



# GAMING

GAMING AS A SOCIAL CONNECTOR

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Gaming has always been a social connector. Even when the gaming industry was dominated by stereotypical computer nerds in the early 1970s, the first commercially successful video game, Pong, rose to fame through its simple design and multiplayer focus that acted as a social lubricant at gatherings. That design was not an accident.

“It was very common to have a girl with a quarter in hand pull a guy off a bar stool and say, ‘I’d like to play Pong and there’s nobody to play.’ It was a way you could play games, you were sitting shoulder to shoulder, you could talk, you could laugh, you could challenge each other,” says Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell, “In fact, there are a lot of people who have come up to me over the years and said, ‘I met my wife playing Pong!’”

As we all know, today’s gaming experience has evolved tremendously since Pong, yet it remains inherently social. An experience to be shared whether engaging in a co-op experience on the couch, a viewing party of a favorite esports team or content creator, or a passionate discussion about game strategy or holiday wish lists. Gaming experiences can often merge playing, viewing and social interaction in one setting, and gamers are increasingly looking for authentic connections.

For the more than 3 billion people who game globally (source: Newzoo), this is one of the primary ways they connect, interact, and socialize, both within the game and outside of it. Gaming’s ability to build and enhance bonds between friends, family, and strangers is one of the things

that makes it unique as an “entertainment” platform. Unlike other forms of digital entertainment, gaming allows for a more active experience by giving the individual control of their playing experience and, in some cases, the actual environments, while unifying others through shared interactions, mutual passions, and community accomplishments.

Connections are built as Gamers play with family, friends, and even strangers. The gaming experience provides one of the most popular social activities - ahead of sports viewership, going to the movies and live music events (source: DigiDay). It also helps develop stronger bonds with friends and family than social media and video chats (Pew Research 2020).

## THE SCIENCE BEHIND GAMING CONNECTIONS

Gaming is simply the latest form of an old human social need that is most succinctly described as “play.” The experimental psychologist Susanna Millar defines play as: “any purposeful mental or physical activity performed either individually or group-wise in leisure time or at work for enjoyment, relaxation, and satisfaction of real-time or long-term needs.”

If we think of playing games at the most basic level, games are about engagement, which facilitates conversation (source: Activision Blizzard Media). The conversation then shapes culture, which can shape the way people live and work.

# SOCIAL CONNECTION IN A MODERN WORLD

At its core, gaming culture provides people the opportunity to discover, engage and explore both within their imaginations and socially. That's why attending tournaments, conferences, and events both live and online are obvious natural places for the gaming experience to expand. This allows people to connect and make the gaming experience more tangible relevant, and impactful to one's personal and professional life. Here are some areas where gaming culture has significantly progressed:

## 1. SCHOOLS

Gaming clubs have emerged at both the grade school and high school level and they mirror the extracurricular and engagement categories that were previously available for sports and theater groups. Colleges have developed school curriculum and are awarding scholarships for their gaming teams, organizing amongst their geographic peers, and competing in publisher run competitions.

## 2. FRIENDS & FAMILY GAMING (COUCH PLAY)

Games are offering family-friendly co-op and parental controls so that Millennial and Gen X parents can connect with their children and enjoy an equal share in the fun. Game designers are actively developing concepts for this expressed purpose (i.e. Roblox).

## 3. ONLINE STREAMING & CONTENT CREATION

The gaming vertical on YouTube is one of the largest – over 16% of all videos viewed. Content products dedicated to gamers (i.e. Twitch, Discord, Huya) are some of the most popular apps in the world and are expanding the categories to mirror today's youth and pop culture.

## 4. ESPORTS

Almost every major title has a professional or semi-professional structure run or supported by the game's publisher. Although the number of truly professional players is still a fraction of a percent of the population (similar to traditional sports). The stakes are high and top players can earn over \$100k per year with some players going on to build personal brands that are capable of earning millions in their career.

## 5. CONFERENCES

Dedicated consumer gaming conferences have existed for decades. Some of the largest now attract over 100,000 attendees per event.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR BRANDS TO CONNECT

Gaming is natively a digital experience, and there are numerous marketing opportunities for brands to connect with target consumers – in the games themselves, through social & digital platforms, as well as in traditional marketing, such as:

**CONNECTING IN THE GAME** – seamlessly integrating into gaming environments, leaving brand & product messaging in a contextually relevant manner.

“The most impactful in-game brand activation that I oversaw was the first ever virtual stadium naming rights deal, says Matt Marcou, former Commission of the MADDEN NFL Championship Series (MCS). The MCS was run online in the live services of MADDEN, yet also had access to private servers to create content and run competitions. In 2019, the NFL and EA jointly approved a partnership with Pizza Hut that made use of digital real-estate that was generating tens of millions of views annually in the most influential sports video games property in the US.”

**CONNECTING THRU SOCIAL & DIGITAL PLATFORMS** – align with esports broadcasts, develop custom creator content, or engage with people socializing around watching other people play.

**DEVELOPING OWNED MARKETING EXPERIENCES** – build brand experiences online or IRL, either as standalone or alongside cultural events by partnering with publishers, properties and industry talent.

**SUPPORTING COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES** – A cost effective way to create value for gamers and drive affinity is to sponsor and support (both through

mentorship and resources) local or regional festivals that can attract thousands of attendees and generate millions of online impressions.

*“There are thousands (maybe tens of thousands) of monthly community-run gaming events all across the US and online. These are the proving grounds that are responsible for the most impactful and engaging moments and friendships for generations Z and Alpha. The organized play efforts are rapidly resembling the sports and afterschool programs that we and our parents grew up with.” - Matt Marcou*

But it’s important to note that not all games, talent or experiences are going to be right for every brand. There are multiple different points of integration and what makes sense for the brand is where they want to “connect” and their target consumer is the brand they’re trying to reach. There are turnkey opportunities as simple as running video ads in a game like Candy Crush or Animal Farm, sponsoring a Rocket League tournament, or partnering with a new Activision or Epic Games title launch to provide unique experiences or offers - it is important to consider how consumers engage with this marketing communications vehicle.

One of the best ways to understand the latest news and trends in the gaming world is through attending gaming conventions / conferences, which now occur both in-person and online. It’s an opportunity to experience exclusive games and influencers firsthand; get to know the latest gaming tech, game prices, upcoming titles as well as gaming software; and hearing keynote speeches from various gaming companies to understand what they have planned.

## CONCLUSION

The main question for marketers to ask: what emotional or physical “value” are they trying to get out of it? Opportunities exist for brands to seamlessly integrate because consumers connect with gaming to address some fairly basic needs—entertainment and/or social connection.

Now, more than ever, games are a powerful tool for creating connections amongst casual and competitive gamers alike – whether they are at an event experience or physically distant. Gamers have known for a long time something that everyone else is starting to figure out: there’s a real, deep human & community connection on the other side of a screen.

## David Rosenberg

Chief Brand Officer, GMR Marketing | [gaming@gmrmarketing.com](mailto:gaming@gmrmarketing.com)

Over the past 25 years, Dave's responsibilities have included direction of key strategic initiatives for the agency. Dave's gaming background started in 2001 with the launch of Xbox and the development of the brands partnerships for over 20 years and well as the creation of the Intel Extreme Masters program in 2004.

David is the senior brand and sponsorship strategist for the agency leading client consulting and services teams

to develop new brand campaigns approaches, building strategic marketing plans and programs for current and potential clients. His leadership has resulted in the acquisition and growth of many of GMR's new technology and consumer segmentation initiatives and top clients including Comcast. He was integral in the launch of the agencies Gaming & Esports practice, established in 2014.

## Brandon Herwig

Director, GMR Marketing | [gaming@gmrmarketing.com](mailto:gaming@gmrmarketing.com)

Brandon has been with GMR Marketing for over 10 years, having developed & supported marketing efforts for brands like Comcast-Xfinity, Nissan, Hershey's, and Mobil1. He helped launch Xfinity's dedicated gaming strategy in 2016 and is an evangelist on GMR's Gaming & Esports practice to guide more brands into the space. Brandon's primarily focus is to create meaningful and lasting connections between brands, properties, and consumers at the convergence of gaming & traditional entertainment.

During this time, his teams have collaborated with industry leaders – like ESL, Twitch, FaZe Clan, Activision-Blizzard, Epic, and numerous influencers – to create innovative solutions that meet the unique needs of brands and authentically navigate the complex nuances of the gaming & esports ecosystem and consumer.

## Matt Marcou

Managing Partner, Tryhard Consulting | [matt@tryhardconsulting.com](mailto:matt@tryhardconsulting.com)

Matt has been a trailblazer in the games industry for over 20 years (even before esports was an established word). Matt has worn many hats throughout his distinguished career including those of competitor, commissioner, startup founder, and game producer - all with an emphasis on elevating video games to the level of professional sports. Many of Matt's projects have become fixtures of the esports industry, including MADDEN NFL Championship Series (EA SPORTS) and the League of Legends World Championship (Riot Games).

Through the course of Matt's career, he has been in leadership roles on marketing, development, and strategic initiative teams. His products have generated thousands of hours of content viewed by an international audience of tens of millions.

He currently oversees Business Development and the Games Industry Consulting unit for Tryhard Consulting. Tryhard Consulting is a boutique consultancy that focuses on knowledge solutions and facilitating connections within the Games Industry.