



NO MIC NEEDED:

Mental health implications surrounding
comfort in virtual spaces

Dr. Steve Kuniak, Brittany Riffle



Learning Objectives

1. Recognize online communication mediums and the evolution of virtual spaces.

1. Propose reasons why a person may avoid online communication and consider variables for future research.

1. Explore “sense of belonging” as a mental health concept and consideration for its inclusion in treatment planning.

1. Identify areas of focus surrounding professional boundaries and mental health ethics.



Observations Leading to this Presentation



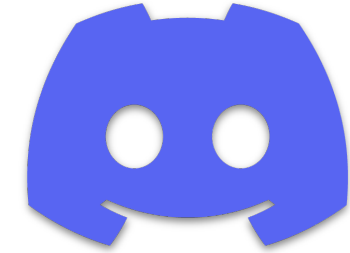
- I've been in a position to see the gaming communication process evolve over the years
 - Used to be a challenge. Was always looking for more seamless methods to communicate. (Ventrillo, multiple cell lines open, etc.)
- As the ability to create private party chats evolved, I noticed in game dialogue dropping.
 - Pros and Cons
- However, now that communication is more available and user friendly, I've noticed that there are less and less people taking up the opportunity to chat.
- Further, I've noticed that it's difficult to get communal games together with unknown individuals, if the chat feature is required.
 - "No Mic Needed" rooms would fill more quickly.



Online Communication Mediums

With the rise of the internet and gaming community, online communication mediums such as Skype, Discord, Zoom, and more have grown in both popularity and ease of use.

These mediums allow for communication across different locations and cultures, helping gamers to easily meet and connect with others who share their interests over text and voice chat.



"Discord"



"Skype"



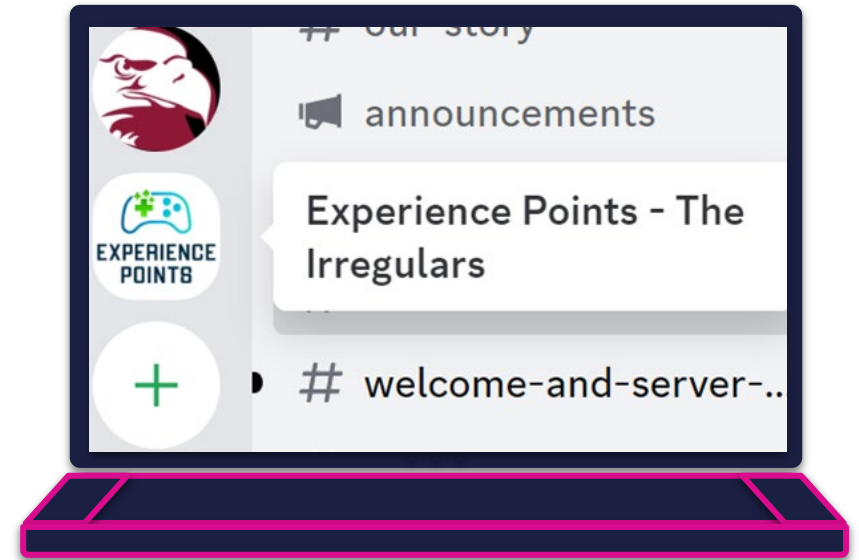
"Zoom"

(Chettiyar, 2021).

Online Communication Mediums

Maintaining over 196.2 million active users in 2023, Discord has grown to be one of the most widely used text and voice chat communication mediums for both avid internet users and individuals with a lack technological experience (Curry, 2023).

Over time, Discord has evolved from a communication platform intended for communities of gamers to one that is commonly used for work, school, personal interests, social gatherings, and more (Honstantinovic, 2020).



An example of a Discord community server for the organization "Experience Points."



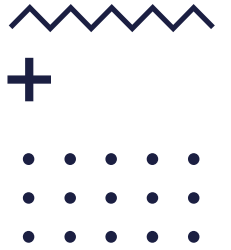
Online Communication Mediums



Many online video games include in-game voice communication as part of their experience. Also, these platforms are integrating with other communication services. This opens up the line of communication for better or for worse.

While there are many potential benefits of online communication mediums psychologically, socially, and performance-wise, there are also many potential disadvantages to using them.





Potential Benefits

Unique Culture

The ability to communicate over voice chat has led to the development of its own unique culture where individuals can talk easily and feel like their connections are more “real” despite being in a virtual environment (Khairunisa, 2020).



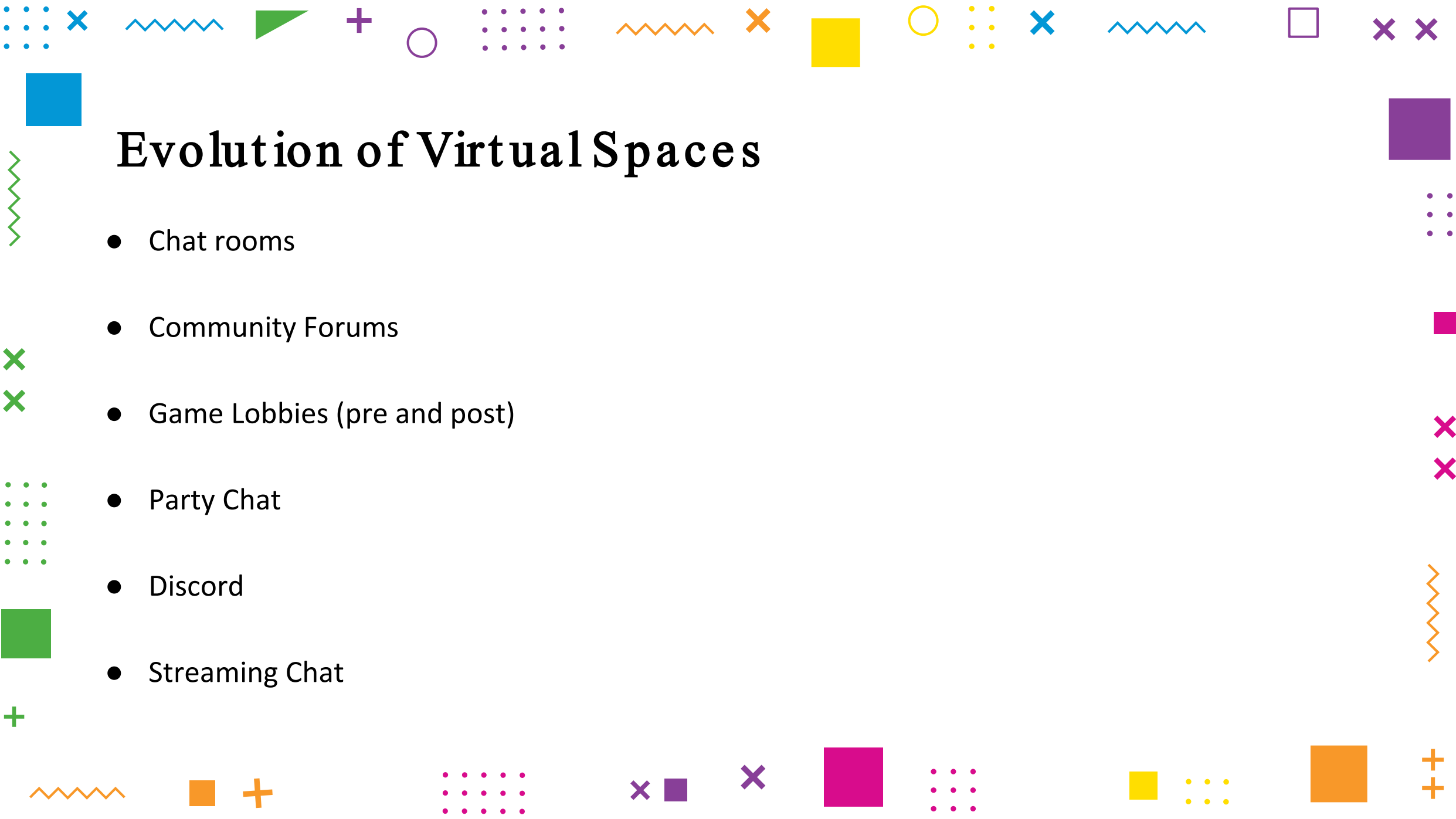
Social Interaction

These mediums that open up lines of communication are being increasingly recognized as a tool that encourages social interaction online, develops a sense of community and belonging, and influences the formation and maintenance of relationships (Ictech, 2021).



Evolution of Virtual Spaces

- Chat rooms
- Community Forums
- Game Lobbies (pre and post)
- Party Chat
- Discord
- Streaming Chat



Importance of Communication - Counseling Perspective

- An ability to communicate with one another is central to any cultural experience. Whenever we communicate with one another, particularly when we speak the same “language,” our experience is enriched. (Singh, et al., 2020)
- So, there seems to be a disconnect between the goal of engaging in preferred, and within culture, activities, and avoiding communication.
- Also, if counselors intend to use new communication platforms to serve others, it would be beneficial to understand the limitations and hesitancies associated with this practice.





Gamer Language as Cultural Concern

Gamer Language “Leet Speech”

Leet = Elite

Noob

Pwned

AFK

Leeroy

Bricked

Camping

Try Hards / Hard Scoping

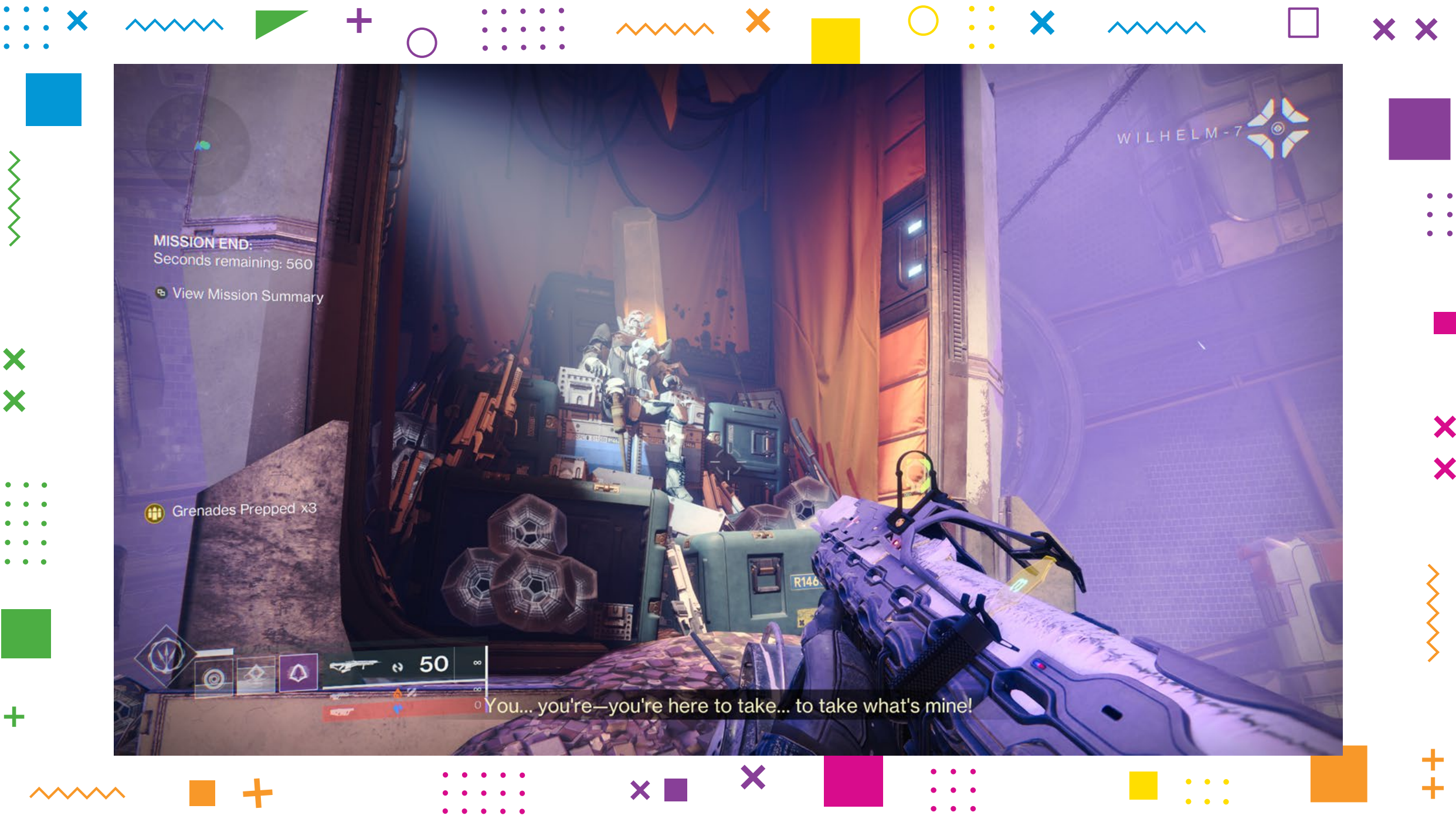
Fission Mailed

GG / Good Game



Importance of Communication - Gaming

- Some games are played better through coordinated communication
- Other games REQUIRE coordinated communication in order to complete end game tasks.
- Choosing whether or not to communicate can be a choice between getting the full or desired experience out of an important activity, or missing out on important aspects of the activity.



MISSION END:
Seconds remaining: 560

View Mission Summary

Grenades Prepped x3

50

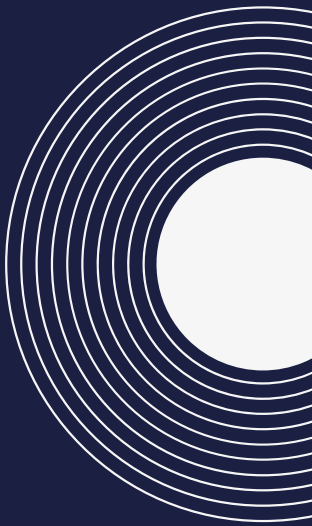
You... you're—you're here to take... to take what's mine!

WILHELM-7

“It’s a Barrier!”

All of this gatekeeping in a community that’s meant to be positive and fun immediately damages the experience.

Gamers/geeks who could add to our communities are turned away before they even get to participate.



+





Language that Includes Vs. Excludes

Excludes

- Be Sweaty
- _____ or GTFO
- KWTD (Know What to Do)
- _____ or Get Kicked
- Know Callouts

Includes

- Casual
- Sherpa or Carry
- Willing to Teach
- Chill Vibes
- No Flaming

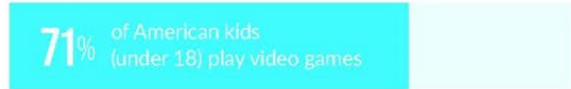
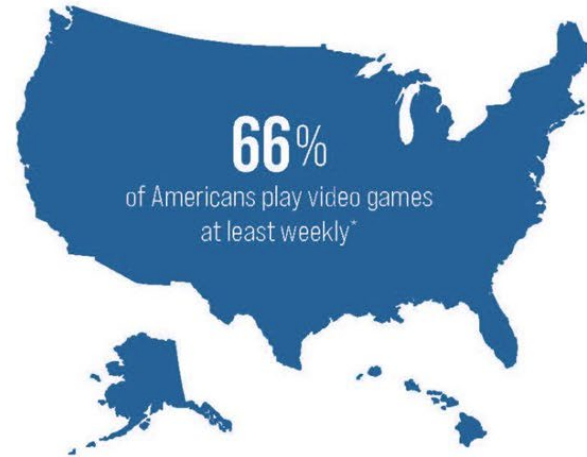


Who is a real gamer?



THE VIDEO GAME PLAYER COMMUNITY

The video game community is vast and diverse. Two thirds of Americans—people of all ages, races, genders and backgrounds—play video games. Video game players are about as likely to be female as male, and the majority of players are over 18.



There are **215.5 million** active video game players across all ages in the U.S.

VIDEO GAME PLAYERS ACROSS ALL AGES:



48% identify as female
52% identify as male†



70% of men and boys play video games



62% of women and girls play video games

* Throughout this report, "video game players" are those that play video games at least an hour a week.

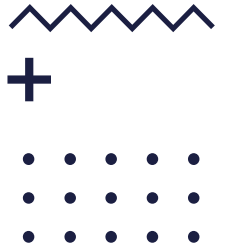
† Among respondents (18+), 0.97% chose "other" or "prefer not to answer."



Avoidance of Online Communication

- While online communication can be beneficial for many, opening up a line of communication within video games can sometimes lead to unwanted toxicity & bullying.
- For many players of online first-person shooters like Valorant, Call of Duty, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, & more, in-game voice communication is often filled with harassment, bigoted comments, curse words, & more (Stummreiter, 2022).
- At one time this “smack talk” was considered a part of the experience, but for many it has always been a barrier to enjoying the experience.





Potential Disadvantages

Regulation Concerns

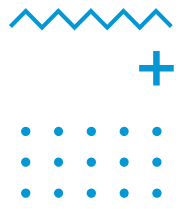
Most online games have report systems built in to monitor negative activity over voice and text chat, but it does not prevent unwanted behavior or eliminate it by any means. There are also many ways for individuals to bypass typical methods of regulation.



Negative Experiences

These factors may cause people to avoid using their own microphone in voice chat or even lead them to disable voice chat from their game completely, something that can hinder the social, fun experience that many people log into games for in the first place.

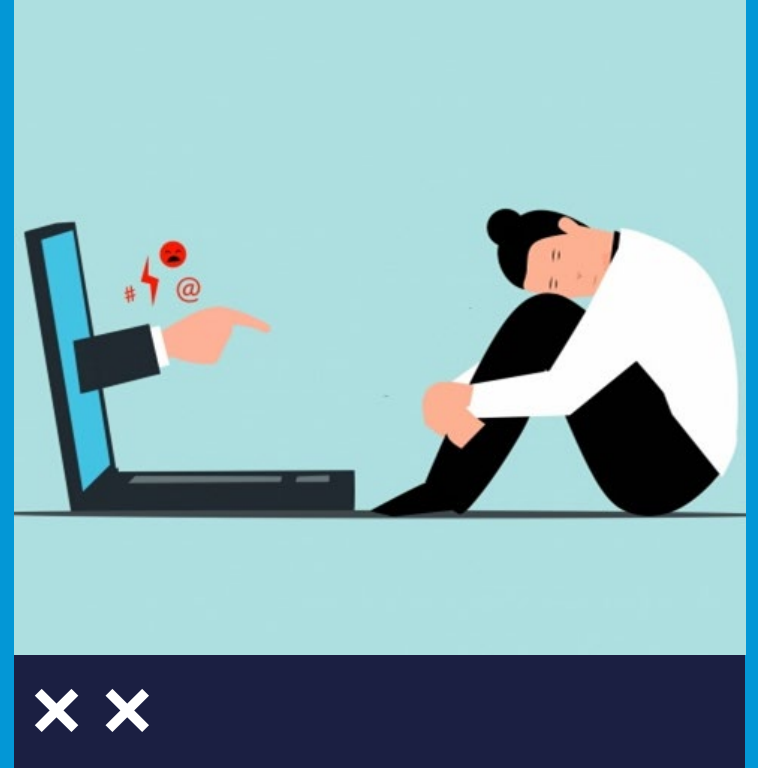




Avoidance of Online Communication

In addition to toxicity that can be potentially experienced by anyone utilizing online communication mediums, individuals with diverse multicultural backgrounds can face additional harassment, discrimination, and threats.

Being harassed or simply observing the harassment can have a negative impact on mental health and hinder the benefits from gaming and online communication, with many individuals considering online harassment to be a “major problem” (Duggan, 2017).



Minority groups often face harassment and abusive behavior online involving **racial overtones**, with 25% of black Americans and 10% of Hispanics indicating that they have been targeted due to their race compared to 3% of whites. (Duggan, 2017).

% of U.S. adults who say they have been harassed online because of their race/ethnicity



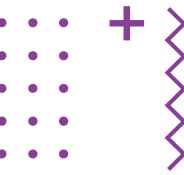
*Source: Survey conducted Jan. 9-23, 2017.
"Online Harassment 2017"*

Avoidance of Online Communication

Alongside the harassment experienced by minority races, women who utilize online communication, especially in video game voice chat, often face large amounts of scrutiny and verbal harassment.

Sexual harassment, unwanted advances, sexist remarks, and toxic masculinity are prevalent and often expected by many female-identifying gamers using video game voice chats and online communication mediums (Ictech, 2021).





“...it sucks when you get on the game and as soon as they hear that you’re a girl ...‘Oh, you can’t play. Oh, you’re gonna suck’ ... other ones, they just end up calling you all types of names—just gotta mute those.”

—Honora, a 20 year old female online gamer

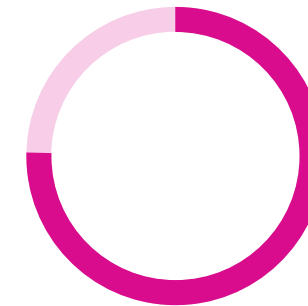
(Ictech, 2021).



Avoidance of Online Communication

A research study conducted in 2022 indicated that **three quarters (76%)** of the 2000 female gamers they studied had disguised their gender when playing games online, whether by using a voice changer when using online communication or by changing their in-game name to a masculine-sounding alias.

93% of those women stated that the reason they did this was because of the sexual harassment they experienced from fellow gamers.



76%
of Female Gamers Studied

Source: Survey conducted in 2022 by FandomSpot

(Celatti, n.d.).



A reasonable rationale for why some may exclude

- Exclusion or negativity directed at fellow gamers for aspects of their identity, their skill level, etc. is totally inappropriate.
- There is a reasonable argument for some gamers creating LFGs for specific skill areas in advance of forming the group.
- However, this still creates the problem of gatekeeping something that should be a welcoming experience.
- Solutions?
 - Paradigm shift for the rest of us.
 - Creation of supportive communities to foster belonging

Sense of Belonging

- Mentioned previously as a potential benefit to online communication, having easy access to social interaction with others can help to foster a **sense of belonging** for individuals that may not have it in other areas of their lives.
- A sense of belonging serves as a protective factor that often comes along when an individual has the perception of strong social ties and the feeling that they are not alone (Allen et al., 2021).



Sense of Belonging

- A sense of belonging is a **vital need** for humans that has been observed across all cultures and at biological, behavioral, and social levels that individuals fulfill in many different ways.
- This is also a **protective factor** that is necessary to consider and encourage in counseling because feelings of support and belonging can increase resilience, overall psychological well-being, and positive psychosocial outcomes (Allen et al., 2021).



Sense of Belonging

- For some, talking to others through online communication mediums and uniting to support each other through a common hobby can provide that sense of belonging that can be difficult to achieve.
- Communicating with a group of fellow video game players such as in player organizations called “guilds” or “parties” is one example of how a sense of belonging can be fostered and provide social and emotional support in a virtual environment (Ictech, 2021).





Ethical & Professional Considerations

- Counselors (and other mental health disciplines) have ethical obligations around fostering safe environments and reducing barriers around technology, etc.
- Codes of Ethics related to technology and supporting others in communication
- Professional relationship codes of ethics



ACA Code of Ethics

Section H: Distance Counseling, Technology, and Social Media

Introduction:

Counselors actively attempt to understand the **evolving nature** of the profession with regard to distance counseling, **technology, and social media** and how such resources may be used to **better serve** their clients. Counselors strive to become **knowledgeable** about these resources. Counselors understand the **additional concerns** related to the use of distance counseling, technology, and social media (American Counseling Association, 2014).



ACA Code of Ethics



A.1.a. Primary Responsibility

The primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the **dignity** and promote the **welfare** of clients.



To promote the welfare of clients in the most effective way possible, we need to understand and respect them as a unique individual. To help them deal with potential stressors and understand protective factors they may have, we must recognize that online communication circles can have a powerful impact on their life.



E.5.b. Cultural Sensitivity

Counselors recognize that culture affects the manner in which clients' problems are **defined and experienced**.



The unique culture of online communication in gaming communities can have a strong impact on an individual's culture through their social interactions and experiences. Problems such as discrimination and targeted harassment through online mediums and a lack of safety can be very important to clients.



What can we do about this in the short term?

- We can create safe spaces and attempt to step in and minimize inappropriate dialogue when it arises.
- The Irregulars is a designation that came from Dr. Kuniak's own gaming experiences. His friend, Greg, would often volunteer to play with inexperienced players.
- Greg would have to play harder to support the other players. Eventually this ever evolving team became known as "Greg's Irregulars" and then just "The Irregulars" and has evolved into a play style that we're proud of.

Experience Points: Irregulars

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EXPERIENCE POINTS



Thanks!

Keep in touch:

Dr. Steve Kuniak -

Email: stephen.kuniak@gmail.com

Twitter: [@Stevagorn](https://twitter.com/Stevagorn)
experiencepts.org

Brittany Riffle -

Email: bmr7190@lockhaven.edu



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