. Greg Guest, Kathleen M. MacQueen, Emily E. Namey. 2012. *Applied thematic analysis*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.