Self-Isolated but Not Alone: Community Management Work in the Time of a Pandemic

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As the COVID-19 crisis forces individuals to self-isolate, work from home, and find new leisure activities, an increasing number are turning to online gaming. These online communities are often developed by community managers who work to engage communities and establish norms. Community management work, broadly, is considered the "soft-skilled" labour of communication, diplomacy, and empathy within an online community. Despite an obvious need for this work in mediating the myriad of personalities and sheer number of users, community management is often underpaid and precarious. Using early interviews with community managers, conducted during the COVID-19 crisis, I aim to highlight those who work promoting pro-social behaviour in leisure spaces online. This work plays a vital role in community well-being, particularly for those who have not previously interacted extensively online. Community management is arguably an essential service during times of self-isolation, as they corral toxicity and shepherd users into positive online communities.

Keywords: self-isolation; community management; online gaming; online community; COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to global mandates for people to self-isolate, leaving many without work, routine socialization, and group leisure activities. Subsequently, many have had to seek out new leisure activities and an increasing number are turning to online gaming (H. Taylor, 2020). Live streaming platforms, such as Twitch and YouTube, have observed significant global increases in viewership as individuals from around the world tune in to watch others play games, cook meals, and practice drag makeup (Jackson, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2019; H. Taylor, 2020). For many, this move to online for social connection and leisure is a new experience. Helping to shepherd these newcomers are community managers, those that greet individuals into their communities and establish norms for these spaces. These workers encourage pro-social

behaviour, and as Kerr (2017) states, they "directly engage with players, they drive engagement through various campaigns, and they respond to problems" (p.119) to drive commercial sales for game studios. However, the emotional demand of managing pro-social behaviour online is draining for community managers, especially when many are socializing online for potentially the first time.

In addition, these communities may not be the best place for people to flock to. Online gaming communities are often hostile to women and people of colour, while the games themselves are often full of stereotyped and harmful representations of marginalized people (Gray, 2014). For Gray (2012), games that are initially "fun and enjoyable, frequently become a place full of hatred and intolerance" (p. 412). Sarah T. Roberts (2019) and Tarleton Gillespie (2018) have both offered contemporary looks at content moderation, or the work of removing unwanted, hostile, and toxic content from online platforms. While community management can involve tasks of content moderation, their work is much more than simply removing content that is deemed unacceptable, but also about encouraging pro-social behaviour to make these communities less hostile.

Despite this, online gaming allows people to keep up connections while maintaining social distancing. This commentary highlights the work (and workers) behind these communities whose labor promotes pro-social behaviour in leisure spaces. While they do not share the same health risks, community management work is arguably necessary during times of self-isolation, similar to the nurses, store clerks, and janitorial staff that continue to work during this pandemic. As Roberts (2019) notes, without the work of moderation and mediation, these platforms would be deserted wastelands, ceasing to function, and be unwelcoming to those seeking leisure and connection during a time of pandemic.

Leisure and Sociality in Games

Online games have become a site of extensive research into sociality and leisure in virtual spaces (see: Malaby, 2009; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; T. L. Taylor, 2006). As communities begin to form, grow, and experience conflict, there is a need to manage them and establish norms. This has become more prevalent with widespread shifts from public commons to digital ones; much of our media, social-interaction, and sharing has moved into online spaces (Williams, 2006). However, as Ducheneaut et al. (2006) argue, these communities face challenges in creating sustained engagement and social cohesion online. Online interactions have previously been argued to be "empty" as they lacked communal negotiation (see: Putnam, 2000). Later work took this notion further, arguing that the anonymity offered online encourages anti-social behaviours (Cheng et al., 2015; Chesney et al., 2009).

However, as Whitson (2013) argues, games impose social order, even when digital. Games act as a leisurely social experience that becomes homogenized, accessible, and transferable to a wider number of participants, generating meaning and sociality (Whitson, 2013). This is still predicated on the existence of these online spaces, and thus their management and moderation, to bring in users but also maintain social order. Just as Whitson (2013) argues that the coded rules of online games are obscured from those who play them, community management work that occurs behind the scenes, but ultimately structures and makes online community accessible and safe to many, is often rendered invisible and undervalued. Creating and maintaining these spaces requires countless hours of labor and social work, lest they be overrun by toxicity and subsequently deserted.

Building and Managing Community Online

Online leisure spaces have a long history of community building, moderation and management (Dibbell, 1994; Malaby, 2009; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Often, this work is done by a community manager. Community management work, broadly, is considered the "soft-skilled" labor of communication, diplomacy, and empathy within an online community (Kerr, 2017; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015). While the core of their work is to drive sales across many industries, daily tasks for community management might involve checking social media accounts and responding to inquiries, interfacing with development teams to communicate information to the community, networking and communicating with content creators, scheduling and writing copy for newsletters, social media, or other content, and a myriad of other tasks that can all depend on the stage of development a studio is at.

Community managers often work to combat toxicity and harassment online to maintain safe and open communities. Despite an obvious need for this work in mediating the myriad of personalities and sheer number of users, community management is often underpaid and precarious work (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015; Roberts, 2019). In addition, the games industry is one that is commonly critiqued for the amount of "crunch" forced upon its workers, with upwards of 70 hour work weeks and upper management that seems unconcerned with the physical and mental effects of this trend of working (Campbell, 2019; Consalvo, 2011; Gilbert, 2019).

This work of mediation and empathy is underlined with the need for community managers to be patient with their communities. As part of my larger dissertation research on community management, I had intended to conduct interviews with community managers at the Game Developers Conference (GDC), the largest international gathering of game developers annually, in San Diego in March. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this field work was subsequently cancelled, and I was forced to

follow up with my participants for online interviews. These interviews represent the first 5 that I completed with community managers from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and occurred in March and April of 2020 as many grappled with cancelled travel plans for business and networking and adapting to working from home.

In describing their work, Marilyn[1], a communications director for a small independent studio in the United Kingdom, noted that community managers needed "a level head, an ability to not take things personally, a strong moral compass, and a willingness to not be too worried about being unpopular." Asked what frustrates her most as a community manager, Marilyn continued that "no matter how much information or how much content or how many games we give them, it's just never enough. It is a great problem to have […] but there is no end to their hunger. There is no pleasing them." This workload intensifies for community managers during self-isolation due to heavy influxes of new players. Many are unfamiliar with the norms and expectations of these communities as they seek outlets for emotional and mental health support.

As the conduit between the community and the developers, community managers are often relaying information that their communities may find unsatisfactory, irrelevant, or just not to their taste. This puts community managers on the frontlines of hostility and toxicity in the communities they are meant to foster and build. These environments are common for community managers online, and is exemplified in the "GamerGate" (2014) controversy which saw individuals (mostly women, queer people, and people of color) and studios receiving what seemed like an endless wave of death threats, women being fired due to outside pressures from "fans," and widespread

[1] Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees to maintain confidentiality.

stalking (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017; Mortensen, 2018). However, many of the community managers I spoke with noted that they enjoy their work of connecting people and creating community. As Rowan, a community manager for a third-party communications company, says "at its core it's about connecting people […] we all like to champion things and be passionate about things […] it's an opportunity to share what you love with people even if it causes you stress."

Community Management as Essential Work

Support during COVID-19 and other pandemic situations are predicated upon gendered, precarious, and underappreciated work (such as store clerks, nurses, and janitors) (Enarson, 2001; Enarson & Pease, 2016; Fothergill, 2003). Online leisure spaces that have uplifted and provided solace during this time, and those that manage them, are arguably no different. Community management has been shifting in its conceptualization for some time, and this pandemic not only highlights the importance of this role but how it has transformed in recent years from simple moderator and censor to caretaker and leader of online communities.

The necessity of this role should not be understated, even under normal circumstances. Many of the community managers I spoke with noted how they were brought on early in the development process to build up communities well before the commercial release of the game. As Marilyn notes "if you launch a game now that doesn't already have an interested community, you can't sell anymore." Under extraordinary circumstances, such as during extended self-isolation, the moderation, mediation, and care work of community management becomes a central facet of everyday life.

While the dangers faced are unequivocally different, there is arguable similarity to workers in grocery stores who struggle to survive on minimum wages while working

on the frontlines of a pandemic. Estimates put the average salary of community managers at $49,978 USD, comparable to the median income of $49,348 USD (Indeed.com, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). While a modest income, Amelie, a community manager at a mid-sized Canadian games company, reflects that "there is no senior position for community managers. If you want to advance in your workplace you have to change branches" indicating that prospects for community managers looking for more financial security are limited. Despite this, community managers are the enthusiastic workers attempting to bring people together, keep everyone occupied, and keep these online spaces safe during the coronavirus pandemic.

During my interviews with community managers, I end on a question asking them about the future of community management. Amelie notes, "there's not a single industry right now that does not have a community manager. […] It's starting to become more recognized as one of the pillars of a company." It should be no surprise then, conducting these interviews online while they work from home self-isolating, that they think about how their role will look like in the coming weeks, let alone in coming years. As Rowan notes, "I think it is interesting how community managers [during the pandemic] have stepped forward to be the shepherds for online life. […] Adapting and shepherding people into new forms of communication." Amelie notes that through backchannels with other community managers, they are seeing surges in users online during the day, playing their games, and eager to chat and connect with people since widespread self-distancing began. It is these workers who combat toxicity online and help guide users into safe communities online.

Across social media people are being reminded to "be kind" to one another, especially those who are working on the front lines of this pandemic. It is important for us to remember not only to be kind to our delivery drivers, nurses, grocery clerks,

janitors, and other essential workers. Questions remain however if everyone is maintaining this same mantra is also doing so online. Ultimately, it is the role of community managers to enact this kindness in their day-to-day work, but also to help others understand how to communicate effectively online as they enter these spaces for the first time. Looking forward to an inevitable return to normalcy, questions remain if they will be recognized for the work they have done to help connect, engage, and provide comfort to those seeking it during this time of self-isolation.

Acknowledgements: The author acknowledges that this work was supported by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (grant number 895-2015-1005).

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