

On coronavirus lockdown, gamers seek solace and community in video games

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Video games have always been a source of solace in tough times for Rosemary Kelley.

Now, as everything across the U.S. is being shut down and slowed down, the 25-year-old has her [game controller](#) in hand again.

"I originally had every single weekend booked, and now I have nothing," she said.

For Kelley, an esports caster and host for games like "Pokémon," "Overwatch" and "Hearthstone," the worsening coronavirus pandemic has led to a halt in bookings and an array of cancellations for events. The Game Developer's Conference, known as GDC, supposed to happen in March is now postponed to the summer. Big gaming convention E3 scheduled for June was called off until 2021.

"Now I'm spending a lot more time just playing games for fun because I don't have the same level of commitments," said Kelley.

In her newfound free time, Kelley plays multiplayer games like Pokemon Sword and Shield and Animal Crossing on her Nintendo Switch.

Once a part-time gaming streamer, Kelley has since increased her streaming time from two to three times a week to nearly every day. "It's been an outlet for me to be creative but also to keep my mind working," she says.

In the U.S., the average gamer plays for six hours and 46 minutes each week, slightly more than the global average of six hours and 20 minutes each week, according to a report on The State of Online Gaming.

And that's likely increasing amid the wave of social distancing efforts and businesses closing doors across the country, as people of all ages look to technology to connect them with the world beyond their windows.

"This isn't just out of boredom but an intrinsic desire to be social. New gaming capabilities allow people to engage with one another virtually," said Nigel Burmeister, vice president of Limelight Networks, which helps deliver cloud-based content.

Gaming is 'light at the end of the tunnel'

Social and personality psychologist Don Forsyth says human contacts and connections sustain us both psychologically and socially.

"Unlike emotional loneliness, social loneliness occurs when people feel cut off from their network of friends, acquaintances, and associates," said Forsyth. "Social loneliness can be countered by reaching out to other people through any (safe) means possible: even writing a letter or email to an old friend will undo some of the negative effects of prolonged isolation."

In its early years a solitary pursuit, gaming has become a virtual hangout for players. Kelley says the community she's found in gaming has been paramount in getting her through her self-quarantining. Especially as the timeline gets longer. On March 29, President Donald Trump announced the administration's extension of nationwide social distancing guidelines to April 30.

"I wouldn't be able to get through my own self-quarantining if I didn't have this community of people I can communicate with on a regular basis. That goes from playing games with them to just chatting about what's going on," said Kelley.

Many forms of gaming, especially multiplayer games have increased levels of social presence—including the ability to share screens and interact with characters, Forsyth says.

"It creates this feeling of togetherness, true presence, that you're no longer distant from another person. It completely satisfies the need for belonging," said Forsyth.

For Eric L., 42, video games have been a glimmer of hope in unprecedented times. "It's a small light at the end of the tunnel," said Eric.

Known as Colt Eastwood on YouTube, Eric has amassed a following of over 87,000 subscribers where he produces content mainly on gaming news, consoles and industry trends. Eric hopes to use social distancing as an opportunity to create more content and expand the video games he plays.

"A lot of our lives are changing inside and outside of gaming," he says. "I've turned to gaming more because we're not going out and doing other events outside of the house."

According to Verizon, gaming saw a 75% surge week over week in data usage in the U.S. in March.

"As more entertainment options are canceled in communities across the U.S., an increase in video traffic and online gaming is not surprising," said Kyle Malady, CTO of Verizon.

Steam, the largest video game distribution service for PC gaming, reached an all-time record on March 15 with nearly 20 million users active on the platform at the same time.

Gaming chat app Discord has also noted an increase in activity and usage in recent weeks. "Overall, we have seen increased usage, particularly in regions where the virus has had a greater day-to-day impact on people," said Discord in a statement.

In March, Discord raised the limits of its Go Live function from 10 to 50 people after noticing increased usage on its platform. The function allows people to privately stream or screen share apps from 10 people to 50 people.

Mack Montague says he uses Discord daily to communicate with gamers. "That's been my go-to app when I'm trying to stay connected."

The full-time father of two has spent the past year and a half building his brand as a streamer on Facebook Gaming. He says he wants to continue to showcase his love of gaming to the world.

"This is the perfect time to really connect with my audience, really branch out and grow with new people," he said.

When connecting leads to disconnect

With the sudden surge in gaming, a number of outages and downtime have also been reported. Nintendo's online Switch service faced a nine-hour network outage on March 17. Sony Playstation and Xbox Live also faced downtime on March 15.

In a tweet, Phil Spencer, head of Xbox for Microsoft, noted increased usage across the company's platforms and their efforts to keep its Xbox gaming services "running smoothly."

The surge in gaming amid coronavirus lockdowns follows a roster of new game releases.

One of the newest online games, "Call of Duty: Warzone," a free-to-play online battle royale [video game](#) launched March 10 for PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC. Within its first 24 hours, publisher Activision said more than 6 million players had played the game.

Nintendo's newest release "Animal Crossing: New Horizons" released on March 20 has also been met with much fanfare. The fifth title in the main series has outsold other Nintendo Switch titles such as "Super Smash Bros." and Pokémon "Sword and Shield," making it the fastest-selling Switch game, according to Forbes.

"With the new titles it gives you something to look forward to," said Kelley.

On March 28, the World Health Organization shared that it's teaming up with major gaming companies such as Activision Blizzard, Zynga and Riot Games to launch #PlayApartTogether, an initiative that encourages healthy social distancing and hygiene guidelines. The WHO outreach to [game](#) companies is a turn from 2019's labeling of video gaming addiction as a mental disorder.

"Still having video games at this time in my life means so much. It's a form of consistency, where video games have been for me at some of the hardest times in my life they're going to be there for me now too," said Kelley.

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