# Cozy Games: How COVID-19 Affected Game Playing Among College Students

by Zhaoyi Fang

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Michelle Kelso
Associate Professor of Sociology and International Affairs

## Abstract

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The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed people's lives, affecting how individuals choose to spend their leisure time during lockdown during unpredictable circumstances. While many countries had strict policies regarding international travel during the pandemic, international students in the United States experienced more stressful circumstances than domestic students, including discrimination, loneliness, and many other negative emotions (Maleku, 2022). Chinese students made up around 30 percent of all international students in 2020, and they were generally unable to purchase plane tickets to their hometowns during the pandemic.

Video gaming, in different categories and with different contents, has become one of the most popular activities during the pandemic (Şener et al., 2021). In recent years, the notion of "cozy games" has become popular among video gamers, which refers to games whose goal is to make players feel relaxed. Unlike other types of games, cozy games were considered to provide many more positive emotions that enhanced players' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wäppling et al., 2022). This research aims to understand how cozy games affected players' well-being during the pandemic, with a focus on three examples of cozy games, including *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and *Genshin Impact*. The researcher recruited 15 participants from online gaming sites and forums to better understand Chinese students' personal experiences of

video gaming. The research findings indicate that video gaming resulted in minor negative impacts such as wasted time. However, video gaming positively impacted players' well-being through sociocultural and psychological aspects.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Lin, a Chinese student who had lived in Columbus, Ohio, since 2017, was afraid of the coronavirus and the rigorous quarantine policies of China during 2020. She didn't buy tickets to return to China before the virus arrived in the United States, and soon she knew that she had missed her only chance to reunite with her family and friends for several years. One spring morning during March 2020, Lin was surprised to find out that her university had made all classes virtual through university Zoom. That was also when she heard about the lockdown and stay-at-home order. She often talked to her mom through phone and was familiar with the safety measures governments were taken during the pandemic. At that point, Lin knew that her life would dramatically change.

As most of her classmates were domestic students, who returned back home to take virtual classes, Lin was disappointed that most airlines were canceling flights between the United States and China. She used to go to her favorite Chinese restaurant with her friends on Friday nights, but now she could only spend the whole day staring at the ceiling and waiting for her food delivery. Living abroad by herself in a small apartment, Lin had not seen her family for almost two years, and she did not hang out with her friends from March 2020 to June 2021. She was tired of TikTok-ing and watching films or TV shows, because these activities made her feel even more socially isolated. She started seeking new indoor activities that allow her to interact with other people and socially connect with the outside world again.

Lin was eventually introduced to video games by one of her best friends, who had been a video game player since childhood. Without having any experience with video games, her friend invited Lin to play *Stardew Valley*—a role-playing game that allows up to four friends to play together. Lin was immediately obsessed with *Stardew Valley*, not only because it was a novel way to relax, but also because the video game provided a new path for friendship to thrive (Quinones & Adams, 2021, p. 5).

According research conducted by the Statista (2023), there were nearly a million international students attending American schools during the pandemic. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many international flights were canceled—especially between countries with different foreign policies. Nearly 30 percent of international students in the United States at that time were from China, most of whom could not reunite with their family members, and their living conditions and emotional stress became critical social problems (Cassinat et al., 2021, p. 1597). Unlike traditional parties and outdoor activities, video games enable friends and family members to spend time together wherever they are. Thus, video games have become a popular way to hang out with friends and reunite with family members (Quinones & Adams, 2021, p. 3). Video gaming is one way of reducing emotional stress, while allowing young people to spend time together doing activities they like without risk to their health.

This research examines Chinese international students' perceptions of video gaming during the pandemic, focusing on cozy games. Compared to other types of games, cozy games typically have a "slower pace, calming music and gentle mechanics,"

which often feature the themes of "nature, exploration and relaxation (Gupta, 2023, p. 4)." This research aims to understand impacts of video gaming on Chinese international students during the pandemic as a coping mechanism for stressors brought on by the pandemic, such as the inability to return to their home countries and reunite with families and friends.

To discover how Chinese international students coped, I interviewed 15 respondents who lived in the U.S. at the time of the pandemic outbreak in 2020. First, I will delve into the literature from both video game producers' and social scientists' perspectives to better understand how video games were used during the outbreak of pandemic. After that, I will also explain how video gaming culture was shaped. Then, I will present my methodology before turning into the analysis.

This thesis will focus on the effects of two specific aspects of video game playing. First, while multiplayer games became more popular among friends during the pandemic, how were friendships affected during the pandemic by video games? While this research specifically focused on three cozy games, how did these three games affect players' emotional well-being during the pandemic? Did video games solve the problem of social isolation during the lockdown phase? These questions lead to the second discussion, which is to understand the purpose of video gaming during the pandemic. Sociology has only recently delved into video games—which differ from traditional sports and entertainment by requiring user interfaces or input devices (such as a controller, keyboard, or motion sensing devices). Thus, this research seeks to fill this gap in

knowledge by understanding the effects of video game play on player's lives during the pandemic. Furthermore, this thesis provides findings related to female gamers, which few studies focus on. This research not only aims to tear down the stereotype of female players but also looks forward to better understanding female gamers' demands regarding aspects of video games during the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

In 2020, the video gaming industry market share was valued at 174.9 billion USD worldwide (Clement, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, video gaming and related industries became one of the most popular entertainment options for all age groups. It is challenging to define cozy games, as different individuals have different standards for them, however, scholars and game designers often base definitions on their field of expertise. For example, one game designer, in Cook's (2018, p. 4), notes that *coziness* includes characteristics of "safety," "abundance," and "softness." According to him, *safety* means "no risk or danger," which enables cozy game players to enjoy games at their own pace, accord, and expression (Cook, 2018, as cited in Wäppling et al. 2022). Cook. draws from Maslow's hierarchy of needs to explain abundance, noting that while most video games fulfill players' basic needs for entertainment or relaxation, cozy games often help players explore higher needs, such as self-actualization and deep relationships. Softness refers to the games' slow tempo, low stakes, visual and auditory aesthetics (such as art styles, color schemes, and sound cues), and use of manageable tasks. These components leave cozy game players with a feeling of calmness.

Game designers, like scholars from other disciplines, are interested in researching the motivations behind cozy game playing. In Cook's article "Cozy Games" (2018), they noted that the first motivation for cozy game playing is a type of self-practice that encourages players to hone skills that are infrequently used in everyday life; cozy games

are also safe and inexpensive compared to other types of practice in real life. Cook also used Maslow's hierarchy to argue that video games help players explore their needs towards the top of the hierarchy. They suggested that because cozy games provide emotional motivations to players, they are helping cozy game players to become better people, leading them to achieve "meaningful play." In the article, Cook continuously returns to humanity, "in that coziness creates space of plenty, it provides focus amongst chaos and allows us to embrace our highest level and most human pursuits"; *coziness* is described as a feeling—although the pursuits and emotions differ from person to person, humans' nature is to seek comfort and a sense of belonging.

Compared to the intensive focus on cozy game-making, game designers rarely discuss the adverse effects on cozy game players. They spend their time and money researching how to avoid making a game that players consider boring because the results of this research are lucrative for the video gaming industry. For example, game plots and mechanical challenges are at the forefront of game designers when discussing the components of making an excellent cozy game. As Tekinbaş & Zimmerman (2003, p. 414)) argued, video games that only seek to achieve meaningful play without mechanical challenge could fall flat.

While game designers are looking to produce more attractive games, researchers of social science disciplines—especially sociologists and psychologists—focus on video games' impacts on players' social lives and well-being.

While this research focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's

video gaming experiences, the literature and my interviews suggested that video gaming was an excellent method to maintain social connections during the pandemic. Kelly (2021) suggested that, according to the 2017 Washington Post–University of Massachusetts Lowell poll, more than half of participants noted that video gaming is an extraordinary way to spend time with friends. Kelly also introduced Discord, a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) platform, which was designed for gamers to communicate better while playing. Like Zoom, Kelly noted that Discord and other apps for video gaming made social interactions more accessible, which was significant during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the help of video gaming and communication apps, friendships were maintained during the pandemic because friends could still play together while physically located in different places. According to Yee and Sng's (2022) research, video gaming helped to satisfy players' needs for "relatedness," which includes maintaining existing relationships during the pandemic.

Moreover, Kelly (2021) argued that only some people prefer real-world social interactions to online social interactions. As they noted, communicating behind screens allows players to use an "online persona" that makes some people feel safer and more powerful than meeting strangers physically. This point of theirs echoed Carter's (2004) research findings on the reason individuals prefer to make friends online. In Carter's article, they noted that there are two main aspects to explain people's willingness to make friends online. Carter's first finding is similar to Kelly's idea, that the absence of physical

contact is making players feel safer. Additionally, relationships online do not rely on external elements, such as age, race, or gender (Carter, 2004).

While most researchers focused on how multiplayer video games benefited players' emotional well-being during the pandemic, cozy games like *Animal Crossing* with both single-player and multiplayer modes should have been addressed as well. However, because of the prevalence of their multiplayer mode, these cozy games were discussed in some research articles. Among this type of games, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was one of the most prevalent cozy games during the pandemic. As Zhu (2021) noted in their article, this game is a life-simulation game. The player role-plays a new resident on a deserted island and develops the island by farming land, catching butterflies, and collecting fish. Zhu also argued that this game was famous for its socialization utility, allowing players to enter other islands and interact with other players. There are many ways players can spend time together in *New Horizons*. For example, before the pandemic, one of the female interviewees attended many Korean and Japanese Popstar music festivals and concerts. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic many of these events got canceled at the very last minute because of restrictions and governmental policies, which disappointed her greatly. *Animal Crossing*, however, provided another possibility for fans, singers, and even schools to hold ceremonies online without worrying about attendees' physical health. Thus, video games like *Animal Crossing* were satisfying players' psychological needs, and in this case, their need for autonomy while still protecting their physical health during the pandemic (Yee & Sng,

2022).

Researchers also noted the negative impacts of video game playing during the pandemic. As Wood et al. (2007) suggested, high-frequency video game players were five times more likely to report losing track of time. It is worth mentioning that his research was finished years before the COVID-19 pandemic, and as people had increasing leisure time they could manage during the lockdown phase, it would perhaps be harder for players to keep track of the time spent on video games. One term used to describe the phenomenon of video game addiction is "escapism." According to Khan (2020), playing video games is like traveling to a parallel universe where players always want to reach out but find it hard to do so. Khan's words echo Cook's statement about the "meaningful play" created by video games: that video gaming allows the players to embrace the highest level of most human pursuits amongst the chaos of the natural world (Cook, 2018, p. 4). Young (1998) stated that escapism might affect players' psychological well-being, but did not provide further detailed information about the adverse outcomes or effects.

After comparing the positive and negative influences of video gaming, it is equally important to understand why it became popular during the pandemic, not only as a form of entertainment but to clarify video games' other uses that set them apart from other types of traditional entertainment. Video game players could use games to entertain themselves and interact with friends and other individuals online during the pandemic. According to social scientists, video games must help players to avoid social isolation

and loneliness (Maleku, 2022). Aside from the avoidance of psychological problems, video games also contribute to the maintenance of social norms. While people were locked up at home, online interaction through video gaming helped people adapt to the new social norms created by the COVID-19 pandemic and governmental policies. Thus, to social scientists, video gaming could be considered a beneficial way for people to spend their leisure time during the pandemic.

## Introduction to the Video Gaming Culture

Sociology has only recently delved into video games—which differ from traditional sports and entertainment by requiring user interfaces or input devices (such as a controller, keyboard, or motion sensing devices)—to understand the effects of video game play on player's lives under the pandemic. Before designing new research methods for video gaming and sociology, it is essential to better understand video games and how gaming culture emerged.

First, video games are a type of electronic game that enables players to interact with an electronic interface using an input device. As Frasca (2004, p. 87) noted, "even if it sounds obvious, video games are, before anything else, games." Like traditional sports games and other types of entertainment, video games can provide players, or even audiences, with various feedback. With advanced technology and diversified hardware, video games offer an increasing number of features that enable users to receive audio and

visual feedback, and excitement or emotional support. For example, all three of the cozy games considered here allow players to build relationships with non-player characters (NPC) that visit and talk to players routinely and offer some help. In *Stardew Valley*, players can even choose to marry their favorite NPC and have children with NPCs. Moreover, most video games create their own stories, also called "plots." It is worth mentioning that one of the advantages of playing video games is that players get to experience different types of lives and occupations, even if those occupations are illegal. The *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) game series provide just such an experience for the player by allowing them to build a criminal empire in Los Santos—a virtual city that is quite similar to Los Angeles. Players can buy luxury automobiles and even gold airplanes after robbing a bank, selling drugs, or becoming a hitman. Aside from the game itself, gaming culture attracts players. A definition of gaming culture remains unestablished in scholarship, as researchers tend to focus on a specific type of video game in establishing the parameters around it. In their research, Shaw (2010) noted that the media and academic articles address video game culture differently. It is true that, compared to academic research which make conclusion after detailed analysis, the media state their opinion before writing about video game cultures. Because this research is based on video gamers' experiences, video game culture will be analyzed through the data collected while researching and conducting interviews. As Frasca (2004) noted, a video game should be one that entertains the users who spend time on it. To me, I think video games are the type of entertainment that allows players to interact with things they are

interested in, and the most important thing is that players feel happy while playing video games.

There are two categories of video games that depend on the number of individuals playing together: multiplayer games and single-player games. Multiplayer games allow more than one player to cooperate or compete with each other, whereas single-player games are for individuals to play alone. Commonly, multiplayer video games are not required to have impressive plots, unlike single-player games, because the opportunity of playing with others creates a lot of real-life "plots" that are worth talking about. Take the example of *League of Legends* where two teams of five players enter combat across the map, seeking opportunities to occupy their opponents' base." For players to succeed, this game requires extensive teamwork and communication. Even though players must start the game over at Level 1 after each match ends, *League of Legends* is dynamic because no two gaming sessions are ever alike. Like *League of Legends*, other multiplayer games can offer interesting discussions. Video game culture develops anywhere players can share their thoughts and strategies, such as in video game forums, video game live streams, gaming Discord channels, or friend group chats.

Single-player games, on the other hand, tend to have more detailed plots. Most single-player games create their own story and a new world for players to seek out different experiences. Take the example of the single-player game *Shadow of the Colossus*. Released in 2015, this game is an action–adventure, single-player game that tells the story of Wander, a young man who entered a forbidden land seeking a way to

resurrect a girl named Mono. Role-playing Wander, the player makes a deal with an unknown goddess that the goddess will revive the girl if the player destroys all of the colossi. Unlike most games, *Shadow of the Colossus* has few conversations between NPCs and players. However, there are a lot of implicit clues about the plot and progress of the game. The colossi are hidden in different parts of the map. Even though the colossi are much taller and more robust than the player, the player can use their sword to discover the colossi's weak points to defeat them. After defeating all of the colossi, the whole story is revealed, and the player learns that the goddess is evil. All of the colossi they destroyed were the guardians of the forbidden land, and their mission was to imprison the evil goddess.

The success of the *Shadow of the Colossus* is no accident, and we can see three features that make this game particularly popular (Sicart, 2008):

1. **The art design**: This can be the deciding factor for a video game' success because it gives players and audiences the first impression of the game; also, most players already have their favorite type of art designs, such as sandbox games, which are simulation games that enables players to create and change the world as they wish.
2. **The plot:** The mysterious plot experienced by players is also crucial; that the game producer built a virtual world with novel experiences helps provide players with a more immersive experience.
3. **The game play:** Along with plot, this is the most significant reason

> why people have continued playing the game for years. Each fight is unique, while all of them require not only patience, but also consideration and skill.

Game play designs are the core part of games because they create the mechanics and rules. Video gamers are not actively experiencing the plot every second they play; however, players constantly receive feedback from video games while undergoing actions like fighting with enemies, exploring new areas, or finishing quests. This feedback—the way video games attract players—is also called *playability* (Paavilainen, 2020), which is defined as a video game's characteristics that aim to provide enjoyment and entertainment by giving rewards or a sense of satisfaction. In general, there are seven main characteristics used to summarize and measure video gamers' experiences, including "satisfaction," "learning," "efficiency," "immersion," "motivation," "emotion," and "socialization" (Arango-López et al., 2019, p. 65). These features will be analyzed based on video gamers' experiences to better understand the benefits of cozy game playing.

According to Severin (2022, p. 12), 57 percent of players prefer single-player games; however, the data they collected shows that "the younger the gamer, the more likely they prefer multiplayer games." As noted in the research, there are many reasons for this "age-defined dynamic." One is biological in that, as players age, their reaction time also becomes slower, which puts them at a disadvantage in competitions with younger players. Another is a time restriction, as older players have less free time to play

video games. This can mean that many multiplayer gamers are able to play with their friends or families, and as they grow up, friends will have a more challenging time allocating time to play together.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the stay-at-home order have changed young people's lifestyles and allowed them to allocate more time as they wish. While many young people were already used to spending their leisure time on video games, the COVID-19 pandemic provided friends with the chance to hang out online through video games. We know that gamers differ in terms of their favorite type of games, but now even those who did not previously play video games are finding categories of video games that interest them. Next, we will discuss some of the main categories of video games.

Massively multiplayer online games promote interaction and communication between players. Role-playing games allow players to play as a character they build. With features of both role-playing and "massive" multiplayer modes, massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs, promote interaction and communication between players. Most MMORPGs offer options for players to create "guilds" or "clans" to connect with other players. To help players to enjoy the role-playing elements, these MMORPGs often ask the player to take on different roles. There are three main roles in most MMORPGs: protective roles that take most damage for the team (called "Tanks"); roles that heal the damage done to other teammates (called "Healers"); and roles that deal damage to enemies (called "Damage Dealers"). As different games have their own detailed game contents, each MMORPG develops its own

subculture such as memes, metaphors, slang, and even social rules. MMORPGs have been fashionable since they were created, and they have helped players to make friends, have relationships, or even build mentorship with other players (Vella et al., 2019).

The games this research focuses on, including *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and *Genshin Impact*, can be categorized as cozy. Cozy games ~~usually~~ are neither strictly single-player or multiplayer. The only and most crucial feature of cozy games is that they are designed to be relaxing and calming. Most cozy games allow players to use fragments of time to play, rather than requiring a block of time like some other kinds of games. The three cozy games discussed here have some features identical to MMORPGs, such as the role-playing style and multiplayer game mode. To players who seek these features, cozy games could be a better option since they have more relaxing playstyle and all of the favorable elements:

1. They are role-playing games where players can create new characters to explore a new virtual world.
2. These games allow players to play together, either to cooperate or to trade with others in the game.
3. No one loses in these games, unlike in traditional competitive games.

Through an achievement system, collection sets, or building up the world as players wish, players can obtain a sense of accomplishment and generate positive emotions. During the pandemic, individuals' everyday lives were interrupted. Mental health problems, including stress, anxiety, and social isolation, made quarantined

individuals more vulnerable. According to Barr's (2022) research, the number of positive responses collected from cozy game players was around 10 times more than negative emotions.

Single-player games usually emphasize certain types of game play or game content. They are often the most challenging or relaxing, so their audiences are pretty stable. Two of the main types of single-player games are "hardcore" and "casual," where the difference is difficulty. The *Soulslike* games—which are typically complicated and time-consuming—are famous examples of hardcore games. Most of them are role-playing games, and players' characters are expected to die repeatedly while challenging enemies. Each enemy has a different style of fighting, which is similar to *Shadow of the Colossus* and requires players to learn after repeated defeats. To take down each enemy, players usually need to spend hours playing continuously.

In comparison, casual games are quite simple and straightforward; for example, fishing-simulation games only allow players to fish. During the COVID-19 pandemic, single-player games met some players' demands in that they could spend time playing video games, in particular because single-player games are much more diversified in content compared to multiplayer games; however, the lack of social connections and personal interactions could also contribute negative impacts to players' mental health (Shan et al., 2022). Independent, or "indie," refers to the category of games that focus on innovative game play, new gaming mechanics, or game content; this is similar to most single-player games because they both focus on practical gaming experiences (Wolf &

Perron, 2023, ch.3).

Other types of games do not require an internet connection. Players can play by themselves or go online with other players, such as real-time strategy games, first-person shooter games, and multiplayer online battle arena games (MOBA). Unlike cozy games, these games are often fast-paced and competitive, and players constantly compete with each other to win. As mentioned earlier, the original purpose of video games was to relax and entertain their players so that they could use their leisure time to reduce stress generated by the real world. From this perspective, this kind of video game often fails to serve its functions because hardcore matches would only increase the level of strain (Shan et al., 2022).

Compared to cozy games, competitive games require continuous focus, high levels of gaming techniques, and fast reaction speeds; to summarize, it is easy for players to feel stressed and tired while playing competitive games. Some video gamer would quit the round if they feel hopeless while leaving other teammates behind. Moreover, toxic players in these games often use abusive language in in-game chats, make racist comments, that would further worsen other players feelings. While earlier research stated that video gaming helped players obtain a higher level of social interaction because the "virtual domains" created a more comfortable path for interpersonal interactions, without disclosure of personal identities (Singh, 2021), recent research by Shan et al. (2021) has found that toxic behaviors could affect players' daily personal interactions in the real world, and it was suspected that the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic might

further affect players' social interactions and mental health. The research provided some evidence that, in MOBA games, such as *League of Legends*, members from the losing team were more likely to feel ashamed and blame each other than those from the winning team. Thus, the abusive gaming environment would induce more negative emotions in players during the pandemic (Shan et al., 2021).

# Chapter 3: Methodology and Measures

An increasing number of people talk about and participated in playing video games during the COVID-19 pandemic as a coping method for lifestyle changes and stress. This research aims to understand the impacts of video games on Chinese students living in the United States while under quarantine. Specifically, I focused on three cozy games: *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and *Genshin Impact*. I chose these games because they were produced as cozy games that have a multiplayer mode, which allows players to cooperate with friends or other players. I chose to use interviews to collect data because they allowed me to explain, better understand, and explore the target group's gaming and living experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the participants were recruited through online gaming sites in personal messages. Additionally, traditional methods such as informational flyers were distributed through Chinese student associations on campus. I also used *snowball sampling* to recruit more participants, which is to ask participants' assistance in finding other potential subjects. Each interview lasted 30–40 minutes and was conducted via Zoom; notes were taken for use in analysis of the video games' respective impacts. Questions focused on interviewees' overall quarantine lifestyles, gaming experiences, and experience with cozy games, specifically. For example, I began with a broad question about the interviewee's overall lifestyle and asked for their feelings towards the changes in their lives during the pandemic, when they were confined at home. Since this research aims to understand the

influences of video gaming, questions related to interviewees' gaming preferences and habits were included as well.

A total of 15 Chinese international students participated in this research; all were between 18 and 26 years old and lived in the United States during the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March 2020 to June 2021, during which most of them were taking virtual courses through university Zoom. They were all studying at American colleges or universities, and most had not returned to China for over two years. Unable to reunite with family members or hang out with friends as before, Chinese students were more emotionally vulnerable than many domestic students who reunite with their families and friends during the pandemic (Cassinat et al., 2021, p. 1597).

The interview transcripts were coded into four specific aspects, including target group's living circumstances, video gaming experiences, gendered influences towards video gamers, and the negative effects perceived by participants. This research is using the inductive coding method. My first goal was to understand Chinese students' living circumstances, especially focusing on the changes in their lifestyles and routine activities. I specifically talk about the boredom and solitude they experienced while they were unable to change their circumstances. Then, I give examples of how participants got into video gaming, and the positive impacts of video games on their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the flourishing of friendships. Next, video gaming experiences are discussed based on the categorization and gendered experiences of video games. Finally,

the negative impacts of video gaming perceived by the participants are discussed, based on their experiences.

# Chapter 4: Discussion

## Chinese Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

> I booked five tickets during Summer 2020, all of them got canceled because of the pandemic. I did know some flights that won't be canceled, but the average cost of an economy class ticket is more than 120,000 CNY, which is more than 17,000 USD.
>
> —Mr. Jiang, research participant

More than 300,000 Chinese international students were studying in the United States in 2021, making up 30 percent of all international students in the United States (Textor, 2023). The majority of those students had little option to return to China as, from February 2020 to June 2021, numerous flights between China and the United States were canceled. When asked about their weekly routine plans prior to the pandemic, most participants answered that they usually hung out with their friends during the weekends. Several outdoor activities were mentioned more than once when interviewing different participants.

There are many outdoor activities that was popular among Chinese students that allowed them to spend their leisure time together. One of these was murder mystery games, which have been popular in Chinese social media recently. In a murder mystery game, each person role-plays a particular civilian, and one of the players secretly plays the murderer. Most murder mystery games provide players with scripts that tell them what to do, and when, and the goal is to figure out who the murderer is. In addition to murder mystery games, most participants, if not all, stated that they were routinely having

dinner with their friends during the weekends. Ying, one of the female participants said that having dinner with friends allowed them to talk about stressful events and relieve their negative emotions through talking together. A few others mentioned that finding delicious restaurants is relaxing and exciting. As Jiang said, “Who likes to eat hamburgers or salads all the time, right?” Similarly, many participants enjoy cooking Chinese dishes and inviting friends to their homes to spend the night together. Participants also mentioned many other traditional activities, such as bowling, shopping, hitting the gym, or drinking.

Through interviewing participants, I found that they participated in many outdoor activities before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and the lockdown terminated most of these, including educational and relaxing activities. However, nearly all participants mentioned that the transition from in-person lectures to online courses enabled them to arrange their time as they wished. Even after the more severe phase of the pandemic ended, they preferred online courses. Nevertheless, the situation was different during the lockdown phase. Wang, one of the participants, talked about his personal experiences with studying abroad. He mentioned that living in the United States by himself was lonely. First, there were no “classmates” or other close groups that ordinarily provide students with social connections. “It’s different”, he said, “in Chinese schools we took every class with same classmates, and we feel much more connected.” Second, the COVID-19 pandemic left him concerned about face-to-face interactions, which caused him to develop a social phobia and not want to talk to others for a period of

several months during the lockdown phase of the pandemic.

Another female interviewee, Miss Zhi, stated that she is a huge fan of Korean and Japanese pop music and attended every concert across the country before the pandemic. Zhi was not afraid of the pandemic and kept buying concert tickets even during 2020 and 2021, when the pandemic took millions of lives, “I would risk my health flying to another city to support popstars I love even during the worst part of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, most of them got canceled at the very last second when fans were all there.”

Identifying herself as a crazy pop music fan, Zhi argued that this situation had worsened her life during the pandemic and provided a mix of many negative emotions, as well as risking her physical health. She felt tired of these situations and started to play a cozy game called *Re: Dive*. This game allowed her to build and train her own virtual characters to become an idol. Moreover, this game is one of a category of games adapted from anime, comics, games, and light novels—commonly called ACGN games—and known as the “two-dimensional culture” (Liao, 2020, p. 2). Zhi was obsessed with anime and cartoons in her childhood but considered it a niche hobby. Even though she loved ACGN cultures, she chose other popular leisure activities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic enabled her to spend time on ACGN games. Since social connections between her and her friends were weakened, Zhi was not afraid of what other people were thinking about her preference for ACGN cultures, “I was nervous telling people I like

two-dimensional cultures and characters. However, video games helped me to conforms to my self-identity as a big fan of ACGN cultures."

Zhi's story echoed Wäppling et al.'s (2022) thoughts towards cozy games, and in particular met two criteria: safety and abundance. Compared with attending popstars' music festivals in personal, playing games involved no health risks. Zhi could play at her own pace and did not have to spend money on flights, thus meeting the safety criterion, according to Wäppling et al. "I was finding and embracing myself during the pandemic through different type of video games playing."

As for abundance, she was embracing herself by playing video games, which met the abundance criterion because video games helped Zhi to explore her higher needs, such as self-identity.

## Why Video Gaming?

One of my participants named Wang said that through video gaming he retrieved friendship with high school friends. "I didn't talk to Gu, my best friend from high school who is currently attending university in China, for several years. Thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, we get to play video games together online." He was obsessed with the *Stardew Valley*, played more than eight hours per day during the outbreak of the

pandemic. “I won’t say it’s the best game in the world; however, its playstyle is so relaxing that allows us talking to each other while playing.”

Although participants were stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were still many choices to relax or reduce their stress. It is crucial to understand why video gaming became their favorite type of indoor activity during the lockdown phase. Many of them mentioned that video gaming had remained a hobby or a habit even after the lockdown ended. Based on the interviews, there were at least four points to unpack: childhood habits, social connections, the benefit of killing time, and stress reduction by escaping from the real world.

To begin with, playing video games during the COVID-19 pandemic could be related to participants’ childhood experiences. While interviewing the participants, 12 out of 15 stated that they had experience with video gaming when they were children or before the pandemic. Because of insufficient knowledge of some positive impacts of video gaming, most Chinese parents consider video games to be “spiritual opium” and as destructive as *Hong Shui Meng Shou*, which means “fierce floods and savage beasts” (Zhang, 2010, p. 45). The media also tends to focus on the harmful effects of video gaming on children’s daily lives. However, as Frasca (2004) said, video games are used to entertain before anything else. The attitude of Chinese parents makes video gaming more “exciting” when children play sneakily. As several participants noted, they could only secretly play video games when their parents are leaving for work, and they have to react quickly to turn off the computer or gaming sets once they hear their parents opening

the front door. As they grow up, they go abroad for higher education and their parents cannot control their video gaming behaviors as before. This is similar to the phenomenon of *retaliatory consumption*, or *revenge shopping*, which refers to a sudden increase in customer spending after people were prevented from shopping for an extended time (Yap, 2022). Many Chinese students exhibited actions that could be called "retaliatory video gaming," especially during the pandemic when they had more control over their free time. When asking how participants got into video gaming, most participants stated that they were introduced it by their friends or family members. This childhood experience was a reason individuals spent time on video gaming during the pandemic.

Another reason participants preferred to spend time on video games was that video games can allow friends and families to have more topics for conversation. As discussed previously, most types of video games have a multiplayer/cooperative mode. *League of Legends* and *Counterstrike* are the two games most participants brought up, aside from the three cozy games on which this research focused. Of the 15 participants, 12 noted that even before the pandemic they had played one of these two video games for years, so they were already familiar with the games themselves; also, these two games are popular among young people, so it is easier for players to find friends to play *League of Legends* or *Counterstrike* than it was for other games. However, these two competitive games are often stressful, especially for the losing team (Shan et al., 2022). Playing along with friends might solve this problem and reduce the potential for emotional stress because playing and talking with friends itself was sufficiently relaxing during the

pandemic.

Jiang, one of my interviewees, confirmed that VoIP applications like Discord had enabled him not only to talk to his friends while playing video games, but they could also spend the whole day together talking to each other:

> You can contact me through email only during working hours, but you can always find me on Discord. I basically live there whether I am playing games or not. The point is, I like to stay with my friends, even when we just having meaningless conversations online.

Even though they were physically apart because of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, according to Kelly (2021), applications like VoIP made social interactions more accessible during the pandemic. The length of time Jiang mentioned he spent on Discord provides further evidence of people's urgent need to maintain social connections between friend, such as mentioned in the work of Yee & Sng (2022).

As opposed to TV shows or movies, each video game has a different length and contents. While people were stuck at home during the pandemic, most participants admitted struggling to adapt their lifestyles. They could barely occupy all of their free time since outdoor activities were not options anymore. Most of the time, they found they had more leisure time between classes, after finishing homework, or feeling bored in the evenings than they could spend with friends. Video games, with different lengths and game contents, are great choices to fill these gaps.

Conversely, there is also a category of video games called *AAA games* (pronounced and sometimes written *triple-A games*), which refers to high-budget, high-

profile, and significant games with well-known producers or publishers. This type of game usually requires a tremendous amount of focus and time. During the interview, one participant stated that it was hard for him to find friends to play with, even during the pandemic. He does not like video games that are too easy to play, and not many friends were players before the pandemic. Thus, his friends felt it challenging to learn to play the multiplayer video games he usually plays. For him, triple-A and indie games were great options for spending hours—and even whole days—enjoying video gaming. While the COVID-19 pandemic did not give individuals many choices, a varied selection of video games that differ in length and content can fit into every person's lifestyle and time arrangement, no matter who is interested in video gaming.

. According to the participants, video gaming has multiple features that enable players to forget or release stress caused by the coronavirus. Video games created a kind of dreamland for their players during the COVID-19 pandemic, where players could escape from the real world (Zhu, 2021). Of the 15 participants in this research, eight mentioned that one of the essential functions of video gaming was to escape from the real world, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, a participant noted that *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* asks for the player's location while playing, and the default weather and time are based on the time zone and place players live. By mimicking the weather and time of the natural world, *Animal Crossing* created a dreamland for players without real-life problems. Second, video game plots can provide immersive experiences just like films. Exciting game play and multiple game modes (including degree of

difficulty and single-player or multiplayer options) would significantly help the player reduce negative emotions.

However, Kardefelt-Winther (2014) pointed out potential concerns about players' psychological well-being. Their research argued that video game players who were motivated to escape life's problems might experience more negative outcomes from online gaming. My research would argue that during times of extreme stress, such the pandemic, the benefits of "escapism" could be more crucial than its potential negative impacts on video gamers. How can this then be further explained? I turn to Agnew and Brezina's general strain theory, one of the most popular theories in the sociology and criminology disciplines as one possible explanation of the benefits of video gaming and "escapism." For Agnew & Brezina (2019), strain level is considered the decisive factor in predicting if a person will become delinquent. Stimuli, similarly, are a factor in understanding the emergence of strains. There are three primary sources of strains, which are prevention of achieving positive goals, removal of positive stimuli, and the emergence of negative stimuli. International students were victims of all of them.

First, international students were losing positive stimuli. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they could not hang out with their friends as before, and most of them could not return to their homeland for years while some of their family members passed away. Second, experiencing negative stimuli could also increase international students' strain levels. One of the participants talked about her experiences during the pandemic. When she was waiting at a crossroads for the traffic light, several people rolled down their

windows and rudely told her to go back to where she belonged. She almost cried when talking about this part of her pandemic life, and this type of negative stimuli did increase strain. Third, the inability to reach desired goals increases strain. However, it is believed that revisiting the "unreachable goals" international students experienced during the pandemic—such as the canceled flights back home—is unnecessary (Agnew & Brezina, 2019).

To sum up, the pandemic brought many strains to international students that, according to general strain theory would possibly make them delinquent unless they found an efficient way to release negative emotions. Video gaming was one of the best options for international students because it helped them repair their social connections and allowed them to find new goals while playing games. Video games helped many international students avoid inappropriate behavior and improved their psychological health during the pandemic. While phycologists argued that escapism would lead to more severe phycological problems, general strain theory also helps us to define the positive aspects of escapism.

When discussing the gendered reactions to perceived strains, Broidy and Agnew (1997) argued that males tend to exhibit delinquent behaviors while females escape from the stressor or the thing that causes strain. They also stated that male have higher crime rates because males' response to strains are more conductive to crime. However, playing video games and hiding in the virtual world were helpful to relieve strains according to my participants, while video gaming caused no damage to others. Thus, video gaming

and the escapism could be seen as what Broidy ad Agnew described as female behavior. Furthermore, escapism does not mean neglect of real-world problems; on the contrary, it is an effective technique to solve problems and resolve negative emotions experienced in the real world.

## Gamer's Perceptions of Video Games

In the earlier part of this article, I discussed the definitional and content differences among different types of video games. In this section, I will discuss participants' thoughts toward varied types of video games. Even though all of the participants are cozy game players that played the three cozy games discussed here during the pandemic, they had different opinions towards types of video games. Before unpacking participants' perspectives, it is worth mentioning that only some participants enjoyed cozy games. It is equally important to learn why other types of video games were more attractive to some during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section of the thesis will be divided into three parts to compare different types of video games based on players' perceptions. First, the perceived advantages and exciting points of cozy games from the participant's perspective will be discussed. Second, while some participants stated that cozy games were not their first choice during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to ascertain what attracted players during this time period. By retaining detailed knowledge

of other types of video games, researchers could better understand video gamers' thoughts and emotional needs while playing video games during the pandemic.

As the participants talked about how they got into video gaming, it was surprising to learn that some had not started playing video games with a cozy or casual game. Most of them played multiplayer, competitive video games in the beginning. Of the 15 participants, 12 admitted that they rarely had experiences with cozy games before attending college. Thus, the researcher requested that participants articulate their feelings towards cozy games from childhood to adulthood. Louisa, one of the participants who spent over a thousand hours on *Stardew Valley* noted that she only played shooting games before the pandemic because those games do not require large blocks of time to play. However, the pandemic allowed her to spend the whole day playing video games on her sofa. Cozy games like *Stardew Valley* became a better option than competitive shooting games. As Louisa noted during the interview, *Stardew Valley* allows players and modification ("mod") creators to add different original content to the game. These original mods improve playability and increase the immersive experience for players. To explain this, Louisa argued that she spent half a month, at least 6 hours a day, unlocking all of the achievements for the exclusive content created by the producer and felt tired of *Stardew Valley* after that. However, she later found out that numerous mods include hundreds of new NPCs and plots, and she spent more than 900 hours playing the mods—especially the mods of her favorite character.

The fact that she spent hours on cozy games differed from my original hypothesis

regarding cozy games allowing players to use fragmented time to play. Would this lead to more emotional and socializing issues because of time consumption? Yuan answered this question by comparing competitive multiplayer games and cozy games. From his perspective, the competitions were just the end of a single game round; the point is enjoying the game play itself. While talking about the time consumption of video game playing, he argued that the video games he played during fragmented time were merely time killers. To him, the coziest games that helped him release stress and other negative emotions were the games that required a longer time to play. Yuan was a *Genshin Impact* player and spent over 1,000 hours playing that game during the pandemic. To him, all categories of video games were just available for real-life interactions between friends and family. Thus, he had a low preference between multiplayer competitive games and cozy games during the lockdown phase of the pandemic. However, this participant eventually stopped playing *Genshin Impact* in late 2021, when he could hang out with his friends in person during leisure time.

It is worth noting that when Yuan stopped playing *Genshin Impact*, he was still playing multiplayer, competitive games with his friends. As he said, video games were all substitutions of face-to-face interactions, but why didn't he stop playing all video games? He explained that because competitive games have their own culture and more active gaming forums and communities, they create new topics for friends to discuss when hanging out or having food together. Take the example of *League of Legends*, which has a global competition that invites professional teams from different parts of the world to

compete with each other every year, producing a lot of memes and interesting behind-the-scenes stories for players. On the other hand, Yuan argued that even though cozy games like *Genshin Impact* allow players to play together, they were making more effort toward the games' plots, art, and audio designs. According to him, these gaming art designs are less critical than having common topics to discuss with his friends.

Another point brought up by many participants is that they wanted to spend time playing different types of video games during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the stay-at-home order kept people in their homes for months, participants sought different gaming experiences to avoid boredom. For the participants who spent a long time on video gaming during the pandemic, they could easily balance time between different types of video games. Chen, who spent almost every second playing video games after finishing schoolwork, said that it was pretty simple to decide what games to play and that he would play competitive games if friends were available to join him. He would play cozy games for the rest of the time when friends were not online. He also argued that he preferred to play multiplayer games because each game was different, as he sought dynamic gaming experiences during the pandemic.

In 1983, a sociologist focused on the demography of arcade video games and noted that the composition of arcade video gamers is roughly 20 percent female and 80 percent male (Kaplan, 1983). However, in the 21st century, women make up nearly half of video game players worldwide, despite the limited ways female characters are represented in video games (Cunningham, 2018, Ch. 2). Besides the stereotype that girls

do not play video games, there were other types of discrimination against female players during the pandemic (Grimes, 2023, p. 5). Video games have long been gendered—just like toys during the last several decades; while there are debates about gender segregation in the video gaming industry, many game producers keep designing games towards stereotypically gendered interests (Cunningham, 2018, Ch. 2). Additionally, the attitudes of video gaming producers have deepened the stereotypes of female video gamers, that girls only play relaxing and low-difficulty games because they are not skilled as male players. “OMG you suck, you must be a girl, aren’t you?” One participant said that she often experienced gendered discrimination during the pandemic and that her teammates often blamed her for their mistakes because she was female. Disparaging and gendered remarks on players skills are not new in the gaming world as Grimes (2003) noted that male gamers often blame their teammates by saying, “You play like a girl!” (p. 5).

Besides the increasing number of female players, their choice in games also differs from the stereotypes (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1998). Among the eight female participants in this research, seven of them mentioned that they routinely played *League of Legends*—one of the best-selling competitive games—which challenges the stereotypes of female players. Take the example of the *League of Legends* ranking ladder, which is often seen as the proof of a player’s skills while competing with others. Riot, the game’s producer, published the distributions of all ranks. Among the seven female *League of Legends* players who participated in this research, five of them reached the rank called “Gold,” outranking 58.6 percent of all players (Milella, 2023).

Lu stated that she is a crazy fan of the *Soulslike* games, which are considered the most challenging type of games—those that require time, patience, and skill. According to Lu:

> I was always playing with my friends, and some of them was new to video games. We spent lot of time playing games with low difficulty, but I won't play those games when I was playing alone. Those games were boring to play, to be honest, they did not require skills, and I do not like the anime style of those games.

She also stated that she had spent over 1,000 hours on *Soulslike* games during the pandemic when she could not find friends to play with. The fact that she is an expert in challenging games also breaks the stereotype of female players.

## Drawbacks of Video Gaming During the Pandemic?

Even though researchers found that video games have benefited players' pandemic lives, the criticisms about the adverse effects of video game playing never stopped. As Wood et al. (2007) suggested, high-frequency video game players were 5 times more likely to report losing track of time. In critics' eyes, this led to more severe problems during the pandemic. According to one participant, it was true that the addiction to video gaming negatively affected his daily schedule—that he missed a few deadlines and had a lower quality of sleep after spending the whole day on video games. Indeed, video game addiction is similar to any addiction that will negatively affect the addict's physical and mental health (Wood et al, 2007). Thus, research on the effects of healthy

video gaming habits could be the decisive factor in determining if video gaming should be considered a decent way to spend leisure time during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As people argued that video gaming negatively impacted players during the pandemic, one of the participants, Hai, noted that video games, like TV shows and films, were merely an option for players. Although he admitted that video game players were wasting a lot of time during the pandemic, he would only blame the coronavirus instead of the player because being stuck at home was unhealthy for individuals. He also condemned the critics of video games by arguing that they could not provide people with a way to release stress and stay physically and mentally healthy during the lockdown phase. “I thought it is Tik-Tok that became boring during the pandemic, and later I figured out that it is because I am depressed to be locked up for months during the pandemic.” Therefore, video gaming was just a scapegoat for some adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders. Like Wang, one of my participants, argued that: “I was spending increasing amount of time on video games even after the lockdown phase, and now I prefer online activities compared to outdoor ones. Go blame the pandemic but not the video games, because they are the best and only option I had.” Take the example of escapism, which is the basis of claims that players are afraid to take responsibility and face problems in the real world, and so they spend time on video games, hiding from reality. However, one of the participants noted that many other things could be considered escaping, such as Lebron James’ fans going to every game in which he played to escape from real-world stress.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many stressful experiences, painful memories, physical and psychological problems, and massive changes to individuals' lives. While Chinese students living in the United States during the pandemic had difficulty socializing with friends and family, they had worse emotional states as a result of being stuck in their rented apartments. To deal with the negative impacts of the pandemic and the stay-at-home order, they needed to find a way to release their emotional stress. Video games, one of the most popular relaxation and entertainment methods among target group, have become the best options for many Chinese students.

To these students, video games were more than just a way to kill time. According to the participants, video games helped them maintain social connections and even build new friendships with the people they met online; also, by playing video games, participants could effectively release their stress and other negative emotions. This was crucial during the pandemic because people could not interact with friends as before. Cozy games are a relatively new term for video games with no content that possibly causes stress (such as violence or inappropriate language). The difficulty of cozy games is often low, and players can reach their goals easily while playing. Cozy games are less intensive and stressful compared to most other multiplayer games. While participants had different attitudes and preferences towards video games, most agreed that cozy games could be the best type to play during the COVID-19 pandemic for both beginners and

experienced players. While most of this research's findings aim at players' video gaming experiences, there is still some unexplored knowledge waiting for future research to explain. For example, how should video gamers balance their time between real-life events and activities in the virtual world, especially during the pandemic when they were having more leisure time to control. Secondly, since increasing number of female players started to spend time on video games, it is also vital to consider from the gender perspective for video gaming during the pandemic.

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