

That Birdie Feeling: Understanding the Role of LAN Organizers in Maintaining a Gaming Community

Brian McCauley
Jönköping University
brian.mccauley@ju.se

Tobias M. Scholz
University of Siegen
tobias.scholz@uni-siegen.de

Kieran Tierney
RMIT University
kieran.tierney@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

This paper presents the initial findings of a longitudinal study examining the role and experiences of LAN organizers in managing player communities pre, during and post the Covid 19 pandemic. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyze interviews with organizers of the Birdie LAN, Sweden's longest running LAN event. Five key themes were identified reflecting the roles of organizers and their experiences pre pandemic. (1) building and maintaining the culture, (2) encouraging inclusivity and community building, (3) negotiating professionalism, (4) learning, adapting and evolving, (5) creating sustainability through a future orientation. This paper presents the results of the first data collection to examine the impacts of the pandemic on grassroots gaming communities. The findings here represent a foundation in understanding the role of community leaders in maintaining a culture around gaming. These initial findings add value to our understanding of grassroots esports and player communities and the social practices of gaming in the modern era.

Keywords: Gaming communities, LAN parties, grassroots esports, gaming culture, community building.

1. Introduction

Games and esports are increasingly important as platforms for communities that provide socialization opportunities (Jung, 2020; McCauley, et al., 2020). During Covid-19 induced lockdowns, online games as a social outlet were valuable for younger and older through alleviating isolation and benefiting mental health (Kowal, et al., 2021). However, despite the surge in uptake of games and esports, existing live gaming and esports events were impacted through

having to move online (Goldman & Hedlund, 2020). As in person events began to resume around games and esports, this study presents the first stage of a longitudinal study examining the impact of the pandemic on Local Area Network events (LAN parties), communities organized by volunteers.

LAN parties have a history and culture founded in groups of friends organizing weekends of gaming and socializing (Ackermann, 2012). Video gaming more generally has a long history in modern society and through technological progress, the way we play games and interact while playing is evolving. For instance, through technological advances such as home to mobile internet and digital platform developments, LANs have moved from the 'basement' and internet cafes to regional mega-LAN events (McCauley, et al., 2020). Essentially, LANs provide a unique environment for socialization that overcomes boundaries such as demographics and geography, and studies are increasingly realizing the positive impacts for the psychological well-being through socialization of players (Halbrook, et al., 2019). For example, while concerns remain regarding a loss of offline social capabilities by those who engage too heavily (Rowert & Oldmeadow, 2013), increasingly the gaming market and experiences are being shaped through both online and offline social interaction and cooperation that builds strong emotional ties between individuals (Collins & Freeman, 2013).

Gaming participants are key actors in shaping the gaming environment (Scholz, 2019). Past research has demonstrated how grassroots players collaborate to modify games to suit LAN playing, shape spatial and social conventions to support communal, urban playing, or shape local esports markets and co-create value contributing to the local community. This in turn shapes gaming culture, practices, and experiences that are enacted by players together and can lead to enhanced relationships (Verheijen, et al., 2019). Recent research into game communities has shown,

the importance of facilitating communities within gaming, how game modalities and media facilitate and shape communities (Jung, 2020) the challenges of event organization and management and call for research into organization of communities such as live audiences and leagues (Cranmer, et al., 2021).

However, despite the rise in popularity of esports and events that have LAN elements, little attention has been paid to why and how grassroots enthusiasts/actors are creating and sustaining LANs (Taylor, 2016), to reshape the communities and culture of digital gaming and reflect a more socialized and integrated experience. Literature has acknowledged the extensive organization that is required for these types of events and the role of grassroots actors as community enablers in for developing regional communities around games and esports (McCauley, et al. 2020). A sustainable future for associated gaming communities is rooted in both economic and social sustainability at both professional and grassroots levels (Nyström, et al. 202).

In this paper, we are focusing on the experience of the LAN organizers of the Swedish LAN party, Birdie that has existed for almost 30 years. Given the need to examine the external social contexts of video gameplay (Collins & Freeman, 2013), co-playing audiences (Bowman, et al., 2015), social sustainability in esports (Nyström, et al., 2022), and LAN events (McCauley, et al. 2020); the following research question was proposed as stage one of a larger study.

How can we understand the role of volunteer organizers in shaping and maintaining a community around a long-standing LAN event?

2. Theoretical Background

There is a long-standing tradition of offline-events for video games, be it meeting-up in the Arcade in the 80ies or since the early 90 in LAN parties. A Local Area Network (LAN) event is where personal computers are linked together in a physical location, in order to play video games face-to-face utilizing highspeed connection (Jansz & Martens, 2005). The LAN-scape itself as an understanding of public networked play varies across a range of variables including size, demographics, practices and cultures (Taylor, et al., 2014) but can be linked to the overarching game culture (Shaw, 2010). The majority of small to medium-sized regional LANS are conducted by local actors without the consideration of profit (McCauley, et al., 2020). However, a lack of academic exploration in the last years on the topic of LANs has meant recent developmental trends remain unexplored for their impact on the subject (McCauley, et al., 2019). The role of LANs in gaming has evolved

beyond bridging technological limitations towards a focus on the benefits for regional communities.

LAN parties in today's digitized society have been augmented by streaming, though their relevance increased in the regional context to act as some form of physical anchor in a digital environment. A recent pilot study on LAN attendees highlighted the hybrid nature of LANs as existing in both the online and offline contexts while attendance was driven by a variety of social motivations. Studies such as this and other previous work specific to LANs (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010) tended to examine the LAN phenomenon from the perspective of attendees while increasingly there is a clear need to understand the actors that shape regional gaming markets (McCauley, et al., 2020), develop offline spaces for competitive play (Koch, et al., 2020) and build regional communities (Jung, 2020).

3. Research Setting

3.1. Research Context: Birdie LAN

To answer the research question, we chose to study the Birdie LAN event based in the city of Uppsala in Sweden, which has been part of the LAN scene since its inception. The first Birdie LAN in 1993 was arranged in a local high school cafeteria and had approximately 100 attendees. The event has since evolved into a significant and iconic LAN in Sweden, attracting around 1,000 attendees and 2,000 visitors to the broader experience that has grown around it. This presents the opportunity to observe and explore the evolutionary change of LAN organization and operations and how this has shaped the LAN experience. Another important aspect was the nonprofit nature of this LAN and robust regional (government) support. Birdie is a not-for-profit event that is financially supported by the local government and is known internationally as one of the main LAN events in Sweden. The event is organized throughout the year by a central planning committee of seven volunteer members, overseen by a board consisting of seven and supported by a crew of approximately 100 volunteers who assist in the three-day event every May. It was held before the pandemic in the local floorball stadium, IFU arena, and features components including; an expo for businesses to engage with visitors, a demo scene where people showcase their creative technological work and traditional board games alongside the central LAN component. The pandemic has since forced the event to go online for three consecutive years 2020-2022 with the next in person event planned for 2023.

3.2. Method

We applied a social constructivist framework to address our research question and to support theory building (Creswell, 2007). This framework is rooted in the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which permits the researcher to facilitate a more in-depth exploration of underlying meanings of informants' lived experiences in particular situations (Smith & Osborn, 2015). We explored in-depth the experiences of seven Birdie LAN organizers. The aim was to facilitate the collection of extensive, information-rich narratives within a focused perspective to build a deep understanding of the cocreative processes within LAN organizing, and the meaning-making of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The IPA approach is suited to our study as it supports the collection and sustained in-depth analysis of extensive participant narratives to uncover socially negotiated and idiosyncratically determined meanings of personal experiences (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018). Further, applying this approach affords responsiveness by adjusting the data-gathering process, such as restructuring questions or adding new questions, in response to emergent themes (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

3.3. Sample and Data Collection

With the goal of theory building rather than testing it, we applied purposive sampling to access seven individuals with common experience of the domain of enquiry and so likely to provide information-rich narratives best suited to answering our research question (Creswell, 2007). Small sample sizes are suited to the IPA approach, as sizeable qualitative study samples can result in significant amounts of data that do not permit sufficiently sustained and penetrating analysis to develop deep insights into participants' meaning making (Smith & Osborn, 2015). We interviewed individuals who had been engaged with Birdie for a minimum of 10 years with active roles as part of the crew, as a member of the executive board or in the project management group. These criteria ensured that each participant had a high level of cultural competence for our domain of inquiry which supported the development of information-rich narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2015), and added in-depth knowledge of the evolution of the LAN event to the research. We interviewed seven male individuals aged from 27 to 48, each of whom had engaged with Birdie over a time period of 12 to 27 years, producing a cumulative experience in delivering Birdie of over 100 years. We didn't interview female participants as LANs are mostly male dominated, especially on the level of management or participating

for an extended period. This gender issue is the same for Birdie LAN. The interviews focused on exploring participants' personal history of gaming, LAN participation, their roles and experiences in delivering Birdie LAN events. Before conducting formal interviews, we tested the questions in mock interviews both thematically to ensure relevance and dynamically to ensure ease of understanding and promotion of an open discussion to support information-rich narratives (Kvale, 1996). We also tested to ensure that participants' free opinions could be elicited without being led by the questions. Additionally, data were gathered in a way that was informed by ongoing analysis, a key feature of IPA, allowing the question instrument for subsequent interviews to be informed by themes identified in earlier transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was digitally recorded, and transcribed by a professional transcription service. We managed the transcripts using NVivo12 and construct a coding scheme based on the emerging themes from the first interview.

3.4. Data Analysis

Our data analysis comprised an inductive approach with extended interpretive engagement with transcripts combined with self-reflection to suspend any a priori assumptions. This is characteristic of the IPA method and supports the interpretation of participants' experiential sense-making across multiple readings of, and reflections on, each transcript requiring profound interpretation of participant meanings (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Before commencing the primary analysis process, an intercoder agreement was developed based on a coding scheme inductively developed by the lead author from the first transcript (Guest, et al., 2006). This involved multiple readings of the transcript to annotate compelling or symbolic statements in the left margin (subordinate themes), translating these into emerging themes in the opposite margin, identifying how these arrayed, leading to the development of an initial coding scheme to clarify and distinguish emergent and potentially superordinate concepts (Whitty, et al., 2011). The coding scheme was then applied to subsequent transcripts, extended by all authors as new subordinate themes were identified, iteratively compared and discussed to identify and reconcile discrepancies, consolidate similarities, refine codes and definitions, and then reapplied to new transcripts. Continually cycling between transcripts, literature, and iterative discussions between the authors, we teased out standard features evident across emergent themes which suggested links of theoretical

significance and a higher level of abstraction. In this way, we identified commonalities that implied connections between subordinate and emergent themes that were common across the seven interviews and therefore led us to identify superordinate concepts (Smith & Osborn, 2015) that underline a 'connection to a broader gestalt of an individual's experiences' (Spiggle, 1994).

4. Results

Based on the identification of superordinate themes led to the following themes: These themes consist of (1) building and maintaining the culture, that focuses on the idea that there is a specific form of Birdie culture evolved and how it is sustained over the years; (2) encouraging inclusivity and community building, co-aligns with the LAN culture and how it is enforced by creating an inclusive community in the Birdie LAN; (3) negotiating professionalism, explains how Birdie LAN developed over time and created a sustainable environment to support the LAN running; (4) learning, adapting and evolving, highlights the methods of Birdie LAN to learn from experiences and adapt to the ever-shifting LAN environment; and (5) creating sustainability through a future orientation, reveals the future orientation of Birdie LAN in its planning and continued development. The following sections uncover how these themes explain the role of Birdie organizers in maintaining a community around a long-standing LAN event, especially with the focus on uncovering the underlying Birdie LAN culture.

4.1. Building and Maintaining the Culture

Our participants were anchored in the Birdie LAN with a long history of engagement as participants, crew members and organizers, and have experienced as well as influenced the environment. This was reflected in the role Birdie played within their self-identity, leading to the understanding that Birdie can be allocated to with a culture. Encapsulating the specific culture of the LAN was the systematic identification of 'The Birdie Feeling'. This key emergent theme was consistent across our findings in how participants viewed their roles, their motivation to engage and their resultant actions. All seven participants discussed this understanding of the Birdie feeling and the need for maintaining it with one participant articulating it as:

We have a job where we cultivate a feeling about Birdie. It is important for us that we have our own identity so that we are Birdie and judged on what we are. I think a lot is about having the heart in the right place, that you have the ideal remain and that we try

to create a feeling that it is the participants themselves who create their own joy on the spot. - We want to position ourselves as a fun and happy LAN rather than being elite and that with us you should be the best or that it is expensive but cozy. Sweden's nicest LAN I think we have called ourselves sometimes. (P#4)

The Birdie feeling explains the underlying culture of the Birdie LAN and how they are different, based on the experiences of LANs this feeling is reinforced and has led to rituals and tradition. By that, it becomes evident that fun plays a crucial role in the embodiment of the Birdie feeling which started with the beginning of the LAN in 1993 and evolved over time. Therefore, there are many traditions, practices, and rituals observable which are kept alive and passed on from one generation to the other. These are all based on the ideas of fun and creativity, perhaps best encapsulated by those not directly related to gaming but instead rooted in creative practice. As all LAN parties Birdie is about fun, however, over time they created a distinct understanding in terms of fun that goes beyond the idea of we are having fun playing video games. This development has led to codified artifacts that are highly contextual and difficult to understand for outsiders not part of the Birdie culture.

We have, you know, there's certain small things that are kind of hard to explain. We have the legend of the guy on row 6. That started you know, early 2000s as a joke that's been living on since then. The guy in row 6 is basically someone who is really behind everything bad that happens. (P#6)

This has led to rituals that only make sense within the Birdie culture, as only the participants of the community appreciate it or even get the sentiment of these traditions. There is a group spirit within the organization that contributes to a unified cultural understanding. This strong sentiment toward the Birdie feeling and the maintenance of its codified rituals and traditions have led to a deep understanding, which may be implicit knowledge, of what constitutes the Birdie culture. Participants can clearly articulate what the difference is between Birdie and other LANs.

We like to think we are fun, and it gives a sense of community of being a part of something. That's what I would say differs Birdie from most of these bigger LANs [...] I mean we're the oldest LAN party in Sweden that's still going. So we've collected quite a few moments during the years, so those things you know keeps on still today (P#7)

Our participants consistently viewed it as their responsibility to maintain and pass on the culture of Birdie through creating a fun and engaging creative experience that encapsulates the Birdie Feeling. But there was more to this than just fun, with organizers assuming a responsibility for delivering this culture.

Birdie is a lot about teaching also. Yeah, we teach crew members new skills on how to do things. We teach them to network, electricity, organising, media equipment, about themselves, you know, so I think we both can relate to that. And also the visitors. It's a lot of teaching going on, you know. And that's the reward, you know, the reward of teaching and seeing that, "hey, this kid got it now." That's a wonderful feeling, man! (P#6)

These narratives show that the long-term engagement of our interviewees as attendees and organizers, has led to a concise understanding of the Birdie feeling, aligned with a sense of responsibility to preserve, build and pass on the Birdie culture.

4.2. Encouraging Inclusivity and Community Building

As a LAN party is a social event, it relies on people that participate in creating, contributing to, and sustaining a community. Therefore, organizers aim to make the LAN as welcoming for everyone to have an experience embedded in the Birdie culture. Community building is at the core of that concept, and this can be observed in the reasoning that the organizers invest the majority of the budget on the visitor experience. This highlights the crew's engagement in taking care of people, to deliver an optimal experience that can foster the Birdie feeling and fortify the Birdie culture.

I think a part of the Birdie feeling is that all the money that goes into Birdie goes out to the visitors. We don't have any ambitions on making any money on Birdie, so everything goes out to the visitors with all these side things that are going on and broadening people's perspectives and their horizons to, you know, learn and see new stuff (P#7).

Further, it is part of the strategy to be welcoming for newcomers and people who are new to the LAN concept. These newcomers could also be friends or the children of veteran participants highlighting the long history and the urge of creating a community that goes beyond a typical LAN party.

This strategy is helpful to make the LAN interesting for newcomers, however, these measures also help to build up a community that is connected. The success of this community building can be seen with the long-standing success, and how out of this environment friendships emerged and stayed by visiting the LAN... Parents are sharing their legacy, as they feel part of this community. ... So they're bringing the next generation to Birdie. And we all sat together, you know, and they had all these kids running around, the new generation together with the old generation. (P#6)

Not only is it the goal to pass on the torch but also to make the Birdie LAN a place for everyone, not just for gamers. This goal became especially relevant as the popularity of video games grew and it moved out of the niche, nerdy sub-culture and into the mainstream. One challenge that the organizers acknowledged was increasing female participation at events. Their estimates at events ranged from 5-12% and they recognized the need to address the issue by working with external organizations.

What Birdie has done in recent years is to invite other actors who know the questions better than ourselves, for example at the last Birdie we had Female Legends in place, we had an organization called Queer & Nerdy and then was about the inclusion of LGBTQ questions (P#4)

This narrative illustrates how the organizers are purposely trying to make the Birdie LAN as open for anybody that wants to participate. The visitors are at the core of their focus. This helps to create a community that leads to enough attendees to organize LAN parties but also foster the Birdie feeling in the long run. The vision is that visitors are engaged as part of the community and years later that they are taking their children to the LAN parties. Crucially it became clear that our participants were acutely aware of the dangers of Birdie becoming a closed group and that it was not just for the more hardcore gamer.

It's just not for the video games, it's for the community. And when people who are not that interested in video games they're like, "Oh, I didn't know you guys did that" and like that is one of the benefits for the society. We're not just a bunch of nerds. We're a bunch of different people with different backgrounds, with all sorts of different ideologies. But we all have the games in common, and then we take it from there. Like we make friends and we're a place that you can feel at home (P#2)

4.3. Negotiating Professionalism

Birdie LAN is a non-profit endeavor, which can be said for the majority of local and regional LAN parties. Still, though, it became evident that in recent years and with the diffusion of the internet, that barriers for participants to visit a LAN party has risen. Consequently, it becomes an imperative to make a great product that people want to participate in. The pull of the Birdie culture may not be sufficient and, therefore, the organizers have to become better and make the LAN more entertaining. For our participants, organizing the Birdie LAN for 1,000 attendees annually represented a large commitment not only in terms of hours and effort but also in optimization of

the experience. The organizers need to have an intrinsic motivation to become better and improve.

We want to still improve you know, yeah. We want to get better, every year. And when people you know, come up to me and say, "Hey, man, this was the best Birdie ever, it was great, I had so much fun!" - the reward is amazing. Because, you know, after every Birdie, like 75% of the crew is like, "I'm done, this was my last year" because you know, they're exhausted. There's nothing left of them basically. And I used to be one of those, like, "Ah fuck, this is my last year", but I'm not anymore because I know when... a few months afterwards, I just want to get started on the next one because we're gonna have a list of things to improve every year. And I just want to get going with that list (P#6).

Beyond that, dedication and a spirit of work hard, play hard, may not be sufficient to create a successful LAN party. In addition, it is necessary to have the appropriate skill sets to maintain a professional and safe environment. Even though Birdie LAN is not a commercial LAN party, there needs to be professionalism from the organizers and the crew of volunteers in terms of safety, security and accessibility.

So it is a young culture that we are part of and nurtures for it to be safe and secure for everyone to be in place. As a parallel issue to this, we did a project we called "LAN for everyone" at the latest Birdie where we inventoried and produced a checklist for how to make LAN more customized in terms of functional impairments. Every year we have a small number of participants and visitors who sit in a wheelchair. It is a parallel to how we can engage and involve more girls in LAN. It's the same thing there, there are groups you can lift and include a lot more. (P#4)

Parallel to this continuous negotiation of professionalism, the ecosystem surrounding LAN parties evolved. This can be seen especially with the exponential rise of esports and the professionalization of the esports scene. Esports teams demand more than before, and, by that, make tournaments more serious, leading to the interesting situation of serious leisure, in which there are amateurs having fun meeting professional esports teams.

So it is definitely challenging with the growing seriousness of esports it is hard for us to keep up with it. But so far I think we've managed and that's a lot because we've changed our method in handling this. Back in the days we mostly did all the tournaments by ourselves and handled that by ourselves. And now we're starting, you know, more collaborating with other communities to outsource esports to different communities and that's been working excellent so far.

Because these communities, they do this you know all the time. So it's been really easy for us to have other guys who help us and keep it, you know, top class tournament to help us with sponsors and everything and all the practical stuff. (P#6)

This is a sign of professionalism as they are outsourcing the task to experts in the field. And despite being a small regional LAN, Birdie offers significant prize pools which further increases pressure.

Birdie must be professional because it attracts so many visitors and participants, and we have contests with 100,000 (approx. 10,000 Euro) in the prize pool for CS:GO (Counter Strike: Global Offensive). Then it is clear that it implicitly demands that it is pretty professional (P#4)

And the evolution of streaming and esports further increases the pressure to be professional as illustrated by the following example:

Streaming has become more important with times, more and more people are streaming. Last year we had almost a record in streaming, then the King of Nordic at Birdie ended up on Twitch's frontpage and then suddenly we got 1.3 million viewers. (P#3)

Furthermore, with this general increase in interest in esports and video games becoming more mainstream, many non-endemic stakeholders become interested in any video-game related events like LAN parties. This development led to the situation that LAN parties have to deal with an increasing range of external stakeholders and balance the expectations of a diverse range of stakeholders sufficiently.

And then now we have - in order for Birdie to stay alive, we have to, you know, bring in newer generations so younger people, and also we have sponsors and collaborations, and in order to survive as a non-profit LAN party. And you can't do those stupid stuff anymore because as I said those are considered scandals now. (P#6)

LAN parties have changed over time and the interest in LAN parties has potentially increased with the boom in esports. The barriers of LAN party attendance increased due to the diffusion of high-speed internet, meaning gamers needed more incentive to be attracted from their comfortable home gaming setup. Consequently, it is essential for any LAN party to survive through constant improvement. This improvement is mostly driven by the intrinsic motivation of the unpaid organizers and production team, which would be difficult to achieve without a unifying culture like the Birdie feeling.

4.4. Learning, Adapting & Evolving

From the first low key gathering in 1993, the Birdie LAN has evolved into an ongoing event that

seeks to satisfy multiple stakeholders within multiple technological, contextual and societal changes over a span of nearly 30 years. As a result, our participants have had to be receptive to change and demonstrate an adaptability in translating new developments into the event accordingly. All participants recognized these needs and were receptive to ongoing learning to deliver an optimal event. Despite the long legacy of the event our participant recognized that Birdie LAN needs to adjust in order to survive while staying as true as possible to the original spirit of the event.

The Birdie feeling has also changed as we have changed with the years, or so I would say. We still, you know, value that Birdie feeling and nourish it. But it's harder today I would say just because you can't do as much stupid stuff anymore (P#6)

Thereby it becomes evident that many of the participants have also changed and, especially, due to the technological progress, the way gaming is performed, the younger players may require different things than in the 90s. It is essential for the success of the LAN party, to identify these shifts in taste and translate this knowledge into changes.

And I think in those days, people weren't as picky as they are today. They just came for the fun, to meet people and just have a crazy weekend. They didn't care how things looked, how the organization was. They just were interested in meeting their friends and having fun and playing Quake and doing demos, you know? (P#6)

This change in desires is also an important aspect, that the organizers have to understand the evolution of their core audience. There is a constant necessity to seek for improvement. If the audience is becoming more demanding, it is essential to deliver more. Furthermore, improvements are demanded by other audiences. Video games and especially LAN parties and esports ecosystems struggle with gender inequality. Although there are many female gamers, they do not show up. Consequently, organizers have to find ways to get more and diverse people involved.

We're working very hard on having a broader participation, not just for someone 17 years old. And also getting other groups included. It's, I would say it's definitely moved away from that (P#7)

The Birdie LAN is a striking example of a long-standing LAN with a broad and deep history, however, at the same time characterized by a constant evolution. LAN parties have changed, the audience has changed and, therefore, organizers have to learn and adapt to evolve adequately towards these changes. Without the drive to adapt and improve, any LAN party will probably fade out over time and the Birdie legacy is testament to the ambidexterity of the organizers.

4.5. Creating Sustainability through a Future Orientation

The Birdie LAN represents the evolution of LAN parties through to a longevity that reflects their focus on the sustainability of their community and their role in society. Underpinning all our participants responses was a recognition that they were committed to the long-term future of Birdie, the culture and the community. The organizers implicitly understood that a LAN party can have a role for the greater good through contributing to regional society and the development of a younger generation that may only know the modern online gaming world. Early LAN events were characterized by innovative aspects of general computing such as the 'demo' scene where attendees showcased their programming or tech building skills and collaborated to share knowledge and skills. The modern LAN organizers recognize the value in these old school aspects of the LAN culture and recognize the value it has had for modern Sweden.

But the programming part is still maybe the old school stuff, you know, Chiptunes and stuff like that. The number of contributions on those have been laying quite stale for the last year. So we're trying to promote the demo scene, to keep it alive and maybe even revive it and get more people interested. So we're making big efforts today in getting more people interested in the demo scene. So for example, we have started a collaboration with a school in Sweden, a high school that focuses on media, graphics, video, programming, etc. We're starting to collaborate with these to get these kids into this because it's related to what they're basically interested in, but maybe they haven't even, you know, heard about the demo scene and seen what it is, and how they can participate in it and learn from it. (P#6)

This response highlights the view of the organizers for their effect on society. This specific case shows that they understand their social responsibility. This responsibility has shifted in the LAN scene as they have become less sub cultural and more mainstream. LAN parties can potentially be drivers for change and can give back to their community a on more visible scale but there is a balance to be maintained between social and commercial initiative.

There are people who want Birdie to become commercial and I really hope it never will. Other larger LANs I have seen appearing to try to be over 500 people, they tried to be commercial at one time and it failed. So this grassroots movement is needed to teach LANers how to LAN. If you can rent the gym in Knivsta and bring in 200 people and sit there for a whole weekend, then you are [...] there. (P#5)

LAN parties can drive change in their region, and they can have an impact on the youth as well as on the society as a whole. Still though, it is essential to stay authentic for the core audience and stay true to the Birdie feeling. One story in particular underlines how the organizers view their potential impact on the youth.

I actually remember there's this kid, he's like, super cocky, extremely shitty behaviour sometimes. But then he came, he had one of the computers from, from the youth recreation centres and he started playing Counter Strike. He was so good. He was super good. And then he went up in a one versus one tournament and he won. And I've never seen him so proud. And it wasn't that he was proud because, oh, I'm better the y'all. It was he could be proud when he realised that other people recognised him for being good, because he could walk in the hallways and someone said 'hey that was that's the guy who won the one versus one tournament'. And you just saw him grow as a person because he got positive feedback, that's what the kids are getting instead of falling like into a criminal or falling into drugs, where they won't get any positive feedback. They could come and do this and they can be seen and they can be part of something bigger (P#2)

The challenge is exploring new social endeavors to reach a new young audience through leveraging the existing audience experience. As participant #5 puts it

I think I have 10,000 hours in LAN organizer experience after all my years, there is so much experience in how things work and how people act and how to organize things that are not written down somewhere that must be communicated in some way. Only the big LANs have it and then only Birdie and DreamHack are left in Sweden. But that knowledge must somehow be shared (P#5)

When asked on how the future of LANS should be maintained, all participants shared a similar viewpoint on how the wider society and local government shared in the responsibility for engaging and sustaining this important real world experience for the modern online teen gamer. Uppsala kommun (government) is one of Birdie's biggest backers in terms of support both financial and other, which the organizers appreciate. But they also recognize the need to maintain this relationship and demonstrate the value to their backers.

Last year we actually had the head of Uppsala kommun and a lot of the high ranking party members of different political parties in Uppsala kommun visiting us. And we told them we're gonna have a case mod competition, like they were like what's the case mod? We had someone who actually made a square standing freely balanced on one of the corners. And it

was just filled with honeycomb holes for ventilation and the entire like computer bits was hanging freely in the middle of the computer. And they were in shocked like "wait someone made this? Yeah, he did it by hand. And that's how you engage people who are not into it and honestly have a hard time understanding why would you just sit to play and video games, like that's not all we do! (P#2)

Birdie organizers recognize that they have to demonstrate their value and actively work toward ensure securing a future for the event.

5. Discussion

This study examined a noncommercial LAN from the phenomenological perspective of the organizers who dedicate their time and effort to an event for the benefit others. In an era of ubiquitous online gaming where esports and streaming have become mainstream, the Birdie organizers remain committed to delivering the best offline event they can annually. Our use of IPA allowed us to gain insights into a subculture of community builders who negotiate the social interactions of those embedded in the culture of gaming, computers and creativity. As our analysis shows, LAN organizers in a non-profit context are driven by a commitment to fostering a community around a shared interest underpinned by a shared vision of the LAN as important for their culture of interest but also society as a whole. Local actors have previously been characterized as building gaming culture through cocreation of value while legitimizing the context and developing institutions (McCauley, et al., 2020). In the case of Birdie we find similar results, albeit within a long-standing institution in which the culture is maintained through a willingness to adapt and grow while retaining the sense of community.

This sense of community is perhaps best illustrated by the concept of that Birdie feeling. This feeling has to be maintained in an era where live-streaming platforms are designed and optimized to engage gaming audiences to express and share their emotions while watching (Lim, et al., 2020). Our organizers seek to design and optimize the Birdie experience to engage their audiences within the 'Birdie feeling' while integrating elements such as streaming that the newer audiences are conditioned to expect. Similarly, the rise of esports has shifted expectations of the audience in terms of the quality and design of the experience. LANs represent the optimal testing ground for ambitious young players to compete in front of an audience (Scholz, 2019) and Birdie organizers must balance the competitive scene with the casual attendee within a shared culture of fun. This provides one example of how a gaming community

around esports is formed (Cranmer, et al., 2021) in that Birdie represents the rare example of a gaming community that nearly 30 years has continued to exist and mature throughout the evolution of gaming itself. Here we present a community that has grown through the organizer's sense of responsibility for building and maintaining the culture of fun that is uniquely encapsulated as that 'Birdie Feeling'.

Birdie organizers are community builders that seek to drive inclusion within the LAN event itself but also for gaming culture within wider society itself. Research has emphasized the need for society, including parents and educators, to be more familiar with risks and opportunities of modern games in order to ensure more positive outcomes for the children that play them. The Birdie LAN represents the best of both these worlds. It offers a platform for younger audiences to engage with others in an offline setting allowing them both to benefit from social interaction while also integrating within the positive aspects of gaming culture. Further the role of Birdie as an educational tool for visitors, parents and society cannot be underestimated and they embrace this responsibility.

Even though Birdie LAN is a traditional LAN party, the case still highlights a core problem of gaming and esports, a male dominance and potential barriers to entry for females. There are ongoing issues over gender, identity, and inclusion within the broader cultural context of gaming (Cote, 2020) and while there are female visitors and participants, our sample consists of only male organizers given the identity of the current board and project group. This may be due to the long history and the male foundation of Birdie LAN, but still could be a danger for the long-term sustainability and the perception of social responsibility of Birdie LAN.

Females tend to experience more barriers to engaging in gameplay such as toxic online communities or gendered leisure constraints (Orme, 2021). Cyber aggression towards women in games remains an issue with research advocating the inclusion and normalization of the presence of women within gaming environments as one method to negate this cultural issue in the long term (Jagayat & Choma, 2021). Female LAN attendees report feeling out of place when so many attendees are male (Cote, 2020). Female Legends are a Swedish non-profit that works towards building a more inclusive culture for female and non-binary in gaming. Through working directly with Female Legends to support female attendees, the Birdie organizers demonstrate that the LAN is a valuable resource for developing prosocial behaviors. Where as increasingly we are understanding how the online game environment can encourage offline

prosocial behavior the Birdie LAN can be seen as encouraging prosocial behavior that can potentially be transferred back to the online environment. This commitment to maintaining a positive gaming culture and building inclusiveness is one of the key arguments for the importance of the modern LAN.

6. Future Research

This study represents the first stage of a longitudinal study. Stage two of the research will consist of re-interviewing the participants to reflect on the impact on the community and challenges of moving the event online. How has the community, event and role of organisers been impacted due to the disruption by Covid and the move to three consecutive online events? Stage three will occur in 2023 with planned observational studies at the next live event followed by a final round of interviews. How has the experience of the pandemic influenced the organizers understanding of the role of LANs?

7. Conclusion

LAN parties have a long history and were, for a long time, a major driving growth factor and formative driver for the game culture that pervades the online world today. This role has changed in the recent years, with more further disruption by the pandemic. In contrast to the beginning of LAN parties where technological barriers were the main driving force, LAN parties after the pandemic could help to create some form of social belonging and consequently communities will have a crucial role in this. The Birdie LAN is, thereby, a useful example for exploring this LAN culture, as it has a long history as well as a quite extensive evolution. Birdie LAN has evolved alongside game culture but still has a Birdie feeling that is rooted in long-standing LAN traditions. This paper fills a gap in the lack of research on LAN parties in recent years such as the growth of esports, developments such as streaming and the impact of an enforced digitalization through the pandemic. Understanding the impact of LAN parties on communities from a longitudinal perspective will provide insights on the role of video games in the digital society. Even though, people do not need to participate at LAN parties to play their hobby, the Birdie Feeling shows highlights the social dimension of LAN parties and reveals the importance of such "analog" anchors in a digital society.

8. References

- Ackermann, J. (2012). Playing computer games as social interaction: An analysis of LAN parties. In *Computer Games and New Media Cultures* (pp. 465-476). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Bowman, N. D., Kowert, R., & Cohen, E. (2015). When the ball stops, the fun stops too: The impact of social inclusion on video game enjoyment. *Computers in Human Behavior, 53*, 131-139.
- Collins, E., & Freeman, J. (2013). Do problematic and non-problematic video game players differ in extraversion, trait empathy, social capital and prosocial tendencies?. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(5), 1933-1940.
- Cote, A. C. (2020). Casual resistance: a longitudinal case study of video gaming's gendered construction and related audience perceptions. *Journal of Communication, 70*(6), 819-841.
- Cote, A. C. (2020). *Gaming sexism*. NYU Press.
- Cranmer, E. E., Han, D. I. D., van Gisbergen, M., & Jung, T. (2021). Esports matrix: Structuring the esports research agenda. *Computers in Human Behavior, 117*, 106671.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.
- Goldman, M. M., & Hedlund, D. P. (2020). Rebooting content: broadcasting sport and esports to homes during COVID-19. *International Journal of Sport Communication, 13*(3), 370-380.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field methods, 18*(1), 59-82.
- Halbrook, Y. J., O'Donnell, A. T., & Msetfi, R. M. (2019). When and how video games can be good: A review of the positive effects of video games on well-being. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 14*(6), 1096-1104.
- Smith, A. & Osborn, M. (2015). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (pp. 53-80): Sage, London.
- Jagayat, A., & Choma, B. L. (2021). Cyber-aggression towards women: Measurement and psychological predictors in gaming communities. *Computers in human behavior, 120*, 106753.
- Jansz, J., & Martens, L. (2005). Gaming at a LAN event: the social context of playing video games. *New media & society, 7*(3), 333-355.
- Jung, C. W. (2020). Role of gamers' communicative ecology on game community involvement and self-identification of gamer. *Computers in Human Behavior, 104*, 106164.
- Koch, N., Pongratz, S., McCauley, B., & Achtenhagen, L. (2020). 'Smashing it': How user entrepreneurs drive innovation in esports communities. *International Journal of Esports, 1*(1).
- Kowal, M., Conroy, E., Ramsbottom, N., Smithies, T., Toth, A., & Campbell, M. (2021). Gaming your mental health: a narrative review on mitigating symptoms of depression and anxiety using commercial video games. *JMIR Serious Games, 9*(2), e26575.
- Kowert, R., & Oldmeadow, J. A. (2013). (A) Social reputation: Exploring the relationship between online video game involvement and social competence. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(4), 1872-1878.
- Kvale, S. (1996). The 1,000-page question. *Qualitative inquiry, 2*(3), 275-284.
- Lim, J. S., Choe, M. J., Zhang, J., & Noh, G. Y. (2020). The role of wishful identification, emotional engagement, and parasocial relationships in repeated viewing of live-streaming games: A social cognitive theory perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior, 108*, 106327.
- McCauley, B., Tierney, K. D., Holmström, M., & Andersson, K. (2019). Understanding co-creation of value in LAN parties. In *ANZMAC 2019, 2nd-4th Dec. 2019, Wellington, New Zealand* (pp. 200-203).
- McCauley, B., Tierney, K., & Tokbaeva, D. (2020). Shaping a regional offline esports market: understanding how Jönköping, the 'city of dreamhack', takes URL to IRL. *International Journal on Media Management, 22*(1), 30-48.
- Muñoz, P., & Cohen, B. (2018). Entrepreneurial narratives in sustainable venturing: Beyond people, profit, and planet. *Journal of Small Business Management, 56*, 154-176.
- Nyström, A. G., et al. (2022). Current issues of sustainability in esports. *International Journal of Esports, 3*(3).
- Orme, S. (2021). "Just watching": A qualitative analysis of non-players' motivations for video game spectatorship. *new media & society, 1461444821989350*.
- Scholz, T. M. (2019). *eSports is Business*. Springer, Cham.
- Shaw, A. (2010). What is video game culture? Cultural studies and game studies. *Games and culture, 5*(4), 403-424.
- Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of consumer research, 21*(3), 491-503.
- Taylor, N. T. (2016). Now you're playing with audience power: The work of watching games. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 33*(4), 293-307.
- Taylor, N., Jenson, J., De Castell, S., & Dilouya, B. (2014). Public displays of play: Studying online games in physical settings. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*(4), 763-779.
- Taylor, T. L., & Witkowski, E. (2010). This is how we play it: what a mega-LAN can teach us about games. In *Proceedings of the fifth international conference on the foundations of digital games* (pp. 195-202).
- Verheijen, G. P., Stoltz, S. E., van den Berg, Y. H., & Cillessen, A. H. (2019). The influence of competitive and cooperative video games on behavior during play and friendship quality in adolescence. *Computers in Human Behavior, 91*, 297-304.
- Whitty, M. T., Young, G., & Goodings, L. (2011). What I won't do in pixels: Examining the limits of taboo violation in MMORPGs. *Computers in human behavior, 27*(1), 268-275.