

Developing a Community:
Qualitative Approaches to Understanding the Role of Community Engagement in Gameswork

by

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Author's Declaration

This thesis consists of material all of which I authored or co-authored: see Statement of Contributions included in the thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Statement of Contribution

Matthew Perks was the sole author for Chapters 1, 2, 5 and 6 which were written under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer R. Whitson. This dissertation consists in part of four manuscripts written for publication. Exceptions to sole authorship of material are as follows:

Research presented in Chapter 2: This research and article was conducted and written solely by Matthew Perks. Supervisor Dr. Jennifer R. Whitson provided feedback and edits on early drafts. Three anonymous peer-reviewers from *Games and Culture* provided feedback in the form of one round of major revisions and a subsequent round of minor revisions before publication.

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This research was conducted by Matthew Perks in collaboration with Dr. Felan Parker at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto as part of the Indie Interfaces SSHRC project. Matthew Perks and Dr. Felan Parker designed the study, conducted data analysis, drafted and edited the manuscript collaboratively. Matthew Perks conducted the data collection. Two anonymous peer reviewers provided feedback in the form of one round of minor revisions before publication.

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Abstract

Through multiple qualitative approaches, this dissertation contributes to understanding the increased role of addressing, engaging, and managing online communities in gameswork. It pays particular attention to how individual actors – such as game developers, content creators, community managers, and game journalists – collectively react to shifting industry trends that prioritize community engagement and building. It contributes to the literature on games by highlighting the experiences and perspectives of those working within the industry – such as community managers and game developers – as their industry undergoes significant shifts in priorities. In addition, it contributes to media and platform studies by examining the impacts on the production and consumption of media when audiences demand more intimate and direct access to creators. It pays specific attention to the workers who act as the filter between those who produce and those who consume.

This dissertation draws together four individual projects with distinct methodologies, research partners, and questions to illustrate the impacts of this shift. Chapter 2 examines critical games journalism to show how a lack of investment in community engagement leads to a breakdown of the community. Chapter 3 uses qualitative interviews and observation of drag content creators to show how they grapple with building their online communities amidst changing platform dynamics. Chapter 4 uses qualitative interviews with game developers to highlight how they choose to or choose not to work with content creators as they adapt to new priorities in their industry. Chapter 5 uses qualitative interviews with community managers to examine how their work has changed, continues to change, and leaves lingering anxieties and questions about the future of their work.

These individual projects are tied together through the complementary theme of servitization (Vandermerwe & Rada, 1988; Weststar & Dubois, 2022), which captures the trend of traditionally individually produced, packaged, and consumed products moving to a system of continuous access and consumption. As gameswork produces more products designed as a service for consumers, it changes the needs and expectations of gaming communities. I argue that this increased emphasis on community changes priorities for those working within creative and cultural industries that have implications for developers, community managers, and players. As these priorities change, new concerns arise regarding the working conditions, career, and educational pathways for those in community-focused roles.

Keywords: game industry, online communities, community management, gameswork, game production studies, content creation, servitization

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Game development used to happen in a vacuum, with limited influence from players. Graeme Kirkpatrick's research on UK gaming magazines showcases how the critique of gameplay and discussion of games was reserved for after a game was completed and released for consumption (Kirkpatrick, 2015). In addition, the activity of discussion and critique of games was reserved for those official reviewers working for these gaming magazines. Markets across various industries are consistently saturated with products indistinguishable from their competitors, making profitable sales difficult for companies and consuming quality goods a challenge for consumers. One potential solution to this dilemma, and the focus of this dissertation, is the increasing role that "community" plays in connecting producer and consumer. Companies and creators around the world are investing more to build and sustain a community of followers built on an emotional connection to their products and brand. Today, and as this dissertation will show, community sentiment and critique shape the development process, giving us insight into broader underlying shifts impacting global culture, creative, and media industries.

Games communities are multifaceted with a significant amount of work done on the peripheries that do not receive recognition. This includes the work of content creators, community managers, developers, and fans. This dissertation engages directly with this notion by examining multiple perspectives of community from different actors within the community 'sphere'. By examining the video game industry, this dissertation engages with the increasing role of "community" and the workers who take on these tasks. The video games industry is an

ideal site of study due to the visible nature of gamer culture – which exists primarily on social media sites due to its digital nature.

This dissertation collects first-hand accounts, interviews, observations, auto-ethnographic experiences, and reporting to trace a shift in how community work becomes prioritized within the video game industry. Community work is done by various actors such as live streamers, journalists, developers, and more and broadly encompasses the monitoring, engagement, and moderation of an online community, and – as this dissertation will evidence – is increasingly tied to the economic growth of the industry. Within Canada, the video game industry employs over 55,000 Canadians full-time and contributes roughly \$5.5 billion to the Canadian GDP (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2021). Since 2019, this contribution has grown by 23%. The industry comprises just under 1,000 video game companies, which has increased by 35% since 2019, mainly within Ontario and Quebec, and just over half (54%) of these studios employ fewer than five people.

The video game industry has similar cultural and social influence as similar industries, such as film and television, not only for its economic impact but also because it supplies one of the most popular leisure activities in the world. An estimated 23 million Canadians play video games, roughly 61% of the population, with an average age of 34 years old and evenly split between men and women (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2020). The video game industry undeniably impacts our social and cultural understanding of the world. This dissertation contributes to the growing body of research on working conditions and the shifts in how community-facing work becomes prioritized. I use the term video game industry

broadly to define my focus, though as Brendan Keogh argues, this term is reductive compared to the reality of the industry, which includes much more than the simple “commodifiable gamemaking activities” (Keogh, 2023, p.7).

This dissertation contributes to understanding how game production has changed, specifically how a focus on user-generated content and games-as-a-service shifts production priorities with an increasing focus on community building and engagement and highlights the workers contributing significantly to this shift. I draw mainly from game production studies and contribute in this dissertation to understanding what happens within the ‘black box’ of gaming beyond simply the work of programmers, artists, and technical workers in this industry. In addition, this work draws upon and develops on platform and media studies, contributing to a better understanding of the emerging community engagement work that occurs across various social media platforms. The remainder of this introduction provides a brief overview of various topics that will be fleshed out further in the following chapters. Specifically, the distinction of ‘online’ communities, the role of community manager that is crucial to this dissertation, a brief overview of game studies literature and online communities, the methodology employed in this dissertation, and a roadmap to understand my chapters before concluding.

1.1 Community and the ‘Online’ Community

The term community has been widely debated by sociologists for over 50 years, resulting in various definitions and understandings of community. Originally, communities were understood by their physical characteristics: how large was the community, where was it located, and what boundaries were drawn between it and others? However, with the industrial

revolution changing how individuals worked, lived, and travelled, network scholars expanded their understanding of community beyond physical limitations. Instead, they became focused on the type of social relations that existed (Wellman, 1982). Instead, social relations and the community became based on various binary relations: strong or weak, associates or friends, local or long-distance (Wellman, 1982). Primarily, strong-tie relations satisfy our core needs and produce tight-knit groups, while weak-tie needs typically serve utilitarian purposes such as an exchange of information.

This foundation of ties extends to ‘online’ communities as well. Howard Rheingold (1993), a writer widely credited with originating the term ‘virtual community,’ offers an early definition of what an online community is:

Virtual communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. (p. 57-58).

Jenny Preece (2000), a human-computer interaction scholar, defines a typography of online communities with characteristics that do not differ widely from that of a traditional community, namely: “shared goals, common interests, shared activities and governance, mutual satisfaction of needs, co-operation, enjoyment, pleasure and location” (Cavanagh, 2009, p. 2). These attributes are each essential to the larger argument I am making in the dissertation about the

new role “community” has in the economics of cultural production - the types of media we play and consume, the forms of monetization they support, and the affective ties they evoke.

Emphasis on space and location remains in some definitions of community, and these attributes become muddled when considering the ‘online.’ Many early community scholars argued that you could not ‘join’ a community but must live it – and therefore, ‘real-space’ co-location becomes central to a true community (Doheny-Farina, 1996). However, this understanding has been pushed back widely by established internet researchers. The definition of space is instead drawn back to understanding social ties as the critical determinant of connection and community. This is seen when examining literature studying online communities and their ability to ‘place’ their study within a specific space (see: Baym, 2015; Malaby, 2009; Taylor, 2006). More concerning to this dissertation is how online communities are utilized, especially when considering their direct connection to large, commercial social media platforms.

As noted previously, an essential attribute of community I consider is enjoyment and connection between individuals. However, online communities face a unique danger when co-opted for commercial purposes. Theorist Jan Fernback (2007) notes that the use of community has become more about “consumption engineering; it is the lure to impel the consumption of some commodity through direct marketing efforts” (p. 52). For Fernback (2007), the definition of a community is inconsequential as it is influenced by innumerable factors beyond our control, including flows of capital and other structural processes that shape our practices. As they state (2007), “we enact community the way we’ve conceived of it. The meaning of

community evolves as we devise new ways to employ it.” (p. 66). This point is critical to remember throughout this dissertation, as while many examples of online communities foster connection, safety, and belonging, there is almost always a spectre of control, direction, and commercialization. Nancy Baym’s work on online fan communities (1998) and her later work on relational labour enacted by musicians (2015) aids in understanding how a community can potentially co-exist under commercialization. For Baym (2000), online communities are based on the shared practices and meanings that their participants create. Often, these are built up based on the affordances of increasingly commercialized platforms. In addition, power within online communities impacts how they are established and grow.

Many internet community scholars (see: Cooper & Harrison, 2001; Kou & Nardi, 2014; Reid, 2002) have investigated online communities revealing the importance of community leaders and moderators and how power is enacted and reacted to within online spaces. These hierarchies of power are theorized as providing a new arena where inequality is enacted (Herring et al., 2002), a case echoed by many other studies of internet cultures (see: Gray, 2014; Vossen, 2018). In addition, managing these spaces and correcting the course for a community has previously been perceived as highly reactive (Cavanagh, 2009). Of more direct interest to this dissertation, however, is the way in which the ‘work’ of creating community has grown and changed over recent years. Recent scholarship around online communities has focused less on individual ‘spaces’, and instead on how communities and interactions online are linked to one another (Cavanagh, 2009). This shift is directly in line with the growth of a multitude of social media platforms and the way individuals share connections between

different ‘spaces’ online. As Wittel (2001) comments on the rise of the ‘network society’, this shift requires a broader, more nuanced understanding of what sociality looks like now compared to previously as the way individuals move about, across, and between different online platforms must be taken into account.

My interest here is in the role of community manager, which I detail in the following section. I have seen online communities become increasingly tied up in the platforms they exist on, and increasingly tied to commercial aspects of cultural production. Yet, I and many others are drawn to these communities for belonging, information, or entertainment. Finding a balance between the goal of engagement for profit or distribution and creating space for community suggests a novel form of work based on skills not previously valued. This dissertation is also fueled by my wish to better understand how these spaces are actively managed with interactions either fostered or suppressed. The following section sets a foundation for these community managers.

1.2 The Community Manager

Community management has seen its development in the past decade as the role shifts to meet the rising demands of social media sites (deWinter et al., 2017; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015; Roberts, 2016). Historically, community managers occupied informal roles within online game communities. They were commonly referred to with titles such as “gamemasters” or “moderators” as they swept up inappropriate and unwanted content on forum sites and early virtual worlds. Ordinary users and developers (in some rare cases) carried out these volunteer and unpaid roles. Their main tasks were to ensure that any rules set up in forums, chats, or

other spaces where users generated content were followed and to reprimand anyone who broke these rules, typically with suspensions or bans from the platform. However, as digital social platforms (such as virtual worlds, multiplayer games, and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Discord) have expanded, their roles have become more formalized. While moderation or customer support could be considered their primary tasks, I argue that their work can be conceptualized differently as it becomes more professionalized and integrated into software and platform development processes. As stated, while much of their work is based in moderation, specific distinct characteristics set them apart.

The moderation of platforms increasingly plays a role in the dissemination and control of users online, shaping public discourse (Gillespie, 2010, 2018). While community management is commonly linked to content moderation, particularly in academic literature, it is important to outline the overlaps and divergences. Moderation is done by community guideline documents or Terms of Service, which aim to instruct and guide users about what is and is not allowed on a particular platform. Those that enact and carry out the ‘will’ of these documents are typically those in community-oriented positions. This work is increasingly emblematic of labour in new economies, representing a broader shift towards “relational labour” as necessary for success (Baym, 2015). For Baym (2015), relational labour captures the work of “regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work” (p. 16). The work of moderating and mediating content and relations in online communities represents a need for “new skills and expertise in fostering connections and managing boundaries” as these workers struggle to balance the professional

and personal (Baym, 2015, p. 16). This work is often underpaid, exploitative, and precarious work that involves being exposed to racist, hateful, and in some cases traumatizing content (Roberts 2016). The literature on online community management is limited, so I use content moderation literature more generally to contextualize the work of online community management.

While growing, these differences mean that literature on content moderation leaves many gaps with respect to community management, which is a less common topic of study. While Roberts (2019) does acknowledge that community management services are sometimes offered by firms providing commercial content moderation and that it is a unique and separate role, she does not delve into the implications of community management and its growth within this industry. There are limited studies that investigate community management within the video game industry (see: Kerr and Kelleher 2015). However, their study mainly focuses on the reliance on emotional and passion labour in community management roles represented by the necessary qualifications in job postings. Chapter 5 of this dissertation engages more with the literature on community management and what precedes it in terms of early online community research. For this reason, I argue that the work of community managers requires a more focused analysis of the implications of their work of building, maintaining, and socializing their communities.

While I focus on online community management within the video game industry, I draw from research on community management in non-game platforms and community managers operating in physical spaces. These workers are found anywhere user-generated

content lives, employed in various industries and contexts, and work across numerous social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Discord, YouTube, Twitch, and more. While this area of research is arguably under-explored, there have been significant investigations into the work of community management in ‘real space’ – specifically surrounding co-working spaces – that helps us to better understand and define the work of community management as distinct. Melissa Gregg and Thomas Lodato (2018) spent extended time with and interviewing community managers and operators of co-working spaces in the United States. In their look into these spaces, they noticed the marketing emphasis placed on the community offered by co-working spaces as an enticing selling point for potential clients. From this, they examined the role of the community manager in these spaces, whose duty was to “combine logistical and affective labor with the service work of hospitality” (Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 178). Drawing on Hochschild’s emotional labour (1983), Gregg and Lodato (2018) highlight how the central role of the community manager is to ‘smooth’ the flow of business for both producer and consumer, creating an enjoyable ‘experience.’ For these co-working community managers, these tasks included:

Allocating time, tasks, budgets and head count [...] overseeing the circumstances of work and personal-professional lives of members, providing opportunities, offering exposure [...] securing a propitious environment for activity, whether through staging interactions among people or direct intervention [...] the community manager orchestrates relationships in both passive and active ways. (p. 181).

What seems to be universal about community management in co-working spaces and online game communities that I focus on is the staging of interactions – the creation of a welcoming space that allows for the smoothing of business transactions. I believe this is crucially important, especially as Gregg and Lodato (2018) emphasize the elective aspect of coworking spaces, highlighting that we opt-in to communities more now than simply exist in it by co-location. These same themes exist for online gaming communities, which are often joined by choice through sign-ups to social media sites, private chat servers, or opting into communications from a studio. The community managers in co-working spaces – similar to those in video game studios – often ‘sit’ in the greeting area of the space where they “manage access [and] greet guests” (Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 182). However, this work is necessary for the operation of the space, and thus its economic and social success seemingly went widely unrecognized – both in gratitude and compensation (Gregg & Lodato, 2018). Throughout their work, Gregg and Lodato point to writing and commentary on the community manager’s key role in a new ‘millennial’¹ way of working. Their work is critical to achieving success: plainly, without an engaged community, there are no consumers to sell to. However, community managers struggle to quantify their benefit directly to superiors without a clear link between their work and sales. This tension creates difficulty in arguing for greater compensation and status.

¹ The definition of millennial is often contested, but I define this as those born between the early 1980s and the last 1990s.

I am specifically interested in direct community work intertwined with the production process. I focus mainly on community management within game development as commonly paid work conducted within and as part of larger development teams in studios rather than outsourced to third-party firms. I distinguish this from unpaid community management work common within smaller fan-driven communities that often utilize volunteers to manage their spaces. In addition, I argue that this work is increasingly paid, and thus focus my efforts on this trend. Even in small teams of less than ten developers, it is increasingly possible that community management duties are carried out by a dedicated person. However, they may also wear the hats of marketing, public relations, publishing, and moderation. Typical tasks for online community managers may include operating social media accounts, interacting with users over chat servers or forums, communicating information back and forth between developers and users, and most other tasks involving interaction with the studio's wider community to drive and direct interest towards the studio's game amidst a highly saturated industry. My investigation is not necessarily on the games that the developers create, but rather how larger conceptions of a community (from journalism to content creators, to designing for content creator communities, to community management itself) are now central to discussions about the economics of cultural production, particularly in the video game industry. While community managers work in various industries, I focus mainly on the video game industry. I choose to do so as this industry has long been a site of study for scholars interested in online cultures within game studios. The following section briefly reviews game studies scholarship that has engaged with online communities.

1.3 Game Studies: Online Communities and Digital Platforms

Video game culture has been a site of investigation for many scholars interested in online communities. Many early studies of online communities in games focused on the back-and-forth relationship between players and developers and how players created governance systems for themselves through their community interactions. Thus, game studies as a field of study has produced many critical studies into online communities. Of interest to this dissertation are three takeaways from game studies: 1) the way that individuals form connections and create community through a shared interest in games and media; 2) that online communities surround the game industry with a culture of toxicity, racism, and sexism that makes managing community taxing; 3) and that large, established social media platforms are a necessary foundation for these communities to exist, but come with concerns of control and surveillance as they are owned and operated by third-parties to game developers and publishers.

Thomas Malaby, an ethnographic anthropologist, wrote in his book *Making Virtual Worlds* (2009) how one of the main challenges faced by the developers of the game *Second Life* was dealing with the community of players that inhabited their game. While focusing on the working conditions and challenges faced by the developers, he detailed how it was not simply enough for developers to create a space for their players but that the health and sustainability of their games depended on their ability to manage their communities to keep them from failing. T. L. Taylor, a sociologist specializing in the culture of gaming and online communities, challenges in her book, *Play Between Worlds* (2006), the preconceived notion of gaming as isolating through an ethnographic study involving participation in a virtual gaming world. Instead, she concludes that games, at their core, are social spaces. When she

attends an in-person convention focused on the game *Everquest*, it becomes apparent that connection and community are abundant surrounding the game. These connections spill over into the non-game space, where they can be captured more clearly (Taylor, 2006). Taylor (2006) conceives of players as “productive agents” who, though directed in their actions by the developers, undeniably influence the game's direction through their expertise and action. Furthermore, as these communities exist across a variety of spaces – not just simply in the game themselves – she raises early concerns on how game studios can expect to control their communities as they develop their customs, expectations, and norms (Taylor, 2006).

However, as these communities have continued to develop, a large body of research has been devoted to online communities' uncomfortable and often toxic reality. Mia Consolvo, a communications scholar interested in gameplay culture (2012), writes that as the industry continues to expand, these expansions are perceived as a threat to a supposed ‘typical’ gaming culture, leading to a backlash against those not perceived as ‘real’ gamers. This issue is captured in the research surrounding Gamergate, a misogynistic online harassment campaign pushing against ideas of feminism, diversity, and progressivism in online game cultures. Game studies scholars Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw (2015) detail how their academic research became embroiled in the controversy itself and became personally targeted. Other studies have additionally captured the anger, hate, and harassment in online gaming communities (see: Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2018). However, this toxicity extends past a year-long harassment campaign, as other scholars have studied. Kishonna Gray, a communications and gender studies scholar, details in her ethnographic book *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox*

Live (2014) a theoretical framework to understand deviant behaviours and individuals within these spaces, providing accounts of racism, sexism, and other types of harassment.

This new “live” economic model for games and other platformed media is tied to expanding emphasis on community. While some games generate toxic communities by their nature, encouraged due to competitive genres where players can ‘trash talk’ (see: Kou & Nardi, 2014), the surrounding social media platforms enable these communities to exist and create toxic spaces. Previously, game studies focused on the move from large ‘blockbuster’ studios—with development focused on finalized products with a one-time purchase (Nieborg, 2011; White et al., 2009)—to the rise of smartphone gaming—with a focus on freely accessible or cheaply purchasable games (Helmond et al., 2017; Nieborg, 2016)—and finally, the monetization and release over multiple stages allowing for constant updates and sustainable income over time (Nieborg, 2011; Prax, 2013). Challenging game developers are the need to create games that are always ‘on,’ allowing for consistent engagement by their player base. This is commonly referred to as ‘live service’ games or ‘games as service.’

In addition, large platforms that uplift and support the games industry – and in some cases exacerbate issues – have emerged and grown exponentially (Poell et al., 2021). Twitch.tv, the largest live streaming² platform for games-related content, has seen its community grow due to its ties to gaming culture and communities. Twitch.tv is used most

² Livestreaming refers to when an individual broadcasts in real-time over the internet. In the context of content creation, livestreaming is often broadcast to an audience, and in the case of video game content creators, typically involves footage from a video game with voice over by the content creator and in some cases footage from their webcam for reactions and greater personal connection with their audience.

commonly for individuals to live stream content to an audience. The most dominant form of the content streamed to Twitch is video games, but a significant proportion includes people just talking to their audience, referred to as ‘Just Chatting.’ Users can follow their favourite live streamers and support them monetarily by subscribing to their content. It is primarily a platform based on community interaction due to its live functionality. It features a live ‘chat’ for audience members to communicate with the live streamer or each other. Figure 1.1 below shows the home page of Twitch, which suggests channels to the viewer and updates based on their viewing habits. Figure 1.2 shows a typical live stream with the chat interface. Much of the research surrounding Twitch has focused on the experience of content creators who utilize the platform to grow their communities for both influence and profit (see: Gandolfi, 2016;

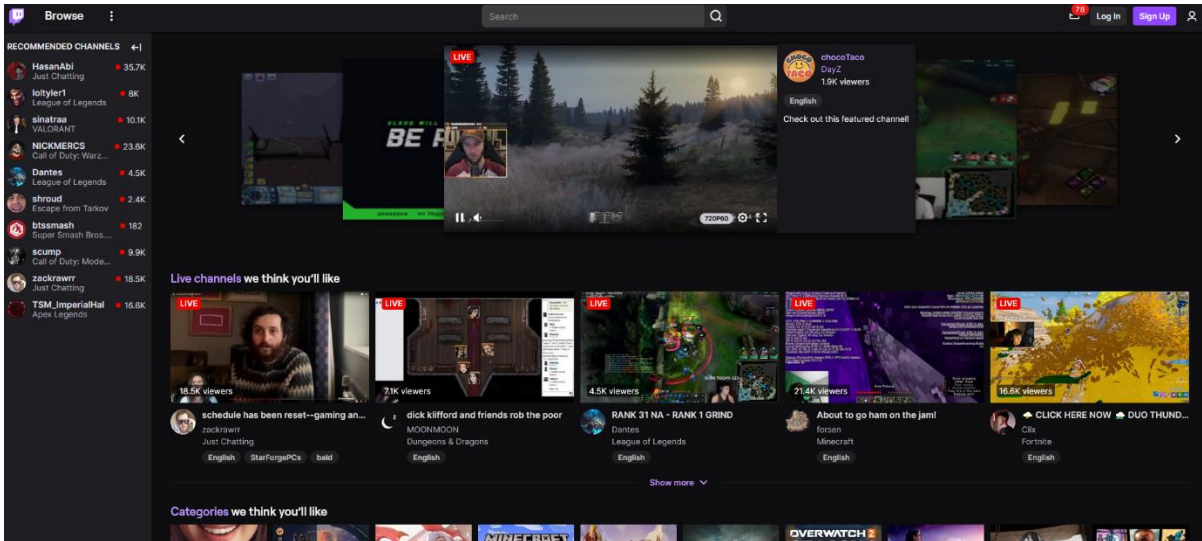


Figure 1.0.1: The homepage of Twitch.tv

Hamilton et al., 2014; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019a). Research often leaves out the work of those connecting, distributing content, and engaging with creators from the developers' side. Research surrounding live streaming has often prescribed it as an entrepreneurial space for

creation and entertainment. However, it often does not connect it within a larger, already established structure of production and consumption within the video game industry.

Altogether, the presence of deeply connected communities, an often overwhelming amount of toxicity needing to be moderated, and the growth of platforms both dependent on and necessary for growing community make online gaming communities and game development an ideal site of study for community management work. Community management work undeniably ties together essential areas of interest, such as the growth of

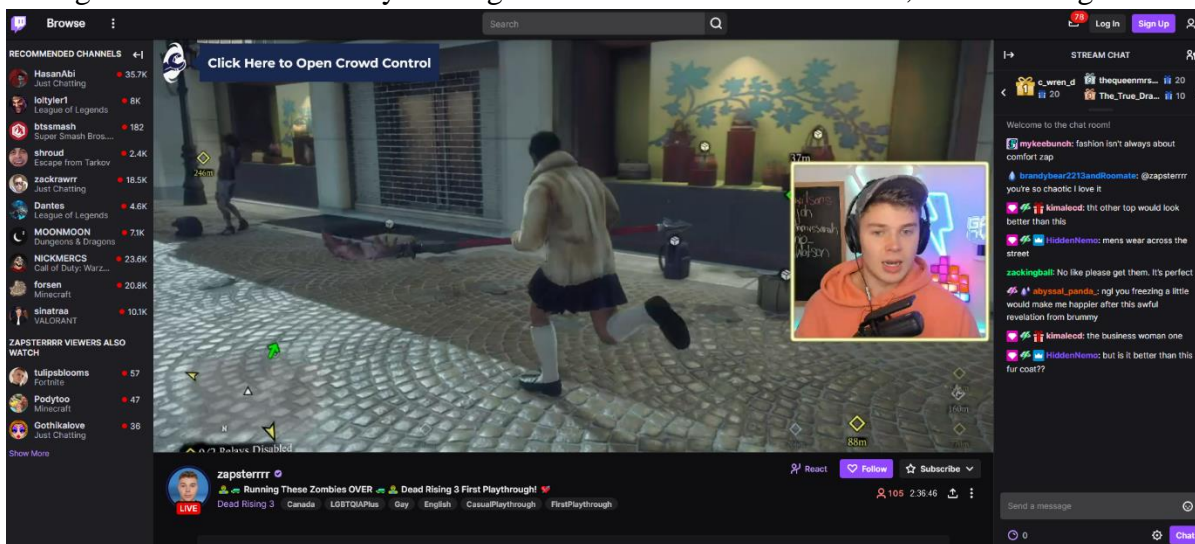


Figure 1.0.2: A typical Twitch.tv live stream featuring gaming content.

invisible and undervalued work that often faces exploitative conditions (Gregg & Lodato, 2018). Gameswork facilitates a site of study where this can be productively explored to learn more about how community leads to further adaptations and evolutions in creative and cultural industries. To answer some of these questions, I took an approach that prioritized community work, whether speaking with content creators, developers, or community managers. The following section details my methodology applied across my four chapters.

1.4 Methodology

The work presented in this dissertation represents various projects, publications, and collaborations carried out throughout my doctorate beginning in late 2017. I chose to present my dissertation as a collection of peer-reviewed articles rather than a continuous manuscript as I felt each aspect of community management work I wanted to capture was its own research project. As such, I approached each with an individual methodology, research partners, and theoretical framing. However, this work is grounded and drawn together by my primary intent: to understand better how a growing emphasis on community has shifted consumption and production processes for those involved in the creative and cultural industries.

The arguments made in the dissertation are rooted in several qualitative studies and research projects taking place from 2017 – 2021, as well as my own personal experiences as a games writer, player, and content creator. The main bulk of data presented in this dissertation was collected as part of the Indie Interfaces SSHRC-funded research project and received ethics clearance from both University of Waterloo and the University of Toronto, St. Michael's College. Indie Interfaces is an academic collaboration with game developers, platforms, and support organizations examining the wide range of "cultural intermediaries" that occupy the spaces between indie game production, distribution, and reception. My involvement in Indie Interfaces was as a research assistant, where I had the opportunity to collect data at research sites, conduct interviews with participants, and draft and publish academic papers alongside the other members. Since then, I have had the opportunity, via other research projects, to interview developers, content creators, and industry intermediaries on a variety of topics not limited by the scope of this dissertation.

I also draw on my personal experiences: I have written on the video game industry before my doctorate and had the privilege to attend multiple industry events, from conferences, to mixers, to days spent working at video game co-working spaces. This included attending multiple events at the Montreal co-working space devoted to independent game developers, GamePlay Space, such as game demo nights, industry mixers with platforms such as Steam, and knowledge-sharing conferences focused on games funding. Finally, I worked as a content creator for roughly two years during my doctorate, growing a community of followers in the thousands and partnering with industry leaders such as Twitch. Content creation is widely understood to be the work of creating entertaining or educational content distributed over a medium or platform of choice. For me, this involved creating content for Twitter as graphics, videos, and text alongside live-streamed video content on Twitch. This included being featured on the front page of Twitch for my content, as well as organizing and speaking at digital conferences and panels focused on LGBTQIA2+ content creators (Rainbow Arcade, 2020). Multiple media outlets have interviewed me on my content creation on topics of gender diversity in different gaming franchises and the rise of digital peer-to-peer fundraising within gaming communities.

My own personal experiences extend to auto-ethnography, informing not only my interpretation of the data I collected, but in building rapport with my participants. As a content creator, I bring a unique perspective and set of skills to my research. My experience in creating content allowed me to develop a deep understanding of how people interact and connect with each other in online spaces, and particularly, how the platforms community managers and

content creators use direct their work. Through my work, I have gained insights into the ways in which community managers can foster engagement, build rapport, and cultivate a sense of belonging among members. My positionality as a content creator has also enabled me to establish connections that have enriched my research and contributed to a more nuanced understanding of community management.

Each chapter applies and further describes its own unique methods, but overall, I have approached the years of qualitative data using the principles of abductive analysis. An abductive analysis is a qualitative data analysis approach grounded in pragmatism and aimed at theory construction (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Abduction refers to the process of producing theoretical hunches for unexpected research findings and then developing these speculative theories with a systemic analysis of variation across a study. This approach depends on iterative processes of working with empirical materials in relationship with broad and diverse social science theoretical literature. My observation, interviews, auto-ethnographic work, and content analysis allow for the triangulation of multiple data sources to provide a holistic understanding of the shifts in gameswork I examine (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014).

I sought out surprising findings within the data I collected based on the literature surrounding the continuous and recent shifts in the video game industry in monetization, work practices, and community management. These findings included upticks in reporting around specific topics of interest (such as decisions to include loot boxes in an upcoming game release), studios deciding to either hire or fire their employees or community managers for speaking out and different performances by community managers on social media sites as they

portrayed both their professional and personal lives – and how closely they tied those to their work within their studios. This search for unexpected findings and my interest in better understanding community management, what role it plays in content development cycles, and the commercial success of both media (such as games) and content creators (such as streamers) was facilitated by note-taking, memo writing, transcription, and coding of the empirical materials including the interviews mentioned above, observational fieldwork, and content analysis as well as informed by my own experiences. In the following paragraphs, I will outline the methods used for each chapter.

In Chapter 2, “*How Does Games Critique Impact Game Design Decisions?: A Case Study of Monetization and Loot Boxes*” I primarily drew from journalistic writing published from November 2017 to early 2019. I selected 24 articles from games publications, scholarly game writing, mainstream writing on loot boxes, and critical game writing on loot boxes. This includes more traditional journalism, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, to more games industry-focused writing, such as that found on *Polygon*. I chose articles based on their order of appearance in internet searches and purposefully sampled similar articles from different types of reporting outlets, as mentioned above. For those articles that reference specific actions by third parties, such as the regulatory bodies of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) and Entertainment Software Agency (ESA), these documents were examined directly. However, I drew mainly on writing that covered these organizations’ actions, as the public response surrounding the actions was most important to this chapter’s arguments. My analysis mainly served to create a linear narrative capturing the different actors, their responses, and

their negotiations in these moments of regulation. I do so to make apparent the many moving pieces involved in regulation within an industry and how it can impact production, consumption, and labour. This paper was reviewed by supervisor Dr. Jennifer R. Whitson originally in 2018 before being submitted for publication to the journal *Games and Culture* where it was reviewed by three anonymous peer-reviewers, who provided feedback in the form of one round of major revisions and a subsequent round of minor revisions before being accepted for publication.

In Chapter 3, “*Beauty from the Waist Up: Twitch Drag, Digital Labour and Queer Mediated Liveness*,” my co-author Christopher Persaud³ and I conducted digital participant observation of drag artist content creators who live streamed on Twitch and were members of the Twitch Teams “Rainbow Arcade” and “Stream Queens.”⁴ Twitch Teams allow content creators to identify as members of invite-only sub-communities to share communities and foster networking, though their live streams are still viewable publically. Rainbow Arcade is a diverse team of LGBTQIA+ streamers dedicated to providing a fun, positive, safe space on Twitch for the entire LGBTQIA+ community. Stream Queens is an all-Drag troupe of content creators, including Kings, Queens, Characters & Creatures on Twitch. Between March and August 2020, we observed 14 drag streamers from the Rainbow Arcade and Stream Queens teams regularly, generally for blocks of one to three hours at a time for an approximate total of

³ Christopher Persaud is a PhD candidate, researcher, and writer at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

⁴ Much of this fieldwork was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw an influx of drag to online video live streaming platforms such as YouTube and Twitch due to the closure of bars, clubs, and other venues where drag artists commonly performed.

80 hours. We supplemented this live digital fieldwork with the archive of videos (VODs) that drag streamers hosted on their Twitch profiles. These were useful for re-watching special events like charity fundraiser streams or exciting moments in a particular game.

We also observed streams from other drag streamers through a snowball approach following the Twitch platform's algorithmic suggestions and word-of-mouth recommendations from members of the Twitch Drag community. In addition, we employed purposive sampling to interview four drag streamers with varying audience sizes. Reliance on algorithmic suggestions to direct this work undoubtedly creates challenges towards generalizability, and this should not be discounted from our sample. However, in utilizing word-of-mouth and more purposive sampling to reach different audiences, I hope my co-author and I mitigate the negative impacts of algorithmic suggestions. In addition, some insights are gained from examining these suggestions themselves, specifically in which content creators the platform itself values over others. These semi-structured interviews focused on drag streamers' relationship with their audiences, queer representation, and the work of live streaming. Using these interviews and our participant-observation data, Christopher and I identified a list of main thematic areas of interest that would later become our main arguments structuring our discussion in the chapter. From here, an outline was drawn up, and the paper was passed back and forth between authors to draft sections most appropriate to our expertise and academic background. Two peer reviewers provided feedback in one round of moderate revisions and one subsequent round of minor revisions before publication.

Chapter 4, “*Streaming Ambivalence Livestreaming and Indie Game Development*,” utilized semi-structured interviews with 12 indie game developers based in Toronto and Montréal, Canada (see chapter for a more detailed breakdown of participants). These participants were selected using a combination of purposive sampling that leveraged past connections and snowball sampling. I conducted this research project with co-author Dr. Felan Parker⁵. We focused on commercial indie game developers who primarily make original, creator-owned games, usually distributed digitally, in various production contexts. Interviews took place in single sessions in 2018 and 2019, usually in studio offices or co-working spaces. We asked participants open-ended questions about their experiences with game live streaming, how they interacted with streamers, the impacts of streaming on various aspects of development, differences between streamers and other kinds of intermediaries like journalists, and the role of streaming platforms themselves. Interview data were transcribed, then collaboratively coded and analyzed according to emergent themes, allowing us to synthesize on-the-ground stories, perspectives, and attitudes. This research is part of the larger Indie Interfaces project. In addition to these interviews, our findings are informed by extensive interviews and ethnographic work conducted with indie game developers and cultural intermediaries between 2015 and 2019. During this time, the potential importance of streaming for indies became increasingly apparent. Two anonymous peer reviewers provided feedback in one round of minor revisions before publication.

⁵ Dr. Felan Parker is an interdisciplinary scholar of media industries and culture, specializing in games, digital media, and film. He works and teaches as an Associate Professor in the Book & Media Studies program at St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto.

In Chapter 5, “*Community Management: The Servitization of Online Communities and Digital Frontline Work,*” between March 2020 and May 2020, I conducted 14 qualitative interviews with community managers (nine women and five men) working in the video game industry digitally over Zoom and Discord. Participants were recruited from an open call on social media for participants and through snowball recommendations from community managers I had previously worked with on other research projects. I interviewed each community manager who reached out to me. Originally, interviews were planned to take place on-site at the Game Developers Conference (the most prominent industry conference for game developers) held annually in San Francisco. However, these interviews were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews lasted, on average, 40 minutes and focused on three main thematic areas. These included: 1) their past work history in community management and the games industry; 2) how they interface with developers and their role within the game development process; and 3) their perspectives on community management as a role and its place within the industry at large. Coding was carried out on transcripts of the interviews, with a first pass of open coding to try to identify the main thematic areas that emerged from my interviews, allowing for flexibility in themes and areas of focus. Following this, my final code list was developed (and later used to structure the main arguments in my discussion). I re-examined my interviews with a selective coding approach based on this code list. Through this analytical process, I determined that a critical ongoing concern of the study was the sense of uncertain ambiguity that community managers have toward their role in the industry. I systemically examined this phenomenon's variation among the conducted interviews and compared this to the literature reviewed. Specifically, I explored how this

phenomenon of interest varied across the data, over time, and across situations, at each point redefining the characteristics of the phenomenon of interest considering the similarities and differences. I plan to publish this chapter as a peer-reviewed journal article after completing my doctorate. In the following section, I detail the roadmap of this dissertation and how these seemingly disparate research projects and methodologies trace widespread shifts within the video game industry, pointing to the growing role community plays in production and consumption.

1.5 Dissertation Roadmap

Like many industries, the video game industry faces an increasingly difficult challenge due to the oversaturation of the market (Parker et al., 2017). Community development, engagement, and management offer a potential solution based on the sustained monitoring, engagement, and support of online communities to support production and entice consumers. This

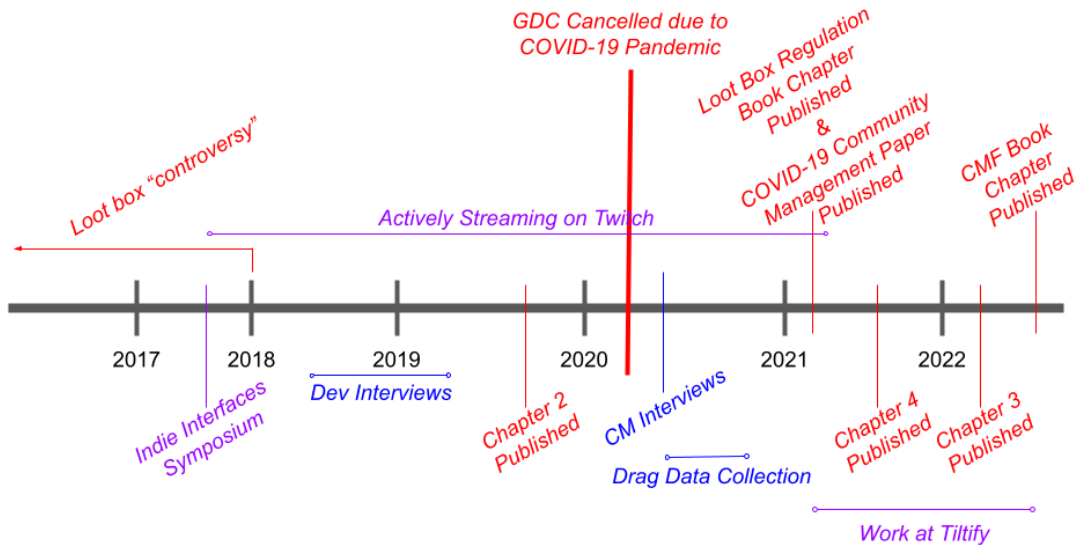


Figure 1.3: A timeline of this dissertation’s work and process

dissertation is organized across a timeline of the previously described fieldwork (and visualized alongside my other doctoral work in Figure 1.3 below), attempting to capture fundamental changes in gameswork as they relate to community management through various perspectives from developers, content creators, and community managers.

Overall, this dissertation asks two main questions. First, how has the video game industry responded to the increased emphasis to engage with online communities? Secondly, how do professionals in the video game industry perceive the changing landscape of community management? In Chapter 2, based on journalistic reporting in 2017 and 2018, I explore a case study of community breakdown when the attention paid to community engagement was not as prominent as contemporarily. To do so, I draw on reporting from the controversy surrounding *Electronic Arts' Battlefield II* launch and choice to focus on 'loot box monetization.' Pressure for studios to continuously develop games, constrained by tight timelines and massive budgets with the expectation that these games will recoup these investments, led studios to adopt novel forms of monetization previously only seen in gambling and the emerging mobile and free-to-play markets. This sudden shift to gambling-like monetization received immense backlash and became the focus of journalistic reporting for months. This chapter draws from the field of sociology of critique developed mainly by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, both French sociologists. It explores the current model of capitalism within the video game industry, justifying why it is fair and how it adapts when faced with significant criticism. Within this chapter, I argue that we are witnessing the

emerging emphasis placed on managing communities and the financial consequences of ignoring them – a gap that developers must contend with.

Chapter 3 offers a case study on live streaming content creators and how they adapt to changes within their industry that prioritize community as they begin building their communities. It ties to the more significant thesis of this dissertation as it considers how content creators have become engrained within the changing production and consumption processes. Like community managers, they strive for engagement that will ideally lead to some form of monetary gain. However, community managers often utilize them to drive engagement on their behalf. This chapter illustrates how community processes impact the game industry and are present in more general cultural productions such as those in which content creators are involved. It documents LGBTQIA2+ drag content creators and their efforts to etch out space for themselves as entrepreneurs and artists. This chapter highlights tensions in the representation of queer identities in the social media age. As more queer people begin developing branded social media selves in spaces of real-time performance, as evidenced by the increasing number of drag streamers on Twitch, their performance of queerness becomes tied up in systems of monetization and expectations of their audiences.

Meanwhile, game developers are trying to engage with these content creators to benefit from their followings. This case study offers insight into how creators find themselves caught up in shifts and changes within this industry. This includes creating content amidst a global pandemic that saw drastic surges in Twitch, TikTok, and Twitter platform users. This chapter concludes with developing the concept of “queer mediated liveness” and makes theoretical

contributions distinct from the rest of this thesis. It is included in this dissertation to highlight how community builders are recognized as critical players that offer solutions to fill the gap presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4 follows the foundation of Chapter 3, focusing on how developers begin to grapple with ideas of designing for the community and creators. This follows Chapter 2, which sets community engagement as the key to success in the video game industry and a necessary factor to contend with actively. A tension exists for developers between creating a “good game” but also in building additional content to attract, manage, grow, and maintain communities around the game long before it is even available to play. This chapter uses qualitative interviews with community managers and game studio leaders conducted in 2019, focusing on how they have adapted to the rise of content creation and live streaming and how these new community-facing foci impact the development process. This chapter investigates how those “on the ground” adjust to rapidly shifting industry pressures. A focus on developing ‘community,’ rather than simply developing individual games, begins to emerge as studios shift their focus from individual retail sales to continuous servitization towards consumers. This chapter is presented as a case study focusing on understanding developers' quick (though sometimes unsuccessful) reactions. While some developers can engage with their communities and see benefits, others grapple with conflicting interests. This includes their artistic expression as developers and anxieties in giving over their content to entrepreneurial creators to use as they wish. This chapter highlights the high level of uncertainty that exists surrounding the

pathways toward a game's success. This leaves many indie developers ambivalent about leveraging influencer attention and how to justify the increased time and energy commitment.

Chapter 5 examines the most contemporary source related to this shift in gameswork by focusing on community managers. This chapter contributes to this dissertation's thesis by examining community managers' perspectives on their own work. I aimed to capture a direct connection between my theorized shifts in production and consumption with how community managers perceive their work and industry and the anxieties of their work as they transition through this industry-wide shift. Ultimately, it ties together several chapters that, while referring, do not engage directly with community managers themselves. It utilizes qualitative interviews conducted online in 2020 with community managers working in the video game industry. Now aware of their growing importance in the rise, fall, successes, and failures of the studios they work for and the communities they manage, community managers are keenly aware of the value they provide.

Nevertheless, they are skeptical about whether others see this value within their industry. Conducted at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily in March 2020, these interviews offer a unique perspective on online community management and their associated role as the front-line and essential workers of online spaces. This chapter focuses on their work requirements, how it has shifted over time, their outlook on their role and their influence not only on the video game industry. This understanding of community is against a backdrop of related literature in game studies that focuses on industry trends towards 'games as service.' This chapter contributes to game studies by focusing on the role of community and community

managers, as much of the previous research has focused on developers or communities of players themselves. Arguably, it is imperative to consider the perspective of those facilitating these relationships and shift, creating sustained engagement over time. As this work was conducted over many years and thus represents differing projects and collaborations with multiple researchers, mentors, and colleagues, each chapter begins with a preface providing context and updates on the work presented.

1.6 Conclusion

This dissertation has three main contributions to more comprehensive scholarship: first, to make theoretical connections across aspects of games communities (such as developers, content creators, and community managers) that are often seen as discrete or invisible as they relate to the production of community. As outlined and to be developed in later chapters, community management work is pervasive across a variety of industries, from games to film and media production. This work maintains and sustains a userbase for a firm, though it is often conflated with similar work of moderation, communications, marketing, and social media. In addition, it represents a shift in values within capitalism by a failure to contend with community engagement in Chapter 2 to Chapter 4, where developers begin to grapple with the new reality of having to take community engagement seriously. Understanding this work is critical for Media Studies scholars interested in cycles of production and consumption, especially as many forms of media we consume continue to move towards ‘live service’ models for both its producers and audiences. For Platform scholars, the work of community management speaks to how these technologies extend their life cycles as their work creates

sustainable communities of users, and community managers leverage and encourage affective ties between users.

This dissertation's second contribution is towards broader areas of sociological literature, such as the sociology of work, the sociology of occupations, and labour studies, specifically on the increasing precarity of work and its impacts on those seeking stable employment. In addition, the feminization of labour and care work has long been documented by concepts such as emotional labour, care labour, and relational labour. This dissertation focuses on a form of work not traditionally considered previously by this literature and interrogates the unique and shifting conditions of that work. Studies interested in the precarity of work, such as this dissertation, undoubtedly have potential contributions to informing policy and public discourse about the changing nature of work. As policy at the federal level becomes more interested in precarious forms of labour (Fong, 2018) and related inequalities, studies such as this contribute to a broader knowledge of who works in these roles and under what conditions. In addition, it contributes to understanding the increase in unionization efforts in the video game industry (Keogh & Abraham, 2022; Parvini & Contreras, 2023) and potentially contributes evidence for workers to push for greater protections in their work. Due to the nature of gameswork as precarious and dispersed, unionization efforts must account for this. Studies such as this arguably provide a needed understanding of the nature of gameswork (Keogh & Abraham, 2022; Weststar & Legault, 2019).

Finally, as this dissertation draws mainly from the video game industry, and much of previous literature in game studies has focused either on the developers, the product itself, or the players, this dissertation contributes to a more holistic understanding of this industry.

Community management acts as a ‘filter’ between these different groups and the answer to the gap between developers and consumers. Community management work is critical to ensuring crucial information passes between different audiences and that consumers, in particular, feel that they are heard to assuage disruptive criticism. These themes are most prominently evident in Chapters 3 and 5, which focus on game developers as they recognize the value of community management and attempt to grapple with these changes to their work. Overall, this dissertation aims to aid in better theorizing the current context of digital media labour and nuanced understandings of how media is produced, consumed and managed online. Online communities offer solace, belonging, and connection – especially in an endemic world where many are still recovering from or adapting to working and connecting remotely. Thus who ‘sits in the seat’ directing, engaging, and managing these communities should be of considerable interest to any concerned with questions of what our work, connection, and consumption will look like moving forward.

Chapter 2: How Does Games Critique Impact Game Design Decisions? A Case Study of Monetization and Loot Boxes⁶

2.1 Preface⁷

Overall, this dissertation traces changes in gameswork over time, with each chapter taking a different approach to online community and the consequences of not engaging. This chapter showcases one of the first moments I observed the breakdown between developers and the player community due to a lack of engagement. I wrote this chapter early in my doctoral career, but I had been interested in loot boxes and monetization since my Master's degree at Concordia University. Game studies always interested me, but I did not know what I could contribute to that field or what it entailed outside of close readings of games and ethnography in virtual worlds. At the time, monetization models and platform economics were not common topics of study in games, but since this article was initially written in 2017, studies focused on these areas have increased (see: Karlsen, 2022; D. B. Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Zanescu et al., 2021 and others). This chapter now fits within a broader literature that has engaged with loot boxes and other forms of gambling prevalent within the video game industry. In addition, it contributes to the literature examining how developers' behaviours change and the introduction (and sometimes rejection) of specific mechanics, such as loot boxes. This chapter still uniquely contributes through its methodology of examining these shifts retrospectively through critical journalism, allowing researchers to develop timelines that can inform either other qualitative

⁶ Perks, M. E. (2020). How does games critique impact game design decisions? A case study of monetization and loot boxes. *Games and Culture*, 15(8), 1004-1025.

⁷ This preface represents new content added to contextualize this chapter. All other content for this chapter is presented as pre-published.

work alongside or with developers or provide context for the phenomenon they are investigating. In addition, it shows more specifically the function by which critique is enrolled into capitalism as it responds to criticism.

My Master's studies eventually took me to work at the Lifestyle and Addiction Research Lab where I was a research assistant on several gambling-related projects (see: Monson et al., 2019) and wrote several blog posts on gambling in games (Perks, 2016, 2017). At that same time, there was a growth in the use of gambling-like mechanics used for video game monetization. Specifically, a developer's choice of monetization methods changed the way the game was developed and played. For example, introducing "loot boxes" in a game encouraged players to participate in gambling-like activities, spend money within the game, and thus generate more income for the studio. To incentivize this type of 'play', they would lock certain types of content away within randomized loot boxes that were available for purchase, making this content inaccessible in any other way. This was different than the standard way of developing and releasing games, which is that an individual paid in full for a game and received all of the content, or perhaps individually selected and paid for additional pieces of content in smaller microtransactions. While it had been common in other global markets for video games, this method of monetization was very uncommon in the North American market at the time.

For me, this moment showcases how breakdowns occur within systems of capital. To do this, I drew on Boltanski and Chiapello, specifically on how capitalism absorbs critiques (such as social movements or critical reporting), to change and adapt. I also drew on

Boltanski's later work on the sociology of critique to show how the process of criticism unfolds: who participates, how, and what the consequences are. This chapter outlines the actors, in this case, journalists and the broader games culture and community as they collectively go through a critique process. Boltanski and Chiappelo argue that this critique process aims to enact significant change. Reflecting now, years after this paper was written, while these critiques were absorbed and initiated some changes, they were not to the degree I suggested in the chapter's conclusions. The significant, sweeping changes I outlined as possibilities have not yet come to fruition and might never come to fruition. While I proposed that this wave of criticism might lead to new forms of monetization, loot boxes remain a standard method in the industry, and no 'new' forms have emerged yet. I also expected greater shifts to occur within studio practices, such as changing monetization models to more traditional methods. While there was a tremendous amount of critique directed towards loot boxes in game studios, and many studios changed their direction and practices, some stayed firm towards using loot boxes and sweeping international and federal regulations never came fully to maturity.

2.2 Introduction

Critique, or the disputes that emerge within our daily lives, have always been present within games culture and the industry. *Game Studies* traditionally focused on analyses of game representations, world-building and narrative, and player actions (Pérez Latorre, 2015). While analysis is common in *Game Studies*, there is little theorization around the role of critique, how it functions, and its impact on game production practices. Studying critical games writing is

important given its influence on games and games culture (Kümpel & Haas, 2016). Previous scholarship on games critique focuses on the inherently subjective, embodied experience of playing games as reviewers (Jennings, 2015). But others argue that more attention should be paid to the relationship between game analysts and the media they judge (Keogh, 2014). In this paper, I offer a theoretical framework to better understand the power of *critique itself* and the role it plays in industry transformations, applying it to a case study of loot boxes.

I draw on Boltanski's (2011) *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, applying a theoretical framework that emphasizes the power of everyday individuals working in games, instead of a critical elite, such as academics. I predominantly focus on more popular writing venues such as *Waypoint* and middle-state publishing such as *First Person Scholar* that act as a 'networked fourth estate' with the collective aim of keeping the video game industry in check (Benkler, 2006). Primarily staffed by either freelance, contract, or volunteer writers, these sites and others are not considered to be an elite. This is in contrast to more traditional games journalism sites (such as *IGN* or *GameSpot*) and magazines which largely focus on games reviews, driving consumerism and acting as 'tastemakers' (Kirkpatrick, 2013, 2015). This analysis is applied at a time where commentary within the industry is often regarded as unnecessary by certain groups of consumers. There is an associated debate as to whether criticism should be regarded as censorship or as a sign of progress – that of a maturing media industry (Jenkins, 2015; Ramanan, 2017; Senior et al., 2018). I additionally draw on Boltanski and Chiapello's earlier work (2005), to consider how economic reproaches specifically impact the industry. The framework offered by Boltanski and Chiapello has been utilized previously

in games production studies, specifically to examine shifts from large-scale production to small team and data-driven design (Whitson, 2019). Within the context of this paper, this framework assists us in better understanding interdependencies between critics and developers, who in response to public pressure generated from journalist commentaries, reflect upon and change their games accordingly. This model emphasizes how design, media, and ‘everyday actors’ (such as games critics) interact, categorizing the different forms of developer responses when faced with public and media backlash.

The use of Boltanski’s sociology of critique offers significant contributions to our understanding of games critique, how it impacts production, and the role of critique more generally. Journalism studies as a discipline has been well-established for decades, but has primarily been concerned with the work of journalists themselves and the conditions of the industry they work in, rather than the impacts of their work more widely (Deuze, 2007). Journalism studies is contemporarily concerned with the challenges the industry faces surrounding ownership, objectivity, and relations with ‘the public’ (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011). My use of Boltanski arguably coincides with the work of journalism studies, which seeks to understand the labour and internal crises of an industry but offers to bridge our understanding of how this industry potentially shapes and impacts the production of another in significant ways through their work. In order to distinguish this work from journalism studies more generally, and to keep it in line with Boltanski’s sociology of critique, I refer mainly to games critics, but mean this to extend to those who write, publish, network, and think on games widely and publicly.

Shifts in models of game development and the re-organization of labour have been previously examined (see: Kerr, 2017; Lipkin, 2012; Whitson, 2012). Economic analyses of the video game industry are significant as the industry continues to grow as a large contributor to global media and entertainment economies (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). While this work no doubt fits in with work that has tackled the political economy of the video game industry (see: Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005; Joseph, 2017; Kerr, 2017) and therefore may fit in with the more economic-centered analyses of political economy more generally, my main focus here is on the processes of critique as a function and how it intersects with production practices and collective understanding of games issues. Issues of how critique shapes and informs games culture and its communities is arguably lost with a focus only on the economics involved. Furthermore, the work of critics is important, but is increasingly operating outside of the scope of formal economies in systems of freelancing or through activity on social media sites such as Twitter (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011; Hermida, 2014). Beyond discussions of this free and precarious labour, which is not my focus here, a political economy approach faces difficulties in grasping at these cultural practices and influences. In this paper, I specifically focus on one issue in the video game industry: monetization, or, the mechanisms by which a developer earns revenue from their game and the cultural practices and implications of critique. Developers always face issues due to their monetization models and the criticisms they receive arguably contribute to larger industry changes, therefore, it is imperative to work to understand how these processes of critique occur and their implications on wider production, consumption, and culture (Nieborg, 2016).

While *Game Studies* is beginning to understand the importance of economic platform studies and economic shifts within the industry, there are few theoretical frameworks to unpack these shifts that also take into consideration their cultural significance and impact on communities. Three topics are examined in this paper: 1) historical shifts of monetization and the importance of their study; 2) Luc Boltanski's conception of pragmatic sociology of critique and its application to *Game Studies* and, 3) commentary surrounding a controversial form of monetization: loot boxes. 'Loot box' monetization, or the use of gambling- or chance-based mechanics to profit from consumers, are emblematic of a monetization model widely considered to be exploitative of consumers. This paper argues the importance of analyzing critique within the field of *Game Studies* to reveal divisive fault lines within the industry.

This analysis helps us understand transformations and the influence of wider discourse in game design practices. Furthermore, the work of games critics, who are often unpaid or work in precarious freelance positions, is arguably deserving of study. Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015) argues that writing on games is formative for games culture and shapes the perceptions of games and 'gamers.' I argue an extension of this, that games critics, rather than providing only simple commentary, serve to drive large and wide-ranging changes in game design that inform choices in game development, the genres and aesthetics of games, and the way that revenue is extracted from consumers. While consumers do certainly possess a large amount of power through their purchasing, especially in areas of leisure and entertainment products such as games, games critics arguably act to direct this purchasing power in at least some manner.

2.3 The Shifting Reality of Monetization

Utilizing Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) and Boltanski's (2011) later work, I argue that economic shifts and controversy can be traced within monetization to better understand processes of change. These shifts are encapsulated in the transformation from 'blockbuster' monetization (where games are purchased once for a premium price) to 'free-to-play' monetization (where games are free to access but require smaller incremental purchases over time). The bulk of Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005, p. 162) work defined the "spirit of capitalism." This spirit is an underlying ideology justifying widespread commitment to capitalism, rendering it viable and attractive, and included shifts from traditional bureaucratic workplaces to the emergence of networked firms and the rejection of hierarchical domination (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 162). Defined as continuous accumulation of capital through 'peaceful means,' capitalism exploits labourers in a never-ending system through its 'spirit,' to justify and maintain worker involvement (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 162). Resistance to these systems is incorporated into capitalism, shifting capitalism in significant ways (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 163). Broadly, criticism arises when a difference is observed between what is idealized or fair in capitalism and the reality experienced by everyday individuals (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 173).

Criticisms are handled differently by independent actors (such as different game development studios) but must be responded to remain legitimate (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 174). A critical assessment could be proven false through a re-organization of the system, such as quick changes in policy (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 174). Alternatively, issues can be circumvented to avoid major re-structuring (e.g. moving production to regions

with less regulation in response to worker rights violations in the original country) (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 174). The primary task of these condemnations is to identify key issues within a capitalist system and offer the opportunity to either clarify or correct these issues so that they appear fair (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 175).

Boltanski and Chiapello can be used to characterize shifts in video game monetization models. Two forms of monetization discussed are summarized in Table 1 and draws from Boltanski and Chiapello’s framework to highlight problems and solutions associated with each model. Previous research in *Game Studies* examined historical and political economic shifts (see: Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009; Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). However, contemporary shifts including the rise of smartphone and tablet games, independent games development, and shifts in how games are monetized, are underrepresented in *Game Studies* (Kerr, 2017; Whitson, 2012). The role of monetization requires further investigation and arguably impacts how games are consumed and purchased, but also who can have a career in games. As monetization is one way that developers define the relationship with their consumers, the implications of their transformation should be interrogated. With a focus on monetization, economic platform studies is used to analyze the shift from ‘blockbuster’ models of monetization to ‘free-to-play’ models.

Table 2.1 *Comparing ‘Blockbuster’ Monetization and ‘Free-to-Play’ Monetization*

	‘Blockbuster’ Monetization	‘Free-to-Play’ Monetization
Forms of capital accumulation	Single-sale, whole retail products typically sold in physical locations by ‘known’	A mixed-methods approach including freemium, premium, microtransactions,

	developers and hardware makers.	advertisement-based revenue, and blockbuster revenue generation.
What is being rejected	Proliferation and saturation of video game market with untested, untrusted developers.	Gatekeeping to game development; the separation of developer and player for use of labour and co-development; traditional modes of monetization reliant on whole products sold only once for a set price.
Problems that have been identified	Exclusivity and near-monopoly levels of difficulty to enter market due to gatekeeping; lack of purchasing options for those without the disposable income; difficulty for independent games development to emerge; cyclical development cycles with little risk taken in terms of genre and content.	Games-as-service and data-driven game development increases surveillance of players; exploitative forms of monetization; exploitation of user-generated content and labour; the rise and success of new genres, limiting possibilities of success in other genres.
Solutions	Online distribution platforms; new networked forms of working with smaller team sizes; introduction of monetization models with either low or no initial purchasing fees.	Community management to build player engagement, including spectatorship; generation of revenue in the viewership and spectacle surrounding a game rather than in the product itself over a sustainable amount of time.

Economic platform studies, in the context of games, ask how economic contexts can “enable, constrain, shape, and support creative work” (Deterding, 2016). Based within technological platform studies and film production studies (see: Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Caldwell, 2008; Salter & Murray, 2014; van Dijck, 2013) it emphasizes dynamics of game design patterns,

genres, and business models (Deterding, 2016). Economic platform studies investigate how economic shifts alter the appeal and viability of games for developers, consumers, and users (such as shifts in consumer taste of genres, e.g., the saturation and subsequent decline of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs)) (Deterding, 2016). Not without precedent, the examination the economic conditions of the industry within *Game Studies* is niche, but previously interrogated economic shifts on the subjectivities of ‘games’ and ‘gamers’ (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & Peuter, 2003; O’Donnell, 2009; Whitson, 2012). Historically tracing these shifts establishes clear distinctions between different models of monetization.

Historically, triple-A studios (large studio corporations, e.g., Ubisoft, Electronic Arts) focused their development on ‘blockbuster’ games. Blockbuster games follow a “hit-driven publishing strategy” that relies on profiting from established franchises for revenue (Nieborg, 2011:3). This relies on one-time purchases of polished retail products from large, established fanbases (Nieborg, 2011; White et al., 2009). Several critiques emerged out of this form of monetization including a stagnation in creative game aesthetics. Combined with high development costs, risk aversion meant developers were less likely to take creative risks, placing a greater emphasis on sequels and proven genres (Nieborg, 2011). Consumers were additionally required to purchase games in full before playing leading to consumer uncertainty as they were unable to assess the value before purchase (Andersson & Andersson, 2006). Players, games critics, and other developers became increasingly frustrated with this model, fueled by the restrictive and cyclical nature of hardware platform development (Johns, 2006;

Williams, 2002). Hardware knowledge that would allow more creative forms of development were ‘black boxed’ through expensive software development kits, software engines, and gatekeeping that made console development inaccessible and unknowable to both consumers and independent developers (Johns, 2006; Williams, 2002). Combined with the emergence of new technologies and an adaptive, capitalistic instinct to survive, new models of monetization emerged within the industry (Whitson, 2012).

New models of monetization are predicated upon the proliferation of smartphones and tablets, leading to a diversification in platforms (Helmond et al., 2017; Mäyrä, 2008). With sped-up development cycles and significantly lower costs, developers were able to innovate games for un-tapped markets supported by un-tested monetization models. This growth in game development indicated that new models could succeed outside of traditional ‘blockbuster’ monetization. Referred to as free-to-play monetization, Nieborg (2016) classifies five of the main methods commonly used. Overall, they are characterized by a lack of up-front purchase by consumers, replaced with smaller sustained purchases over time (Nieborg 2016). These five models are captured in Table 2.

Table 2.2 *Free-to-play (F2P) monetization models*

Monetization Method	Description
1) ‘Premium’	Users pay per download for full product, most like the ‘blockbuster’ model of triple-A development.
2) ‘Freemium’	Users download the initial product for free and pay later for a full, ‘unlocked’ version, similar to ‘shareware.’
3) Advertising Supported	Users download the product for free, but gameplay is interrupted by the presence of advertising. In some cases, users can pay an

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| | extra fee to remove advertisements (upgrading to a ‘freemium’ model). |
| 4) Subscription Model | Users download the game for free, typically, but must pay a fee over a set period (typically every month) to have continued access to the game. |
| 5) Microtransactions | Users download the game for free but have the option to purchase additional content or virtual items within the game. |

Source: Adapted from Nieborg (2016)

However, many of the strategies employed in free-to-play monetization have their history in arcade slot machines. Coin-operated machines in general (from vending machines to strength testers to slot machines) emerged in the 1880s and provided innovative and supposedly interactive stimulus to consumers (Huhtamo, 2005). At first found in stores, restaurants, and bars, these machines soon were found in dedicated establishments, commonly known as “penny arcades” and relied on the psychologically mesmerizing effect of intensive feedback loops. At the time, designers understood the goal of making consumers spend as much as possible as quickly as possible in small increments and this can be seen worldwide today in the continued proliferation of slot machines (Fisher & Griffiths, 1995; Huhtamo, 2005). In the early to mid-1990s these arcades and gambling halls came under criticism for their exploitation of consumers, in an effort to combat this, the industry shifted its focus from games of chance, to games of skill, which led to the new forms of gambling in casinos and pinball games in arcades (Fisher & Griffiths, 1995; Huhtamo, 2005). Overall, the history of shifts in monetization in the games industry is similar to previous shifts in coin-operated penny games, arcades, and pinball machines.

In contemporary practice, developers use a mix of monetization models to create the feeling of choice for consumers, mixing both moments of chance and skill together (Nieborg, 2016). As developers continue to refine their implementation of free-to-play monetization, development of games transforms to tailor certain styles of play and consumption to maximize profits. This includes the extension of time-on-device, increased push notifications, ‘check-in’ features of free-to-play games, and emphasizing perceived social benefits to items (such as more appealing customizations, quarantining items behind paywalls) (Animesh et al., 2011; Guo & Barnes, 2009; Huang, 2012; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2015). In summary, the problems associated with ‘blockbuster’ development brought about changes in how games were made and monetized, driven by critique, while introducing new complications to address. Moving forward, theoretical frameworks are needed to better grasp these processes of analysis and transformation within the industry.

2.4 The Context, Process, and Necessity of Critique

Boltanski’s (2011) “pragmatic sociology of critique” interrogates the function and process of commentary. Critique is defined simply as “disputes of daily life [that] denounce people, systems, events [...] characterized as unjust by reference to particular situations or context” (Boltanski, 2011, p. 6). Heavy importance on the process, structure, and necessity of the dispute is emphasized rather than the content. Boltanski (2011) argues that commentary is the only defense against systems of oppression or domination from institutions (such as video game developers and publishers), who seek to maintain reality through repetition and control,

and that critique can be exercised, not just by the powerful, but by all individual actors in society.

In games, much of the power is held by developers and publishers, thus the role of games critics is to expose contradictions where the industry requires change. It should also be noted that consumers possess a large amount of power in their purchasing power. However, as critics work to bring disputes to a larger, mainstream platform, they break cycles of repetition and exploitation to aid consumers with a foundation of knowledge to judge these institutions and direct their consumer power. This section explores Boltanski's work on critique, focusing on three of his main arguments: 1) that there exists 'practical' and 'metapragmatic' moments; 2) that institutions are bodiless entities, who attempt to construct reality through a process of 'confirmation' and the use of spokespeople; and, 3) that critique is a necessary and integral part of society characterized by three forms of 'tests' that expose contradictions between what institutions say and what is experienced. While the tests will be explored in greater detail later, they are distinguished by who employs them and to what degree they are considered radical. Within games, tests can be considered as moments where game developers and publishers act to construct the experiences of their consumers, such as a press conference or game release.

Boltanski (2011) argues for a 'pragmatic' sociology of critique, or, that the capacity for judgement is held by ordinary individuals. This contrasts with traditional theories of critical sociology (see: Bourdieu, 2004) where power is held by a social elite. Instead, opportunities arise out of everyday disputes between the collective understanding of what should be (what Boltanski refers to as 'symbolic forms') and what is in fact experienced by individuals ('the

state of affairs’) (Boltanski, 2011, p. 109-110). These moments of dispute, referred to as ‘metapragmatic,’ emerge out of originally ‘practical’ moments where individuals come together to complete repetitive tasks that they collectively understand (p. 67-68). ‘Metapragmatic’ moments exercise more reflexivity and shift the focus from embodied action to characterizing action (Boltanski, 2011, p. 67-68). Representing a more self-referential approach, this aids in understanding the justification behind the action and if that aligns with the shared understanding of what is right (Boltanski, 2011, p. 68). Boltanski (2011) uses the example of a graduate department committee going over student profiles, without any critical thought to their process (a practical moment), only to have their process questioned by one individual, upon which the process switches to a metapragmatic moment where the focus is on characterizing the process as correct or not, fair or unfair (p. 68).

Within games, press coverage about a common game mechanic affords the opportunity to reconsider whether it is ethical or not. Through these ‘metapragmatic’ moments language can be more critical to draw attention to the gap between what is being suggested (the ‘symbolic form’) and the reality of the situation (the ‘state of affairs’). The difference between these two is typically characterized by exploitation or violence, and in recognizing the gap, individuals (i.e. consumers) recognize the violence as well. The process of shifting between a practical and metapragmatic moment is through, as Boltanski argues, the emergence of contradictions in a process of ‘confirmation,’ carried out by institutions and their spokespeople (Boltanski, 2011, p.72-73).

Institutions play an important role in Boltanski's (2011) conception of critique, where the two are tied together and cannot exist without the other. Institutions (such as government or corporations, in a traditional understanding) are regarded as a main source of violence, both symbolic and real, within society (Boltanski, 2011, p. 93-97). Criticism acts as both defense and emancipation from this violence (Boltanski, 2011, p. 97-99). However, we also rely on institutions to construct our reality for us through confirmation (Boltanski, 2011, p. 72-73). This process defines the 'what is' and 'what is not' within society, allowing for institutions to carry out their task – whether that be for profit, organization, or domination (Boltanski, 2011, p. 57, 94). Institutions are constantly caught up in the process of needing to confirm and re-confirm reality to maintain their power and is done through a process of practices that establish a normative discourse, such as corporate statements or federal hearings (Boltanski, 2011, p. 99).

Boltanski (2011) argues that the use of spokespeople by these bodiless institutions creates unease when they attempt a 'confirmation' that strays too far from the reality experienced by individuals (p. 101-102). This gap offers a moment for critique to be utilized, referred to as a 'hermeneutic contradiction' where the gap is exposed to the wider public (Boltanski, 2011, p. 86-87). Boltanski (2011) uses the example of contradictions and disputes that arise between small town city councils and the lived experiences of their citizens, where they are able to recognize the gap previously invisible to demand change within the town (p. 85). However, within the video game industry these contradictions are observed between the 'pitch mode' talk of corporate public relations workers, who spend much of their work

managing the expectations of consumers, and the lived experience of a consumer experiencing a game for themselves.

These ‘hermeneutic contradictions’ revolve around the presence of violence (considered as either symbolic domination or real, experienced harm), revealed through failed ‘confirmations’ by spokespeople (Boltanski, 2011, p. 84-87). Institutions hold the power to construct reality through ‘confirmation’ processes and exercise a dominative power how reality is interpreted (Boltanski, 2011, p. 93-97). Critique offers individuals the reflexive power to unmask and denounce the reality offered to potentially pave new pathways of resistance (Boltanski, 2011, p. 97-99). In this regard, there are three different types of critique, which Boltanski (2011) refers to as ‘tests.’ This includes ‘truth tests,’ carried out by institutions to re-affirm and stabilize the gap between the ‘state of affairs’ and ‘symbolic forms,’ mainly through a repetitive structure that establishes reality as normative (Boltanski, 2011, p. 103-105). Truth tests embody the process of confirmation to “make visible the fact that there is a norm” (Boltanski, 2011, p. 104).

Within games, the yearly Electronic Entertainment Expo (colloquially referred to as ‘E3’) where game developers hold large, spectacle-like press conferences could be understood as a truth test and as an opportunity for developers to construct a normative reality for their consumers on what is alluring and exciting about their products through demonstrations and trailers. Second, ‘reality tests’ explore the gap between the ‘state of affairs’ and ‘symbolic forms’ allowing an acceptance of this gap or concessions on the part of institutions to reduce it (Boltanski, 2011, p. 105-107). Reality tests conservatively seek to experiment in spaces of

uncertainty, rather re-confirm a supposed norm, and offer an opportunity of reform (Boltanski, 2011, p. 106-107). Continuing with the example of E3, a developer may introduce a new game, declared to be experimental and innovative. However, as the reality of this game is revealed, fans and critics can point to existing games that appear to do the same. Developers, now caught in a contradiction, must further justify their claims to close the gap. Boltanski (2011) notes that reality tests, while offering room for critique, ultimately result in reforms and compromises that still adhere to over-arching institutional structures, resulting in potentially minimal changes that reduce symbolic violence (p. 107).

Finally, and arguably most pertinent, are ‘existential tests’ which critique existing ‘reality tests’ through an acknowledgement of the violence they cause (Boltanski, 2011, p. 107-110). Situated in lived experiences, ‘existential tests’ radically seek to undo the relationship between what is accepted and what is experienced by others. I argue then that video game critics work to make the experiences of consumers visible and intelligible for purposes of criticism. Through the rejection of reality constructed by corporate interests, rhetorics of change are able to be adopted in an effort to establish new symbolic forms and states of affairs. These analytical actors drive this work of analysis that is inherently provocative with intention and strategy in mind. Boltanski’s (2011) conception of the process of critique is one that places the power within the hands of everyday individuals, informed by their experiences, to break down and reveal exploitative powers previously concealed with the goal of effecting change within reality. So far in this paper, I have outlined economic platform studies, and how processes of commentary work in games, now I will draw the two together, in a more detailed

examination of a controversial model of monetization. In order to do so, an overview of how Boltanski, with Eve Chiapello, addresses economic shifts due to processes of critique is necessary.

2.5 The Contradiction of Loot Box Monetization

Journalistic accounts about controversial monetization strategies act as a site to apply Boltanski's frameworks, and 'tests', to help us categorize the different ways developers respond to commentary. As discussed previously, free-to-play monetization is an increasing standard within the industry. One form of free-to-play monetization is the use of microtransactions as 'loot boxes.' Examining commentary on loot boxes aids in understanding how critiques drive economic change and the importance that everyday actors play in these transformations. Loot boxes are typically purchased with virtual currency, through exchange of real world currency, and offer a chance of receiving individual items out of a larger pool of variable quality, desirability, and rarity (Koeder & Tanaka, 2017). This method of monetization has historical precedent in Japanese "gachapon" (ガチャポン) whereby consumers purchase small toy capsules from coin-operated vending machines to receive a variety of small miniature models, stickers, keychains, or other toys (Spiker, 2017).

Loot boxes typically contain cosmetic items to change a character's appearance, boosts to reduce the time needed to reach certain goals, or other unique items. Costs for loot boxes vary (some costing only a few dollars) depending on the quantity purchased at a single time. With the emergence of loot box microtransactions, similarities are drawn to traditional forms of chance-based gambling, such as slot machines (Heimo et al., 2016; Spiker, 2017; Zagal et

al., 2013). Recognized as profitable, game developers acknowledge loot box monetization as inspired by gambling machine designs (Alha et al., 2014; Dixon et al., 2010). Linked to traditional gambling, loot box monetization poses complicated hurdles for government regulation with few successful legislative actions occurring internationally (de Kervenoael et al., 2013; Sithigh, 2014).

With the launch of *Battlefront II*, developed by Electronic Arts as an action-shooter video game based on the Star Wars film franchise, there was an outpouring of resistance to their loot-box monetization model (see: Alexandra, 2017; Frank, 2017; Ore, 2017). Many of these articles pointed to the amount of content locked within loot boxes, effectively creating a gambling paywall to access all content ‘included’ in the game. This marked a controversial synthesis of free-to-play and blockbuster monetization, whereby publishers expect players to pay a high initial cost in addition to chance-based microtransactions to access all game content.

Returning to Boltanski, this uniquely acted as a reality test for Electronic Arts to ‘explore’ the gap between the state of affairs and reality through a new mechanic of monetization in their game. In doing so, they attempted to confirm a new reality, one where a combination of free-to-play and premium modes of monetization was acceptable. However, they opened themselves up to the possibility of critique through their reality test. Games critics were quick to recognize the symbolic violence of these loot boxes carried and the contradiction that existed in this confirmation. In addition, consumers themselves were upset, and added to the momentum of this dispute. Specifically, that EA impressed on their consumers the premium quality of their game, where one payment unlocked all content, when the reality was far

different. This resulted in game journalist sites and social media platforms quickly filling with criticisms of Electronic Arts and loot boxes more generally (Alexandra, 2017; Ore, 2017; Wasserman, 2018). Polygon writer Ben Kuchera wrote, in response to the conversation surrounding *Battlefront II*:

...this tension and focus on each game's economy could hurt morale among developers themselves. It's going to be hard for players to care how well a character animates if they feel angered by games that are designed with an eye toward monetization instead of enjoyment. [...] EA's focus on free-to-play style economies in its big releases might be profitable in the short term, but it's slowly strangling the company. (Kuchera, 2017)

This commentary is especially impactful when considering the earlier argument that commentary on games results in changes in developer labour and the power of these disputes.

In addition, these critiques had been levied against the game industry for some time, but it took a larger moment of dispute for the criticism to hold power. In response, developers of *Battlefront II* cut prices in half but ultimately disabled microtransactions altogether (Frank, 2017b). However, the release of *Battlefront II*, combined with the release of other games with similar forms of monetization, led to loot box criticism being addressed more generally within the industry (see: Alexandra, 2017; Ore, 2017). Many of the arguments indicated that loot boxes are widely considered to be a source of symbolic violence inherently designed to exploit consumers (Alexandra, 2017; Ore, 2017). Attention quickly turned towards video game regulatory bodies, who were quick to dismiss critiques as unsubstantiated as items within loot

boxes have no real-world value and players always receive ‘something’ regardless of the perceived value of that item (Schreier, 2017b). According to them, loot boxes could not be gambling despite the widespread consumer reporting acknowledging them as such (Schreier, 2017b). Self-regulatory organizations within the industry, in their own explorations of the reality test created by Electronic Arts, sought to conservatively re-confirm previous understandings of gambling and in-game monetization – almost arguing that nothing changed in their understanding of reality, that this situation was simply another opportunity to re-confirm through a truth test. This entire process is summarized in Table 3 alongside Boltanski’s definitions of the three tests.

Table 2.3 *Tests and Industry Responses*

Test Name	Definition of Test	Example
Truth Tests	Carried out by institutions to re-affirm and stabilize the gap between the status quo and reality, mainly through a repetitive structure that establishes reality as normative and fair.	Developer introduces a new premium blockbuster game with no microtransactions, continuing the status quo.
Reality Tests	Explores the gap between the status quo and lived experience of individuals allowing for an acceptance of this gap or concessions on the part of institutions to reduce it.	Developer introduces a new premium blockbuster game heavily reliant on microtransactions, challenging the understanding of what a premium game looks like and must attempt to reconcile this

		with consumers by making concessions
Existential Tests	Radically seek to undo the relationship between what is accepted and what is experienced by others by revealing previously invisible violence or exploitation.	Developer receives a massive amount of critique and must justify, explain, and correct their methods while having revealed the exploitative nature of monetization more generally

Source: Adapted from Boltanski (2011) and Author

In the United States and United Kingdom, lawmakers raised the issue of gambling-based monetization in video games at a federal level – but not for the first time (Chalk, 2017; Good, 2017a). In 2014, legislation was passed in Singapore that was thought to cover loot box gambling, however, the legislation did not adequately cover social games or those where players could not exchange virtual currency back to real world currency (Wee, 2014). This is a common loophole for developers to avoid gambling regulations. China is the only country to successfully pass legislation targeting gambling-based microtransactions, such as loot boxes (McAloon, 2016). In response, Blizzard Entertainment, developer of *Overwatch*, changed their monetization in China to award loot boxes as a “free gift” for purchase of virtual currency (Ziebart, 2017). This could be understood by Boltanski’s theories as an institution attempting a reality test to make concessions and confirm a new understanding of loot boxes, re-emphasizing that this was a gift and not gambling. These tests offer institutions the opportunity to re-establish control over reality to re-gain control of how they extract revenue from consumers while adhering to regulations. Ultimately, a reality that allows them to proceed

without radically altering their monetization model. Significant is the understanding of the importance that games critique played in these shifts and the responses. Arguably, government and organizational regulation is ineffective, but instead, developers took on the responsibility of adjusting themselves more effectively.

2.6 Failing the Test of Loot Box Criticism

The video game industry is currently grappling with widespread criticisms of chance-based monetization (Hussain, 2018; Kuchera, 2017; Ore, 2017). Meanwhile, developers are struggling to stand out amongst a saturated industry, and struggle to choose between economic viability and the use of controversial monetization strategies. However, the examination of these processes allows for a better understanding of developer responses and the interplay of developers, media, and critique. Ultimately, following Boltanski (2011), this commentary presents an opportunity to challenge the status quo of monetization and pave a new pathway for monetization that ideally is founded on less exploitative principles. Ideally, these critiques lead to forms of monetization that do not enact a form of exploitative ‘violence,’ such as monetization models where users purchase items directly for a set cost, rather than chance-based gambling. Established as exploitative by critics and consumers alike, legislation is slow-moving or unsuccessful in contending with emerging forms of virtual goods and currencies. This is further complicated by a lack of data to justify regulation. Player data collected by developers is obfuscated behind complex economic models and large, privately-owned datasets (Whitson & French, 2021). Traditional forms of regulation surrounding gambling cannot be so neatly applied as the function of loot boxes remain deliberately concealed

(Whitson & French, 2021). Furthermore, it is shown that players report difficulty in distinguishing gambling from gaming when the two are intertwined, such as in free-to-play monetization (Albarrán-Torres & Goggin, 2014). If critiques directed at self-regulatory organizations – such as North America’s ESRB or Europe’s PEGI, both of which have been analyzed within *Game Studies* as in need of improvement (see: Felini, 2015), results in a passing of the blame, then perhaps attention should be turned back towards developers.

In response to recent criticisms of loot boxes, some developers self-regulated to avoid public backlash (Cleaver, 2017; Messner, 2017). Shifts within studio practices indicate that potential solutions exist and may originate from resistance to current systems. Development studios, such as Phoenix Labs, shifted their monetization models away from loot boxes in direct response to rising discourse, requiring players to purchase items directly for a set cost (Messner, 2017). Alternatively, developer Playsaurus moved away from free-to-play models entirely, citing that they wished to avoid any ethical issues (and backlash) associated with gambling-like microtransactions (Cleaver, 2017). While they remain outliers, these decisions signal towards the potential power of discourse to affect change. Critique, if effectively utilized, acts as a corrective measure to exploitative modes of monetization. Commentary that calls for alternatives to legislation may prove more effective, especially as we see legislation in the United States and United Kingdom fail to fully address exploitative monetization. Cases of successful legislation of loot boxes are rare, which provides an opportunity for developers to self-regulate in response. Ultimately, this E3 featured many developers announcing that their

games would not include loot boxes or satirizing the controversy (Farokhmanesh, 2018; Hussain, 2018).

Returning to Boltanski, critique is a necessary process and the examination of discourses and the actors that instigate these moments. Within the video game industry, publishers and development studios are the institutions that construct our reality. Through the repetitious publication of games, genres, aesthetics, and marketing materials, they construct a normative reality and routine for those who play games. This includes the construction of what is and is not an acceptable form of monetization. This process of confirmation implies a gap where symbolic violence exists, demonstrated through an examination of the unregulated chance-based gambling models of monetization and the harm of continued convergence of gambling and gaming (King et al., 2010). The violence of development studios and publishers can be extended to the harms that stem from poor representation (of both women and marginalized groups) in games and games communities or the precarious working conditions of game developers.

The work of critical actors, in this case games critics, is vital to exposing this violence. The work of these actors is often to provoke individuals out of their routines and recognize violence (Boltanski, 2011). However, this is a difficult process for these actors, who must be able to convincingly portray these contradictions and the harm they cause. This arguably leaves their platform open to suspicion, censoring, loss of potential advertising revenue and backlash from players and an imbalance exists in power and risk between critics and corporate institutions (Boltanski, 2011). Critique plays a clear role in transforming the industry, with the

case of loot box monetization within the industry causing shifts in response to commentary. These most recent critiques could lead to similar shifts, to be subsumed by capitalism, and lead to new models of monetization. The analysis of free-to-play games, and specifically exploitative loot box mechanics, will likely lead in time to new models of monetization in response. Games critics then are key in making sure those within the industry (developers and players alike) remain aware of different systems of symbolic violence.

Examining how developers historically contended with issues (and circumvented it) highlights, I hope, the importance of critique and games critics in shaping our conceptions of games, those who play games, and the labour of game developers within the video game industry. In coping with blockbuster monetization commentary and needing to increase revenue from free-to-play models of monetization, developers turned to gambling-based monetization (loot boxes) to address the issue of offering their games for free. Briefly availing developers of criticism and the opportunity to create new games freely, this mode of monetization continues to flourish throughout the industry as new voices of resistance rise. These voices (of consumers, critics, and other developers) now encapsulate the current dispute within the industry surrounding monetization and directly signal potential shifts moving forward. Opportunities exist for the discussion and examination of how to influence industries in ways that reduce or eliminate the symbolic violence these forms of monetization pose. This moment, of which Boltanski and Chiapello detailed as key in shaping future shifts, affords the opportunity to shape the economics and, by extension, the aesthetics and genres of this media by broadcasting and talking about new alternatives that may address critiques, but also offers

economic stability for developers. One such example includes the ‘Battle Pass,’ by *Fortnite* developer Epic Games, which is regarded as a clear case of how publishers can monetize their games successfully without loot boxes (Ashley, 2018). *Fortnite*, which was released in 2017, does not contain any form of gambling-based monetization⁸ while still generating several hundred million dollars in revenue in a single month with a ‘consumer-friendly’ image (Ashley, 2018; Statt, 2018).

2.7 Conclusion

Video game developers are no strangers to shifts and transformations that alter the landscape of their creative labour and media. However, the work of tracing and interrogating economic shifts of monetization aids in exploration of future interventions when capitalist practices are determined to be exploitative of consumers. Furthermore, it may be possible to co-opt these moments of change through resistance to direct the industry’s future to one that is less exploitative of consumers. Paying attention to the critical actors that drive these shifts, and the discourse they create, is revealed to be an important area of inquiry for those interested in issues within the video game industry and communities. While consumers are often perceived to have the greatest amount of power, and certainly do possess power in their purchasing, this analysis reveals how this power may be directed and influenced through practices of critique.

The historical and contemporary tracing of shifts within monetization, emphasizing ‘where’ these shifts begin, offers the opportunity to explore the processes of change for the

⁸ Update since publication, *Fortnite* has offered loot-box options in specific circumstances, and has faced lawsuits because of it: <https://www.theverge.com/2021/2/22/22295676/epic-games-fortnite-loot-box-lawsuit-settlement-rocket-league-v-bucks>

study of future economic and industry-wide shifts. In addition, I emphasize how critique and wider discourse surrounding monetization (or other similar economic factors) within industries, including the reproaches and discourse of ‘everyday’ individuals, such as consumers, and critics, can be effectively examined. The work of Boltanski and Chiapello show how these criticisms are subsumed by capitalistic systems and could then be potentially be co-opted for greater change. Examining how commentary functions aids in the understanding of the necessity, process, and roles that exist.

Future research could turn to the practices and responses of developers in the design and implementation of loot boxes or similarly chance-based monetization in games. The role of legislators and the insight of legal professionals on the difficulties in passing legislation on virtual objects would nuance similar analyses and provide insight into the efficacy of these movements, or on the implications of legislation for practices of production. In addition, validation of links between patterns of gambling and patterns of loot box purchasing should be more widely established through the adaption of more traditional measures from the field of gambling and psychology (see: Macey & Hamari, 2018). More generally, the use of theories of pragmatic sociology of critique could aid in the analyzing of other movements within the video game industry (or in how previous campaigns have impacted games culture more widely), with close attention to games critics, the discourses they generate, the implications for consumers, and the responses of developers.

Critical discourse analysis offers future work the opportunity to highlight exploitive systems with games criticism readily available to study. Opportunities to utilize commentary

to make corrective and radical changes to capitalism and determinedly exploitative systems should be taken with the powerful knowledge of the role critical discourse plays in these shifts. This includes discussions of who is accountable for these systems, the establishment (or requirement) of necessary data to explore the implications of these systems, and the creation of industry-wide and fairer monetization systems.

2.8 References

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Chapter 3: Beauty from the Waist Up: Twitch Drag, Digital Labor, and Queer Mediated Liveness⁹

3.1 Preface¹⁰

This chapter focuses on content creation and live streaming. While focused on a specific population of streamers, it begins to point to how these individuals fill the gap between players and game developers highlighted in Chapter 1. These content creators work to build communities that are both engaged with their brands and game developers' brands and act as go-betweens, with many game developers opting to create partner and ambassador programs with content creators. They receive insider information and early access to games so that developers can ideally create engagement from potential customers. The issues that arise for developers are explored more in Chapter 4, and this chapter seeks to approach it from the perspective of the content creators. This project was incredibly personal as I engaged in content creation heavily over two years within the community highlighted in this chapter. In addition, this chapter helps introduce some of the forms of labour discussed in future chapters that make up the majority of community engagement work. Specifically, the concept of relational labour. Returning to Baym's (2015) definition included in the introduction of this dissertation, relational labour is "regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work" (p. 16).

⁹ Persaud, C. J., & Perks, M. E. (2022). Beauty From the Waist Up: Twitch Drag, Digital Labor, and Queer Mediated Liveness. *Television & New Media*, 23(5), 475-486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764221080912>

¹⁰ This preface represents new content added to contextualize this chapter. All other content for this chapter is presented as pre-published.

However, this chapter highlights how even with this engagement with content creators, and the work that content creators do themselves, gaps still exist between developers and players, users and platforms that cannot be mediated by third-party entrepreneurial content creators. While much of the work that these content creators participate in could be linked or tied to community management (and in Chapter 5 I touch on how many community managers first began as content creators themselves), it lacks the industry professionalization and insider experience necessary to truly engage with a community. Especially as how these content creators are focused on their own success and ways of monetization, which often can become muddled as they work to establish their brands and create safe spaces for their own, specific communities. This chapter introduces the concept of “queer mediated liveness”. For this chapter, this concept highlights how just through their identity, queer content creators find themselves entangled in issues of queer representation for many of their audience members. Tying this to the larger dissertation, this entanglement as the spokesperson or representative of a much larger entity begins to feed into future issues discussed in Chapter 5 of community management work.

3.2 Introduction

In recent years, game live streaming has become a key site of video game culture for players and audiences around the world. As T.L. Taylor writes in her foundational book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, streamers draw on familiar audiovisual elements from televised entertainment broadcasts and web-camming culture to “transform private play into public entertainment” (2018, 22). To date, game live streaming scholarship

has explored how the medium offers diverse forms of self-presentation, increasingly commercialized avenues of promotion, and vivid examples of participatory cultural production (Scully-Blaker et. al 2017; Taylor 2018; Woodcock and Johnson 2019). In the popular imagination, video game live streaming tends to conjure images of esports players and competitive gaming communities. This article, however, focuses on the vibrant subculture of queer drag artists who stream themselves performing and playing various games on the Twitch.tv live streaming platform.

In what follows, we explore how drag artist game live streamers (or drag streamers) engage in digital labor and performance, offer a distinct case of queer internet microcelebrity, and highlight tensions concerning the representation of queer identities in the social media age. As more queer people begin developing branded social media selves in spaces of real-time performance, such as the increasing number of drag streamers on Twitch, we contend that their performance of queerness becomes tied up in both potential avenues for monetization and the expectations of their followers. We conclude by developing the concept of “queer mediated liveness” to describe the labor, aesthetics, and live content creation of queer streamers who (purposefully or not) become queer representation for their social media audiences.

3.3 Representation and Authenticity Online

Despite the relative novelty of game live streaming as a medium, our study is firmly rooted in a longer tradition of queer media studies research. Taking niche queer subcultures and their interpretive work seriously as an object of study builds on past work on queer readings and implicitly and explicitly queer media (Benshoff and Griffin 2006; Gross 2001; Ruberg and

Shaw 2017; Russo 1987; Sender 2005; Shaw and Persaud 2020). As Adrienne Shaw (2015) has shown, it is unwise to capture the diverse experiences of queer gamers under a simple slogan like “Representation matters!”, without inviting questions of “how?”, “why or why not?”, and “for whom?”. Observation of these communities, as they wrestle with questions of representation ‘live’, between fellow queer streamers and their queer audiences, offers a timely contribution to queer media studies, as well as broadening scholarly understandings of Twitch and notions of internet microcelebrity on social media platforms with live streaming capabilities.

Live streaming is an emergent area of scholarship, with diverse work that attends to sociocultural issues. Beyond Taylor’s pathbreaking book *Watch Me Play* (2018), researchers have studied how race (Chan and Gray 2020; Gray 2017), gender (Cullen and Ruberg 2019; Ruberg et al. 2019), sexuality (Ruberg 2020), disability (Johnson 2019), affect (Woodcock and Johnson 2019), and intimacy (Ruberg and Lark 2020) mediate the experiences of streamers and their audiences. Furthermore, scholars of cultural industries have explored how live streaming touches artistic production (Phelps and Consalvo 2020), game design and development (Johnson and Woodcock 2019), and community management (Perks 2021). In particular, scholars have noted that game live streaming offers a unique point of entry to explore the convergence of work, play, and performance (Scully-Blaker et al. 2017; Wenz and Taylor 2020). Studying queer game live streamers on Twitch, and specifically drag streamers, further pushes the boundaries of research interested in live streaming as a kind of cultural

production. By focusing on drag streamers on Twitch we hope to encourage further studies of niche live streaming communities.

Our understanding of drag streamers, and queer game live streamers generally, is also informed by scholarship from internet and social media studies on internet celebrity, authenticity, and digital labor. Senft's (2008) formulation of "micro-celebrity" describes people who cultivate digital audiences through performance practices that entail a great deal of interpersonal labor and image management. Building on this work, Alice Marwick (2013) illustrates how microcelebrity requires the curation of "authentic" branded selves that deliver the right balance of intimacy and interactivity to their followers and fans. Crystal Abidin (2015; 2017) develops these ideas further in her scholarship on influencers and calibrated amateurism, demonstrating the co-constructed nature of internet microcelebrity by content creators and audiences. In the age of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, where the Emmy award-winning reality television empire propels local drag artists to international stardom, and Twitch, where stories are frequently told of live streamers amassing thousands of followers and (importantly) significant income, studies of how queer individuals work towards their own status of micro-celebrity are important for understanding contemporary media and cultural production. As for the work of internet microcelebrities themselves, Brooke E. Duffy's (2017) "aspirational labor" describes the often-unpaid independent work that content creators take on as an investment towards a future well-compensated independent social media professional self. Internet microcelebrities also engage in what Nancy Baym (2018) calls "relational labor",

where they maintain personal connections with audiences that supposedly lead to future work and on-going avenues of monetization.

Building on these areas of scholarship, we explore the labor of developing a Twitch Drag persona, describe drag streamers' cultivation of queer internet microcelebrity, and show how drag streamers negotiate audience expectations and monetization possibilities for queer representation in live streaming contexts.

3.4 Inside the Digital Drag Show

As a way of understanding how drag artist game streamers function as a distinct genre in the broader streaming cultures on Twitch, we conducted digital participant observation of drag streamers who are members of the Twitch Teams "Rainbow Arcade" and "Stream Queens". In addition, we employed purposive sampling to interview four drag streamers with varying audience sizes. These semi-structured interviews focused on drag streamers' relationship to their audiences, queer representation, and the work of live streaming. In analysis, these interviews allowed for a triangulation of data that complemented our participant observation notes.

Between March and August 2020, we observed 14 drag streamers from the Rainbow Arcade and Stream Queens teams on a regular basis, generally for blocks of one to three hours at a time for an approximate total of 80 hours. This live digital fieldwork was supplemented by the archive of videos (VODs) that drag streamers hosted on their Twitch profiles, which were particularly useful for re-watching special events like charity fundraiser streams or exciting moments in a particular game. While not all drag streamers regularly updated their

archived videos, when available they were used to supplement missed live streams. Due to the ‘liveness’ of Twitch, these recorded livestreams were useful auxiliary opportunities for data collection, providing additional moments to be ‘present’ in the field. We also observed streams from other drag streamers through a snowball approach following the Twitch platform’s algorithmic suggestions in addition to word-of-mouth recommendations from members of the Twitch Drag community.

Taking a qualitative interpretive analytical approach to our observation and interview data, we identified emergent themes concerning digital labor, monetization, microcelebrity, mediated liveness, and queer identities. The drag streamers in this study have divergent audience relationships, diverse makeup and costume aesthetics, play a variety of game genres, and engage in performances like lip-syncing, comedic acting, and dramatic social commentary to varying degrees. We are neither interested in nor capable of making essentializing claims about “Drag on Twitch”, but we find that this digital ethnographic approach allows us to map broad conceptual trends in concerning drag streamers and their audiences on the Twitch platform.

3.5 Getting into Character

In general, being an active game live streamer demands a good deal of digital labor. Woodcock and Johnson (2019) have described the affective and immaterial labor behind game live streamers’ maintenance of a “character” who deploys a range of improvisational acting and performance techniques to keep audiences engaged, solicit donations, and develop distinct self-branded identities. For the drag streamers in our study, this concept of creating a streaming

character is even more explicit. A drag streamer might use different pronouns in drag than they do in other contexts, have an array of emotive actions that become reoccurring tropes on the stream (e.g. yelling a contemporary gay popular culture catchphrase every time they get a new subscriber), or only playing a particular genre of game when they are embodying their drag persona. Some drag streamers are also drag artists in queer nightlife settings, while others exclusively do Twitch Drag and have developed their art form around the experience of playing games. Drag streamers also leverage multimedia components (e.g. sound effects, emotes, disappearing overlays) that inform their drag aesthetic. Many drag streamers, like co-author Perks pictured below getting into drag as Sierra Myst on their Twitch stream, choose to invite their audience ‘behind the scenes’ to witness the costume and technical work that goes into Twitch Drag character design.



Figure 3.1: Co-author Perks getting into drag on their stream.

Many drag streamers use the elaborate process of putting their hair, makeup, and outfit together as a medium for informal live chatting with their audience. Getting into drag on stream is not just about visual fabrication, the liminal setting of shifting “into-character” for a drag streamer can be an avenue for the audience to learn more about drag as an art form, behind-the-scenes details about a particular streaming session, or simply a chance to talk to the artist while their attention isn’t being pulled in numerous directions. One drag streamer, while carefully applying nose and cheek contour, discussed colorism and homophobia in Latin America, noting that they often feel that they can be more intimate with their audience before they are engrossed in putting on an entertaining show. Streamers at various levels of popularity also described how their drag personas enabled them to present themselves to their audience in ways that they might otherwise have felt too shy or nervous to do. A quote from drag streamer Evidious exemplifies this:

It led to some different psyche changes for me. I feel like the character that I created within the stream has given me more confidence and strength in my professional life. I feel like they play off each other a lot. Balancing the two of them can be difficult. You are kind of the champion of your own destiny streaming versus going back daily to a little bit more corporate structure at work.

Drag streamers also regularly use their time getting into drag as an opportunity to ask their audience members about their day or check in with viewers who they know were going through some personal hardships. Given that the observation data collected for this study was during the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, many drag streamers and viewers exchanged

stories about how their lives had been affected. For streamers and audiences alike, these moments of care and vulnerability were more likely to surface at the edges of more attention-demanding activities like playing a fast-paced survival game or preparing for a co-operative session with another streamer.

For some queer drag streamers, building a drag character is a way of cultivating an internet microcelebrity persona that enables them to be more “authentic” with their audience than they might have been otherwise. As Eve Elle Queen put it,

I've been streaming for four years. And it wasn't until I brought out Eve. That's where I started growing and I was wondering what was the thing [that] changed? Like, yeah, okay, I'm doing drag and it was the realization that authenticity is more important than anything else. Even though I'm bringing forth this drag persona, it was like more me.

This heightened authenticity through drag character is a common sentiment, where drag streamers describe that they are more successful at the kinds of digital labor required by a platform like Twitch if they are able to filter it through their drag character.

3.6 Queer internet microcelebrity

All of the drag streamers that we observed or interviewed commented on how being a part of the LGBTQIA/queer community shapes their experience on Twitch and on social media generally. Some actively embraced being “queer role models” to their audiences, while others were more ambivalent about how their behavior and self-presentation inevitably reflected on queer people broadly. As Stefanie Duguay (2019) describes in her study of queer womens’

microcelebrity labor, sexual identity can be leveraged to build intimacy with followers, scaffold relationships with other content creators, and inform the relational labor practices of a queer internet microcelebrity towards their audience. Furthermore, Crystal Abidin and Rob Cover (2019) have shown that gay influencers with substantial audiences are able to engage in discursive activism about sexuality and gender while leveraging their queer identities for commercial ends. Building on these findings, here we identify three main themes that frame the queer microcelebrity of drag streamers: 1) live disclosure and discussion of sensitive topics, 2) professionalization and brand sponsorship as a queer content creator, and 3) the difficulties of being a visible queer person in a niche streaming subculture on Twitch.

Given that their audiences include many queer young people, drag streamers are often viewed as highly visible and seemingly accessible queer elders positioned to dispense advice or affirming commentary when sensitive topics are brought up in the live stream chat. Examples of this include coming out narratives, intimate relationship problems, being a queer person in the workplace, or questions about sexual practices. Most drag streamers treated this as a normal occurrence, voicing whatever thoughts they have off the top of their heads while playing a game, or during other slower moments like getting into drag while offering some heartfelt anecdote if they thought their own personal experience might be helpful. Eve Elle Queen describes this as something that they do their best at, while assuming people are bringing these things up in good faith:

It is a very young audience and being older, I've gone through those steps. So, I can give some advice, but also I am learning, I'm constantly learning. Whether

it's about myself or just situations in general and in other people's lives, and it gives you that moment of wonder where you're looking at these names in the chat and you're realizing every single person is living a life that you have no idea about.

Some drag streamers also feel that Twitch Drag as opposed to drag found in queer nightlife spaces offers visibility and potential to reach people who might otherwise never be exposed to subversive gender performances, queerness, and other ways of being. Drag king streamer Amethyst describes:

This is something that I see a lot with Internet drag versus the traditional in person [drag] and I think that's something that's really important about this. You should be able to consume drag without it having to be associated with alcohol and the other thing is, age, while I do have 18 plus on my channel, [...] there are a lot of younger people. I think that's also really important to be exposed to drag sort of at younger ages as well. It makes it more accessible. Like I think a lot of queer culture, unfortunately, it's often based around cities, large metropolitan areas, but I've had people in my stream literally be like, hey, I live in Egypt and I can't be openly queer here. So, it's really a relief to be able to come and chat with people about queer things.

This affective labor of interacting with queer audience members, sometimes disclosing in detail their hardships, was heightened by the liveness of the platform, where drag streamers that were used to engaging with their audience about sensitive issues were able to address their concerns

in ways that felt sincere without overshadowing the entertainment production of the stream. It was uncommon for a drag streamer, especially those that didn't have a particularly large audience to manage, to ignore a comment or question about queerness or queer identity. However, depending on the setting, sometimes during a sponsored stream, if the streamer and their moderators were dealing with a particularly lively chat, or if there was a sense that there were some users trolling the chat, they would be left unanswered.

For some drag streamers, cultivating a drag persona is also a way to explore some aspect of their own gender identity or gender presentation. One drag streamer noted, while securing a wig on their head, that their experience becoming a drag queen helped them realize that they might identify as nonbinary. Their drag character was an outlet for them to play with gender and creativity in ways that they otherwise didn't have space for in their professional life. In this way, doing Twitch Drag, as much as it can offer some form of queer representation to a young queer person in their audience, is also a conduit through which they might learn more about themselves.

Most drag streamers on Twitch are not Twitch Partners¹¹, though they engage in a wide range of monetization and professionalization strategies as content creators, influencers, and internet microcelebrities. For some, their experience on Twitch is just a hobby or something they do part time to have a creative outlet. For others, they either view it as their full-time gig

¹¹ Twitch Partners are live streamers on Twitch who have reached a minimum threshold for average viewership and activity and are approved by Twitch staff to enter into a partnership agreement with Twitch. They often receive different payout structures, early access to new features, and additional opportunities and credibility for being "verified" by the platform.

(especially those with a large following) or it is something that they aspire to turn into their main source of income. Like any other streamer on the platform, the two basic options to make money are cultivating an audience that subscribes to their content or pursuing brand deals and sponsorships to generate revenue. While a small handful of Twitch Drag artists achieve a sustainable level of success to stream full-time as their only income, this does not seem to be a viable pathway for the majority of drag streamers. Team Stream Queens Founder Deere, who streams full-time on Twitch, was the only partnered streamer who did drag regularly for years. While this changed relatively recently, there is a narrative around a theoretical professional ‘ceiling’ for Twitch Drag artists that does not seem to exist for other niche game live streamers on Twitch¹². While it is unlikely that any streamer can secure commercial deals without having a decently sized audience, based on our observation and interviews, it is unclear what that threshold might be for drag streamers.

¹² Many creators are known for playing a single genre or game consistently, and often build their communities around these games and see success from continued engagement with that community. Anecdotally, this did not seem the case for Drag streamers.

#StreamWithPride during Pride Month on Twitch

May 28 2020



Update June 15: As Pride month continues, we acknowledge the event commemorates the Stonewall riots, an uprising that had Black queer folks – like Marsha P. Johnson – at the forefront. We also recognize the parallels between the social inequities of that time and the moment we’re facing across the world today. We believe that it’s more important than ever to celebrate inclusivity and diversity, and to strive for equality by standing in solidarity and supporting the shared goals of social justice among the LGBTQIA and Black communities. Starting today, Twitch will donate \$0.10 to both [The Trevor Project](#) and the [National Black Justice Coalition](#) through July 15 for every paid Sub, Gift Sub, or Cheer of 300 Bits

Figure 3.2: Twitch’s #StreamWithPride donation initiative for Pride Month 2020.

Drag streamers on Twitch are most often approached for sponsorship during Pride Month, though many expressed frustration that brands don’t seem to be interested in supporting the visibility of queer people outside of this window. As Adrienne Shaw (2012) has argued, framing queer gaming audiences as distinct from “gamers” generally for marketing purposes also works as a kind of marginalization that further reinforces the idea that queer people belong at the periphery of gaming culture. As drag streamer Evidious puts it,

I would really love them to step up and proactively reach out to queer content creators and treat them with more value. And it would be nice to have those

things not just be a favor, but be more integrated, and be respected as content creators, not just features when it's convenient.

Beyond being selectively tokenized, drag streamers also contend with their work as drag artists not being recognized as something worth paying for in live streaming contexts. This is further compounded by drag streamers being excluded from commercial opportunities by gaming brands that fear alienating their broader target market of presumed heterosexual young men, despite evidence that the overall gaming audience is actually quite diverse (Brown 2017; Williams et al. 2008).

Turning to the Twitch platform itself, there have been some positive developments like drag panels at TwitchCon and drag artists being featured on the front page. Drag streamers often noted that while there are “LGBTQIA+” and “Drag” tags on Twitch, it is difficult to locate drag artists and other visibly queer content creators amidst those using the tags in bad faith. To that end, community-based tagging systems like Peer2Peer by Trans Lifeline offer avenues of connection for marginalized streamers and audiences beyond the Twitch’s internal discovery mechanisms.

Queer content creators on Twitch regularly experience frequent bouts of random harassment, trolling, and derogatory coordinated raids (Smith 2019). Drag streamers are no exception, and some feel that they are targeted precisely because they hyper-visibly disturb normative notions of gender presentation. Beyond potential abuse, as drag streamer Amethyst notes, Twitch could be doing more to explicitly signal that the drag community is welcome on the platform:

I want Twitch to actually make a statement sticking up for the queer community specifically, because we are often left in the dust and forgotten. And I wish that people would take the queer community and the drag community more seriously on Twitch because to an outside audience, we're very much the silly little clowns in the corner.

3.7 Toward queer mediated liveness

In this article, we have described how drag streamers develop their Twitch Drag characters, make sense of their status as queer internet microcelebrities, and manage audience desires and monetization possibilities for queer representation in live streaming contexts. Drag streamers negotiate these interests alongside the labor of leveraging their gaming proficiency, conversation skills, and knowledge of queer popular culture for their viewers' entertainment. We propose the concept of "queer mediated liveness" as a way to name the particular ways in which drag streamers, and queer live streamers in general, navigate layered expectations for authenticity and vulnerability during their live performances; professionalization and financial concerns as queer content creators; and the experience of providing highly visible queer representation for their largely queer audiences.

Based on the drag streamers we observed and interviewed, performing queer mediated liveness also comes with ambivalence about being a "spokesperson" for the queer community. Some resisted being framed as role models for young queer people, claiming that they might be better understood as cautionary tales for choosing a more stable career path than being an online content creator. Others felt constant pressure to be educators about sexuality and gender

to their audiences, even if they weren't always sure of what to say. As queer streamers become more widely integrated in the Twitch ecosystem, we suspect that this complicated relationship between representation, authenticity, and performance will persist. Ultimately, whether they are streamers doing Twitch Drag or members of other queer subcultures, queer streamers will continue balancing potential economic gains and creative control with the representational complexities of queer internet microcelebrity.

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Chapter 4: Streaming Ambivalence: Livestreaming and Indie Game Development¹³

4.1 Preface¹⁴

This study of streaming and how developers design for streamers and their audience communities illustrates 1) the role of intermediaries in potential success, 2) the new associated pressures to not only design a game but design for online platforms, streamer intermediaries, and their audiences of viewers. This chapter follows closely from Chapters 2 and 3, specifically, that developers now recognize the need to engage with player communities more closely to ‘bridge the gap’ and avoid costly breakdowns surrounding their games. Developers now need to become experts in engaging with and designing for players rather than treating them as an afterthought. In addition, the increased role of ‘parasocial relationships’ in the game industry. This chapter, in conjunction with Chapter 2, sets up the following Chapter 5 of community building and platforms that now seem essential. In the context of the larger dissertation, this chapter is about pointing to trends not well explained by existing literature and understandings of capitalism. Continuing from Chapter 2, which showcased how capitalism works to incorporate critique, shifting priorities and demands, Chapter 4 examines a time post this transformation. With community recognized as a key, unignorable part of game development that must be contended with, is this a positive change for developers?

¹³ Parker, F., & Perks, M. E. (2021). Streaming ambivalence: Livestreaming and indie game development. *Convergence*, 27(6), 1735-1752. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211027809>

¹⁴ This preface represents new content added to contextualize this chapter. All other content for this chapter is presented as pre-published.

Most of the previous literature on live streaming focused on the experiences of streamers, framing it as a gold rush opportunity of success, fame, and fortune (Hamilton et al., 2014; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019a; Taylor, 2018). However, missing from these accounts are the community managers and game developers who need to contend with streamers – they hold power to shape audiences, act as tastemakers, and direct the reception of the games these developers worked on. Thus, streamers needed to be accounted for and engaged with even before the game was shipped. As this chapter explores, the growth of live streaming impacted the day-to-day work and scope of what independent game developers needed to consider in their game-making. Increasingly, developers were dealing with market saturation and intense competition. Thus they were focused on the issue of discoverability – a complex game marketing system that embraces grassroots, viral marketing tactics that operates alongside (or even replaces) traditional advertising by games publishers. As is typical of Indie Interfaces, we decided to respond to this literature gap by speaking with developers to understand how they were grappling with this new reality of needing to respond to and enroll the community in the development of games.

Over a few months, I interviewed independent game developers on how they viewed live streaming, how it impacted their development process, if at all, and how they would contend with community management and streamer management going forward. The interview was structured around these key themes, asking participants whether they had changed anything in their games based on live streaming, if they noticed any positive impact when streamers streamed their games, and their plan for handling influencers. We found an

overall sense of ambivalence among the developers we interviewed. With no way to track the impact of streamers, as many success stories as failures, and the high cost in time and resources to manage these relationships, many of the developers we spoke with were unable to properly engage with them despite industry expertise touting their necessity (Takahashi, 2016). Instead of a system where developer labour and investment into community spaces would guarantee better sales or coverage of their games, game developers were left with another time-consuming aspect of their work that needed to be contended with (Keogh, 2023).

This chapter builds upon my ideas surrounding how critique can change industry practices by providing a case study of workers reacting to widespread shifts in their industry. In this case, how online communities must be taken more seriously and considered more heavily by the industry is seen here as game developers begin to consider streamers and grapple with their undeniable presence within the industry. Developers react and adapt to incorporate streamers into their development, even though it appears to have no apparent benefit. This explains the sense of ambivalence that the game developers interviewed are experiencing. While some see limited success and others experience failure, they are still within a system where their resources and time are limited by the system they work within. This chapter is a clear example of the ‘live’ grappling those workers must undergo to come to terms with the transformations around them. This shift is a direct response to critiques that game studios do not listen to their audiences and are out of touch with what their consumers want. In giving more attention to online communities and giving voice to streamers over traditional marketing, indie game developers seek to market their games more ‘authentically,’ even if these methods

have faults and have no direct connection to success. If community engagement is now essential, it means developers have to engage more directly with players, but also need to engage with the platforms these communities exist on.

4.2 Introduction

Without question, livestreaming is changing the industry and culture of digital games. Twitch, in particular, has been built up as *the* platform for users to broadcast themselves performing play and vie for the elusive social and economic rewards of online celebrity. Viewers consume billions of hours on a monthly basis, interacting with streamers and fellow spectators in live chat in ways that spill onto social media and ripple outward to shape popular tastes, modes of communication, cultural attitudes, and dominant play styles in game culture (Taylor, 2018). Twitch and competing platforms like YouTube (and their parent corporations Amazon and Google) extract massive profits from all this engagement via advertising, sponsorship deals, and various fees, guiding user attention to specific channels via front page ranking and recommendation algorithms (Partin, 2019). Commercial game makers at all scales of production have increasingly come to incorporate streaming into every stage of the game development cycle. Mainstream hits like *Fortnite* and *League of Legends* owe their ongoing status as *bonafide* pop cultural phenomena in no small part to their massive uptake by celebrity and amateur streamers alike, and triple-A releases from major publishers can reliably expect significant attention on streaming platforms, in some cases achieved by paying streamers directly to play (Lanier, 2019). But what about smaller, lower-budget games? For independent game developers, the costs and benefits of streaming are less clear.

Indie developers are acutely aware of the centrality of streaming in the contemporary game industry ecosystem, but they lack the resources, brand recognition, and dedicated marketing teams of big-budget giants. There is a persistent popular myth that streaming and related forms of online content creation are a golden key to indie game “discoverability” and ultimately sales, and that Twitch streamers, YouTubers, and other game-based streamers and influencers are the new gatekeepers of indie success (Phillips, 2018; Takahashi, 2016). However, commercial indie game development remains an extremely precarious form of cultural work (Whitson et al., 2018). A great diversity of game and non-game content is broadcast but popular blockbusters continue to dominate streaming platforms, attracting the highest-profile celebrity-influencers and their legions of fans, as well as countless smaller streamers. With the rare exception of breakout indie hits like *Among Us* (Fenlon, 2020), indie games collectively make up only a tiny fraction of the overall audience. There remains a high level of uncertainty about the factors that lead to a given game’s success, leaving many indie developers ambivalent about leveraging influencer attention for sales even as they commit significant time and energy trying to do so. Are streamers the golden key to success, a necessary cost of doing business as an indie, or platform capitalist snake oil? This article critically examines different discourses around streaming and commercial indie games, beginning with an overview of popular success stories, then focusing on developer perceptions of the benefits and risks of streaming and its impacts on indie game making practices, including production, promotion, and community-building.

The body of academic research on Twitch and game streaming continues to grow, and

scholars have investigated streaming services as platforms, the experiences of streamers marginalized on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and mental health, the diverse forms of visible and invisible labour involved in streaming, cultures of game spectatorship, the possibilities of streaming for game development education, and the intersection of streaming and competitive esports (Consalvo & Phelps, 2021; Gray, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Ruberg et al., 2019; Ruberg, 2020; Ruberg & Lark, 2020; Taylor, 2018; Walker, 2014). These insights directly inform our approach here, and we hope to expand and nuance this body of work by directing attention to the experiences of game developers with streamers and streaming platforms, extending the project of indie game studies and game production studies (Ruffino, 2021; Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021). We likewise build on critical work on the political economy of digital platforms, online influencers, content creators, and micro-celebrity, and media and cultural industries research more broadly (Abidin, 2018b; Bishop, 2020; Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duguay, 2019; D. B. Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Ultimately we argue that, contrary to popular success stories, the impacts of streaming for indie game developers are complex and uncertain, and their ambivalence is characteristic of contemporary platformized cultural work.

Our findings are based on semi-structured interviews with 12 indie game developers based in Toronto and Montréal, Canada (see Table 1 below) selected using a combination of purposive sampling leveraging past connections and snowball sampling. Canada is the third largest producer of digital games internationally, and both cities are significant hubs, encompassing game making activity from AAA to DIY. Almost 90% of Canadian studios,

including all of our interviewees, fall into the category of “small” or “micro” operations with less than 25 employees (Nordicity, 2019). Our focus here is on commercial indie game developers who primarily make original, creator-owned games, usually distributed digitally, in a variety of production contexts.

Table 4.1 *Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Studio size	Roles	Projects at time of interview
Hugh	18	Creative direction, writing	4 releases, 1 in development
Helena	9	Communications, community management	6 releases, several more as publisher for other studios
Melvin	6	Co-founder, game design, business development	1 released, in post-development
Tessa	6	Community management and quality assurance	2 released, in post-development
Holly	3	Studio director, operations lead	1 released, 1 in post-development
Lauren	N/A	Co-working space project manager	Worked with indies and streamers as co-working space staff
Stuart	3	Co-founder, game design	1 in development with studio, several independently released
Curtis	2	Founder, game design, art direction	5 released
Charlie	6	Co-working space co-founder, producer	6 released
Carolyn	3	Co-founder, art direction	1 released, 1 in development
Tom	1	Solo developer	3 released
Christopher	5	Communications	3 released, 1 in development

“Developer” here includes all kinds of game workers, not limited to studio leadership or traditional “creative” roles, but also frequently overlooked roles in commercial game-making like marketing and community management (Perks, 2020). In some cases, due to the shifting nature of indie cultural work, developers are responsible for multiple areas, while others are in more dedicated roles. All participants are embedded to varying degrees in local and translocal indie scenes and most are personally acquainted via community organizations, co-working spaces, and social events, as well as larger global networks of indie developers (Parker & Jenson, 2017). In addition to individual experience, these interconnected communities of practice inform developer understanding of streaming through informal knowledge-sharing and formal initiatives, such as events for developers to meet local streamers organized at co-working hubs.

Interviews took place in single sessions in 2018 and 2019, usually in studio offices or co-working spaces, and participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences with game livestreaming, how they interact with streamers, the impacts of streaming on various aspects of development, differences between streamers and other kinds of intermediaries like journalists, and the role of streaming platforms themselves. Interview data was transcribed then collaboratively coded and analyzed according to emergent themes, allowing us synthesize on the ground stories, perspectives, and attitudes. Participants were given the opportunity to review the article and quotations before publication, and all names have been anonymized. This research is part of the larger Indie Interfaces project, and in addition to these interviews our findings are informed by extensive interviews and ethnographic work conducted with indie

game developers and cultural intermediaries between 2015 and 2019, during which time the potential importance of streaming for indies became increasingly apparent.

4.3 Streaming success stories and cultural intermediation

To set the stage for the present research, it is important to consider the wider industry context and popular narratives around indie games and streaming. In the wake of digital distribution, cheap bundling of games, and increased interest in smaller games, commercial indie games are now widely understood to be an oversaturated market, making it difficult to stand out (Keogh, 2018). In light of these concerns (whether or not they are accurate) streaming appears to be an “implicit low-intensity marketing” solution to the problem of discoverability (Kerr, 2016, p. 135). Popular streamers command the attention of hundreds, sometimes thousands of eyeballs, and if they are playing your game then there is a presumed opportunity to convert them to customers and fans. Journalist Jason Schreier underscores the role of streamers and YouTubers in the success of two breakout indie hits, *Stardew Valley* and *Shovel Knight*. In his account, “early streams and videos generated more buzz for *Stardew Valley* than any press outlet” (2017a, p. 77), and “when huge YouTube channels like the Game Grumps later played through the [*Shovel Knight*] demo, they reached hundreds of thousands of people” (2017a, p. 180). These and other success stories about indie developers making it big thanks to positive attention from streamers and YouTubers circulate widely and inform game development practices. Like other indie success stories, these narratives tend to assume a linear path in which the passionate labour and creative vision of obscure independent creators, along with a little luck, translates into well-earned fame (Ruffino, 2013). The developers we spoke to frequently

mentioned these and other examples, and a handful have found traction with streamers for their own games.

In many ways, game streamers resemble cultural intermediaries, those actors in a cultural field that connect cultural works to consumers (Matthews & Smith Maguire, 2014). Intermediaries such as community organizers, festival and showcase curators, critics, co-working space coordinators, and other behind-the-scenes actors are the connecting tissue that constitutes indie game culture as such (Parker et al., 2018; M. E. Perks et al., 2019). Aphra Kerr calls game streamers and online content creators “new cultural intermediaries who are taking the place of specialist game magazines and written game reviews. These players are generating advertising, sponsorship revenue and driving sales of games. They assist in the circulation, marketing and commodification of gameplay” (2016, p. 137); Mark R. Johnson and Jamie Woodcock go so far as to argue that streamers are making professional reviewers obsolete (2019b). Carolyn gestures to this as she tries to find the right word to describe what exactly streamers do for indie developers, suggesting “servers,” “advertisers”, and “sales people” as possibilities, while Holly thinks of streamers as “tastemakers” that draw attention to new games.

Our research suggests these accounts of influencers’ influence may be hyperbolic. Certainly, game streamers can act as tastemakers in that they — at least sometimes — are able to expose consumers to previously unknown cultural products. But Kerr goes on to note that the paratextual content created by streamers “exists in an uneasy relationship” to the game makers whose work they build their streaming careers on (Kerr, 2016, p. 137). This uneasy

relationship is further complicated by the platforms themselves, who are themselves powerful intermediaries. For this reason, T.L. Taylor challenges reductive accounts of streaming as merely promotional, a framing that glosses over the more complex cultural-economic interdependences involved and the creative/cultural labour of streamers themselves (2018, pp. 50–51). There is an important difference between “downstream” intermediation of putting games in front of potential players associated with advertising and tastemaking, and “upstream” intermediation between developers and powerful industry actors like publishers, platform-holders, and investors (Parker et al., 2018). This is further muddled by forms of “cross-stream” intermediation between developers and journalists, curators, and community organizers whose “relational labour” and networks of mutual support are far from obsolete and remain key to indie game development even if they do not directly engage consumers (Baym, 2015; Whitson et al., 2018). As we will show, streaming is not a simple or linear process of promoting cultural products to consumers, and in fact performs a wide variety of functions for a diverse range of actors that “transform private play into public entertainment” (Taylor, 2018, p. 22), and indie game developers do not necessarily have much agency in this process.

Meritocratic success stories risk misrepresenting the work and complexities involved in both streaming and indie game development. In reality, only a small upper crust of indie games catch the attention of streamers and influencers in the first place, and the process by which they do so is anything but straightforward. These stories also ignore the “survivor bias” of early adopters of new game production and distribution techniques; what begins as an exciting new “blue ocean” quickly become a hyper-competitive “red ocean” as other

developers attempt to emulate the success stories (Mi, 2015) — indeed, breakout games like *Stardew Valley* and *Among Us* occupy significant platform real estate, making it that much more difficult for newcomers to capture attention. Melvin alludes to this, saying part of the challenge for developers is keeping abreast of new avenues for promotion and distribution, without falling into the trap of replicating strategies that no longer work. No doubt hard work, good ideas, and sheer luck play a role, but our research participants — including those that have found popularity with streamers — point to a more complex and ambivalent assemblage of actors, factors, and attitudes at play, suggesting that success stories are not the whole story.

4.4 Streaming and indie game production

Unsurprisingly, the rise of streaming has influenced not only promotional strategies, but all aspects of game development, including the design process. Tom argues that “streaming games has changed the landscape of what kind of games are practical to build,” or at least what is commercially marketable. In the current moment, all game developers are compelled to keep the dynamics of streaming platforms in mind as they conceptualize, execute, iterate, and launch projects and support them post-release — even if they ultimately choose to ignore them.

4.4.1 Watching others play

The most subtle but important way that streaming shapes game design is that developers are able to covertly watch their games being played online. Watching streams and gameplay videos becomes an extension of playtesting for developers, which is particularly valuable for in-development games with public “early access” releases, or completed games that may be continually patched, updated, and developed for months or years after release based on player

reception, data analytics, platform changes, and other factors (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This offers certain advantages compared to conventional private playtesting. Hugh compares it to watching “actual people” playing at in-person exhibitions, but better. He is especially drawn to smaller streamers with low viewer counts, who he says are more likely to “play the game in a very similar environment to how they play the game if they were just playing without streaming it.” For Christopher, this removes the artifice of playtesting in the studio or at shows, because the players are playing without direct “coaching” and scrutiny from the developers, resulting in something close to the “the real experience of a first time player.” This lack of scrutiny leads to less filtered, more actionable feedback according to Tessa, because streamers “don’t feel like [they] owe any amount of patience to the game to make you understand, which can come across as pretty harsh [...] but at the same time, it’s fair.” Melvin remembers how watching streamers struggle with certain features of his game (which was not originally designed with streaming in mind) was revelatory, and helped identify key usability problems, bugs, and other issues to be fixed that were missed in regular playtesting. However, this also creates a new challenge for developers. As Hugh notes, if the game is too buggy or broken, streamers may bounce off of it, or viewers may decide, “well, there's 7,000 other games released this year. I'm not buying this one.” If the developers aren’t able to make the necessary fixes promptly in response to issues flagged by streamers, says Christopher, “We've lost these players or these viewers,” the opposite of the desired effect. This illustrates the risk of unofficial playtesting in front of a live online audience compared to more controlled environments, as well as the “always-on” grind necessitated by the shift to ongoing “games-as-a-service” style development (Dubois & Weststar, 2021).

4.4.2 Designing for “streamability”

Different genres, styles, and features are considered more or less amenable to the performance of play, and most developers we spoke to considered “streamability” and “watchability” in the design of their projects from the beginning in hopes of increasing their platform “discoverability” (Della Rocca, 2020; McKelvey & Hunt, 2019). Action-oriented, competitive, and silly games, multiplayer “live” games that are updated frequently, and horror games are singled as good content for streamers because of their unpredictability and potential for humorous or entertaining commentary, their encouragement of audience “back seat” play, and their capacity for long-term play. By contrast, single-player narrative games, especially those with fairly linear stories, are seen as less amenable for streaming. This emerging discourse of streamability and discoverability contributes to a kind of normative standardization of which types of indie games and developers are considered commercially feasible, and which are not.

Many developers told us they take time to closely analyze the most popular games on Twitch and other platforms to determine what makes them so streamable, and whether those qualities are marketable to a wider audience beyond content creators. Hugh thinks the visual and user interface levels are crucial to make the game legible and entertaining for audiences as well as players. His studio’s competitive multiplayer game was not made exclusively for streaming, but it was designed to work well as a competitive esports with online spectators. Its presentation is influenced by professional sporting events, “So we looked at both those types of, how those things are presented on TV and tried to copy certain things.” Hugh notes that designers may prefer simplicity and minimalism, but from a “spectator design” standpoint it is important to have additional information visible on screen, such as timers and energy meters,

to engage commentators and the audience in the action. In Helena's experience some features streamers look for are relatively simple to implement, such as timers to foster speedrunning¹⁵, but other features believed to enhance "streamability," such as networked multiplayer, nonlinear structure, procedural generation¹⁶ to increase replayability, and customization, are more substantial undertakings for developers.

From Christopher's perspective, every aspect of a game's design is key to its appeal to streamers and viewers, and he put a lot of thought into making his multiplayer game "perfect for Twitch." Having small teams, for example, allowed for legible communication and interaction between players without overwhelming the streamer or viewers (Christopher notes with pride that his team came to the same conclusion as popular AAA titles on the ideal team size). He also determined, based on observing streamers and the affordances of Twitch as a platform, that "games with some downtimes, as long as they're not too long, is great because they have time to engage with their community and talk with people and read the chat." This is somewhat counterintuitive, since Christopher's design philosophy and past experience suggest players want a fast-paced game with as little downtime as possible. Tom also touches on this contrast: "the streamer demands a certain flow for it to fit inside of a stream. If I'm making a super high stressed action game, that doesn't work for the streamer as well as it does

¹⁵ Speedrunning is the act of playing a video game, or section of a video game, with the goal of completing it as fast as possible. Speedrunning often involves following planned routes, which may incorporate sequence breaking and can exploit glitches that allow sections to be skipped or completed more quickly than intended.

¹⁶ Procedural generation is a method of creating data via algorithm rather than by hand. Game developers can harness this to allow the game to generate its own content (settings, objects, and stories) using a series of rules.

for the individual player.” That “slow time” allows streamers to more actively engage with their audiences, an essential part of their performance.

Developers are also keenly aware that if streamers are not hooked by a game’s pacing and flow early on, they may not stick with it for long. Curtis feels in retrospect that his most recent game was not structured well for streamers:

[T]he big mistake that I didn't know I was making until I saw it being streamed, which is that I was really trying to get a good difficulty curve from the game, which means sort of introducing things at a steady pace, but not necessarily showing our hand entirely early on. [...] it's only once you get into the second [world] that you start seeing the things that are important, that are not important, that are surprising and that make you sort of realize, “Oh, this game's a lot deeper than I expected.” But that first world ends up being a really natural stopping spot. So, what I've seen is a whole bunch of people who've done a single stream of the game where they play for around half an hour to an hour, finish up the first line and then never come back to the game on stream because they feel this shows what the game is about.

This poses a dilemma, however, because Curtis feels the game as released is better from a design perspective, even if a more front-loaded structure would be more appealing for streamers and promotional purposes. As Christopher’s example of incorporating downtime also indicates, developers’ instincts about what works for ordinary players must be balanced

against what they think will work for content creators, directly informing the design process.

4.4.3 Platform programmability and integrations

Twitch’s “programmability” as a platform (Helmond, 2015) extends to game developers, who can use Twitch’s API to easily integrate platform functionality directly into games — a more explicit way of enhancing streamability. The developers we spoke with are ambivalent towards these integrations. Melvin’s team added minor Twitch integrations that allow viewers to vote on in-game elements, which he says was a post-release decision once the game was already gaining popularity with streamers: “It was just a cool idea and there was a plugin that worked for it, so we used it.” Helena sees integrations as an iffy proposition that not all streamers actually like, especially if they are “obtrusive” and allow viewers to directly intervene in the game, so her studio has stuck to “passive” features like using viewer usernames for in-game characters. These kinds of features are fun add-ons rather than core to the game’s design. By contrast, Lauren has more experience with integrations and sees them as a substantial way to make genres perceived to be less streamable, such as single player narrative games, work well on stream. She explains that developers can tap into “that desire that streamers have to connect” by developing features that allow streamers and viewers to engage directly through the game. One example is incorporating Twitch “drops,” free in-game items awarded to viewers if the streamer hits certain goals, which Lauren says incentivizes streamers to play the game, while simultaneously incentivizing viewers to become players so they can use the free items. But she cautions that it can’t be a tacked-on thing, adding “you have to actually think about it, I think developers are thinking about it more and more and are actually doing something that makes

sense with their game, or just don't do it.” Other developers are dubious of the value of integrations, especially for small teams on modest budgets, and Stuart notes that because they do not work on mobile devices, many viewers will not even be able to use them. Here we see a central, recurring tension between dedicating time, energy, and budget to make streaming an “integral feature” of the game, versus focusing on other things.

Several developers talked about plans to build future projects around streaming from the ground up. Holly is hoping to take advantage of the excitement around virtual reality (VR) systems, explaining a concept where “the streamer could play it in VR, but the audience could participate in the game itself using the new integration tools,” by voting on what happens in the game, with those interactions incorporated into the VR user interface so the streamer is not “cut off” from the audience. An important factor for Holly is that these integrations are monetizable via viewer donation, with developers getting 20% of the revenue alongside the platform and the streamer, as opposed being left out of the deal as they are in other forms of streaming monetization. She sees this as a pathbreaking idea, since most VR games are not optimized or monetized for streaming, and hopes that the audience-interactive elements will also increase replayability. Curtis has also done experiments with what he calls “stream first” games that are “made to be played over Twitch.” With some cultural agency funding, he prototyped “a game that was played between the audience and the person streaming” using the Twitch chat, rather than the official API, and thought it was promising. However, he’s hesitant to turn it into a larger-scale project due to the “serious money” required and the lack of well-designed, successful examples of similar games, which he attributes to the fact that some

audiences simply want to watch rather than become active participants in the game. Nevertheless, like most developers streaming is front of mind as he conceptualizes new projects: “I’m going to just basically sit down and look at the state of the industry and try to figure out what my plans are next, because it keeps changing.” Indies are navigating a constantly shifting environment, and the language of risk permeates their comments.

For Tom, the greatest risk lies in ignoring streamers: “A lot of developers would make a game without considering necessarily whether they’re making it for streaming audiences,” waiting until the game is ready to release before contacting streamers with a “hope this works out” approach rather than intentionality. Curtis finds this process “super annoying,” since he feels it devalues games designed to be self-contained experiences in favour of “endless amounts of content” and games-as-a-service models. This is exacerbated by what he calls the inscrutable “black box of discoverability” on different platforms¹⁷, leaving developers mystified about how to find an audience. This skepticism is warranted, according to other developers. Hugh lists off the many ways incorporating streaming-related features can impact a project: “additional cost, additional programming time, additional quick fixing, additional [quality assurance]. So you have to be really sure that there’s value in what you’re doing before you commit to spend that money in development.” Christopher is fairly certain there is no value in streaming for his team’s next game, so he’s “not going to invest effort and money too

¹⁷ The blackbox of discoverability refers to the difficulty many developers and community managers face when trying to gain recognition on a variety of social media or sales platforms. Without knowing the details of how games are featured over others, they are unable to plan or factor this into their expectations for how many sales or impressions they can expect.

much on streaming because these kinds of games almost [never] stream or barely.” Strategic decisions about costs and benefits, imagined audiences, and design ethos, all inflected by platform logics, are now central to commercial indie game development. These strategies are undertaken, on the chance – however slim – that streaming can lead to commercial success or notoriety for indie developers.

4.5 Streaming and indie game promotion

Although the experiences and specific attitudes of our interviewees vary, in the broadest terms indie developers see streaming as a means of promoting their games, alongside marketing, press, social media, public exhibitions and other forms of promotion. According to developers, the potential value of streaming is highly dependent on the genre of game, and moreover there are many different kinds of streamers, each with different styles of performance and genre preferences, from competitive streamers who often play one game exclusively, to “variety streamers” who rotate games and genres regularly, to “niche” streamers who focus narrowly on a particular genre or subgenre. When the genre of game aligns with the streamers’ particular tastes or play style, Helena says, streamers become “very good hype people. If you have a game and you want people to get excited about it and you want to get it to as many people as possible, I feel like streamers are just the connectors.” Developers’ ground-up theories of streaming resonate with Austin Walker’s argument that the affordances of Twitch as a platform encourage a “promotional stance” (Walker, 2014, p. 440). What exactly is being promoted — the game, the developer, the streamer, the platform, or some combination thereof — is not always apparent, however, which complicates notions of symbiosis between developers and

streamers (Taylor, 2018, p. 126).

Some developers see a fairly direct connection between promotion, streaming, and sales. Melvin and Tessa's accounts of the success of their "highly streamable" competitive party game exemplifies the idea of streamers as a form of promotion. Although they did see some spikes in their sales that directly correlated with popular streamers playing the game not long after its release, they place greater emphasis on the fact that they have maintained sales at an unusually steady level for upwards of three years, a "long tail" of players discovering the game thanks in part to ongoing streaming and gameplay videos. "A lot of them are small, but still people are making content," which for Melvin and Tessa speaks to the value of fostering paratextual practices¹⁸ as a "primary strategy" for ongoing post-release promotion that they have pursued "pretty aggressively" as they have pushed new content for the game by directly soliciting hundreds of individual streamers. Tessa puts it succinctly: streamers are "amplifiers" and "arguably the most effective way that we could possibly have out there to get people's attention and grow our audience." Tom ascribes the modest popularity of his own humorous multiplayer game to its "replayability," which he believes encouraged streamers, notably those who played in groups, to "keep coming back to it," correlating with increased sales. Stuart had a similar experience when a high-profile YouTube content creator discovered one of his games several years after release, which he says "spiked my sales and then the sales reset, but not to launch maybe to the year before. It basically, bumped it back a year in terms of the sales, in

¹⁸ Paratextual practices here refers to Melvin and Tessa's strategy of promotion that relies on everything except the game itself, instead using content generated by others to promote their game.

terms of those numbers. That's huge.” Stuart directly attributes this “reset” of his game’s long tail to this YouTuber, and he and Christopher both note that the permanent archive of recorded gameplay videos on YouTube may be an even greater asset than livestreamed content since they have more longevity. Several other interviewees drew similar correlations between streaming and long-term success, with the goal of becoming a “forever game” updated over a long period of time for a dedicated audience, as Tom puts it.

Helena compares the role of streaming in promotion to celebrity and influencer marketing in other fields: “It's why some perfume company would pay a model or a celebrity to take a picture with a perfume bottle. It's like, we want the streamer to play the game because we know that will make the game seem fun to their audience.” While certainly this is true in the case of big-name celebrity streamers, smaller or niche streamers can also have a positive impact. Stuart says that his team is deliberately marketing their game to a particular genre niche: “our niche streamers are magnitudes smaller. But they are a way more targeted market. I feel like the conversion rate on views to sales would be way higher, like 10 times higher” because they “cater directly to our audience.” In other words, quality is as important as quantity in promotion. Although he is not as convinced of direct sales boosts or measurable return on investment, Hugh contends that “we can definitely see that in some cases, our game brought audiences to a Twitch streamer’s channel. And in other cases, the Twitch streamers channel’s audience brought viewers for us for the game.” This leads him to contend that having a game streamed in sufficient numbers can improve discoverability on digital distribution platforms thanks to increased searches and wishlisting. In the same vein, Christopher sees streaming as

a useful way to gradually build a player base for in-development games still in beta testing or early access.

4.6 Uncertain results, ambivalence, and dismissal

In spite of the opportunities most of our interviewees see in streaming, the strongest theme in our conversations is ambivalence. Indies recognize the inevitability of streaming as a factor in contemporary game development, but frequently express uncertainty about how impactful, reliable, and measurable it really is, and whether actively pursuing it is worth the significant time and effort involved. Although as noted above some developers anecdotally attribute sales or engagement spikes to attention from specific streamers, in many other cases developers report that being featured by streamers with large followings produced no measurable results (Tran, 2020). Past success is no guarantee, either. When Tom made a new and improved 3D version of a previous game that had gained traction with many streamers, he found that they only played it briefly and moved on, and he isn't sure why it didn't resonate. Hugh characterizes indie game marketing as a process of "just testing assumptions constantly," with no concrete rules or best practices to follow: "One week this type of content works, the next week this type of content works. You can't plan for that. So I try a bunch of different things." Helena likewise finds that there's no formula, which makes it hard to track, lamenting that "the problem with streaming is that sometimes you can't really judge if it's working well." This leads her to question whether exposure in and of itself is truly beneficial for her studio, contra popular narratives of streaming success.

In spite of his game's popularity with streamers, Melvin also remains ambivalent. At

one point, Melvin and Tessa's studio invested money in the Twitch "Bounty Board" system, which allows developers to make a pot of money available for streamers to claim in exchange for featuring their games. This led to more streamers playing the game, but didn't have any obvious effect on sales or engagement. "What does that mean?" Melvin wonders, frustrated, "Does that mean that it didn't have any effect? Does it mean that the effect is going to be felt over the next 12 months as just like a long tail addition to the general visibility of the game? We don't know." Ultimately he concludes that Twitch is "trying to own the channel of communication between the developers and the streamer," echoing Will Partin's work on how platforms "capture" previously off-platform monetization strategies (2020). Several other developers, including Tom, Helena, and Lauren likewise question the usefulness of paying streamers directly, at least for indies working with small budgets. Christopher's studio used the Bounty system early on at Twitch's urging and found that while it did get streamers to play the game, the return on investment in terms of sales was negligible, suggesting that, as Lauren puts it, the feature is "not attuned to indie reality." Curtis links the pervasive uncertainty around streaming to the rapid pace of change in the game industry, and the dominance and inscrutability of platform algorithms: "Do articles make a difference? Do streams make a difference? Is there anything other than being on the front page of Steam, make a difference? And then no one knows how stuff gets onto the front page of Steam." Lacking answers to these questions, Curtis concludes that all developers can do is find an intersecting point in the "Venn diagram" of different factors and their own creative interests and hope for the best. Other developers go so far as to chalk success with streamers up to sheer luck. Tom and Stuart both describe it as a "fluke," with a high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability in terms of

impact. Although streaming platforms, digital storefronts, and third-part analytics services offer developers a plethora of data about their games and players, these layers of quantification only seem to further mystify the process (Egliston, 2021).

All of this raises questions about much of the advice that circulates about streaming for indies. Charlie critiques the popular idea that if you “find the right streamer with the right audience [...] it's guaranteed to make all your financial dreams come true as an indie developer” as a potentially dangerous misconception. Carolyn likewise observes that “people think it is an easier thing than it is” and worries that naivety or overconfidence will lead developers to overemphasize streaming to the detriment other important factors. The concerns discussed above about how amenable different genres are for different kinds of streaming play into this as well. As Lauren puts it, “Considering streaming as just the one thing is kind of saying, all games are the same, all games have the same process [...] can we realistically compare a three person VR studio to an 18 person mobile game studio? No, we can't.” Lauren and Carolyn both caution that this makes it difficult to compare different indie experiences, since what works well for one game may not work at all for another.

For some indie developers, ambivalence leans towards a wholly negative view of streaming as too risky or even harmful to their games. This reflects a small but significant countercurrent to the generally celebratory discourse around game-based content creators, exemplified by Numinous Games' charge that YouTube Let's Play videos hurt sales of their narrative game *That Dragon, Cancer* (Green, 2016). Of all our participants, Holly's perspective is the most negative and closely aligns with their experience:

[M]ore people have played the game for free than have bought it and I find that statistic depressing. [...] it all comes back to the nature of our game. Our game is a narrative game that plays like a movie. Once you have seen our game, you don't really have a reason to play it. And this is the inherent problem with the streaming culture and the game we made. The game we made, it streams well. People enjoy watching it and watching someone play it and it's a cool experience, but they have no reason to buy it afterwards.

The issue was exacerbated by the fact that Holly's team gave away numerous free promotional copies of the game to streamers, further reducing their overall sales. Anticipating these problems during development, her team considered asking streamers to only play half the game. They decided against it because they didn't want to sour relationships by coming off as overly controlling, but their fears were borne out.

Another factor that contributed to Holly's negative experience was her game's serious, dark themes. She was worried that streamers — especially those who usually stream more mainstream games — would not take it seriously:

It feels dangerous to put it into the hands of someone who's more likely to make fun of it than to appreciate it. [...] I know there's in theory no such thing as bad publicity, but since it's such a specific and somewhat sensitive game, I just didn't feel like we should be courting that kind of attention.

This again echoes Numinous Games' concern that *That Dragon, Cancer*'s deeply personal story of loss would be devalued by content creators, and also resonates with the experiences of

queer game developers like Robert Yang, whose games about gay sex and masculinity are frequent targets of gameplay reaction videos and streams that use them as fodder for exaggerated, often profane mockery, and have also been censored by Twitch (k, 2018; Yang, 2016). Helena, whose games often feature characters of diverse gender and sexual identity, is cautious about how sexist, homophobic, or racist “broey men” streamers will present those aspects to their audiences. Increased visibility on the internet is not necessarily a positive thing, especially for people marginalized on the basis of identity, and game culture in particular is notoriously hostile (Gray, 2014; Nakamura, 2008).

All of this has left Holly fatigued by the overemphasis on streamers in indie game promotion, at least for narrative games: “frankly, I'm just disillusioned, I'm like why? Why would I do that? Cool, they'll play it and no one will buy it.” Several other developers share this skepticism, with Tom even suggesting that a perceived decline in story-oriented games could be related to the rise of streaming, further evidence of a normative effect on game development.

4.7 What exactly are streamers promoting?

A key factor in all of the different attitudes and perceptions discussed above is the knowledge that streamers are cultural producers in their own right. They may in some cases directly or indirectly promote indie games, but as noted above, cultural intermediation is not their primary function (Taylor, 2018, p. 51). This sets streamers apart from other actors in the space, such as journalists or festival curators, and developers are acutely aware of this fact. Tom observes that streamers cultivate “parasocial relationships” that give their audiences a sense of a “personable

and amicable” social interaction when in fact it is largely unidirectional — concepts that align closely with critical research on other kinds of influencers (Abidin, 2015). Helena is also cautious about parasociality, and worries about “the amount of trust that they get from their community, how easily influenced the community can be and rabid fans and the ways they can take advantage of that.” She points to controversies like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* YouTubers hawking gambling schemes as one example (Frank, 2017a), and more recently there has been slew of sexual harassment and assault charges against popular streamers (Grayson, 2020). If a streamer recommends a game, that recommendation may hold additional weight thanks to their parasocial relationships (as in all influencer marketing), but streamers are less intermediating and more *remediating* the games they play – the stream stands as a distinct cultural product (Consalvo, 2017).

For some developers, this state of affairs feels unfair or even exploitative. Holly’s negative experience with her game has led her to personally view streamers as unfairly profiting off of indies: “If they have a large enough audience, they are literally getting money from the audience to be playing a game and or from I guess other ads on Twitch. [...] They're making money off of it.” On the other hand, Hugh understands why some developers feel this way, but is critical of the impulse: “There is a particular angle that says streamers are parasites, they are producing content off the back of the work that we're doing. [...] the reality is that that's just not how the world works anymore.” For Hugh, developers need to take streaming as a given of the contemporary industry and make the best of it, rather than treating streamers as competition. Similarly, Lauren argues that streamers and developers alike should approach

streaming from a place of collaboration.

4.8 Collaboration, connection, and community building

It is in this potential for platform-mediated collaboration, connection, and community-building that developers see the most direct value in streaming. While the influence of streaming on direct or indirect sales is difficult to pin down, many interviewees point to other, less quantifiable but equally important factors at play, such as community building and fostering audience engagement. What allows for long tail success like Melvin and Tessa's is a critical mass of people invested in the developer and their work. Cultivating a loyal, participatory community of fan-consumers who feel a personal connection to the creator is understood to be essential for contemporary independent cultural production, and social media engagement is a key means of doing so (N. K. Baym, 2015; Kribs, 2017). In Carolyn's experience, having your games featured on Twitch streams produces engagement "in a way that is very organic and/or authentic," and so it should be seen as a community tool that ripples outward onto other social media platforms, regardless of sales. That sense of intimacy and authenticity is actively constructed and presents streamers as "real" players actually playing and reacting to the game, often through "calibrated amateurism" and other performative techniques, reinforced by the technical and social affordances of platforms (Abidin, 2018a; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Ruberg & Lark, 2020). As Hugh argues, having an engaged community even if "they're not all consumers or they're not all potential purchasers of your product" is useful in and of itself, giving developers more to work with as they relationally cultivate an audience, promote their games, and develop new projects.

Tessa, for example, uses streaming as raw material for producing social media posts for her studio: “for me it really serves the purpose of creating content that I can use to make the promotion of what's coming up.” She collects clips of interesting or funny moments from streams, as well as memes, press, and other materials and reworks them into compelling content to share via other channels, a strategy other community managers also employ to generate engagement and build brand recognition. Tessa explicitly ties this to credibility and authenticity, a way of incorporating streamers and viewers into the studio’s community, and she says streamers appreciate this mutually beneficial acknowledgment, another indication that these relationships may be best conceived in business-to-business terms. The community-building function extends also to shaping that community. Charlie argues that streamed and recorded play not only helps new players grasp the basics of a game, but additionally model normative ways of playing and enjoying it, contributing to emergent community standards more effectively than official developer-produced content or journalistic coverage. Although it was not a major theme in our interviews, some indie developers livestream their own game development work for similar reasons (Consalvo & Phelps, 2021). Rather than seeing streamers as a way of outsourcing promotion, developers are compelled to adopt the same parasocial strategies of self-promotion and relational community maintenance as the streamers themselves, much like other independent cultural producers in the digital age (Kribs, 2017) – provided they have the time and resources to spend.

4.9 Conclusion

Game developer perspectives on streaming illustrate just how mutable and precarious

commercial indie game development continues to be, in spite of the proliferation of streaming-related success stories. The small Canadian developers we spoke with feel the influence of streaming on all aspects of their work, and approach its potential risks and benefits ambivalently as they pursue the elusive goal of creative and economic sustainability (Whitson et al., 2018).

In the production process, streaming offers an opportunity for more organic playtesting and tweaking games in response to player experience, but this requires active, ongoing development work. Streaming also has a normative effect on design practices, as developers attempt to conceptualize games that appeal to streamers and viewers, though this may clash with their own design sensibilities. Programmable tools that integrate aspects of the streaming platform directly into games may enhance streamability, but they are often prohibitively costly or labour-intensive for smaller developers. Beyond production, streaming is understood to serve a promotional function, and some developers attribute sales bumps and long-term interest in their games to uptake by streamers. However, the majority of our participants express uncertainty about the value of streaming as a promotional tool, pointing to inconsistent results and frustratingly opaque platforms. For certain kinds of games, the impact of streaming is seen as largely negative, benefitting streamers and the platform more than developers, which has implications for what developers consider commercially feasible. Where developers seem to find streaming more consistently useful is in the less explicitly promotional but no less important community-building aspects of cultural production. Streaming thus becomes one of many venues where developers themselves are compelled to adopt the performative, relational

techniques of streamers and other online influencers to cultivate a following for their work.

Our findings complicate the optimistic narratives and advice that characterize much of the discourse on streaming and indie games, in which platforms are paradoxically positioned as both the cause of and solution to the problem of discoverability. In fact, the “nested precarities” of the competitive market for indie games, the rapidly changing game industry, and the ambiguous cultural and economic logics of different platforms (Duffy et al., 2021) are embodied in game developers as profound ambivalence (Chia, 2021). The experiences of indie game developers with livestreaming are thus consistent with the more general precarity and ambivalence of cultural work in the era of platform capitalism (de Peuter et al., 2017; Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2021; Lehto, 2021; Siciliano, 2021). With a whole ecology of platforms and content creation practices shaping game production, promotion, monetization, and community management in the present moment, there is much to learn by centering the empirical experiences of ordinary game developers navigating this environment.

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Chapter 5: Community Management: The Servitization of Online Communities and Digital Frontline Work

5.1 Introduction¹⁹

Emerging in the mid-2000s, the social web – also known as the participatory web or Web 2.0 – provided an endless array of opportunities for individuals to connect online, generating an endless stream of user-generated content (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012; DiNucci, 1999). Contrary to the more static older websites, the social web brought opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and dialogue that live on social media giants such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Twitch, and more. Content generated on social media sites ranges from photos to videos (both pre-recorded and live) to long or short-form writing. This content is primarily created by users themselves, contrary to previous iterations of the web, which generally featured content for consumption with no or little space for contribution. With this newfound freedom and innovative ways to connect came new venues for harassment, hate speech, and an extension of ‘spam’ across the web. While many assume that managing these spaces – keeping them safe and free from unwanted content – could be done automatically, it is often done by humans in circumstances that are harsh, underpaid, and underappreciated (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019). However, some capitalized on their ability to shepherd, direct, and manage online communities free from or with minimal disruption.

¹⁹ Chapter 5 does not include a preface as it is written originally for this dissertation and not for a separate research project.

I focus on community management within the video game industry, as I later detail in the following section. This chapter focuses on the “community managers” whose work, I argue, encapsulates the industry-wide focus on user-generated content and the management, moderation, and direction of this content. The video game industry has a long history with community management and using users as active agents of change within a platform (Taylor, 2006), and it acts as an ideal site of study. In addition, the game industry has undergone many changes in how it produces and distributes content to consumers, which I argue prioritizes the work of community management (Nieborg, 2016). I utilize the concept of “servitization” to understand these shifts in the labour market for community managers. Servitization captures the phenomenon whereby games previously “produced, sold, and played as discrete units” (Weststar & Dubois, 2022, p. 2) shift to a system where consumers pay in smaller increments to participate continuously. As Weststar and Dubois argue, servitization represents shifts that ultimately change our understanding of production and consumption processes in the video game industry and other similar creative and cultural industries.

I argue that the role of community managers is critical as a filter between production (such as game developers) and consumption (video game communities and players). Their work needs to be better understood when examining changes within the video game industry and broader changes on various other media platforms. To explore this, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with community managers in the video game industry, focusing on themes of their work history, day-to-day tasks and responsibilities, and their view on community management as a category of work. In the following section, I explore a brief

history of community management and the concept of servitization. Following this, I detail my methods and explore data from my interviews organized by thematic areas. I conclude this chapter by arguing for greater attention to the community management role based on their increased impacts on gameswork that extend to other media industries.

5.2 Moderation to Management: Servitization of Community Management

The role of community management has seen significant development in the past decade as the role shifts to meet the rising demands of social media sites (deWinter et al., 2017; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015; Roberts, 2016). Community managers work to maintain these spaces online, even as their industry changes, complicating their work. Historically, community managers occupied informal roles and were commonly referred to as “gamemasters” or “moderators” as they swept up inappropriate and unwanted content on forum sites and early virtual worlds. These roles were volunteer and unpaid and carried out by ordinary users (and developers in some rare cases). Their main tasks were to ensure that any rules set up in forums, chats, or other spaces where users generated content were followed and to reprimand anyone who broke these rules, typically with suspensions or bans from the platform. However, as digital social platforms (such as virtual worlds, multiplayer games, and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Discord) have expanded, their roles have become more formalized. I focus on community management within the video game industry, where they can be found managing user-generated content and are employed in various industries and contexts. This work crosses numerous social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Discord, YouTube,

Twitch, and more. As stated, while much of their work is based in moderation historically, specific distinct characteristics set them apart.

The moderation of platforms has a long history and increasingly plays a role in the dissemination and control of users online, shaping public discourse (Gillespie, 2010, 2018). As this work shifts from removing to fostering productive content, it is increasingly emblematic of “relational labour” (Baym, 2015). Moderation and mediation of content and communities online create a demand for skills previously undervalued within many industries, including the video game industry, while simultaneously creating a work atmosphere where workers struggle to delineate between their personal and professional lives (Baym, 2015). Despite the higher demand for this work, community engagement is often underpaid, entry-level, and precarious work that lacks the security and compensation of other more technical roles while also subjecting workers to volatile, hateful, and sometimes traumatic content (Roberts, 2016). While some moderation work is automated, much of the decision-making is made by humans (Roberts 2016). Moderation is contrary to community management work which instead focuses on the demand for human affect. Community managers are the creators of social bonds within the otherwise impersonal, algorithmically created, and managed spaces of our platformed, online world. This work has commonly been feminized and obscured behind more ‘traditional’ masculine roles within software development, such as coding, programming, and design (Harvey & Shepherd, 2017; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015). I argue that community management work, while often overlapping the work of content moderation, is distinct.

Literature on community management is limited, often overtaken by research focusing on content moderation.

Kerr and Kelleher (2015) offer the most comprehensive look into community management from a labour and industry perspective, examining job postings and interviewing some community managers. However, they focus on the conditions of their work and a reliance on emotional labour in their roles, as community managers must either produce or repress emotional states in the course of their work (Hochschild, 1983). While Hochschild's emotional labour helps consider community management work, it does not account for a broader understanding of how emotion is utilized in community engagement. This includes a lack of exploration in areas where emotional labour may lead to meaningful workplace experiences – such as positive encounters with clients and compassion for colleagues (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011 p. 162-163). Additional research expanded upon the monolithic nature of emotion that Hochschild argues for, breaking down different ways of using emotional labour as resistance (Bolton & Boyd, 2003). Hochschild's concept of emotional labour is a fundamental concept, one that led to the development of additional concepts of labour such as relational labour and care work. For the purposes of my study, I find that it is not expansive enough to fully grasp the work of community engagement. Ultimately, I do not feel that one conception of labour fully captures their work at this moment, signalling the importance of the study of community management work.

Prior to recent work examining community managers, research that examined similar work rarely named it as community management. For example, Tim Jordan examines power

and politics within online communities yet does not refer to anything close to community management, despite similarities in how the role might be conceived (Jordan, 1999). Other early works considered “computer-mediated communities” as “vehicles” that users themselves controlled (Jones, 1998). However, with the rise of community management, this work has arguably shifted away from users towards a more top-down control system. Below in Table 1, I have tried to define the main tasks, audiences, fundamental values, and standard tools for various roles closely related to community management. In doing so, I hope to highlight the blurred lines in defining their work, a theme captured in my interviews and my participants' various job titles. However, I also hope to show what distinguishes community management from other roles and highlight it as distinct. As Kerr and Kelleher (2015) state, the growth of community management work and new media and community roles more generally “signals alterations to existing production logics, and perhaps a new production logic.” For this reason, I argue that the work of community managers requires a more focused analysis of the implications of their work of building, maintaining, and socializing their communities.

Table 5.1 *Community Role Breakdown*

Job Title²⁰	Main Tasks	Audiences	Key Value	Common Tools
Community Manager	Create guiding documents for codes of conduct; foster community events; filter information and sentiment	Development team and wider community	Generate excitement and interest around a product through sustained engagement; Filter key	Social media platforms (ex. Twitter, Reddit), social media analytics web tools (ex. Sprout Social, Hootsuite), internal and external chat

²⁰ Many of the participants I interviewed worked directly for the studios they did community management for, with only a few exceptions that worked for independent PR firms.

Job Title²⁰	Main Tasks	Audiences	Key Value	Common Tools
	between developers and community		information between developers and audience	software (ex. Discord, Slack)
In-house Content Moderator	Set standard for enacting company policies on undesirable content; ensure company is compliant with laws, regulations	Platform users, external content moderators	Make wider decisions on what can and cannot exist on a certain platform, protect company from legal liability	In-house moderation tools for removing and censoring content
External Content Moderator	Repeatedly enacting previously set standards for content on a wide range of social media platforms	Platform users	Maintain currently set policies and remove majority of unwanted content from platform	Proprietary software from parent platform companies to moderate content
Social Media Manager	Maintain company accounts across a variety of social media sites, respond to comments, and generate content	Platform users engaging with company content and wider community	Maintain social media accounts across a variety of platforms	Social media sites (ex. Twitter, Reddit), social media analytics web tools (ex. Sprout Social, Hootsuite)

My investigation is not necessarily on the games the developers create but rather on the work these community managers engage in, their experiences and feelings carrying out this work, and the recognition and support structures in this industry. I focus mainly on community

management within game development as it is commonly paid work and typically conducted within larger development teams rather than outsourced to third-party firms. Outside of games, the title of community manager is still relevant, and roles with this title are found in numerous industries, such as in-person co-working spaces (Gregg & Lodato, 2018). Even in small teams of less than ten developers, it is increasingly possible that a dedicated person carries out community management duties. However, they may also wear the hats of marketing, public relations, publishing, and moderation. Typical tasks for community managers may include operating social media accounts, interacting with users over chat servers or forums, communicating information back and forth between developers and users, and most other tasks involving interaction with the studio's wider community to drive and direct interest toward the studio's game amidst a highly saturated industry.

Those who manage game player communities are on the frontlines of handling users across multiple platforms. Game development, therefore, is an ideal site of study for the following reasons: First, much of the earliest research on developers interacting with their communities comes from games, as users have been enrolled in “playbour” and “co-creation” by developers (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Kücklich, 2005). Players have long been described as “productive agents” (Taylor, 2006) whose action is governed and directed in the development of video games by developers who increasingly rely on the expertise provided by these non-professional actors. Second, games are often the site of cultural crises dealing with toxic behaviour and misogyny in gaming culture, requiring intense regulation of communities alongside cultural and social values (Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2018). Third, the video

game industry has already been grappling with issues of how to govern its users through alternative means, such as self-regulated tribunals for toxicity and hateful rhetoric in gameplay (Kou & Nardi, 2014). The services of community managers within the video game industry contribute to more significant shifts occurring within the industry, particularly the concept of “servitization.”

Servitization represents a shift in a business strategy focusing on customer, demand-driven offerings (Vandermerwe & Rada, 1988). Weststar and Dubois (2022) characterize servitization within the video game industry as a “shift from games produced, sold and played as discrete units to games sold on a subscription or pay-as-you-play basis” (p. 2). In my previous chapter, *How Does Games Critique Impact Game Design Decisions? A Case Study of Monetization and Loot Boxes* I detail parts of this shift and how they lead to moments of breakdown within an industry. Servitization in the video game industry is commonly referred to as ‘games-as-a-service’ (GaaS) or ‘live games’ and, as Weststar and Dubois (2022) examine, fundamentally changes the way that games are produced from conception to consumption. Their study focused on developers' perspectives on this shift, while I argue that community management is a missing perspective on this change that has not been critically engaged with. As servitization creates a scenario that depends on consumer interaction and co-creation (Weststar & Dubois, 2022), work that engages with the community consistently is arguably as critically important as the production of the product. As Weststar and Dubois (2022) state, this shift “makes developers directly accountable to players and presents player acquisition, engagement and retention as new deterministic success metrics” (p. 2). Their work

significantly contributes to understanding the impacts of servitization on developers, while my work engages with the emerging roles caused by servitization. In the following section, I detail my methodology and the characteristics of my participants working within the community management industry.

5.3 Methods

Between March 2020 and May 2020, I conducted 14 qualitative interviews with community managers working in the video game industry digitally over Zoom and Discord. Participants were recruited from an open call on social media and through snowball recommendations from community managers I had previously worked with on other research projects. Each community manager who reached out to me independently was interviewed. Ethics approval for these interviews was granted by the University of Waterloo (#30581 and #41877). Originally interviews were planned to take place on-site at the Game Developers Conference (the most prominent industry conference for game developers). However, these interviews were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews lasted, on average, 40 minutes and focused on three main thematic areas. These themes centred on: 1) their past work history in community management and the games industry, 2) how they interface with developers and their role within the game development process, and 3) their perspectives on community management as a role and its place within the industry at large. Interviews included questions such as: “What stage of development were you brought on to the project initially?”, “What are the key skills or qualities that you think are essential for community management?” and “What are your biggest anxieties around community management work?”. Interviews were

semi-structured, and the full interview schedule is found in Appendix A. The community managers I interviewed worked at studios of various sizes and focuses, with a wide variety of job titles and educational and work backgrounds, illustrating the variability in this industry. In addition to the details collected during the interview, I followed up on the job status of my interviewees in 2022. This was done to better investigate the status of community management as a career pathway. Table 2, Interview Participant Information, below provides additional information on those interviewed.

Table 5.2 *Interview Participant Information*

Name* (Gender)	Job Title	Studio Size (approx.)	Educational Field	Where are they now?
Javier (M)	Editor-in-Chief (prev. Community Manager)	Indie	Journalism	Same position.
Renaë (F)	Community Manager	Indie	English	Community Manager at a different studio.
Tatianna (F)	Communications Director	Indie	Film and Literature	Same position.
Kent (M)	Community Manager	Indie	Communications	Same studio, now in position of Marketing Director.
Irwin (M)	Software Developer	Indie	Unknown	Working on self-published game.
Solomon (M)	Communications Manager	Indie	Journalism	Same studio, now in position of PR Executive.
Allegra (F)	Social Marketing Manager	Indie	Programming	Community and Marketing Manager at a different studio.
Troya (F)	Community Manager	200 - 300	Art and Technology	Community Manager at a different studio as well as ongoing content creation.

Name* (Gender)	Job Title	Studio Size (approx.)	Educational Field	Where are they now?
Emanuel (M)	Marketing Director and Community Manager	Indie	Information Technology	Still works at same studio, but also picked up contract work outside of industry.
Ela (F)	Community Developer	Indie	Education	Left studio, several contract positions in Influencer Outreach, Community, and Production as well as on- going content creation.
Yasmin (F)	Community Developer	15,000+	Psychology	Same studio, now working in Production.
Bette (F)	Social Media and Community Specialist	Indie	Commerce	Marketing and Community Lead at a new studio.
Zofia (F)	Community Manager	800 - 1000	Communications	Influencer Relations Manager for a content creator Talent Agency.
Junita (F)	Marketing, Social Media, and Community Manager	Indie	Public Relations	Brand Manager for a video game publisher.

* Pseudonyms have been used.

Since the start of my doctoral degree, I have interviewed over 50 developers, content creators, and industry intermediaries on a variety of topics not limited by the scope of community management but touching on these areas in one way or another. In addition to these interviews focused explicitly on community management, this chapter is undoubtedly informed by my previous personal experiences and data collected from related research projects carried out throughout my doctorate beginning in late 2017. Understanding the perspectives and dynamics of others' work as an ethnographer takes time that is inaccessible as a passive observer, so I made sure to engage with the communities I researched directly and

often (Emerson et al., 2011). This practice, of engaging directly with those in the industry, has proved effective for other scholars researching gameswork (Banks, 2013; Keogh, 2023; Whitson, 2018). In addition, I attended multiple industry events, from conferences to mixers to days spent working at video game co-working spaces where I heard from community experts, shared idle thoughts over coffee, and heard chatter between anxious and excited co-workers. Finally, I worked as a content creator, live streaming myself and playing games to a following of 3,000 and an average viewership of 50 at my peak for roughly two years during my doctorate. Through this, I had the opportunity to work with industry leaders such as Twitch and Electronic Arts on collaborations and spoke at and organized an online conference on the work of being a content creator (Rainbow Arcade, 2020). My observation, interviews, auto-ethnographic work, and content analysis allow for the triangulation of all data collected to provide a more holistic understanding of community managers and the changes within their industry (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; Jerolmack & Khan, 2014).

The following sections are organized around the following main themes from the interview data: 1) what does community management work look like in practice?; 2) what are the pathways towards community management?; 3) how is community management work intertwined with traditional developer work?; 4) what the future of community management work is?; and, finally, 5) What concerns do community managers hold about their work?

5.4 The Care and Keeping of Players

In this section, I explore three themes of what community management work looks like culminating in a definition of community management based on my interview data. One of the

main goals of this chapter is to help draw the boundaries around what community management work looks like, but also what defines that work. Like the cultural intermediaries of the games industry that I studied as part of a larger research project (see: Perks et al., 2019), an immediate roadblock in examining the work of community management is creating a singular definition of their work, as community management tasks vary greatly from role to role, studio to studio. Despite the many hats they wear, the varied educational and professional backgrounds, and the wide spectrum of job titles, common themes existed when asking my participants how they defined their work. As Renae, a Community Manager described:

A community manager is someone who is in tune with both the industry and the players. So, somebody who is able to balance the line between what the industry wants and what the players want and to be both is able to kind of be a champion for both.

This theme of working between two worlds was echoed by other participants as well. Not only this, but the work they executed as often stretched between a variety of different tasks, targeted at different audiences, and covered a wide range of responsibilities from many different roles. Many of the participants I spoke with, particularly those working at smaller studios, spoke of being community managers but had responsibilities covering marketing, public relations, social media management, and communications. As shown in Table 1, many responsibilities were shared between roles, and there is overlap, despite differences in roles overall. The abstract nature of their work is compounded by the fact that there was no specific career path for community managers.

Significantly, each participant had a unique pathway into the industry. While there were some similarities in their educational background – reflected in the type of communications and writing-based work they did – there was no specific standard in their educational background. This is a stark comparison to the pathways for traditional development roles, which were often characterized as highly competitive and opaque but had dedicated higher education programs, college internship opportunities, and various online resources (Harvey, 2019). Instead, getting into community management seemed to reflect more of a ‘hobbyist’ style of learning and qualification, akin to developers who received jobs earlier in the game industry based on making modifications to games to receive attention from employed developers (Wallace, 2014). As Brendan Keogh notes in his book, these alternative and marginalized areas form the “foundations of skills, cultures, genres, communities, technologies, and aesthetics” that allow the industry to grow into what it is (Keogh, 2023, p. 6). Ela, a community manager for an independent game studio, stumbled into community management after the developers noticed her content creation:

It was kind of by chance a little bit, which is I am always hesitant to say, but originally, I was actually a content creator. I was creating videos on YouTube, primarily [...] when a company reached out to me and said that they enjoyed the content I was creating and they wanted me to freelance and create videos for them just kind of on a contract basis. After about a month or two of that they reached out again saying that they were really excited

about the work I was doing and wondered if I could jump into a community role since I was already interacting quite a bit with the community.

Despite Ela's hesitancy to disclose how she got into the industry, she was not the only community manager I spoke with who had a similar story. Troya, a community manager for a studio employing hundreds, also had a similar story of creating content, getting recognition from developers, and being offered a community role. This echoes previous research into the unpaid passion labour often exploited within the games industry (Harvey & Shepherd, 2017; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015). Even the community managers I spoke with who took more traditional pathways through games programs commented that getting access to formal education in community management was difficult. As Allegra, a social marketing manager for an independent studio, who completed a degree focused on game design and production notes:

I didn't really know that community management was a career until the second half of college [...] it was not really something I heard a lot about and it wasn't really something that was respected in my major, so it was not an avenue I had the luxury of exploring until I graduated.

Most of my participants spoke of having an interest in games and, without a clear education pathway available, chose degrees with related, but not targeted, focuses. This included degrees in writing, communications, and journalism. The lack of dedicated programs or courses was a continuous theme throughout the interviews and one I revisited when I asked participants to discuss their concerns and hopes for the industry's future. The lack of educational programs, at least in part, I argue, comes from a lack of value placed on their work but also the abstract

nature of the skills required to be a thriving community manager. However, other researchers have found that education in games did not always lead to employment (Harvey, 2019; Keogh, 2023). Interviewees consistently brought up soft skills when asked what a community manager's critical assets and qualities were. Higher education arguably focuses on technical or theoretical skills that can be evenly applied and systemically taught to students. As Ela notes:

I've found folks who want to do community work of any kind can learn the technical skills. But if there is not a sense of empathy, and patience for people [...] then I don't think they would honestly enjoy community management in the long run, because it's just a required personal trait.

This raises the question, is it possible to teach the skills necessary to succeed in community management? The vast majority of the community managers I spoke with identified patience as a core skill necessary to succeed in this role. In dealing with communities, these workers reflected that they interacted with people from all walks of life, often from various cultures and geographic regions, who spoke different languages and had varied knowledge about how game development worked behind the scenes. Patience was a key theme in many interviews and a difficult challenge for community managers. Due to the nature of game development, many details are purposefully hidden from consumers until there can be a formal reveal. However, this creates frustrations for consumers who are upset by changes, unsatisfied or feel let down. A few community managers gave the example of when a feature in the game was teased and removed later, upsetting players who would then chime in with their 'expertise' on game development. As Allegra reflects on critical skills for community management:

Effective communication skills [are] probably the most important, I feel like the biggest thing that causes a lot of problems is lack of transparency and if you can communicate effectively to the players about stuff, within what you can talk about in your NDA²¹ [...] Patience is another one. Especially with more aggressive communities or dealing with those people who are not exactly breaking the rules but are skirting the rules.

The work of handling aggressive or problematic users – and the communication skills necessary to do so – was also a consistent theme on the necessary qualities for community management. Kent, a community manager for a studio employing around 30, emphasizes the importance of patience when dealing with aggressive community members:

You have to be patient. Sometimes we'll see a player on a forum, and he is going to be like very angry, he's going to be very aggressive, you can't just say I will block him or ignore him. You have to think about how his anger may have the cause in your game. I hope most of the time the anger is justified, but you have to stay calm and patient.

Overall, community management requires various skills characterized as feminized care work. This includes effective communication, empathy, patience, and sociality. These 'soft skills' have been historically undervalued in the workplace, theorized around the concepts of emotional labour (deWinter et al., 2017; Guy & Newman, 2004). Traditionally in "tech" fields,

²¹ NDA: Non-disclosure agreements are common the video game industry so that studios can maintain control over their intellectual property.

such as the video game industry, there is not a history of care work (nor a history of valuing it), creating an industry without clear pathways for those who excel in this work to meet this demand. Without a clear pathway, many community managers work in roles unpaid or contract to prove their worth and passion for community management, such as Ela and Troya, who worked as content creators and as contractors before being offered full-time work (Harvey & Shepherd, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Beyond simply caring for their communities, community management must also integrate with a technical development team. In the following section, I characterize community management as ‘filtering’ work that aims to pull out, synthesize, and broadcast the useful information of developers to players and the integral feedback of players to developers.

5.5 The Filter Between Community and Developers

As Renae previously characterized, community managers are often seen as the connection between the community of players, consumers, or users and the broader development team of artists, programmers, and producers. In working to retain users and provide a positive community experience, community managers often ‘filter’ information between developers and players. In some cases, they are shielding developers from the toxic communities surrounding their games and, in others highlighting the excellent work the joy their games provide. I would argue that filtering useful information between two audiences is a crucial characteristic of community management work. In our incredibly digital and platformed age, we are constantly bombarded with a daily flow of information. As some of my interviewees reflected, many community managers feel that without an engaged community, a game will

not see commercial success. However, the amount of work required to keep up with an impatient, hungry community creates immense pressure for all involved in development. In game development, overworking – or ‘crunch’ – is a widely known phenomenon (see: Campbell, 2019; Gilbert, 2019; Weststar & Dubois, 2022). Community managers work to filter information back and forth between production and communities, making sure pathways remain clear for developers to focus on work and relaying demands for information to increase excitement. Many of the community managers I spoke with commented on the types of requests they would make of developers to facilitate their work. To generate excitement around the game or engage users, they often request different assets to put on display. Kent gave one such example, though noting that he often felt like he was bothering developers:

I will talk to the artists and say, ‘okay what have you been working on lately? Do you want to show that to the community?’ And for the programmers something like ‘I need a new demo of the game because I need new screenshots, or I need to show this feature’ so I guess sometimes I can be quite a problem for them but that’s for the sake of the community.

This theme continued with a few other interviewees noting that they had difficulties, in some cases, interfacing with the rest of the studio. For example, she had to rely on volunteer help from moderators in Discord chats instead of receiving technical support from their team. Junita spoke of the volunteer moderators at her previous studio, saying they supported and understood her work more than the developers on her team. They understood that the game and studio would suffer if the Discord server became a hostile community. This experience was not seen

across the board and seemed to depend on the studio's culture and size. For example, Yasmin spoke about how she would be pulled into meetings as an opportunity to give direct feedback to developers:

Sometimes they'll pull me into a meeting. 'oh, we want to know how the community would feel about that.' [...] And then I say, well, this is what they think. Then for example, that's exactly how they implement that into the game. It's cool to see the impact that community feedback has on the game and that I have a part of that.

Ela builds on this notion that when presented with more opportunities to interface with the studio, she finds her work more rewarding:

What's really nice is being able to provide the developers with the good stuff that folks are saying, so that it helps like motivate them, and like re inspire them to work because after working on a game for however long it can get, you know, we can kind of wonder if it's still fun, or if it's still a good game.

The object of a 'sentiment report' came up in several conversations and represented one of the few consistent deliverables that I heard about from community managers. Some of the community managers I spoke with interfaced with their studio more technically, representing a form of professionalization of their work. Bette, a social media and community specialist for a third-party public relations firm, described to me what a sentiment report looked like and its still-evolving state:

We do sentiment reports, which are constantly evolving and how we are doing them is just like a gut feel. [...] It's still largely a summary of here's our positive feedback, here is kind of neutral questions that we can maybe address in our future marketing or communications with the community. If there is negative sentiment that we think we can act on immediately, we do flag that with them like hey, we can address this now or this is going to be addressed at this point of the campaign.

When I asked other interviewees about sentiment reports, some mentioned completely different processes, depending on the set of tools or third-party applications they had available. Some were written reports based on their perception of what was happening in their communities. In contrast, others offered data-driven analytics from social media sites generated from community responses to announcements, posts, etcetera. Overall, I received no clear and consistent list of tools used by community managers when asked, indicating a lack of consistent training and practices within the industry.

Community managers seem not to receive the same level of respect and value given to their work despite arguably generating significant positive value and impact for the studio. While their work arguably impacts the overall product the studio is creating, some of the community managers I interviewed spoke of how certain colleagues undervalued their work. Despite previous examples of how their work could positively impact the studio, most praise is consistently given to programmers, artists, and other more technical roles with no recognition of the work community managers do. Community engagement work is arguably

not considered a “formal” part of the games making process by many (Keogh, 2023). For Zofia, this fact is very apparent in her work:

I'd say the one thing that really frustrates me is how devalued our work is for other departments. People often don't know what we do. [...] There's some companies that think community management is a stepping stone into the video game industry.

This idea of community management as a ‘stepping stone’ or entry-level role to eventually transition out of was common among interviewees. However, it troubles the argument that they are significant within the industry. Despite community management roles increasingly growing across all sizes of studios, denoting a clear need for and importance of their work, the work itself seems undervalued by some developers and not considered ‘career worthy.’ Troya further develops on this thought, reflecting on questions she has received from other developers in the video game industry:

I think personally, it's very important and it's undervalued by a lot of Game Studios or teams, because they don't really understand the importance of it. [...] People don't really understand what you do. Sometimes they're like, ‘Yeah, but does it drive sales?’ Well, community management is more about engagement, much more than sales, but it can still lead to sales but it's not the main target. It's like keeping your players engaged and making sure that they stay with the game.

Several interviewees echoed the tension between engagement and sales, echoing the earlier discussion on servitization. One community manager I spoke with felt that this spoke to marketing ideology ‘creeping’ into their work but that a ‘sale’ is not always the goal of community management work. Instead, many of the community managers I spoke with described their work as more about creating a shared space that facilitated other activities (such as sales) but that their work could never directly point towards an economic impact, despite pressure to show these results from superiors. This feeling of being undervalued was echoed by multiple community managers I spoke with. Other independent and smaller-sized studios integrate with their community managers more directly and offer them a seat at the table. One such studio, Kitfox Games, an independent video game studio that employs a community manager, notably pays all employees the same salary, regardless of role (Schreier, 2018).

All the participants I spoke with shared their anxieties and concerns about the future of their industry. How could the industry grow and formalize without more explicit education and career development pathways? This may be due to the gendered nature of their role – demographically and based on the type of tasks and skills necessary to succeed. Within Canada, women are much more likely to be in work characterized as precarious, such as temporary or part-time work (Cranford et al., 2003). In addition, even within permanent full-time employment, considered the least precarious, women are more likely to receive fewer protections in these roles than their male counterparts (Cranford et al., 2003). As remarked earlier, structural divides exist between masculine and feminine forms of labour that not only

impact issues such as pay and recognition, but also larger, structural areas such as resources, training, and certification that hinder the ability of those who work in this industry to flourish.

5.6 The Challenges and Rewards of Community Management

However, a tension I encountered in my interviews was that, despite their understanding of their work as having great value, and previous research showing that developers understood the value in community management (such as in Chapter 4), my interviewees consistently discussed a lack of industry job security. This led to a great deal of ‘churn’ in positions. Many spoke of likely leaving community management at some point to move into marketing or communications simply because there was no other way for them to ‘move up’ in the company. When asked about anxieties experienced when reflecting on their work, the one main concern of the community managers interviewed was their emotional well-being and safety. Gaming communities are known for being particularly toxic and aggressive to developers, and community managers represent those on the front lines of this hate (Consalvo, 2012; Massanari, 2017). Allegra captures this anxiety in her frustration at having to remain neutral in the face of harassment:

There are some times where you wish you could tell players: ‘I am a real person can you please stop being a dick to me.’ But there is not really a way to do that because you are supposed to be neutral so you cannot express when you are frustrated. Sometimes community members can be so toxic that you get doxxed.

In addition to these anxieties surrounding player abuse, the community managers touched on the difficulties in communicating restrictions with players. Due to game development's nature, game studio employees are often asked to sign non-disclosure agreements to protect the studio's intellectual property. While this creates a sense of secrecy and excitement when new features in a game are announced, many of the community managers I spoke with expressed frustrations with explaining the more intricate details of game development or were met with dissatisfaction with the amount of information revealed. Bette captures this anxiety below:

People demand a lot of transparency nowadays. It's quite tough to manage that. Especially like getting blamed, like people saying developers are lazy, or like they're incompetent or whatever, because this or that ended up a certain way. But when you're behind the trenches, and you're like, no, this happened because Nintendo dropped the ball. Or this happened because approvals didn't go through until 3 am this morning. Or someone higher up the chain decided not to go through with it at the last minute. Within hours there's so many things that can go wrong and sometimes, and oftentimes, we can't always communicate that to players.

This is compounded by the fact that not all developers value the work of community managers equally. This creates a sense of anxiety for community managers regarding their ability to execute their work to its fullest capabilities. Despite this, many community managers I spoke with reflected on their positive impacts on developers, the community, or the studio's health.

As Kent states, some of those impacts continue to live on through other games, sequels, and more:

Even though I have been here for three years now, sometimes the other developers do not see community management as important, they will sometime see my requests as a problem. They will sometimes say that focusing on developing the game is more important than the small projects for the community [that I do] even though the effects that I did on the community are still visible today.

This is not to say that all community management work is anxiety-inducing and without any rewards. While each community manager had stories of the anxiety they experienced and hardships they faced, they also all had moments of happiness. There was a sense that the day-to-day of their work was enjoyable. Most of this happiness seemed to stem from moments when they could share new features, new information, and other announcements about the games with their community. Yasmin captures this happiness when reflecting on days when she gets to share exciting news with her community:

Good days are days that I get to share really fun news with the community that I know they'll be excited about. And, you know, getting to see their excitement.

Aside from more emotional anxieties and moments of happiness, the community managers I spoke with shared more structural issues. These issues arguably arise from the tension created as a new economic model encroaches on the traditional. As Weststar and Dubois (2022) found,

many developers struggled with the servitization of their work. Changing priorities and pressures from management created an atmosphere where what previously brought success – and notoriety for these developers – no longer seemed to be working. As an emerging industry area, additional difficulties were repeated among my interviewees, including reflection on a lack of mentors and senior-level community managers for my participants to look up to. Not only does this make it difficult to learn skills and share information with those newer to the industry, but it makes community managers feel that they need to transfer to other departments to have any upward mobility in the industry. Allegra captures this issue perfectly:

I think the big concern for community management is not just the pay, because typically community managers are not paid very well, but turnover rate and the lack of career progression. I feel like whenever I talk to mentors usually you get to a certain point in community management where you can't go any higher because there's not enough high-level positions and you end up going into other facets of marketing. I want to stay in a community aligned position for as long as I can.

Yasmin builds on this concern, noting that community management still feels like an entry-level position due to the lack of role models in community roles:

I don't really have any models to look up to have, like, a female community manager in her like 40s or 50s. [...] I think that's partially because it's considered somewhat of an entry level job in video games.

Community management as a role is still novel, making a lack of career pathways understandable but still anxiety-inducing for those working in these positions. A lack of training, and in some cases, standard expectations for job responsibilities, understandably leads to an unclear promotion pathway, even if their work is valuable and may benefit from more senior or higher-level positions. Without their work, many games arguably would fail and receive no recognition (Castello, 2020; Xsolla, n.d.). However, this reality is changing, as some interviewees noted. The games industry is incredibly saturated, and interfacing with influencers, audiences, and communities is important work done by community managers (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019b). Even if traditional developers do not understand this, community managers do. As Tatianna notes, even in the last few years, she feels recognition of the role has shifted:

I think people have realized, not only that more games are coming out now that are service oriented, that require ongoing community. That people who launch a game now that doesn't already have an interested community, then you can't sell anymore. Bringing in someone earlier to develop the community from scratch so you can potentially launch well enough to continue making games after you've launched one is no longer a 'nice to have.' It shouldn't be an unusual thing, like my job four years ago was very unusual.

A broader shift has occurred within the game industry, a small part of which I traced in Chapters 2 and 4 as we saw differences in monetization shift gameswork prompting independent developers to grapple with new priorities with already limited resources. This is observed within the gaming industry and film and television, where service and subscription models have become the norm, shifting how we consume this media, how it is being produced, and who is doing this work (Dubois & Weststar, 2021). As Weststar and Dubois (2022) note, this fundamentally increases the intensity at which media must be produced to satisfy demands. Often, this demand exists before conception ends and production fully begins. Leading this change are community managers who exist as digital frontline workers, filtering massive amounts of information into digestible metrics of desire and disdain to direct engagement. Despite this shift and the increased importance of community management, the same anxieties and issues of recognition remain consistent.

Overall, this section aims to capture important themes that emerged from interviews I conducted with community managers and connect these experiences to broader industry shifts seen in other creative and cultural industries. I argue these interviews help understand shifting models of production and consumption within games, with new priorities to engage with communities. However, community management work remains difficult to trace and define concretely. With this abstract understanding of their work, structural issues have emerged, including pay inequity and a devaluing of their work. The current pathways into community management are not clear. While there is a growing need for community managers, there is a lack of consistency between studios, community managers themselves, and other developers

regarding expectations for the role and the duties they carry out. Furthermore, while community management is a rewarding job with a clear impact on the game's community, the community managers I spoke with expressed intense anxieties surrounding their work. This included concerns about their mental health and safety and the absence of long-term career paths to follow within the industry.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter presents two main takeaways contributing to my broader dissertation and scholarship interested in game studies, media and creative industries, and community management. First, the growing use of live, subscription, or service-oriented products and media undoubtedly generates new demands of media production companies, which in turn need to foster and grow new types of work that meet these demands (Gebauer et al., 2005; Oliva & Kallenberg, 2003). I argue that community managers are this answer and that their work, perspectives, and insights are critical to understanding future media consumption and production trends. They also provide insight into how these transformations unfold and impact workers. This chapter relies heavily on the experiences of community managers to establish a baseline for their work and the anxieties that emerge as their industry matures.

Finally, this chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of online games community scholarship that receives little attention, specifically the community managers behind those communities. Much recent scholarship has focused on related changes in media and creative industries and where online communities fit within this shift. However, they often examine this shifting priority towards continuous service delivery and consumption through

the perspective of developers (Dubois & Weststar, 2021) – including my research (see Chapter 4) – or focus on the community impacted (Kow et al., 2014; Zanescu & Lajeunesse, 2019). I argue that game studies, and other areas of academia, would benefit from examining community management's work to understand better the current dynamics of production, consumption, and community within the games studied. These contributions would benefit the fields of sociology of work, sociology of occupations, and labour studies. This dissertation captures a new form of work with an increasing role and presence in many organizations today. Outside of games, studying community management offers insight into how online communities can impact the work of various companies and how individuals are targeted to form communities. Overall, community management represents frontline digital work with its primary value in engaging and focusing on the communities that sustain mainstream service-oriented consumption. In addition, this work provides invaluable insights into communities through sentiment analysis and engagement. Despite being under-recognized work with few clear education and career pathways, the community managers I spoke with were excited, empowered, and uplifted by their work from the joy they brought into people's lives. As Troya states:

I can interact with people [and do] something that really means something to them [...] Everyone wants to belong to something. It's like a basic need pretty much, right? So, I just want to offer them that place.

This work of providing space for countless individuals to express their creativity and find shared experiences with others interested in the same topics, games, and media is patently

valuable. I hope that this chapter provides a starting point for future research in online communities.

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Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Summary

This dissertation highlights the increasingly common phenomenon whereby moments of breakdown occur between production and consumption. I argue that this points to the ‘gap’ between producers and consumers – where there is little back-and-forth interaction between the two – was no longer sustainable. I highlight this breakdown in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, looking at a breakdown within the video game industry. As brick-and-mortar sales became increasingly outdated and models of production and consumption changed to be more fluid and readily accessible, consumers began to expect this same accessibility from developers. Coupled with the growth of various social media platforms that buoyed these industries, such as Twitter, YouTube, Twitch, and more, the gap between video game developers and players had a spotlight shone on it, and players were no longer content. Following significant moments like these, such as the one I detail in Chapter 2, developers could no longer ignore the community.

I use Chapter 3 to introduce content creation and live streaming to the dissertation. In addition, it highlights how once the gap was ‘revealed,’ there were attempts to manage and fill it. Already engaging in communities associated with their brands and developers’ games, content creators have become a quick band-aid solution to address the community issue. They offer an opportunity to assuage irate audiences while building engagement for their products. In addition, we start to see how they work, where we find this work, and what makes an ideal community builder emerge as content creators professionalize themselves and grapple with

their position. Chapter 4 continues the focus on live streaming by examining developers' beginning to grapple with this shift in gameswork. They understand that community builders are crucial and could potentially be designed for to make their games more successful. However, work involved in fostering these communities and building relations is both times intensive and, over time, appears to have mixed rates of success, leading to a sense of ambivalence towards community building. The work is justified in its necessity, but without clear, calculable impacts from the investment, tension appears to be forming between traditional, technical game development and community-building work.

Chapter 5 begins to examine this work more closely – these community builders have been recognized and hired, but what does their work look like? In addition, we begin to see what justifies their work and what they have done to professionalize themselves. In some of the cases of those interviewed, this included direct transitions from unpaid or lower-paid work of content creation to legitimize themselves before being able to transition into a slightly more secure position as a community manager. However, though the community manager is now a staple to help bridge the gap between producer and consumer, their work remains precarious. This chapter provides a case study of the anxieties and uncertainties that come with emerging work in the creative and cultural industries and the justifications and joy that come from community-building work.

6.2 On Justification

Most of this dissertation focuses on justifying community-building as a necessity, even if precarious and novel. In Chapter 1, I introduce Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's work on

the spirit of capitalism as well as Luc Boltanski's later work on critique and how it informs moments of breakdowns in capitalism. In thinking about the future directions of this work, I want to consider another concept of theirs, specifically the *cit *. While I could not fully incorporate the concept of the *cit * into the dissertation, I had original intentions for it to be the basis of Chapter 5. However, upon further reflection and returning to my data, the theory did not fit with what I had collected. The *cit * may be an exciting concept to understand this emerging work form. It would offer theorists and researchers insight and potential directions to study community management and other forms of emerging work. However, my methodology did not align with Boltanski and Chiapello, and further research would be required to make this claim. I offer this discussion on Boltanski and Chiapello's *cit * as a 'rough draft' of the work I had previously begun around community management and the *cit *.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) traced the transformations within capitalism that allowed the evolving justifications of individual participation, specifically outlining this as the "spirit of capitalism" (p. 162). As argued by the authors, this spirit was an ideological system that justified people's commitment to capitalism, which made capitalism attractive to its participants despite being a system that uses wage earners for their labour through a never-ending process of widespread exploitation. Despite this reality, a capitalist lifestyle is still attractive, and many are committed and eager to participate in these systems. However, as technology and culture changed over time, we have witnessed various criticisms and retaliations by wage earners. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) focus on French industries, which despite a long history of revolutionary behaviour and attitudes towards capitalists, continue to

support a thriving economy. The adaptability of the spirit of capitalism is contrary to traditional Marxist understandings of capitalism as a rigid and ever-standing ‘superstructure.’ Instead, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that capitalism maintains its spirit through three main factors: 1) creating excitement around participation with capitalism; 2) offering security to those that participate; 3) and that a sense of fairness is either demonstrated or exists in the minds of participants.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) examined management texts to compare those from the 1960s and 1990s in France to examine the shift between one spirit and another. From this, they could identify each era's main ‘problems,’ the solutions applied, and what was being ‘rejected’ from this spirit of capitalism. In the case of comparing French firms between the 1960s and 1990s, managerial issues stemming from a lack of autonomy and rigid hierarchy created an unsatisfied workforce. As the 1990s shift occurred, hierarchy was rejected in favour of leaner, project-oriented firms that valued the autonomy and creativity of their workforce. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) expand on the spirit of capitalism by incorporating earlier work by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), where they argue that each spirit is made up of several “cités” that coexist within the same space.

Cités differ from the overall spirit in that they are tied more directly to specific sectors or industries, whereas the spirit is an overarching order based on the same principle. Capitalism primarily operates under the same spirit but can be made up of many cités depending on the location, culture, and industry. It would be incorrect to claim that one all-encompassing system directed much of our lives, with no variation based on geography, type of work, or other key

features. Cités help fill this gap by providing more specific, nuanced understandings and frameworks for specific industries and areas. The routes of success for the auto industry in North America may not be the same in Asia – or similarities between the video game industry and furniture manufacturing. For this conclusion, my focus is mainly on the potential emergence of a new cité, similar to Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) original work that established the project-oriented cité as newly emergent and others that have proposed emerging cités (Annisette et al., 2017; Nyberg & Wright, 2012). In addition, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) define the characteristics of the ideal worker or “great one” (p. 168) within a particular cité. In the case of the cité that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) define, a great one is an individual who expresses a sense of adaptability and flexibility and can generate enthusiasm among teammates. The cités can be evaluated upon a set of principles by Boltanski and Chiapello. In the table below, I show how they defined their project-oriented cité.

Table 6.1 *The Grammar of the Project-oriented Cité*

Principles of Evaluation	Definition of Principle	Project-Oriented Cité
Equivalency principle (general standard)	In reference to which an evaluation can be made of all actions, things and persons for that particular Cité	Activity; project initiation; remote links between people
A state of greatness	A “great one” being a person who strongly embodies the Cité’s values, and the state of smallness, defined as lack of greatness	Adaptability, flexibility, polyvalence; sincerity in face-to-face encounters; ability to spread the benefits of social connections, to generate enthusiasm and to increase teammates’ employability
A state of smallness	Defined as lack of greatness	Inability to get involved, to trust in others, to communicate; close-

		mindedness, prejudice, authoritarianism, intolerance, stability, over-reliance on one's roots, rigidity, etc.
Directory of subjects	A definition of that which is important to each world in terms of categories of human beings	Managers, coaches, innovators
Natural relationship	A definition of that which is important to each world in terms of categories of verbs	Trusting and being trustworthy; ability to communicate; adaptability to others' needs
Greatness ratio	Specifying the nature of relationships between the great and the small, especially the way "great" persons, because they contribute to the common good, are of use to "small" persons	"Great" persons enhance "small" persons' employability in return for their trust and enthusiasm for project work, i.e., their ability to take part in another project
Format of investment	This being a major precondition for each Cité's stability since, by linking greatness to sacrifice (which takes a specific form in each Cité), it ensures that all rights are offset by responsibilities	Ready to sacrifice all that could curtail one's availability, giving up lifelong plans
Standard (paradigmatic test)	For each justificatory regime, best reveals a person's greatness	Ability to move from one project to another
Harmonious figure of natural order	Conveying the ideal-types that correspond to the universes within which there has been a fair distribution of the quality of greatness	Where the world's natural form resembles that of a network

Source: Adapted from Boltanski and Chiapello (2005)

The project-oriented cité was developed to explain changes in French business practices in the late 1990s that may be similar in other contexts. For the project-oriented cité, the most crucial

factor – that evaluated an individual’s ‘greatness’ – was their *activity*. This contrasted with the previous industrial *cit *, which valued an individual’s ability to hold consistent wage-earning work over long periods, typically with the same firm. By contrast, the workers within the project-oriented *cit * valued agility and creativity over higher wages. I would potentially argue that while the project-oriented *cit * is still applicable today, we may be witnessing the emergence of a new *cit *. However, it may be too early in its formation to properly examine within Boltanski and Chiapello’s typology.

While an individual can work on many products and produce many pieces of media, without an engaged, sustained community to rally around the product during the production phases, the chances of success are not high. This more clearly justifies the need to hustle, which refers to interviews in Chapter 5 and how this hustling work of building and engaging community provides value and reward for those involved. It is no longer enough to work on many projects and create different incredible applications, services, tools, or media – but it is now also important to be constantly talking about the process of their creation, inviting in engagement and spectacle from a following, and creating a sense of excitement or ‘hype’ even before the product hits the ‘shelves.’ The work of tying together production and consumption alongside community is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and issues remain with how applicable the concept of *cit * is for this project.

6.3 Future Work and Contributions

Returning to my introduction, we see this work of engaging and building excitement across a wide range of products – even those outside of media consumption – from household products,

service industries, and more. However, this work is still in its transition. The role of community is arguably entrenched now. As evidenced in Chapter 5, community management as a role is still growing and professionalizing. Issues of certification, education, and job precarity remain at the forefront of these workers' minds. Future work should continue to engage with those within community-facing roles when examining production, consumption, and audience communities. In addition, this dissertation focuses only on community management from the perspective of the video game industry, and there are undoubtedly differences in their working conditions and tasks between industries. More ambitious work could engage with the theoretical implications of the rise of community, as referenced in the previous section. As community work continues to grow, it will undoubtedly change how we justify our work and shift perspectives on what work is 'great.'

This dissertation contributes to the field of Game Studies, expanding upon the roles that we consider when looking at games production and providing valuable insight for those interested in what happens within game development studios and how decision-making impacts the product created, the engagement with audiences, and the ongoing experience of players. In the context of the servitization of the video game industry, this dissertation provides valuable insight into how developers grapple with changes to their work, how emerging roles significantly impact this process and the historical perspective on the breakdowns leading to these industry-wide changes. Beyond the video game industry and more generally in Media Studies, the findings and methodology of this study point to the need for similar studies in increasingly service- and platform-oriented industries such as television and film. For platform

and social media scholars, future inquiry should be interested in the impacts of professional, commercial community building on users and platform developers.

My original hope for this dissertation was to employ a more engaged methodology, working alongside community managers to examine different strategies for building and engaging the community. In addition, I had hoped to seek more focused feedback from developers on how they incorporated community building into their development practices. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this option was not possible. In addition, upon reflecting on the chapters I was able to complete, I realize that a significant focus of the dissertation became precarity, anxiety, and the negatives of the role of community management. In its origins, much of the community management work was done by volunteers who enjoyed it, either because of how it made them feel or the social capital it gave them. As the role became professionalized, facets of this previous work are lost, or perhaps two very distinct forms of community management diverge here when it moves from a volunteer, opt-in community management to salaried, paid, contracted community management. This reflects other trends within the industry where blurred lines exist between formal and informal gameswork, each with their own justifications and motivations (Keogh, 2023). Future work could interrogate this difference between community management that creates spaces for those to enjoy and those that create spaces for customer engagement. In addition, other work could compare formally structured and paid community work versus informal practices around community formation and maintenance. I believe that some of this is captured in Chapter 3, focusing on drag queen live streamers, where we see those who do this for the joy and community and others to

supplement or replace their income. In my own experience as a content creator, the engagement of my community was incredibly joyful. However, immense tension and anxiety arose whenever my focus drifted toward making ends meet or focusing on various metrics of growth. This was driven in part due to the platforms themselves, which increasingly seek to “formalize” and profit off a broader range of social and creative activities (Keogh, 2023; Poell et al., 2021).

Overall, I believe this dissertation offers a foundation to move forward from for scholars interested in community management. Future work could take a more ethnographic and entrenched approach to community management work that would be more ‘hands-on’ and provide greater depth to understanding the taskscape of community managers. Overall, I hope this dissertation provides greater legitimacy to community management work. Community managers are an integral part of modern daily life for any of us who visit, work, or engage with social media. Their work is everywhere around us, from newsletters from brands to quick social media posts that work to connect us to something more significant. While much of this work is focused on driving engagement and a feeling of bonding with a brand or a sense of community centred around a product, it is undeniable that it is genuine, authentic work in some spheres to create space for those of us who seek connection and community online. Allegra, an interview participant from Chapter 5, sums up her work as the following:

Community management is the focus on retaining the community invested in your product and engaging them and making them feel welcome. Trying to make them grow that connection with what they like, this game that they’re really excited about. **The care and keeping of your players.**

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Appendix A

Chapter 5 Interview Schedule

GDC Community Manager Interviews – 2020

Semi-structured interview schedule

- How did you get into community management?
- Tell me about the studio I work for?
 - How many people work in the studio?
 - How are the roles split? (e.g. programmers, artists, other community managers?)
 - How many are full time, part time, or contract?
- How long have you been working for this studio in a community management role?
- What stage of the development were you brought on initially?
- How many hours/after hours work do you put in?

- What are the main pieces of software or platforms that you use for your work?
- What are the key skills, or qualities, that you think is essential for community management work?
- When do you decide to engage with your communities online?
 - On which platforms? Issues? Topics?
 - “Personal” accounts or “corporate” accounts?
 - Do you use any automated tools to respond? (e.g. bots, support ticket systems, etc.)
- How do you supplement the idea of the 24/7 work requirement of community work?
- How do you feel community management work impacts the work of developers?
- How do you interface with the rest of the studio?

- What are your biggest anxieties around community management work?
- What irritates you about your work? Or your communities?
- What makes you happy about your work?
- What do you think the future of community management work is?
- What is something you think I forgot to ask about community management work?
- What is interesting to you right now in community management?