



## Full Length Article

# When the ball stops, the fun stops too: The impact of social inclusion on video game enjoyment



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## ABSTRACT

Video games have long been understood as an entertaining and popular medium, and recent work has suggested that at least part of their appeal rests in their ability to foster feelings of sociability and belonging with others. From this, we expected that following an episode of social ostracism, playing video games with other people would be an enjoyable experience due to the game's ability to restore one's social needs. However, in a 2 (social inclusion vs. social ostracism) × 2 (choosing to play alone vs. co-playing) quasi-experimental design, individuals who were socially ostracized in a ball tossing game reported no deficit in their subsequent enjoyment of the video game. Ostracized players reported above-average enjoyment, while individuals who were socially included pre-gameplay reported significantly lower enjoyment when playing alone compare to all other conditions. These effects held, controlling for individual sex, trait need for belonging, video game self-efficacy, and individual performance at the game. These results ran counter to predictions regarding the socially restorative power of video games following a social ostracism episode, and offer insight into how social scenarios might foster expectations of entertainment media products.

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## 1. When the ball stops: The impact of social inclusion on video game enjoyment

Video games are a multi-billion dollar business (Bacon, 2011; Cucuel, 2011; Hinkle, 2011). What was once a niche activity enjoyed by a few individuals has now become a media industry giant, reporting profits of more than the movie and music industries combined (Global Industry Analysts, 2009). This unprecedented growth has spurred the interest of game developers and researchers alike as to why people are engaging with this new media at such a growing rate. In particular, there is a rising interest in why people show preferences for, or enjoy, certain kinds of games over others.

One fundamental aspect of video games that is often overlooked – both in research as well as popular discourse (Bowman, Weber, Tamborini, & Sherry, 2013) – is their ability to be co-played with others. The social functions of games are evident in their design; indeed, from the very first home consoles (i.e. the Atari VCS), one is hard-pressed to find a console released without at least two controller ports along with an extensive library of multiplayer games. Indeed, the socialization dynamic of video game play has been recognized

in a variety of studies, including both industry data (ESA, 2012) and large-scale survey work (Lenhart et al., 2008). Survey work by Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, and Lachlan (2006) and Yee (2006) identified socialization as a prominent self-reported motivation for game play.

Yet, for all of the survey work establishing socialization as a relevant dimension of the video game experience, less known are the uses, benefits, and consequence of playing with others for players' state well-being. However, social psychologists – particularly in the last decade – have demonstrated that people seek out social experiences to counteract damaging effects associated with social ostracism in everyday life (Williams, 2007). To this end, we propose that social game play could play a role in restoring or enhancing players' sense of belonging by counteracting feelings of isolation. Specifically we explore the social game playing preferences of players made to feel socially ostracized, and examine the role of social game play in their overall enjoyment.

### 1.1. Video games as social experiences

Within all of the established game play motivation models, the desire to socialize with other players holds a prominent role. Social motivations for game play have consistently been found to be one of the primary motivating factors for players to start playing, and

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continue to play, video games (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Ghuman & Griffiths, 2012; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Yee, 2006). The popularity of social play is also demonstrated through the high rates of social play reported among representative samples. Recent data compiled by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reports that 62% of all game players play with others, either in person or online (ESA, 2012). Among adolescents, this number is higher, as representative data compiled from the Pew Internet & Life Survey reports that 76% of teenagers play games with other people in some way (i.e., physically co-located or together online; Lenhart et al., 2008). Moreover, while social motivations are often assumed to be a core element of online gaming experiences – online games being specifically marked by their ability to bring non-co-located players together digitally – social motivations have also been found to drive gameplay and enjoyment for offline games as well (deKort & Ijsselstein, 2008; Jansz & Martens, 2005). In fact, these same studies have shown that even single-player offline game play can be social experience, as when only one person is actively engaging in gameplay, groups of co-located friends can become socially engaged through coviewing and sharing their comments, suggestions, and predictions.

In terms of the direct impact of video games on psychological needs, work by Huh and Bowman (2008) found that individuals who engaged in extreme amounts of massively multiplayer gaming (games such as *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*) had the highest scores on personality indices related to extraversion, suggesting that games can provide gratifications for even those with the greatest social appetites. Considering the “massively multiplayer” nature of these games – often, players are given access to potentially hundreds of others rather than the handful of friends that would comfortably fit in one’s living room (cf. Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) – this finding might not be so surprising. Similar work applying the framework of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to video games has found that playing games with others can significantly enhance feelings of relatedness, understood as the desire to feel connected to social others (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010). However in these studies, it is difficult to tease apart how much relatedness reported in those studies was a product of player’s feelings of connectedness to social actors within the game (such as in-game characters and avatars, found in follow-up work by Banks & Bowman, 2014; Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008) or the co-located others in the gaming environment itself (such as other corporeal gamers as suggested by Ewoldsen et al., 2012). Nonetheless, these add support to the general notion that video games can foster feelings of social inclusion.

### 1.2. The importance of social inclusion

Generating a sense of social belonging through social inclusion is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Interacting with others in positive ways bolsters self-esteem, provides a sense of self-worth, and contributes to one’s overall psychosocial well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Conversely, being socially ostracized – which is being ignored or excluded from social interactions (Williams, 2001; Williams & Sommer, 1997) – can have a distressing impact on individuals. Social ostracism not only leads to feelings of being shunned or ignored, but can also incite frustration (Geller, Goodstein, Silver, & Sternberg, 1974) and lead to a reduced sense of social belonging and control (cf. Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Williams, Shore, & Garbe, 1998). In extreme cases, the effects of social ostracism can extend beyond damaging an individual and contribute to their outward displays of aggression: in 13 of 15 case studies examining children involved in school shootings since 1995, social ostracism was cited as a contributing factor (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Other

work (Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990) reports social ostracism as a common factor in cases of juvenile disorders related to delinquency, with rates of delinquency for socially excluded children as much as twice as high (35%) as compared to a total sample of children.

According to Williams and Sommer (1997), when one is socially ostracized, a need-threat cognition model is activated by which ostracized individuals strive to regain or repair the fundamental social needs (i.e., self-esteem, belonging, control, and sense of existence) through some subsequent event or task. In order to cope with and prevent the psychologically deleterious effects of ostracism, Gardner, Pickett, and Brewer (2000) contend that individuals use a psychological-based social monitoring system to process social information that could be relevant in establishing or maintaining social connections. This system provides individuals internal feedback that helps them to assess how well they are fitting socially, which can in itself promote feelings of belonging. In the event of negative feedback (e.g., being ignored or excluded from a social activity), the social monitoring system should become more active, leaving individuals hyper-attentive and sensitive to cues about their social standing. For instance, in one study of social monitoring activation, Gardner et al. (2000) demonstrated that people were able to more accurately recall information related to social interactions after they had been ostracized socially.

#### 1.2.1. Media and social inclusion

In general, it is argued that the best way for people to satisfy their need for belonging is through regular, positive interaction with others (cf. Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Emerging research suggest that social media applications can help fulfill this need, with a stronger need for belonging traits having been found to correlated with social network site use (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Sun & Wu, 2012) and mobile phone use (Walsh, White, Cox, & Young, 2011). Drawing from this research, Cohen and Lancaster (2014) argued that individuals with a greater need to belong may be more positively oriented toward television co-viewing situations. Although they did not find that need to belong as a disposition was a predictor of in-person television co-viewing, they did find that it predicted more engaged and interactive social television usage, or the use of social media in conjunction with their television watching (such as texting with others or posting to social network sites about television shows during viewing). This work, in tandem with work demonstrating that video games can be social activities – providing opportunities to socialize with other gamers (Yee, 2006) or to satisfy one’s psychological needs associated with extraversion (Huh & Bowman, 2008) – offers a base for us to predict that video games might be selectively used in an effort to restore one’s sense of belonging after being ostracized. Given the choice to play games known to vary in their social nature, we expect that (H1) socially ostracized individuals are more likely to select co-playing game scenarios than socially included individuals.

#### 1.3. Enjoyment of shared media experiences

It is generally recognized in social science and media research that the social usage of media products can substantially impact entertainment experiences. As far back as the mid-20th century, Hylton (1971) argued co-viewing experience can influence how an individual processes mediated content through intra-audience effects – that is, people are influenced both by their own reactions to the content as well as social others’ reactions to the same. In a similar vein, Hocking and colleagues (Hocking, Margreiter, & Hylton, 1977) found that manipulating crowd reactions to a live concert significantly impacted patrons’ positive or negative evaluations of the show – when the crowd expressed displeasure with

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