Article

Games and Culture
1–19

DOI: 10.1177/15554120221150058
journals.sagepub.com/home/gac


"Community" in Video Game Communities

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Abstract

The concept and experience of community have been changing in contemporary societies, from a traditional concept in an idealistic, homogeneous context, characterized by union, to the exploration and experience of new forms of organization and participation. The specific characteristics and dynamics of emerging video game (VG) communities can help us better understand the importance of game cultures. Based on an ethnographic study of five game jams and data from eight focus group discussions with game jam and VG community participants, this study explores five analytic and emerging dimensions of the VG community: meanings and perceptions associated with the VG community, feelings of belonging, issues of access, structure, and organization, and contexts of participation. These results improve our understanding of the ways participants in VG communities can be seen as creators of game culture and how VG communities are recreating the concept and experience of community in contemporary societies.

Keywords

video game communities, sense of community, game culture

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Introduction

We live in a "gameful," "ludified" society (Walz & Deterding, 2015) and in a century that has come to be called the ludic century or the "playing age" (Zimmerman, 2014). Game cultures have been studied in this context as a fundamental expression, useful for understanding the society in which we live (Sutton-Smith, 2009). More and more people are coming together around the shared interest of games, and in a digital society, video game (VG) communities have emerged as communities with specific characteristics and dynamics that need to be researched as emerging cultural and educational contexts (Gee, 2009).

The concept of community, as the ideal of a commonplace, of belonging and continuity, where relationships are of the highest value, as is the feeling of *communitas* (Henricks, 2015; Turner, 2012), seems to have been reinvented and recreated by these new contemporary communities (Bauman, 2013). These communities tend not to be geographically centered, but are multi-situated and hybrid; they involve a great diversity of experiences and people with different identities meeting together, mostly in a voluntary way, and moved by a common interest and feelings of affinity (Gere, 2008; Jenkins, 2015).

Several studies have considered VG communities as emergent contexts in which people can express themselves and share knowledge in multiple ways (Jenkins, 2015), and as important "spaces of affinity" where people come together because of common interest, spontaneously and voluntarily, without the apparent mediation or control of formal institutions (Gee, 2009). VG communities have also been studied as "digital contexts of sociability" (Handberg, 2015), bridging online and offline worlds, and as "third spaces" or alternative (e.g., to family or school) socialization contexts, where participants can find "equipment for life" (Bourgonjon & Soetaert, 2013) and "powerful opportunities to learn" (Gee, 2009, p. 76). These communities have been characterized as places of "personal connection" which bring together a diverse group of people around fruition and pleasure (Schulzke, 2009) and which challenge members to participate collectively in activities like mentoring or volunteer work (Rainie & Wellman, 2014). In line with this, several studies have considered VG communities as contexts for development of various educational processes (e.g., Aarseth, 2007; Gee, 2009; Jenkins, 2015) that bring them closer to the concept and practice of learning communities (Gee, 2009) and highlight the role of these communities as places to educate and learn (Gere, 2008).

Game jams (GJ) are important places of participation in VG communities, not only as contexts for creating and playing VGs, but also as privileged contexts for the community to meet, participate and have shared lived experiences. GJ have been defined as "contemporary happenings" and "accelerated events," developed with the aim of co-creating new video games and having a wide array of possibilities and formats (Kultima et al., 2016; Locke et al., 2015). There has been a recent growth of a "jamming culture," with an increasing number and a larger variation of formats and themes for GJ. The academic community has increasingly been recognizing the

value of these experiences and their educational potential and dynamics, as well as considering them, overall, as "an inevitable experience of learning" (Arya et al., 2013; Gaudl et al., 2018; Meriläinen et al., 2020). Despite this growing interest, there has been a lack of studies that can contribute to our understanding of the role these experiences play in VG communities, and there is particularly a need for qualitative studies which allow access to the meanings given by participants in these communities.

Methodology

This study explored the cultures of VG communities, understanding their educational and political dimensions, through the context of GJ as places where this community meets and creates together. The focus of this article is to understand how participants make sense of, signify and appropriate the concept of "community," in relation to their participation experiences within contexts associated with the video games community.

We used multi-sited ethnography (Hine, 2007; Marcus, 2011; Silva & Webster, 2018) to explore—in depth and in context—the interactions, dynamics, intersubjectivities, and ways the participants live, experience and make meanings for GJ and the VG communities within them. This method has been pointed out as the most sensitive to the characteristics of a global, interconnected, and moving society (Burawoy, 2000; Hine, 2007), acknowledging the changing concepts of place for people living in a diversity of contexts between the online and the off-line (Hine, 2007; Pierides, 2010). This is the case for VG communities, which are generally characterized as fragmented, hybrid, and multi-situated; meeting in different contexts; moving from GJ to another; and traveling between different media.

At the same time, due to the characteristics of GJ, which are generally organized as "weekend events," we used "short ethnography" (Pink & Morgan, 2013) or "focused ethnography" (Knoblauch, 2005). These methods are adequate to study intensive and short experiences (Falzon, 2016; Marcus, 2011). The combination of these methods has been widely used in the field of education (Payet, 2016; Pierides, 2010; Silva & Webster, 2018) as well as in video game studies (Barab et al., 2004; Boellstorff, 2006; Taylor, 2009).

We selected and observed a total of five GJ, with a duration of 48 h each (in total, 240 h) between January and April 2019. The selection took into consideration the diversity of geographic regions (north, central, and south of Portugal), the type of organization promoting it (institutional/not institutional), and the GJ formats or themes.

We collected approximately 160 pages of field notes describing interactions, spaces, the living experience of being in the different GJ, and conversations with participants, as well as methodological notes and theoretical reflections. Additionally, eight online and synchronous focused discussion groups (Morgan & Lobe, 2011) were held between January and March 2020. These involved 30 participants who had previously been in GJ, and have experienced different contexts of the VG community—mostly students and video game developers—aged between 20 and 30 years old

and from different geographic regions of the country. These focus groups were carried out using planned guide questions (Appendix A), using the Messenger app, and sought to further explore the meanings of the experiences lived in GJ and, specifically, the perceptions and meanings participants had about the VG community.

All of the collected material was transcribed. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) made possible the emergence and identification of the main themes related to the perceptions, meanings, and characterization of the VG community.

Results and Discussion

To explore the characteristics emerging in VG communities, the data were organized in five analytic dimensions: meanings and perceptions, feelings of belonging, issues of access, structure and organization, and contexts of participation.

Meanings and Perceptions Associated with the VG Community

The community is associated, first of all, with *people and relationships*, with sharing, mutual assistance, and the creation of a network of contacts: "This community is a place of sharing and of exchange. We help each other a lot" (Peter[1]) and "In my opinion, the community works a lot based on network contacts, meeting people and actively being there"[2] (John).

It is also associated with *feelings* such as *security and safety and with a spirit of communion and camaraderie*: "it is a safe space for people to share whatever we want without fear" (Mary) and "It's a brotherhood, it's like a family of people with the same interests" (Jim). Lived experiences, such as participation in community events (like GJ or game development [dev] meets) are also important: "I experience the community in all the events that we live together as a community."

It is perceived as a *heterogeneous and diverse community* and as a community where access to the people is easy: "It's a community where you can meet a wide diversity of people, with different backgrounds, professional fields and experiences" (Sam), where "it is still possible to meet the people directly" (Kim). There is a perception of *originality or uniqueness* of the community associated with a perception of difference that is mainly associated with the *diversity of the participants' backgrounds*:

> You can try, but you will not find a community like this. It is really unique! It's amazing how we can put together so many people with different backgrounds, working together to the same common result. Here you can find professionals, from different fields, amateurs, people that are only interested, all together. (Mary)

Finally, there were a considerable number of participants who evoked a larger VG community, feeling that they belonged to what they called an "*international movement*": "Sometimes, these people are not aware that they are part of a larger movement" (Kelly). For these participants, the community goes beyond geographical

boundaries like an academic, cultural and social movement which is perceived, above all, as an *abstract entity*. We can say that the concept of community stays between the concrete and the abstract and between the political and the personal. There seems to be a more abstract sense of community, which integrates the general sense of what the community is, as well as a more concrete and personal sense, which integrates personalized experiences of relationship with the community as a whole.

Thus, a majority of the participants believe in the existence of a wider community, but what they understand as community is mainly composed of the people with whom they share direct experiences, and those with whom they are more intimate—and not even with everyone in a group. Within the community, different forms of personal relationship are perceived. Participants revealed some tensions between an intimate relationship dimension, characterized as direct contact and friendship, and a professional dimension, which integrated more distanced forms of relationship. The data reveal that the two forms of relationship are present within the community and that they are combined in different ways. It is also interesting to highlight that, for several participants, their perception of the community was presented as dynamic because it undergoes changes, over time: "For me, the community has meant different things over time" (Jim). It is thus possible to understand that the VG community is perceived simultaneously as a personal and a social construction, that integrates dimensions of the traditional concept of community, while recreating them in new ways (Bauman, 2013; Jenkins, 2015).

Past, Present, and Future and the "in Definition" Identity. Participants identified *distinct time periods and generational differences* in the history of the VG community. In particular, there was the first generation, from the 1980s, "with less training, and with a stronger business inclination, and more masculine and closed" and a second generation, starting after 2005, with the beginning of VG degrees, characterized as more diverse, heterogeneous and international: "Everything was changing after the degrees in VG. There were more people in the community, and we are having more international connections with other communities." The onset of specific higher education degrees is also considered the main reason for the increase in the number of participants in the community. Participants noted that there are several divisions and differences between these generations, especially regarding the power to define the community: "they think that they rule in the community and they say what this community is, and that we are just a few kids who are here to pass the time" (Tom). But there are also experiences and contexts that bring both generations closer: "They come to realize what it's like to be in a GJ and they want to learn" (Jim). The GJ thus appear to be contexts where socialization and learning between two generations is present. There is also a *feeling of disadvantage and inferiority* when the community defines itself and compares itself to other international communities: "our community is very small, and not very well known in the international game scene. Although we have good companies, we cannot compare with other countries. They have really organized and big communities."

Although *ephemerality and fluidity* are recognized as fundamental characteristics of this community—"where things change very fast. One year can change everything" (Tom)—there also seems to be a concern about *the memory of the community*, and with how to preserve the experiences and products of the VG community. This led to the idea of a Nostalgia Museum, which would tell the history of VG and could keep a register of the experience of each GJ or other community events.

Regarding the *future*, some participants highlighted the potential for evolution and growth, but, at the same time, the fear that the possible growth of the community will make it more hierarchical, rigid, and elitist: "only for some" (Eve). In fact, the definition of a community by its members—who defines it, how it is defined and how it projects itself in the future—is an eminently political issue. We could observe that the definition of the identity of the VG community is made, in most cases, by means of comparison: between different generations, between different creative and cultural industries, and between international communities. We get the feeling that the community is still in a process of searching for a proper and distinct identity: "this community is in the process of defining itself" (Ann). The participants actively integrated processes of "memory making" and also engaged in the projection of the future (Gibbons, 2019) of the community. As different authors have pointed out, a common memory and a common history are very important dimensions of the sense of community and are very relevant in the process of defining community identity (Cook, 2013; Flinn, 2010).

Critical Perspectives on the VG Community. Most participants have a *positive view and evaluation of the community*, which is characterized as open, welcoming, and friendly, as well as encouraging and facilitating the integration of new members and the involvement and participation of existing ones. It is also considered a community that does not generate divisions or separations. It is evaluated as a positive context that promotes positive feelings of pleasure and security, especially in providing opportunities to be with people with similar interests: "I love being with people who understand my language and like the same things as me. It's my community!" (Kurt).

On the other hand, some of the participants referred to *negative and critical aspects of the community*, such as what they designate as a *lack of cohesion and unity*, especially regarding relationships between professionals from different areas, who often meet and participate in separate events and in different circles or in terms of what they call *individualism*, or the way some people stand out in the community and they end up giving importance to their own interests and not to the common ones.

There was also concern expressed about the *rivalries between local communities, about status, recognition, and resources*, and the divisions that they cause: "we are a small community, and still there are divisions"; "I don't like: some 'mafias' that exist"; and "I would change the rivalry that is sometimes unnecessary between people" (Cole). It was also mentioned that the community could be considered *homogeneous,* especially in terms of *gender*, with the participation of very few women, as well as being a community that has "many prejudices" (Sue). Participants highlighted

concerns about equality between men and women within the community: "I like how the community is normally welcoming, even for inexperienced people and are always ready to help, but it is also quite homogeneous (there are few women, for example) and still has some prejudices" (Tom).

At the same time, it is possible to perceive some *feelings of discontinuity, conflict, and lack of identification*: "I don't like that our community doesn't have an ethical code. There are so many misunderstandings because of this. Look at the problems that we have about the ownership of the games" (Kim); "I can tell you that it is a nice community, but, of course, that here, we are not all the same. Sometimes, I am not proud of what we are" (John); and "There are problems of plagiarism, we need to do something about this. This community is not only peace and love" (Sam). Although it is possible to acknowledge that a sense of community integrates a homogenous and linear perspective of what is involved in experiencing the community, as a place of harmony, safety, and communion (Bauman, 2013; Tonnies & Loomis, 2002), the data indicate that there are critical discourses that help to distance and deconstruct it, integrating the referred feelings of "not perfection," conflict, individualism, discontinuity, and lack of identification. This is in line with the concept of community de-idealization (Wiesenfeld, 1996).

Feeling of Belonging to the VG Community

The feeling of belonging has been studied as one of the most important dimensions that express a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and it was possible to understand how it is present, in different ways, in the VG community. Participants assume that anyone with an interest in VG can be considered a member of the VG community. What makes them belong is, above all, having something in common: *the interest in and relationship to VG* (i.e., studying, writing, speaking, making, and playing VG). However, there are *differences in status and power* in this belonging. Those who organize events or create contexts where the community meets and participates are considered "the real participants"—or participants that are more relevant and have more power. In this sense, being active in the community is perceived as key to belonging.

Most participants say that the identity of the community does not interfere with their personal identity. In fact, the community provides them with common experiences and memories, which they perceive as very positive, but it does not seem to be associated with strong community values or identities. This was underlined in some participant comments:

> The community doesn't interfere in nothing with my identity. I really don't know what the values and identity of the community are, and I don't care about that. I know that I connect with people with the same passion and interest and that it is enough for me. (Liv)

In fact, this experience seems to express the concept of "connected individualism" (Rainie & Wellman, 2014), which is characteristic of the digital cultures in which people from different backgrounds and provenances come together to express their

identities and unique individualities, without the pressure to "merge" with a community.

Thus, in terms of sharing personal identities, membership in the VG community mainly involves sharing a personal interest in VG. Being with people with common interests seems to be what connects people and makes the participants feel like they belong. In the same way, the idea of a "professional community," which connects people through "a work connection," but outside of the usual and typical work contexts while *combining a relational and social component*, is very present, and it is also considered important to the feeling of belonging to the community. This feeling of belonging appears as something *dynamic*, which changes over time, and which depends on the degree of involvement and presence: "I have sometimes felt that I was more part of [the community] than I am now" (Eve). It is a feeling that needs time to be understood and recognized—"I'm not sure if I'm part of it"—and that can have varying degrees or intensities: "Sometimes I feel that I don't fit in well" (Rose).

We also observed the *difficulties of people who come from other areas of study*—that is, other than those most typical in the community, and who, therefore, "feel that they come from another universe," with "a different language" (Kelly), and who need more time to feel that they belong. Having (and sharing) this *common language* is another important factor in making participants feel they belong to the VG community. The feelings of belonging are also related to the way participants feel inside the community and how others from outside see the community (Steltenpohl et al., 2018). Participants consider that, in general, people have a *positive and attractive image* of the VG community. They see it as innovative, dynamic, and sophisticated. Still, there are *stereotypes and prejudices that people from outside associate with the community*, such as the perspective that professionals in this field do not work, but rather dedicate their time to playing VG. Some participants even mention the community's responsibility in raising awareness and *challenging the stereotypes* about the professions associated with VG. Overall, for the participants, the question of belonging seems to be more important than the question of community identity, which is a tendency reflected in the increasing cultural and ethnic diversification of contemporary societies and the development of communities of belonging beyond communities of identity (Antonsich, 2010).

Issues of Access in the VG Community

The data indicate that people access the VG community through a *relational route*, as they are invited by people significant and close to them—usually by friends. In the case of women, in the vast majority of cases, they claimed to feel safer and more comfortable if they were invited and accompanied by other women. For many participants, the *route was academic*, as they started studying VG or a related topic, and they found or helped to create a local group. The relational evolution within the community is characterized, in most cases, by a *gradual process of snowballing*, in which meeting some people lead to meeting other people. This is a gradual process, which is described by

the participants as "starting by seeing and recognizing," then speaking to the people from time to time and then starting to participate more regularly in the "meets" and in other community meetings.

Some participants recognized a moment of transition between the feeling of being "people who participate in VG events" and the moment they are part of and they feel they belong to the community. This involves more than being in the role of "passive spectator" and implies taking an active role in the organization and dynamization of the local community. The importance of *meeting "key people"* is also mentioned, as it connects to access to more contacts, resources, and opportunities. Participating in certain "*key events*" is also very important to gain access to knowledge and relevant people from the national and international communities. The *participation in GJ*, due to their proximity, level of interaction, and intensity, is considered, by the vast majority, as decisive for relational evolution. They are an *"open door" to enter the community* and make it possible to start having access to more events, experiences, and resources in the community. The VG community is seen by those who intend to enter and by those who already take part in it as "*an open community*" (Lee), easily accessible to everybody, where it is simple to relate directly to other members. This accessibility was illustrated by how easy it was to enter the field as a researcher in the different GJ, as well as in the openness expressed by participants and organizers who ensured "we accept all registrations, even from people who say they do not know how to create games" (Leo). There is a perspective that "this community does not have a strong pressure to be an industry," like other cultural and artistic areas, so it can be more free, flexible and egalitarian: "in the VG community, we are more open and free than in other industries, and the relationships between us are more direct. There are no big 'stars', and if you would like to talk with someone is very easy" (John).

Although these events are considered "open to all," participants noted that a certain *cultural and educational elitism* still prevails, because they are only really open to those who have access to material, educational and symbolic resources that allow them to access this experience: "Everybody can come to these events, but of course we know that only certain people, with certain characteristics will come, and at the same time is difficult to come alone, without a team" (Ben). An example of this issue arose in one observed GJ that was held in an institution in an economically vulnerable area of the city. No one from the neighborhood participated, and all of the participants came from outside the neighborhood: "we tried to promote the event in the neighborhood but nobody came. We told them that we would have computers and free meals, but still they did not come" (John). At the same time, we noticed a *gender gap* and a very visible disproportion in access for women: "Nobody is telling us 'don't come', but we feel unsafe being in a place where there are only men" (Eve). Other *difficulties in access* are *geographical*, and put people living outside large cities at a disadvantage. This has consequences for the isolation of smaller and local game communities. Participants reported economic, time, and resource-related difficulties to participating in relevant events, which take place only

in large urban centers. These difficulties are perceived as obstacles to their participation in the community. Thus, although it sees itself as fluid and open, the VG community seems to reproduce and repeat the standard social access inequalities of society as a whole.

Structure and Organization of the VG Community

The participants perceive the community as organized according to a certain informal structure: they conceive the existence of *a general and more abstract community* at the national level, which they designate as the VG community—this is present in major national events that bring the community together and also through online groups. This VG community includes all of the people and institutions that have a focus on and interest in VG: people who play, create, study and teach, as well as companies, the VG industry, universities, and schools. There is a clear separation of *two groups* in the community: the *people who develop VG (developers*) and the *people who play them (gamers*). GJ emerge as important meeting places, especially for developers. This community is perceived as a complex system, in turn, *divided into sub-communities* or sub-systems, that seem to interact and be in relation with each other organized by geographic regions, type of involvement (player, game developer, student, entrepreneur, teacher), and generation/age. There are also sub-communities or groups associated with universities, schools, associations, societies, and companies. Online groups also appear as community contexts and are often perceived as the community itself. There are several *online groups* which mainly separate VG players and VG developers and creators.

One aspect that is frequently mentioned is the existence of *differences between the local communities*, motivated by *geographical inequalities*, that favor the communities from the larger cities which have more opportunities, more people involved, and access to a larger number and diversity of events. Criticism of this inequality often arises in the participants' discourse. These inequalities are seen as generating division and even feelings of rivalry between sub-communities. It is possible to find different perceptions about the relationship between these sub-communities; some point out the dispersion and lack of unity, while others mystify the "unity in the diversity": "we are similar, but we are different. Every community has their own way of doing things" (Sam). It reveals what is characterized as the *"insular" nature of the VG community*. Although participants mentioned the disadvantages of participating in smaller communities (need for transport, unequal access to logistics, financial resources, etc.), advantages were also evoked, especially considering the opportunities to experience closer and more direct contact with the members.

The VG community thus simultaneously represents *a hierarchical organization* (national community, local and online communities, with differences in power and geographic inequalities, with the local communities from larger urban centers assuming greater prominence and status) and a *horizontal organization*, as all have their own autonomy in the ways of organizing. The community combines an organized structure,

characteristic of "traditional communities," with a fluid, relaxed and dynamic approach to organization, which is consistent with what has been found for new forms of community organization (Bauman, 2013; Jenkins, 2015).

Power in Relationships. In different GJ, conversations about the past and previous experiences in other GJ were often raised as a way of approaching and identifying as part of the community and communicating *status* (connected to the *number and diversity of GJ* in which they had already participated). There were thus power differences between "*the most experienced*," who often offered practical advice, and the "*initiates*." Differences in power and status between members of the community are mainly based on the *relevance and success of their career* in the VG area (e.g., having launched VG, having been successful or recognized) and also related to the *number of years of experience* and the *degree and intensity of participation* in organizing and promoting events in the community. At the same time, experiences associated with exchanging favors with *networks of power and influence* were also reported.

Contexts of Participation in the VG Community

Online Groups and Forums. Participation in online groups was the form of participation most mentioned by our participants. There are several active *online groups* on different digital platforms (e.g., Facebook, Discord). Of the various existing groups, some are for game developers and others for players and people interested in games, while some smaller groups bringing together students from VG degrees from different universities. Different ways of participating in these groups are reported: from more *passive* ("liking" posts, reading what others have posted, and/or recognizing the kinds of issues discussed); to more *active* (commenting and publishing posts, suggesting topics for discussion). The *topics discussed* include VG being released, sharing and exchanging VG, publicizing events, asking for support with the development of games and GJ, and sharing projects that may be interesting to other members. Participants state that they benefit from these contexts of community participation mainly through the network of contacts, support and mutual assistance in resolving issues and critical support in understanding job advertisements in the area. Participating online is perceived, by some, as the most effective way to have a "*feel [of] the community as a whole*" (Sue), because people from different regions of the country participate there. They consider it as a more accessible and direct way of being in contact with what is happening in the community, of showing and disseminating their own projects, of creating a network of contacts and finding employment opportunities. There were, however, *several criticisms* of these online groups, which were considered by various participants as "toxic and emotionally charged" (Ann), especially because of the "troll-style comments" and the "exaggerated and dramatic discussions" (Jim). Reports of false job advertisements, false identities, and the opportunities it provides to "create stereotypical ideas of real people"—as "it is not possible to establish a personal relationship in contexts with so many people" (Tom)—were also present. Several

participants referred to the distance and the lack of personal contact in these interactions, stating that "one thing is all these people from the online community and another thing is my community" (Beth) and thus emphasizing the importance of personal, face-to-face contacts and of a restricted group which is considered "their community," within the "larger community." Face-to-face relationships are seen as "more truthful, honest and open" (Kurt).

Game dev Meets and Meet ups. These are referred to as face-to-face meetings with a *relaxed structure* organized by different local communities. Some have recreated the concept of the "soirée," which further emphasizes the *playful and cultural character* of the activity, and sometimes they are carried out in places, like bars. When we spoke with the organizers, they stressed the importance of going beyond institutional and academic circles, of valuing informality, and of giving space to other people to participate. Others take place in *more informal contexts at the university*, but often they take place in *VG companies*, which sometimes sponsor and support, offering the opportunity people in the community a chance to get to know the company's facilities and work dynamics.

These meetings are held once a month, at regular dates; access is free, and they are publicized through informal invitations and through posts on the pages of the groups that organize them. In these meetings, which are usually structured, organized and have a *plan of activities and presentations*, there is also *free time*, time to socialize, play games, get to know new games created by the people present or simply to pass the time. When participants referred to the reasons motivating them to participate, they mentioned: presenting and learning about VG projects; sharing VG at different stages of their development, asking for and giving feedback on the process of creating a VG; meeting people from VG companies, from startups to more established companies in the industry; creating a bridge between the academic world and the working and business world; socializing, meeting and making new friends; and enjoying the positive relational environment. It is noteworthy that these meetings are referred to as the most important for people "to be and feel part of the VG community." The participants also considered them important for the development of the community: "I am in the organization team of the game dev meets. It has been great because I feel the importance of these kind of events to foster our community" (Jim). In these meetings, we can find a *great diversity of people*, from students at various levels of education, university professors and teachers from other education levels, business people, members of the VG industry, VG stakeholders, amateurs, professionals in the field, and researchers. In general, most participants have a positive evaluation of these experiences, and many refer to these meetings as "the maximum exponent of the VG community" (Kim) and strongly recommend the experience. *Critical views of these meetings* are also mentioned and make reference to the difficulties of participation felt by less experienced people or by those with lower status in the hierarchy of power in the community, "because the same people always speak" (Jake).

Game Jams. If game dev meets are considered the contexts for knowing and reflecting on what the community has lived, GJ are seen as the contexts "for experiencing, for living the experience in practice" (Chad). GJ are thus seen as *"living laboratories"* in the VG community, where different experimentations can be carried out, as an unique performance or "repertoire" of actions, that reinforces GJ as an emergent contemporary ritual, considered to be very important for the VG community. As they are lived in an intense and condensed time and space, they are seen as opportunities to be with people from the VG community, allowing participants to get to know others better and become closer to them, moving "from acquaintances to friends" (Cole). Several participants see GJ as the "*main form of union of the community*" (Neil) and the most "*real and authentic contexts*" (Luke), where the identity of the community is materialized and where its history is written. Several participants share the opinion that the sense of the VG community depends of the face-to-face experiences that occur in these kinds of context: "GJ are the main events that foster the community spirit, during the year, where people can meet face to face" (Ross), and therefore they are particularly important contexts for encountering others and socializing with them, contexts where people from the VG community can meet and bond: "I participate because I know that I will find my friends here, and also people that I only meet in GJ. It's an opportunity to meet with my community again" (Cole). Participants underline the importance of this identification with the community and of *GJ as contexts of affinity:*

> Where I can be with people who like the same things, who know the same things, who speak the same language. Here, I know that everybody will understand my interest, that I can talk for hours about things that I like. (Todd)

GJ are also seen as *unique contexts of creation* in contemporary society that reinforce the uniqueness of this community: "Where can we find places like this in our society? Places where different people are creating new things together, like here? I don't know others. This community is really unique and special" (Trent).

Game dev camps, game weeks and game showcase events. In these contexts, participants can attend conferences, with the presence of national and international speakers in the area of VG. This is highly valued and appreciated, as it fosters a *network of contacts* and helps to establish close and direct connections with people with different statuses and roles in the community: "I was in the organization of the L. Games Week. It was a little bit tiring, but it paid off because I met really interesting new people and made really good community network contacts" (Sue). These events are mentioned for their importance in bringing *visibility* to and increasing the *influence* of the VG community in society.

Volunteering and Association Experiences. In general, most of the activities in the community are *voluntary*, but the participants reported that they find it difficult to call

these experiences volunteering. The volunteering activities that participants identified were in VG associations or while participating as organizers or providing support to an event, especially in GJ:

> I am doing volunteer work in this GJ and its has been an amazing experience to get to know the GJ from the inside. And I love to be with this organization team and to get to know the VG community from the inside. (Ann)

VG associations are referred to as places of participation in the community and as contexts that provide multiple *opportunities to learn* and develop new skills:

> I took part in L. (name of the game association) and it was very important to me, because I learned lots of new things and met new people with the same interests. It was a way to be closer to the VG community. Here, we meet each other and organize events around VG. (Troy)

These associations can be seen as more or less independent from academic contexts, and they bring to the participants a *diversity of experiences*, like, for example, the experience of working in groups that use digital and technological solutions to solve community and social problems: "I am now doing volunteer work in a group, and we try to organize digital solutions for people of our local community, and it involving VG" (Tess).

Commercial Video Game Events. Several events associated with brands and VG companies were referenced by the participants and seen as opportunities to participate in *contests* and *competitions* and to obtain *recognition* and *prestige* through prizes.

Groups in the Higher Education Context. Groups connected to universities or to student associations, often linked to VG degrees, are contexts for *organizing activities* associated with VG, such as game dev weeks, dedicated to the development of games; LAN parties, intensive sessions of playing VG in teams; and so-called game sessions, shorter VG events. Small student groups, for sharing contacts and opportunities, and for *everyday interactions*, sometimes become very "important contexts for developing and feeling the local VG community" (Jane) for community members outside big cities.

International Events. Although they were not mentioned as often, some participants talked about the importance of participating in international events, such as DAF, Digital Art Conference or the Nordic Games. Because they see the international VG community as bigger, with more resources and "better" than the national VG community, participants took *pride* in their participation in these events which could add to their *status* in the national community.

Final Reflections

The results suggest that the VG community integrates and combines, in a unique way, dimensions coming from different theoretical models of community. It combines dimensions of the traditional sense of *communitas* (Henricks, 2015; Turner, 2012), with dimensions of contemporary communities and societies in transition, so we can say that the VG community is part of what we could call "communities in transition" or "communities between" (Bauman, 2013; Gee, 2009; Jenkins, 2015), and also "diluted" (Komito, 1998) and "flexible" communities (Fernback, 2007)

The dimensions proposed by classic sense of community theories, the components of the theoretical framework proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986)—sense of belonging, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection—can be identified in participants' perspectives and observation of the VG community. Simultaneously, results support the idea that VG communities are contexts of affinity (Gee, 2009; Jenkins, 2015)—that is, that they are multi-situated and hybrid; incorporating a great diversity of experiences fundamentally linked together by a common interest; and by networks of relationship, sharing and voluntary support, more than by a common, fixed, homogeneous identity or by important shared common values (Bauman, 2013). More than a strong community identity, the VG community seems to function as a context for sharing individual identities, akin to the concept of connected individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2014). In fact, the meaning of community for participants seems to integrate intertwined processes of idealization and de-idealization of a classic, homogeneous, and linear sense of community (Wiesenfeld, 1996).

This combination of traditional and contemporary forms of community brings together poles often considered antagonistic: between the concrete and the abstract, the personal and the political and the cognitive and the emotional. It exists in the dimension of its temporality, between a common and generational memory and the ephemeral processes of fluidity, which are characteristic of contemporary society, and in terms of the perception of space, it is not limited to a physical or geographic territory, or to face-to-face experiences, but combines a diversity of places of encounter and creation, also supporting those that are digital. In terms of structure and organization, the VG community combines hierarchy and power relations based on traditional indicators such as status and influence, while also including horizontality and flexibility.

These results encourage us to reflect on how the concept of community remains alive and continues to be experienced by people connected to VG, and how the VG communities are actualizing and creatively combining new ways of experiencing and constructing *communitas* in contemporary societies (Bauman, 2013; Turner, 2012).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the FCT, IP, within CIIE's multi-year plan (grants no. UIDB/00167/2020 and UIDP/00167/2020). This work was also supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) and the European Social Fund, under the Operational Programme Human Capital (OPHC) of Portugal 2020, specifically under the FCT PhD Grants (PD/BD/135578/2018).

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Notes

1. These "names" refer to the participants and authors of the cited quotes and were created in order to protect their identity and anonymity.
2. The cited quotes were translated from the original language (Portuguese) to English.

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Appendix A

Discussion Group Guide Questions

"What is the video game community and what does it mean to you?

How do you experience and in what way/s do you participate in the video game community?

How do you characterize the VG community in 3 words?"

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