

# Understanding the Perspectives of Autistic Gamers through an Online Autistic Community and a Survey

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Autistic people often have an interest in and spend a substantial amount of time engaged with video games. Games can be supportive of their mental health and social needs and have been widely used for behavioral interventions among autistic people. However, the gaming experiences and preferences of autistic people themselves have not been thoroughly studied. To explore these experiences, we used a multi-method approach, analyzing game-related posts from a large autism-related subreddit and conducting a survey with 145 autistic people. The survey allowed us to further understand preferences around accessibility and sensory experiences, representation, and social experiences in communities that emerged in the Reddit posts. We found that games offering a sense of freedom, control, and creativity might be particularly appealing to autistic gamers. Discussions also emerged around what types of audio and visual sensory input were considered soothing and appropriate. Moreover, both the Reddit posts and survey responses highlighted the importance of accommodating diverse social preferences and providing accurate autistic representation. Overall, our findings offer insights into the gaming experiences and preferences of autistic gamers, emphasizing the need for greater inclusion, accessibility, and supportive gaming communities.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → *Empirical studies in accessibility; Accessibility systems and tools*; **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; • **Social and professional topics** → **People with disabilities**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Autism, Video Game, Online Community, Reddit

## 1 Introduction

Playing video games is a popular leisure activity that provides entertainment, contributes to mental well-being [23, 32, 35], and offers protection against mental health challenges [34]. Autistic<sup>1</sup> teens and young adults exhibit heightened interest in video games<sup>2</sup> and devote substantial time to playing them [47, 54]. Research also indicates that games can serve as effective tools for skill-building, emotion regulation, and therapeutic support in autistic people [28, 67], aligning with broader findings that game-based interventions may support mental health needs [20, 24, 38]. In this paper, we describe how our analyses of posts from an online community and the results of a broader survey of autistic gamers provide insights into autistic gaming experiences and the accessibility

<sup>1</sup>In this paper, we use identity-first language (e.g., autistic people), as this way of referring to individuals advocates their identity [57].

<sup>2</sup>In this paper, we use the term video game as an umbrella term including visually displayed games played on a screen or any games implemented using digital technology, even if it is not primarily visual.

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challenges that arise in gaming currently. Although inclusion has been a broad area of discussion for gaming for several years [30, 44], accessibility has been less of a focus, particularly for non-physical disabilities.

We build on prior research that has explored the preferences of autistic people for specific game features [18, 46, 56, 58] to understand which games, types of games, and features within them make video games truly accessible in a holistic way to autistic players. To this end, we took a multi-method approach using analyses of both discussions around gaming from an autistic online community and self-reports from a survey of autistic adults. This approach builds upon prior studies of online communities to gain perspectives from autistic people [29, 56, 58, 81]. Studying online forums can allow researchers to understand the autistic experience of gaming outside formal research settings that can be less comfortable for autistic people [50]. Specifically, we used data from one of the largest autism-specific subreddits (324K subscribers, approximately 50 posts and comments per day, when most recently accessed in October 2025; 315K subscribers when data were collected in November 2023) to understand the experiences and perspectives of autistic people with video games. Reddit forums allow users with diverse demographics, interests, and backgrounds to come together and engage in open discussions while maintaining a certain level of anonymity. We then followed up with a survey of 145 autistic adults probing further at themes developed in our Reddit analysis.

The results of our analysis of both of these datasets together 1) confirm prior research that open-world games are particularly appealing to the autistic population, 2) indicate that the origin of this preference may at least partially lie in the genre's accessibility for autistic players in the form of self-relief, the ability to achieve goals, and opportunities for immersive exploration, and 3) reveal that sensory design, authentic autistic representation, flexible social options, and inclusive community environments all work together to create accessible gaming environments. Specifically, overwhelming visual or audio stimuli can make it harder for autistic players to engage, while an authentic and diverse representation of autistic people encourages players to engage with a game when done well. Our findings complement recent research on the role of disability representation [64, 77, 78], including self-presentation [77], in games with a specific focus on autism. Additionally, our results demonstrate how accessible gaming features contribute to engagement and a sense of belonging for autistic players while flexible social interaction and disability-inclusive gaming communities work together to create positive gaming experiences.

Our research contributes to the accessibility research community by providing empirical insights on how game design and community practices affect accessibility for autistic players, drawing from both large-scale survey responses and naturally occurring data from Reddit. These insights highlight the need for HCI researchers to further study ways to enhance accessibility in these games and can guide the development of more inclusive and accessible games and virtual environments for autistic people. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the ways in which games and online communities provide insight into autism and the need for safe and accessible gaming communities.

## 2 Related Work

The present study builds on existing literature on autistic perspectives and experiences in games. In this section, we describe research on games as intervention as well as more recent studies of autistic perspectives on games. We also highlight the limited studies that currently exist around identifying and addressing the accessibility barriers autistic people might face when playing games, an area we sought to expand in our work. Additionally, in terms of our methods, we draw on scholarship that studied online communities both as spaces for connection among autistic people and as sites for understanding the perspectives of autistic people.

## 2.1 Video Games as Intervention

Starting in the early 2000s, multiple studies have suggested that autistic people exhibit a strong interest in games [47, 54] and used such interest to position video games as intervention tools for autistic people [4, 11, 28]. Gaming-based interventions frequently aim to support well-being and behavior of autistic people in a more naturalistic setting [4]. These interventions address specific behaviors that are perceived as undesirable among autistic people [67], with a focus on social communication, emotion recognition, and other cognitive or physical issues [4, 79], as well as on teaching skills considered important for independent living [80]. For instance, interactive games like *ComFiM* [55] and *SIDES* [53] were designed to encourage autistic people to engage in communications with each other dynamically, providing a space for autistic people to improve their communication and collaboration skills instead of fostering social isolation. Similarly, *ECHOES* is a serious game to help autistic children to enhance their social communication skills through virtual gardening activities with an interactive agent [10]. Through this game, educators were able to observe the behaviors of autistic children, allowing them to discover unexpected capabilities of children that might otherwise have remained unnoticed in traditional settings. Another serious game, *EmoTEA*, built to teach autistic children to identify facial expressions related to emotions, was considered enjoyable to play [26]. However, this line of research tends to focus only on using serious games to develop or regulate developmental skills and facilitate autistic individuals' adaptation to mainstream society, providing limited consideration for whether these norms serve the interests of autistic people themselves [67]. Taken together, this body of work suggests that while gaming can provide supportive interventions for autistic people, there remains a need for more research that takes an assets-based and inclusion-oriented approach, ensuring that such interventions are developed in ways that reflect and respect autistic perspectives.

## 2.2 Autistic Perspectives on Video Games

In contrast to studies of games as an intervention for autistic people, relatively few studies have explored gaming from the perspective of autistic individuals, such as their gaming motivations and feature preferences. For example, one study reported that escapism and social motivation might motivate autistic people to play games for leisure [49]. Autistic people can meet and establish new connections with others through online multiplayer games [25, 46]. Young autistic adults who played video games for leisure believed that games had a calming effect on them [22]. Moreover, video games provided them with conversation topics and a common interest when meeting new people, which allowed them to make friends more easily [22]. These studies indicate that games not only provide entertainment but may also give autistic people a place to escape from reality and serve as a facilitator for them to make social connections.

Some studies explicitly report on autistic gaming preferences and what game features influence these experiences and their gameplay choices. For instance, autistic players and their parents modified Minecraft and built their own community to support different types of communication and social play, indicating the importance of positive sociality and community in gaming [56, 58]. In multiple studies, autistic people have reported preferring Role-Playing and Action-Adventure games [18], in part due to their fantasy elements [46]. At the same time, they disliked 'first-person' perspectives that caused technical problems, such as images not displaying correctly or the game taking a long time to appear on screen. Furthermore, negative social interactions in online games and violence in games were aversive to autistic players [46]. Similarly, autistic people reported misreading or failing to understand non-verbal cues in scripted narratives and finding jarring sounds or flashing images distressing [18]. We build on these past studies through our analysis of empirical data to understand the interactions and relationships autistic people have with games from their own perspectives.

### 2.3 Game Accessibility for Autistic People

Despite the widespread use of games as intervention tools for autistic people and the positive effects games can have on the autistic population (*e.g.*, relieving stress [22] and fostering social connections [22, 25]), there is limited research on what practices are needed and adopted to mitigate accessibility barriers autistic people might face when playing games. Most existing accessibility guidelines for games primarily focus on people with physical disabilities [30, 44] rather than cognitive disabilities, possibly due to the greater complexity and variability of cognitive abilities [30]. Among the limited accessibility guidelines addressing cognitive disabilities, recommendations for mitigating accessibility barriers tend to be largely utility-driven, with limited consideration of the broader experiential needs of players with disabilities [16, 31]. These guidelines commonly include reducing time constraints, minimizing on-screen stimuli, and simplifying input demands [76]. They also recommend incorporating interactive tutorials, using simple and clear narrative structures, offering failure-free practice modes, providing contextual in-game help or tips, and allowing players to adjust game speed [1]. While these efforts provide promise and show a commitment to accessible gaming broadly, they are limited thus far in their ability to address the autistic perspective in particular. Therefore, in this study, we focused on how autistic people discuss their experiences with games, which factors they consider important, and how these factors shape their gameplay experiences, to gain experience-driven insights that reflect the diversity of autistic gameplay.

### 2.4 Autistic Online Communities

Online communities are widely used and offer valuable spaces for the autistic population [45]. They provide autistic people with dedicated spaces to exchange information, share experiences, and offer social support [15, 61]. Traditional in-person social interactions can be challenging for neurodivergent people due to differences in interpreting nonverbal cues, varying comfort levels with eye contact, and other mismatches between neurotypical and neurodivergent communication styles [50]. Some studies suggest that it is easier for autistic people to form new relationships online, as it provides them with an opportunity to connect to others for emotional and social support without having to interact face-to-face [14, 27]. Moreover, online communication can provide autistic people with better control over interactions, offering them the chance to express their “true selves” [27]. As a result, many autistic people may turn to online communities for finding social connections and supportive relationships [7, 15, 59].

Given the success of online communities to attract and support autistic people, many scholars have studied how autistic people perceive and use diverse online platforms, including Twitter [29, 81], TikTok [70], and Minecraft [57, 59]. As an example, analysis of conversations and user profiles using the #ActuallyAutistic hashtag from Twitter [29, 81] revealed that the online platform allows autistic people to share their life experiences of being excluded and to receive support from the community [81]. Similarly, a virtual ethnography of the Minecraft autism community on the Autcraft platform revealed that the community acts as a support group for autistic people, protecting them from harassment in online spaces [57]. Moreover, the community redefined the label “autism” into something positive, serving as a source of empowerment and strength, and helping autistic people embrace their identities [57]. TikTok also provides a space for autistic creators to share a diverse range of experiences beyond their disability identity and to provide resources for autistic children to sense-make their identities [70].

Not only do online communities serve as meaningful spaces for autistic people to come together and embrace their identities, but they also offer rich insights into autistic experiences across diverse contexts (*e.g.*, school, home) and technologies. That is, studying interactions in online communities can help understand first-person autistic experiences and perspectives in a way that is potentially more comfortable for some autistic people [33, 65]. For instance, prior research found that “Autistic Twitter” contains numerous counter-narratives not commonly encountered in academia, such as use of a neurodiversity framework for understanding autism, while academic autism research has traditionally emphasized medical models of autism [29]. The present study

expands beyond the online communities analyzed in prior work (e.g., Twitter, Minecraft) to a focus on a specific Reddit community, one of the largest autism-related subreddits, and their perspectives on gaming in particular. Nevertheless, studying public data within online communities must be done responsibly and ethically [21], as we describe for our project in our methods.

### 3 Study 1: Insights from an Online Autistic Community

To gain insight into autistic experiences surrounding games, we studied a large subreddit dedicated to autism but with substantial gaming-related content. Through quantitative analysis of the posts and comments for the mentioned game names and qualitative analysis of the posts to understand how specific game features influence autistic gameplay experiences, we discovered that autistic gamers discuss Sandbox and Virtual Life games the most, noting their exploratory, creative, and flexible features. Positive sensory experiences, along with authentic autistic representation and respectful gaming communities, all emerged as key factors shaping how autistic people evaluate and engage with games.

#### 3.1 Methods

**3.1.1 Reddit Data Corpus.** At the time of data collection in November 2023, the subreddit we studied had more than 315,000 subscribers and an average of 103 posts per day. The subreddit’s focus on autism enables autistic people or those with close relationships with autistic people to share autism-related information and support.

Within this autism-specific subreddit, we searched for posts with keywords “game” or “video game” using PRAW<sup>3</sup> (Python Reddit API Wrapper) and collected 346 posts in total from April 2021 to November 2023. Due to a change in the Reddit API’s policy in July 2023, our data collection was restricted to a subset of available posts. The API allowed up to 1,000 posts to be collected without designated keywords, while keyword-based queries returned significantly fewer posts. We conducted two different queries and collected a total of 346 posts; the two queries returned 241 and 105 posts, respectively. In all cases, returned posts followed Reddit’s default ranking—typically the Hot sorting order—which prioritizes posts based on a combination of score and recency. We checked whether the datasets from each query contained any duplicates, and none of the posts were duplicated. As noted above, the subreddit we studied was not specifically focused on games but was a general forum open to all types of discussions related to autism. Thus, it is natural that only a small portion of the overall posts were game-related posts compared to the overall size of the subreddit.

The first and last authors then coded 70 (approximately 20%) randomly selected posts (83% agreement) for inclusion, based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in Table 1<sup>4</sup>. We included all posts identified by either author for inclusion and divided the remaining posts for further coding. All comments associated with an included post were considered for inclusion, except those written by bots (i.e., ‘AutoModerator’) ( $n = 157$ ) or comments referencing another person as autistic (e.g., “my son” clearly indicating that the commenter themselves is not identifying as autistic but posting on behalf of or about someone else) ( $n = 21$ ). Following this process, our dataset comprised 160 posts from 148 unique Reddit users and 7,989 associated comments.

**3.1.2 Reddit Data Analysis.** We used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze posts ( $n = 160$ ) and only quantitative analysis for the comments ( $n = 7,989$ ). We extracted the names of games mentioned from both the posts and the comments in our dataset. Using Wikipedia’s List of best-selling video game franchises [73], we used 47 popular franchises listed as selling at least 50 million copies to develop our own games names list. We excluded the Wii franchise from our selection, considering it more of a platform than a game series. The franchise

<sup>3</sup>A Python package that allows for simple access to Reddit’s API

<sup>4</sup>In the listed criteria, video game was used to refer to visually displayed game played on a screen, while digital game refers to any games implemented using digital technology, even if it is not primarily visual. Digital interactive video game was used as the most specific term, to emphasize both user interaction and screen-based video content, often in policy or regulatory contexts.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. This table shows the list of inclusion and exclusion criteria used for analyzing game-related posts from the autism subreddit.

<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to “game” or “video game” as digital interactive video game</li> <li>- Discusses about favorite/least favorite games or game genres</li> <li>- Asks or discusses people’s preferences/thoughts on games or game genres</li> <li>- Discusses about certain aspects or features of a game</li> <li>- Discusses about the things they find important when playing games</li> <li>- Discusses about the issues they encounter while playing games</li> </ul>
<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- References to “games” that are not digital (e.g. focused on analog board games, card games, etc.) or the use of “game” as a verb related to manipulating or other meanings of the word game that are not digital games</li> <li>- Focuses on the environment around gaming (e.g., game controllers, gaming consoles)</li> <li>- Related to developing games</li> <li>- Written by people who are not autistic (e.g., “My son,” “My girlfriend,” etc.)</li> </ul>

lists captured a comprehensive range of games; for example, ‘The Sims’ franchise includes games spanning from ‘The Sims 1’ to ‘The Sims 4.’ Using this list as a base, the first author developed a Python script that captures all variations of each game’s name, such as abbreviations or commonly used names in online platforms (e.g., ‘GTA’ for ‘Grand Theft Auto’), mentioned in both posts and comments. The script calculated the number of posts and comments mentioning each game, with repeated mentions within a single post or comment counted only once.

To understand the specific features of appealing and highly discussed games and the experiences autistic people encounter while playing, we analyzed our corpus of Reddit data using reflexive thematic analysis [12]. The first and last authors developed an initial understanding of the data through the process of establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria and sorting the posts (as described in Section 3.1.1). These initial impressions informed the creation of a shared set of preliminary codes, documented via an online spreadsheet. These preliminary codes were accompanied by analytic notes that served as the basis for discussion during regular research meetings, in which the first and last authors discussed their interpretations of the data, compared early codes, and collaboratively refined and clustered related codes into a set of mid-level categories. Then, the first and last authors manually coded the remaining posts based on these categories. The first author analyzed approximately two-thirds of the data, while the last author analyzed the remaining third. During these rounds of coding, we met regularly to compare interpretations, discuss divergences, and collaboratively develop the themes presented below. The themes below were developed through iterative discussions of our interpretations of the data, reading our data alongside literature on gaming and autistic experiences, and merging of conceptually similar codes and categories. These themes were then discussed with the entire authorship group and refined through an iterative process of discussion and writing over several months.

Each of the authors has played video games throughout the last two decades, but none considers themselves a games researcher. Rather, all authors are accessibility researchers, two of whom have focused their careers on neurodivergence, and all of whom have worked in this space for multiple years. All authors come from a community-based research focus that centers marginalized voices whenever possible, including but not limited to groups that have been stereotyped and maligned, such as both autistic users and video game players. While none of the participants in the study are personally known to the research team, the authors have personal and professional relationships with people who play games heavily and with autistic people, including family

members, friends, and colleagues. Throughout our analysis, we reflected on our findings in light of our own lived experiences, those of our friends and family members, and the extant research base in this space. When an individual researcher became concerned that a connection might be drawn on the basis of bias or data not present in our dataset, that person and at least one other team member had a discussion, re-examined the specific data, and came to a conclusion about the best path forward. Such next steps might include revisiting other parts of the dataset, explicitly and intentionally reflecting on the lived experiences and research literature that drew us to these conclusions, and/or re-examining the subset of data in question with more research team members.

*3.1.3 Ethical Considerations.* Accessible computing research with public social media data from platforms like Reddit, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter, particularly content created by people with disabilities [3, 39, 41, 70, 81], informed our approach to data collection, analysis, and presentation in this work. The specific subreddit we studied explicitly supports academic research that uses its existing content for publications, especially studies focused on advancing autism understanding, and does not require researchers to obtain prior authorization. Our work aligns with this mission in seeking to illuminate how autistic people experience and perceive gaming, insights that could guide game developers in creating more inclusive and accessible gaming experiences.

Despite the public accessibility of the forum and its openness to research, protecting participant data remains a critical ethical obligation [21, 72]. The community we studied is at times used as a space for sharing personal experiences and challenges of autistic people. Thus, we do not reveal the specific subreddit studied. Moreover, the risk of participant reidentification through publicly available research data presents substantial concerns [72]. To mitigate these risks, we implemented protective measures, including word reordering and obfuscation strategies when incorporating quotes from our Reddit dataset into this paper. Moreover, the obfuscated quotes were compared side by side with the originals by all co-authors to ensure that contextual meaning was preserved. While our analysis used the unmodified original posts and comments from our collected data, obfuscation in the publication should help to mitigate some risk to reconstruction of identifiable or traceable data [2, 17].

Although the forum appears to include posts predominantly authored by autistic people, and all discussions remain centered on autism, it welcomes anyone with an interest in autism-related topics and does not require people to attest to any particular label or diagnosis. Thus, our dataset may include perspectives from individuals who do not identify as autistic. To prioritize authentic firsthand accounts, we implemented exclusion criteria that removed posts referencing third-party autism experiences (such as “My son”), as detailed in Table 1. This filtering approach, while not perfect, was designed to center the voices and lived experiences of those who self-identify as autistic.

## 3.2 Findings

In this section, we present the results of our analysis of game-related posts from an autism-specific subreddit. We begin with quantitative findings on which games are discussed most frequently within this community, followed by the results of our thematic analysis of the Reddit data. The thematic analysis revealed four main areas of discussion: (1) appeal of games that enable exploration, creativity, and flexible play; (2) the need to navigate sensory enjoyment without stress and overstimulation; (3) desiring positive and authentic autistic representation in games; and (4) looking for appealing social interaction in gaming communities.

*3.2.1 Frequently Mentioned Games and Genres in the Autistic Online Forum.* To understand online discussion of games within this community, we began by identifying the games most frequently mentioned across the posts and comments in our Reddit dataset. The most mentioned games were Minecraft ( $n=530$ ), The Sims ( $n=289$ ), Animal Crossing ( $n=223$ ), The Legend of Zelda ( $n=201$ ), and Mario ( $n=186$ ), as shown in Appendix A Table 3<sup>5</sup>. To

<sup>5</sup>The most frequently discussed games in Reddit posts had limited overlap with the best-selling games lists we consulted [51, 73, 75]. The top 5 best-selling games from 2023 included Hogwarts Legacy, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III (2023), Madden NFL 24, Marvel’s Spider-Man

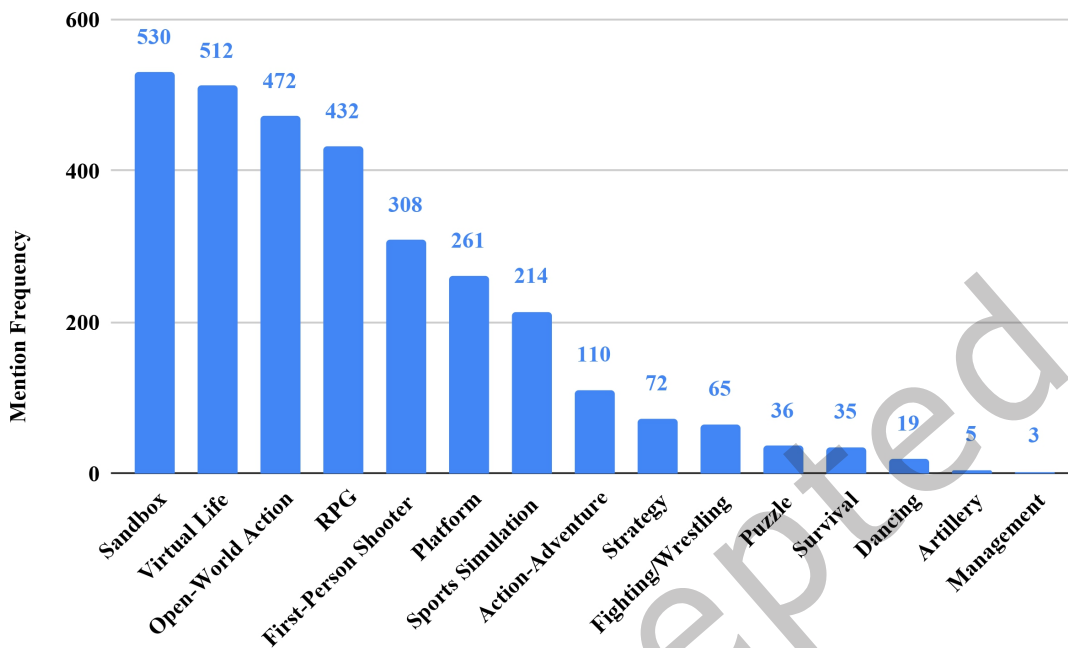


Fig. 1. Frequency of Mentions of Game Genres. This figure displays the frequency of mentions for each game genre in the dataset. The x-axis represents the genres, while the y-axis indicates the number of mentions recorded for each genre.

limit the impact of any specific game on our quantitative analysis and to gain insight into how these games are perceived on a broader scale, we grouped them by game genre. We classified each game in our dataset based on the categorization method used by MetaCritic<sup>6</sup>. We then calculated the frequency of mention for each genre, as shown in Figure 1. The top four most frequently mentioned genres were Sandbox ( $n=530$ ), Virtual Life (*i.e.*, Life Simulation) ( $n=512$ ), Open-World Action ( $n=472$ ), and Role-playing ( $n=432$ ). The frequency of mentions sharply declined for genres beyond the top four. Sandbox games offer players a high level of freedom and creativity within a virtual world without any predetermined clear objective or with a goal that players could alternatively set. Virtual Life games allow players to simulate various aspects of the physical world and their lives by controlling one or more virtual characters in open-ended gameplay. Open-World Action games allow players to explore or shape their own adventure and engage in combat or other action-oriented gameplay. Role-Playing games (RPGs) immerse players in the role of controlling virtual characters and making decisions that shape the unfolding narrative within a storyline.

**3.2.2 Exploratory, Creative, and Flexible Games Appeal to Autistic Gamers.** Our thematic analysis of posts revealed possible explanations for the frequent discussion of these genres. Exploration, creativity, and engagement with diverse activities beyond just combat appeared highly appealing to the autistic gamers in our data:

2, and The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom [75]. The top 5 grossing of all time included Minecraft, Grand Theft Auto 5, Tetris, Wii Sport, and PUBG: Battlegrounds [51] or Mario, Tetris, Pokemon, Call of Duty, and Grand Theft Auto in another source [73]. Although there is debate amongst the industry experts about whether and how such best-selling lists can and should be used [62].

<sup>6</sup><https://www.metacritic.com/game/>

*I've experimented with various games, and I'm particularly drawn to those involving crafting, collecting, building, and exploration. I do enjoy battling monsters but not as the central theme of the game. - R138<sup>7</sup>*

This response highlights interest in flexible gameplay that supports multiple forms of engagement rather than being limited to specific experiences. In particular, players often expressed a strong preference for games like Minecraft, whose gameplay allows both creative expression through designing virtual worlds and exploration of pre-existing ones within a given setting:

*I used to really enjoy these kinds of games and would spend a lot of time on them... They often offered different ways to play. For example, one mode where you could create your own world, and another where you could explore ones that were already built. I wonder why so many of us find these types of games so appealing? - R46*

These games provided both agency and structured play, enabling players to choose between self-directed creation and guided exploration. This combination may offer autistic players both freedom and familiarity. They can explore and create on their own terms within rule-based systems that reduce unpredictability. Another post mentioned how games that allow them to set their own goals, pace their actions, and design the virtual world as they see fit might be particularly appealing to autistic people:

*I've always enjoyed games where you start with just a few basic elements and slowly build them up into something larger, managing problems along the way and making sure everything works smoothly. From what I've noticed, games like this seem especially appealing to autistic players, or at least to me. - R106*

Analysis of the posts indicates that games offering control, self-direction, and creative freedom, in which players can immerse themselves and shape a virtual world without rigid boundaries, might be appealing. Many autistic players described enjoying games that blend creative construction, exploration, and hands-on management. In these games, they can set their own goals, expand their creations over time, and keep things running smoothly while engaging in a variety of activities beyond combat.

**3.2.3 Balancing Sensory Enjoyment with Overstimulation.** Autistic gamers in the community we studied discussed navigating sensory experiences in games. Approximately 74% of the autistic population [37, 50] live with sensory difficulties, which can also impact their experience in virtual gaming environments. Sensory preferences, sensory processing disorders [48, 60], and sensory sensitivities [71, 74] appear to influence the way autistic people choose to play and talk about games. Posts discussing sensory experiences highlighted the impact of game audio, including sound effects and original soundtracks, and game graphics. Some experiences were viewed positively and made a game more desirable; others were seen as problematic. For example, one post shared the need to mute the audio, because in-game sounds cause stress:

*I occasionally listen to the in-game sounds to understand their contribution to the overall experience, but then I usually mute them again and play the game, relying on the general vibe. I find it challenging and stressful to play many games with their own sound. - R49*

This post describes testing the games first to understand how the sound might impact the game-playing experience, choosing only to keep the sound audible if it contributes substantially to understanding the game. In many cases, posts described people needing to rely on using other sensory cues, such as those in the visual channel, to get a “general vibe” of the game while keeping the audio muted.

In other cases, sound might be particularly desirable for gamers. For example, in multiplayer games, sound effects, signals, and in-game communication can be essential for players to navigate the game environment

<sup>7</sup>To distinguish between data sources, we use the label R for Reddit posts and S to refer to survey respondents.

effectively, communicate with teammates or opponents, and respond to in-game events or cues. These elements make it difficult to mute and rely only on visual input. However, sensitivity towards auditory input [74] can lead players to feel overstimulated by games, which if not addressed can lead to dysregulation, discomfort, and even “meltdowns<sup>8</sup>” and “shutdowns<sup>9</sup>”:

*I’ve realized that playing PvP [Player versus Player] and FPS [First-Person Shooter] video games becomes too overwhelming for me, especially when I wear a headset and engage in conversation. It often leads to meltdowns, and in some cases, even shutdowns. - R118*

Similar to audio sensitivities, visual sensitivities were also raised as an issue for autistic gamers in our data. One post described how the change in graphic settings of the games stopped them from enjoying the game they were engaged with for a long time:

*...when they changed how the lighting and camera worked in an update before the pandemic. It made me feel sick, dizzy, and I couldn’t control my character properly, so I had to stop playing... - R158*

In our Reddit data, autistic posters described preferring simplicity in design and limited visual interference over having too many visual elements:

*Personally, I prefer games with fewer icons and visual elements. I tend to avoid games with many characters on screen simultaneously because it becomes challenging for me to comprehend what’s happening. - R136*

This post highlights the impact visual design choices can have on individuals with sensory sensitivities. While some games might induce stress and overstimulation, others provide visual and auditory sensory enjoyment and can serve as a means to decompress or avoid other sensory inputs:

*I believe Stardew Valley is a fantastic game for people on the autism spectrum because of its uncomplicated visuals, vibrant colors, soothing music, absence of pressure, and no need for spoken words. Whenever I feel stressed or want to escape from overwhelming thoughts and sensory stimuli, I play Stardew Valley. - R100*

Stardew Valley is a farming simulation role-playing game that features pixelated graphic design and allows players to engage freely in a variety of activities that include completing simple repetitive tasks, such as farming, and building relationships with in-game characters. The minimal graphic design and use of written text instead of voice chat for dialogue among characters can help autistic people avoid negative sensory overload from the physical world.

The autistic community, while extremely diverse, has some tendencies in common, such as high rates of sensory sensitivity [71, 74], which helps to contextualize the considerable discussion of sensory experiences we saw in our data. Given that a substantial portion of the autistic population is sensitive to sensory stimulation [37, 50], including auditory [74] and visual sensory inputs [52], a better understanding of the sensory aspects of gaming can support the design and creation of inclusive experiences. As video games seek to be more accessible, not only of neurodivergent gamers but also of those with other sensory-related disabilities, addressing the need to engage with sensory input and multi-modal interactions that do not impact the overall gaming experience will be essential.

**3.2.4 Autistic Representation in Games.** Our analysis indicates that inclusion and representation in games can strongly influence autistic people’s game choices and whether their gaming experiences are judged to be positive or not. For example, in one post, a player who had tried multiple games described failing to find any autistic characters, even after searching through the characters and storylines for autistic representation:

<sup>8</sup>Meltdowns are intense emotional outbursts or breakdowns usually triggered by overwhelming sensory experiences, stress, or frustration.

<sup>9</sup>Shutdowns involve a withdrawal or retreat from overwhelming stimuli or situations, leading to a reduction in communication and interaction.

*One aspect that I find slightly disappointing is that, after reviewing all the characters in the game and its story, there is no mention of an autistic character. - R6*

On the other hand, the presence of autistic representation, even in small ways, can greatly enhance their gaming experience. For example, the inclusion of identity markers, such as the autism pride flag, within game design can provide recognition and affirmation for autistic players:

*I was thrilled to see that a game ... included the autism pride flag as a design option! - R42*

The representation of neurodivergent characters could include characters who specifically disclose their autism:

*In Your Turn To Die, there's a character who's openly autistic within the game's storyline. - R62*

In-game characters might also show support to the neurodivergent community by explicitly advocating for autistic people as part of their character arc or as part of the overall story:

*I really appreciate how Genshin Impact is accepting and supportive of neurodivergent people, even one of the main villains in the game advocates us. - R160*

Positive representation for autistic gamers includes not only *that* they are represented, but also *how* they are represented. For example, posts sometimes sought advice for finding games that represent autistic or neurodivergent characters authentically:

*I'm a fan of video games, but I've struggled to find many that feature Neurodivergent (ND) characters, and even fewer that portray them accurately, without resorting to making them the comedic relief. Does anyone know of any video games that feature autistic or ND characters in a respectful way? - R105*

Others described encountering moments in games that felt disrespectful or uncomfortable, suggesting that harmful stereotypes or careless portrayals can undermine players' enjoyment:

*I was really enjoying a game when I came across something that made me uncomfortable... Am I the only one who feels that way? - R109*

This post also included a screenshot from the game being referenced, which showed a character description that read, "An autistic little man that whispers brilliant tactical moves in the ear of commanders." The discomfort appeared to stem from how the description framed autism. Using a diminutive label like "little man" when describing an autistic character, and positioning their value only in terms of instrumental usefulness to others, rendered the autistic character as a caricatured sidekick rather than a full character with agency.

As such, this demonstrates the dual nature of autistic representation, in which simply having an autistic character is not enough. That character must be "authentic" or at least not a negative stereotype and definitely not present for mocking by other characters and the gamers themselves.

Our findings illustrate how inclusion and representation can be foundational for creating a gaming environment in which autistic gamers feel welcomed and valued. Moreover, they also highlight that intentional representation carries responsibility. When developers make the choice to depict autistic characters, authenticity and positive portrayals matter greatly to autistic players, who may feel misrepresented or alienated if the portrayal relies on stereotypes or inaccuracies. As the gaming industry evolves, game producers must address the needs of autistic, and more broadly neurodivergent, gamers by promoting positive representation, allowing the gaming industry to build a more inclusive landscape that engagement and joy in games in ways that suit them best.

**3.2.5 Looking for Appealing Social Interactions in Gaming Communities.** Our results indicate that autistic-friendly gaming communities beyond the games themselves appear to influence choices about which games to play or to avoid. In the subreddit, there were frequent conversations about the community surrounding a specific game, with posters preferring communities that are perceived to be more inclusive. Positive communities tended to be described as those that allowed autistic people to socialize and connect with others on their own terms:

*I'm searching for a game with a nice community! I'm not a hardcore gamer, so I'm hoping for something easy to control with the option to meet people through either voice or text chat. - R96*

Here, “nice” refers to both the people and the specific game elements that allow autistic people to meet in ways that feel accessible and comfortable, such as “either voice or text chat.” Similarly, other autistic game players expressed a desire for these kinds of communities but struggled to find spaces that aligned with their needs:

*I enjoy the sense of being part of a community, but I prefer not to feel obligated to interact unless I decide to. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find anything that works for me... The Eve and World of Warcraft communities made me leave... I like being part of a community but don't want to interact with others unless I choose to. I haven't found any gaming community that suits my preference. - R147*

Our data, as exemplified by the quotes above, indicate a preference for flexible communication options that accommodate differing needs and desires. However, the tension between flexible socialization and the rigid expectations in some gaming communities may lead some people to leave a community. Social accessibility remains a substantial barrier for many people with disabilities when gaming [5]. Furthermore, gaming communities in online games can perpetuate stereotypes and negative perceptions of people with disabilities, leading to toxicity, particularly towards those perceived as less skilled gamers [8]. Analysis of our data illustrates how the experience of these negative social interactions can lead to feeling excluded from gaming communities and limit enjoyment of the game. For example, in one post, an autistic gamer describes being mocked by others from the community for playing at an easier level:

*Video games are my biggest interest, but I struggle a lot with them. It really upsets me when people mock playing on easy mode or using assistive features like tutorials. - R39*

Similarly, another post highlighted similarities between the social anxiety and fear experienced in virtual worlds and those encountered when socializing in the physical world, such as due to the possibility of public criticism:

*I feel nervous when I join online games, even if I don't interact with others. There's always a sense of fear, similar to how I feel in a crowded room. I play a lot of Team Fortress 2, which is already quite overwhelming for me, and I often worry about being criticized for not being as skilled as other gamers or making mistakes. - R66*

Changing policies in gaming communities can sometimes have unexpected adverse effects on the autistic people they were designed to help. For instance, one Reddit post mentioned how a specific game tried to regulate language by banning players from using the word “autist” in an attempt to create a safer environment. However, this led to the community using the label “autism” instead to insult others:

*In the game League of Legends, which has a very toxic community, there's a new rule where you can't use the word “autist” during a match. If you do, no matter the context, you'll get banned from chatting for the rest of the game, which can last up to 30-40 minutes. This rule was supposed to stop people from using the word in a toxic way, but in my opinion, it's just made things worse because now people are using “autism” as an insult even more. - R27*

According to the post, by banning the word “autist,” the game could inadvertently draw (negative) attention to autism. This shift in language usage not only failed to address the underlying issue of toxicity within the community but also exacerbated it by providing a new avenue for harmful behavior. The same post continues describing how this inadvertently alienated and hurt those who identify as autistic, as banning the word created a spark to use alternative language more:

*As someone who's autistic, I find it more hurtful that the game developers banned the word altogether, instead of just dealing with the rude players. Being called an autist isn't an insult to me, it's just part*

*of who I am. And banning the word hasn't stopped people from using it to insult others; if anything, it's made them do it even more. - R27*

This post highlights how even well-intentioned attempts to regulate language can have unintended consequences, ultimately exacerbating feelings of exclusion and alienation among autistic people. It is important for gaming communities to be aware of the potential outcomes of policy changes like these and to foster an environment that respects and values the neurodivergent population.

While virtual spaces offer opportunities for socialization and community-building for autistic people, they also present significant challenges that are similar to those that are commonly encountered in the offline world, such as social anxiety and fear. This highlights the need for a more thoughtful game design to better address the social needs and preferences of autistic people and for communities to create a more inclusive gaming environment that accommodates gamers with different needs.

## 4 Study 2: Insights from a Survey of Autistic Adults

To further understand the preferences of autistic people directly, we conducted an online survey with 145 participants who identified as autistic. Among the four factors we observed from Reddit as potentially influencing gameplay motivations and experiences, the findings revealed that autistic gamers considered respectful gaming communities for players with disabilities to be the most influential, whereas autistic representation and advocacy were reported to be the least important.

### 4.1 Methods

**4.1.1 Survey Design.** The survey requested demographic information from participants, including their self-identification (*i.e.*, diagnosed autistic, self-diagnosed or undiagnosed autistic, or not autistic) and age. Participants who did not identify as autistic or were younger than 18 years old were directed to the end of the survey, while those who did meet the eligibility criteria were then invited to respond to other background questions, like gaming frequency. Information about participants' gender was collected at the end of the survey.

Participants were asked about specific video games they enjoy playing as well as their preferred gaming genres (*e.g.*, First Person Shooter, Action-Adventure) to provide insight into their gaming preferences. Using their most and least favorite genre, they then responded to a set of questions regarding those genres and specific games within them. Genres were sourced from MetaCritic's Best Games of All Time<sup>10</sup>. From the list of genres, we included only video games intended for entertainment purposes. Additionally, overlapping genres such as Action, Action-Adventure, and Adventure were consolidated into a single category to simplify the classification, resulting in a total of 17 genres (see Appendix A Table 4 for more details). Given that the genre categorization of games is subjective and somewhat variable, to maintain standardization in the analysis, participants were allowed to select only from the list of provided genres. Moreover, while individual preferences cannot be directly attributed to autism, these preferences were reported by autistic players whose perspectives are rarely centered in game research and design. This study explores the design insights that emerge when autistic players' self-reported preferences are treated as the starting point.

After gathering participants' genre preferences, the survey shifted focus to exploring autistic perspectives on gaming more broadly and design elements that might influence their decision to play a particular game that emerged during our analysis of Reddit posts described in Study 1. These factors focused on game functions that could shape players' interactions rather than on genre-based characteristics, including gentle sensory input (*e.g.*, calming audio, soothing visuals), multiple communication options (*e.g.*, voice chat, text chat), a respectful and inclusive gaming community, and meaningful autistic representation or advocacy within games. Participants

<sup>10</sup><https://www.metacritic.com/browse/game/>

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the survey participants ( $n = 145$ ).

Characteristic	n	%
<b>Autism Status</b>		
Diagnosed autistic	96	66.21
Self-diagnosed or undiagnosed autistic	49	33.79
<b>Age Group</b>		
18-24	23	15.86
25-34	61	42.07
35-44	36	24.83
45-54	16	11.03
55-64	7	4.83
65 or older	2	1.38
<b>Gaming Frequency</b>		
Almost Everyday	79	54.48
4-5 days a week	41	28.28
2-3 days a week	16	11.03
Once a week	5	3.45
2-3 times a month	3	2.07
Once a month	1	0.69
<b>Gender Identity</b>		
Male	66	45.52
Female	56	38.62
Transgender	8	5.52
Non-binary	9	6.21
Prefer not to disclose	4	2.76
Other	2	1.38
<b>Geographic Location</b>		
United States	73	50.34
United Kingdom	30	20.69
Canada	26	17.93
Other countries	16	11.03
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100.00</b>

were asked to rate how important each factor was when playing games. After rating the four factors, participants were given the option to provide additional comments or information in a follow-up open-ended question.

No identifiable information was collected apart from age, gender, and the region in which the survey was taken. This study was conducted in accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of California, Irvine.

**4.1.2 Sampling and Participants.** We employed a two-phase recruitment strategy to gather survey participants. Initially, we distributed our survey through multiple autism-focused subreddits, including the community from which we had previously collected comment data, resulting in 50 respondents. To expand our sample size,

we subsequently recruited an additional 95 participants via a research panel. Research panels consist of pre-established pools of individuals who have agreed to participate regularly in survey research. These panels are operated by various research organizations, both private companies and non-profit entities, such as Ipsos, YouGov, Dynata, AmeriSpeak, and QuestionPro, and are commonly utilized in social science, behavioral, and accessibility studies [13, 40, 82]. A key advantage of panel-based recruitment is that these services can be strategically sampled to match specific demographic characteristics and generally produce higher-quality, more representative data compared to alternative recruitment approaches like social media outreach or snowball sampling methods. Through this combined recruitment approach, we collected a final sample of 145 autistic adults between February 17, 2025, and April 2, 2025, representing a substantial, though still not fully representative, sample size within the field of accessible computing research [43].

The demographic profiles of participants from both recruitment sources were largely comparable, with one notable exception: gender identity distribution. Participants recruited through Reddit demonstrated greater gender diversity, with 34% identifying as transgender, non-binary, declining to disclose, or selecting other gender categories, whereas only 6.32% of research panel participants fell into these categories. Because our research objective centers on comprehensively understanding gaming experiences within the autistic community, rather than conducting comparative analyses between recruitment groups, we merged the demographic data from both sources for reporting. This approach allows us to present an integrated overview of our participant characteristics that captures the full scope of our sample. The full demographic details for all participants can be found in Table 2.

**4.1.3 Survey Data Analysis.** We conducted a descriptive analysis to summarize the key characteristics and descriptive indicators in the data, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies using Python packages, such as pandas<sup>11</sup> and scipy<sup>12</sup>. We examined participants' most and least preferred genres, along with follow-up questions for each genre (e.g., reasons for playing the chosen genre, what they like or dislike about the genre). We analyzed the data from the two survey samples separately and comparatively (Fisher's Exact tests and Mann-Whitney U test) to test for any differences in the populations. For questions in which there were differences, we report these separately, though our aim was not to compare the two groups. We have limited hypotheses for why any such differences might exist and note that with only 145 participants, mainly from the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, we do not consider these responses representative of the entire population of autistic people.

For the open-ended question that followed rating the importance of the four factors on game design, the first author read all the responses and grouped them according to the factor it referenced (e.g., "*Gentle input is good when appropriate. I want context to match the game.*" was grouped under gentle sensory input). If a response mentioned more than one factor, we split the response into multiple phrases and grouped them accordingly. In cases of uncertainty, phrases were assigned based on the closest conceptual match to the factor definitions and discussed with the other authors. All the authors then analyzed the subgroups of responses to further understand participants' ratings for each statement. We analyzed the ways in which participants explained the importance of each factor and why it mattered to them by identifying recurring explanations in the open-ended survey responses. By comparing the added survey responses side by side with the Reddit findings, we looked for areas of alignment and any potential conflicting perspectives across the two data sources.

**4.1.4 Ethical Considerations.** Following the posting guidelines established by one of the recruitment subreddits, which encourages researchers to share study outcomes with the community after participant recruitment, we distributed our results back to the forum members. The community response was positive, with the results post generating more than 600 views to date and receiving exclusively supportive feedback in the comment section.

<sup>11</sup><https://pandas.pydata.org/>

<sup>12</sup><https://scipy.org/>

## 4.2 Findings

In this section, we present the results of our survey analysis. Our findings reveal that autistic people show a strong preference for Role-Playing, Open-World Action, and Action-Adventure games, aligning with findings from our analysis of Reddit discussions. Additionally, participants reported moderate to high levels of agreement on the importance of four key factors when playing games: gentle sensory input, autistic representation or advocacy, diverse communication options, and respectful gaming communities.

*4.2.1 Game Genre Preferences of Autistic Players.* Results from our survey regarding game genre preferences aligned with the frequency of game genres mentioned in Reddit discussions. The five most frequently chosen favorite genres were Role-Playing (16.6%,  $n = 24$ ), Action-Adventure (14.5%,  $n = 21$ ), Open-World Action (13.8%,  $n = 20$ ), Shooter (9.7%,  $n = 14$ ), and Sandbox (7.6%,  $n = 11$ ). While the rankings are not exactly identical, there is considerable overlap with three of the four most frequently mentioned genres in the Reddit posts (Open-World Action, Role-Playing, and Sandbox), leading us to conclude there is some stability in these preferences and interests within the autistic gaming community.

The most dominant reasons for playing the top preferred genres centered around self-relief, enjoyment, immersion in the narrative and the virtual world, gaining a sense of achievement, and opportunities for exploration. These preferences suggest a strong appeal for games that offer creative exploration, self-paced and open-ended experiences, or rich, immersive narratives. The top five most frequently reported reasons, apart from ‘To have fun’ (78.6%,  $n = 114$ ), were ‘To relieve stress’ (66.9%,  $n = 97$ ), ‘To play by myself’ (47.6%,  $n = 69$ ), ‘To immerse in the story of the game’ (46.2%,  $n = 67$ ), ‘To gain a sense of achievement’ (45.5%,  $n = 66$ ), and ‘To explore the virtual world’ (39.3%,  $n = 57$ ). Our qualitative analysis of the posts and survey responses about what participants particularly liked in their chosen genres aligned with the descriptive analysis of their reasons for playing.

Our data indicate that immersing oneself in a virtual world, offering satisfaction through control and self-directed engagement, can provide a break from the unpredictability of daily life, giving players the autonomy to shape their own experiences. One respondent emphasized this experience:

*The fact that I can exist in an interactive 3D virtual environment without the boundaries and limitations imposed by real life. It's an escape from the nonstop struggle of daily life, and a way to return some semblance of power and control to myself. - S42*

Beyond control, games also allowed players to step into the life of a character and escape from the limitations of everyday life and experience new, imaginative identities:

*I'm a boring human in real life, but in these games I can be an elf wizard. - S45*

Games can also enable players to become idealized versions of themselves. Players can embody a more confident or imaginative self, highlighting potential for both escape and self-exploration:

*That you can be the hero of a story, that you can often change the world around you depending on your choices, that you can be an extra awesome version of yourself or a character you've created in your mind and in-game. - S18*

Similar to the Reddit findings, emphasizing the appeal of freedom and creativity emerged in our survey data, such as the comment from one respondent:

*No rules or limits. You can make the world your own and explore all the details, also you can be very creative and make things. - S108*

On the other hand, the top five most disliked games were Dance (23.4%,  $n = 34$ ), Gambling (16.6%,  $n = 24$ ), Shooter (11.0%,  $n = 16$ ), Sports (11.0%,  $n = 16$ ), and Digitized Board/Card games (5.5%,  $n = 8$ ). Interestingly, Shooter games ranked among both the top five most liked and the top five least liked genres.

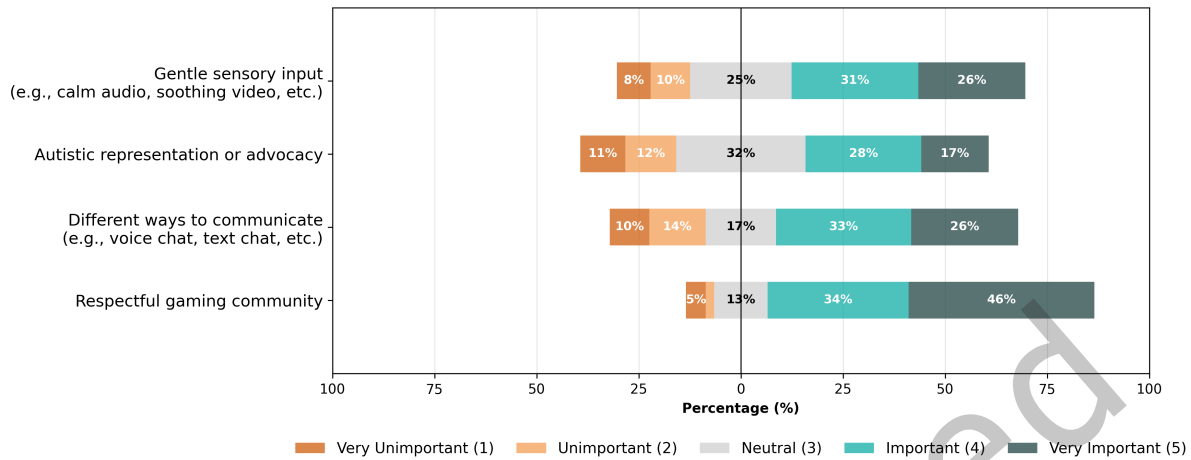


Fig. 2. Rated Importance of Four Factors. This divergent bar chart displays how survey respondents ( $n = 145$ ) from both Reddit Users ( $n = 50$ ) and Research Panel ( $n = 95$ ) rated the importance of the four factors that could influence their gaming experience.

Their reasons for disliking these genres further underscore the appeal of open-world games. One respondent emphasized a preference for games that reward skill, strategy, and player decision-making, rather than leaving outcomes to chance:

*I don't like games that are based on luck. Every game should be winnable with a proper strategy. - S144*

This reflects a broader preference for agency within the gaming experience, where success ties to the player's choices, abilities, and efforts. Moreover, rich stories and dynamic environments that allow players to fully immerse themselves were seen as important, yet were lacking in some games, like those related to gambling:

*There tends to be no story lines in them or graphics with interesting changing scenes to fit what is going on in the game and for me these are the most engaging things. - S124*

Similarly, Dance games were disliked for failing to create a sense of immersion:

*I don't like dancing or any form of rhythm games as a whole. I don't find them fun nor immersive and feel I'm wasting my time. - S106*

These quotes show how games that offer the ability to explore, make meaningful choices, and become part of the virtual world could be far more appealing than those with static or chance-driven mechanics for autistic people. Moreover, such positive experiences seem to be most commonly associated with Open-World Action, Role-Playing, and Sandbox games as suggested by our data.

**4.2.2 Gentle Sensory Input.** Our survey data revealed that autistic people considered gentle sensory input to be of moderate importance, with an average score of 3.57 ( $SD = 1.2$ ) on a 5-point scale, as shown in Figure 2. In the optional question, asking if respondents had anything they wanted to share regarding this matter, one respondent described how overwhelming sensory experiences can make it difficult to engage with certain games:

*The sensory thing is especially hard for me, there are some games I just can't play because the lights and sounds are too intense. - S9*

Our analysis of the survey responses indicate the challenges that intense sensory stimuli can create for autistic players, similar to those described in our Reddit data. To address these challenges, another participant stressed the value of customizable settings:

*Regarding the sensory input, I appreciate games that give immediate control to the player via settings for volume, subtitles, text size and style, and things like flashing lights or UI elements that move a lot.*  
- S43

However, such sensory adjustments must be implemented thoughtfully to align with the overall game design and atmosphere. One survey respondent shared a perspective similar to a Reddit post where a player described listening to in-game sounds to understand their contribution to the overall experience before adjusting the settings:

*Gentle input is good when appropriate. I want context to match the game.* - S37

Overall, these findings highlight that gentle sensory input plays a significant role in shaping accessibility and comfort. Autistic gamers valued options that allow them to tailor sensory experiences, such as adjustable audio, visual, and interface settings, so they can engage with games without being overwhelmed. At the same time, players emphasized that such adjustments should respect the intended atmosphere and context of the game, suggesting that thoughtful, flexible design is needed.

**4.2.3 Autistic Representation or Advocacy.** For the importance of autistic representation or advocacy, participants gave an average score of 3.27 ( $SD = 1.18$ ) (see Figure 2). Overall, participants expressed neutral agreement regarding its importance, and it ranked as the least important of the four factors influencing gameplay experiences in both groups. The responses to the optional question offer insight into why autistic people might find this particular factor the least important in influencing their game preferences:

*I really enjoy seeing autistic representation in video games, but it's so rare to see that I don't think about it when playing most games.* - S38

While players appreciated seeing autistic representation when it occurred, its rarity meant it was not something they actively considered when choosing or playing games. A similar sentiment was expressed by another respondent:

*If a game has no autistic representation I probably wouldn't notice, since they don't give a f\*\*\* about us in real life either, but if it has bad representation then I won't consider playing it.* - S39

Absence of representation was generally not considered as critical as inaccurate or harmful portrayals, similar to concerns raised on Reddit. Another respondent emphasized that while they did not always expect autistic representation in games, when a game intentionally included an autistic character, it became important that the portrayal is accurate and respectful:

*...if a game goes out of its way to introduce a character who's autistic, it \*is\* important to me and I would like to see it portrayed realistically correctly.* - S31

A similar concern was raised by another respondent, who noted that poor representation could be more harmful than no representation, and that if the portrayal was negative, they would prefer no representation at all:

*I would be glad to see autistic representation in video games, however... I'd rather it not happen that be done in such a way that we hate the representation it gives us and has negative effects on how the rest of the world see us.* - S25

While autistic representation and advocacy in games can enhance players' sense of connection and belonging, its rarity meant it often may not be a deciding factor in game choice. Participants emphasized that accuracy and respect are crucial when such representation is included, and poor or stereotypical portrayals could be more damaging than no representation at all. Thus, developers should approach autistic representation with care and

authenticity, ensuring that inclusion genuinely supports rather than undermines the community it seeks to depict.

**4.2.4 Diverse Communication Options.** Survey respondents gave an average score of 3.52 ( $SD = 1.27$ ) for the importance of different communication options (e.g., voice chat, text chat, etc.), as shown in Figure 2. It was considered moderately important, and the qualitative responses provided deeper insight into this matter. Similar to the Reddit posts earlier, one respondent described how communities that require communication with other players can create barriers to participation:

*respectful community is nice, but interacting with a community is not always possible for me, so if a game requires that ... then I will not be able to play that game as much. - S19*

Managing communication externally or opting out entirely are also potential mechanisms to customize communication and allow autistic players to maintain engagement with the game:

*I generally used 3rd party programs for (voice) chat if I'm playing multiplayer or disable communication entirely. - S32*

Moreover, simplified gameplay-based communication systems that reduce the need for verbal or text interactions entirely could make games more approachable:

*I like when games have a simple gameplay-based in-game communication system (like a "yell-button") instead of voicechat or textchat. - S20*

Overall, participants valued having multiple communication options that allowed them to engage on their own terms, whether through voice, text, third-party tools, or gameplay-based signals. Flexibility in communication design also helped reduce barriers to participation, particularly in multiplayer environments where social demands can be overwhelming. By offering customizable and nonverbal communication methods, games can create more inclusive spaces that respect diverse interaction needs while still enabling connection.

**4.2.5 Respectful Gaming Communities.** Survey respondents considered respectful gaming communities to be the most important factor when choosing games, with an average score of 4.14 ( $SD=1.06$ ) (see Figure 2). Several respondents emphasized the importance of fostering gaming environments that are inclusive and supportive for neurodivergent players:

*I value inclusive and supportive environments, especially for neurodivergent players, in gaming communities. - S137*

*...The good community is very very important for people with autism... - S108*

To some autistic players, gaming communities served as safe, accepting spaces where they feel free to engage authentically, without pressure to mask or conform to neurotypical social norms. It was a place for them to be "myself":

*...The community around certain games has enabled me and surely others to make connections that do not require me to be anything but myself. - S25*

Such environments may reduce social anxiety, foster a sense of belonging, and make sustained participation more likely, especially for autistic players who might face barriers in traditional social settings [50]. The high importance placed on respectful gaming communities underscores the role that social environments play in shaping autistic players' overall gaming experiences. Moreover, the high importance on inclusivity and support suggests that players are not only looking for enjoyable gameplay but also for spaces where they feel safe, respected, and understood. Creating and maintaining such communities can be a decisive factor in whether autistic players choose to engage with a game long-term.

## 5 Discussion

In this research, we explored the perspectives autistic people hold about games by analyzing game-related posts from a subreddit dedicated to autism and survey responses from autistic adults. We identified games and genres that appeal to autistic gamers and explored how game designs could impact their preferences for and experiences of inclusion/exclusion and levels of accessibility in games, as well as the sensory and social experiences they encounter. Our results contribute to a better understanding of the gaming experiences of autistic people that can guide future researchers and developers in studying and making video games more inclusive for autistic people.

### 5.1 Understanding Autism Through Preferences in Games

Our analysis revealed a strong interest among autistic people in games that offer the freedom to explore virtual worlds with full control and immerse themselves in the environment, suggesting a high level of engagement with these genres. Compared to the findings of Mazurek *et al.* [46], in which they reported Sandbox and Simulation games (referred to as Virtual Life in our study) ranked 10th and 5th, respectively, these two genres were among the most frequently mentioned in our Reddit data. However, overall preferences from both Reddit and the survey indicated that Open-World Action and Role-Playing games were most preferred, showing a similar trend to the prior study.

This emphasis on autonomy, creativity, and unstructured exploration seemed to appeal to autistic people's preference for environments that offer both predictability and personal control [42]. Open-world games often provide such settings, combining clear rules and structured mechanics with the freedom to explore and act independently, a combination that can support the self-directed engagement many autistic people find meaningful [4, 46]. Prior research also suggests that video games serve multiple roles for autistic people, as outlets for self-expression, tools for stress relief [36, 46], and platforms for social connection [46, 49]. However, in our study, one of the dominant reasons for playing the preferred genres was to engage in individual experiences. Rather than seeking social interaction, games in these cases become a form of personal escape. Moreover, while stress relief was not a prominent reason reported in our data, the subreddit we analyzed did include posts from individuals seeking ways to manage stress, anxiety, and other mental health symptoms through gaming. We did not analyze these in depth for this study but suggest future research to explore the potential for mental health support and well-being through games.

Our analysis opens new questions about the dominant preference for open-world games among autistic people. Understanding which features of these games are most appealing, and why, can provide deeper insight into the lived experiences, values, and needs of autistic players as reflected in their gaming choices. While open-world games may naturally align with certain preferences, it is also possible that this preference is the result of other types of games lagging in their accessibility and inclusion approaches related to game features, sensory issues, advocacy, social challenges, or toxicity in gaming communities towards the neurodivergent population. Nonetheless, given that many game-based systems have been developed for the autistic population, incorporating features prevalent in open-world games into such systems may offer unique opportunities for engagement and positive outcomes.

Future research could include observational studies of open-world games to better understand why these games appeal to autistic gamers and to identify patterns and characteristics that support their engagement and inclusion [68]. Additionally, researchers should seek to understand how observations made by autistic people about their own experiences (*e.g.*, that engaging with open-world games is soothing) align with other types of studies (*e.g.*, experimental or assistive studies), potentially leading to the wider adoption of these enjoyable practices and inclusion in future intervention work or recognition of games as a type of assistive technology. Furthermore, game developers designing open-world games should recognize and support the interests of autistic

players, ensuring that these virtual spaces continue to be welcoming, engaging, and enriching for the diverse population.

## 5.2 Implications for the Design of Inclusive and Accessible Games

Playing video games can include a wide variety of sensory experiences. For people who experience sensory sensitivity, games can be an escape from sensory experiences of the physical world, or they might be highly stimulating and possibly overwhelming themselves. Our findings suggest that certain challenges faced by autistic people in the physical world, such as sensitivities to sensory input and even social difficulties, seem to extend into these virtual worlds, such as audio overload, visual overload, and social anxiety. These issues become more pronounced in multiplayer games, where multiple sound inputs and the stress of social engagements with other gamers may hinder autistic gamers from fully immersing themselves in the game. The results align with other studies, although not autism-specific, suggesting that the majority of games lack accessibility due to factors such as response time constraints and an overwhelming amount of stimuli [69, 76], as well as toxicity in gaming communities towards gamers who do not conform to stereotypical gameplay norms [6]. Consequently, we highlight the need for HCI and accessibility researchers to further study ways to enhance accessibility in these games, encouraging greater participation and engagement from autistic people across a variety of games.

Additionally, representation and inclusion in video games have been an important theme in the research literature surrounding games for the last two decades [63, 66]. More recent work has examined the role of disability representation specifically [64, 77, 78], including the concept of self-presentation in social virtual reality [77]. While self-presentation allows people with disabilities to control and customize their digital identities, many gamers with disabilities continue to advocate for more authentic and diverse characters within these spaces. Our findings highlight the importance of authentic and respectful autistic representation, while also pointing to the risks of misrepresentation. Inaccurate or comical portrayals can reinforce stereotypes and alienate autistic players, undermining the potential for games to serve as inclusive spaces. Accordingly, game developers should understand the value of engaging autistic communities directly in design processes and moving beyond tokenistic inclusion. Representation should not be confined to a single “autistic character type” but instead reflect the diversity of the spectrum, offering multifaceted portrayals that resonate with a wide range of experiences. By doing so, games can foster belonging, enrich storytelling, and build more inclusive player communities.

In addition to character representation, game design itself should be inclusive. However, our findings indicate that certain design choices in games may unintentionally exclude those with different sensory and social needs. To address this, we recommend that game developers incorporate customizable sensory settings, such as adjustable sound and visual effects, and offer diverse interaction options like button-based communication to accommodate a wider range of player needs. Importantly, these adjustments should be implemented in a way that preserves the game’s overall context and atmosphere. While such changes can improve accessibility, they may also spark debates within the gaming community about balancing accessibility with a game’s intended design, an issue that may warrant further exploration.

## 5.3 Need for Safer Community Space for Autistic Gamers

Our analysis indicates that autistic players use games and virtual worlds to make social connections with others, as suggested in prior research [22, 25, 46, 49, 56]. Social spaces in virtual worlds appear to offer more comfort for autistic gamers, relieving them from the social pressure of having to interact face-to-face or to use verbal communication, while providing them with an opportunity to socially connect with others. Our findings are also aligned with other studies on computer-mediated communication, which have shown that autistic people seek stronger social bonds and use online communities centered around shared interests to make positive and supportive connections [9, 15]. However, as shown in our findings, online gaming communities have a history of

toxicity and exclusion of people with disabilities [6], or those who do not conform to stereotypical gameplay [8]. Additionally, some gaming communities push players to interact against their preference or do not support diverse communication options, while policy changes intended to promote inclusivity fall short in addressing the needs and advocacy of people with disabilities.

Rather than creating entirely separate spaces exclusively for autistic people [19, 58], gaming communities can become more inclusive and respectful. Building communities in games for autistic people requires offering a variety of interaction options that are more intuitive, such as chat buttons, as well as granting autistic gamers the freedom and agency to engage with others only when they choose to do so. This approach builds on notions of supporting individualized communication and interaction options for better social accessibility in multiplayer games [5]. Additionally, community moderators and managers, and to some degree even casual members, must be aware of the impact community policies can have on the neurodivergent population, ensuring that disability-related labels are not used as insults or in a comical manner that could unintentionally harm gamers who identify with those disabilities. Like *Autcraft*, the autism community in *Minecraft* [58], or autism-related groups in *Second Life*, such as the *Autistic Liberation Front* and *Autism Awareness Center* [19], a community that respects people with diverse skills and backgrounds and understands the different needs of autistic people, can foster a positive environment where everyone feels valued.

To support this broader inclusion, specific design and moderation strategies must actively consider autistic players' needs. These include enabling player-controlled social boundaries, promoting respectful community norms, such as emphasizing prosocial rewards over punitive language bans and clearly explaining policy changes to discourage mockery, and involving autistic players directly in game and community design processes. Such practices not only help counter ableism and exclusion but also contribute to healthier, more inclusive gaming environments for everyone.

## 6 Limitations & Future Work

Although our work provides a step towards understanding the perspectives of autistic gamers, there are limitations to our work. First, despite implementing measures, such as excluding Reddit posts written in the third person, we cannot guarantee that the posts or comments are authored by autistic people. Moreover, the ability to generalize our results to the broader autistic gaming population is limited by the fact that our samples only include individuals who can engage in discussions on Reddit or are able to and interested in participating in a survey study, and who possess sufficient proficiency in English to participate in the study.

The games list used to analyze the mentioned game names in Reddit data may not have captured less mainstream or indie games, since it was based on popular franchise titles. Similarly, in the survey, while the 17 genres provided to gauge participants' preferences in game genres were designed to include as many games as possible, they may still have excluded less mainstream or indie games, especially given that game genre categorization is subjective. Additionally, restricting participants to four predefined factors may have constrained their responses, as other factors important to their gameplay experiences may not have been captured. Future research could further examine other factors that may influence autistic people's experiences and how these factors shape their gameplay.

Our study provides a preliminary understanding of autistic gaming. Using a computational approach to further analyze these comments beyond our preliminary analysis could have provided a broader understanding of Reddit user experiences within and around games. For example, the sentiment, emotional and context nuanced aspects of the posts regarding the frequently mentioned games were not further explored, which might offer deeper insights into their gaming experiences of those games.

## 7 Conclusion

Our analysis of 160 game-related posts and their associated 7,989 comments in a popular autism-focused subreddit and the survey responses from 145 autistic adults provide insights into the appeal of specific games and genres for autistic people. Our results shed light on how the design and experiences of these games, as well as their surrounding communities, encourage—and in some cases discourage—engagement among autistic gamers.

Our findings reveal a high level of interest in open-world games that allow creativity and autonomy. The presence of inclusive features in games, along with sensory and/or social experiences, influences the game choices of autistic gamers, with open-world games generally seen to be best at addressing these specific needs. Given these findings, game designers and researchers interested in the inclusion of autistic users should seek to provide authentic representations of autistic characters and make social spaces that feel inclusive to autistic players. Communities surrounding these games also play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and accessible environment for autistic gamers. By cultivating an atmosphere of respect and understanding for people with diverse needs and abilities, gaming communities can create spaces where autistic people feel like they belong and are supported. Small but necessary steps include policies that mitigate discrimination and ableism. However, our findings indicate the difficulty in implementing such policies, which can, at times, actually make things worse and more exclusive. The nuanced ways policy, community, and design interact for autistic players leave open new research questions. In particular, given that game communities serve as platforms for autistic people to make social connections despite a variety of well-known challenges, designers and researchers should seek to understand how we can create safer and more inclusive communities surrounding games. Such research should explore in-game interactions as well as the surrounding gaming ecosystem (e.g., online forums like Reddit as well as Discord channels and other social media platforms). Future work should seek to understand these diverse gaming ecosystems in the open and exploratory game worlds that we found to be most engaging in our data.

In summary, this paper contributes to the discourses around accessibility in gaming as well as autistic perspectives on these technologies specifically. Our research lays a foundation for further mixed-methods research around both autism and gaming as well as providing indicators for other types of accessibility research in the broad entertainment space. This work provides important implications for both policy and design while opening new strands of potential research for others interested in this space.

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## A Appendix A

Table 3. The Mentioned Frequencies of Games. This table displays a comprehensive list of 47 games mentioned in the dataset, both posts and comments, along with the frequency of mentions for each game and their corresponding genres.

Genre	Game	Count
Sandbox	Minecraft	530
Virtual Life	The Sims	289
Virtual Life	Animal Crossing	223
Open-World Action	The Legend of Zelda	201
Platform	Mario	186
Role Playing	Pokemon	163
First-Person Shooter	Call of Duty	116
Role Playing	Final Fantasy	97
Open-World Action	Red Dead	95
Open-World Action	Assassin's Creed	80
Open-World Action	Grand Theft Auto	73
Strategy	Civilization	72
Racing Simulation	Gran Turismo	70
First-Person Shooter	Halo	65
Role Playing	The Elder Scrolls	58
First-Person Shooter	Destiny	56
Platform	Sonic the Hedgehog	52
Racing Simulation	Need for Speed	52
Soccer Simulation	Pro Evolution Soccer	47
Role Playing	The Witcher	46
Action-Adventure	Star Wars	42
Action-Adventure	Lego	38
Role Playing	Diablo	35
Survival	Resident Evil	35
First-Person Shooter	Borderlands	33
Fighting	Super Smash Bros	33
Puzzle	Tetris	32
First-Person Shooter	Battlefield	23
Platform	Crash Bandicoot	23
Open-World Action	Metal Gear	23
Role Playing	Monster Hunter	22
Football Simulation	Madden NFL	22
Action-Adventure	God of War	21
Dancing	Just Dance	19
Basketball Simulation	NBA 2K	14
First-Person Shooter	Far Cry	14
Fighting	Mortal Combat	13
Fighting	Tekken	13
Role Playing	Dragon Quest	11
Soccer Simulation	FIFA	9
Action-Adventure	Tomb Raider	9
Artillery	Worms	5
Puzzle	Bejeweled	4
Wrestling	WWE 2K	3
Fighting	Dragon Ball	3
Management	The Oregon Trail	2
First/Third-Person Shooter	Tom Clancy's	1

Table 4. The 17 Genres Used for the Survey. This table displays a list of 17 genres with two examples of games and the description for each genre.

Genre	Games	Description
Action-Adventure	Star Wars, Lego	Games combining exploration, puzzle-solving, and narrative elements with fast-paced combat and action gameplay
Artillery	Worms, GunBound	Strategy-based games where players control and fire weapons to hit targets, often involving physics-based mechanics
Dance	Just Dance, Dance Dance Revolution	Interactive games where players follow on-screen choreography and perform dance moves to music
Digitized Board/Card games	Monopoly, Solitaire	Games that are online versions of traditional board or card games
Fighting/Wrestling	Super Smash Bros, Mortal Combat	Competitive games where players control characters to engage in close combat or wrestling matches, often with special moves and combos
Gambling	Online Slots, Online Poker	Games where players wager money on games of chance or skill with the potential to win real money or prizes
Management	The Oregon Trail, Railway Empire	Games where players oversee and organize resources, people, or systems to achieve goals, often involving decision-making and optimization
Open-World Action	The Legend of Zelda, Red Dead	Games that feature expansive, non-linear environments where players can freely explore, complete missions, and engage in combat or other dynamic activities
Platform	Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog	Games where players navigate levels by running, jumping, and climbing to overcome obstacles and enemies
Puzzle	Tetris, Bejeweled	Games that challenge players to solve problems or complete tasks through logic, pattern recognition, and critical thinking
Role-Playing	Pokemon, Final Fantasy	Games where players role-play characters, shaping their narratives and abilities through quests and choices
Sandbox	Minecraft, Roblox	Games that provides players with an open-ended environment to explore, create, and interact freely, often without predefined objectives
Shooter	Call of Duty, Fortnite	Games where players engage in combat using firearms or other weapons
Sports	Pro Evolution Soccer, Gran Turismo	Realistic video games that replicate the rules, mechanics, and experience of real-world sports
Strategy	Civilization, Old World	Games that require players to plan and make decisions to achieve objectives, often involving resource management and tactical combat
Survival	Resident Evil, Silent Hill	Games where players must gather resources, manage health, and fend off threats to stay alive in a challenging, often hostile environment
Virtual Life	The Sims, Animal Crossing	Simulation games where players create, control, and interact with digital characters or environments, mimicking real-life activities and relationships