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Game Communities and the Professionals Who Shape Them

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Abstract

Video games have evolved into a global industry with billions of players. The social aspect of gaming has become integral, with communities contributing to players' well-being and the success of games. The responsibilities, challenges, and strategies of professionals working with these gaming communities were examined focusing on the different dynamics of social interactions within the spaces.

Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three experienced professionals from European and international game companies working in roles related to game communities. The theoretical framework incorporated Self-Determination Theory, social identity, and social capital to contextualize player behavior and community engagement, while addressing toxicity, a normalized phenomenon of deliberately disrupting others' experiences in gaming.

Key work responsibilities identified in the interviews with game community professionals included social media management, content creation, analysing player feedback and building community trust. Challenges such as toxicity, emotional labor, and maintaining work-life boundaries were addressed, and the importance of adaptability, technical expertise, and personal investment in the product were emphasized as critical for success in these roles.

It was concluded that effective management of gaming communities contributes to player satisfaction, strengthens engagement, and can enhance the overall success of games by creating positive social environments. The findings highlighted the evolving role of professionals in navigating and shaping different digital communities. As gaming evolves, the role of community professionals remains important in shaping inclusive and dynamic digital spaces, reinforcing the broader cultural and social significance of gaming.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Game Communities, Social Video Gaming, Self-Determination Theory, Social Media, Toxicity

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1 Introduction

Video games, once a niche hobby, have grown into a global phenomenon, attracting billions of players worldwide. As technology continues to evolve, so too does the way people engage with games. Games are no longer just solitary activities and have become deeply social experiences. Players interact with each other in virtual worlds, share their achievements, and join communities that revolve around their favorite games. These social interactions make gaming a meaningful part of life for many people, offering connection and a sense of belonging. This thesis explores the community aspect of gaming, focusing on player experiences and the professional roles dedicated to maintaining these spaces.

Through a combination of theoretical framework and interviews with industry experts working in game community roles, it examines their experiences, responsibilities, challenges, and strategies. The study also investigates how social dynamics in games affect player well-being and the ways professionals can create supportive environments that encourage positive engagement. Self-Determination Theory and social identity offer valuable perspectives on player behavior and community engagement, while the firsthand accounts of industry professionals highlight the practicalities of navigating digital landscapes.

As gaming continues to connect people worldwide, understanding how to build and maintain healthy game communities has become essential—not just for the players, but also for the success of the games themselves.

2 Theoretical Framework

Video games are digital experiences, enjoyed on different devices such as consoles, computers, or mobile phones, that have rapidly evolved as one of the largest sectors in the entertainment industry. As of 2024, there are roughly 3.32 billion active video gamers worldwide, and the video game market is valued at approximately \$282 billion (Howarth, 2024). Video games provide players different interactive challenges, virtual worlds, and stories. The design and core mechanics of a game significantly shape these experiences, while the context in which the game is played—whether solo or with co-players—also plays an important role in defining how players engage with the game (Emmerich, 2019). Video games cover a wide range of genres, including action, adventure,

role-playing, strategy, and puzzle games, offering experiences from casual gaming to more complex challenges.

2.1 Social Video Gaming

Video games are widely enjoyed as a past time activity, (Ruggles et al., 2005) primarily because of their social aspects that can provide players with sense of community (Bowman et al., 2022). Social gaming can boost well-being by fulfilling needs of connectedness and by enhancing positive emotions and mood states (Bowman et al., 2023, p.2). Using online features players can, for example, share their own achievements and knowledge of the game to each other and engage in multi-player experiences where teamwork and communication are crucial for success (Arbeau et al., 2020). Online features in games might include actions and game mechanics, like battling with other players and/or built-in communication features like an in-game chat (Gonçalves et al., 2023, p. 1). Technology nowadays allows people to spend time together even with a long physical distance in between, with gaming being a way for many to pass time and maintain their social life (Gonçalves et al., 2023, p. 3).

The possibility for social exchange is often a central motivation for playing video games, (Gonçalves et al., 2023, p. 2) and the interactions and experiences happening in the digital world can play a part in one's personal growth and identity development (Arbeau et al., 2020). Positive social interactions within in-game groups can enhance personal trust, mutual understanding, and improve team efficiency. These positive experiences also contribute to an individual's overall well-being (Emmerich, 2019). Participants' "gamer identity", rooted in social identity theory, reflects how individuals' sense of self is determined by their connection to a social group, in this case, the game communities. These gamer identities are a combination of the individuals' identities online and offline and promote their investment to the gaming community, facilitating a sense of belonging (Kaye et al., 2017).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains three fundamental human needs essential for well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The theory also distinguishes between different types of motivation—intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable and satisfying, while extrinsic motivation is driven by the desire to achieve specific outcomes or rewards (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT provides a valuable framework

for understanding why people play games by emphasizing these psychological needs. Games that meet the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness lead to positive outcomes for players, including increased enjoyment, immersion, intrinsic motivation, and a greater desire to continue playing (Uysal & Yildirim, 2016).

By examining one of the core psychological needs identified by the theory—relatedness—it can be reasoned why individuals enjoy the social aspects of gaming. Engaging in video games socially can enhance players' emotional experiences, maintain a sense of social belonging, and positively impact their social lives. Satisfaction of relatedness in gaming can be crucial in game enjoyment and future participation, as it is strongly linked to intrinsic motivation (Zhao, 2022). For instance, massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) offer environments for social interaction and collaboration, allowing players to form connections, share experiences, and work together to achieve common goals. The fulfillment of psychological needs outlined by SDT can not only trigger immediate enjoyment but also allow long-term engagement in gaming, with players coming back to the game for the sake of these social interactions.

The relationships built within online gaming communities can extend beyond the games themselves, allowing players to engage in discussions of recent gaming events and sharing their gaming experiences to each other (Gonçalves et al., 2023, p. 1).

2.2 Game Communities

The social aspect is crucial for a game's success, as increased discussion around a game can help it reach a bigger audience (Bankov, 2019). Most businesses, including the game industry, rely on online marketing strategies like influencer endorsements, social media advertising, and managing user-generated content to increase brand awareness. Social media allows content sharing, collaborations, and online interactions to support marketing activities (Jamil et al., 2022, p.2).

Virtual communities of consumption contribute to the value of companies through various means, for example by supporting the products or services, advocating for brands, and strengthening customer loyalty. They also might serve as a source for new innovative ideas. (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011) In the context of the video game industry, there has been a notable transition towards online content, player interactions, and social gaming. Nowadays the collaboration between

firms and communities plays an important role in generating value for the consumers (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011). By working closely with communities, game companies can improve their gaming experiences in ways that resonate with players' desires, however, they may also face challenges with managing all the diverse and sometimes conflicting feedback they receive.

The player base contributes to the value of online games, both directly and indirectly. On top of purchasing the game, in-game items, or expansions, games like *Fortnite* or *League of Legends*, have active communities that generate content, participate in events, and drive word-of-mouth marketing, enhancing the game's success. As games incorporate online modes, preserving the game's atmosphere becomes important for its continued success in the marketplace (Kelleher & Kerr, 2015, p. 2). Communities are inherently unpredictable, with each having their own distinct characteristics (Hytti, 2016). Varying from micro to large (Gonçalves et al., 2023, p. 1) player-bases are in the need of support, regulations and engagement from the developer's side (Kelleher & Kerr, 2015, p. 3). There's no universal strategy that applies to every community as both games and circumstances change. While complete control over a community is impossible, it can be steered toward specific goals. For this, game developers require a proficient team for community management (Hytti, 2016). Community managers shape a company's brand and online image across multiple platforms (Jacobson, 2017, p. 9). The size of the company affects how specialized and formal this work becomes (Kelleher & Kerr, 2015, p. 7). For instance, larger companies like *Epic Games* have entire teams dedicated to community management, while smaller indie developers often rely on one person to manage different tasks across several platforms.

Game Community Management

Originally, the role of a community manager was filled by dedicated players and volunteers. Although this norm has shifted over the past decade as game development and social networking have become more structured, in some cases, this approach is still employed. The responsibilities of a community manager entail both in-game activities and social media management (Kelleher & Kerr, 2015, p. 7). They create engaging digital content, find and partner with influencers, and enhance brand recognition, as well as address customer concerns and maintain online communities revolving around the client (Jacobson, 2017, p. 9). Effective community managers organize events,

run social media campaigns, and create contests to create a sense of belonging among players. Over the years, the adaptability of community managers has become more and more important.

In addition to avid use of social and digital media in their work, community managers may also organize different offline events, for example conventions and gaming expos (Kelleher & Kerr, 2015, p. 14). These events provide a chance for community members to connect face-to-face and enhance the sense of belonging within the gaming community, while creating positive feelings towards the brand. A community manager can also be responsible for developing a comprehensive social media strategy. This strategy is a detailed plan that aligns with the organization's goals and typically includes setting measurable objectives, choosing suitable social media platforms, conducting assessments, and planning content accordingly (Jacobson, 2017, p. 9). While playing the game is usually not part of a community manager's job description, it's generally expected for them to be well informed of the games they are supporting (Kelleher & Kerr, 2015, p. 14). This knowledge is crucial, as it allows them to engage authentically with the community, respond to players' feedback, and to create content that resonates with the audience.

Furthermore, Kelleher and Kerr's research into recruitment practices for community managers highlight the key characteristics and skills sought in job advertisements, which include passion, gaming knowledge, communication skills, and language skills (Kelleher & Kerr, 2015, pp. 9-10). Community managers connect the players with the developers, and as the gaming world changes, their ability to adapt and innovate in both online and offline settings is essential for building active and engaged communities.

Common Social Media Platforms in Community Use

By July 2022, the number of social media users had reached 4.48 billion, representing approximately 57% of the global population (SandVox.io, 2021, para. 4). Listed below are some of the most popular social media platforms in game community use:

Facebook serves as both an advertising platform for businesses and a social tool for users to connect with friends and strangers online and to share various media, including photos, music, videos,

articles, and personal opinions. Companies can create Facebook pages for their products and through fan groups, word of mouth marketing can be shared (Gaur & Jignesh, 2020, p. 959).

Instagram is a social media platform primarily focused on visual content, allowing users to share photos, videos, and stories. Companies use the platform to engage with their audience by sharing content. Engagement received on Instagram, (likes, comments, reactions) can serve as valuable customer feedback. (Chaudhary, 2021, p.19) Due to its popularity, many companies have adopted Instagram as part of their marketing strategy (Chaudhary, 2021, p.19).

X, (formerly Twitter) is a significant platform for social interaction, information sharing, and community building. On X users communicate in short messages, but photos and videos are also present in the platform. According to the internal research of X, gamer audiences are drawn to the platform for the latest game updates and the opportunity to read reviews and opinions from others (X Marketing, 2024). With approximately 535 million global monetizable monthly active users, X remains a significant player in the social media landscape (X Business, 2024).

Discord, one of the most used, free VoIP (voice over Internet Protocol) platform is used to keep in touch with others on the internet. It enables users to communicate via text messages and voice chat, and to create and participate different types of online communities. (Bankov, 2019, p. 4) According to Discord's own web page, the platform is being used by over a hundred million people to spend time in different groups and communities (Discord, 2024). Discord's user-friendly text-channel and server customization features also present opportunities for game developers to utilize in community building (Greenberg, 2019, p. 17).

Reddit is a popular platform for forming communities around games and game-franchises, where fans can participate discussions in different subcommunities known as subreddits (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021, p.1). According to Reddit's global insights, there are over 100 thousand active communities on the platform and a vast majority of users trust others' opinions on the platform when learning about new products and brands (Reddit Global Research, 2022).

2.3 Toxicity

Not all in-game social interactions are driven by a desire to connect with others (Bowman et al., 2022). Players might participate or fall victim to in game trolling, where one deliberately disrupts others' experiences, possibly harming their well-being, and for instance causing anxiety and lowered self-esteem (Bowman et al., 2022; Turpeinen, 2023). Research of Frommel et al. (2023) suggested gaming to have two types of social outcomes, with both positive and negative effects existing, yet the extent to which toxicity undermines the benefits remained uncertain. Player behavior is generally considered to be toxic if it goes against the rules and social norms of the game (Träistar, 2024, p. 11).

Typical forms of in game trolling can include for example sabotaging gameplay by killing teammates or attacking others verbally. In the worst-case scenario, it can appear as different forms of abuse, such as discrimination, or threatening behavior (Turpeinen, 2023, p. 4). Research indicates that extrinsic motivations for playing video games—such as playing without genuine interest, acquiring in-game rewards and items, seeking social recognition, and letting out tension or guilt—are strong predictors of excessive and problematic gaming behavior. (Uysal & Yildirim, 2016). Not being able to control frustration and anger caused by negative in game events, can lead to one acting toxically, and being harmful towards others (Turpeinen, 2023, p. 31). Extrinsic motivation is associated with obsessive passion, a detrimental form of passion where individuals feel compelled to engage in gaming at the expense of other life aspects. In contrast, passion is characterized to lead in more self-determined engagement, typically resulting in positive outcomes (Uysal & Yildirim, 2016).

Toxicity can affect player experiences, leading to loneliness, decreased in-game social capital and lack of relatedness (Frommel et al., 2023, pp. 6-7). Frommel et al. observed a normalization of toxic behavior existing within gaming communities, with perceptions of its severity varying among players (Frommel et al., 2023, p. 1).

While toxicity has become somewhat normalized in the game culture (Träistar, 2024, p. 11) recent research shows that catering to the toxic players might not be profitable for companies (Kilmer & Kowert, 2023). Toxicity in the community can impact the financial success of a game, as it detri-

mentally affects the primary demographic of players. Toxic players seem to not be the ones making most purchases and non-toxic players don't feel encouraged to spend money or engage in gaming spaces, where they have experienced hate or harassment (Kilmer & Kowert, 2023, p. 4). Continuous disturbance of coexistence rules and antisocial behavior can lead to the victims discontinuing their gameplay and discouraging new players from joining (Trăistar, 2024, p. 45). For game developers, this presents a significant challenge, as high levels of toxicity can lead to player attrition, negative reviews, and a tarnished reputation for the game. Brand image refers to how consumers perceive a brand based on the associations they hold in their memory. If a consumer links a brand to toxic behavior, it could damage the brand's image (Turpeinen, 2023, p. 4).

Players can become less restrained in online interactions compared to how they would act in-person, due to the anonymity on the internet which allows them to not have to worry about consequences of their actions. (Trăistar, 2024, p. 11) To combat these challenges, some game platforms offer mechanisms such as muting or blocking toxic individuals and reporting abusive behavior. Perceived toxicity in online communities has been linked to reduced benefits of gaming, and it has been found across different online games, not only in competitive or notoriously toxic franchises (Frommel et al., 2023 p. 1). Game developers play a crucial role in creating healthy online environments by implementing stricter community guidelines and enhancing reporting systems. For example, League of Legends, the most played video game in the world with a 100 million monthly players, (League of Legends, 2024) is a multiplayer online battle arena game, notorious for the toxic behavior that occurs among its players. In recent years, the parent company Riot Games has invested heavily in Player Dynamics design, which attempts to build structures that decrease the hurtful interactions between players and encourage rewarding social experiences to happen (Riot Games, 2022). By recognizing and addressing harmful dynamics, the gaming community can work toward a healthier and more enjoyable environment for all players.

In their research nearly a decade ago, Kerr and Kelleher found that one of the major challenges community managers faced in their work was handling problematic player behavior and communication. Their profession involved significant emotional labor and the ability to stay calm and supportive despite emotionally charged interactions. The community managers that were interviewed also mentioned dealing with sensitive issues such as suicide threats, political arguments, sexism, racism, and homophobia. Additionally, hacking incidents and the exposure of player data caused

further challenges, as they were responsible for managing communications around these crises (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015).

The presence of toxicity within online game communities highlights not just the challenges of moderation but also the emotional and mental toll it can take on those managing these spaces. To better understand these challenges, the following research looks into the experiences of those working directly with game communities, offering insight into how they navigate this demanding and evolving profession.

3 Implementation

The implementation chapter includes the research methodology, research questions and ethical considerations, along with an explanation of the data collection and analysis processes

3.1 Research Approach

In this thesis, the research approach is qualitative research, aspiring to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon and how it is formed, in this case the roles, responsibilities, and challenges faced by professionals working with game communities. Qualitative research is based on analysing individual cases, and commonly used data collection methods include interviews and thematic interviews (Kananen, 2017). Conducting scientific research requires a clearly defined research problem, which is a key step in the research process. This research problem helps to establish and clarify the objectives and purpose of the thesis work (Kananen, 2017). The data collected aims to address the research problem. In this thesis, the research problem focuses on understanding the experiences of professionals in different roles working with game communities and examining the impacts of their work.

Primary Question:

- What are the roles, responsibilities, and challenges faced by professionals working with game communities?

Supporting Questions:

- How do community managers and related professionals navigate the complexities of online game communities, including workload, toxicity, and well-being?

- What skills and strategies are necessary for successfully managing game communities?

The ethical considerations of research are based on the ethical principles and the implementation of good scientific practices. Good scientific practices involve honest and fair reporting of the work, as well as respect for the privacy of research participants. Key factors include voluntary participation, protection of the data and the right to be informed about the results (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). In this thesis, the theoretical framework is built upon scientific research articles and relevant online sources. When using sources found on the internet, critical quality assessment has been applied. For finding relevant research articles, academic online libraries such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect and Theseus were used.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The research interviews were conducted individually with each participant in October and November of 2024 via Zoom. A total of three people with significant experience in game community related roles in different European and international game companies were interviewed. Participants were informed of the thesis' focus on the experiences of professionals working with game communities, with a particular emphasis on topics such as workload, well-being, and safety. They received a Zoom invitation via email and were provided with information on ethical considerations, anonymity, and the handling of research data.

One of the participants requested to see the interview questions in advance. This request was accommodated, as it did not affect the research whether participants were familiar with the questions beforehand or encountered them for the first time during the interview. The questions were shared with the participant via email.

Each interview lasted approximately from 30 minutes to one hour and followed a similar set of questions. With consent, interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. In each interview, a base set of questions was prepared to ensure consistency across participants. However, the interviews were semi-structured allowing flexibility, follow-up questions and adjustments based on the experiences each interviewee brought up. Occasionally, participants addressed certain questions within their responses to earlier prompts, so these questions were skipped to avoid

repetition. This approach helped maintain a natural flow and allowed interviewees to fully explore topics relevant to their experiences.

Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed into Word documents, with repeated words and verbal hesitations removed to highlight the essential content, as the first step to content analysis according to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), is data reduction. The interview recordings and transcriptions were securely stored on the researcher's private device, ensuring that no one else had access to them. These materials were permanently deleted following the completion of the thesis writing process. The participants were also informed of the data handling.

Backgrounds of the interviewees

The interviewed professionals are presented anonymously in this thesis in the form of a table, and they are categorized with the identifiers P1 through P3. Although P2 and P3 have not been community managers in the strictest sense, their roles as Creative Content Manager and Social Media Manager overlap significantly with community management responsibilities. Both roles involve engaging with gaming communities, shaping brand identity, and maintaining communication through social platforms, all of which are integral to community management.

| | Years of Experience | Background | Current Role |
|-----------|----------------------------|--|---|
| P1 | 5 | Freelancer, Community Developer, Community Manager | <i>Junior Social Media Specialist</i> in a multinational gaming company |

| | | | |
|-----------|----|--|--|
| P2 | 10 | Marketing & social media roles in game and game voice-over studios | <i>Creative Content Manager</i> in a European game studio |
| P3 | 7 | Social media management, freelancing | <i>Local Social Media Manager</i> in a global gaming company |

Table 1 Backgrounds of the Professionals

4 Results

The findings from the interviews have been organized into categories based on the key themes of the interview questions. They offer a perspective on the roles, responsibilities, and challenges these professionals encounter, as well as the skills and strategies they employ to working game communities.

4.1 Motivation

The professionals shared different but interconnected motivations for pursuing careers around game communities. P2's motivation was grounded in his ability to adapt and grow in the marketing field.

“I was the youngest member on staff, and they said: ‘You probably know how Twitter works? Good, you’re in charge of that now.’ I sort of stuck around in marketing because it was something I got a knack for quite quickly and was able to pick up.” P2

Both P1 and P3's motivations aligned with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), particularly relatedness— feeling connected to others and being part of a community. P1 described her drive to create positive experiences for others, like those she herself had as a community member and similarly, P3 had

love for game communities for being a place for them to express themselves and form close friendships. Both were motivated by the sense of connection and belonging within the gaming world and expressed willingness to contribute and give back of what had made it so important for them. As Deci & Ryan (1985) note, fulfilling the need for relatedness not only sustains motivation but supports emotional well-being.

“Community is one of the core human essences. Some people have a sports club, some people have a pub. For me it was video games and so that’s why.” P1

4.2 Key Responsibilities and Qualities

The professionals interviewed described a wide range of responsibilities recurring in their work with game communities, many of which aligned with findings from the theoretical framework.

Typical Workday

The professionals detailed a typical workday in their past or current work with game communities and outlined their key responsibilities. All interviewees mentioned managing social media platforms and planning content, though the specific platforms they used varied. For example, P1 and P3 were responsible for handling multiple platforms in their roles and P2, while experienced with various platforms in the past, currently focuses primarily on TikTok. In addition to platform management, the professionals’ responsibilities often involved tracking trends, looking into user feedback, and collaborating with other teams to create and coordinate content that resonates with the community.

“I would check our Discord, Reddit, Twitter accounts, Steam forums, and keep a file of [players] experiencing bugs. We would go over what needed to be done in terms of social content, so once a week a social media calendar for the next week. We had a very ‘strict’ weekly schedule because Thursdays are big for Steam, the updates would roll out and we had weekly developer streams to strengthen that bond between community.” P1

“My typical day involves going through TikTok, trying to keep up to date with what people are sharing, what trends are current and responding to things that people are tagging us to, posts that they think we should see, or the comments on any of our videos. There’s also planning the content with the Senior Content Strategist and Senior Communications Developer.” P2

“I create social media content for [different company channels] which includes seeing what is popular in conversation, getting hands on what the game itself is to understand what really makes it tick. Analysing things like user sentiments and just generally getting involved. [...] Seeing what actions we can do to combat any issues or to help the product.” P3

Kelleher & Kerr’s (2015) findings on recruitment practices of community managers align closely with the professionals’ descriptions of their responsibilities and the skills required in their roles, even with P2 and P3 not working as traditional community managers. Their roles as Creative Content Manager (P2) and Social Media Manager (P3) overlap with many aspects of community management, particularly in social media, engaging with player communities, and shaping brand identity, which supports the applicability of Kelleher & Kerr’s insights. The professionals’ efforts in trends, user sentiments, and brand identity across platforms also align with the idea of online interactions and communities affecting brand value and loyalty (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011).

Companies and community strategies had different approaches to whether the employees were visible to the game communities as themselves. Some emphasized creating a distinct identity as community managers, while others worked behind the brand’s identity or adjusted their visibility based on organizational practices and roles.

P1 explained that her previous team intentionally distinguished themselves as community managers rather than blending with developers. This decision was made from respect for the game developers, whose space they were managing, and to establish recognizable figures within the community. This was a key element of their strategy.

P2 noted that his visibility is more limited, as his interactions often happen from behind the company's account on TikTok.

For P3, consumer interaction in their current role is less direct, reflecting the operational style of the company. They highlighted how different approaches existed in the industry and this one worked for them. P3 also had experience working in roles that involved more direct engagement and immediate feedback from consumers.

Characteristics

Figure 1 visually represents the various skills and traits that the interviewed professionals working with game communities identified as essential for their roles, from technical abilities like video editing and strategic thinking to interpersonal skills such as communication and conflict de-escalation.



Figure 1. What Kind of Skills/Traits Are Useful Working with Game Communities?

Many of the described skills, such as analysis, adaptability, and interpersonal communication link directly to the traits necessary for successful community management also defined by Kelleher & Kerr (2015).

P1 stressed that being a gamer themselves is one of the core qualities of an effective community manager. Understanding the product and being personally invested in the community helps managers better understand their player base. P3 highlighted that having a passion for the product and being adaptable is key for working with game communities. They suggested that not only should you just consider the gamer perspective, but also how to engage diverse groups, such as children or older adults, who may not yet be invested in the product. Being open-minded and willing to shift strategies when things aren't going as expected is also essential for staying relevant and growing the community.

The professionals' reflections align with Kelleher & Kerr's (2015) assertion that passion for gaming and knowledge of the product are essential traits. P1 emphasized the importance of being a gamer to better understand the player base and build authentic connections, while P3 highlighted the need to engage diverse groups and adapt strategies to ensure the community remains relevant.

P1 also mentioned that understanding human psychology and intrinsic rewards are important because they are a core motivator for engagement in gaming communities (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Uysal & Yildirim, 2016).

“By understanding why people find it interesting to connect and what rewards are interesting to them, you can build a strategy that will not only get more people to actively talk about and participate but also give them something to advocate for.” P1

P2 emphasized the importance of attention to detail. He praised their Senior Community Manager for her ability to quickly gather, analyse, and synthesize online discussions into actionable insights. This includes determining whether community frustration is genuinely directed at the company or stems from unrelated issues. According to P2, the skill of turning massive amounts of online information into clear and coherent findings is one of the most valuable skills in the field.

“Being able to pick apart what people are saying and find the actual real truth in the center of it is really important.” P2

Similarly to Jacobson's (2017) research, which highlighted the role of community managers in shaping a company's brand and online presence across multiple social media platforms, the interviewed professionals described different aspects of the social media landscape and possessing technical skills such as video editing, understanding social media trends, and using project management tools. Given the fast-paced nature of social media and community management, where trends and tools change rapidly, it is crucial to stay up to date in order to be effective. P1 specifically mentioned that stress can build up with the constant need to learn and upgrade skills.

4.3 Workload and Well-being

The professionals defined their workload as dynamic, varying depending on company culture, personal boundaries, and external factors such as product launches or updates.



Figure 2 Aspects Contributing to Workload

Both P3 and P1 emphasized the difficulty of "switching off" due to the nature of their roles. Even outside structured work hours, they often find themselves monitoring social media or mentally processing issues related to their communities.

“Your community will be active around the clock. So how do you maintain your sense of personal space? (...) Knowing where you end, and your professional role begins, can massively impact what goes on in your life. It becomes hard to detach yourself because you care, so at the end of the day logging off, having a life, having hobbies, and not thinking or talking about it, is tricky.” P1

Workload and work-life balance varied between companies. While some had clear boundaries, others could have irregular hours and after-hours tasks.

P3 shared that their workload increased in a full-time role, compared to previous freelance and part-time work. While working structured 9-5 hours, they still found it hard to completely switch off, as they would continue thinking about work-related matters, such as community reactions and content ideas, even outside of work. P1 mentioned that her previous work as a Community Manager usually included odd hours, since part of her team worked in the United States, in a completely different time zone. This meant that normally she would finish her workday around 9-10 PM, sometimes even at 2AM. The workload variability and well-being challenges of community managers were also discussed by Kerr and Kelleher in their research (2015).

P2 expressed satisfaction with his current workload as a Creative Content Manager but noted that updates and game launches tend to create busier periods. He also discussed the variation in workload depending on the company.

“I’ve worked in some where I haven’t been bothered until the following morning when I return to working. But then at other places you can be texted late at night, like ‘We need to do this as soon as possible. Can you put out something?’ Sometimes it’s more down to my own personal boundaries of work than any company. In some places you feel like you want to give more.” P2

4.4 Game Communities

The professionals described varying experiences with the atmosphere and culture of the gaming communities they have worked with, highlighting both positive and challenging aspects.

P1 recalled a particularly rewarding experience with a highly engaged community for her first game, a roguelike deck builder. This community was receptive, enthusiastic, and collaborative, creating a win-win dynamic where feedback was easily implemented. P2 also described a generally kind and caring community for his current game, noting that the overall tone was positive, with most players genuinely invested in the game.

However, P1 contrasted her initial positive experience with a more difficult one at a second company, where a similar game launched into early access with significant issues. This resulted in a more negative and grim community atmosphere. While the team successfully turned around the community sentiment over time by addressing player concerns, the experience shows how difficult it can be to maintain positivity in a struggling community. P3 also mentioned how receiving negative reactions to content they worked hard on could feel personal, making the work and managing such feedback sometimes feel emotionally taxing.

P2 described his previous experience working on a tactical shooter game with a politically charged community. Players in this community sometimes requested controversial features, creating uncomfortable situations tied to sensitive historical and political contexts. P2 also mentioned staying out of the aggressive corners of gaming communities, acknowledging that every community has its less favourable aspects.

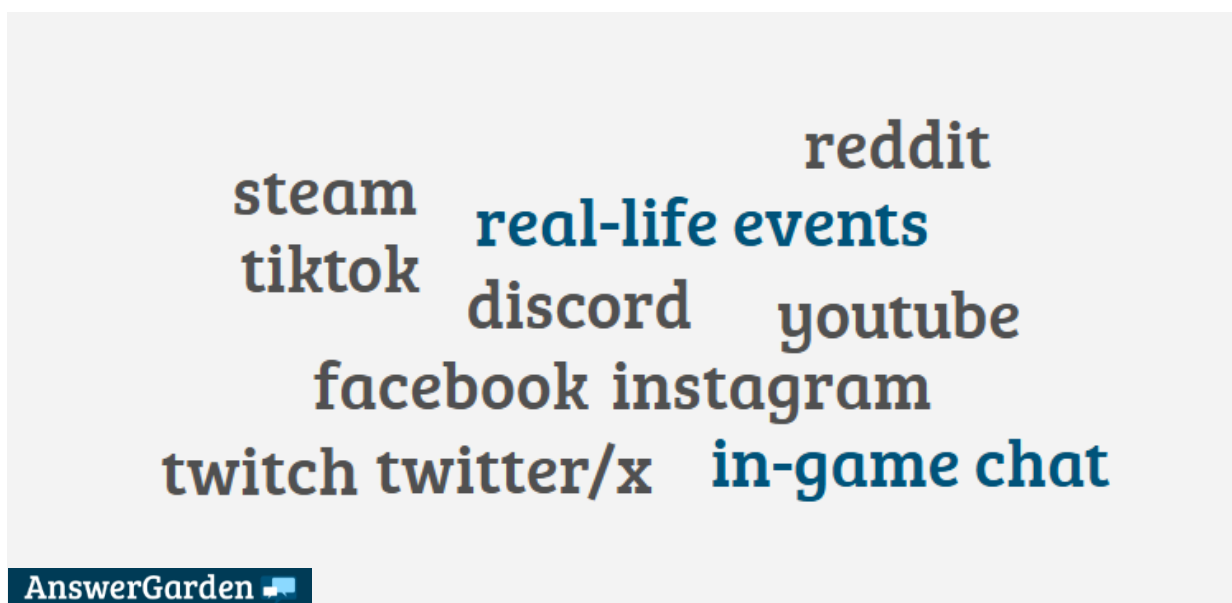


Figure 3 Where Do Game Communities Exist?

The professionals detailed different challenges in their roles. A recurring theme was the difficulty of navigating the fast-paced nature of the work.

P2 found TikTok particularly challenging due to it being so trend driven. He explained that staying current with humour and trends requires a lot of effort and creativity. The unpredictable and time-intensive nature of creating relevant content makes it one of the most demanding aspects of his role.

P3 discussed the past challenges of being in a consumer-facing role, sometimes dealing with negative feedback from customers about things they had no control over, for example company layoffs. They shared that it can be tough to stay positive and take in complaints when the issues are completely out of their hands.

P1 listed aligning personal tone of voice with the company's brand identity and measuring the success of social content as some of the most difficult aspects of the job. She pointed out how viral posts don't always translate to meaningful results and emphasized the difficulty of finding the right balance of content that is both reactive and not too transactional while maintaining consistency with the brand's tone and meeting community expectations.

"It's such a complex field, I don't know why I chose it sometimes." P1

The professionals highlighted several rewarding aspects of their roles in working with game communities, all which centred around the positive impacts of their work. P2 emphasized succeeding in creating content that surprises the audience and how reactions like "I can't believe this is your official account!" gives affirmation that they have resonated with the community. P3 described trusting their instincts and seeing unconventional ideas succeed, especially when met with scepticism from management. P1 shared a particularly meaningful experience of the impact community strategies can have:

"When somebody on Reddit realized that you could play [Roguelike deck building game] entirely with the mouse, allowing use of eye tracking software, we had a mas-

sive influx of disabled, paralyzed players. We translated that to our community strategy, so all our social content was always accessible also to deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired people. Somebody on Reddit made a thread thanking the social media managers for that. People started piling on that about everything they appreciated about what we were doing in terms of accessibility, and it was incredible to see and hear.” P1

The accessibility efforts not only enhanced the inclusivity of the community but also created deeply rewarding feedback for those managing it.

4.5 Toxicity and Safety

The professionals shared their experiences managing toxicity in game communities, highlighting the challenges of addressing harmful behaviours within these spaces. As noted by Frommel et al. (2023), toxicity undermines the social benefits of gaming communities. To combat this, companies have different strategies for addressing harassment, discrimination, and inappropriate behaviour, which, unfortunately, have become normalized in many gaming communities.

P1 explained toxicity being especially apparent when she was working on an online game. Players were able to interact with each other both in the game and in the separate social media spaces that they had, so it was easy to find somebody to pick on. P2 described how passionate players often clash over differing opinions, such as preferences for specific game features. While disagreements are usually left to resolve naturally, P2 noted that intervention becomes necessary when a community's code of conduct is violated.

P3 emphasized the importance of establishing ground rules early and proactively addressing toxic behaviours, including racism, sexism, and transphobia, to maintain safe community spaces. They noted that involving multiple perspectives helps prevent the rules from being too narrow and ensures everyone in the team is aligned on appropriate actions, such as when to issue time-outs or bans.

Both P1 and P3 highlighted automated tools to monitor and filter toxic content. P1 stressed the importance of having sufficient systems in place to flag situations before they spiral out of control.

This includes tools like slow filters on Twitch and clear safety documentation, with de-escalation plans for critical situations, such as a community member threatening to self-harm. Similarly, P3 discussed actions like banning and timing out users on platforms like Discord, and directly addressing inappropriate behaviour happening in the comments of live streams.

In P1's case, the development team decided to remove chat features entirely from an online game due to persistent issues with bullying, swearing, and discriminatory behaviour. Continuous antisocial behaviour disrupts coexistence within communities and discourages player engagement (Trăistar, 2024), which is why drastic measures are sometimes necessary. P1 emphasized the difficulty of managing such environments, particularly in online games, and how important it is to document actions for when to block users or publicly address behaviour depending on the platform.

“Making sure that you keep an eye, have automated filters, and have things be flagged to you before it escalates. Also knowing when to lock everything up basically and decide enough is enough.” P1

The use of automated filters, safety documentation, and clear guidelines aligns with Kelleher & Kerr's (2015) recommendation for proactive community management. These measures can reduce the burden on community managers and help minimizing harmful behaviours.

The professionals identified several factors contributing to toxicity in online spaces. P3 emphasized that a significant reason for toxicity is the lack of consequences for harmful behaviour online. This aligns with Trăistar's (2024) point that anonymity reduces players' restraint in online interactions compared to in-person behaviour. P3 explained that when individuals are not called out or held accountable, such behaviour becomes normalized, making it harder to challenge and change over time. High-profile figures demonstrating toxic behaviour furthers the issue, as their actions set a negative example and encourage others to act similarly.

P1 highlighted that in competitive gaming, toxicity often stems from frustration. Poorly balanced games, unfair matchmaking, or repeated losses can lead to players lashing out in toxic ways. Ensuring that games provide fair and positive experiences, such as balanced matchmaking, can help mitigate some of this behaviour. These observations align with Turpeinen's (2023) findings that

unregulated frustration can lead to toxic behaviours and harm others and also connects to Uysal & Yildirim's (2016) discussion of extrinsic motivation, where players overly focused on external outcomes may result in obsessive passion.

Both P1 and P2 mentioned rewarding constructive behaviour and creating spaces where members feel valued. P1 emphasized the role of understanding intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in making sure community participation remains a positive experience. They noted that offering meaningful incentives—whether through developer feedback, in-game achievements, or recognition—can give players a sense of pride and satisfaction, reinforcing their connection to the community. Building trust by delivering on promises and setting clear boundaries is also crucial. When trust is broken, frustration increases, and members may lose their motivation to be kind or constructive.

P2 explained that when players see the company rewarding positive input, they are more likely to engage constructively themselves.

“If people see that the company rewards positive community input, then they're more likely to take a more positive slant before posting. If they're positive, the company might engage with them, if they're negative the company is less likely to engage with them.” P2

P2 observed that anger and aggression online often stem from wanting to feel heard. He shared that when individuals directing their frustration at someone are met with acknowledgment, their anger tends to dissipate. By validating their concerns with responses like “Thank you for your feedback”, by expressing empathy, the cycle of aggression is disrupted. P2 noted that once people feel they've been listened to, they often struggle to maintain their anger, as there's little left for them to reiterate.

The professionals highlighted both personal factors and workplace practices that influenced their sense of security working with game communities.

P1, having experience working with influencers prior to community management, knew most of how to keep personal life matters safe and separate from the threat of the online spaces. P2 and

P3 highlighted organizational practices that contribute to feeling safe. P2 mentioned his employer's prioritization of well-being by encouraging time off when needed and having a collaborative environment where others could step in during challenging situations.

Similarly, P3 credited their current company's structure and rules, which shield employees from direct backlash by them not acting as messengers for the company. P3 noted that feeling safe at work might also be partly due to being more masculine presenting, highlighting broader issues of sexism in gaming communities. They also mentioned that their role centres more on light-hearted content instead of, for example, apologising on behalf of the developer or company. However, P3 shared an incident where early in their current role they were tracked down on LinkedIn and targeted on different social platforms by an individual tagging them in posts about frustrations with a game release, despite P3 not being involved in decision-making. While they followed company policy by not engaging, P3 acknowledged the potential how such situations could escalate. This reflects the challenges of personal targeting, as noted by Kerr and Kelleher (2015), who identified managing problematic player behaviour as a key difficulty in the field.

P1 also emphasized the role of community managers as gatekeepers who set the tone for their communities. A well-managed community can enhance the gaming experience for players, however, she cautioned that to connect with players on a personal level, some community managers may inadvertently encourage overly critical behaviour.

“All in all, I'd say the community manager, if done well, sets the tone (...) and makes or breaks a game experience for a lot of people.” P1

Frommel et al.'s (2023) found that toxicity reduces the social capital and relatedness players derive from gaming. By fostering trust and maintaining boundaries, community managers can counteract these negative effects and amplify the positive social outcomes of gaming communities.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This research underscored the importance of relatedness and collaboration in online gaming communities. It shows that while gaming communities can bring players together and enhance the enjoyment of games, they also present challenges, particularly around managing toxic behaviors and meeting the diverse needs of players.

5.1 Working with Game Communities

The professionals interviewed described a wide range of responsibilities recurring in their work with game communities, many of which aligned with findings from the theoretical framework. Managing social media platforms and planning content was a central task, with some professionals overseeing multiple platforms, such as Facebook, X, Instagram and TikTok, while others focused on one, depending on their role, company size, and organizational practices. Tracking trends, gathering user feedback, and collaborating with other teams in creating content that resonates with the community were also highlighted as key responsibilities. Approaches to employee visibility varied across companies. Some professionals worked to establish a distinct identity as community managers, while others operated behind the brand's identity.

A diverse set of skills and traits were identified as important in these roles. Professionals emphasized the importance of being gamers themselves, as personal investment and understanding of the product helped them to connect with the player base. Passion for the product, adaptability, attention to detail, and the ability to quickly analyze and synthesize online discussions into actionable insights were also noted. The professionals, responsible for shaping companies' brand and online presence across different platforms, had a broad understanding of the social media landscape. However, the fast-paced nature of this work, with rapidly evolving trends and tools, could create stress due to the constant need to learn and upgrade skills.

The professionals described their workload as dynamic, influenced by company culture, personal investment, and external factors like product launches or game updates. Work-life balance varied across companies, with some maintaining clear boundaries while others required irregular hours or after-hours tasks. Some professionals experienced the difficulty of completely "switching off," as they often found themselves monitoring social media or mentally processing issues related to

their communities even outside of structured work hours. Additionally, periods of updates and game launches led to increased workloads, requiring more content to be created and shared. Strong, well-managed communities could contribute significantly to a game's success; however, it requires a careful balance of resources, time, and effort. The professionals' reflections highlighted the emotional demands of their roles, which were also present in the theoretical framework.

The professionals shared several rewarding aspects of their roles in working with game communities, all focused on the positive outcomes of their efforts. These included the fulfillment of creating content that surprised and engaged the audience, confirming that their work had connected with the community. They also found reward in seeing unconventional ideas succeed, as well as receiving positive feedback from the community regarding both their content and community management efforts.

5.2 Addressing Toxicity

Another important key theme was the dual nature of gaming communities as both a source of connection and a space where conflicts could arise. Toxic behavior in gaming communities remains a persistent issue, impacting player well-being and disrupting positive interactions. Several contributing factors to this behavior were identified through the theoretical framework and interviews with professionals. This included possible frustration directed at the game's development or gameplay mechanics, such as unbalanced matchmaking, with anger and aggression often being linked to players' desire to feel heard. Disagreements and differing opinions about the games themselves could also lead to conflicts between players. Furthermore, the anonymity and lack of consequences for harmful actions online, combined with the normalization of toxic behavior, perpetuated the issue. Additionally, the ability for players to interact both in-game and across separate social media spaces added complexity to moderating and maintaining safety in these communities.

The findings suggested that effective strategies in countering toxicity include clear community guidelines, automated moderation tools, and rewarding positive behavior. Positive community engagement, well-crafted social content, and effective communication were found to enhance player satisfaction and promote long-term engagement with games. According to the professionals interviewed, understanding intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, and making players feel valued with means

such as developer feedback or recognition, could give players a sense of pride and satisfaction, reinforcing their connection to the community and keeping participation positive.

Proactive actions, such as setting ground rules early and addressing toxic behaviours like racism, sexism, and transphobia, were identified as essential for creating safe spaces. Safety documentation, including de-escalation plans and guidance on addressing inappropriate behavior—such as blocking or timing out users or publicly calling out actions—was found to support those working with game communities. Including diverse perspectives when developing rules was highlighted as a way to strengthen inclusivity and help teams align on appropriate consequences for specific actions. In severe cases, removing features like the in-game chat may be necessary to uphold community standards when constant misbehaviour occurs. Community managers play an important role in implementing these strategies, addressing toxic situations directly, and creating safer, more welcoming spaces for players.

The professionals interviewed generally reported feeling mostly safe while working with game communities, identifying several factors that contributed to their sense of security. Maintaining a clear separation between personal life and online spaces was highlighted as an important strategy. Workplace policies also played a role, including support for employee well-being, such as allowing time off when needed, and maintaining a collaborative team environment where others could assist during difficult situations. Additionally, company structures and rules that shield employees from direct backlash—such as policies preventing them from acting as company messengers—were seen to increase a feeling of safety. The nature of an employee's role was also seen to affect their treatment from the community, with roles centered on lighthearted content often resulting in less scrutiny compared to those involving apologizing or addressing grievances on behalf of developers. Finally, broader issues within game communities, such as sexism, racism, and transphobia, were noted as factors that could influence how public-facing employees were treated by the community.

5.3 Reflections and Future Considerations

The qualitative approach used in this thesis provided understanding of working with game communities through the lived experiences of professionals. While the semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share realities and insights, the small sample size may limit how widely the

findings apply. Future studies could explore perspectives from different regions or gather input from players themselves to provide a more complete picture of gaming communities. The research process is outlined in a way which allows for the possibility of replicating the study. However, it is important to note that the results may differ, as different interviewees could provide unique perspectives and insights into working with game communities. Also, including more interviewees might have enhanced the results. Proper sampling is important for strengthening the reliability of research (Heikkilä, 2014). As the gaming world continues to evolve, understanding and improving the role of community management will remain important.

Additionally, while the theoretical framework, particularly Self-Determination Theory and social identity, provided valuable insights, integrating complementary theories could deepen understanding of player behavior and community dynamics. Technological and cultural shifts will continue to shape the field of community management. The emergence of AI-driven moderation tools, and attention to diversity and inclusion in gaming highlight areas where future research could provide actionable insights.

Broader societal implications should not be overlooked. Inclusive and well-managed gaming spaces can help combat online harassment, promote diversity within gaming communities, and enhance communication skills among players. Professionals working with game communities are crucial for shaping the social side of gaming. Their work not only helps individual games succeed but also supports the growth of gaming as a positive, inclusive culture. Successful gaming experience depends, not only on the gameplay itself, but also on how the community is built, managed, and supported. As gaming continues to grow globally, the importance of community management will only increase.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview Questions

Introduction and Career Background

1. Could you please introduce yourself and your career background? How many years of work experience do you have working with game communities?
2. What inspired you to pursue this field?
3. How would you describe your own personal relationship to game communities?

Key Responsibilities and Qualities

4. Could you describe what kind of responsibilities your work around communities includes/included? What is a typical day like in your role?
5. In what kind of ways did you/do you interact with game communities in your work?
6. Are you visible as yourself to the community members?
7. In your opinion, what kind of skills/traits are useful or necessary when working with game communities?

Workload

8. How would describe the workload you've had throughout your career?
9. What kind of aspects of working with game communities do you consider the most challenging?

10. What have you found most rewarding working with game communities?

Game Communities

11. How would you describe the general atmosphere or culture of the different game communities you've worked with?

12. Where did these game communities exist? E.g. Which social media platforms?

13. Have toxicity or online bullying been apparent in your work at any point of your career? What do you think is an effective way to approach these situations?

14. What do you think causes people to be un-kind to each other online in the communities you have experience with?

Safety

15. Throughout your career, have you created/followed any specific strategies for making the communities safer for participants?

16. Would you consider that you yourself felt safe working with game communities?

17. Are there any specific things you can think of that either added or decreased your feeling of safety at work?