

**VIDEO GAMES & THERAPY:  
THE IMPACT OF COZY GAMES, RPGS, AND MMORPGS**

by

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## **Dedication and Acknowledgement**

A dedication to my partner who has always supported me and encouraged me to pursue my masters in counselling.

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## Abstract

Video games, once dismissed as mere entertainment, have evolved into complex, interactive digital environments that invite exploration, creativity, and social connection. Accessible through consoles, computers, and mobile devices, they allow players to engage through customizable avatars and immersive storylines that mirror aspects of reality (Bocci et al., 2023). While early scholarship often framed gaming as a source of aggression or disengagement, recent research has begun to highlight its capacity to foster psychosocial growth, emotional regulation, and identity development. This capstone examines the therapeutic potential of video games within counselling contexts, responding to the growing integration of digital culture into clients' everyday lives. Following the COVID-19 pandemic—when many turned to virtual spaces as refuges of safety and belonging—games have emerged as digital third places that offer opportunities for self-expression, social connection, and meaning-making outside traditional environments. Drawing from self-determination and narrative therapy frameworks, this paper explores how role-playing games (RPGs), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and cozy games can enhance the counselling process by supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Rather than replacing conventional therapeutic modalities, video game therapy functions as a complementary tool that strengthens rapport, engagement, and the co-creation of story between counsellor and client. The discussion integrates current research, practical applications, and ethical considerations, concluding with a reflexive analysis of the author's professional learning and a toolkit for practitioners interested in applying video game therapy in clinical settings.

*Keywords: video game therapy, massive-multiplayer online role-playing games, role-playing games, cozy games*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background Information

*Spacewar!* was a video game created in 1962 that significantly influenced the development of video game consoles. In 1972, The Magnavox Odyssey was released as the first video game console (Banfi, 2023). As Banfi (2023) discusses, the popularity of arcade games started around the early 1980s, but began to decline by the late 1990s, because home game consoles shifted consumer interest. Home game consoles eventually surpassed the arcade industry, and are currently still the most popular way to play video games. One of the most influential titles in this era was *Super Mario Bros.*, released by Nintendo in 1985. Its widespread success created interest in home gaming after the decline of arcades and positioned Nintendo as a cultural leader in accessible, family-oriented entertainment. The game's focus on creativity and cooperation also laid the groundwork for later understandings of how gaming can foster social and emotional engagement. Sony released the PlayStation in 1995, which was immediately followed by Nintendo releasing the Nintendo64 in 1996. *Final Fantasy VII* is an RPG game that put Sony on the global map with its enticing graphics and narrative depth (Banfi, 2023). Sony and Nintendo are currently still leading the gaming industry with Microsoft, Electronic Arts and Tencent not far behind. The positive effects of video games was not a popular topic of research before the 2010s, because it was believed to increase aggressive and violent behaviour (Barlett et al., 2008), and most research was focused on first-person shooter (FPS) games. Moreover, video games were often seen in the context of being unproductive and a waste of time. The mid 2010s is when studies highlighting the benefits of video games began to emerge, along with a growing interest to explore a wider range of video game genres.

In terms of current research findings about role-playing games (RPGs), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and cozy video games, there is more literature that highlights the positive impacts on feelings of belonging, the ability to make healthy decisions, and interpersonal wellbeing. Saraswati (2022) discusses *Finding Paradise*, an RPG adventure game that explores the complexities of loneliness, this game's narrative creates an informative and relatable platform for players struggling with feelings of isolation. Baker (2022) examines how *Dungeons & Dragons* can have potential mental health benefits, it is one of the biggest role-playing games and has been around since the 1970s. According to this article, *Dungeon & Dragons* can influence psychosocial skills such as making connections, maintaining relationships, decreasing social anxiety and stress, and improving social skills overall (Baker, 2022). Looking at MMORPGs, Williams (2011) discovered that lots of MMORPG players come from marginalized groups, and digital platforms can provide a safe space for players to express their true identities. Zhu (2022) outlines how harmonious passion can influence prosocial behaviours, and how obsessive passion can influence more aggressive behaviours. While considering the game's objectives, having tasks that require players to be cooperative or competitive can also change how players decide to interact (Zhu, 2022). Lastly, cozy games have created a digital third place that offers a soft, and calm environment that allows players to unwind (Gunderman, 2024). Gunderman (2024) expresses how cozy games can encourage players to explore their identity development and build meaningful connections with non-playable characters. Highlighting notable findings about the positive impacts has sparked curiosity on what implementing video games within a counselling context could look like. This overview sets up Chapter 2, which will examine current research in more depth.

## **Purpose of the Paper**

Studies on cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs tend to focus on the exploration and development of psychosocial skills and behaviours. Including identity exploration, combating loneliness, increasing prosocial behaviours, and how digital spaces can provide a sense of safety and comfort. The purpose of this paper is to identify how video games can positively impact individuals who struggle with psychosocial skills, and how it can contribute to the field of counselling. The abundance of video game literature in a therapeutic setting is still lacking, so there is not a substantial amount of evidence that supports the positive effects of video games. I will be discussing how video games might be used as a tool to assist existing counselling modalities, rather than trying to replace certain modalities. For example, Bocci et al. (2023) explains that the benefits of video games in therapy allows the client to feel a sense of engagement and immersion that traditional therapy often lacks. Furthermore, video games in therapy have shown to help individuals dealing with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addiction (Bocci et al., 2023). The implementation of video games in counselling could benefit both the client and counsellor, because it can also be used to strengthen the therapeutic relationship.

## **Research Question**

To what extent can cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs improve psychosocial skills and behaviours?

## **Definition of Key Terms**

In order to grasp the purpose of this paper, describing key terms would be beneficial to understand how video games can impact our social-emotional wellbeing. This will include definitions of flow, digital third places, harmonious passion, obsessive passion, restorative

nostalgia, and reflective nostalgia. I will also explain the key aspects of RPGs, MMORPGs, cozy games, open-world games, simulation games, and serious games.

### ***Cozy Games***

*Cozy games* focus on emotional comfort and relaxation, and often have minimal challenges or time constraints, like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Calico*. The goal is to create an atmosphere that relies on an aesthetic that encapsulates comfort, safety, and wholesomeness (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020).

### ***Digital Third Places***

*Digital third places* are essentially the same idea as third places, it is a digital environment that allows players to unwind and interact with others in a safe space. Being within this environment can create positive experiences for players, because it promotes supportive, collaborative, or solo-play. It is important to find third spaces to create community, encourage social interactions, increase creativity, and support mental and emotional well-being (Gunderman, 2024).

### ***Flow***

*Flow* refers to the player's gaming experience, it is a balance of navigating the game's challenges and sustaining immersion in the virtual world, it activates the player's working, visual, and spatial memory (Bocci et al., 2023). Video games that create flow requires a level of difficulty that engages the player while still feeling enjoyable, and a certain level of proficiency from the player to navigate the game. Reaching this flow state is often what generates feelings of happiness (Laffan et al., 2016). Players in a flow state tend to lose sense of time, feel less tired, and have good perception levels (Bocci et al., 2023).

### ***Harmonious Passion***

*Harmonious passion* refers to individuals engaging in activities on their own accord, without feeling like they have to. This usually leads to positive outcomes because of autonomous internalization, which works in harmony with pre-existing values and goals (Zhu, 2022).

### ***Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games***

*Massively multiplayer online role-playing games* (MMORPGs) are somewhat similar to RPGs, except for the massive online presence of thousands of players within a shared world. Open-world video games give players more freedom to choose how to play the game, and what tasks to focus on, this encourages exploration, player choice, and agency. For example, *World of Warcraft*, *HighRise*, and *Avakin Life* are all considered both MMORPGs and open-world video games (Williams et al., 2011).

### ***Obsessive Passion***

*Obsessive passion* indicates feelings of pressure to engage in a certain activity, whether it is due to social acceptance or interpersonal dependency. This can create feelings of frustration due to controlled internalization, because it can conflict with personal values and goals (Zhu, 2022).

### ***Reflective Nostalgia***

*Reflective nostalgia* focuses on the feeling of longing with the understanding that the past cannot be restored. Rather than trying to recreate the past, the hope is to reflect on those experiences for personal development. This type of nostalgia can promote self-understanding, balances loss and appreciation, and fosters resilience and creativity (Redhead Ahm, 2020).

### ***Restorative Nostalgia***

*Restorative nostalgia* is a kind of nostalgia that expresses a longing towards a home, and focuses on reconstructing a period of time that was sentimental to the individual (Redhead Ahm, 2020).

### ***Role-playing Games***

*Role-playing games* are story-based games that allow players to engage with the virtual environment, and interact with characters, whether they are real players or non-playable characters (Rubio et al., 2023). The point is to carefully make choices and play cooperatively in order to reach a desired outcome. This outcome can be decided by the players, since there can be multiple endings depending on the choice you make (Saraswati et al., 2022). Popular RPGs include *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Persona 5 Royal*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and the *Final Fantasy* series (Baker et al., 2022).

### ***Serious Games***

*Serious games* have educational or training objectives that improve player knowledge, and can often be used for research. Serious games can making learning more engaging, increase retention and understanding, and provide safe spaces for experimentation to develop real-world skills (Fernández-Aranda et al., 2012).

### ***Simulation Games***

*Simulation games* are meant to replicate real-world situations or activities, the focus on realistic mechanics lets the player to experiment and experience things in a safe and usually entertaining way (Pearce et al., 2022).

There can be a lot of overlap within these video game genres, therefore, there is no set rule of how one genre should be. Each gaming genre is intriguing in its own way, and the reasons for being drawn to specific types of games are dependent on each player. These games can develop different skills, so more research needs to be done to understand how these immersive experiences can influence psychosocial skills and behaviours. To briefly compare FPS games to cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs, the differences are important to highlight to understand how these genres impact the player's skills. FPS games require players to have fast reaction time, good aiming, and accuracy (Granic et al., 2014). They are arguably the most important skills to be an outstanding FPS player, and there is not much emphasis on making decisions carefully and thoughtfully. However, role-playing games (Baker et al., 2022) and cozy games (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020) often require players to actively make decisions that may impact their gameplay. Role-playing games, massively multiplayer online role-playing games, and cozy games give players more freedom on how they want to play the game. From personal experience, choice-based games often have multiple endings that are influenced by the player's choices, games including *Persona*, *Monster Prom*, and *Danganronpa*. Knowing that your choices can affect the outcome of the game can encourage players to not make hasty decisions.

### **Contribution to the Counselling Field**

As I mentioned, literature around the benefits of video games became more popular within the last decade, so research on video game therapy has also been emerging. In 2012, Dini (2012) released an article about video games, culture, and therapy. This article describes virtual spaces like cities, because each virtual space pertaining to a game has its own set of rules and culture. Furthermore, the more time someone spends in a city, the more integrated they become

within that society and environment (Dini, 2012). When a player enters a virtual world, they are often asked to create an avatar. The customization of an avatar can play an important role, because players can choose to create an avatar that resembles them, or create a character that is different from who they are. This allows players to explore different identities, whether they are doing it consciously or subconsciously. Individuals who feel like their identities are suppressed may turn to gaming to play out different scenarios or characters they are curious about.

In 2019, Dr. Francesco Bocci was one of the main founders of the video game therapy approach that puts the gaming experience at the centre of therapy, and is often personalized to each client (Bocci et al., 2023). Bocci et al. (2023) was inspired by Geek Therapy and Adlerian therapy. Video game therapy was developed as a tool to practice emotional containment, expressive work, and supportive and therapeutic work. He also analyzes how the Myers Briggs personality test can suggest which video games to play, while still considering therapeutic goals. The use of video games within a counselling context can encourage the client to reflect on one's emotions and thoughts, and improve social skills, because digital third places allow players to act out imaginary scenarios in a safe and controlled environment (Bocci et al., 2023). According to Bocci et al. (2023), video game therapy has currently been used to promote a sense of identity, social belonging, to activate cognitive processes, and to increase emotional experimentation and literacy. With video games creating a strong sense of engagement and immersion, it has been shown to help individuals dealing with depression, anxiety, addiction, and PTSD, because it can increase problem solving skills, decision making skills, and coping strategies (Bocci et al., 2023). Therefore, video game therapy would be beneficial for individuals who are seeking to improve their psychosocial skills and behaviours. Especially for clients that may be interested in more

play therapy rather than talk therapy. Video games can serve as a platform to build rapport and be used as a tool for externalization if the client has difficulties expressing themselves.

Video game therapy is still not a widely recognized therapeutic intervention compared to modalities that have been around much longer. However, due to the pandemic, it increased awareness around how video games can be therapeutic. The impact of video games during the pandemic also highlighted the need for accessible and cost-effective coping strategies in times of chaos (Bocci et al., 2023). I will discuss the impacts of the pandemic and video games on individual wellbeing more in Chapter 2. More future research needs to be done to understand the advantages and disadvantages of using video games within counselling. Recommendations include being aware of excessive play, because some clients may struggle with navigating discipline, so tailoring a clear plan and objectives for each client is crucial. Considering the client's strengths, struggles, and even personality can impact how the counsellor chooses to use video games in counselling. The type of video game used, the objective, and even the duration of the process can differ depending on the client. This research is valuable because video games can be a profound way to explore the self, and the interactions we have within a community or environment. With this digital age, video game players continue to increase, and could offer a relational platform between individuals, especially between counsellor and client. More details about how video games can be used in a counselling setting will be discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Positionality Statement**

Video games have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My very first handheld console was the Game Boy Advance Special made in 2003. From a young age, I seemed to gravitate towards RPGs, cozy games, platform games, and racing games. *Pokémon*,

*Animal Crossing*, *Kirby*, and *Mario* are franchises I'm very familiar with because they have been around since I was a kid. However, growing up in a Chinese family definitely shaped my perceptions around gaming. There were a lot of negative stereotypes attached to video games and the people who play them. Considering Chinese culture in Hong Kong, there is an immense emphasis on academics and career, so gaming was seen as unproductive and a waste of time. Living in a society that looked down on gamers influenced the way I perceived myself in relation to my peers who were more 'high-achieving'. The term high-achieving was always used in relation to grades, job titles, and how much money you make. There was not much acknowledgement around what high-achieving could mean in other contexts. For example, if someone creates their own video game, their accomplishment could be easily overshadowed by someone who becomes a doctor. Therefore, the recognition of how video games could increase an individual's psychosocial skills was essentially non-existent.

Within a personal and social context, video games helped me when I was struggling with family and friends. Growing up in an intense household caused me to disassociate and video games were a perfect distraction. Being surrounded by unhealthy relationships and behaviours influenced the way I socialized with others. In middle school, I experienced social isolation, loneliness, and what it feels like to yearn for companionship. Being alone in my room every weekend caused me to reflect on why things turned out this way, but it also gave me time to immerse myself into digital third places. In *Animal Crossing*, I was able to engage with non-playable characters and have social interactions that I was lacking in real life. At the time, I did not know how much of a positive impact video games were going to have on me. However, having the time to reflect made me recognize the resilience and strength I had to keep going.

Feelings of being an outcast were very present throughout my life. Not only was gaming frowned upon, but I was also interested in punk culture, which was uncommon in Hong Kong. Having a style that stood out from the rest was not seen as a positive thing, I would often get negative comments from passing strangers on the street. Being a local international student made me feel even more like an outcast, because I did not completely fit in with the locals or the expat kids. Since it felt like so many parts of my identity were not accepted, I learned self-compassion and how not to take negative comments to heart. Video games were the only space where I felt fully accepted. This time in my life was incredibly difficult, but it allowed me to create a strong sense of self. It gave me the time to explore my interests, beliefs, and values. Feeling like I had no one to talk to made me realize how important it is to have healthy relationships.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, video games gave me a platform to meet socializing needs and escape the chaos caused of the virus. Understanding that the pandemic affected people differently, I was lucky enough to be thriving instead of suffering. Since people had to spend all their time at home and people were deprived of social interactions, it makes sense to why it impacted social-emotional wellbeing. However, having experienced similar circumstances, I was able to navigate the situation with more ease because I already knew what it was like to be isolated. So, I turned to video games without a second thought when the pandemic hit. Not only did video games give me a platform to socialize with others, but I was also able to continue exercising without going outside. In terms of physical activity, *Just Dance* allowed me to work on my cardio in a fun and immersive way. Looking at cozy games, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* gave me a sense of comfort and escape in a therapeutic way, because its aesthetic and coziness contrasted the chaotic world of COVID-19. I even hosted events on my island and

invited players I met through *Animal Crossing* Facebook groups to participate. I will elaborate more on how *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* became a lot of people's digital third place during the pandemic in Chapter 2.

In terms of socializing, I played *Highrise* and *Avakin Life* the most during the pandemic. They are both MMORPG social simulation games. Both games are very customizable and allows lots of freedom for its players to build their virtual life. Avatar customization, home decor, and the social aspect of the game allowed players to visit each other's virtual spaces to experience how other players chose to play. *Highrise* encourages its players to form crews because some tasks were unattainable to do alone. This gave me a sense of community because I got to know people online and found a crew that suited the way I played the game. On the other hand, *Avakin Life* has a career aspect that allows players to earn avacoins to buy things for customization. This gave me a sense of agency because even online accomplishments can increase feelings of autonomy. Playing *Highrise* and *Avakin Life* satisfied my need for daily social interactions, and it granted me the opportunity to experience the pandemic in a more positive way. I feel grateful and appreciative that my experience during the pandemic did not make me lose sight of myself.

### **Chapter Outline**

Currently, I have highlighted background information, the purpose of this capstone, my research question, definition of key terms, contributions to the counselling field, and my positionality statement in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 will consist of a literature review, where I will explore topics that are relevant to current video game culture. I will be focusing more on the positive impacts of video games, including health, cognitive, emotional, social and cultural aspects. I will still briefly discuss the

portrayal and treatment of men and women in video games, because gender inequality still exists in the gaming industry. I will also examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the gaming industry and its gamers. This chapter will include deeper insight into how cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs can influence psychosocial skills and behaviours. More details about current research on video games and therapy will be discussed. This chapter will be the largest portion of the capstone to understand how video games can impact personal growth and development.

Chapter 3 will include a discussion about the research findings, its highlights, and appreciations of my learning. I will revisit the concepts of flow, reflective nostalgia, restorative nostalgia, harmonious passion, obsessive passion, and digital third places. Applications to the counselling field will be explored to understand the benefits of implementing video games in a therapeutic context. Specifically, I want to explore how a narrative framework and self-determination theory for video game therapy could positively impact individuals struggling with psychosocial skills and behaviours. I created a video game therapy toolkit to address how ten psychosocial skills can be developed through specific video games, and I also included possible guiding questions. I will discuss ways to implement video game therapy interventions during a game-based activity during sessions. Wanting to improve social skills, explore identity, and find safe digital third places are good examples for individuals who may benefit from trying video game therapy. However, video game therapy is not limited to these examples. I will also include the limitations of using video games in a therapeutic setting and discuss future directions for video game therapy. Lastly, I will include a reflection on my personal learning throughout this process. Hopefully this paper will highlight findings that are not well-known and inspire counsellors to implement video games in sessions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review will consider how video games could have beneficial qualities to increase psychosocial skills and behaviours. This chapter will be divided into three themes in order to explore current research focusing on video games and therapy. The first theme will discuss the different impacts video games can have on its players, in relation to health, cognition, emotion, gender, culture, and social connection. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand why video games provided a digital third place for many during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how the pandemic has made a lasting effect on social-emotional wellbeing. To go more in depth, the second theme will specifically look at how cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs can impact psychosocial skills and behaviours. For the third theme, I will include current research about implementing video games in counselling, because living in a digital age allows the use of technology in innovative ways. With technology getting more advanced, and esports becoming incredibly popular, it would be beneficial to try to understand what makes video games so captivating and enticing. Lastly, I will explore possible limitations and gaps with current studies around video game therapy and make suggestions for further research.

### **The Impacts of Video Games**

#### ***Physical Health Impacts***

In terms of video games impacting health related outcomes, there are games that require its players to engage in physical activity, which can encourage players to be more active.

Challenging the idea that video games are only played sitting down, exercise games provide an immersive experience that motivates players to keep engaging with the game. For example, *Just*

*Dance* is a rhythmic dancing game where players can learn choreography and exercise in a fun way. Considering physical therapy, there have been some studies that focus on how it can improve physical health. I will discuss two articles that use exercise games to help aging individuals, and individuals with Huntington's Disease.

Looking at the impact of exercise games, Suleiman-Martos et al. (2021) reviewed 22 studies between 2012 and 2020 that focused on physical function of older adults, and how increasing exercise can improve overall quality of life. As stated in this article, not being active can have detrimental effects on health. Physical activity can delay the decline of physical function that comes along with aging, including mobility, muscular strength, balance, and physical performance. Staying active tends to be connected to having a higher quality of life, because it can positively affect metabolism, the immune system, cardiovascular system, and respiratory system (Suleiman-Martos et al., 2021). Especially for older adults living independently, it is important to adopt healthy habits to maintain good physical and cognitive health. Suleiman-Martos et al. (2021) mentions the use of active video games can decrease the risk of falling amongst older adults, and even mitigate depressive thoughts and feelings. For this study, exercise games like Wii Sports, Wii Fit, and Xbox Kinect were used to measure mobility, fall risk, balance, walking speed, endurance, grip strength, lower-body strength, agility, and knee extension strength (Suleiman-Martos et al., 2021). By using pre-existing data and analysis, Suleiman-Martos et al. (2021) considered participants, intervention, comparison, and outcomes to understand how exercise games can affect older adult's physical abilities. The exercise programs lasted between three weeks to six months, and most participants had two to three sessions per week for 30 to 60 minutes. Findings show that the outcome of exercise games are

similar to traditional exercising, however, exercise games have shown to have more enjoyment, motivation, and satisfaction. It seems that the health qualities that improved the most are walking speed, mobility, balance and fall risk (Suleiman-Martos et al., 2021). Moreover, Suleiman-Martos et al. (2021) states that some participants noticed improvements with their visual working memory, pain reduction, and confidence. By playing active games frequently, it challenged participants to think faster, remember patterns, gain confidence, reduce fear of falling, and feel less pain and stiffness in the body. The exercise games left an impression on the participants and many showed interest in buying a console to continue playing (Suleiman-Martos et al., 2021).

The immersiveness of a video game can encourage players to work on skills in an enjoyable way. Kloos et al. (2013) conducted a study that aimed to understand whether a rhythm-based exercise game could improve movement skills for individuals with Huntington's Disease. Huntington's disease affects motor skills that can impact daily activities and increase the risk of falling. Therefore, there can be frustrations around not having control of your body, and feeling defeated when it does not respond the way you want it to. The video game used for this study was *Dance Dance Revolution*, a popular dancing game in the early 2000s. Playing rhythm-based games can possibly improve mobility, walking speed, balance, and decrease the risk of falling, because it allows its players to practice dynamic and coordinated exercises (Kloos et al., 2013). After six weeks of supervised *Dance Dance Revolution* sessions twice a week, Kloos et al. (2013) found improvements in dynamic balance during walking, which was measured by double support time. Furthermore, participants got better at the game itself and notably increased their motivation to exercise. About 94% of the participants wanted to continue playing *Dance Dance Revolution*. However, there seems to be no improvements in walking speed, mobility, and

balance (Kloos et al., 2013). Kloos et al. (2013) mentioned this being the first study to use an active video game to treat individuals with Huntington's Disease, more research needs to be done in order to understand how it can impact movement skills. For example, having a larger sample size and more time for observations could be beneficial to understand the long-lasting effects of exercise games. Six weeks is not enough time to determine whether active video games can significantly improve walking speed, mobility, balance, and overall quality of life (Kloos et al., 2013). Lastly, investing in a home-based intervention can be more accessible and affordable overall, because it minimizes travel time and costs. Also, being in the comfort of your own home could build confidence, which could increase motivation for exercise. More long-term studies need to be conducted to understand the lasting effects of exercise games.

### ***Cognitive Impacts***

Considering cognitive impacts, there are studies that explore how online video games can be beneficial if it can be tailored to the client's needs, and monitored by the therapist to keep the client on the right track. Using video games can inspire intrinsic motivation, especially with children, because it entices the client to play out of curiosity. Interest in fantasy elements can be a motivator for someone individuals, which can challenge them to improve certain skills.

Wilkinson et al. (2008) wrote a literature review that examines how video games have already shown positive advances in helping individuals with aggression, anxiety, ADHD, autism, psychotic disorders, and personality disorders. Intrinsic motivation can play a significant factor in engaging clients, so that they feel a desire to improve their skills and challenge themselves (Wilkinson et al., 2008).

Another review article by Choi et al. (2020) highlights six cognitive functions that have been positively affected by video games. The five video game genres discussed are traditional games, simulation games, strategy games, action games, and fantasy games. The cognitive functions discussed are attention, working memory, visuospatial skills, problem-solving skills, probabilistic learning, and second language learning. Attention has shown to increase from playing FPS action games, because it requires the player to practice selective attention and divided attention. Brain activity was observed to discover that there is reduced activation in visual motion-sensitive areas, which allows the player to practice more efficient processing (Choi et al., 2020). Working memory, specifically visual and spatial working memory, was also shown to improve through action games, as players seem to have more precise visual representation and faster updating of information. Visuospatial skills are improved by playing traditional games, like Tetris, or action games, because visuomotor coordination, spatial processing, and navigation skills are being challenged (Choi et al., 2020). Choi et al. (2020) explains the structural changes in the brain of increased grey matter in the hippocampus, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and cerebellum. For problem-solving skills, strategy games and fantasy RPG games are associated with improved planning and reasoning, especially amongst adolescents who play long-term. This could essentially enhance better academic performance, because it teaches the individual to analyze situations, practice advance planning, and adapt to changes if necessary (Choi et al., 2020). Probabilistic learning uses probabilities to explore the different possible outcomes, and how likely it would happen. Probabilistic learning is enhanced by action games, because the player has to make decisions based on the evidence they have, which can improve resolve ambiguity. Increased activity in the hippocampus, thalamus, and prefrontal cortex indicates

improvements in probabilistic learning (Choi et al., 2020). Second language learning can largely be influenced by MMORPGs, because of frequent socialization with other players from different countries. This supports language acquisition in an immersive online world that focuses on the essence of human interaction (Choi et al., 2020).

*Playmancer* is a serious game developed in the late 2000s by Fernández-Aranda et al. (2012). This video game was created as a complimentary therapeutic tool to address behavioural, emotional, and attitudinal issues with individuals struggling with impulse control related mental disorders. As Fernández-Aranda et al. (2012) describes, *Playmancer* is designed to evoke emotional and physiological responses that are observed through biofeedback and emotional regulation technologies. Tracking the player's facial expression, speech, and physiological data can shed light on self-control skills, teaches relaxation, improves emotional regulation, and brings attention to impulsivity and stress reactivity. The facilitators are expected to monitor the player in real-time, and adjust their responses accordingly (Fernández-Aranda et al., 2012). The two impulse-related mental disorders Fernández-Aranda et al. (2012) focuses on are eating disorders and pathological gambling. This game uses three mini-games that challenges the player's planning skills and frustration tolerance, teaches them relaxation, and how to regulate their emotions better. Findings indicate an improvement in emotional regulation and coping skills after using *Playmancer* as an intervention for 12 to 14 weeks. Participants acquired better self-control, coping strategies for stress, frustrations, and increased tolerance for emotional discomfort. However, generalizability is limited due to the small sample size of 24 participants, so more studies need to be conducted in order to increase statistical power (Fernández-Aranda et al., 2012). Furthermore, this study is only limited to exploring binge-eating disorder, bulimia

nervosa, and pathological gambling; other impulse-related mental disorders have not been discussed.

Fagundo et al. (2013) uses *Playmancer* in another study to further develop knowledge around bulimia nervosa and video games. This study combines cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and *Playmancer* to treat patients with bulimia nervosa. This video game serves as a complimentary tool within therapy rather than a replacement. According to Fagundo et al. (2013), CBT was used to address core bulimia nervosa symptoms, such as bingeing, purging, cognitive distortions, and issues around body image, while *Playmancer* provided biofeedback as mentioned earlier. Using *Playmancer* along with CBT interventions helped patients reduce anxiety and arousal, which in turn reduced disordered eating behaviours. Improvements in physiological control and emotional regulation seem to have decreased binge-eating and purging episodes (Fagundo et al., 2013). Intrinsic motivation also plays a notable role in the impact and engagement of this intervention. Overall, incorporating both traditional therapy interventions and video game interventions has revealed to be quite a success for this study. The limitations of this study also include a small sample size of only women, and does not capture the complexity of impulsivity. Lastly, this study was a short-term assessment with no follow-ups, therefore it is unknown whether the improvements have been sustained over time (Fagundo et al., 2013).

### ***Gender Impacts***

The video game industry has always been a male dominated field, including its players, developers, creators, and the video games itself. In 2000s video games, women characters were often over sexualized, absent, or appeared as a secondary character to a male protagonist (Burgess et al., 2007). Burgess et al. (2007) analyzed how male and female characters were

portrayed in over two hundred video game covers to understand the gender differences in roles, physical characteristics, frequency, and objectification. This content analysis found that male characters appeared four times more than female characters. Male characters were five times more likely to be the main character, while female characters were more likely to share the spotlight with a male character (Burgess et al., 2007). This portrayal might suggest that women were not capable of being independent, and often needed rescuing from their male counterparts. Women were also immensely objectified compared to men in video games, where they would exaggerate body parts, have them wear revealing clothing, and pose seductively. About 38.5% of female characters served no greater purpose than to just be visually appealing, like a piece of decoration (Burgess et al., 2007). It has only been in recent years where there has been an increase of female gamers, and the portrayal of female characters have shifted away from the male gaze. Even so, there is still room for improvement in representing all genders in these spaces, and it can start with the game itself. Systemic issues persist, but using video games for representation can be used as a form of advocacy, and serve as a form of awareness for players that have minimal knowledge about gender.

The representation of women is not the only issue women face in the gaming industry. Fox and Tang (2016) sheds light on the amount of general and sexual harassment women experience when playing online multiplayer games. After surveying almost 300 female gamers, Fox and Tang (2016) aimed to highlight these women's experiences to understand how it has impacted them. Findings show that it is incredibly common for women to be harassed online, whether it is being threatened, insulted, or unwanted sexual advances. It often leads to women withdrawing from playing, and those who continue to play develop coping strategies, such as

gender masking, avoidance, denial, and seeking help. Feelings of self-blame are also common, because the hostile environment causes emotional and psychological distress. Gaming companies should take harassment seriously, because unresponsiveness and lack of support from companies worsens the impact of harassment. Therefore, improving reporting systems, taking visible action, showing support for players experiencing harassment, and punishing harassers can make these spaces feel more safe (Fox & Tang, 2016). Encouraging players who witness harassment to report players can create a more positive community that looks out for each other, rather than relying on the player who experiences the harassment to deal with it alone. Implementing clear anti-harassment policies would also be helpful. More research focusing on harassment needs to be conducted, because this study only focuses on gender-based harassment, and there may be other marginalized groups that have to deal with other forms of harassment (Fox & Tang, 2016).

On a more positive note, Sonder Van Wert and Howansky (2024) highlights how RPGs can influence gender identity development for transgender and gender non-conforming players. More specifically, this study wants to understand how RPGs can support gender exploration, identity affirmation, and well-being through avatar customization, social interactions, and immersive narration. With transgender and gender non-conforming individuals dealing with discrimination and mental health disparities, having gender-affirming experiences are crucial in cultivating a healthy sense of identity. The interactive and immersive aspects of an RPG can allow players to explore identity, because it offers anonymity, avatar customizations, social interactions, and narrative choices (Sonder Van Wert & Howansky, 2024). Having a sense of agency can be important within a game setting, because some individuals may lack a sense of autonomy in the real-world. Sonder Van Wert and Howansky (2024) discovered that RPGs were

able to provide a safe space to experiment with gender, because players were allowed to customize their character with features that they resonate with, whether it is more feminine or masculine. Having social interactions with non-playable characters and other online players also created a sense of validation when the player was addressed with their preferred pronoun. Having these positive interactions seem to build self-awareness in an affirming way, as some participants stated feeling more acceptance towards themselves by playing RPGs (Sonder Van Wert & Howansky, 2024). To examine the limitations of this study, I recognize that the majority of participants were not racially diverse, and recall bias is relevant since it is based on the participant's memory of their past experiences. Future research focused on decreasing gender dysphoria, and increasing gender euphoria could be beneficial in understanding how RPGs can positively impact gender identity development.

### ***Social Impacts***

The social impacts of video games can greatly influence psychosocial skills and behaviours, which is why it is important to consider both positive and negative aspects of it. As I mentioned earlier, women often face harassment when gaming online, and being aware of this can help players navigate virtual communities more thoughtfully and choose interactions wisely. Just like the real world, virtual worlds have players that are friendly or hostile, so having more positive and cooperative interactions could increase prosocial behaviours, while hostile and competitive interactions may cause more distress and isolation. Socializing through online gaming can be a fun way to meet new people or spend time with friends, and playing games that require cooperation can strengthen bonds between players. However, players under the age of 18 should be even more cautious when interacting with people they do not know. Therefore, games

with more restrictions that prioritize the player's safety should be considered, especially for children. *Webkinz*, *Neopets*, and *Club Penguin* were the most popular online games designed for children during the late 2000s and early 2010s.

*Webkinz World* is a great example of a virtual world designed for children, it is an online game where you can take care of a virtual pet. Black and Reich (2012) describes how culture and community forms within this shared virtual environment for children aged 6 to 13. The authors underline the sociocultural factors on how children engage with the game, and what they learn from it. In terms of culture, *Webkinz* promotes kind and caring behaviours that motivate children to care for their pets by monitoring their happiness, health, and hunger. Promoting caring behaviours of feeding, bathing, and playing with your pet is a huge aspect of *Webkinz*. Also, learning how to earn and save money in order to care for your pet introduces kids to financial management. These activities encourage responsibility, because the interactions children have within their immediate social environment are fundamental to their learning and development. Furthermore, there are restrictions in the chat function that has preselected phrases the player can choose from, which protects children from strangers (Black & Reich, 2012). *Webkinz* provides an online playground for children to play in a safe space, while learning prosocial behaviours of helping, sharing, and showing kindness. Prioritizing safety has created other limitations, because chat restrictions limit deeper social learning and collaborative learning, which is justified given the young demographic of *Webkinz* players. Given a player's age, socializing online to engage in deep social interactions should only be appropriate if the player is an adult, and are fully aware of the possible consequences of meeting people online.

Greitemeyer and Mügge (2014) conducted an analysis on how video games can affect social outcomes depending on whether the gameplay is violent or prosocial. After analyzing 98 studies with almost 37,000 participants, this study found that content matters more than the time spent playing a video game. Meaning that the type of gameplay is what directly influences behaviours. Violent video games tend to encompass competitive behaviours, because the aim is to take down other players, so there is a risk for increased aggression. Therefore, violent video games can be a risk factor of aggression, but not necessarily the sole cause (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014). Prosocial games are focused on helping others, and often promotes empathetic and cooperative behaviours. However, some violent games have cooperative aspects that require team members to work together to defeat the other team. These games are seen to be less harmful than violent games that have no prosocial content at all (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014).

Hanhøj et al. (2018) investigated whether cooperative video games could improve social participation and motivation for at-risk students that struggle with socializing. The duration of this experiment lasted for three weeks, involving 190 students between ages 8 to 12, and included 32 at-risk students. This study aims to help students that feel more shy, excluded, and may also have disruptive behaviours that prevent them from making friends and meeting their full potential. Hanhøj et al. (2018) uses an action RPG, *Torchlight II*, to assess team coordination, resource management, and strategic decision-making skills. This game is designed for players to work together in order to succeed, this encourages students to practice their communication skills and helping behaviours. From a self-determination theory perspective, Hanhøj et al. (2018) looks at intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to understand how the students internalize motivation over time. After three weeks, findings show that social participation had

significantly improved amongst at-risk students, and new friendships were formed. Moreover, there was an increase in collaboration, and decrease in social conflicts, which in turn made students feel less isolated and excluded. There was also a positive shift in motivation, where at-risk students felt more internally driven, and felt less like they were being forced to participate (Hanghøj et al., 2018). These studies have shown a positive shift in prosocial behaviours when playing games that focus on cooperation instead of competition.

### ***Cultural Impacts***

The cultural impacts of video games have evolved over the decades. From only being seen as a form of entertainment, it now serves as a cultural medium that can influence art, language, communities, and even politics. Video games are a form of art and storytelling, in which the player experiences narratives that are not their own. It can be used as a platform to learn and experience something new, or find a sense of relatability to one's own experience. Some games can explore serious themes and political issues that spread awareness to players.

Even more interestingly, virtual platforms have also been used for online protests. For example, Ismangil and Lee (2020) discussed how political activists in Hong Kong used *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as a space to hold virtual protests in 2020. During the height of the political protests in Hong Kong due to the extradition bill, the pandemic forced social distancing and quarantine rules that prohibited large group gatherings. However, that did not stop hong kong people from protesting, and a virtual space was created that included chants, signs, and phrases from the movement. Furthermore, Lin and Sun (2022) examines how Hong Kong protestors used MMORPGs to communicate, strategize, and mobilize the social-political movement. Planning and organizing future protests through MMORPGs allowed them to create

symbolic identities and narratives. There was a game forum thread that served as the central base for protest knowledge in hopes to block outsider understanding, game jargon was used to try and avoid authorities and the older generation. This became a community bonding tool that created a sense of connection and security amongst protestors (Ismangil & Lee, 2020; Lin & Sun, 2022). Video game culture has its own communities, traditions, languages, and art that is appreciated through shared experiences. Instead of only looking at the game itself, it is also about the social world it creates and inspires outside the context of the game. This can influence community and feelings of belonging, because players can find cultural relatedness in digital third places. Virtual platforms that embrace shared cultures can foster empowerment, agency, and identity.

### ***Covid-19 Pandemic Impacts***

The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 put the world to a momentary halt, this global outbreak impacted our society, economy, environment, education, and our physical and mental wellbeing. This global pandemic issued quarantining and social distancing regulations in hopes to slow down the spreading of the virus. Countries implemented different rules and regulations, so the intensity of the pandemic's impact heavily depended on where people lived. For example, people living in Hong Kong had quarantine and social distancing rules that lasted for three years. This prevented me from seeing family for years, because the mandatory quarantine rules would have used up all my vacation days. When visiting Hong Kong at this time, there was an expectation of 21 days of quarantine, and it was only reduced to 14 days in 2022. However, it was not until 2023, where the government finally lifted pre-departure and post-arrival quarantining completely. Even though location plays a significant role in how severely the pandemic affected people, everybody experienced its impact to a certain extent.

Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2021) discovered that the spike of gaming during the pandemic played a positive role on people's wellbeing. After gathering data through online surveys from almost 800 participants, this study highlights how the gaming during the pandemic changed people's gaming habits, and mostly had a positive influence on wellbeing. Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2021) found that there was a 71% increase in gaming amongst existing gamers, and that 63% of these gamers changed the types of games they played during the pandemic. With the chaos of Covid-19, it is not surprising that modes of play shifted, people were seeking games that offered relaxation and opportunities for socializing. The desire to play violent, competitive or horror games decreased due to the uncertainty and life threatening health risks of the virus (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021). In addition, with all this time people had on their hands at home, players spent more time gaming than before, and leaned into multiplayer games instead of single-player games. In terms of wellbeing, key aspects have been identified in which video games positively contribute to overall wellbeing. This includes reduced anxiety, improved mood, feeling grounded, stress relief, cognitive stimulation, a sense of agency, normalization, socialization, and escape (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021). Not being able to socialize created intense feelings of isolation, video games offered a platform for players to stay connected while respecting social distancing and quarantine rules. Compared to video calls, video games included a playful and immersive element that allowed players to feel even more connected to their loved ones.

To understand more about how video games played a remarkable role during the pandemic, Medina and Medina (2024) provides insight on how open-world video games offer a digital third space for players to chat, play, and learn. The immersiveness of open-world video

games enhances the player experience by allowing players to explore freely, and interact with their surroundings. As Medina and Medina (2024) states, “Play is a way of engaging with others, and the rules create a context that we can negotiate and modify” (p.2). Video games are a form of play that provides scenarios for the player to challenge and overcome. Even though these are fictional worlds, these digital spaces are based on aspects of reality, with their own characters, objects, qualities, and rules shaped by the context of the game. These virtual spaces become a place for players to create meanings and learn to overcome obstacles, and depending on player input, the decisions made within these interactive environments can influence the outcome. This can encourage players to practice their problem-solving skills and persistence, which can transfer to how we behave in the real world (Medina & Medina, 2024). *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* gained incredible popularity during the pandemic, with its release in March 2020 and the global lockdown in April 2020, many people turned to this game for comfort and to connect with others. This game sold around five million copies within the first month, and broke a record of most digital units sold in one month (Zhu, 2020). *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* provided an escape from the chaos of the pandemic, and allowed players to have real-time social interactions to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation (Medina & Medina, 2024; Zhu, 2020). These digital third places go beyond the traditional gamer community as it became a safe and adaptable space for players to gather virtually and sustain relationships (Medina & Medina, 2024).

With more insight on how *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* positively impacted player’s wellbeing during the pandemic, Yee and Sng (2020) describes how this game helped players meet basic psychological needs during lockdown by maintaining autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In terms of autonomy, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* has an open-world

environment that lets the player decide how they want to play. The highly customizable and flexible style of this game creates a sense of control and encourages self-expression. Having a flexible play style also satisfies the need for competence, because the player has the ability to set personal goals to accomplish. Finding a sense of accomplishment when being confined at home is no easy task, and video games provide a platform to do this without breaking quarantining rules (Yee & Sng, 2022). As Yee and Sng (2020) explains, “the need for relatedness refers to a human being’s fundamental desire to feel connected to other people” (p. 3), and being able to maintain these connections online is what helped people get through the day. This positive distraction kept people occupied and mentally engaged during a time of isolation and uncertainty (Yee & Sng, 2022). After the pandemic, video games have gained more social acceptance as legitimate spaces for interactions, learning, and relaxing (Medina & Medina, 2024).

Not only did *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offer a platform for people to socialize, but it provided a space for players to create their own narrative when gathering online with other players (Medina & Medina, 2024). Austin (2024) studied how *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was used as a space for mourning and memorialization during the pandemic. As many lives were lost due to the virus, many people struggled with grieving since in-person funerals were restricted. Players turned to virtual places to create shrines, host memorials, and bereavement rituals to show their love and appreciation for the person they lost. Being able to mourn loved ones is a crucial part of the grieving process, and hosting funerals online can just be as meaningful as in-person rituals. This also challenges the idea that video games are purely escapist, proving that they can be powerful tools to process loss and foster community connection (Austin, 2024).

## **Cozy Games, RPGs & MMORPGs: Improving Psychosocial Skills and Behaviours**

As stated before, research on video games only recently shifted to understanding its beneficial impacts. Rather than only perceiving it as a form of escapism and increasing aggressive behaviour, video games can positively influence identity exploration, combat loneliness, and provide a sense of safety within a virtual environment. Through collaborative gameplay, problem-solving challenges, and immersive social interactions, players develop communication, teamwork, empathy, and decision-making abilities. Therefore, I will discuss how cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs can encourage prosocial behaviours, such as helping others, managing conflicts, and navigating complex social scenarios. This makes gaming a potential avenue for fostering personal growth and social competence, this section will give us insight on how video games can affect psychosocial skills and behaviours.

### ***Cozy Games***

Cozy games refer to video games that evoke comfort, relaxation, and safety, it tends to be low-stress with minimal challenges and no time constraints. These games are successful in capturing wholesome and heartwarming vibes through aesthetics. Including visuals, sounds, and the interactive and predictable environmental design. Coherent cozy games are video games where the soft aesthetics and aligns with the story (Gunderman, 2024). However, cozy games can also tackle challenging topics while maintaining a soft aesthetic. Dissonant cozy games maintain the cozy aesthetic but addresses difficult narratives, such as *Spiritfarer*, a cozy game that explores themes of death and loss (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020). As Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) explains, “cozy games allow players to seek the fulfilment of love and belonging needs (friendship, intimacy, family and sense of connection), esteem needs (respect, recognition and

freedom) and self-actualization needs (desire to achieve one's full potential)" (pp. 226-227).

Regarding the experience of coziness, there are three core qualities identified in this article, safety, abundance, and softness. The absence of danger, penalties, and time restraints creates a sense of safety for the player. The use of ambient sounds, warm and low-contrast visuals conveys softness that is unique to cozy games (Andiloro, 2024; Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020).

As a digital third place, cozy games offer the perfect space for players to unwind and reconnect with yourself and others. Gunderman (2024) analyzes how cozy games as a digital third place can embrace identity exploration, social connection, and relaxation in accessible environments. This study looks closely at *Stardew Valley*, *Coffee Talk Episode 2*, and *Kinder World* to explore how placemaking can exist in virtual environments. Placemaking refers to spaces that gain emotional significance or meaning through memories, interactions, culture, and symbolism. Digital third places creates a sense of belonging that allows people to socialize and recharge, and feeling relief from daily stressors can positively impact emotional wellbeing (Gunderman, 2024). Digital third places often replicate spaces in the real world, and it offers more accessibility in terms of cost, location, disabilities, or other factors that prevent someone from leaving their home. As Gunderman (2024) identifies the community-based establishments of a rural setting in *Stardew Valley*, this game invites players to build connections with the town and the non-playable characters living in it. *Stardew Valley* is an RPG farm simulator that emulates a cozy game aesthetic by emphasizing natural environments and community intimacy. A great example of a digital third place is The Stardrop Saloon, its playful and nostalgic ambience evokes elements of joy and comfort since it mimics real-world rural pubs. This space represents a sense of belonging, reflection, and emotional support, which the player experiences

through non-playable character conversations and having an important role in town life.

Furthermore, the opportunity to build relationships with non-playable characters allows players to participate in a community with depth and emotional significance (Gunderman, 2024).

*Coffee Talk Episode 2* is entirely set inside a digital third place, a cafe that takes place in a fantastical version of Seattle, Washington, where the player is a barista. Leaning into a classic coffee house aesthetic, the subdued lighting, chill background music, and seeing the rain through windows situates the cafe as a warm safe haven. This game not only fosters a cozy atmosphere but also encourages relational connections through non-playable character interactions, as the stories they share can involve elements of identity exploration (Gunderman, 2024; Waszkiewicz & Bakun). Cozy games can act as digital third spaces that provide a soft and low-stress environment that supports emotional wellbeing by offering comfort, a sense of community, and achieving small goals. This can help reduce stress, foster mindfulness, and create moments of joy and comfort in daily life. Given the accessibility of digital third places, it could be an effective tool to use in counselling. Since it gives players flexibility and control within a comfortable space, it can reduce social pressure and provide safe emotional experimentation. Cozy games have the potential to foster connection and belonging, finding a way to implement this in a collaborative way could be beneficial for those who struggle to socialize or feel isolated.

### ***Role-Playing Games***

Role-playing games are narrative based games that allow players to interact with characters and environment. The intention is to encourage collaborative play with other online players or non-playable characters, and make decisions that can impact the storyline and outcome. Story-driven games can be derived from fictional or non-fictional worlds, it can also be

played as a video game, a tabletop game, or live-action role-playing. Role-playing games are set with a limited number of players, but there are some RPGs designed for solo play. Simulation games can also overlap with RPGs, some popular single-player simulation RPGs include *Stardew Valley*, *The Sims*, and *Animal Crossing*. The appeal of RPGs is the ability to immerse yourself into a narrative that is different from your own, and being able to briefly walk in someone else's shoes.

The therapeutic potential for RPGs improving mental health is explained by Arenas et al. (2022). This review looks at over 50 sources to determine how RPGs have been used for counselling and mental health interventions as a therapeutic tool or prevention strategy (Arenas et al., 2022). The results that Arenas et al. (2022) found concluded mostly positive indications of influencing mental health. When playing *SPARX*, a game that implements CBT interventions, individuals experiencing depression were discovered to have significantly reduced depressive symptoms. Tabletop RPGs seem to improve social skills, communication, and overall quality of life for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, there were mixed outcomes for emotion recognition amongst children with ASD, even though there was good acceptability and high social engagement (Arenas et al., 2022). Playing *Dungeons & Dragons* has also been reported to help individuals cope and process feelings of trauma, grief, and abuse, since players are able to safely project their experiences onto a character (Arenas et al., 2022). Lastly, games like *Desafios* and *SmokeSCREEN* were uncovered to develop coping skills and prevention for individuals with a substance use disorder (Arenas et al., 2022).

The exploration of potential mental health benefits of RPGs is observed by Baker et al. (2022). This commentary spotlights *Dungeon & Dragons*, a fantasy tabletop role-playing game

that began in the 70s, and gained more popularity during the pandemic. The structure of *Dungeon & Dragons* is a collaborative story that involves a dungeon master and a party of players. The dungeon master sets the scene, controls the world, and is in charge of storytelling. The party are players that create a character to be a part of the fictional world and narrative. The outcomes are based on dice rolls, and the dungeon master is expected to be flexible and adapt to choices players make (Baker et al., 2022). *Dungeon & Dragons* served as a social tool during the pandemic since there was already an existing online version of the game. Besides assisting players in lockdown to stay connected with others, it seems that there is a link between *Dungeon & Dragons* and psychological benefits of empathy and creativity (Baker et al., 2022; Medina & Medina, 2024). Williams (2011) discovers that role-players are strongly correlated to marginalized groups and often have physical or personal challenges. For example, role-players reported having higher rates of depression, loneliness, substance and behavioural addictions, and learning disabilities. Baker et al. (2022) explains that RPGs are sometimes used as therapeutic tools in drama therapy that enables reflection and emotional processing. With supervision, participants can use role-play as a tool of exploring alternative ways of dealing with situations in a creative and playful manner. “Role-play in clinical practice is reported to be associated with higher levels of reflection, empathy, insights about the client, and peer learning. By simulating a real situation, participants are more able to appreciate people in the context, leading to better understanding” (Baker et al., 2022, p. 3904).

Similar to cozy games, RPGs can provide a safe space for players to collaborate and practice social interactions in a low-stake setting. Role-playing as a character often feels safer, making it easier for players to experiment with behaviours and reactions that might be difficult to

do in real life scenarios. Furthermore, Baker et al. (2022) used structured interviews with a narrative analysis to discover how *Dungeons & Dragons* relates to mental health and emotional processing. Participants described emotional engagement, coping, relationships, and identity exploration through their in-game experience. By selecting long-term regular *Dungeons & Dragons* players, evidence showed that players have successfully navigated their childhood trauma through this role-playing game (Baker et al., 2022). Baker et al. (2022) found that *Dungeon & Dragons* can help build resilience, increase confidence, improve the ability to confront situations, and cope with unexpected events. Practicing these skills in a role-play setting can influence players to transfer what they learned into the real-world. Since there is no way to win *Dungeon & Dragons*, the cooperative nature of the game compels players to focus on enjoying the adventure together, which strengthens bonds between players. Overall, *Dungeon & Dragons* has proven to aid relationship building and maintenance, reduce social anxiety and stress, improve social skills, and act as a therapeutic tool to relieve mental health challenges (Baker et al., 2022).

*Finding Paradise* is an RPG video game that follows the memories of an old man experiencing loneliness. This narrative driven game highlights emotional struggles that many face. When uncovering the character's life story, the player learns about his experience with abandonment and rejection (Saraswati et al., 2022). Saraswati et al. (2022) examines *Finding Paradise* through a narrative framework to identify how complex emotions and social realities are portrayed. The representation of loneliness allows players to engage with mental health topics in a relatable and authentic way. The immersive environment of visual cues, dialogue, and music plays a large role in influencing player attachment to the character, which can encourage

empathy and reduce stigma (Saraswati et al., 2022). Saraswati et al. (2022) outlines themes of isolation, regret, connection, and acceptance that show up in this game, which can create feelings of relatedness. Role-playing video games can illustrate emotional storytelling visually and audibly that can evoke an emotional response, since the active engagement creates an immersive full-on experience. More research is ideal to understand how relatedness and reflection of one's own struggles can improve feelings of acceptance towards ourselves. Using a narrative framework to use RPG in a therapeutic way could allow counsellors and clients to collaborate, and use an interactive platform to discover parallels.

Rubio and Besoain (2022) conducted a study to promote healthy behaviours through a mobile RPG. The aim was to encourage condom use and embed a more positive outlook on safe sex. Using an elaboration likelihood model, this game implements persuasive messages that follow central route or peripheral route. The central route is deep and thoughtful, and requires high motivation and effort, which is likely to make a more lasting change in behaviour and attitude. The peripheral route tends to be more surface-level, and influences temporary changes in behaviour and attitude. This game designed three missions for players to complete to challenge ideas towards condom use. Findings show that participants developed healthier attitudes towards condoms, and intentions to buy condoms increased, which decreases the chance of sexually transmitted infections (Rubio & Besoain, 2023). This study indicates that serious games can shape behaviour by motivating players to practice healthy behaviours and attitudes. "Serious health games intend to improve several factors in promoting sexual health behaviour, from a decrease in STI incidence, increased contraceptive use, changes in perceived risk, and attitudinal change toward safe sex" (Rubio & Besoain, 2023, p. 242). For future directions, it

would be advantageous to have a larger sample size to increase generalizability, since there were less than 40 young adults that completed this study. Furthermore, creating a more in-depth narrative that expands the game could deepen learning, and generate a longer-lasting impact on the player (Rubio & Besoain, 2023). Exploring whether serious games could be implemented in other genres of video games should also be considered. It could be beneficial for serious games to create awareness on topics that are difficult to discuss, or for individuals that struggle to maintain their attention in a lecture-based environment.

### ***Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games***

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games are similar to RPGs, the main difference is the massive online community of thousands of players on the same server. Role-playing video games are often more personal and story-driven, while MMORPGs are more community-driven and focused on the social aspect. It is impossible to interact with everybody on the server, so players can team up and form a smaller party. This group tends to be the players you interact the most with, because they can help with quests, strategize about battling, and engage in social interactions. A lot of MMORPGs are also open-world video games as it allows its players more freedom to choose what tasks to focus on.

As mentioned in the gender impacts of video games, avatars can be an impactful tool for identity exploration and self-representation. A customizable avatar gives players the option to express themselves and anonymity for those who want to try out different looks. The vast options and sense of safety can encourage experimentation with personalities and appearances for those who feel socially constrained to do so off-line (Williams, 2011). Williams (2011) analyzed *EverQuest II* through a large-scale survey that was completed by almost 7,000 players to

understand role-playing culture within MMORPGs, and to what extent avatars can enable players to discover their true self. Findings show that motivations behind playing MMORPGs are for stress relief, escapism, social connection, immersion, and developing creative and language skills. Using MMORPGs as a safe creative outlet can function as a therapeutic coping mechanism for dealing with stress and finding social belonging (Williams, 2011). Overall, it seems that avatars served more purpose as a mode of experimenting with personalities and appearances, rather than discovering personal identity.

*World of Warcraft* is one of the most iconic MMORPGs, its longstanding player base and engaging gameplay has kept this game relevant through ongoing expansions. According to Snodgrass et al. (2011), *World of Warcraft* has endless tasks to accomplish and increases complexity as the game progresses. The player can choose to follow the main quest, which advances the main narrative, or complete side quests to gain rewards, experience, and learn about localized stories. Given the social aspect of this game, Snodgrass et al. (2011) inquires whether playing *World of Warcraft* with offline friends can impact gameplay. Offline friends refer to people you know outside of the video game, this author hypothesizes that playing with offline friends could reduce problematic interactions within MMORPGs, and possibly increase awareness of excessive play (Snodgrass et al., 2011). This study received about 250 responses from *World of Warcraft* players through semi-structured interviews. The results indicate playing with strangers online is more positively associated with problematic gameplay, since players feel more obligated to play longer than desired, and being overly immersed can make players lose track of time. Playing with offline friends seems to be negatively associated with problematic gameplay, because it reinforces existing relationships by sharing achievements, which can also

boost self-esteem. Additionally, offline friends can help regulate and reduce excessive gameplay (Snodgrass et al., 2011). Snodgrass et al. (2011) points out that problematic gameplay seems to also be associated with pre-existing psychological distress including depression, loneliness, anxiety, introversion, and impulse control. Therefore, playing games that have endless tasks with offline friends can keep players more grounded, and help them acknowledge unhealthy interactions and behaviours (Snodgrass et al., 2011). Not only can MMORPGs solidify existing relationships with others, it can also improve how players perceive themselves. “Massively multiplayer gameworlds like *World of Warcraft* set the stage for collaborative and simultaneously shared play interactions that seem as real as they are fun, unfolding as they do in a meticulously rendered fantasy world and via avatar-characters who, in many instances, come to feel like second selves.” (Snodgrass et al., 2011, p. 1212). Having a safe space for self-expression allows individuals the opportunity to find a sense of security with identity and exploration. However, it is realistic to expect that not all interactions will be pleasant, players can still encounter some forms of toxicity when gaming online.

Zhu et al. (2022) describes how interpersonal dynamics can influence toxic and prosocial behaviours, such as mutual dependence, passion for video games, and perceived power. Passion for video games can determine choice of games, and can shape feelings of closeness and relatedness. *Harmonious passion* refers to freely engaging in activities without feeling compelled to, which stems from autonomous internalization. Driven by internal factors of pleasure, meaning, and choice, it often aligns with the individual’s authentic self. *Obsessive passion* is when individuals feel obligated to participate in an activity due to social contingencies. This derives from controlled internalization, which is often influenced by external forces and internal

pressure (Zhu et al. 2022). This cross-sectional survey received almost 800 valid responses of MMORPGs gamers between the ages 18 and 55. The data suggests that harmonious passion and perceived power lead to more prosocial gaming behaviours, and encourages healthy and cooperative communities in MMORPGs. Autonomous internalization can increase adaptive psychological outcomes, which can enhance well-being and a sense of control. Toxic behaviours seem to be more closely associated with obsessive passion, because controlled internalization can be linked to negative mood, rigid persistence, and more aggressive reactions (Zhu et al. 2022). For future directions, Zhu et al. (2022) outlines expanding the study group to include interactions between competitors instead of teammates, and broadening the measurement of prosocial behaviours that include both verbal acts and behavioural actions. More video game research needs to be done to understand the correlation between harmonious passion and prosocial behaviours, and how relatedness and closeness could increase more positive experiences when gaming (Zhu et al. 2022). Wilkinson et al. (2008) discusses how MMORPGs could potentially offer therapeutic aspects through social interactions, because it has narrative depth and immersive environments.

### **Current Research On Video Game Therapy**

In recent years, the popularity of video games have heightened, and the number of people who play video games have increased. Therefore, recognizing the different impacts of video games can have many advantages, including building rapport with clients, and having an immersive platform for clients to explore challenging issues. The potential value of video games supporting therapeutic interventions can improve self-esteem and conflict resolution (Primack, 2012). For example, Wilkinson et al. (2008) discusses how MMORPGs could potentially offer

therapeutic aspects through social interactions, because it has narrative depth and immersive environments. The immersive engagement of video games can generate emotional and intellectual connections, serving as a platform for insight, emotional expression, and relationship building (Franco, 2016). This section will feature existing literature on video game therapy and how it has contributed as a tool in counselling.

### ***Video Game Therapy: Narrative Framework***

Narrative therapy is a collaborative strength-based approach that perceives problems as separate from the individual and focuses on the individual experience. This framework emphasizes the stories we share and how our narrative can shape our choices, identities, and relationships. Being able to “re-author” one’s narrative and discover alternate perspectives that highlight values and resilience can increase agency and feelings of empowerment. The video game therapy approach by Bocci et al. (2023) emphasizes the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural experiences when playing video games and how it can be used as a therapeutic tool. As mentioned in the first chapter, the video game therapy approach is based on the four stages of Adlerian therapy, engagement, assessment, insight, and reorientation. Engagement is about building trust and rapport between the therapist and client, and assessment refers to getting to know the client’s story in order to understand their goals. Insight is the use of video games to explore emotions, narratives, failures, and themes that are affecting the client. Reorientation allows clients to apply insights into real-world contexts through imaginative storytelling and behaviour interventions (Bocci et al., 2023). Similar to a narrative framework, Bocci et al. (2023) claims that an Adlerian framework prioritizes one’s story and how one makes meaning from it. Both frameworks take a holistic and collaborative approach to recognize strengths. The

difference is in theoretical framing and techniques used, however, the emphasis on story gives us a better understanding of how to implement video games through a narrative lens.

By using the Myers Briggs personality test to discover one's Myers Briggs type indicator (MBTI), Bocci et al. (2023) selects video games dependent on personality type and therapeutic goals. While considering risk assessment, games are carefully chosen in order to enhance social skills, problem-solving skills, and emotional literacy. By providing a safe space to explore identity, express feelings, and cope with difficult emotions, clients can promote self-regulation, empathy, and awareness (Bocci et al., 2023). Bocci et al. (2023) identifies three key therapeutic techniques in video game therapy, failure and catharsis, desensitization and exposure, and storytelling and role-play. Digital third places can make failure feel more approachable and productive, which can reframe mistakes to develop resilience. Feeling catharsis is a part of this process and enables emotional release when playing intense games (Bocci et al., 2023). Video games can act as a tool for exposure therapy, in which clients can interact with distressing stimuli in a controlled way. This can benefit individuals experiencing anxiety, phobias, trauma, and more. Having the opportunity for expression through avatars, choices, and game narratives can draw insights and meaning towards the client's experience (Bocci et al., 2023). Bocci et al. (2023) describes the role of the therapist in video game therapy as a collaborative approach. Rather than having the role of the facilitator, the therapist is reframed to be a co-player or co-experiencer in this process of shared experience. The therapist can choose to play alongside the client or sit alongside the client to witness their in-game experience (Bocci et al., 2023). In order to achieve shared flow, mutual vulnerability, and imaginative play, the therapist needs to guide, contain, and mirror emotional content while still prioritizing the client's experience. This can be

a demanding but powerful tool; therefore, therapists must have the ability to be emotionally attuned, have digital literacy, and gaming knowledge (Bocci et al., 2023). Even though shifting power dynamics as a co-player could reduce hierarchy and create more comfortability, the limitations of this shared experience can blur lines between therapist and friend. There is an expectation for therapists to pay attention to the client's therapeutic goals, avoid hijacking the experience, and be able to step back into the role of a therapist during reflection for this process to be effective. The therapist must remain flexible in switching between the roles of co-player and counsellor to effectively use this framework (Bocci et al., 2023). Future directions would involve more clinical trials, statistical validation, and integration into broader therapeutic practices to determine the effectiveness of video game therapy.

### ***Video Game Therapy: Couples and Family Framework***

Couples and family therapy aims to explore dynamics, relational patterns, and communication to understand how to improve the overall health and functioning of a unit. Curtis et al. (2017) applies the couples and family technology framework and token economies to demonstrate how games can be used as a tool for strengthening relationships. Especially families with youth, incorporating games can be a way for parents to connect with their kids. Using technology to consider how it can reshape family structure and processes can provide the opportunity to strengthen relationships. By integrating the idea of quests and rewards, parents can apply these game mechanics for real-life activities (Curtis et al., 2017). For example, making household chores as quests that can be rewarded can make daily duties feel more fun and manageable. As Curtis et al. (2017) explains, family structure can be challenged when there is a shift in roles between child and parent. For rules of engagement, parents can create their own

rules and rewards to motivate the child to play, and set boundaries for the duration of play.

Allowing the child to be a part of the design process can increase feelings of agency and build more trust between the child and parent (Curtis et al., 2017). Learning how to communicate and negotiate can develop social skills and build relationships. Curtis et al. (2017) describes how family processes can influence interaction patterns, communication and intimacy, and praise and reinforcement. Finding a more positive and engaging way to complete daily tasks can foster open dialogue and closeness. Furthermore, since this intervention is designed appropriately for each family, it is more accessible and affordable because parents can determine the amount of resources they use and time they spend on it. This can also allow kids to explore their identity and interests through imagination and play. However, it is a privilege in itself to be able to commit the time and energy to develop a game. The demand for creativity and consistency can be a limitation for many parents that have their hands full providing for their family. It also requires the child to be interested in games, since this intervention is based on video game mechanics (Curtis et al., 2017) .

Pearce et al. (2022) investigates how families played *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* together during lockdown to cope with stressors from the pandemic. This qualitative study interviewed 27 families in the United States to examine individual and communal coping. Combining a family coping framework with media as a coping tool allowed Pearce et al. (2022) recognize the benefits of communal coping. Communal coping is about perceiving the problem and taking responsibility for the problem collectively. Emotion-focused coping refers to managing feelings, and problem-focused coping focuses on addressing the source of stress and finding solutions (Pearce et al., 2022). Using video games to cope can offer a sense of control,

relaxation, distraction, emotional expression, and social connection. According to Pearce et al. (2022), the data suggests that this created the concept of joint distraction, where parents can avoid thinking about political, economic, and environmental stressors of Covid-19, and kids can be occupied by something fun. An increase in emotional regulation and mood management were detected due to the cozy aspect of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, which can encompass feelings of safety and softness (Pearce et al., 2022). “Spending time together allows for relational maintenance and family solidarity and is tied to family resilience, including during the pandemic” (Pearce et al., 2022, p. 775). Future directions for a longitudinal study would be ideal to understand the impacts of families gaming together post-pandemic. Observing the use of other video game genres would also be beneficial to see how the outcome differs (Pearce et al., 2022).

### ***Video Game Therapy: Children and Adolescents***

With the vast amount of existing video games, finding ways to integrate commercial games into psychotherapy could have positive influences on building rapport and developing interpersonal skills in an engaging way. In a literature review written by Steadman et al. (2014), the authors identified 100 of the most popular commercial games, grouped them into genres, and delved into the potential therapeutic uses of these genres. While considering psychology, psychiatry, and behavioural databases. Observations indicated that violent games, such as FPS or action games, can be controversial due to links to aggressive attitudes and behaviours (Granic et al., 2014). However, FPS and action games have shown to foster prosocial behaviours when there is a cooperative aspect and have been seen to improve visuospatial skills, selective and divided attention, and decision-making skills (Steadman et al., 2014). Role-playing games, such as *Skyrim* and *Diablo*, encourage social interaction, emotional engagement, and identity

exploration. Incorporating CBT interventions with RPGs can assist clients to test new coping strategies in a safe digital third place before applying it in the real-world (Steadman et al., 2014). Steadman et al. (2014) sheds light on playing *The Sims*, a simulation game that allows players to explore family dynamics and genograms in an interactive virtual environment. This includes aspects of play therapy in order for the client to visualize and role-play family structures and processes. As discussed previously, sports and active video games have physical benefits, and can increase bonding between people playing together in real-life (Steadman et al., 2014). Lastly, Steadman et al. (2014) looks at how strategy games can improve problem-solving skills, working memory, reasoning, and executive functioning. This can help individuals that struggle with impulse-control, planning, and self-regulation.

### ***Video Game Therapy: Positive Effects***

The effects of video games have been studied over the last few decades, the shift in understanding the positive impacts has put video games in a different light. Baranowski et al. (2008) analyzes how video games with a focus on storytelling can support health-related behaviour change, because it can be a more effective way to promote healthier choices and sustain it over time. This article considers using video games for health-related education, because it offers a captivating platform to learn new things and practice skills. Drawing from social cognitive theory and self-determination theory, games can model behaviours, increase self-efficacy, provide a safe space to practice skills, and incorporate feedback loops (Baranowski et al., 2008). Baranowski et al. (2008) sheds light on how fantasy is the active use of imagination and is a primary source of intrinsic motivation for youth. Intrinsic motivation plays a role in maintaining sustained engagement, which leads to better learning and retention and increased

autonomy and agency. Baranowski et al. (2008) reveals the impactful role of storytelling that makes messages more memorable and relatable, because players can envision themselves in the narrative, which can inspire self-reflection and emotional expression. Games can also give real-time feedback that can reinforce positive behaviours, since interactive gameplay is a major part of building social skills. “Games satisfy the player’s needs for autonomy, connectedness, and control” (Baranowski et al., 2008, p. 74-75). Records showed improvements in attitudes towards healthy behaviours, increased health-related knowledge, and overall positive behavioural changes and management. The challenge is finding a balance between educational content and fun to ensure effective intervention, and making it accessible and appropriate for a diverse audience (Baranowski et al., 2008).

Laffan et al. (2016) also highlights the challenges in making serious health games equally as fun as they are educational. This original study looks at structural video game characteristics in relation to engagement and general happiness. Features including rewards, punishment, social interactions, and graphics influencing flow, immersion, and absorption presence. The goal is to see what games feel more engaging and if there is a link between engagement and happiness (Laffan et al., 2016). The information collected from online surveys confirms that flow is positively linked to structural video game characteristics, but happiness was not strongly linked to engagement. Flow is generally considered a positive experience, because it tends to enhance feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction. However, flow states do not always guarantee high levels of happiness, since it can be greatly dependent on the player and context of the game. Extended periods of time in flow state can also create feelings of frustration, exhaustion, and negative moods (Laffan et al., 2016). The limitations of this study are the fact that data is self-reported,

and participants were allowed to use their favourite game, which implicates biases in relation to happiness. Future directions should be geared towards understanding how to create serious health games that enhance player engagement and activate flow state (Laffan et al., 2016). Flow can increase engagement, motivation, and promote self-regulation and positive reinforcement. This is because flow requires high focus and reduced self-consciousness, which can allow clients to temporarily distance themselves from rumination or negative emotions.

The benefits of playing video games are discussed by Granic et al. (2014), this review article categorizes potential benefits into four main themes, cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social. Granic et al. (2014) points out that cognitive benefits derive from FPS games, where players develop more accurate attention allocation, increase spatial resolution in visual processing, and better mental rotation skills. Enhanced creativity and problem-solving skills seem to also be linked to playing RPG and strategy games, as it allows gamers to solve issues through trial and error (Granic et al. 2014). Granic et al. (2014) describes how motivational benefits are most significant when players have an incremental theory of intelligence instead of an entity theory of intelligence. The incremental theory of intelligence believes intelligence is something that is cultivated through effort and time. Perceiving intelligence as malleable can foster more optimism and persistence, because perceiving intelligence as fixed can induce feelings of worthlessness when dealing with failure (Granic et al. 2014). “Video games are an ideal training ground for acquiring an incremental theory of intelligence because they provide players concrete, immediate feedback regarding specific efforts players have made.” (Granic et al., 2014, p. 71). The emotional benefits allow players to use video games as a form of mood regulation because it becomes a safe space to practice coping with anxiety and frustration. The

social benefits mentioned an increase in helping behaviours after playing prosocial games, which builds trust and teamwork (Granic et al. 2014). Halbrook et al. (2019) adds onto existing literature on how video games can have positive effects on wellbeing. As mentioned in multiple articles, the social aspects of gaming promotes enjoyment, reduces aggression, and increases feelings of empathy and belonging (Granic et al. 2014; Halbrook et al., 2019). Socially motivated gameplay has been linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, especially when the player also has a strong offline community (Halbrook et al., 2019). Current research has shown that video games can foster social connection, prosocial behaviour, cognitive engagement, physical health through exercise games, and reductions in depression and anxiety when played in moderation. This shift reflects a more balanced understanding that video games are not inherently harmful and can potentially meaningfully support well-being depending on motivation, context, and design (Granic et al. 2014; Halbrook et al., 2019) .

This chapter highlights how video games can influence social, gender, cognitive, physical, and cultural aspects. To understand the immersive nature of video games and how it creates emotional ties, concepts such as flow, reflective nostalgia, harmonious passion, and digital third places are a significant factor to the gaming experience. In order to address various psychosocial skills, I created a video game therapy toolkit (Appendix A) to convey the possibility of using existing video games to motivate clients to increase positive behaviours. The application of video game therapy has potential to provide a safe and engaging way to support personal growth and development. However, there are still limitations to this intervention, which will be discussed at the end of the next chapter, followed by future directions.

### Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how video games can potentially improve psychosocial skills and behaviours. After delving into literature pertaining to the effects of video games, playing video games has been described as complex, multifaceted experiences that can contribute meaningfully to learning, wellbeing, and therapeutic interventions. Baranowski et al. (2008) describes the importance of video games allowing players to participate in ‘what if’ scenarios, and increasing empathy by experiencing narratives that are different from your own. Stories that engage players tend to be more effective in making long-lasting impressions, since emotion has been strongly linked to memory and retention (Baranowski et al., 2008). “Make-believe play provides children opportunities to reproduce real-life conflicts, to work out ideal resolutions for their own pleasure, and to ameliorate negative feelings” (Granic et al., 2014, p. 67). Play contexts are not limited to children, adults can benefit from experimenting with social experiences and considering alternative emotional responses. Pretend-based narratives can develop problem-solving skills, resilience, and support emotional resolution in real-life scenarios (Granic et al. 2014). Findings from the last chapter have highlighted the benefits of using video games in therapy, important concepts to examine are *flow*, *reflective nostalgia*, *harmonious passion*, and *digital third places*. Not only can these concepts enrich the in-game experience, but they can also guide us in using video games more effectively in therapy.

#### Discussion

This section will discuss literature review highlights, learnings, and appreciations. *Flow* tends to enhance the gaming experience, Bocci et al. (2023), Granic et al. (2014), and Laffan et

al. (2016) discuss how this state creates a fluid and harmonious moment of all psychophysiological systems working together. Being in a *flow* state can cultivate positive emotions, because experiencing it can create inspiration, connectivity, and lessen the impact of negative emotions. Simply playing video games can make people feel happier, so the emotional benefit should be considered (Granic et al. 2014). Incorporating video games effectively in a therapeutic setting requires understanding the impacts of flow, and building a strong therapeutic alliance. “Combining these two concepts enables the player to have a fruitful gaming experience alongside a therapist who helps them play and leads them through the game” (Bocci et al., 2023, p. 5). Flow state allows clients to feel immersed and motivated, creating a safe space to practice psychosocial behaviours. The therapist can observe or join gameplay, while ensuring meaningful reflection and real-time observations. This can build trust, resilience, process challenges, and link in-game experiences to real-life scenarios (Bocci et al., 2023).

*Restorative nostalgia* is a longing toward a home, in which the person attempts to reconstruct what once was. *Reflective nostalgia* focuses on the energy of the longing itself, the feeling of nostalgia (Redhead Ahm, 2020). It is important to differentiate these two concepts, because trying to recreate the past can induce feelings of frustration or stuckness. Reflecting on the past fosters learning, healing, acceptance, and growth by recognizing insightful thoughts. *Harmonious passion* refers to engaging in activities voluntarily, and is often linked to satisfaction around autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Obsessive passion* tends to be linked to feelings of obligation motivated by controlled internalization of social acceptance (Zhu et al., 2022). As Zhu et al. (2022) explains, harmonious passion has shown to promote reparative behaviours during conflict and is more likely to be associated with open-mindedness, which influences

players to feel less judged by others. Obsessive passion is associated with more aggressive behaviours, because the player is compelled to defend their identity, which increases the likelihood of losing temper due to bad performance (Zhu et al., 2022). Reflective nostalgia and harmonious passion should be examined when using video games therapy, because this mindset can cultivate growth and healing. Furthermore, positive in-game experiences can elevate overall passion and engagement, harmonious passion creates an inclusive gaming environment that prioritizes mutual dependence and autonomy (Zhu et al., 2022). Reflective nostalgia can connect clients to positive memories without trying to relive them, which holds space for meaning-making and self-understanding. Harmonious passion integrates video games in a balanced way, supporting happiness, motivation, and resilience without it being overwhelming.

Digital third places is a significant concept to explore because it creates a safe, shared environment outside of both the client's home life and the formal therapy room. It allows players to express themselves, build relationships, and experiment with new roles or skills without the pressures of real-world consequences. With virtual environments being more widely accepted after the pandemic, this platform provides a neutral, flexible, and creative space for players to explore (Medina & Medina, 2024). Using digital third places in a therapeutic setting produces safety, comfort, social connection, identity exploration, and transitional space. Having the opportunity to practice socializing in a non-judgemental space can enable clients to discover aspects of themselves, and transfer in-game skills to real-life situations (Gunderman, 2024).

Digital third places offer more accessibility for people who cannot access in-person third places, such as coffee shops, libraries, and parks. Digital third places function as an extension of the counselling room, where therapeutic exploration feels natural and engaging. By entering a virtual

environment together, therapist and client co-create a safe space that blends play with reflection, making counselling more dynamic and immersive. These concepts are highlighted, because it helps translate the gaming experience into language that can be understood, explored, and applied in therapy.

### **Application: Video Game Therapy ToolKit**

Considering a narrative framework, video games can be used as a collaborative therapeutic tool to re-author the client's story through growth and resilience. Bocci et al. (2023) indicates that video games with an emotional impact can contribute to the player's self-reflection through storytelling, externalization, and re-authoring. By prioritizing the client's strengths, agency, and autonomy, video games can empower clients to take ownership of their narrative. Narrative therapy co-creates meaning through dialogue, video game therapy provides reflection on gameplay narratives. This creates safe exploration for clients to navigate meaning-making and identity development (Bocci et al., 2023). The collaborative nature of the narrative framework positions clients to use video games to foster belonging through cooperative play and contribution to team goals. Therefore, clients can simultaneously strengthen personal development and psychosocial skills and behaviours. Social-determination theory is a framework that tries to understand what motivates people and supports wellbeing. Intrinsic motivation is an important factor of motivation that increases feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Hanghøj et al. (2018) and Yee and Sng (2022) underline the advantages of engaging in activities that are both meaningful and enjoyable. By participating in activities without external pressures or rewards, individuals act in ways that align with their sense of self, fulfill their desire for connection with others, and feel capable.

The application of video game therapy involves using video games intentionally as a therapeutic tool to develop psychosocial skills, emotional regulation, and cognitive development. I created a video game therapy toolkit (Appendix A) focused on assisting counsellors with clients that have challenges around psychosocial skills and behaviours. Straying away from FPS games, this toolkit will include already existing cozy games, RPGs, MMORPGs, and a few other games worth mentioning from other genres.

Even though some games are kid-friendly, this toolkit is aimed for more mature clients, since some games have mature themes. Examining in-game mechanics in relation to psychosocial skills can shed more insight on how to approach video game therapy interventions during sessions. Before selecting a video game, the counsellor and client should collaboratively discuss and identify which psychosocial skills and behaviours need focus. Exploring the client's gaming habits would help with finding a suitable game, so genre preference, gameplay frequency, and play style should be mentioned. For clients with limited gaming experience, some time should be spent on psychoeducation to explain the benefits of using video games as a platform, and to destigmatize the previous emphasis on games causing violence. Hearing the client's experience with successes and challenges in their life can clarify therapeutic goals, such as improving frustration tolerance, managing stress, or practicing social interactions. Once there is a goal, the client can focus on developing their skills through gameplay, and process and reflect on the therapeutic experience. In terms of therapeutic structure, the counsellor should check-in on the client at the start of the session, and discuss emotions, feelings, or thoughts that have been showing up. Before starting the game-based activity, the counsellor should debrief the goals and session plan with the client, including the chosen video game. The counsellor can

either observe or join gameplay to model and coach the client, ensuring that the objective is not lost during gameplay. It is imperative that the counsellor can flow between being immersed and bringing the experience back into the counselling room. Processing and reflection on the therapeutic experience is crucial, using guided questions can provide clarity for clients to connect game behaviour to real-life, and link observed behaviours to their goals. Towards the end of the session, the counsellor should check-out with the client to acknowledge their appreciations, struggles, and hopes. Depending on client interest, counsellors can suggest a small task to apply in-game learnings to real-life.

To address psychosocial skills and game applications, I organized video games into ten psychosocial skill categories with some games overlapping. Categories including identity and self-expression, empathy and perspective-taking, emotional regulation, coping and stress management, communication and listening, teamwork, community and belonging, relationship building, social behaviour and boundaries, and problem-solving and flexibility. It was important to differentiate each category, because even though they are interconnected, each theme targets unique skills to develop.

### ***Identity and Self-Expression***

Identity and self-expression refers to exploring different aspects of identity, playing different roles, and expression through customization. Video games that have a focus on customization, role-playing, and dialogue choice can foster individuality and creativity. *Sims 4* is a highly customizable RPG for players to experiment with roles and create narratives to experience. Players can express themselves through avatar customization, environment design, and lifestyle choices for their character. Having control over these choices can increase player

feelings around autonomy and agency. When exploring identity and self-expression, the counsellor should support player choices, and encourage reflection on how their choices may be influenced by their personal values or traits.

### ***Empathy and Perspective-taking***

Empathy and perspective-taking is to experience narratives different from your own, and develop the ability to look at situations from multiple perspectives. Feeling compassion for others can increase empathy, moral understanding, and prosocial behaviours. Learning how to hold space for others can teach players how to hold space for themselves. Video games such as *Finding Paradise* or *Spiritfarer* transports players into someone else's life to learn about their struggles to become aware of diverse experiences. During the game-based activity, the counsellor should ask the client to pause before making narrative decisions to understand the thought process behind making this choice. Discussing how narrative choices can impact gameplay can encourage the player to consider multiple perspectives and balance the pros and cons.

### ***Emotional Regulation***

Emotional regulation refers to improving patience, distress tolerance, and impulsive decisions. Having a space to practice regulating emotions can increase the window of tolerance, resilience, and create more emotional awareness. In-game mechanics that challenge the player's thought processes and reactions can teach impulse control and frustration management. *Mario Kart* is a very popular racing game that tests player frustration tolerance, the unpredictable chaotic nature of the game is often reliant on luck, not skill. Therefore, players must navigate the track, manage items, and be cautious of other player's actions all at the same time. As someone who has played *Mario Kart* for decades, dealing with losses and setbacks are a huge part of this

game, and learning how to manage a rollercoaster of emotions can develop resilience and persistence. When the client experiences moments of frustration or excitement, the counsellor should pause the activity to take a moment to recognize emotions and feelings that come up, and prompt clients to reflect on their emotional state. Implementing healthy coping strategies can give clients the tools to manage intense emotions when continuing gameplay, such as deep breathing, counting, or positive self-talk. Eventually, the client can identify triggers and apply coping strategies to real-life scenarios. Furthermore, practicing how to regulate our emotions can widen our window of tolerance, which increases our resilience the more we are able to successfully navigate stressful situations.

### ***Coping and Stress Management***

The coping and stress management category is specifically about finding ways to reduce anxiety, frustration, and practice calmness. This is where the importance of cozy games come into play, because digital third places emulate feelings of coziness, safety, and cultivate wellbeing. Video games such as *Calico* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* create a gentle, low pressure, and heartwarming atmosphere through visuals, music, and gameplay. Cozy games offer a platform for relaxation, stress relief, and emotional significance. Counsellors should draw attention to the calming elements, somatic experience, and encourage slowing down.

### ***Communication and Listening***

Communication and listening works on active listening skills, empathy, and cooperative planning. Strong communication skills are having the ability to express thoughts and feelings clearly and concisely, while respecting other perspectives. Having strong listening skills is learning how to actively listen to others with empathy and compassion. Understanding the

difference between a response and a reaction is also key to practicing mindfulness and self-awareness. *Overcooked* is a great example of a video game that requires effective communication and listening skills, players are expected to navigate an overwhelming environment that challenges patience and stress tolerance. It can feel intimidating for clients that struggle with communication, counsellors should be able to model active listening and strong communication skills when assisting clients in sessions. When clients are feeling stuck or instructions are unclear, taking a pause to allow clients to figure out how to best communicate their thoughts and develop confidence. Asking the client to clarify or rephrase what their intentions are helps them rehearse concise communication. Reframing mistakes and encouraging clients to try again is a significant aspect to improving overall communication and listening skills.

### ***Cooperation and Teamwork***

The focus of cooperation and teamwork is collaborating with other players to accomplish shared goals. Playing cooperative games can build trust, increase efficiency, and create supportive environments. Learning how to work well with others can improve overall social skills. Cooperative games tend to go hand in hand with games that require communication and listening skills, such as *Moving Out*, *Peak*, *Portal 2*, and *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*. *Portal 2* is a puzzle platform game that cannot be played solo, all puzzles require strategic portal placements, synchronized actions, and shared problem-solving. Working as a team guarantees success, however, it will challenge players' social and communication skills. When engaging with cooperative games for video game therapy, counsellors should pay attention to how roles are shared or how tasks are divided. Highlighting moments of collaboration to motivate the client and mentioning missed moments of coordination can bring awareness to the client's gameplay

style. Furthermore, the counsellor and client can discuss methods on how players can support each other during the processing and reflection stage. The therapist should encourage the client to retry tasks with a collaborative lens and help them connect these skills to real-life activities.

### ***Community and Belonging***

Community and belonging is being able to connect with others within a virtual environment and feeling a sense of connection. This includes building a community with other players or non-playable characters within the game, feeling accepted can increase happiness, confidence, motivation, and decrease feelings of isolation. Offline communities, forums, and servers dedicated to a specific game is also a significant part of the gaming community. These extended virtual spaces support socializing, sharing knowledge, creative expression, and community identity. Video games that create a sense of community and belonging include *Stardew Valley*, *Roblox*, and *VRChat*. *Stardew Valley* focuses on creating a virtual community, where players work to rebuild the town, participate in community events, and build relationships, which promotes helping behaviours and community engagement. *Roblox* and *VRChat* are more focused on connecting with other players instead of non-playable characters, and create shared experiences within a virtual environment. Noticing moments of inclusion and exclusion can help clients reflect on emotions that show up. This reflection can also teach clients to consider and empathize with other people's feelings, which reinforces prosocial behaviours.

### ***Relationship Building***

Relationship building refers to creating and maintaining relationships with other players or characters within a virtual world. Similar to community and belonging, relationship building includes video games that provide a platform for players to connect and play together or build

connections to non-playable characters. *World of Warcraft* is an example of an MMORPG that offers a digital world for players to work with others, and keep in touch with offline friends.

*Persona 5* is an RPG that allows players to build friendships and relationships with characters in the story, through moments of open-world exploration players have the opportunity to decide where their focus lies. Discussions around fostering relationships and supportive environments can increase social skills and self-expression. The client's in-game experience with virtual relationships can promote feelings of relatedness and hopefully inspire applying the social skills learned in real-life. Acknowledging that virtual relationships can evoke real emotions validates the gamer experience and provides more understanding to how games can influence our behaviours, thoughts, or actions. Furthermore, players can practice how to navigate conflict resolution to strengthen relationships, which will be explained more in the next section.

### ***Social Behaviour and Boundaries***

Social behaviour and boundaries offer players the chance to practice social interactions and appropriate responses. Testing boundaries and different ways to interact can feel less intimidating in a virtual space, since consequences are less immediate and permanent compared to face-to-face conversations. Video games that have multiple endings are dependent on in-game choices, players can choose to make decisions based on their real-life values or experiment with choices they wouldn't normally make. As I mentioned earlier, *Persona 5* creates the possibility of building romantic virtual relationships with non-playable characters, but choosing to romance too many characters can lead to the player receiving a "bad" ending. Games that have good and bad outcomes enable players to understand that choices can have consequences. *Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc* is a visual novel mystery adventure game that pushes boundaries, and

requires the player to reflect on social norms, ethics, and morals. With themes of trust, betrayal, survival, and justice, the player navigates high-stake situations to determine who can be trusted and what values matter in life-or-death situations. Responsibility falls onto the player to explore the meaning of fairness in extreme circumstances. When incorporating games that challenge social behaviour and boundaries in therapy, the counsellor should motivate the client to consider personal and group needs, and how in-game choices can impact the overall outcome. This can create more awareness on how behaviour and decisions can affect others.

### ***Problem-solving and Flexibility***

Problem-solving and flexibility is learning how to adapt to change, build resilience, and think strategically. Critical thinking allows clients to develop planning and resource management, and experimenting with trial-and-error can increase flexibility, patience, and persistence. *Hades* is a dungeon crawler where players face repeated failure and permadeath, so it is important to practice persistence and reframing challenges to find multiple solutions. This game increases problem-solving and flexibility because combat requires quick decision-making, adaptive strategies, and resource management. Players learn to evaluate risk, use abilities effectively, and plan upgrades in order to succeed. When playing games that challenge problem-solving and flexibility, counsellors should take notice of failed strategies and rigid thinking, and encourage brainstorming, trial-and-error, and adapting roles. Celebrating persistence and creative solutions can motivate clients to continue playing and not give up. Recognizing the significance of flexible thinking, and applying it to real-life challenges can increase the window of tolerance. The application of video game therapy remains largely theoretical, but observations from current research suggests that they could offer meaningful benefits. By acknowledging that video games

can have positive impacts, it opens up space to use them as tools for learning, social connection, and personal growth. Engaging players in social, cognitive, and emotional challenges, video games can foster empathy, problem-solving, flexible thinking, and a sense of belonging, making it a promising tool for supporting psychosocial development.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Adapting or incorporating existing video games for interventions can influence wellbeing, reduce stigma, and motivate active and consistent participation. Engaging with familiar games can meet clients where they are, support motivation, and promote healthier coping strategies (Colder Carras et al., 2018). Video game interventions can support clients to explore aspects of their identity, combat loneliness, create a sense of belonging, and inspire prosocial behaviours. However, it is important to be aware of overplaying video games as a means to avoid emotions or responsibilities in daily life, which can lead to more negative feelings and outcomes (Granic et al., 2014). Since video games are highly engaging and immersive, being conscious about time spent playing can benefit overall wellbeing. Finding ways to have a balanced lifestyle include tending to physical health, mental well-being, relationships, and personal interests. Furthermore, even though video games can be cheaper than other therapeutic interventions, not everybody can access them due to socioeconomic status, disabilities, or technological literacy. Even if the therapist can provide a console for clients to play during sessions, it would be more advantageous for clients to practice these skills at home too. Video games should also be selected appropriately for each client, since there are games that have mature themes, violence, or strong language, it should not be assumed that some video games would work with every client, especially with children and adolescents. When suggesting

a video game, therapists should carefully screen games for age, cultural sensitivity, diversity and clinical relevance. Understanding in-game experiences is a key aspect of implementing effective video game therapy. It is essential for a counsellor who wants to incorporate video games in a therapeutic setting to have some experience playing, and stay informed about the mechanics, narratives, and communities.

As Granic et al. (2014) explains, video games that are fundamentally social relies on the varied social partners you engage with every time you enter the gaming world. Meaning that your experience can change depending on who you interact with. This dynamic feature of gaming means there is a unique element to each player's experience, even if the same game is being played. Therefore, for future directions, there should be less emphasis on gaming having positive or negative impacts, and focus more on acknowledging the complexity and interactivity aspects in order to develop complex models to explain how gaming can influence player's emotional, social, and cognitive domains (Granic et al., 2014). Which is why I believe focusing on cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs can be beneficial, because collaborative play and long term social engagement can increase psychosocial skills and behaviours. Implementing video game therapy as an assist to existing therapeutic modalities can increase rapport for clients that are into gaming, and create a more engaging intervention to improve psychosocial skills and behaviours. Current research indicates that while video game therapy shows promise, its implementation in clinical practice is still limited and requires further exploration. More longitudinal studies need to be conducted in order to understand the long-term effects of using video games in a therapeutic setting.

## Reflections on Personal Learning

Reflecting on my personal learning throughout this process, I noticed that my passion and knowledge for gaming has increased even more than I would have thought. Current research that highlights the positive impacts of video games has given me a sense of validity in my experience. With the negative connotations of video games I grew up with, discovering how it can improve psychosocial skills and behaviours has made me understand myself better. In some ways, it has solidified my identity and the way I perceive myself. The positive findings of video games have shed light on providing therapeutic care in an innovative way. Extended self-presences refers to a “process of extending some aspects of personal identity into a virtual representation of oneself” (Yee & Song, 2022, p. 9). Learning about this term perfectly describes the way I approach video games, because I perceived avatars I created as an extension of myself. Players can often design characters in a fantastical way or take on roles that are not their own, but I always chose to make avatars that were similar to my real identity (Yee & Sng, 2022). There is no right way to play video games, but it motivate reflection on why we choose to play a certain way. In my perspective, video games are a way to bring people together, enrich personal experiences, strengthen identity, create self-awareness and challenge skills in a creative and fun way. Fostering harmonious passion, reflective nostalgia, flow, and digital third places has influenced the person I am today. I believe video games have taught me a lot in managing impulses, understanding your locus of control, and creating your own safe space. Being reflective and self-aware is an important aspect to not be consumed by the virtual worlds. Therefore, I believe that finding balance is often the key to maintaining wellbeing. I also understand that even though I have passion towards video games, not everybody will share the same perspective.

## Conclusion

This capstone has mostly discussed the positive impacts of video games and how it can improve psychosocial skills and behaviours. Starting with the exploration of the different impacts video games, findings have indicated how playing video games can influence us physically, cognitively, socially, culturally, and in terms of gender. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to examine how it negatively impacted social emotional wellbeing, and discover what role video games played during this time. Video games provided a digital third place for players that lacked social interactions and safe spaces in the real-world (Medina & Medina, 2024; Yee & Sng, 2020). Lots of research came out after the pandemic when people realized that video games can decrease feelings of isolation.

I chose to focus on cozy games, RPGs, and MMORPGs because it allows players to have emotional, cognitive, and social growth opportunities. Using these genres of video games can also support different therapeutic goals and be used as a tool to assist existing modalities. Cozy games can offer a space for reflection, mindfulness, grounding skills, stress reductions and emotional regulation (Andiloro, 2024; Gunderman, 2024; Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020). Role-playing games can increase empathy, decision-making, self-expression, identity, and help process personal narratives (Baker et al., 2022; Saraswati et al., 2022). Massively multiplayer online role-playing games can influence communication, collaboration, active listening, belonging, and manage social boundaries and conflict (Snodgrass et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2022). Exploring how video game therapy can be used within a narrative framework (Franco, 2016), couple and family framework (Curtis et al., 2017), and how it can impact children and adolescents (Steadman et al., 2014) can reveal how video games shape identity, relationships, and personal growth. Lastly, it offers a platform for clients to approach therapy in an experiential and engaging way.

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## **Appendix A: Video Game Therapy Toolkit**

Video games have become a mainstream form of entertainment played by people of all ages, so it's beneficial for counsellors to understand this medium in order to better connect with and support their clients. Using video games as a therapeutic tool alongside existing modalities can provide unique insights into clients' emotional and social worlds in a way that's meaningful.

### **Before Choosing A Video Game**

- Identify psychosocial skills the client wants to develop.
- Psychoeducation on using video games as a tool for improving psychosocial skills.
- Explore the client's gaming habits—genres, frequency, and play style.
- Set goals (e.g. improve frustration tolerance, practice social interactions etc.)

### **Check-in (5-10 mins)**

- Status Update: Check-in on how the client is feeling.
- How are you feeling today? On a scale of 1-10.
- What emotion has been most present for you since our last session?
- Plan Debrief: To recap goals and chosen game to be played.

### **Game-based Activity (20-30 mins)**

- Game Choice: Find a game that fits with the client's goal.
- Play Together: The therapist can either join or observe to model and coach the client.

#### **4. Processing & Reflection (15-20 mins)**

- Guided Questions: To help clients connect game behaviour to real life.
- Skill Translation: Link observed behaviours to psychosocial goals.

#### **5. Check-out (5 mins)**

- Reflect: What are some of the clients' takeaways? Explore thoughts they have.
  - What is something you appreciated (rose)?
  - What is something you struggled with (thorn)?
  - What is something you look forward to (bud) ?
- Quest: Suggest a small, real-world application task.

### **Psychosocial Skills & Game Applications**

Through gameplay, players can develop psychosocial skills within engaging and interactive environments. Having a platform to practice managing frustration, navigate social boundaries, collaborate with others, and explore aspects of identity in a safe and creative way can support personal growth. The hope is to transfer in-game skills into real-world social emotional growth.

## Identity & Self-Expression

Goal: To explore identity, play different roles, and use customization to be expressive. Role-playing, choosing dialogue, and designing spaces can foster individuality and creativity.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Animal Crossing: New Horizons</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, housing, villagers, and the island. There's lots of flexibility in decorating the island, and choosing how to play.
<i>Avakin Life</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, housing, and lifestyle choices let players experiment with identity and creativity. Has a multiplayer aspect to interact with other players.
<i>Dragon Raja</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, career/class choices (e.g. soul dancer, visionary, puppeteer, fighter etc.). Can join guilds
<i>HighRise</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, room decorating. Has more bold and expressive clothing choices for players to experiment with. Can also customize spaces with other players.
<i>InZOI</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, environment design, dating preferences, and custom content. A highly customizable game.
<i>Monster Prom</i>	Dialogue choice and dating preferences can reflect personal values.
<i>Play Together</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, pets, and housing. Players can choose what to focus on, and interact with others in common areas.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Roblox</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, housing, and much more. Can create and design spaces with other players. Lots of world-building.
<i>Second Life</i>	Avatar customization, fashion, environment design, and massive online communities. Role-playing is a huge aspect of this game.
<i>Sims 4</i>	Avatar(s) customization, fashion, pets, housing, and storytelling. Ability to create narratives the player wants to experience.
<i>VRChat</i>	Avatar customization in a highly immersive environment.  Strong role-play elements as you interact with others as their avatars.

Guiding Questions:

- How did your in-game choices reflect your personality, preferences, or values?
- Did you try a role or style different from your usual self? How did that feel?
- What did you learn about yourself based on the choices you made?
- Were you able to explore different aspects of identity through customization?
- How was individuality and creativity cultivated when creating this design?
- What thoughts or feelings did you have while designing this?

## Empathy & Perspective-Taking

Goal: To experience multiple narratives and take on different perspectives.

Having compassion for others can increase empathy, moral understanding, and prosocial behaviour. Holding space for others can also teach players how to hold space for themselves.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Binding of Isaac: Rebirth</i>	Themes of trauma, neglect, fear, and familial conflict.  Exposure to difficult emotions can create moral ambiguity and ethical reflection.
<i>Celeste</i>	Themes of identity, self-acceptance, and overcoming personal struggles, which encourages reflection.
<i>Coffee Talk</i>	Each character has their own story and unique personality.  You're a barista that gets to know their customers through active listening.
<i>Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc</i>	Players have to consider multiple perspectives in order to find the culprit. Using psychological reasoning and emotional cues to enhance empathy, and learn about each character's story.
<i>Disco Elysium</i>	Deep dialogue/storylines reflect character motivations, struggles, and perspectives. Focus on diverse experiences and ideologies.
<i>Finding Paradise</i>	Themes of loneliness, grief, and isolation. Positive representation of depression can reduce stigma and encourage empathy.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Night in the Woods</i>	Themes of anxiety, depression, belonging and financial stress.  Strong moments of vulnerability and emotional depth.
<i>Persona 5</i>	Forming bonds and engaging with character stories and struggles to increase empathy. There's a focus in 'changing hearts' to make the world a better place.
<i>Silent Hill 2</i>	Themes of trauma, guilt, loneliness, and grief. Explores the main character's psychological journey.
<i>Spiritfarer</i>	Caring for each spirit as you ferry them to the underworld teaches compassion and emotional understanding. Strong theme of grief.
<i>Undertale</i>	Encourages understanding and communication rather than aggression. Each monster has their own story and has multiple endings.
<i>World's End Club</i>	Story choices influence how characters trust and support one another. Players are expected to experience different perspectives.

#### Guiding Questions:

- Did any emotions come up while playing?
- How did it feel taking on an experience that is different from your own?
- Were there moments you felt an emotion on behalf of another person or character?
- How did understanding another perspective influence your decisions or reactions?
- What moment in the game impacted you the most? And why?

## Emotional Regulation

Goal: To improve patience, distress tolerance, and impulsive decisions. Having a space to practice how to regulate emotions can increase window of tolerance, resilience, and create more emotional awareness.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Celeste</i>	Platform game challenges increase resilience, and teaches players how to regulate frustrations.
<i>Cuphead</i>	Boss fights are designed to make you fail many times before succeeding. The internal reward of persistence and not giving up.
<i>Binding of Isaac: Rebirth</i>	Dungeon crawler where players face failure and permadeath. Learning how to remain calm and adaptive after repeated losses.
<i>Dark Souls</i>	High difficulty levels that require patience, reflection on mistakes, and persistence—learning from failure instead of giving up.
<i>Fire Emblem: Three Houses</i>	Making difficult decisions that can affect gameplay, and promotes coping with moral dilemmas, stress, and consequences. Choices such as deciding which character lives, dies, and how to lead.
<i>Hades</i>	Dungeon crawler where players face failure and permadeath. Learning how to remain calm and adaptive after repeated losses.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes</i>	Players learn to manage frustration when communication breaks down. Recognizing that everybody processes things differently.
<i>Mario Kart</i>	Teaches impulse control and frustration management. The unpredictable nature of the game challenges player patience and can increase window of tolerance.
<i>Minecraft</i>	Experiencing unpredictable combat or a loss of resources can teach frustration tolerance and resilience.
<i>Persona 5</i>	Learning how to balance school, social life, and completing missions. Managing time and prioritizing things with a deadline.
<i>Pokemon Diamond</i>	Dealing with losing battles or setbacks, which can develop persistence to keep trying until you win.
<i>Silent Hill 2</i>	Players navigate fear, anxiety, and tense situations. Practice managing emotional responses to unsettling stimuli can improve stress tolerance.

#### Guiding Questions:

- What did you notice in your body or mind when reacting to stressful or exciting events?
- What strong emotions came up when playing? How did you respond?
- What strategies did you use to stay calm or focused during challenging moments?
- Can you identify a moment you felt like you successfully managed frustration or excitement?
- What would you do differently next time to manage emotions more effectively?

## Coping & Stress Management

Goal: To reduce anxiety, practice calmness, and manage frustration.

Digital third places emulates feelings of coziness, safety, and cultivate wellbeing. Cozy games isn't just entertainment, it's virtual environments with cultural and emotional significance.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Abzû</i>	Highly immersive with beautiful visuals, soothing music, impressionable aesthetics, and creates mindfulness and presence.
<i>Animal Crossing: New Horizons</i>	Low-stakes, playful, and creative—offers relaxation, stress relief, and coziness through socializing and decorating.
<i>Avakin Life</i>	3D art-style (semi-realistic and cartoonish), vibrant colors, and music that falls under electronic, dance, pop, and club.
<i>Calico</i>	Pastel color palette, hand-drawn cartoon style, and relaxing music. Low stakes and lots of flexibility on how you want to play the game.
<i>Coffee Talk</i>	Pixel art, neo-noir, warm lighting, and lo-fi music. Rainy streets and city life visible through large windows situates the café as a warm refuge from the urban world outside.
<i>Emily is Away &lt;3</i>	Uses a Facebook template and is designed to look like someone is using social media. Incorporates popular songs from the 2000s and computer sound effects to create a cozy and nostalgic vibe.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Hello Kitty Island Adventure</i>	Calm and low-pressure tasks with a focus of exploring, collecting, decorating, and making friends.
<i>HighRise</i>	2D anime art-style, clean aesthetic, and radio station ambience. Focus on customization and socializing can foster relaxation.
<i>Journey</i>	Emotionally restorative experience with safe and supportive multiplayer mode. Non-violent and low stakes.
<i>Play Together</i>	Chibi art-style, upbeat music, and fun colors. There's mini games for players to relax and relieve stress (e.g. fishing, cooking, camping).
<i>Stardew Valley</i>	Farming, fishing, and building relationships can induce feelings of coziness. Simple quests and routine gameplay can offer a sense of predictability and relaxation.
<i>Sims 4</i>	Can offer a platform to create a narrative the player is interested in. Having a sense of control can reduce anxiety and calmness.

#### Guiding Questions:

- How did this game make you feel emotionally? (calm, relaxed, or comforted)
- Were there specific activities that made you feel more peaceful or grounded?
- How had your mood changed from when you first started playing and now?
- How did the game help you slow down or take a break for real-life stressors?
- Did you find yourself reflecting on positive experiences, gratitude, or small joys while playing?

## Communication & Listening

Goal: To increase active listening skills, empathy, and cooperative planning.

Strong communication is being able to express thoughts and feelings clearly, while respecting other perspectives. Learning the difference between a response and a reaction.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Among Us</i>	Players can increase social skills and navigate tense situations. Social deduction gameplay can create playful bonding, and practice communication and listening skills. .
<i>Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes</i>	Players are required to actively listen and have the ability to describe symbols, patterns, and puzzles clearly.
<i>Luigi's Mansion 3</i>	Communicating and listening each other's observations are essential to solving puzzles and navigating the levels.
<i>Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime</i>	Provides opportunity for effective communication, role clarity, and coordination. Learning how to function as a whole, each player manages different parts of the spaceship.
<i>Mario Party</i>	Mini games will have team matches that require players to communicate to succeed.
<i>Moving Out</i>	Communication, active listening, and collaborative planning is key. Challenges active listening, empathy, and frustration tolerance under time pressure.
<i>Overcooked</i>	Cooking under stressful circumstances that requires players to communicate, and practice stress tolerance and patience.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Peak</i>	Clear communication is dependent on player proximity. Players need to describe hazards, share status, and warn teammates.
<i>Portal 2</i>	Challenges players to speak clearly and concisely to navigate puzzles as robots. Highlights active listening and communication.
<i>Split Fiction</i>	The cooperative nature of the game requires players to work closely together, fostering effective communication and teamwork.
<i>Unravel Two</i>	Players can talk through strategies, give clear instructions, and listen without distraction. Practicing how to respectfully communicate when feeling mild stress.

Guiding Questions:

- How did it feel to clarify instructions or expectations? Was it challenging?
- Were there moments of misunderstanding that affects the outcome? What happened?
- Did you feel you were able to effectively communicate your thoughts in a respectful way?
- How did you show that you were listening to other's ideas or suggestions?
- How did it feel when you were able to successfully complete a quest with strong and effective communication?

## Cooperation & Teamwork

Goal: To collaborate with others and work towards accomplishing shared goals.

Playing cooperative games can increase efficiency, build trust, and create supportive environments. Learning how to work well with others can increase social skills.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>It Takes Two</i>	Cultivates shared goals, compromise, and patience. Success is dependent on coordination, role division, and helping each other.
<i>Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes</i>	Players improve coordination and delegation skills. Dividing responsibilities between the defuser and the instructor.
<i>Luigi's Mansion 3</i>	Many puzzles require synchronous actions. Coordinating strategies builds trust and cooperation skills.
<i>Minecraft</i>	Multiplayer mode allows players to work together, and create shared goals and tasks.
<i>Moving Out</i>	Focus on players working together to complete tasks.  Practicing how to communicate effectively and respectfully.
<i>Overcooked</i>	Players must coordinate cooking tasks under time pressure, practicing communication, task delegation, and patience.
<i>Peak</i>	Collaboration is key. Sharing and managing resources, helping each other climb ledges, and planning who leads and when to rest.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Portal 2</i>	Puzzles are impossible to solve solo—it requires strategical portal placements, synchronized actions, and shared problem-solving.
<i>Split Fiction</i>	The cooperative nature of the game requires players to work closely together, fostering effective communication and teamwork.
<i>Stardew Valley</i>	The multiplayer function allows players to create joint goals. Collaborative gameplay strengthens communication and shared responsibility.
<i>Unravel Two</i>	The players are connect by a thread—one cannot progress without the other. Increases reliance, mutual support, and coordination.
<i>World of Warcraft</i>	Raids require organized teamwork, role distribution (tank, healer etc.), and strategic collaboration.

#### Guiding Questions:

- How did working with others differ from solo gameplay?
- How did you contribute to the group's overall goal?
- What role did you naturally gravitate towards to in the group? How did it affect the team?
- Did you ever step back and let someone else lead? How did that feel?
- Did you experience any conflict with teammates? How did you resolve it?
- Were there moments when teamwork made a task easier or more enjoyable?
- How did it feel when you were able to successfully accomplish something as a team?

## Community & Belonging

Goal: To connect with others within a virtual space and feeling a sense of belonging.

Finding a community that accepts players for who they are increases happiness, confidence, motivation, and decrease feelings of isolation. This also includes massive offline communities.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Animal Crossing: New Horizons</i>	Villagers engage in friendly and warm interactions. Players can visit others' islands, trade items, attend online events or simply hang out.
<i>Avakin Life</i>	Built around shared spaces for players to interact (e.g. events, fashion shows, parties). Promotes participation in group activities.
<i>Dragon Raja</i>	Guilds, teams, and social hubs encourages friendships and cooperative play.
<i>Genshin Impact</i>	Limited time events and co-op experiences foster shared excitement and achievements. Online guilds create communities with a shared purpose and feelings of belonging.
<i>HighRise</i>	Joining a crew allows players to interact with same players, and complete group quests together. Voice chat is used often in events.
<i>Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild</i>	Rebuilding an in-game town harbours community development. Helping villagers contributes to helping behaviours.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Minecraft</i>	Public servers, community projects, and shared virtual worlds encourage contribution, collaboration, and social responsibility.
<i>Roblox</i>	Incredibly popular gaming platform amongst youth. Shared spaces, social hubs, events, mini-games, and highly cooperative.
<i>RuneScape</i>	The relaxing nature of the game encourages people to socialize with each other.
<i>Stardew Valley</i>	Playing a character that becomes an important person in town, and participates in community events. Villagers express gratitude and fondness towards the player, which fosters a sense of belonging.
<i>VRChat</i>	Highly immersive platform for players to interact as their chosen avatar. Supportive towards subcultures and sub-communities.
<i>World of Warcraft</i>	Guilds, raids, and shared world events create a strong sense of belonging to a team and a larger community.

Guiding Questions:

- Did you feel included or excluded at any point? How did it feel?
- Did you notice a shared culture or rules within the game community?
- How did helping another player affect your experience?
- How does interacting with others enhance your engagement with the game?
- Did the game encourage you to engage in a larger community outside the game?

## Relationship Building

Goal: To create and maintain relationships with characters or other players in a virtual world.

Games that have a focus on developing connections with non-playable characters through choice-based mechanics can improve decision-making skills, self-expression, and social skills.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Animal Crossing: Wild World</i>	Different from <i>New Horizons</i> , <i>Wild World</i> offers an opportunity to deal with grief and loss when villagers decide to move away.
<i>Avakin Life</i>	Players can engage in real-time conversations and virtual relationships. Players can help each other out when trying to make in-game currency to unlock more customizations.
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>	Learning choices impacts relationships and navigating conflicting personalities. In-game decisions influence story progression.
<i>Disco Elysium</i>	Dialogue choices impact relationships with the characters. Language, tone, and persuasion influences trust.
<i>Emily Is Away &lt;3</i>	Centred around romance, friendship, and trust. Player decisions will affect relationships, and create a cause-and-effect social experience.
<i>Fire Emblem: Three Houses</i>	Players can increase bonds with characters that affect combat performance and narrative outcomes. Players can interact with characters through events, support conversations, and mentoring.
<i>Genshin Impact</i>	The massive fanbase extends beyond playing in co-op mode. This includes discord groups, fan spaces, and narratives created to show love and support.
<i>HighRise</i>	Chat rooms, group activities, and role-play events foster conversation skills, making friends, and social collaboration.
<i>Monster Prom</i>	Making dialogue choices to increase affection with characters based on their personalities and motivations.
<i>Persona 5</i>	Players can choose to romance characters and unlock different paths. Building relationships is one of the main focus in this game.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Stardew Valley</i>	Players can develop friendships or virtually marry a romanceable character. Strengthening bonds reveals more of the villager's story.
<i>World of Warcraft</i>	Offers a platform for players to connect in a virtual world. Participating in guilds and community events foster long-term social connections (raids, events etc.).

Guiding Questions:

- How did you make or strengthen connections through the game?
- Were there moments where trust and understanding played a key role?
- Did you rely on others for support or guidance? How did that affect your relationship?
- How can using skills to build in-game relationships be applied in real-life?

## Social Behaviour & Boundaries

Goal: To practice social interactions and appropriate responses or reactions.

Games that have multiple endings are dependent on player choices. Players can make choices based on real-life values or experiment with choices they wouldn't normally make.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Animal Crossing: New Horizons</i>	Encourages players to exchange gifts, talk to villagers, and collaborate with other players. Players learn to respect each others islands (e.g. not to run through flowers, dig up their fossils etc.)
<i>Avakin Life</i>	Online interactions, trading, and role-play create real-time opportunities to practice appropriate social conduct.
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>	Party dynamics and negotiation with NPCs teach consideration of social cues, boundaries, and conflict resolution.
<i>Cult of the Lamb</i>	Players take on the role of a leader responsible for the wellbeing of followers. It builds awareness of how power and influence can be used, and invites reflection on ethical leadership.
<i>Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc</i>	A space to explore social norms, ethics, and consequences of boundary violations. Themes of trust, betrayal, and deception allow discussion about appropriate social behaviour and respecting limits.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Disco Elysium</i>	Players are encouraged to make choices you normally wouldn't. Balancing moral, social, and practical considerations for decisions.
<i>Emily Is Away &lt;3</i>	Players are given three responses to choose from when having conversations. Respecting boundaries, timing, and consent are highlighted in this game.
<i>HighRise</i>	Online interactions, trading, and role-play create real-time opportunities to practice appropriate social conduct. A platform to refine social skills and engage with other players in group activities.
<i>Monster Prom</i>	Learning that each character has their own likes, dislikes and motivations. Players face rejection and discover ways handle it.
<i>Persona 5</i>	Narrative choices can influence a "good" or "bad" ending. Experimenting with social behaviour and boundaries.
<i>Play Together</i>	Opportunity to experiment with social behaviour, boundaries, make online friends, and handle rejection.
<i>Stardew Valley</i>	Main story and side quests fosters helping behaviours.

#### Guiding Questions:

- Were there times someone else's behaviour tested your boundaries? How did you respond?
- How does respecting and setting boundaries impact the relationship?
- Were there times you had to navigate conflict? How did you handle it?
- Did you encounter any situations that made you question your values, morals, or ethics?

## Problem Solving & Flexibility

Goal: To adapt to change, build resilience, and think strategically. Games that require critical thinking can improve planning and resource management skills. Learning by trial-and-error can increase flexibility, patience, and persistence.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Binding of Isaac: Rebirth</i>	Upgrades, randomized drops, and managing resources requires planning and flexibility. Players learn to evaluate risk vs. reward.
<i>Cult of the Lamb</i>	Players can improve decision-making skills since choices can affect gameplay. Dungeon combat and navigation requires adaptability and strategic thinking.
<i>Cuphead</i>	Learning how to manage frustration, and increase patience and pattern recognition. Practice reframing and not reacting impulsively.
<i>Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc</i>	Mystery-solving mechanics is the premise of the game, including collecting clues, social deduction, and noticing inconsistencies. Promotes logical reasoning, critical thinking, and decision-making.
<i>Fire Emblem: Three Houses</i>	Tactical problem-solving with consequences for planning, positioning, and resource management. Requires critical thinking and foresight for battles.

Video Games	In-Game Exercise / Mechanic
<i>Hades</i>	Combat requires quick decision-making, adaptive strategies, and resource management. Players learn to evaluate risks, use abilities effectively, and plan upgrades.
<i>Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild</i>	Puzzles that require logic, creativity, and experimentation. Players approach challenges from different angles and increase adaptability.
<i>Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch</i>	Turn-based combat that relies on planning, management, and evaluating strengths and weaknesses.
<i>Persona 5</i>	Turn-based combat requires players to use strategic thinking. Dungeon navigation and boss fights rely on adaptability and problem-solving abilities.
<i>Pokemon Diamond</i>	Strategically choosing the correct Pokemon type for each battle. Puzzles are incorporated to challenge the player (gyms, caves etc.).
<i>Stardew valley</i>	Mine levels get progressively harder with combat, and in-game mechanics tests adaptability. Resource management and pre-planning would benefit overall gameplay.

#### Guiding Questions:

- Did the game present unexpected challenges? How did you adapt?
- Did you encounter a problem that required multiple attempts or strategies?
- Did you rely on planning, intuition, or trial-and-error to solve challenges?
- How did it feel to complete a quest after failing multiple times?