

Team Information

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(edited by Kevin on 04/19; added **Project Zone & Technical Plan** as a table)

Design Description

Description

Our intended product is an online resource and community for analog games, such as board games, card games, and tabletop games. We hope to provide a space for enthusiasts of all sorts to gather, find groups to play with, and talk about their hobby!

Motivation

Something that drew our group to this problem was our own experiences trying to find people to play games with. It can be difficult, especially online, to find communities and groups that align with a player's specific interests and schedule. This community is often provided in physical game stores. However, these can be difficult to find in many regions, can be hard to get to, and are limited only to those in your immediate area. This inspires the need for an online platform that can serve the same needs as that of a game store.

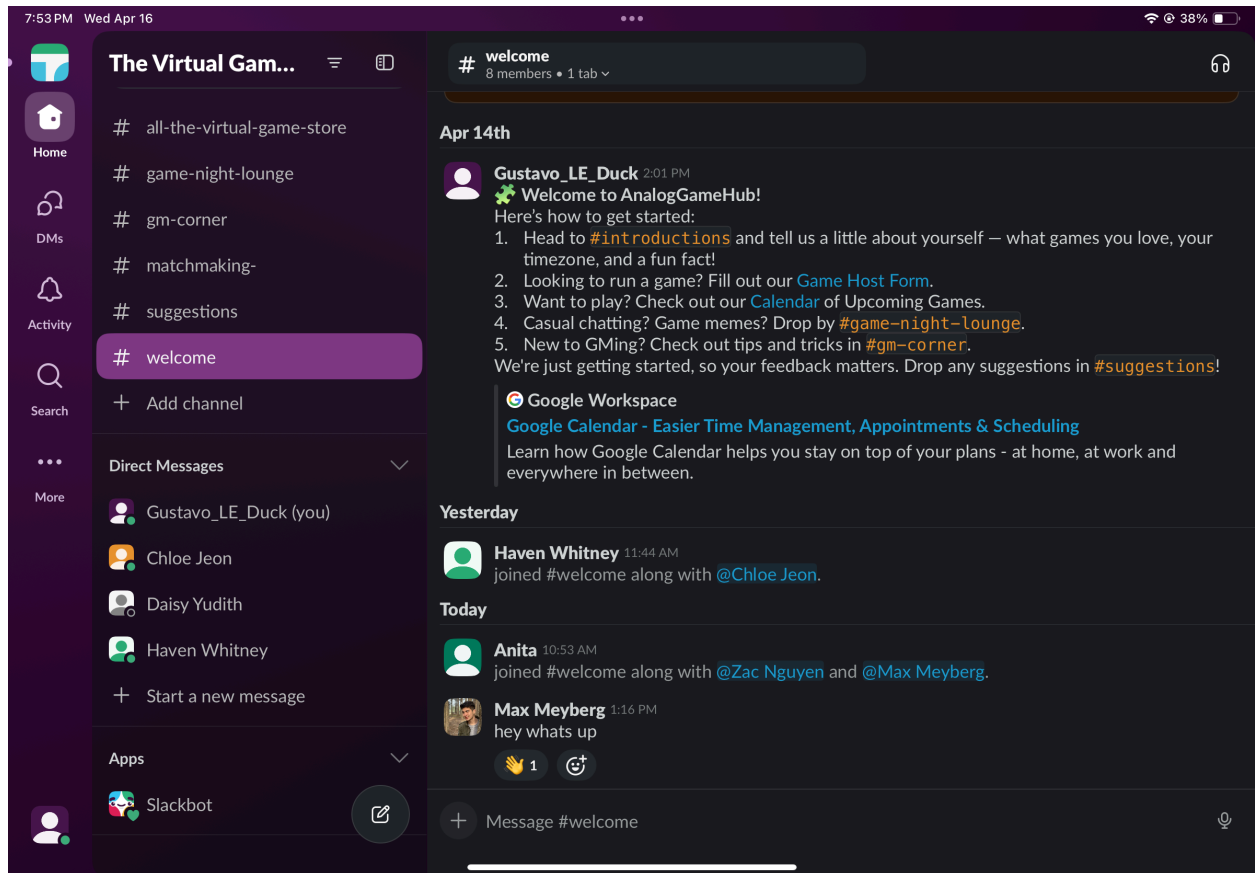
There are several existing platforms that try to do this, often specifically for tabletop games, which usually require more consistent play groups and time commitment. Roll20, for example, is a platform that has a "Join a Game" feature to allow players to find interesting campaigns, and for game masters (GMs) to advertise their ideas. However, this tool is somewhat free-form, and it can be difficult for players to find games based on their schedule or interests without a lot of research. These types of games also have a second crucial element, which is that they are much more enjoyable to play with people you personally get along with. Discovering if you "vibe" with a certain group is not possible with the application format of this platform.

Finally, many existing platforms don't prop up the "hard side" of this sociotechnical problem adequately. The person who runs a game or hosts it often must do more prep than other players, and we would like to see more tools and resources available to help these users facilitate scheduling and logistics more easily.

Prototyping Method

To create a piggyback prototype for our design, we wanted to go with a platform that had the capacity for different “zones” of interest while still keeping a small-group, intimate setting. We considered Discord, but we moved away from this idea as finding a Discord server can be difficult as they are often unlisted in common locations like searches or bulletin boards. We then considered a forum like Reddit, which lists subreddits publicly and where it is very easy to find a community through its platform search. However, a lot of Reddit norms revolve around a more longform approach to communication, as it models itself after the classic, asynchronous bulletin board or internet forums of previous decades. We wanted a space where people feel comfortable to chat casually and instantaneously, as if they were together in the same space. For this reason, we ultimately decided to use Slack as our piggyback platform. It had many of the same features as Discord, including the ability to sort conversation by channel, pin important information, DM people separately, and add bots that allow for more features and tools. However, the Slack workspace format within an external organization (such as Stanford) makes it easier to find new communities and groups than on Discord.

To begin with, we kept our initial prototype’s capabilities basic, paying attention to Andrew Chen’s advice to underperform in your niche when starting a new network. While in the future we would love to have more scheduling capabilities, automatic game bots/features to start up games and chat rooms on the fly, we stuck instead to a few basic channels: a welcome page, a place to introduce oneself, a matchmaking/game planning channel, a TTRPG resource hangout, and a general lounge for miscellaneous conversation.



A depiction of our initial prototype layout. Newcomers would be directed to the welcome screen after joining to learn how to use the platform.

To facilitate game planning and event scheduling, we added a Google Form for interested players to suggest times/events they were free, which would then be added to a Google Calendar shared with all members of the platform and moderated by our team.

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← Preview mode Published Copy responder link

Host a Game – Submission Form

Slack Name

Your answer

Game title

Your answer

Brief Description of even

Your answer

Is this game

☐ a one-shot

☐ Multi-game campaign

☐ Ongoing open-table

This was the form that the game master would be prompted to fill out to host a game which seeks to emulate what much of the backend of our final model will do. Our team then reviews submissions and adds manually to the Google Calendar.

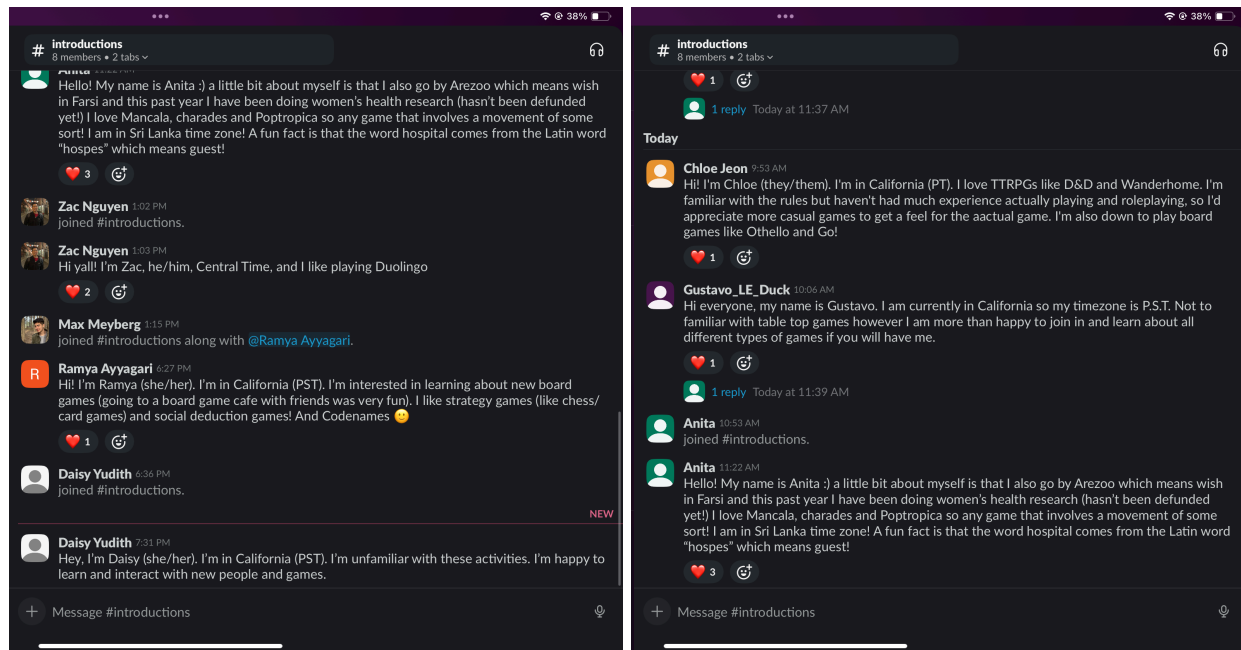
Over the course of our observation, newcomers were encouraged to introduce themselves in the introduction channel and engage with others who joined. We want the platform to ideally be both a place to plan for games and meet other people with similar interests in games, recommendations, and ideas for events. For this reason, we wanted to start by facilitating the sense that everyone in the group knows a little about each other, giving them jumping off points for conversation. Further, we wanted there to be less emphasis on scheduling a meeting and more just on building this community.

Prototype Results

We saw a lot of people being willing to engage within the first few minutes of joining—going to the introductions channel and following the example format to introduce themselves and list any games they like to play. We even saw cross conversation between people, with some members replying to others' introductions to continue the conversation and relate similarities.

However, after that, we saw very little engagement. We also saw little interaction with our shared Google Calendar, with no one suggesting a new event time during our observation period.

The engagement pattern largely matches what is seen across online platforms: most people prefer to read or just lurk, with only a small percentage actually creating content (in this case, talking).



Examples of introductions shared in the Slack.

It seemed likely that they would have engaged more if there was more to engage with, both in terms of socialization and in terms of the gaming experience (relating back to the cold start problem). An empty channel can be as daunting as a silent room in real life, and, as we've discussed in class, people are often hesitant to speak up before they know the norms of a new space in fear of breaching them. Perhaps if we had more time, we could have constructed a more robust chat history to make it feel like there was already a large community. Our team predicts that with more ongoing prompts to engage with (such as conversation starters like polls about favorite games, questions about where to find board games around campus, and other topics that would appeal to the members of the community), people would feel more comfortable jumping in directly.

Having embeddings or webhooks where they could interactively play games with each other may have offered an alternative point of engagement, aside from just chatting with others, potentially strangers, but this would defeat the point of *prototyping*, as we hoped to see the emergent social dynamics.

Moving forward, we intend to address the issues inherent to the Cold Start Problem more robustly. As stated above, we plan to add more material and content for users to engage with from the beginning. We hope this will allow for more natural conversation by making the descriptive norms of the community more clear to everyone. Further, we'd love to start adding more features that make the space feel more casual and lively, such as game bots or webhooks to allow freeform interaction and socialization.

Project Zone & Technical Plan

Item	Scope & Decisions
Zone	Zone 2 (Hybrid) — We'll bootstrap with Next.js + Firebase Auth UI templates, then hand-code the game-matching logic and calendar integration (<i>optional</i> : reputation system, admin control, leaderboard)
Active-user target	>15 weekly active users by Week 7-8, in line with Zone 2 guidance
Key features to build	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Session wizard v2 — selects <i>time + people + space</i> in one flow and exports an .ics file.2. Smart match algorithm — intersects host availability, attendee RSVPs, and room open hours.3. Admin — CRUD for sessions (players, capacity, location, open hours).4. Leaderboard page — real-time top-hosts / top-players filterable by campus or last x days.5. Reputation engine — per-event feedback, nightly aggregation, cooldown penalties for no-shows.

Stack	<p>Frontend : Next.js 15 + React (Typescript, Tailwind, TanStack Query).</p> <p>Backend : Firebase Auth, Firestore (realtime DB), Cloud Functions (business logic), Cloud Scheduler cron for nightly reputation recalculation, Algolia replica index for fast leaderboard sorting.</p> <p>Integrations : Google Calendar API (location+people fields), Mapbox static map for room pins.</p>
AI tools	<p>ChatGPT (o3) for schema scaffolds, tests, release notes.</p> <p>Cursor IDE for inline refactors & AI-generated unit tests.</p> <p>Replit workspace as shared monorepo + preview deployments (CI triggered on every PR).</p>

Risk Analysis

We found that the following three cards related most closely to our desired platform.

The forgotten: When you picture your user base, who is excluded? If they used your product, what would their experience be like?

Game communities often exhibit a strong “dudebro” energy dominated by upper middle class cishet white men and boys. Gatekeeping and shame towards people who don’t match this energy or are not skilled or serious about the gaming experience is common, leaving “casual” gamers, introverts, and people outside of this demographic feeling excluded from these communities. We hope to have norms in place to make them feel welcome and included.

The superfan: How would a community of your most passionate users behave?

As mentioned, there is a risk of excluding certain types of gamers from gaming communities, especially with the more passionate gamers, which might create a divide between the passionate and casual gamers, especially since they are likely to want to play games with people with similar levels of commitment (or worse, division along demographic lines). We hope to mitigate this risk by way of community norms.

The big bad wolf: What could a "bad actor" do with your product?

One risk is that if multiple rooms are accessible by one person, a person desperate to get a group going with no interest in getting to know people could just spam every room with a promotion of their campaign. This is counter to our intention of facilitating socialization and community.

Additionally, as with any publicly accessible online space, there is risk of scammers and trolls, who both hurt the community experience and, in the case of scammers, put community members at risk. Strong moderation tools (for both the hard and easy sides) need to be in place to filter out bad actors and also to maintain the kind of community we want to facilitate.