BAN HAMMER: RHETORICS OF COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT IN THE COMPUTER GAME INDUSTRY

by

Joshua J Zimmerman

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Joshua J Zimmerman, titled Ban Hammer: Rhetorics of Community Management in the Computer Game Industry and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

____________________________________________________ Date: 04/13/2016
Dr. Ken McAllister

____________________________________________________ Date: 04/13/2016
Dr. Amy Kimme Hea

____________________________________________________ Date: 04/13/2016
Dr. Maritza Cardenas

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate’s submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

____________________________________________________ Date: 04/13/2016
Dissertation Director: Dr. Ken McAllister
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SIGNED: Joshua J Zimmerman
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Dedication

To my great aunt, Velma Morrow. Thank you for showing me that I was never alone. I feel you with me still.
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Abstract

This dissertation, “Ban Hammer: Rhetorics of Community Management in the Computer Game Industry,” argues that community management, as an emerging corporate discipline, manages community discourse to produce particular subject-consumer attitudes and behaviors. Employing a multi-perspectival, suspensionist methodology, this dissertation analyzes the discursive practices of community managers working in the computer game industry, along with the communities themselves, to discover how computer game communities and computer game development organizations employ a wide variety of rhetorical strategies as they attempt to exert power over one another. Drawing from a wide range of sources in the study of rhetoric, community management, fan studies, computer game development, psychoanalysis, new media studies, and professional communication, this project argues that community manager’s inhabit a unique discursive space, one characterized by unresolved and unresolvable discursive tension, and that the work of community managers has an ever increasing importance to both the computer game development cycle and the production of fan communities.
Chapter 1 - Grown-up Work: Community Management as Theory and in Practice

1.1 — Introduction

This chapter will lay out a theory of community management in the computer game industry. It specifically offers a theory that explains why communities are managed at all, as well as why the need to undertake such management is increasingly necessary to computer game development cycles. Community management is not exclusively (or even primarily) about the management of a community, but rather is about the production of a community, one populated predominately by a particular type of subject. This distinction represents a fundamental shift in the scholarship regarding fans and consumption. In particular, it reimagines the origin of the fan herself, arguing that (some) fans are produced instead of emerging "naturally" of their own volition. Subsequent chapters will examine a variety of ways that community managers go about producing those fans, addressing the various ways fans are accommodated to discursive structures of authority, history, membership, work, and play. To begin, however, I will first discuss my own researcher positionality. I will then outline theories of fandom, space, and community that play important roles in subsequent chapters. I will also review the popular literature on community management, complemented by survey data collected from community managers in the computer game industry. Finally, I offer an outline of the theory animating this project.

1.2 — Community Management – What is it?

To begin this project, I want to offer a brief overview of what community management is. Specific duties and challenges will be discussed more fully later in this chapter, but to begin, I will offer a general outline for the work of community management. Succinctly put, community managers are employees tasked with building, managing, and growing communities of fans and customers. They may do so through social media, in-person events, videos, podcasts, forums, or any number of other mediums. A community manager often serves as the liaison between the community and the company.
In the case of computer game community managers, that might include gathering information from players regarding community suggestions for changes to the game, or it might involve translating information from the development team into information more easily understood by the community. As community management consultant Christie Fidura puts it, a community manager’s primary goal is engagement with the community. This definition, however, is far from settled.

1.3 — Challenges of Defining Community Management

Throughout this project, I will refer to community management as a “corporate discipline,” particularly as an emerging corporate discipline. Traditional corporate disciplines include departments such as marketing, customer service, sales, and human resources. Information technology services (IT Services) is perhaps the most well-known example of a corporate discipline emerging in recent memory.

As early as 1954, at the first conference held on the training of employees in computing, some “at the conference believed that the supply of [IT] workers” would be a concern as business applications proliferated (Coopey 3). In those early days of information technology, however, the focus was on training mathematicians to grapple with the mathematical complexity of computing technologies (Coopey 3). Within just a few years, however, it became apparent that computing technologies would require both staff to operate them and training to produce those staff. As such, industries began offering training programs in order to supply their need for IT professionals (Coopey 7). But as Gil Press notes, “Until the 1980s, all computer-related activities [in places of business] revolved around interactions between a person and a computer.” As Press puts it, “Connecting people in a vast and distributed network of computers not only increased the amount of data generated but also led to numerous new ways of getting value out of it.” This, of course, lead to changes in the training and duties of IT professionals.

What this very brief history of the development of IT professionals reveals is 1) that the familiar IT department was not always a part of doing business and that 2) even in the short time they have
existed, IT professionals training and duties have changed many times over. In this study, I am examining a newly emerging corporate discipline, community management, which is still very much in a state of flux in regards to its position within industry, as well as with regards to what makes a person a good or bad community manager. As such, community management is a field with few agreed upon definitions.

Take for example, a presentation from community management consultant Christie Fidura. In this presentation, Fidura explains the differences between a social media manager (SM) and a community manager (CM). Fidura argues that a SM’s primary goal is to “broadcast” for the company, increasing its social media footprint and increase raising awareness of the brand. CMs, in contrast, are primarily concerned with cultivating engagement between the company and the community. To simplify even further, a social media managers communications generally go one way (out to possible customers), while community managers see communications go out to community members, and then see communication from the community coming back to the company. Throughout her presentation, Fidura argues that SMs and CMs have different skills, different goals, and different metrics for success. It is ironic, then, that the same Facebook group that led me to her presentation (Community Manager, Advocate, and Evangelist) has multiple posts from companies seeking social media managers, an article explaining why social media shouldn’t be considered a part of the marketing corporate discipline, and multiple articles referring to “Social Media Community Managers” (McLeod; Kolowich; Eridon).

Many of the authors writing about CM cited in this chapter more or less agree with Fidura’s rough sketch of what community management is. But just as early IT departments saw their training and duties change over the course of just a few years, so too are community managers. Community management is still very much emerging as a corporate discipline. It’s exact duties, the training and responsibilities of the people who do it, and even the title of community manager are still being defined and redefined by those who consider themselves community management professionals, the companies they work for, and the communities they manage. As such, this study takes at face value those who are
saying the work they do is community management, whether their job duties involve social media management, in-person events, customer service, or any of the myriad of other duties a CM might find herself tasked with. To do otherwise would place me in a position of judgement that I neither desire nor am qualified to hold.

1.4 — Researcher Positionality

In this section, I will be discussing my position as both fan and researcher in relationship to the subject of community management and the computer game industry. I include this information for two reasons. One, drawing from the work of fan theorists Matt Hills and Henry Jenkins, who identify themselves as aca/fans, I need to acknowledge my own positionality as a bilocation between the academic world and the fan world, inhabiting both at once. I do so in order to implicate and locate myself within this study. I am not an objective observer of this subject. I am, indeed, deeply invested both intellectually and emotionally in this subject, and by locating myself in (and in-between) academic and fan discourses, I not only seek to reject any notion of objectivity, but also to locate a certain similarity of positionality with community managers in the computer game industry. The tensions between discourses of the academy and of fandom are assuredly part of what draws me to the work of community managers. Like myself, they exist in a space where fandom and work overlap. They are pressured and pulled to be one or the other by all sides, but, as the literature reviewed later on in this chapter will indicate, going to one side or the other completely would actually represent a failure on the part of the community manager. And so, I see myself in this work. Unsurprisingly, then, like community managers, my own positionality is complicated, existing somewhere among play and work, affection and antagonism, consumer and producer, critical mind and enthralled viewer. There is no split, but the terms do not sit cleanly together. They rub against each other uncomfortably. I wish to hold on to that feeling of discomfort because it makes me aware of my own positionality and the positionality of the community managers who are the focus of this study.
But that positionality is itself shifting. In her work on monstrous rhetoric and fan culture, Sara Howe, for instance, inverts those subjectivities, identifying as a fan first and an academic second (11). Looking at my own work, I recognize that I move between those positions, sometimes motivated first by my passionate fandom, sometimes by the intellectual draw of the academic mindset. As Matt Hills says, "Academics, far more generally, are 'not proper academics' either, if by this we mean that their scholarly selves cannot be cleanly separated out from their media-audience-based identities" ("Media Academics as Media Audiences" 33). My identity as a researcher and fan has no clean separation. These different positionalities are imbricated, often distinct in their social roles and behaviors, but always connected.

These different positionalities are also influenced by feelings of affection and anger. Both emotions play a part in fandom and the academy, though in the case of fandom, as Derek Johnson argues, fan scholarship has "underplayed the constitutive centrality of antagonism and power of . . . fandom" (285). I recognize and acknowledge this pull within my own work, between the affection I have for my chosen subjects, and for the various roles I might play vis a vis those subjects. But also, I recognize and acknowledge the equally powerful frustration and anger I sometimes feel about the place of my chosen subjects in the academy, in the treatment of a character in a property I love, or in the inequities and injustices concealed within subjects I love as both an academic and a fan. Together, these multiple, often conflicting positions reinforce the multiple, sometimes conflicted positionalities I inhabit, informed by affection, antagonism, scholarship, and fandom. My place in this work is conflicted and in tension at all times because I am care for it deeply, and because my continuing consumption and production of computer game related materials implicates me in both the joys and the problems I examine in this study.

1.5 — Theoretical Assumptions about Fandom and Computer Games

Because community managers interact so much with fan communities, fandom and the study of fans will play a major role in this dissertation. My positionality brings along with it assumptions about
fans, computer games, and their intersection. To begin, I articulate my assumptions about fans and fandom. First, fans are embedded in systems of production and consumption that can both work to support and undermine capitalist culture. Second, fans can both support and challenge dominant narratives in the culture around a wide range of topics. Third, fandom is an affectively intense performance, one that has consequences both positive and negative to the psychic and material lives of fans. Fourth, fans and fandom are serious topics worthy of study.

Next, I need to articulate my assumptions about computer games and the industry that produces them. First, I assume that computer games can be art, and that they can affect players in ways similar to film, books, etc. I will not, in fact, even consider the question of whether games are art, primarily because that issue has been so well-covered by a wide variety of thinkers, commenters, and theorists. Second, computer games are also part of an industry, with many computer game developers (but not all) relying on the sale of their games to support themselves economically. Third, the art and the business of computer games will at times conflict and at other times complement one another. Fourth, both the production and consumption of computer games intersects with issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Fifth, and the major focus of chapter 5, differentiating work and play in computer game communities can be difficult. This is particularly true due to the ambiguous and subjective nature of the terms.

At the point of intersection between fans and computer games, I assume that computer game fans interact with the computer game industry in ways that are similar to how fans of other entertainment media do, as well as having access to a number of responses that are relatively unique to the medium, primarily because computer games require a level of input (the pushing of buttons, the making of decisions) that other mediums such as novels and movies tend not to. I also assume that computer game fans can be computer game developers, and vice versa.
1.6 — Major Questions

Aware of these assumptions about fandom and computer games, I can establish the following as the major questions about community management, computer games, and fandom that this project will seek to answer:

- Why are communities in the computer game industry being managed at all? And what is the relationship between the work of the community manager, and the individuals and groups in the community?
- What role do rhetorics of authority and justice play in managing computer game fan communities?
- What are the rhetorical approaches, and the implications of those approaches, in regards to history, memory, and nostalgia in community management?
- How do computer game fan communities come to be, grow, and decline? And what role does the community manager have in this process?
- How does community management unsettle and complicate the relationship between work and play?

1.7 — Methods and Methodology

Investigating these questions requires a methodology that can accommodate multiple, sometimes simultaneous subjectivities. My methodology draws, in part, on the work of Douglas Kellner and, in part, on the work of Donna Haraway. From Kellner, I will draw on the idea of the multi-perspectival. Kellner says:

At its strongest, cultural studies contain a three-fold project of analyzing the production and political economy of culture, cultural texts, and the audience reception of those texts and their effects. This comprehensive approach avoids too narrowly focusing on
one dimension of the project to the exclusion of others. To avoid such limitations, I
would thus propose a multi-perspectival approach . . . (4)

This project will engage consistently with those perspectives, but it will not be limited to them. Instead, it will focus on Kellner’s more universal idea: that the complex material, psychical, and affective realities of cultural artifacts require methodologies that accommodate their multifaceted nature.

This project, at its core, demands a multi-perspectival approach as community management itself is a multi-perspectival job. Community managers must be able to write technical and professional documents, determine when and how to engage with the social and emotional life of the community, and navigate the often treacherous waters of what Ken McAllister calls the “computer game complex” (199). A single theoretical lens will simply not be sufficient. As such, I will also be employing Donna Haraway’s work on partiality and speech, particularly her piece "The Promises of Monsters." This piece informs my methodology in two important ways. One, Haraway defines the term "artifactualism,” meaning "nature for us is made, as both fiction and fact" (316). Artifactualism posits that science produces the things it studies, and that to understand an artifact requires the interpretative creation of an artifact to be studied. In short, the very act of situating an artifact for study is an act of interpretation. This applies equally to the artifacts in this study. I will be drawing heavily from web forum posts, Twitter exchanges, podcasts, and similar discursive sites. Each of these artifacts is, by the very act of studying it, dislocated from its context so that it may be analyzed. Even my attempts to keep that artifact in context changes its context. As Haraway says, "This is not denaturing so much as a particular production of nature" (316). As such, my study is not meant to be a definitive analysis of the artifacts under consideration or of the work of community management in the computer game industry. It is, instead, another perspective (multiple perspectives, in fact) on the work of community management, contestable and partial, but still adding to the growing body of literature on this emerging corporate discipline.
“The Promises of Monsters” also makes an important point about the way that research that speaks *about* can become a process of speaking *for*, effectively silencing the subject under study. Haraway says:

*Science speaks for nature . . . . Permanently speechless, forever requiring the services of a ventriloquist, never forcing a recall vote, in case the object or ground of representation is the realization of the representative’s fondest dream . . . . The represented must be disengaged from surrounding and constituting discursive and non-discursive nexuses and relocated in the authorial domain of the representative* (330, 334)

My goal in this study is not to speak for community managers in the computer game industry. I do not wish to be their "ventriloquist." I have attempted to represent their voices in this study. In particular, I have collected data through an on-line survey from community managers who currently work or have worked in the computer game industry. Participants were recruited through direct e-mail contact, through the Facebook group "Community Manager, Advocate, and Evangelist," and through Twitter. My goal in collecting this data is to let the voices of actual community managers interact with, enrich, and contest the analysis of this study. I have also included a variety of community member voices in this study, drawing from publicly available forum communities, Twitter feed, and Facebook posts. In both the case of the quoted community managers and the quoted community members, I have refrained from correcting grammatical or spelling errors or in marking them with [sic]. To do so, frankly, would be to impose a particularly academic vision of correctness that would dampen their individual voices. At the same time, I recognize that the very act of collecting their voices dislocates those voices, making them artifacts. Their voices are filtered by my questions (questioning surely being an act of interpretation and mediation), filtered again by the pieces I select and chose to employ, and filtered again by the very act of writing them down. As Haraway says of articulation, "It is always a non-innocent, contestable
practice; the partners are never set once and for all. . . . Articulation is work and it may fail" but, "commitment and engagement, not their invalidation, in an emerging collective are the conditions of joining knowledge producing and world-building practices” (338). I aspire to commitment and engagement, to take my piece of this work and join it to an emerging collective of knowledge production, to not speak for, but to speak with. But speaking with requires that I account for my own positionality throughout this project. Again drawing from Haraway, “The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable” (“Situated Knowledges” 586). By constantly seeking to situate and resituate myself as I move from topic to topic in this project, I am trying to undermine the “god trick” that Haraway warns of, the trick of pretending that you can “see everything from nowhere” (581). Instead, I will spend time offering an always incomplete accounting of my own positionality, to show where I research, analyze, and speak from. Just as artifacts are created to study, I attempt to account for how I create myself as a researcher, scholar, and fan.

My methods in this project, discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis, reflect my desire to engage in a discourse with community managers and the works they have produced. In the following chapters, I will be drawing from the work on discourse analysis produced by James Gee and Barbara Johnstone in order to examine the ways that discourse between the development organization, the community manager, and the fan community shapes and produces “community” as an idea as well as how it interpolates individual community members. Gee and Johnstone’s discourse analysis is not, however, Foucault’s discourse analysis. Gee was, in his own words, “very influenced by Foucault” when developing his theory of discourse analysis, but Gee’s discourse analysis functions for different ends that Foucault’s (Rogers 4). Gee describes the difference between his works and Foucault’s by saying, “I began to get kind of tired of discussions of power that were always about oppression, imperialism, and post-colonialism, and post-modernism,” and that he wanted to focus his work on “a micro level and how context is so determined with different practices and changes over time” (Rogers 10). Gee’s discourse
analysis, however, does not eschew issues of oppression, imperialism, etc., entirely. Instead, Gee wishes to avoid a focus on what he calls “grand theories” of discourse. Instead, his discourse analysis focuses on the micro level of more limited discursive occurrences. This focus on the micro level allows Gee’s discourse analysis to examine the discursive texts of community management (e.g., social media, in-game chat) in such a way that the context and goals of the interlocutors is made clearer.

Further, employing Gee’s discourse analysis makes space for multiple, sometimes competing or contradicting analysis that can be firmly situated in a time and place. In doing so, Gee’s discourse makes rooms for me to pay particular attention to the way that discourses circulate within particular communities, at particular times.

One portion of Gee’s discourse analysis method, however, is troublesome. Gee’s position on the subject is that “all discourse analysis needs to be critical” because all language is political in its very nature (9). And by critical, Gee means that discourse analysis should function as a jumping off point for critical interventions into the discourses analyzed. That position, however, is not fully compatible with the suspensionist position that I take on in this project. That position, explored more fully below, can be simply defined as resistance to making “good or bad” judgements about the activity being studied. At the same time, my project does not simply describe the discourse. It also interprets that discourse, trying to seek out motivations, strategies, and impacts. As has arisen before in this project, my method in this chapter must inhabit the uncomfortable space between poles, in this case the critical and the supposedly uncritical. My work in this project, therefore, needs to be read with an understanding of that tension. I will not and do not deny that the analysis of this project has a political dimension. Both the discourses I examine and the examination itself embody particular politics. What I will avoid, however, is to lay out plans for critical interventions based on findings. I will, for instance, examine the words of participants in a variety of settings, arguing that their discourse works to influence or produce particular ends. I will not, however, be laying out a political project to correct or interrupt injustices identified.
This is certainly not because I do not believe that these injustices should not be addressed. It is simply that this particular set of discourses has been so rarely studied that I believe a prescription for its particular woes would be premature and beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, I hope to maintain my suspensionist position while still acknowledging that the discourses of the communities in question emerge from and with other political imaginaries. In the future, however, I see rich avenues for critical, in Gee’s sense of the term, analysis of community management practices.

Rhetorical analysis offers a vital complement to discourse analysis. As Sonja Foss notes, “rhetoric is an action” and rhetorical analysis (which she refers to as “rhetorical criticism”) is “the process of systematically investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (3, 7). As a scholar of rhetoric, I am obviously interested in the rhetorical strategies of community managers. Employing rhetorical analysis allows me to examine and name the rhetorical strategies of community managers, in particular how they use rhetorical strategies to shape the discourse of the community, and thus the community itself. Rhetorical analysis thus allows me to fill a gap in the method of discourse analysis outlined, respectively, by Gee and Johnson where discourse analysis focuses on the goals of speakers but does not necessarily look at these discourses as persuasive action. Rhetorical analysis, meanwhile, does focus on these communicative acts as forms of persuasion. As my contention is that community management is aimed at the production of particular types of subjects (i.e., persuading community members to take on particular behaviors and beliefs), my supposition is that community management is fundamentally a rhetorically-based corporate discipline and thus studying it will require rhetorical analysis.

1.8 — Theorizing Fans and Fandom

Fans and fandom play a central role in the questions of this study, because of the way that community managers can create, interact with, and influence those communities. As such, a short review of the literature on fandom, along with definitions of the terms “fans” and “fandom,” is
necessary. It should be noted, however, that I don't intend to offer a comprehensive review of fan studies. Fan studies, especially what Henry Jenkins calls the "third wave" of fan studies covers far more theoretical ground than could be reasonably covered in this chapter. Jenkins argues that the first wave of fan studies includes the work of John Tulloch, John Fiske, and Janice Radway, their primary innovation being that they stressed that being an audience member was a type of activity, instead of being solely passive receptors (11). That period of work, however, also constantly tried to keep its distance from its subject, having "no acknowledgement of any affection they feel for the objects of study" in Jenkins' words (11). This is a critique furthered by Matt Hills in "Media Academics as Media Audiences," when he says, "By laying claim to the nonaestheticized study of popular culture, scholars sought to discursively distance themselves from what are viewed as normative practices of media consumerism" (35). That desire to remain above the thing studied, almost a direct instantiation of the ivory tower metaphor of the academy, is antithetical to this project, but this study's debt to those early authors is clear as their work helped to theorize the sort of dialectic between fan community and community manager that this study examines.

The second wave of fan studies includes Henry Jenkins himself as well as authors such as Camille Bacon-Smith. As noted by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, the second wave of fan studies "highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and subcultures, as the choice of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structured through our habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital" (6). Their scholarship also worked to legitimize and rehabilitate fans as both social subjects, fighting back against previous notions of fandom that pathologized fans, and subjects of study, finding a place for fandom studies in the academy. Jenkins notes that his work arose, at least partially, from frustration about "how badly fans have been written about" (12). That attempt at rehabilitation, however, resulted in critiques from the third wave of fan scholars, particularly scholars such at Matt Hills, who argues that attempts to
legitimize the fan have the effect of projecting academic values onto fans (12). As I noted in my methodology section, this is a case of the act of study creating the artifact being studied.

The third wave of fan studies is an attempt to correct this issue, particularly its more utopian tendencies (Johnson), as well as representing a general broadening of the arena of fan studies. Third wave fan studies is particularly focused on fandom "as part of the fabric of our everyday lives" (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 9). My own past scholarship fits this characterization well, and, at least at the time of this writing, this study would likely find a home in the third wave of fan studies. This study, however will also represent a turn towards what I call fan studies 3.5, as it will bring attention to the way that fans are managed and produced, focusing on the emergence of fans and the performance of fandom as not only a social and psychological performance, but also an economic one.

What, then, is a fan? I will be relying on Matt Hills’ definition, offered in his book *Fan Cultures*, that "fan" is a performance of identity (xi). Hills argues that being a fan still entails laying claim to, "in some sense . . . an improper identity" (xii). But Hills rejects the pathologization of fans that existed before (and to some extent, during) the first wave of fan studies, as well as the utopianizing vision of the second wave of a fan studies. He argues instead for a "suspensionist" position that refuses to determine which fans are good and which are bad. As noted before, I extend that same suspensionist approach to community managers as well. Hills definition also tries "to place fan culture squarely within the processes and mechanisms of consumer culture, given that fans are always already consumers" (27). My work in this project will continue that trend by examining what kind of consumers are produced by the work of community management. In doing so, this project also expands the ontology of fandom by demonstrating how fans are *produced*, instead of simply assuming that fans emerge organically or naturally from the fans’ own interests. Further, this study shows how individuals who engage in fannish social performance come to be situated in a community of fans, a fandom. With this understanding of what a fan and a fandom are, I turn now to the questions of where the fan exists within material and
cultural contexts (a question of place) and how the network of connections that constitute a fandom is established and maintained (a question of community).

1.9 — Theorizing Place

The question of place is important to this study because "place" is a difficult to pin down concept when discussing computer game communities. Computer game fans exist in their own material lives, they exist in a relationship with an in-game avatar, they exist online, but also outside of the game on blogs, forums, and social media; and they may exist in the material space of fandom (conventions, MeetUps, release events, etc.). As such, the question of online vs. offline place is far too limited to be of much use in this project. Instead, I will be relying on the notion of locality, as defined by Arjun Appadurai and drawn on by Deirdre McKay, as "a variable quality constituted by a sense of social immediacy, technologies of interaction, and the relativity of contexts, with the maintenance of its materiality or 'place-ness' requiring ongoing work" ( McKay 199).

Appadurai calls these place-making projects "neighborhoods," where locality is expressed "in terms of agency, sociality and reproducibility" that "can have both 'traditional' (place-based) locality and 'virtual' (based in communications technologies) locality. Locality is thus co-constitutive of a distinctive subjectivity—the 'sense of place' carried within the person that grounds their self-understanding" ( McKay 199). Appadurai’s definition of locality is particularly useful in this project because it breaks down the material/virtual binary that so often dominates work on computer games. Computer game fan communities are, after all, constructions of both the material and the virtual and their effects are felt across both realms. It should be noted, however, that Appadurai’s definition does not efface geography. Instead, it turns place into a "sense," a collection of impressions, relationships, and commitments. In this way, “place” becomes an interpretative act instead of an already existent space that a subject enters. The subject, of course, brings geography with her, the environmental and social realities of her life playing a role in the place-making act of interpretation. But the subject, in this theorization, also plays an
active role in the formation of the locality. Examination of and analysis of that role, and the way that role is determined by community managers, plays a key part in this project.

Discussions of place led me to considerations of space, particularly discursive space. A community manager’s work depends heavily on the management of discourse between themselves, other members of the development organization, and the community of players. The discursive space where those discussions take place are, however, not always clearly delineated. While this study does not draw on theories of third space for the explicitly political ends of its most famous theorists (Bhabha, Lefebvre, Anzaldúa, amongst many others), their investigations into discourse at points of cultural and political intersection do provide valuable insight into some of the discursive challenges of community management. Thirdspace, as theorized by Bhabha, arises from elements of language that “do not lend [themselves] to translation” between different discourse groups. It is this very lack of translatability that “makes it possible for discursive authority to be re-negotiated despite the asymmetrical relations of power” (xi). The theorization of third space forward by thinkers such as Bhabha emerges as a way to analyze the role that space, both physical and discursive, plays in the ordering and re-ordering of the world as people from different cultures, races, genders, and social positions interact. As I will note throughout this study, computer game player and computer game developers inhabit different social positions vis a vis computer games. While I am certainly not equating these social positions with the social and political ramifications of race, gender, or orientation, third space theorization does provide a useful analytical frame when considering the work of community management. In particular, third space rejects the negative connotation of “being on the fence.” As Julia Lossau puts it, “‘It is precisely this exclusionary vision of hybridity—hybridity as the ambiguous, problematic and hence non-desirable middle ground that lies between two fixed and authentic realms—which Bhabha’s concept of third space seeks to disturb and reconceptualize’” (65). As I will discuss more fully in the last section of this chapter, community management requires the community manager to inhabit a discursive space that
exists in tension between the development organization and the player community. That ambiguous position, however, is not the result of an undesirable discursive tension. Instead, that tension is the progenitor of a “contingent reality” where argument, agreement, and negotiation can occur between parties that hold different social positions that come with different, and sometimes conflicting, forms of power (Lossau 71).

Together, these conceptualizations of place and space provide useful parameters for the analysis of community managers’ work. A computer game player community exist as an interpreted place, with the internal geographies of members and the development organization powerfully influencing their sense of the communities locale, meaning (for instance) its sense of social intimacy, its relative position in regards to other social groups, and what impact membership in the group has on the subjectivity of its members. Those various internal geographies interact with one another, along with the internal geographies brought by both the community manager and other members of the development organization, in a discursive space akin to Bhabha’s third space. It is only there, outside of the binary choice of either being in the development organization or the player community that the discursive negotiations of community management can occur. As I will discuss throughout this study, however, third space discourse does not necessarily lead to radical freedom or change in the communities, because, as Loussau notes, space of any sort also serves as an ordering system where, “The imagery of space represents a cognitive grid in which different things are located at different places” (68). Space, she notes, renders things locatable, and prevents things from inhabiting the exact same space. A place for everything, and everything in its place, as the saying goes.

1.10 — Theorizing Community

Place and space provide parameters to discuss features and discourses in a community, but they do not define community itself. The term has been theorized extensively across a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and rhetoric and composition. In discussing why
community has been studied so extensively, Gerard Delanty, in his book *Community*, posits that, "The idea of community, which perhaps explains its enduring appeal, is related to the search for belonging in the insecure conditions of modernity" (1). The question of what belonging means and what a subject belongs to animates decades of theoretical discussion of community. Additionally, the delineation (or not) between community and society (Gusfield, Konig, Durkheim), or between community and the State (Rousseau, Hegel) comes under consideration repeatedly in the literature. For the purposes of this study, there are several definitional questions to answer. Taking as a key reference Gerard Delanty's description of community as an "open-ended system of communication about belonging," I will examine some of the theorizing about community, detailing what features community takes on and disposes of through Delanty's definition (187).

As referenced above, computer game fan communities exist across both physical and virtual realms. As such, circumscribing the notion of community to a particular physical space or web forum will not be useful. On its surface, a conception of community such as Benedict Anderson's, which conceives of communities as imagined, meaning not solely structured by social intimacy or lived space, can minimize the role of community managers in communities that would seem to arise, fundamentally, from communicative social intimacy. At the same time, Anderson’s imagined communities offer a useful theory for how members of communities that are isolated from one another by distance or time can maintain a feeling of community through imagination. Of particular use is Anderson’s analysis of how shared language, spread through the growing power of capitalism and major advances in communication technologies, allows even these isolated or distant individuals to imagine a community because of a feeling of simultaneous action and experience with an imagined community of others (157). Anderson’s particular example of this phenomenon is the singing of the national anthem, knowing in their minds that other individuals who they do not now and may not ever know are singing or have sung or will sing this exact same song to the exact same tune (170). That certitude of shared, meaningful
experience is what allows even these isolated individuals to feel as if they share experience across great space or time. Being as a computer game community manager’s community is almost assuredly geographically disparate, Anderson’s conception of the imagined community, built on either imagined simultaneity of experience or at least the ability to imagine that others share your personal experience, provides this study with additional theoretical support for why far-flung networks of computer game fans should even be considered a community at all. Fundamentally, computer game communities share language (the discourse of their chosen games), and are capable of both very real simultaneity (playing a game together) and imagined simultaneity (knowing that others are playing the same level, encounter, game that you are). At the same time, Anderson’s imagined community can also privilege an individual subjects interpretation of the imagined community to such an extent that it loses track of socializing forces that arise from materially shared experience, i.e. discourse. Further, Anderson’s imagined communities thrive primarily on the sameness of experience. While shared experience certainly plays its part in computer game communities, a theory of computer game community that relied solely on Anderson’s theory would struggle to account for the community building effects of diverse experiences and of paradigm shattering discovery that often occurs in computer games.

This is a definitional challenge shared by the definition of community put forward by Anthony Cohen in *The Symbolic Structure of Community*, where community is conceived separately from the question of locality and instead focused on community as a meaning and identity making process (9). Cohen’s argument is that community emerges as members define themselves in relationship to other groups. There emerges a sense of "us" versus a sense of "them," the boundary between one community and another becoming the primary symbol of the community. Cohen’s vision of community has two major problems as far as this study is concerned. One, it assumes that community memberships are singular. Considering that computer game fans can play many games at the same time and may be a part of several fan communities at once, Cohen’s definition of community is too limited. The second
problem is that this conception of community fails to address the question of mediation, in both the material and digital worlds, ignoring what Linda Driskill refers to as external sources of meaning, specifically forces that are external to the network of symbolic structures that Cohen argues structures community (59). Instead, the meaning of community for each individual member arises solely from her own interpretation of the symbolic boundary between her community and anyone outside of that community. That means that while Cohen's view sees community as defined "in terms of particular kinds of awareness groups have of themselves in relation to other groups," his definition does not sufficiently address the way that awareness of the self is mediated and manipulated by both technology and possibly through active management, such as a community manager (Delanty 46).

In contrast, Delanty's definition stresses that community is a fundamentally open system, in the sense that the discourse of belonging may be influenced and altered by forces both internal and external to the community. What defines the community is not then a particular boundary or even a particular imagined vision of shared experience (as experience in computer games can and does often change quickly and vary wildly). Instead, the community is defined by an on-going communication, or, as I argue an on-going discourse, about belonging. James Gee’s defines Discourse as a “characteristic way of saying, doing, and being” with the processes of saying, doing, and being all being interwoven and interdependent (An Introduction to Discourse Analysis 30). I will explore Gee’s definition of Discourse more fully in chapter 2, but just by comparing his definition with Delanty’s assertion that “community as belonging is constructed in communicative processes” makes it clear that Delanty’s communication systems and Gee’s Discourse share many vital similarities as they entangle processes of saying, doing, and being (187). Key to understanding Delanty's definition of community, however, is recognizing that it situates this discourse of belonging primarily as a universal sub-text, instead of using it to refer to an actual, constant conversation about who belongs. For instance, a recent thread in the Halo Waypoint forums titled "Spartan Animals?" asks the following question: "I know sounds weird, but why haven't
the UNSC create super animals like a spartan cat or even a spartan Moa?" (Jack Taylor 123). For those not familiar with the *Halo* universe, the question is asking why a military organization in the game's universe has not created animal troops to help them fight their war. That particular question is not expressly a discussion of who belongs to the community and who does not. But Delanty's definition argues that there is a subtextual discussion about belonging inherent to this question. If we were to make that subtext text, the discussion might be framed by the question, "Who here is capable of understanding the references to the UNSC, spartan, and Moa I have made? Who can then situate those references in a shared framework of knowledge about the *Halo* universe and engage in a dialogue about the hypothetical I have posed?" The ability to participate in this discussion or the desire to try to participate becomes the marker of who is in the community and who is not. This is a key difference between a discourse about belonging (an open-ended system in Delanty's language) and a discourse of belonging (a closed system like we see in Cohen and Anderson). In the former, the discourse is an ongoing discussion where the markers of belonging are contested and mutable. The latter is a discourse where the markers of belonging have been set (the symbolic boundary) and the discourses become a constant reaffirmation of membership. The former is becoming, the latter is being.

Because it makes room for rhetors to have different levels of facility with the discourse, Delanty's definition does not require total foreclosure of the community, meaning that community can be defined only by a closing of its borders, while at the same time it acknowledges that there is an inside and outside to community through the avenue of participation. Participation is particularly important in this study, as we will see below, because so much of the community manager’s work is to figure out how to encourage and then measure participation. What counts as participation is, in fact, a major issue for community managers and an issue that Delanty doesn’t actually address. For instance, is a forum member who does not post to the forums, but does read the forums extensively (i.e., a “lurker”) a member of the community? Based on Delanty’s definition, they are not. Such a subject would be
considered a visitor to the community, but because she is not participating in the discourse, she is not a member. Crucially for this study, this means that when I am discussing the work of community management, I am fundamentally seeking to understand how discourse is managed (including bringing those lurking members to participate in the discourse) because discourse is the connective tissue that holds community together and allows for it to grow and change.

Delanty’s definition of community as communication also integrates Rene Konig’s idea that a community’s most distinctive feature is a "certain consciousness of the mutual connections between people" (40). Notice that Konig’s definition explicitly suggests that communities’ connections are mutually held between people. This serves to differentiate community relationships from the relationship an individual might have with, for instance, iTunes. That relationship may be considered mutual, in that the consumer and the business both receive something from the relationship (goods for money). Further, the transaction does communicate information. But Konig’s definition requires that communication be between people, and Delanty requires communication to be about belonging for it to qualify as "community." The community manager, then, actually allows for this type of relationship, the community relationship, to be formed between the business and the consumer. The community can form a relationship with a person (the community manager) and that relationship can form around a wide variety of conversations that inevitably find their roots in belonging (this particular facet will be more fully examined in Chapter 2). Foreclosed by this definition, however, is the idea that community forms between organizations and people. Being a customer of Apple is not the same as being in a community with Apple.

In addition to limiting community to being between people, this definition rejects the oppositional distinction of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (though not the terms themselves) described by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887, but carried forward by sociological and anthropological thinkers well into the 1960s. *Gemeinschaft*, community, was conceived of as organic and real, in contrast to *gesellschaft*,
society, which is imaginary and mechanical (Delanty 37). In this conception, every community started by a computer game company would be *gesellschaft*, as they have been designed and managed. In contrast, a fan community that arises "organically," such as a community of people who bond over a particular game at a game store, would be seen as *gemeinschaft*. Delanty rejects this oppositional framework, however, arguing that *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* "are not fundamentally opposed but mutual forms of sociability" (30). Positioned as mutual forms of sociability, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* encompass a large range of community origins and structures that are sometimes in conflict but that can also support and even nurture one another. Because Delanty's focus on community as communication about belonging allows for this dynamic interplay, it allows communities to include both the real and the imaginary, the organic and the mechanical. Returning to the previous point, however, it's important to remember that this definition allows for the real and imaginary, organic and mechanical to be integrated into the community *in a constellation around people*. This is the point where I will depart most strongly from Delanty's position. In particular, I would argue that, in the case of computer games, it is not uncommon for communities to form around *personalities* that are not necessarily persons. This is, in fact, a fundamental feature of many fan communities. For instance, the character Sylvanas Windrunner from the Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* stands at the center of a community of artists that spans the world. A simple Google search for her name finds thousands of examples of fan-created art spread across thousands of different websites. Each of these creations stands as part of a discussion about the character of Sylvanas, ready to be commented on, critiqued, or lauded. In a case such as this, the personality of Sylvanas forms the core of the community with the people who wish to discuss her and to create works inspired by her situated as the constellation.

In the next section, I will review the popular literature on community management to see just how community managers are trying to navigate community spaces.
1.11 — Popular Community Management Literature

As already discussed, the idea of community management as a distinct category of work is relatively new. As such, the literature on the subject is relatively sparse (as opposed to a corporate discipline such as marketing), with very little of it emerging from the academy. Instead, the majority of the writing about community management has been written by professionals who are in the field themselves. Likely as a reflection of its provenance, the writing on community management is focused on the practical work of community management, instead of focusing on a larger theory of what community management is and why community management matters. That said, these texts do constitute what Thomas McLaughlin calls "vernacular theory," or theory that is produced outside of the academy (6). McLaughlin says that vernacular theories "do not make use of the language or analytical strategies of academic theory; they devise a language and strategy appropriate to their own concerns" (6). And while the term "vernacular theory" can create a foothold for what I see as a troubling value distinction between theory from inside and outside of the academy, it does at least help to establish that theory can arise from many sites⁴. In the following sections, I will offer a brief overview of a number of popular works about community management and in the process will examine theories about four major concerns shared by these authors: the formation and growth of online communities; who the community manager represents; how the community manager should spend his or her time; and the defense of community managers’ work.

1.12 — How Communities Come to Be and Grow

The following sections will focus on work from community management experts Amy Kim, Deborah Ng, Richard Millington, Anna Buss and Nancy Strauss, Tharon Howard, and Jono Bacon. To begin, however, it is important to note how their work on communities is influenced by the author’s personal work experience and definition of community. For instance, Jono Bacon, currently the community manager for Linux software developer Unbuntu, has published two editions of his book The
Art of Community. In this book, Bacon outlines a vision of communities that form around need. In his book, Bacon often uses the example of a team of volunteer software coders working on an audio editing program for Unbuntu, a function the operating system did not initially have. This emergence of community from need shapes Bacon's vision of how communities evolve, especially in that he sees the life cycle of the community as having a distinct end when the need is satisfied. Bacon views the community life cycle as one of need identification, team formation, need satisfaction, and community dissolution. Those community members might go on to form a new community around a newly identified need or they may never interact again.

Bacon's work is unique in this vision of the community life cycle. Other authors write from the perspective of brand managers, not as project managers such as Bacon. That leads these other authors to assume that their communities will not organically draw members to them due to a need. Instead, community managers themselves must figure out how to draw together community members, how to keep them in the community, and how to use those community members to benefit their brand. This generally involves directly reaching out to members, selling the idea of the community to them, and making sure the community offers what Tharon Howard in Design to Thrive calls "remuneration," meaning that the community offers positive return on the community member’s investment. This positions community members and the organization on opposite sides of a transactional relationship, with each side investing in the other in hope of a return.

This transactional relationship defines the work of the other authors being discussed here. For instance, in her book Community Management for Dummies, Deborah Ng spends five separate chapters focusing solely on attracting, keeping, and utilizing community members for the growth and promotion of a brand. Defining a community "as a group of people interacting, sharing and working toward a common goal," Ng’s work offers a vision of the community and its members as a maturing organism, with its needs and features changing over time (9). Similarly, Amy Kim, in Community Building on the
Web, devotes the entirety of her 350 page book on how to draw community members into a positive transactional relationship with the brand. Because of her wide range of clients and projects as a community manager, Kim's definition of community lacks specific features, saying only that communities arise from a "web of relationships" that emerge "for different reasons" (x, 2). Buss and Strauss share a similarly vague definition in Online Communities Handbook, defining an online community as "a group of people who regularly interact with each other on a website" (4). They offer specific features of online communities as well: online communities offer common activities, online identities, profiles and/or profile pages, and ways for members to communicate one-on-one (9).

Kim, however, offers more specificity when she attends to the way communities develop. In her fourth chapter, Kim describes what she calls "the membership life cycle" (118). This cycle is defined by the movement of the member from the outside of the community, visitor, to the inside, a member, and finally to positions of influence, a community elder. This process requires that the community manager constantly engage in dialogue with the member, guiding them through the various stages of the membership life cycle. Each stage of that cycle represents a different stage of the transaction, with the amount of investment from the two sides tilting more heavily from the organization to the member as time goes on. Again, Buss and Strauss mirror Kim, with members needing to be recruited, encouraged to participate, and, hopefully, converted into sources of content and support for other members.

In Design to Thrive, however, Tharon Howard argues against Buss and Strauss' definition specifically, saying it is overly limiting with its focus on websites and that it fails to distinguish between social networks and online communities. Drawing from the work of social network scholar danah boyd, Haron argues that communities have two specific features. First, a community is defined by the positioning of the individual. In a social network, Howard argues, the individual's relationship to other individuals is the center of the network. An example would be the way that Facebook offers suggestions for new Facebook friends based on who the user is friends with already. Conversely, the relationship
between individuals in a community is secondary to the individuals’ relationship to "a core set of interests, values, and communication practices" (15). While this definition does not totally discount the role of individual relationships in the community, it does diminish their importance. The second feature of Howard's definition is the strength of connections between members. In a social network, Howard argues, my connection to another person (let's call her Jamie) has little predictive power about the sorts of relationships I might have with other users connected to Jamie. I may not know them at all, we may have no shared interests, and we may not even speak the same language. In a community, in contrast, our presence in the same online space immediately indicates at least some shared interests, whether or not I know the other members socially or professionally (16). Howard's definition of community then, situates discourse and ideology at the center of a community. His vision of how those communities develop emerges from this assumption, with his work spending little time on the "recruitment" phase that is so heavily discussed in Kim's, Buss and Strauss', Ng's, and Millington's work. For Howard, members will come as long as they are aware the community exists and the community manager's focus is thus on keeping and developing those members.

**1.13 — Who The Community Manager Represents**

A major challenge for any community manager is that they "will become . . . the human face of your brand" for community members (Buss and Straus 100). This positions the community manager as the primary interface between the fan community and the corporate structure, or as Deborah Ng puts it, "A community manager advocates for both the member and the brand, while ensuring that discussions are positive and productive" (17). Ng, however, argues, “Although the community manager is, indeed, an advocate for her community, her real loyalty is toward her place of employment” (22). Ng's book is unique in the literature in that its focus is largely on brand advocacy, with her communications with the community being focused on being a "mouthpiece for the organization" (20). Ng also recognizes, however, that the community manager’s job also requires that the management of the organization
know as much as possible about the needs of the community. That particular job, however, is not as deeply explored in Ng's work. Instead, the focus is on how "community managers do have to sell and do have to pitch to get members to react without looking like they're selling at all" (59).

This tension is explored in an alternate form in Jono Bacon's *The Art of Community*. Bacon's book, in both the 1st and 2nd edition, is primarily focused on communities that work as a unit, often in a volunteer capacity. He offers advice on how to draft goals for the community, how to form teams, and how to track and review data about the community's project. Bacon's experience and expertise in community management and the way he discusses the work is shaped by his experience working in the Open Source community (reflected in his Community Management position with Unbuntu), where volunteers have specific goals (e.g., developing a new audio program for Linux) and projects that will eventually end when the project is complete. This presents a unique perspective on the work of community management as Bacon's community's goals often are the goals of the organization because no organization exists outside of the community. As such, his approach to the work of community management is often less concerned with conflicts between community and another organization and instead focuses on conflicts with individual community contributors, such as a community member who chronically complains (260). In effect, Bacon's work positions the community manager as representing the community because there is no one else to represent.

*Amy Kim's Community Building on the Web* represents a compromise position between Ng and Bacon when she says "It's crucial to integrate the ideas, desire and opinions of your members into your site as it grows" but observes that those ideas and desires must operate synergistically with the needs of the owners, a set of goals that Kim simply refers to as "purpose" (11, 20). Kim's book, in particular amongst the literature on community management, is aware of this tension between the demands of the community and the demands of the organization. But she rejects the urge to simply cave to one side or the other in an attempt to relieve this tension. Instead, she recommends that the tension instead be
articulated early. Kim recommends that before a community is even established, a community design
team determine the needs of members, the needs of company owners, and the goals for the
community. When there is conflict between member and owner needs, Kim argues that the members’
needs cannot always be sacrificed to the needs of the company owners. At the same time, she
recognizes that community managers will face pressure from within the organization to accede to the
owner’s demands. Kim recommends that these tensions actually be codified through separate internal
and external mission statements (20). The internal mission statement, she argues, allows employees to
stay focused on the goals and values of the organization, providing a clear picture of what success will
look like. The external mission statement, meanwhile, provides community members with a clear
understanding of what "the community is all about and who the intended audience is" (20). By first
building a discursive structure for the organization through an internal mission statement and then
sharing an audience friendly version of that statement with the community, this process establishes "a
mediatory ground that makes their communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary
for their interchange of blows" (Burke 25).

Richard Millington's book *Buzzing Communities* (2012) is particularly explicit about this
internal/external tension as a form of conflict. He is also emphatic about the need for community
managers to prepare themselves with data to take part in this struggle. He says, "Without data, you’re
not a professional" and that without that professional standing, the community manager lacks the
ability to advocate internally within the organization and to manage the user experience of community
members externally (xiv; 17). Millington's concern with the community manager as a professional is
rooted in a concern that I will address more fully later in this chapter, namely that community managers’
positions situated between the organization and the community can leave them particularly vulnerable
if they are not prepared to defend themselves and their work. So while Ng positions the community
manager as primarily a representative of the organization, Bacon as the representative and organizer of
the community, and Kim as obligated to hold on to the needs of both, Millington proposes that community managers must first be ready to represent themselves to both the community and to their employer.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I have collected data from community managers in the computer game industry in order to supplement my review of the literature on community management. Review of this survey data largely supports the positions of the authors reviewed thus far. For instance, respondents were asked how they would describe their work to a stranger, as well as how they would describe their work to both the organization that employs them and their communities. There were ten responses to the first question, with six describing themselves as either a "bridge," "a link," or "an interface" between the community and the organization. Other descriptions include, "Like HR but then for people outside the company" or "I am the babysitter of a huge online kindergarten" (Zimmerman). When describing their work to their organization, nine of the ten described themselves as a link between community and organization. Only one said he was, "The Advocate of players in the company." Foreshadowing the discussion I will be picking up later in this chapter about the vulnerability of community managers, one respondent said, "I am Janus, two-faced god. I represent company to the community, and the community to the company. As such, I get slapped twice as much" (Zimmerman). Considering how many audiences both the authors and the survey respondents say they must satisfy, a discussion of how to satisfy those audiences is in order.

1.14 — Managing your Time as Community Manager

The literature on community management spends an enormous amount of time discussing what it is, exactly, that a community manager should be doing with her day. This desire to codify the work of community management is a running theme in the literature, and the lack of codification seems to be a real concern for many of the authors in question. Millington is particularly disdainful of this rather haphazard, "figure out what works" approach to community management, noting that community
managers are too "reactive, too ad hoc, and too lacking in long-term strategy" (xi). The goal of his book, then, is to "transform your approach to community management and to convert good community managers into professionals" (xii). The methods of professionalization offered in the texts discussed below falls largely into two categories: categorization of duties and defense of the community manager’s work to the organization. This section will deal specifically with the various categories these authors have established.

The establishment of categories of work is often framed as a clarifying one for the reader, as a sort of corrective for the folkloric approach to community management that has (supposedly) driven the readers behavior previously. This particular sentiment is best expressed by Jono Bacon when he says, “Much of the art of community is subtle, undocumented, and unwritten, and much of my own approach was largely the product of feeling my way around in the dark and learning from what I found” (21). Bacon's remedy for this state of affairs is to offer the reader a chronologically ordered road map of activities, starting with early planning meetings to set up rules and goals, followed by the creation of specific teams within the community to establish tasks, and into the maintenance and eventual decline of the community as the project nears completion. As before, Bacon’s advice emerges from his position as a software developer who guides communities with discreet goals and projects. The approaches of the other authors covered in this study, however, focus on the growth and maintenance stages of community management, often leaving the question of community death out of the discussion entirely.

The first three chapters of Amy Kim's *Community Building on the Web*, for instance, focus on creation and growth strategies. It is only in chapter four, however, that Kim acknowledges a "membership life cycle" and begins laying out prescriptions for the day-to-day work of a community manager with an established community. Her recommendations, echoed by Tharon Howard in his own book *Design to Thrive*, revolve around daily communication with members, tips on how to start conversations, how to plan events, and how and when to moderate comments. For both Kim and
Howard, the focus of the community manager’s work is on the creation and maintenance of connections between community members. Both authors also share a focus on rhetorical awareness, though only Howard actually calls refers to it as such (*A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities* 86). Kim, for instance, recommends that community managers spend time every day establishing what the needs of the community are, even invoking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to help organize and analyze the information gathered (8). She also recommends that community managers ensure that community forums or other social media applications provide information about each member so as to better establish a context for trust between members and between the members and the community manager (84). Kim's tasks often focus on the structural challenges of the community management such as the layout of websites or registration pages or the type and display of information in a user's profile. While Kim and Howard both offer specific suggestions on what work should be done by a community manager, no other author offers as much specific direction as Deborah Ng in *Community Management for Dummies*. Early in the text, she offers the following list of the community manager’s duties: “As a community manager, you provide customer support, respond to question and inquiries, and monitor the web to see what is being said about the business you work for. You act as spokesperson and ambassador for your company” (20). In addition to this list of general duties, however, Ng also advises the reader about how many Facebook posts to create each day (at least one, no more than three), how to set-up Google alerts, and even how to use the search function on Twitter (13, 227, 229). This focus on specifics is reflective of Ng’s approach to her book in particular, and of the *Dummies* line of books in general, which she establishes on the first page as being a "practical guide" that should be used as a reference by community managers (1). Part of that reference includes her "Ten Essential Community Manager Tasks": Handling community correspondence, planning events, creating content, troubleshooting, writing and editing, moderating and mediating, providing customer service, serving as a liaison (between the community and the organization), social networking, and marketing (280).
Similar recommendations to Ngs are found in Anna Buss and Nancy Strauss’ *Online Communities Handbook*. They specifically state that the community manager’s job is to respond to member questions and feedback, interface between members and the organization, facilitate community activity, censor abusive content, and police the website (115). In addition, however, Buss and Strauss make specific suggestions about how community managers track their work, going so far as to suggest how an e-mail tracking system should be configured in order to help the community manager establish metrics for how much and what work they have done on a day-to-day basis. Buss and Strauss’ concern with these metrics reveals the next area of interest shared by the literature on community management: defending the value of the community manager’s work to the organization.

1.15 — Defending Community Managements Value

The question of what value the community manager brings to the organizations rests on whether the community manager's work is well understood by the organization. Responses to the aforementioned survey of community managers in the computer game industry are mixed on that particular issue. Ten respondents answered the question, "Do you feel like your work is well understood by others in your organization?" (Zimmerman). Out of those ten, six said that their work was only partially understood, with two respondents saying that while the organization understood their basic duties, the scope of their work was poorly understood. Three respondents said their work was well understood, and one said she was not sure. While the prevailing opinion among respondents was that their work was only partially understood, the sample itself is small and the three respondents who responded that their work was well understood said so with little ambiguity, saying to the question, "Yes, I do," "Within the organisation it is entirely clear, what the community manager's roles are," and, "Most of the times it is" (Zimmerman). In contrast to these results, the authors of popular community literature base their defense of community management largely on where they imagine the majority of
that work takes place and, as discussed above, whether the community manager is identified as part of
the community or part of the organization.

Kim, Ng, Buss and Strauss, and Howard, for instance, share a common assumption that the work
will largely take place within the community space. That might mean answering questions on the
forums, managing social media accounts, setting up events, or moderating comments. Kim, Ng, and
Howard also assume that the community manager will be onboard with the organization from the start
and that, when they join the organization, the community manager will play a major role in the design
and evolution of the community. Richard Millington shares that assumption in *Buzzing Communities*. But
in contrast to these authors he argues that the community manager should be spending more time
outside of the community, specifically gathering data about the community. Millington defines these
contrasting styles of work as micro and macro work, with micro work dealing with issues such as
moderation and macro work dealing with larger strategic issues, such as campaigns for a new product or
feature (24). Millington's argument is based on his own experience as a community manager, specifically
a community manager who was fired even as he thought he was doing a good job. Millington argues
that he was fired because his work was solely reactive, and thus, unable to be defended as part of the
company's overall picture of success. Specifically, the amount of reactive work that he was doing meant
that he was unprepared to defend his work to others in the organization who had come to see him as a
sort of community janitor, good at cleaning up messes but not an essential part of the company's
strategy (p. xi). Millington argues that many community managers are in this same position, and as
such, they have made themselves vulnerable to lay-offs and firings, and to the continued lack of
professionalization in the community management profession.

His book attempts to address this concern by laying out a data gathering system for community
managers. Millington's focus on data includes specific goals on content creation for different stages of
the community's lifecycle. For example, Millington argues that a community manager's first goal is to get
the community to "critical mass," a state where more than 50% of the content comes from members instead of from the community manager (25). Millington's data points are less important for their specificity, however, than the context in which they are deployed. Namely, Millington repeatedly argues that part of the community manager’s job is to educate the organization about the community and the life cycle discussed above and then to present data in that educated context, saying, “If organizations don’t acknowledge the community life-cycle, they have no way of establishing realistic expectations for their community strategy” (24). When those expectations have been clearly set out, the community manager can prove she has met them through data, thus protecting the community manager’s job. Further, Millington’s approach works to constantly reestablish the community manager as part of the organization, particularly as a member of the organization who can employ a discourse of professionalism, strategy, and "return on investment" that can be understood and appreciated by company owners (22).

While other authors don’t share Millington's focus on data as the "magic bullet" for community management woes, a concern with data does still occasionally arise. Deborah Ng, for instance, argues that the community manager must rely on data to defend her work, but she also cautions that data must be contextualized for "the muckety-muck in the big offices" so that the proper message is communicated. She argues, for instance, that the community manager should set community growth goals in the context of already present customer relationships and encounters. Much like Millington, Ng worries that community managers, especially new community managers, expect "a super hero cape to come with [their] employee manual" and that in their attempt to prove themselves by managing every minor crisis, they will leave themselves vulnerable due to a lack of overall strategy. The difference between her position and Millington's, however, is that Ng, despite her statement about contextualizing data for company higher-ups, only provides the reader with details about how to use data to work within the community. For instance, she spends a chapter on how to use data to assess the health of the
community, but no time is spent in that chapter on how to then present that data to the "muckety-mucks." This chapter has thus positioned the community manager as community facing, not organization facing, leaving readers to their own devices when it comes time to defend their work to the organization.

Other authors of the literature on community management offer even less advice on defending the community manager’s role. Buss and Strauss, for instance, spend an entire chapter on the value of an online community to a company, arguing that a wide range of income-generating and cost-saving benefits emerge from the community (20). Their discussion of the person who will actually run that community, however, encompasses fewer than ten pages in their entire book. Further, the book assumes that the reader is not a community manager himself or herself, but instead the person who will manage that community manager. As such, the community manager is discussed as a resource in the community, not as an architect of the strategy for building the community (132). Jono Bacon’s work takes the opposite position, meanwhile, treating the community manager as a sort of project leader whose work is self-evidently valuable because the project is progressing. In both cases, the advice given assumes that managing the community well will lead directly to evidence of the community manager’s value to the organization. The question of how community managers show that their work actually causes improvements, however, is left largely unaddressed.

In each case, these authors’ approaches struggle to deal with the problem of representation. Specifically, who the community manager represents influences who they must defend themselves to. What emerges from the reading of these texts, however, is that the community manager must be prepared to defend herself to everyone involved, constantly establishing and re-establishing expectations for both the community and the organization. The method by which they do so is often left unclear and, sometimes, confused by the often conflicting demands of the two groups. Even Millington's organization-facing, data-driven thesis with its call to ignore small conflicts in the community spends an
entire chapter on how to gain influence with individual community members. This tension reveals fundamental questions about community management, why are online communities managed at all? What of value is being produced by community managers? While each of these authors presented arguments for the value of their work, I believe that their arguments largely ignored the proverbial elephant in the room, namely, that online community management ultimately aims to produce subjects with particular features and behaviors through the careful management of community discourses, that management taking place through the strategic deployment of rhetorical strategies across a range of venues and topoi. So while this study will focus on community management and its role in the computer game industry, I believe its findings can be usefully (if tentatively) expanded into other industries that employ community management professionals.

1.16 — Computer Game Complex, Computer Game Industry, and Development – Examining Definitions

This section deals with defining the computer game industry. I have already employed Ken McAllister’s term "the computer game complex" in this chapter. McAllister defines the computer game complex as "[t]he totality of the computer game industry, including games, gamers, developers, marketers, parents and guardians of gamers, manufacturers of game-related paraphernalia, and so forth" (199). McAllister’s definition of the complex covers an enormous amount of social and economic ground, rolling the computer game player who buys the game into the computer game industry alongside the organizations and individuals who produce the game through their labor. McAllister’s definition highlights that the lines between production and consumption in the computer game industry (and, arguably, in many industries) is often very vague. At the same time, being part of the player community or being a part of the development organization represents a different social position, with all the attendant issues that different subject positions entails. Because of this, I would complement McAllister’s definition with a definition the computer game industry offered by the Entertainment
Software Association, a non-profit organization "dedicated to serving the business and public affairs needs of companies publishing interactive games for video game consoles, handheld devices, personal computers, and the internet" (12). This definition of the industry focuses on the developers and publishers of computer games, meaning only those developers, marketers, and manufacturers of computer-game-related paraphernalia from McAllister's definition are included in the industry. The other two groups, players and virtual agents, are obviously still major influences in the computer game complex, but they are clients of the industry in this definition, not part of the industry itself. My position in this study attempts to split the difference between these positions. McAllister is right to include players, players' families and guardians, et al., in his definition of the computer game industry. The industry, after all, cannot exist without them. That said, the Entertainment Software Association's definition reveals that the industry itself does not always include these additional groups, highlighting the difference in subject positions between developers and players. My analysis in this dissertation will not attempt to reconcile this particular tension between these definitions. Indeed, that tension is an important reason that community management in the computer game industry exists at all, as community managers help actors across subject positions work together.

Also in need of definition is what is meant by the term "development" itself. Game designer and author Chris Crawford in *The Art of Computer Game Design* outlines a game design sequence that starts with choosing a goal and topic, runs through research, various structure and design phases, programming, play testing, and ending with a post-mortem phase where the developer considers the public response to the game. Game development has a similar structure in computer game development guides published in the 2000s (Novak, Rollings and Adams, Dille and Platten), though these later development guides offer a more in-depth discussion of the post-release period than Crawford's book. That difference can likely be ascribed mostly to the shift towards internet connected and co-operative play that has developed since Crawford's book was published in 1984. In each case, the idea of
community building and management is not included as part of the development process. Survey responses from community managers collected for this project show more variance than the literature. Out of the ten complete surveys, all ten said community managers should have some role to play in the development process. For instance, one response said, "CoMa [Community Managers] should be direct link between community and game developers. Be able to filter good ideas from bad ones." The responses seem to indicate, however, that community managers may still struggle to be a part of the development process, with three of the responses directly mentioning that community managers often struggle to be included from the beginning of the project, a major tenet of community management as discussed in the popular literature reviewed. The most representative response stated that, "Ideally, they [community managers] would be considered before a feature of the game is put into planning, but my experience taught me that cm usually comes afterwards." One respondent noted that the level of participation allowed to the community manager was a reflection of "how open minded" a company is.

This brings me to one of the major exigencies for this study. The computer game development process is constantly changing. The respondent with the longest history in community management, including community management outside of the computer game industry, started in the field in the year 2000. Since then, the computer game industry has undergone tectonic shifts, with mobile, free-to-play, and casual gaming becoming increasingly popular, with so-called "nerd" culture becoming mainstream, and with generations who grew up on computer games now coming into political and economic power. The respondents to my study each saw community management as having a role to play, or an increasing role to play, in the development process. But what role this will be is still largely in question, and computer game developers are still in the process of negotiating that role. This study, in addition to making an argument about how community management produces subjects, helps to illuminate how community managers are negotiating this ever-changing role. It focuses particularly, of course, on the way that community managers employ rhetorical strategies to carry out their work,
highlighting the role of communication in both their individual work and in the on-going process of computer game development.

1.17 — Moving Pieces: A Rhetorical Approach to Community Management

As mentioned above, this study is examining two interlinked issues: (1) how community management works to produce particular types of community members, and (2) what role community managers and those communities play (and could play under other circumstances) in the computer game development process. I theorize that community managers’ work around issues of authority, history, membership, work, and play, is, in fact, an integral part of the computer game development process. As such, the following chapters will see me testing this theory by examining how community management practices influence the behaviors of player communities, and then how those behaviors impact development organizations, for both good and ill. These areas of examination are not, however, distinct from one another. A community manager’s attempt to establish authority in her community, for instance, may conflict with her attempts to encourage members to self-govern. A community manager’s work always, I argue, exists in this position of tension, requiring community managers to carefully deploy a wide variety of rhetorical strategies, a skill which requires impressive rhetorical discernment on the part of community managers.

This position of tension is, I argue, the defining characteristic of community management work. As detailed above, the community manager constantly finds herself suspended between the development organization and the community, all of which have their own cooperating and conflicting motivations. Here, Donna Haraway’s work is again valuable. In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway outlines the mythology of the cyborg as an always partial and contingent figure that rejects the imagined mythology of the Edenic garden. The cyborg’s partialness, the contradiction and complication of its boundary blurring form, is not, however, seeking resolution. Instead, the cyborg instantiates the value of “a partial explanation,” and the notion that “We do not need a totality to work well” (299, 310). The
tensions between parts of the cyborg is constitutive, and its resolution would represent a reification of identity that is antithetical to the cyborg metaphor. Haraway’s project in “A Cyborg Manifesto” is aimed at addressing the problematics of “production of a universalizing, totalizing theory,” and “taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology” (316). But her explication of the cyborg metaphor provides a useful framing of both this study and the work of community management by advocating for the value of the partial, the contingent, and the unresolved. The purpose of community management cannot be to resolve all tensions between the development organization and the player community, nor can the community manager resolve the tensions of her positionality as part of the development organization and part of the community. Instead, each moment of interaction between these various actors is situated in its present moment, and always contingent on the circumstances of that moment. As such, any resolutions of particular tensions between and among actors are temporary and partial. The challenge for all involved (including me as the writer of this project) is to remember that lack of permanent resolution is, to borrow a phrase, a feature and not a bug of community management.

The following chapters of this project will look more closely at different rhetorical strategies employed by community managers in their work with computer game fan communities. In Chapter 2, I will be examining the way that community managers navigate questions of authority and justice. I will employ discourse analysis (primarily drawn from the work of James Gee) to offer an analysis of open conflict between players and community managers. In addition, I offer an extended reading of computer game patch notes, as well as message board and Twitter postings, from community managers and fans in order to show how metonymy is employed by both fans and community managers in an attempt to control both the direction of the community and the computer game itself. In chapter 3, I examine the way that community managers deal with questions of memory, history, nostalgia, and memorial in their communities. I will be drawing particularly from the work of David Lowenthal, Maurice Halbwach, and
Marcos Natali to examine the ways that community managers encourage community members to produce memories, histories, and to experience nostalgia. Chapter 4 will focus on the way that community managers employ what I call “structures of membership,” in combination with Amy Kim’s community member life cycle, to encourage community members to govern themselves. Finally, chapter 5 will examine the increasingly vague distinctions between work and play and how community management actually serves to blur that line even further.
Chapter 2 – Ban Hammer: Discursive Conflict and Discourse about Conflict in Computer Game Community Management

2.1 — Introduction

This chapter will take as its point of departure a statement from Daniel Cook, Chief Creative Officer of Spryfox.com and game designer of Lostgarden.com, who says, “Governance is a system of rules that enables groups to do more work together” but also that “[n]orms are violently-negotiated social contracts” (Alexander). As established in Chapter 1, community managers deploy rhetorical strategies to manage community discourses in order to produce particular types of subjects. One facet of this process is the system of governance Daniel Cook speaks of. Communities can only survive and evolve if standards of behavior—governance—create opportunities “to do more work together.” Governance requires community managers to establish, interpret, and enforce written codes of conduct, as well as unspoken standards of community behavior. But the very act of enforcement introduces conflict into the community, and with it, the possibility of community harm or dissolution.

The struggle of the community manager is to balance the need for rules enforcement with the conflict that inevitably emerges from such enforcement. Like the community manager herself, the community must exist between extremes, somewhere between totally controlled and totally free.

This chapter will examine that tension by analyzing rhetorics of conflict, justice, authority, and power that emerge as community managers attempt to establish and enforce community standards. I will approach these issues from two different directions, loosely characterized as open conflict and discursive struggle. I begin this chapter with a more in-depth discussion on discourse analysis before moving on to discussions about the role of conflict and customer service in community management. I then turn to the first form of conflict to be examined: Open conflict. Open conflict refers to a sort of public conflict between community managers and (at least one) member of the community, as opposed to conflict that might occur privately, such as by one-to-one (or even one-to-several) e-mail. Such
conflicts represent a rupture in the fabric of the community, often involving a violation of established community standards. As such, they also require action to repair that rupture, i.e. the violator must face justice. This leads to my discussion of the theories of justice that inform this chapter, before turning to a specific example of open conflict by examining the case of Xbox Live moderator "The Pro." This discussion will be supplemented by an examination of player codes of conduct and data collected from community management literature and survey data collected from community managers in the computer game industry.

The second half of this chapter will focus on an often less pyrotechnic form of conflict, but one that exerts enormous influence over how computer game communities are constituted and shaped. This form of conflict involves conflict over who controls the community discourse on a wide variety of game related topics. My analysis in this section examines the role of metonymy in this struggle for control over community discourse, and even possibly the path of development itself. In these sections, I analyze forum posts from the MMORPG Rift, developed by Trion Worlds. I also explore how metonymy is used to create meaning-dense discursive nodes, whose “rhetorical gravity” bends the opinions and behaviors of players and developers alike. Unlike the first half of this chapter, however, the conflicts in this section do not represent ruptures in the community, but instead are constitutive of the community. As such, the resolution of these conflicts will not rely on the rendering of justice to a violator. Indeed, these conflicts often have no resolution at all, as they are necessary for the continued survival of the community. As such, this section focuses on how community managers and players employ this rhetorical strategy in an attempt to assert power over important discursive domains both in and around the game, with a particular focus on how this interaction can shape the development process, and how that conflict serves to sustain and grow the community.

From both discursive directions, this chapter highlights the important role that conflict and the management of conflict plays in a process of boundary making (and breaking) that helps constitute,
preserve, and evolve computer game fan communities. In doing so, I show how community managers attempt to “thread the needle,” exerting power over the community when necessary but still allowing community members to express themselves, an activity essential to the ongoing discourse about belonging that forms a cornerstone of my conception of community.

2.2 — Researcher Positionality

As stated in Chapter 1, I want to try and account for my own positionality as I move from topic to topic in this project. To do so, I want to offer a bit of background on my relationship to gaming communities and conflict. Namely, I am not a fan of conflict. I have, in fact, quit playing a computer game recently because I found the community so full of unregulated conflict that I felt it had become harassment. As I felt the development organization could not (or more precisely, would not) manage community conflict, I quit playing. This aversion of open conflict has also led me to never play a game like Halo with voice communication on, as well as making me a largely silent member of my former Everquest II guild’s voice chat during raids. Simply put, I do not want to get into any sort of altercation in the game world, particularly a fight about how I or anyone else plays.

I am much more willing, however, to engage in long, thoroughly researched disagreements on community forums. This particular type of conflict is one I’ve been trained for as an academic, but it also represents the type of fan I’ve always been, i.e. the type of fan who likes research. Doing research on the games I love includes watching and commenting on YouTube videos (almost always positively, even when I disagree with the author’s point), commenting on articles or forum posts (again, almost always positively), or even just sharing a particularly interesting discussion on social media to gather feedback from other players. I am always willing to do my own testing, setting up in-game experiments to determine how or why a particular approach works.

As will be detailed in this chapter, these two different types of conflict are potent creative forces in computer game communities. But in my own life as a computer game player, I am much happier to
have a long, technical discussion than I am to yell. That tendency may, in fact, play some role in why I have chosen the particular examples I have for this chapter. In particular, the more explosive conflict comes from a community of which I am not now nor have I ever been a part of. The other, quieter conflict, meanwhile, comes from a game that I played for nearly a year, including as a Beta tester. In neither case do I see my personal history (or lack thereof) as undermining the analysis that follows. Instead, I offer this perspective on my relationship to the study so that, as mentioned before, I speak from somewhere, and that my interpretation of the events in question emerges from that positionality.

2.3 — Chapter Definitions and Method – Discourse

As noted in my discussion of methods in chapter 1, I will be relying on James Gee's process of discourse analysis, defined as “the study of language-in-use,” by engaging in a close reading of forum posts, codes of conduct, and statements to the gaming press (8). In this chapter, however, I want to spend a few moments more fully exploring Gee’s theory of discourse analysis in close proximity to my actual enactment of it. Doing so should make my use of discourse analysis more easily understood, as well as providing a useful frame for the work of the chapter.

Discourse is a term with a variety of meanings, all of which carry their own theoretical and practical implications. Gee himself divides discourse into two types: little "d" discourse and big "D" Discourse. Little "d" discourse refers to "any instance of language-in-use or any stretch of spoken or written language" (205). Examples of little "d" discourse would include texts such as the forum posts and codes of conduct I have referenced above. Gee's big "D" Discourse refers to "ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity" (201). For Gee, these discourses, further divided into primary and secondary Discourse depending on when/how the individual learns them, are how identities are both acted out and recognized by others who are a part of that Discourse. Gee also notes that individuals are often a part of several, sometimes contradictory,
Discourses (201). In this framework, little "d" discourse is only a part of big "D" Discourse, with Discourse encompassing a wide variety of artifacts and behaviors outside of the written or verbal limits of little "d" discourse.

Gee's discourse/Discourse and its focus on identity, however, can (but does not always) neglect the way that discourse interacts with issues of power and authority.¹ Those particular facets are addressed more fully by Michel Foucault. Foucault's definition of discourse is operationalized through the idea of the formation, a regularity "between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices...an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformation" (Archeology of Knowledge 38). These discursive formations serve to create worlds for individuals by structuring what counts as knowledge or truth as well as communicating information about those who use particular discourses. Most importantly, however, discourses in Foucault's definition function to either grant or deny individuals or groups power (Whisnant 5). For example, a doctor in Foucault's discourse is able to speak authoritatively about issues related to medicine or disease because of their association with the multiple discourses of medicine. Even if that particular doctor has said something wrong, his association with such discourses can serve to empower his speech, granting it an air of authority and truth. This chapter's artifacts fit Gee's notion of little "d" discourse well. But this chapter will also be explicitly concerned with the way that power is articulated to both individual little "d" discourse and big "D" Discourse. As such, I want to keep Foucault’s work on discourse in the back of my mind as I discuss discourse/Discourse in this chapter, particularly when referring to the way that discourses are used to exert power over individuals and groups. Gee’s definition of discourse/Discourse forms the core of my analytical framework, and I share Gee’s conviction that critical intervention is possible through discourse/Discourse. At the same time Foucault’s work on discourse provides a necessary counter-balance to Gee’s focus on the use of discourse by individuals. Discourse is not just a tool by which people take action in the world, but also a force that acts upon subjects, often without their conscious
knowledge or consent. The activities, practices, and ideologies they take part in can be a result of those discourses. That definition will focus and guide my use of Gee's discourse analysis method.

In Gee’s definition, discourse analysis allows for texts to be described as well as making it possible for the analyst to make critical interventions into the political and social realities instantiated by and embodied in discourse. Most importantly, Gee's discourse analysis method looks at language for, "What is the speaker trying to DO and not just what is the speaker trying to SAY?" (42). This, of course, also means that the analyzer can only provide an argument for what the speaker’s motivations and/or goals are. In some of the cases below, speakers actually explicitly outline some of their motivations and goals. But in many cases, the speaker’s goals and motivation may be more opaque. As such, discourse analysis relies heavily on the interpretation of discourse, with the analyzer looking to features of the discourse like word choice and syntax to support his interpretation. Again, however, Gee's discourse analysis is well-equipped for this task because of the attention it pays to the contexts in which communication arises, a feature of Gee’s analytical method that also makes discourse analysis particularly compatible with the study of rhetorical strategies.

Further, this attention to context makes Gee’s analytical method a particular good fit for the study of community management, a corporate discipline which relies heavily on careful analysis of and response to rhetorical situations. Employing rhetorical analysis in this project allows me to examine the ways in which rhetorical strategies are used to negotiate relationships of power between community managers, the organizations they work for, and the communities they manage. Grounded in Kenneth Burke’s notion of rhetoric (as discussed in Chapter 1), I situate these often agonistic discourses inside of a field of common ground, one founded in a shared body of knowledge about the game and out of a desire to belong, which is it itself rhetorical in Burke’s analysis (A Rhetoric of Motives 28). To begin with, however, I will briefly discuss the theory of conflict that informs these discussions.
2.4 — The Constitutive Power of Conflict

Much as I have stated my desire to maintain a suspensionist position about the work of community management itself, I will take a suspensionist position on conflict. I assume that conflict is both inevitable and, in fact, necessary, but I reject the notion that conflict is either intrinsically good or bad. Beyond simply disarticulating the notion of conflict from notions of good or bad, however, this position also attempts to dissolve the subject positions of “good guy” or “bad guy” in a conflict. Instead, it sees both positions as part of the ongoing discourse that produces communities, with perhaps clashing goals and motivations, but with both positions being fundamentally a part of the same process. As Derek Johnson writes, “ongoing struggles for discursive dominance constitute a fandom’s hegemonic struggle over interpretation and evaluation through which relationships among fan, text, and producer are continually articulated, disarticulated and rearticulated” (286). Johnson argues for conflict as a necessary part of the development of fan communities, in contrast to the work of second wave fan studies intellectuals like Henry Jenkins who, he argues, focused too heavily on the utopian aspects of fan communities. He argues further that this focus on positive discourses worked to disguise the productive role of antagonism in fan communities, specifically that antagonism silences particular voices in the community, allowing the development of accepted community positions on controversial issues. Johnson’s work does not argue that disruptive voices are permanently silenced, however. Instead, the cycle of speech and silence is “continually articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated” (286). That churn may or may not be visible to the viewers from the outside as it may be (1) contained in fan communities largely ignored by mass culture or (2) so specific and detailed as to be incomprehensible to anyone outside of the community. This conflict, and the subsequent disciplining of that conflict, serves to educate new members and to remind old members of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Further, the struggle itself allows for the formation of bonds between community members as they take sides against one another or the community manager. But these battles are constantly shifting
based on the current conditions, meaning that alliances and antagonisms shift as well, giving community members new opportunities to build history together. It is this conception of conflict and antagonism that forms the first part of this chapter’s analytical lens. That said, community management is a discourse embedded in the discourse of business. As such, I want to attend briefly to how that discourse treats the issue of customer conflict.

2.5 — Community Management’s Orientation toward Customers

Disagreement between producers and their consumers is so inevitable that it has spawned a library worth of clichés, the most famous being “The Customer is Always Right.” But the work of community managers in the computer game industry, due to their own liminal position between the organization and the community, defies many of these conventions, putting community management at odds with the literature on customer orientation and economic performance. Customer orientation is defined as “focus . . . on the needs of . . . customers, i.e. behave in a customer-oriented way” (Hennig-Thara 461). Hennig-Thara’s work on the subject also draws from studies of customer orientation by Narvel and Slater, and Jaworski and Kohli to substantiate the idea that customer orientation is economically advantageous for organizations in that it builds positive associations with the business. A further study by Bitner, et al., found that customer orientation of employees improves the customer’s perception of the service received. But in the case of community managers, “customer orientation” is poorly defined. Which customer, the players or the development organization? And what services? As discussed in chapter 1, the literature on community management is itself conflicted on the subject, meaning that community managers’ customer service standards may diverge sharply from other corporate disciplines.

That divergence makes community management in the computer game industry a particularly fascinating site for analysis as its practices present unique challenges. For instance, customer service for computer game community managers may include reports of bugs or glitches in the software itself,
reports on the (mis)behavior of other players, or feedback on features. But community managers also deal with issues outside of the game, managing the conduct of community members as they debate and discuss in forums, Twitter feeds, and community blogs. The resolution of such issues may require that a customer be removed from the community, an example of the silencing Derek Johnson refers to in his work, with customer satisfaction requiring the creation of a supremely unsatisfied customer. This implies that "customer orientation" is an inadequate analytical category for this discussion, at least in its focus on an individual customer's experience. Instead, community engagement and growth, the primary focus of Millington's *Buzzing Communities*, will function as my primary analytical category vis a vis discourses about authority and justice in community management. That focus forms the second lens for this chapter’s analysis, allowing me to set aside whether a community manager’s work makes customers happy and instead focusing on how her work (even when that work involves conflict) develops or does not develop her community. Together, these lenses focus the discussion thusly: conflict is an integral part of community formation, but conflict must be appropriately managed to the overall goal of engagement and health. The particular incidents I will examine in the following sections will be analyzed in the light of those assumptions.

2.6 — Bring Down the Hammer – Justice and Authority

At the heart of community management is the fundamental contradiction that community members must chose to be members of the community and to live up to its standards, while at the same time conflict with those rules and with other members is necessary to both establish and evolve the community. As members come into conflict with those standards, the community manager must respond, establishing procedures and consequences for violations, the deployment of which sees the community manager meting out justice to rule breakers. It is important to note, however, that in the community manager’s task is to offer justice for transgressions against community members and standards. That is not the same thing as rendering justice for a crime. Crimes are juridical in nature, and
justice is rendered through juridical means (a trial, a sentence, reparations to victims and/or the State). Transgressions of community standards are generally not criminal in nature, but they do represent a disruption of the bonds that hold a community together. As such, violations must be addressed and remedied to maintain the community. But justice in these cases does not and should not necessarily look like juridical justice. At the same time, justice is so closely tied to the juridical, any examination of definitions of justice will assuredly include mentions of crime. This being the case, I can only ask the reader to keep in mind that my discussion is focused on justice within communities that are not governed through legal statute, but by community guidelines and terms of service.

Having established these parameters, what exactly do I mean when I reference “justice” in this chapter? Callicles in the Gorgias assumes justice to be a convention created to oppress the strong, while Habermas argues that justice is established in postmetaphysical societies through dialogue (Plato 828, Habermas 9). In each case justice is supposed to arise from communication between community members, either through an explicit process of law making (Habermas’ ideal speech situation) or the establishment of community standards through repetition and reification of everyday practices. At the same time, however, procedures of justice (how justice is determined to have been served) seem to have some indefinable quality that, as David Williams notes, “have been chosen because they were believed to be the most conducive to abstractly conceived ideals of justice and the common good” (127). For instance, Williams examines Habermas’ “dialogic justice” theories and their assumption that people can make laws for themselves through dialogue (109). Habermas’ dialogic theory of justice assumes an “ideal speech situation” in which all concerned community members are able to participate in the dialogue without coercion or fear of retribution (373). In this theory of justice, the assumption is that more participation and more equal participation will contribute to the process of justice-making. Most importantly, Habermas’ theory of justice assumes that dialogue will make justice, and the process of justice making, better in some largely indefinable way. As we have seen in Chapter 1, community
management generally shares (perhaps not consciously) Habermas’ appreciation for dialogue as a way to establish, preserve, and evolve a community. But does the dialogue in that community, especially about justice making, truly occur in a venue free of coercion if the power relationship between various members and the community manager is asymmetrical? As we will see later in this chapter, the power relations between community managers and community members cast that particular aspect of dialogic justice into doubt, meaning that this particular theory of justice may offer limited utility in this analysis.

Because the mode of interaction between community managers and community members is not legal nor judicial, juridical notions of justice provide limited usefulness in this analysis. But other notions of justice function outside of the juridical sphere, such as theories of healing or restorative justice. Restorative justice, as defined by Tony Marshall, brings together victims and perpetrators, “to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future” (qtd. in Braitwaiithe 11). Restorative justice keeps the various stakeholders in any particular incident involved in the process of justice instead of giving the deployment of justice to the authority of a jury or judge. This collective approach to justice, however, is rarely enacted in computer game fan communities, particularly MMORPG communities where reports to Game Masters of violations often do not include interaction between the violators and the victims. Instead, community managers in computer game fan communities almost always put the deployment of justice in the hands of the community manager solely. As such, restorative justice also fails to adequately address the particularities of justice in community management.

Healing justice is generally seen as a subset of theories of restorative justice. Healing justice “is a different pattern of thinking which seeks to heal the injuries revealed by an act of crime” (Sawatsky 34). Theories of healing justice posit that crimes are a symptom of an injury in the perpetrator, both internally and in the perpetrator’s external circumstances. Justice, then, is about the healing of the wounds of victims and perpetrators alike. Healing justice is presented as an alternative to punitive
justice, a conception of justice that both Sawatsky and Braitwaithe argue equates the infliction of pain with justice. That equation of terms reduces justice to nothing more than the infliction of punishment, the infliction of another wound on the perpetrator. Healing justice argues that the infliction of such a wound on a member of the community only adds harm to the community, perpetrating a cycle of illness and woundedness. In the case of computer game fan communities, a wound could be said to be inflicted from conflicts that arise from the violations of unwritten community standards, while some others arise from violations of the legal agreements established by user agreements. Instead, healing justice argues that perpetrators must be engaged in dialogue that brings them to an understanding that their actions have incurred a debt to both their victims and to the community at large. The end goal of healing justice, then, is the reintegration of the perpetrator as a healthy member of the community, a theory of justice that fits well with the literature on community management.

2.7 — Authority to Mete out Justice

In the pursuit of justice for their communities, community managers must concern themselves with elements of the community that either (1) refuse to comply with community standards of behavior or (2) are uninformed about the community standards and inadvertently break the rules. This requires the community manager to take action, authorized by agreement between themselves and both individual players and the community-at-large. These agreements form one part of the assumptions about what justice looks like, as we will see below. The community manager’s authority to act comes from two primary sources, with many communities being governed by either one or both. The first source of authority is the user agreement. For instance, when users register for the forum community of the 2014 Bandai Namco release *Dark Souls II*, they click to indicate that they agree to “abide by the rules and policies detailed below” (Bandai Namco, “Registration”). The rules themselves are simple: posts are only the opinion of the author, not Bandai Namco; users agree not to post obscene or offensive material, and Bandai Namco reserves the right to remove any posted material for any reason (Bandai
Namco, “Registration”). But there are also other community standards presented in the Frequently Asked Questions section of the forums. For instance, in the section titled “Dealing With Troublesome Users,” Namco Bandai describes how to block certain users and how to report offensive behavior to the community managers (Bandai Namco, “BANDAI NAMCO Games Forums FAQ”). There is yet another set of regulations under a “Terms of Use,” that contains the following sprawling condition:

In addition to these Terms of Use, when using particular Services, you will be subject to any posted guidelines or rules applicable to such Services which may be posted from time to time. All such guidelines or rules are hereby incorporated by reference into these Terms of Use. Your continued use of the Services after the posting of changes to these terms will be deemed to constitute your acceptance of those changes.” (Bandai Namco, “Terms of Use)

In relation to the issues of this chapter, the most important clause in this Terms of Use is the following:

3.2 BANDAI NAMCO may also terminate your account(s) (and access to all related Content and Services) for violation of these Terms of Use, illegal or improper use of your account, or illegal or improper use of the Services, products, or BANDAI NAMCO’s Intellectual Property . . . . You acknowledge that BANDAI NAMCO is not required to provide you notice before suspending or terminating your account(s), or selectively removing, revoking, or garnishing Content associated with your account. If BANDAI NAMCO terminates your account, you may not participate in a BANDAI NAMCO Service again without BANDAI NAMCO’s express permission. BANDAI NAMCO reserves the right to refuse to keep accounts for, and provide BANDAI NAMCO Services to, any individual (Bandai Namco, “Terms of Use).

These multiple levels of regulation by the development organization establish avenues of action for the community manager across a range of venues. The first agreement discussed specifically covers the
forum community, while the second and third extend the community manager’s authority, as representative of Bandai Namco, across any and all platforms and services that Bandai Namco owns. This agreement, then, establishes the parameters of authority for the community manager, authority meaning that the community manager has the right to take action vis a vis the player’s presence in the community even if the community member doesn’t like or agree with that action. Employing that authority, however, is not without controversy and risk. In the next section, I will examine one such event, analyzing the various statements and actions of the participants to see how rhetorics of justice and authority are deployed by all sides of the argument.

2.8 — Open Warfare: iTzLuPo vs The Pro

This section will be focusing on the first kind of conflict noted above, open conflict. In particular, I will be examining an incident involving Xbox moderator “The Pro” and the player “iTzLuPo.” In this incident, we are seeing the community manager in his role as the “ban hammer” that gives this chapter (and this project) its name. As you will see, the community manager involved in this incident is acting as both a police officer (investigating an issue) and a judge (dispensing a sentence for the transgression). As will be detailed later in this section, however, the community manager could have taken on the role of mediator or even teacher. By choosing to take a more aggressive, authoritative position, the community manager in question actually makes it harder to discern both where the transgressions lies, and whether justice was truly done.

The inciting incident occurred at the end of an online match of Call of Duty 2: Modern Warfare. According to The Pro, the ban was the result of Terms of Use violations on the part of iTzLuPo. The player, however, contended that the ban was an example of a moderator who had gone mad with power and who issued bans to satisfy personal vendettas. As evidence, iTzLuPo posted a video of the incident to YouTube on February 21, 2010 (pwned209, “Xbox Live Mod ‘The Pro’ abuse’s power on Itz LuPo”). The video begins with iTzLuPo asking viewers to share the video and asking Microsoft to take
action against The Pro, calling him a “corrupt moderator.” The video also contains audio and video captured from the game play session, purportedly showing The Pro berating players, threatening them repeatedly with bans, and finally banning iTzLuPo from the Xbox Live service.

The story was picked up quickly by a number of computer game journalism sites, including Kotaku, Joystiq, and The Tech Game (Mitchell; Plunket; “Microsoft: The Pro Xbox Live Moderator ‘Followed Protocol’”). Notably, each story expressed skepticism about the iTzLuPo’s claims. Plunkett’s article on Kotaku is particularly skeptical, writing of iTzLuPo’s claim, “Right, that’s one side of the story” (Plunkett). The other side of the story emerged when then Director of Xbox Live Policy and Enforcement, Stephen Toulouse, responded to iTzLuPo’s video, stating, “The player behavior in question and subsequent interaction with the moderator violated the Xbox Live Terms of Use and Code of Conduct. The Xbox Live moderator followed protocol and, while he regrets his tone, the video was heavily edited to omit the inappropriate behavior and we fully support the moderator’s decision to take action against the offending players” (Mitchell). Another video was posted without editing, revealing that the banning was related to charges of “modding” the game, which gave iTzLuPo and another player named Pie an unfair advantage. It is at the end of a match that the player Pie unleashes a torrent of insults at The Pro. This additional footage was apparently edited out of iTzLuPo’s video sometime between time mark 3:06,110 and 3:06,011. Based on the evidence presented by both sides, the end result was iTzLuPo being banned from the Xbox Live service temporarily and The Pro receiving essentially nothing outside of a talking to about his tone.

Interestingly, commenters on both the video and the Kotaku articles referenced here are decidedly in favor of The Pro in their judgments of the situation. Comments such as, “[e]dited or not, the mod’s tone was a little out of control and I don’t blame him since he has to put up with assholes all day” are representative of the general response from commenters (Turkeyslam). Considering the amount of effort iTzLuPo put into gathering a crowd of supporters, he seems to have made little impact outside of
his own YouTube channel. That's particularly clear when the news stories about the incident are reviewed. For instance, a review of the incident on GiantBomb.com (a very popular "nerd" site), ends with, "Thank you The Pro and Xbox live moderators, we need you to keep an eye on this shit, the job you do is unappreciated and I wish there were more of you out there" (Sovietdancnbear). The incident was even immortalized on the popular website Urban Dictionary with The Pro being defined by users as, "A Moderator who made the right decision in dropping the banhammer while being taped by an angry person" ("The Pro").

As far as clashes between community managers and community members go, this particular incident is relatively minor. Accusations of power abuse are common and players behaving poorly are even more common. What this incident highlights, however, is how the interlinked issues of justice and authority in community management exist in the game, in the community that exists outside of that game, and in the social sphere of that community, all at the same time. iTzLuPo’s banning is notable primarily because it reverberated across each of these spheres. As such, the discourse it engendered about the community manager’s authority and whether justice was effectively served can actually help to illuminate the community's underlying assumptions about what justice in the community should look like. In order to examine these underlying assumptions, I now turn to the dialogue of the interaction more specifically.

2.9 — The Event in Question: iTzLuPo’s Banning

In this section, I will be examining the videos themselves, conducting a discourse analysis of the audio and visuals to examine the struggle over authority and justice within the moment of banning itself. As referenced above, iTzLuPo’s banning by The Pro in the actual moment is contested on both sides of the dispute. First, there is iTzLuPo’s recording of the ban, which is presented as the definitive account of the encounter and the banning. But there is also the version of events presented by Stephen Toulouse in his response to iTzLuPo. Both sides of the dispute enter into the discourse agreeing on only
one major point: iTzLuPo was banned by The Pro. The actual circumstances of that banning and whether that banning was just is contested by alternate sets of evidence.

To begin, I want to focus on iTzLuPo’s reaction to his banning. As mentioned above, iTzLuPo took to YouTube to post his initial reaction to his banning. The introduction of his video sets out a number of assumptions about his position vis a vis the community and the Microsoft organization. “The clip you’re about to see is The Pro, who bans everyone on COD [Call of Duty]: modern warfare 2 for literally anything you say. I sent him a message on a new account with a message saying “LOL” with an exclamation mark and he suspended that account immediately.” iTzLuPo establishes that he sees his violation as one of speech, not of in-game action. Further, he establishes that The Pro has acted against everyone, not just him. In doing so, iTzLuPo positions himself within the community, a member of the banned crowd, and The Pro outside of it. This rhetorical strategy undermines the both/and positionality of The Pro as a community manager, being both part of the community and the development organization, and instead sets him as outside and destructive of community bonds through account bans.

iTzLuPo, however, also asserts that he understands that the community itself is not able to exercise authority over The Pro. Instead, he appeals to Microsoft, saying “Microsoft, I hope you’re watching this video because I know it’s going to get spread around the internet pretty quickly. Um...You have a corrupt moderator on your team, he’s abusing his power.” iTzLuPo’s first sentence can actually be read as a threat of sorts. He understands this particular video will strike a chord with at least some members of the community, and that it may well become a viral hit. As such, he speaks directly to Microsoft, invoking the specter of “corruption.” iTzLuPo’s accusation of corruption is particularly interesting in that, in order to invoke the specter of corruption, he must first acknowledge that some authority over the players is valid. Again, iTzLuPo positions himself as part of the community in the sense that he does not reject all community standards. The conflict is thus characterized not as a conflict...
with community standards but with The Pro, a figure already rhetorically situated as a threat to the community. iTzLuPo’s next step is to try to establish some credibility for his claims, particularly noting that the recording was not scripted, and that he had not altered The Pro’s gamer tag (the online name used by players on the Xbox Live network). Here iTzLuPo employs what Gee calls the “situated meaning tool,” where readers ask “what specific meanings do listeners have to attribute to these words and phrases, given the context and how the context is construed” (152). In this context, iTzLuPo comes as the accuser of a person in authority, and as such, he must establish his ethos with the community. As this particular incident and the resulting incident occurred online in an era where modification of the video would be, to this particular audience, relatively simple, iTzLuPo must explicitly state that no modification has been made to the video. In doing so, he invites scrutiny of the tape, creating an impression that he has nothing to hide and, thus, bolstering his claim to trustworthiness in this conflict.

iTzLuPo’s response so far focuses on claims. One, iTzLuPo was the victim, one of many. Two, that The Pro misused otherwise valid authority in a way that harms Microsoft and, by extension, the community of Call of Duty players. Before moving into his presentation of evidence, iTzLuPo makes a direct call to action, asking viewers to “Please watch this, put it on your [YouTube] channel, everyone just spam this, please, I’m begging you.” That call to action is repeated again at the end of the video in text that reads “Corrupt Microsoft employees what a shame/join the fight against The Pro/and post this video on your channel/download will be in description.” As before, iTzLuPo’s rhetorical approach is to encourage identification, to borrow Kenneth Burke’s term, with his audience. He asks for direct help from them in the beginning to spread his message, making them a part of the communicative act to Microsoft. He then asks again at the end for viewers to “join the fight against The Pro.” In these two utterances, iTzLuPo again affirms a valid authority, that of Microsoft, and positions a community of players and viewers against an invalid authority, The Pro. iTzLuPo skillfully employs one of the central tenets of discourse: participants shape discourse and discourse shapes participants (Johnston 8). In fact,
iTzLuPo actually attempts to shape himself into the manager of the community through this discourse, organizing and deploying them to particular collective action, with The Pro being positioned as the violator of the community norms who must now be punished by the valid authority of the Microsoft.

The game play sections of the recording focus on providing evidence for iTzLuPo’s claims. The primary evidence provided was a recording of the event in question (explained in the above section). As proof of his claim that The Pro abused his authority, iTzLuPo includes sections where The Pro threatened permanent bans repeatedly, saying at one point to iTzLuPo, “I’ll ban every account you have and every console you’ve ever logged on to. Don’t play that game with me again, please.” The Pro also says, “LuPo, I don’t threaten, I ban, as you well know and if you’re stupid enough to do anything like you pulled that stunt there on [Justin TV?] again, I will permanently ban you.” iTzLuPo’s decision to include these particular moments in the recording were important in their relationship to the opening statement in the video, that The Pro abused his authority repeatedly. The Pro’s references to past encounters with iTzLuPo are framed in relationship to The Pro’s threat of permanent bannings and his “harsh tone.” That issue of tone was clearest when The Pro mutes a player for asking what iTzLuPo had done.

The validity of these evidentiary claims forms the basis for Microsoft’s response to claims of corruption. Their response relies heavily on establishing whether The Pro’s exercise of authority was, in fact, valid. To support his claim that it was, Stephen Toulouse mentions that he had seen the “heavily edited” footage. Such phrasing is an example of what Deborah Johnston calls a “contextualizing cue,” a metacommunicative feature of language that allows the speaker to establish that the statement in question should be read on multiple levels (204). In employing such a cue, Toulouse provides a counterpoint to iTzLuPo’s claims of corruption by calling into question The Pro’s own trustworthiness. This approach is particularly evident in that the footage is referred to as “heavily” edited, implying not just simple clipping but active manipulation on the information. A point, it should be noted, that was objectively true. For instance, that iTzLuPo was (ostensibly) banned for modding was omitted from his
video, with the focus instead being on the fact that The Pro was rude while enforcing community standards. That said, Toulouse does acknowledge that The Pro’s tone was problematic. According to Toulouse, The Pro didn’t just act mad, he seemed to have actually been mad. As such, his actions, while still justified in Microsoft’s judgment, looked questionable to the community because they appeared to be driven by emotion, not by a search for justice. In the end, Microsoft made the final judgment about whether The Pro’s actions were done in the service of enforcing community standards and norms. iTzLuPo’s individual bad experience with The Pro was thus seen as a regrettable, but acceptable, sacrifice to those norms.

2.10 — How to Handle a Troll: The Pro’s Behavior in Context

The issue of tone while enforcing community standards is a major concern for community managers, and survey data gathered from community managers points to why The Pro’s rhetorical approach may have caused so much uproar—the display of anger and the closure of discussion between The Pro and players. According the survey respondents and respondents on the Twitter feed TheCommunityManager (@TheCMgr), the order of operations when dealing with disruptive members should be, as Krysta Gahagen puts it, "Gentle reminders followed by swift action" (Gahagen). Both the reminder and the swift action represent strategies of engagement with the disruptive player, first engaging in dialogue to attempt to find the root of the problem (a strategy routinely employed by healing justice advocates) and then using disciplinary actions such as banning in order to enforce community standards if the problem persists. In the case of The Pro, it does seem that there had been previous discussions with iTzLuPo based on his statements "as you well know" and his reference to an earlier "stunt.” But The Pro also explicitly shut down dialogue twice during the discussion, first when he said to iTzLuPo that if there is another violation, there will be "no warning" and again when an unidentified player attempts to ask a question and The Pro muted him. Additionally, The Pro was sarcastic at one point in the recording, saying to iTzLuPo after he berated him publicly, "Lupo do you
have any questions or is there anything I can help you with because I'm here for you right about now?

You've got my complete undivided attention.” Several survey respondents warn against such an approach, stating that players respond much more positively to "straight and honest" dialogue. Taken in the light of these responses, Stephen Toulouse’s assertion that The Pro’s failure was simply one of tone seems questionable. Indeed, The Pro seemed to ignore what appeared to be fairly common knowledge among community managers.

Several respondents also pointed out that the enforcement of rules rested on an agreement and that players do, in fact, have rights in the community that have to be respected by the community manager. As one respondent puts it, "My users have their rights," noting further that if the community member had only angered the community manager, but not violated a rule, it was the community manager’s job to let that issue go. The Pro clearly failed in this regard, bolstering iTzLuPo’s claim that The Pro ignored player rights in order to exercise his authority. The Pro shut down dialogue and threatened iTzLuPo with not only a ban on his own console, but also a ban on every console that iTzLuPo has ever logged in on. That would mean that The Pro threatened community members who have not violated any rules simply because of their association with iTzLuPo. Such players may be friends with iTzLuPo outside of the game, perhaps a sibling, or even just an acquaintance who played with iTzLuPo at a party or tournament. Had the Pro carried through on his threat, these players would have simply turned on their Xbox to find that they could no longer play online. Because of the harshness of this approach, not only had dialogue with iTzLuPo been foreclosed, but dialogue with members of the community not even involved in the inciting incident had been abandoned. If, as Deborah Johnston argues, “All discourse is both a reaction to the world and an intervention in it,” The Pro’s reaction to the community’s discourse was to shut down further discourse on the issue (196). This puts The Pro not in the position of the community manager, a position that is grounded in dialogue, but of the community tyrant, dispensing punishments based on his whim, his anger, and his power.
The problems with The Pro’s rhetorical approach, however, arise from an incident where iTzLuPo may have very well broken the rules of the community. Further, as the additional tape shows, the Pro was repeatedly antagonized by the player Pie. As such, some action did have to be taken. But as multiple survey respondents noted, disruptive members are often deeply passionate about the game they are playing and engagement with the player can turn a disruptive player into a valuable resource to the development team. Additionally, several respondents noted that these disruptive players may be high-profile members of the community and, as such, the community manager must engage with them carefully to avoid community backlash (Zimmerman). Two respondents even suggested that these high-profile disruptors be brought onto the community management team as volunteer moderators in order to bring them in line. While Pie may not be an ideal candidate for such an approach, iTzLuPo very well may be as he showcased a deep passion for the game through many video postings prior to this incident.

What was missing from The Pro’s approach then was engagement with the players. As previously mentioned, survey responses indicated that even disciplinary action, such as a banning, can even be framed as a way of engaging with the player, reminding them of the community standards and attempting to re-establish the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable behavior so that the disruptive member can be reintegrated into the community. This assumption of reintegration, so key to the idea of healing justice discussed above, forms the basis for much of the work of the community manager. But in the case of iTzLuPo and The Pro, there was no indication on the part of The Pro that he wanted to reintegrate iTzLuPo. Instead, his tone and his refusal to engage in discussion indicated that he simply wants iTzLuPo gone. As iTzLuPo is a well-known and dedicated player of Call of Duty, that attitude did not simply indicate the loss of a privilege, but instead represented the severing of a relationship that iTzLuPo, at least according to his own statement, felt a part of. It was the threat of virtual exile, an existential threat to iTzLuPo’s role in the on-going discourse on belonging that makes up community. As
such, iTzLuPo reacted to this threat with his own threats. The ban wounds iTzLuPo, who responds by trying to strike back and wound the Pro.

2.11 — What Can Be Learned – Open Conflict

Analysis of this conflict points towards several preliminary conclusions about community management. These conclusions would, of course, need to be tested further by examining more scenarios of conflict to see if the observed rhetorical practices are common. Nonetheless, these early observations indicate that further research into the area may be fruitful. The preliminary conclusions are as follows: First, the establishment and enforcement of community standards produces conflict and tension no matter what action the community manager takes. If the community manager does not take action against a violator, community bonds suffer as players become unsure about how to behave in relation to one another. Further, community standards such as rules against game modifications help players understand how the game itself is supposed to work. If a player such as iTzLuPo is allowed to modify the game without punishment, the actual rules of the game come into question. And without those rules, the game become more difficult to play.

In contrast, taking action against violators immediately places the community manager in conflict with the player. Should that conflict take place publicly, as was the case with The Pro and iTzLuPo, the enforcement process becomes part of a larger discourse in the community, with community members able to comment on and possibly even influence the course of enforcement. Based on the responses from the surveys and the literature on community management, such public conflict is best avoided because of its capacity to turn issues of individual behavior into larger, more disruptive discussions about community standards. At the same time, enforcement must result in public changes in individual behavior, with violating players visibly being brought back into alignment with community standards or being removed from the community, thereby healing the wound of conflict. So community enforcement must be both private and public, often at the same time. Such a contradiction
that refuses to be resolved continues the themes of community management identified in chapter 1, that community management is a corporate discourse that requires tension between the development organization and the community. That tension creates a rhetorically complex position for the community manager, serving as gatekeeper between the inside and outside of the community for violators of community standards.

This sort of incident only represents one type of conflict in the community: active, open conflict between the community manager and the community members. Other forms of discursive conflict are just as important and require as much, if not more, of the community manager’s time and attention to manage. These forms of discursive conflict focus less on conflict between personalities and more on control over how players interpret changes in the game and the community. This interpretative conflict will be the focus of the second half of this chapter.

2.12 — Discursive Struggle - Ownership and Control

As discussed earlier, modern computer game development does not necessarily stop at the game's release. Instead, development teams may toil for months or even years over new content (e.g., patches to software, content expansions, downloadable content). The new content and changes, however, are never rolled out without an enormous amount of talk from both sides of the developer-player relationship. In this section, I examine examples of the discourse between community managers and community members from the official forums of the Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) Rift in order to examine the role of metonymy in the discourse of players and developers. In particular, I will examine the ways that players and developers employ these techniques in an attempt to assert ownership and control over the both the game community and the game itself. I begin with an extensive analysis of the ways that players are employing metonymy, before moving on to the ways that community managers respond to these rhetorical strategies. In doing so, I will show how similar, but not identical, deployments of metonymy reflect the community managers own position of
tension between community and development organization as well as highlighting the discursive complexity of communities themselves and the work that communities do.

2.13 — Metonymy

In this following sections, I focus on how players and community managers deploy metonymy in their discursive struggles for control over their communities and the games those communities play. There are, however, many other rhetorical strategies that this section could have focused on. I have chosen to focus on metonymy for three key reasons. One, by focusing on a single rhetorical strategy, I am able to identify patterns in usage in a way that a more scattered approach would not allow for. Two, as my examples below illustrate, metonymy is routinely used in computer game communities to discursively establish homogenous groups that are then set into conflict with one another. As this chapter focuses on conflict, an understanding of the use of metonymy for both starting and carrying out these conflicts provides a solid foundation for further research on this topic. Three, metonymy shares a thematic resonance with my discussions of community in chapter 1 of this dissertation. Specifically, effective use of metonymic language serves as a clear marker of an individual’s membership in a community.

Relying on Raymond Gibbs' definition, metonymy involves "one conceptual domain, in that the mapping or connection between two things is within the same domain" (322). This definition is offered as a contrast to the definition of metaphor, where two conceptual domains are mapped against one another (321). Gibbs' definition of metonymy is fruitfully complex, while still being straight forward enough to allow for its use as an analytical category. Gibbs’ clarifies his definition with examples where the metonymy is not necessarily clear but the metonymic reasoning required to make the sentence work is undeniable. For instance, he offers the sentence, "They were told to expect the prime minister at twelve the next day. Punctually at noon the car drew up in front of the State Department" (323). In this sentence, Gibbs points out, "the car" can be inferred to stand in for the prime minister in the minds
of listeners despite the fact that the car is not necessarily a part-to-whole relationship or a token-for-
type. But in the minds of listeners (or readers), the relationship between car and prime minister seems
obvious. Gibbs continues his automotive focus by also showing how metonymy is employed to transact
massive amounts of information in small discursive packages. Gibbs' example is the following
(seemingly) simply exchange:

A: How did you get to the airport?

B: I waved down a taxi.

Gibbs explains that "Traveling from one place to another involves a series of actions, where people find
some vehicle to take them to the desired location, get into the vehicle, ride in it to the destination,
arrive, and get out" (327). Metonymy, however, allows listeners to infer the rest of these steps from a
cognitive model shared with the speaker. Put simply, the listener is expected to already know all of the
sub-steps to get from one place to another, and so the speaker doesn't mention them explicitly. Instead,
all of that information metonymically collapses into the one statement "I waved down a taxi."

This gap filling process is what makes Gibbs' definition of metonymy so useful to this analysis.
Player-developer discourses in MMORPGs regularly employ metonymy as a way to create groups that
are placed in opposition to one another. For instance, metonymy can be used to flatten difference
between different groups of players or different parts of the development team in order to discuss them
as an undifferentiated mass of actors. In doing so, forum posters rely on the metonymic knowledge of
players to "fill in the gaps" of the statements they make. And if, as Gee argues, these discourses are
"ways with an integrations of words, deeds interactions, thoughts, feelings, objects, tools, times and
places that allow us to enact and recognize different socially situated identities", then this metonymic
knowledge also constitutes a way for players and developers who want to be part of the community to
prove their membership in the community (44). This echoes, of course, Gerard Delanty's definition of
community discussed in Chapter 1, with community being an open-ended discourse about belonging.
2.14 — A Note on Vocabulary

Knowing that this chapter may, in fact, be read by a reader who is not “one of us”, a short note outlining important vocabulary is in order. MMORPGs, as a genre, are played by a group of dedicated players who have developed a rich and complex vocabulary. Further, each particular MMORPG has its own unique vocabulary, a sort of gamer dialect. *Rift*’s particular game mechanics have resulted in yet another mutation of the MMORPG language that may be confusing to non-players. Below is a very short list of major terms that will be employed in the discourses of both player and developer forums participants. This list covers only terms that will be used with some regularity. Further definitions will be offered in endnotes as needed:

- **Calling**: The four callings (warrior, mage, rogue, cleric) broadly determine what armor and ability sets will be available to a player’s avatar. The player’s calling determines which “Souls” are available to the player.

- **Soul**: Souls are *Rift*’s mechanic for giving players’ avatars different abilities. Players swap between sets of three different souls in order to customize the abilities of their avatar.

- **OP**: Stands for “over-powered.” Used to refer to particular abilities or Soul combinations that are deemed unfair. The claim that something is “OP” is perhaps the most common type of argument in MMORPGs.

- **QQ**: A common MMORPG emote. Also sometimes insult used in reference to players who are considered whiners. Often followed by the statement “Cry more” as the letters look a bit like crying eyes.

- **Nerf**: To weaken or otherwise reduce the power of.

- **Buff**: To strengthen or otherwise increase the power of.

- **PVP**: Player-versus-Player. A mode of game play where players fight one another. Contrasted with PVE (Player-versus-Environment) where players fight the game’s AI.
2.15 — Constitute metonymy: Metonymy makes an “Us”

Both players and developers employ metonymy to create an “us.” For instance, player’s routinely post statements such as this:

![Forum post – QQ Harder](image)

In the first sentence of this post, Chiron101 explicitly uses metonymy four times. First, he refers to *Rift*’s developer Trion. Second, an opponent is created by referring to “all those people”. Third, he refers to the other players complaining about their “class.” Fourth, he mentions “what they want.” Chiron101’s post might also, arguably, point to a fifth metonymy, the “want” of the “they.” Those uses of metonymy position different actors in an agonistic field. First, Chiron101 has turned the individual employees and developers of the different parts of Trion into a singular entity, Trion. This metonymy has a two-fold purpose: One, it removes the need to discuss particular developers (who the players might not actually know). In short, it provides an easily identifiable opponent. Second, the metonymic use of “Trion” is deployed in relationship to the metonymic “all those people” that constitutes Trion as a particular type of subject. In particular, it is a subject that is easily persuaded by the so-called complaining of the connotatively loaded “those people.” Trion here is an opponent, assuredly, but it is also a particularly weak-minded opponent.
The second metonymy is more straight-forward in its effects. While “those people” exist in a relationship with the metonym “Trion,” it also constitutes a new entity distinction from Trion. That opponent is other players, in particular others who play as rogues, warriors, and clerics. Readers know this based on where the post is located, the mage forums. In contrast to Trion, this opponent is not spineless. Instead, they are whiney. As noted earlier, calling other players “QQers” or whiners is perhaps the most common insult in MMORPGs. The insult is powerful because of its connotations. A player who is whining is thought to be complaining about something that is not, in fact, a problem that the whining is a sign that the complainer is spoiled or selfish. A non-game example might be a child who complains that his sister got a bit more ice cream than him. This particular metonymy collapses that connotation into “those people.” Through just the first two metonyms in his post, Chiron101 has established two opponents: one a spineless parent and the other a whining child. Without actually mentioning himself, Chiron101’s use of metonymy also implicitly creates an “Us” to stand in opposition to these two enemies.

The third and fourth metonymies are employed to reinforce the adversarial relationship between the poster and the metonymically constituted opponents. By referring to “their class” and “what they want,” Chiron101 reinforces that these opponents are a them, not an us. These opponents are constituted as Others. It should also be noted that Chiron101 is actually using the language of “class,” a term borrowed from other MMORPGs. In fact, the nomenclature of “class” is totally absent from Rift, pointing towards the conclusion that Chiron101 is familiar with other MMORPGs. Instead of “class,” Chiron101 might have used the word “Role” to discuss the “they” he references. I would argue that the use of “class” could be deliberate, a rejection of the language of “role” deployed by the developers of Rift and a way to connect Chiron101’s argument to the larger history of class disputes that have existed as long as MMORPGs have.
Having established a solid “us vs. them” field for his statements, the end of Chiron101’s sentence uses an implicit fifth metonymy to establish the nefarious purposes of his opponents. Having already established that his player opponents are whiners, Chiron101 states that their whining has been effective in getting “what they want.” But what, then, did these players want? Chiron101 doesn’t actually say. Instead, he relies on the metonymic power of want to fill in the gaps. He is, in fact, referring to a large number of diverse players who might want wildly different things. But because readers already know from the earlier metonyms that his opponents are whiners, we know that the things they want are things they don’t actually need or things that are unfair to other players, particularly the implicit “us” of his post. Through these metonyms, Chiron101 has created a discursive space with a winner and a loser. Further, he has attempted to establish that one side is behaviorally (or perhaps even ethically) worse than the other, having engaged in a campaign of whining and complaining. In doing so, Chiron101 has created an opponent to fight an inherently unfair fight. And winning this unfair fight gives Chiron101 the chance to build his reputation in the community. And as it is common for community managers to reach out to or solicit feedback from prominent community members, Chiron101’s post can be read as just the first step in a fight for greater prominence and influence on the development organization.

2.16 — Nested Metonymies

Chiron101’s discursive strategy is, however, more complex than just creating weak enemies to battle. Chiron101, in fact, also uses metonymy to further define both the “us” and the “them” of his argument in order to establish his expertise, and to prove his membership in the community. For instance, Chiron101 employs several other metonyms that “nest” inside the original set, adding definition to the “us” and the “them” while still allowing a large number of players to inhabit both groups. Chiron101’s deployment of metonyms might be imagined as an hourglass, with the ‘widest’ set of metonyms establishing a framework and the next sets metonyms offering a progressively
more restrictive set of metonyms that refine the overall point. Finally, the cone widens again at the bottom to a broad set of metonyms primarily used in reference to Chiron101’s opponents in the argument.

Chiron101’s first metonymy in the set makes explicit an earlier implicit metonymy and an excellent example of how metonymy, as David Lodge argues, functions along the “combination axis of language” (76). Chiron101 says, “So if we mages complain harder than anyone else can we will get what we want.” Here Chiron101 has explicitly established the “us” of the earlier metonyms as mages, one of the games four callings. As noted in my earlier definitions, the four callings in Rift establish very broad parameters for the selection of avatar abilities as well as armor and weapon choices. Based on calculations from the Rift forum participant Negai, there are eighty-four possible soul combinations per calling. Chiron101’s deployment of mages serves to combine all of those possible combinations into the singular mage, a category more easily contrasted to the “them” of the still implicit metonyms of rogue, cleric, and warrior. As pointed out in Johnston’s work on discourse analysis, this sort of construction attempts to capitalize on a sense of solidarity, meaning that the power relationships between members of the particular community are relatively equal (113). Chiron101 has established that mages are relatively equal in their powerlessness, in a relationship of solidarity, in contrast to what Johnston calls a power relationship, one where the power dynamics are asymmetrical (113). Therefore, mages are feeling the influence of the other callings discursive power, a power which may only be resisted through 1) solidarity with one another and 2) employment of discourse to gain greater control over the game’s continued development. Chiron101’s second metonymy nests within “mages” in the word “Pyros.” For non-Rift playing readers, one thing is important to note. First, Pyromancers, or Pyros, are players who have chosen to take the majority of their avatar’s abilities from the Pyromancer soul. But as my earlier definition of “soul” points out, players can pull abilities from three different souls at one time. So when referring to “Pyros,” Chiron101 is actually talking about a very large field of possible avatar types, or
builds, whose primary similarity is a large investment in the Pyromancer soul. By employing the
metonymic “Pyro,” however, Chiron101 flattens the significant differences between these different
avatar types. Instead, readers are left with a monolithic figure, the Pyro. By employing this singular
figure, Chiron101 is able to ignore the both the ludic and purely mathematical intricacies of the large
variety of possible builds and instead taps into what was, at the time of his post, a major concern about
the Pyromancer in the community, i.e., that the Pyromancer was “overpowered” in PVP play³.
Chiron101 has used metonymy to simplify the discourse and, in doing so, has strengthened his own
argument.

Chiron101 deploys a similar metonymy in his usage of “Lock,” short for Warlock. While the
metonymy is similar, the purpose for which it is invoked is dissimilar. The deployment of “Pyro”
establishes not only the figure of the Pyromancer, but also establishes that Chiron101 is a player with
knowledge of the larger arguments in the game surrounding the notion of balance⁴. In contrast,
Chiron101 deploys “Lock” to establish a contrasting opinion from the majority, i.e., that Warlocks are
more powerful than Pyromancers. This move relies on metonymy’s power to collapse a great deal of
connotative meaning into singular phrases. For Rift forum readers, Pyro is a figure that not only
represents avatars with Pyromancer abilities, it is also a figure connected with a contentious and long-
running debate in the forum community. Lock is a metonymy with its own connotative meanings, but at
the time of Chiron’s post, those connotations were less emotionally charged than Pyro. In arguing that
Warlocks are, in fact, stronger than Pyros, Chiron101 attempts to exert power over the metonymic
Warlock figure that the forum community has created through its discourse. In much the same way that
Pyro establishes Chiron101 as a member of the mage community, the deployment of Lock in
conjunction with his argument establishes Chiron101 as a figure in conflict with the common wisdom.
Specifically, Chiron101 argues that other players have not noticed that the Warlock is so powerful
because they have been distracted by the Pyro’s attention grabbing power. In offering his analysis in this
way, Chiron101 attempts to establish himself not only as a valid member of the community, but also as a community member with keen powers of discernment. Far from being an empty gesture, Chiron101’s opinion on the Warlock, if taken seriously by enough players, can change the way that Rift players play the game, not to mention the shift in the forum discourse such a change could enact. And, as before, that increase in community influence can lead directly to greater influence with the development organization through interaction with the community manager.

At the bottom of our discursive hourglass, meanwhile, Chiron 101 pivots from the figures of the Pyro and the Lock back to the vague “no one” and “classes” of his final two sentences. Both “no one” and “classes” stand in for the enormous number of players who do not fit into the “us” category of Chiron101’s argument. By leaving them as a vague amalgamation of others, Chiron101 leaves himself room to maneuver if rebuttals arise and, most importantly, he allows the power of metonymic association to fill in the information gaps. Who, exactly, is the opponent in this post? In the end, the specific opponent matters less than the opponent readers are encouraged to create for themselves, with the ambiguous constitution of the group allowing readers to substitute their own personal opponents into the agonistic field of the argument. That raises the question, however, of what is happening in this field of actors. And that brings us to the action metonymies of the post.

2.17 — Action Metonymies

So far, the metonymies deployed in this post have focused on metonymies that constitute particular groups, e.g., developers, whiners, us, and them. The metonymic collapse of meaning does not only work on groups of people. Metonymy also allows for complex actions to collapse into meaning-dense lexico-grammatical features by hiding the depth and breadth of the actions in question. In this section, I want to examine three of those action metonymies in order to show how they interact with and shore up the other metonymic devices in the post. I’ll first examine “QQ”, then “burst”, and finally
“balanced.” In doing so, I will show how action metonyms are strategically deployed by both players and community managers to gain influence over the community and the development process of the game.

2.18 — QQ: Cry

Chiron101’s first action metonymy is actually in the title of the post, “Lets QQ harder than other classes.” He describes Rift as "a giant QQ war than an acual MMO.” As noted earlier, “QQ” is a common MMORPG emote/insult that means, literally, “to cry or to whine.” QQ is often deployed as an insult indicating that a player or players are complaining about something that is pointless or childish. In this instance QQ refers to not only complaining on the forums, but also a whole set of discursive practices both within and without the game world. For instance, a player who is upset with the state of their calling might re-roll a new character with different abilities. Such an action might actually be considered QQ-ing by certain players where others would see it as a totally reasonable reaction.

The most common type of QQ, however, is the complaint post. As an example, we can look at this post from Nobbynobsgard:

![Figure 2.2 – Forum screenshot – Complaint post](image)

In his first line, Nobbynobsgard makes the claim that the cleric calling is unbeatable in PVP game modes. Chiron101s post does not employ the same language as Nobbynobsgard’s QQ but it does metonymically reference the type of complaint made in Nobbynobsgard’s post. In deploying the QQ metonym, Chiron101 is actually offering instructions on the type of action he would like other players to take, i.e. to complain in the same way Nobbynobsgard complained. Ironically, Chiron101’s post is itself a type of
QQ, a complaint about the complainers. This fact is pointed out in the very last response on the thread from Missionary who responds to the original post saying, “yet again, another useless thread about how mages aren't gods, get over urself.”

2.19 — Burst

Chiron101’s use of QQ serves as a set of instructions to other players. In contrast, “burst” (used in the context of “burst class”) serves a more traditional metonymic function, i.e., “when people use one well-understood aspect of something to stand for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of it” (Gibbs 64). Burst is used to refer to the employment of some ability or combination of abilities to produce large amounts of damage, healing, or threat very quickly—thusly called burst damage, burst healing, burst threat. The actual process or set of processes to produce such a burst would be different for each calling and their soul combinations. Some combinations might have no potential to create a burst at all. In its usage in this post, players know what sort of burst (damage, healing, or threat) is being discussed because of the presence of the earlier Pyro metonymy. This metonym, deployed in concert with the metonymic figure of the Pyro, stands for the whole set of processes necessary for a Pyro to produce a burst of damage.

The connection of these two metonymies serves then as a signal to readers of Chiron101’s knowledge of the class and the game, as well as a way to define the damage caused by a Pyromancer, and the Pyromancer itself, as a burst soul (or class, as some might refer to it even if the game developers do not use this terminology). By adding the metonymy of “burst” to the metonymic figure of Pyromancer, Chiron101 seeks to make claims about the unbalanced or unfair nature of this play style as illogical and/or irrelevant. After all, by the logic of this post those who complain are actually complaining about the fundamental nature of the Pyromancer, which he positions as unchangeable through the articulation of burst to the Pyro. Much as we saw him doing with the figure of the Warlock, Chiron101 is attempting to exert power over the metonymic Pyromancer through the deployment and articulation of
a different metonym. In doing so, he shapes the play and opinions of both players and developers who read his post.

2.20 — Balance

The last action metonymy I want to examine is the invocation of a “balanced game” in Chiron101’s post. As I’ve noted elsewhere, balance is a metaphor that equates the equivalency and fairness of a game with weights on a scale. But balance can also function metonymically, as it does here. In asking for a “balanced game,” Chiron101 is actually asking for a whole series of game changing processes. Balancing an MMORPG could include data collection, analysis, focus groups, the development and distribution of new code or even the total re-imagining of core game mechanics. But none of that is mentioned. Instead, we get balanced. In effect, the metonymy hides the enormous amount of work that Chiron101’s desire for balance brings with it. Hiding that work is a way of strengthening the player’s position in the argument by making the fix to their concerns seem easy or quick. The development organization, then, can be positioned as lazy or incompetent for not acquiescing to such a seemingly simple request. To be fair to players, however, the developer’s themselves may be contributing to the power of this metonymy through a lack of transparency in the development process.

Chiron101’s invocation of balance is also another attempt to shift the balance of power from developers to players. Specifically, his post attempts to shift the power to balance the game towards the metonymically constituted group of players who make up the “us” of the argument. The full final sentence of Chiron101’s points towards that conclusion when he says, “A balanced game can only be achieved when you get all the classes to complain an equal amount.” As a call to action, Chiron101 is asking players to complain in relatively equal amounts. Who are they complaining to? The weak-willed developer, Trion, that was metonymically constituted earlier in the post. Further, the call to action seemingly shifts the burden of balancing the game to the player and away from the developer. Thus the
metonymy of balance hides the work of the developers in the process of game balancing and instead substitutes the work of the player, complaining, in its place.

Complaining, however, does not actually instantiate changes in the game. The development team must still do the work of designing, creating, and testing any changes. But this shift has put the developer at a disadvantage in the dialogue. The player base has been positioned to see themselves as having done their work, i.e. complaining, about the balance of the game, while the developer is seen as having failed to meet their obligations to the players by balancing the game to the complaining players’ liking. The development team is, for instance, constantly under assault for its choices about where it spends its development resources. For example, in 2012 Sony Online Entertainment announced that it would be adding a system called SOEmote to the MMORPG Everquest II. This technology would allow the player to control their avatar’s expression and mouth movement using a web cam that would track the player’s real life face. The announcement was met with excitement by some players, but comments such as, “Another huge waste of time and money by SoE, they sure have their priorities straight when their game is broken and practically unplayable” and “Brilliant, now we can take screenshots of our toons [avatars] looking disgusted when we run across any /bug that has been ignored while they were implementing SOEmote!” were far more common (Dark, Cmors). Of course, even should the development organization present a counter-argument to these sort of complaints, complaining players can simply complain again because complaint has become the players’ role in the dialogue, the rhetorical lash used to keep the development organization moving.

2.21 — CM Metonymy: Giant’s Response

Chiron101’s post shows how metonymy can be used in an attempt to exert power over both other players and developers. But one of the actors in the field is actually totally absent from the discussion in Chiron101’s post, the development organization. At no time in that forum thread does a member of the development team respond. Because of that, there is no opportunity to see how the
community management team responds to the Chiron101’s attempt to exert power. In order to do that, we need to examine a different thread in the Rift forums.

This thread deals with what was a major concern at Rift launch: the response time and quality of Game Masters (GMs). The original poster, the_real_seebs, started the thread in order to complain about the quality of customer service from the GM team of Rift. He employs the same constitutive metonymies as Chiron101, substituting “Trion” for the individual employee(s) who caused the problem. In addition, he employs the metonymy “GMs” to stand in for the particular GMs who he has dealt with.

His primary complaint is that GMs do not appear to have read his submission fully (or possibly at all) before replying to him. The thread was popular enough that it eventually received a response from GM Giant, Trion’s GM team manager. Giant’s response is extensive and the full response actually spans several different posts in the same thread. For the purposes of this argument, I’ll only be dealing with parts of it. That portion is included below:

Figure 2.3 – Forum screenshot – GM Giant
What this shows is that the community manager deploys metonymy more selectively than players, but the community manager uses those metonymies in many of the same ways as players.

Giant's response is actually as notable for the metonymies it doesn't use as for the metonymies it does. For instance, in his second sentence, Giant says "...I appreciate you taking the time to voice your concerns." Giant employs "I", "you", and "your" instead of metonymic phrases like "players" or "mage." His phrasing regarding "your concerns" actually serves to break down the constitution of groups that we saw in Chiron101's post, instead focusing on how the expressed concerns are those of individuals, not groups. By establishing the individual nature of the complaints, even if they reflect a systemic problem, Giant serves to undermine the cycle of escalating complaint that characterizes many forum discussions. Additionally, I would argue that Giant's response encourages players with complaints to focus on their individual complaints and to disaggregate them from the larger systemic issues that have occurred with the game's customer service.

When Giant begins employing metonymies, they focus primarily on Trion and not on players. In just the short section being reviewed here, Giant employs "we" four times to refer to his team of GMs. Three of those uses of "we" are used in reference to the customer service problems that have plagued the early months of the game. The final "we" is used in a sentence that states Giant's plans to fix the self-same problems. The "we" of Giant's metonymies are contrastable with Chiron101's metonymy for Trion. Whereas Chiron101 uses metonymy to constitute a figure of the developer as weak-willed and foolish, Giant's metonymy associates Trion with a recognizable problem that they are in the process of fixing. The focus on "we" also serves to draw player's attention away from themselves and instead focus on the actions of the developer, in this case their actions to solve the problem.

There is only one reference to players and that reference is to "our community." There are, in fact, two metonymies in this statement but they function in relationship to each other. First is "our," the "our" being identifiable as Trion. Second is "community." There are two things to note about this set of
metonymies. First, the metonymic "our" establishes a possessive relationship between Trion and the community. Second, community carries a different connotative weight than a metonymy like players or customers. The "our" establishes the primacy of Trion in general, and the GM team in particular, over the community itself. Further, I believe that the invocation of "community" is savvy rhetorical move. As I have already argued, Giant encourages players to disaggregate their problems from a larger, community-based clump. But then he invokes community in an attempt to reaggregate players into a new metonym of his choosing, one based in the connotative power of the word community. Much as we saw Chiron101 attempt to exert power over players through manipulation and rearticulation of the figure of the Pyro, we see Giant attempting to exert power over the players by manipulation of the figure of the player into the metonymic figure of community. In doing so, Giant is taking the same approach that iTzLuPo took in his conflict with The Pro, discussed earlier in this chapter: complainers are outside of the community. Community members, indeed, are being explicitly asked to help manage the community by reporting poor customer service experiences. The player base has been integrated into the community, a community that does work for the development organization. Further, this process allows the development organization (though the person of GM Giant) to counter player attempts to control the discourse around a contentious and serious issue. In this way, the discursive conflict is not only managed, but actually turned to the reinforcement of the community.

2.21 — Developer Action Metonymies

Giant's use of metonymy to constitute players into a particular community mirrors the practices of players like Chiron101. We see the same sort of practices in his use of action metonymies as well. In particular, we can see Giant employing action metonymies as a way to make problems seem more easily solvable, in much the same way that players invoke the process of balancing. The context, however, isn't in the game itself. Instead, he employs the metonymies "coaching" and "training" in his discussion of failing GMs. Both metonymies point towards solutions to the problems players have brought up. But
both serve to obfuscate the actual process by which the GMs in question will be brought up to par. It also serves to deflect the question of Trion's culpability by assuming that the problems with customer service were errors due to inexperience, as opposed to simple laziness or malicious intent on the part of the developer. Consider as well that this solution helps to reinforce yet another constitutive metonymy, the inexperienced GMs mentioned earlier in the post. Giant uses the constitutive metonym of inexperienced GMs and the action metonymies of "coaching" and "training" to re-order the discussion. No longer is this a question about Trion having failed to live up to appropriate customer standards as a company. Now, it is a question of a few inexperienced GMs whose actions can be corrected through the deceptively simple sounding "coaching" and "training." Through the deployment of these metonymies, Giant redirects the terms of the argument towards a more developer favorable position.

2.22— Versus

Examining these examples as a whole, I believe we see two striking patterns emerge. First, metonymies deployed selectively by both players and community managers attempt to constitute audiences in particular ways. Both players and community managers employ metonymies to create allies, but the players in our example also used metonymies to create opponents. The presence of those discursively constructed opponents allowed the player to try and form a community of solidarity that could be aimed towards his particular ends. As we have seen in analyzing Giant's response, community managers can employ a similar strategy, if perhaps more subtly than what was seen from the Chiron101. These rhetorical strategies are used not only to indicate the overall characteristics of particular groups, but also the individual characteristics of the people in that group. They might be constituted as whiney or stoic, smart or stupid, adversarial or communitarian. But regardless of how they are constituted, the nature of those groups is constituted in strategic ways which allow the speaker to exert power in ways both subtle and unsubtle.
Second, action metonymies are often deployed by both players and community managers in ways that obfuscate the complexity of particular actions. In the case of players, we see action metonymies deployed not only to simplify complex in-game processes, but also to attach those simplified processes to metonymically constituted figures. In doing so, players are able to re-articulate those figures in ways that support their own claims. Community managers engage in much the same process, but the examples in this chapter show how the process can work even outside of the game by focusing the community not only to play the game in particular ways, but also to serve the community through labor. Regardless of whether the action comes in-game or out-of-game, the strategic deployment of action metonymy by both players and community managers allows for manipulation of discourse. Control of that discourse has implications not only for the way that the game is played, but also for the way that communities form in both the short-term and long-term around that game. For players, that might mean the development of relationships that last decades. For the developer, it can be the difference between having a successful game or an unsuccessful game. It also encompasses a wide range of response in between these two more extreme polls, from an increase in Twitter followers for particular players or developers to better panel attendance at a convention. The consequences are not simply virtual, but material for all involved.

2.23 — Conclusions

Players and community managers often have a contentious relationship. Neither can exist without the other, but that stops neither group from attempting to exert power within the relationship to their own ends. As my analysis in the first half of this chapter shows, community managers and players engage in a discursive struggle over the meaning and application of justice, fighting for control over the community’s guidelines and standards of behavior in more or less open combat. In the second half of this chapter, I have examined the ways that metonymy is deployed strategically by both groups, making clearer the rhetorical power and the discursive complexity of this relationship. In both cases,
however, it becomes clear that the management of community conflict cannot rely simply on the exertion of power and authority, especially when the use of that authority might shut down the dialogue between the development organization and the community. Doing so, after all, would end the discourse about belonging that defines community. Instead, community managers must be willing to engage in extended dialogues with their community members. Sometimes that discourse involves direct communication about the behaviors or attitudes of various actors. Other times, the discourse relies on subtle variations of language to encourage the acceptance of particular positions. In both cases, however, the need for insightful rhetorical awareness is apparent.
Chapter 3 – Old-School: History, Memory, Nostalgia, and Memorial in Community Management

3.1 — Introduction

On October 23, 2014, Everquest 2 (EQ2) Community Manager Hats posted the following image to the official EQ2 Facebook page:

![Figure 3.1 – Facebook screenshot – EQ2 Inventory](image)

The accompanying text reads "Do you remember when looting a 6-slot bag meant an upgrade in inventory space? #TBT." The hashtag TBT stands for "Throw Back Thursday," a popular social media trend that first began on Twitter. Posts tagged #TBT are often accompanied by pictures from elementary school, nostalgic pictures of grandparents, or references to old media properties. The picture itself is a screenshot from the early days of Everquest 2, an MMORPG where item collection (colloquially known as "shiny hunting") is a popular form of gameplay. The responses to this nostalgic post from the Community Management team are an outpouring of player nostalgia, with comments such as, "OH god.. the dark days... I remember when I finally had farmed enough stuff up, sold it, and was able to afford 16 slot bags. I was on top of the world" (Shini). Such a response is typical of what Truman Capote referred to as "too Valentine a view," recasting a bad memory as a good one through the transformative magic of
nostalgia (17). In effect, the memory of a frustrating game play experience has morphed into not only a cherished memory but also a sign of the player's history with the game and the community.

These sorts of memory evoking activities are a common strategy employed by computer game community managers to stimulate engagement in their communities. Through dialogue with players, as well as in-game events and attractions, community managers routinely ask players to articulate their memories to the community. In the first two chapters of this project, I have discussed why community managers exist at all (Chapter 1) and how community managers discursively manage conflict in their communities (chapter 2). In this chapter, I will turn to the role that memory and its management by community managers plays in both the construction and maintenance of their communities.

3.2 — Positionality

This chapter will examine a number of different encounters with the past. In examining those sites of memory and memorial, however, I will also be examining my own memories. Some of the events and memorials are in communities that I am, at least tangentially, connected to. In all cases, they are sites that I was aware of before beginning this chapter's writing. So as I go through this process, I would ask the reader to keep in mind that I, as the author of this piece, am interpreting and reinterpreting these sites through my own lens of memory. That process, in some cases, has a strong affective component that I will address as part of the analysis.

Of particular concern in this chapter is the way that my own memory has been articulated to the sense of a larger history of gaming. I grew up as a part of the so-called “Nintendo Generation,” and that moniker has powerfully affected both my vision of myself and of the world in which I grew up. My generation has also sometimes been seen as the first so-called “Digital Natives,” children who grew up in a world of ubiquitous computer technology. From the early 1990s on, meaning from about second grade on, I have never had a classroom without a computer or a home without a computer game console. Having grown up with these sorts of labels, it can be easy to mistake my own history and
experience with computer games with a more universal, totalizing history of games. As such, I have endeavored, whenever possible, to present my own memories of these events with their fragmentary and incomplete natures made apparent to both myself and the reader.

This chapter deals with a variety of different encounters with the past, both at the level of the individual player and at the larger, community level. These various encounters can be roughly broken into three different areas of concern: a concern with memory, a concern with history, and a concern with nostalgia. The various sites of this study will be examined to see how community managers have dealt with these multiple concerns, often simultaneously, in their work to support and grow their communities. These three types of encounters with the past can be further sub-divided into whether the encounter is one of memory, or of memorial. That distinction, and its implications for the work of community management, will be more fully explored later in this chapter.

3.3 — On Memory, History, Nostalgia, and Memorial

This chapter's analysis of how community management employs encounters with the past focuses primarily on the way that community managers encourage players to encounter the past through both in-game and out-of-game events, and through direct questioning. The challenge for community managers is to promote the right kind of encounter with the past, ones that sustain, strengthen, or expand the community. Throughout this chapter, I will be offering a taxonomy of the various encounters with the past, beginning with memory. After reviewing the various theories about the particular encounter with the past, I’ll turn to examples from computer game community managers, examining how their work enacts (or doesn’t) the theories examined.

3.4 — Memory

Kimberly Smith notes that Plato conceived of memory as a path to truth, serving as a basis for political action (517). This conception of memory assumes, as David Lowenthal puts it, that memory is “inescapable and prima-facie” (187). Memory in this formulation is a recording of the past, the details of
the world embedded in the permanent and accurate medium of the mind. Such a conception, however, was undermined through theories such as Freud’s notion of repression, where the individual’s memory becomes not an unchanging record of the past but “a set of images manipulated by our unconscious desires” (Smith 513). Freud’s theory of repression argues, “that repression is not a defense-mechanism present from the very beginning, and that it cannot occur until a sharp distinction has been established between what is conscious and what is unconscious” (“Repression” 97). This requires that the impressions of the external world that are experienced through the senses go through a process of categorization, with some being painful and some being pleasurable. This process of categorization is interpretative, creating a network of attitudes and affects towards these sensory impressions that influence the individual’s understanding of those perceptions.

Just as the individual’s relationship to her own memories has been questioned, so has the notion of memory as fundamentally individual. Memories are formed in a social context and are thus subject to social forces, or as Lowenthal says, “We need other people’s memories both to confirm our own and to give them endurance . . . memories are continually supplemented by those of others” (196). This understanding of memory not only argues that memory is not solely individual, but also that memory is both created and changed by its social context. This effect can most clearly be seen in the case of major world events, such as the 9-11 terrorist attacks, where individual memories come to be colored by the social force of mass media and mass memory. While individual memory is influenced by the social, it also remains a deeply personal and individualizing force. As David Lowenthal notes, "The past is integral to our sense of identity. . . Ability to recall and identify with our own past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value" (41). Lowenthal’s point echoes Pierra Nora’s contention that “Memory is life, always embodied in living societies . . . and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened” (3). In both definitions, memory is intensely personal and formative, while being both contingent on the point of view of the person doing the remembering, and also absolute as the
person remembering has no other perspective but their own from which to remember. Together, these two ideas, of memory as both social and individual, forward the notion that memory, unsupported by the memories of others, erodes over time. Thus, individual identity, informed by individual memory, requires social maintenance. This also establishes memory, situated in the social network that supports and influences it as an artifact of the past, not the past itself. The past, in fact, is too large for memory (or history) to contain in its entirety. As beings that can inevitably only live in the present, humans only have access to fragments of the past through memory. How then can individual memories, their details fading with distance from the event, serve as a basis for individual identity, especially if, as Lowenthal argues, the interaction of the individual memory with the social can alter that memory, therefore altering the individual?

James E. Young offers an intriguing notion of how this might work by stressing the difference between collective memory and collected memory. Young’s definition seeks to differentiate between “unified forms of commemoration and the unification of memory itself,” arguing that “memory . . . is not necessarily shared but in fact distinctly varies from person to person” (70). He argues that in moments of social remembrance, collective memory attempts to universalize and homogenize the memories of individuals. Collected memory, however, compiles and collects the memories of individuals while still leaving room for a multiplicity of perspectives and voices on the past being remembered. Collected memory requires only that space be made for individual memories to congregate, not that the memories share a common understanding or orientation to the past being remembered. This space for the collection of memory is, in fact, an instantiation of Appadurai’s conception of “place” (discussed in Chapter 1), with place defined as interpretation of the collective impressions and relationships that individuals carry in their memories (McKay 199). Further, Young’s distinction between the collective and collected memory is particularly useful to this study as it accommodates the definition of community forwarded by Gerard Delanty with community as a discourse about belonging and Tharon Howard’s
understanding of communities being built around the interests shared by individuals in particular ideologies (187, Design to Thrive 16). In both cases, the multiplicity of voices is a necessity for the community. Collective memory would be, in fact, incapable of constituting a true community because of its single, unified voice of the past.

This understanding of memory, as emerging from and influenced by both individual and social forces, is the one that I will be employing in this chapter. As with many of the other theories I have discussed so far in this project, it locates the phenomenon in question, memory, at a place between and across the individual and the collective. This definition, in fact, insists on this positioning, arguing that individual memory arises relationally from the individual’s interaction with the world and its actor, both human and environmental. Further, it assumes that the endurance of a memory arises, at least partially, from its interaction with the memories of others and that similar memories from multiple sources both co-create and maintain one another through their interaction. At the same time, the theory of memory employed in this project assumes that collected memory is possible, that the multiple memories of individuals in discourse with one another are, in fact, a necessity for the creation and maintenance of a community.

3.5 — Community Memories

Community managers can act as curators of community memories, encouraging and connecting individual remembrances in order to establish particular attachments and remembrances that build up the community’s bonds. Curation involves a number of different activities. Most commonly, community managers simply ask community members to share memories with one another. Common questions include posts on forums such as, "Tell us about your first day in Norrath," or "What’s your favorite old school zone?" By soliciting memories from community members, community managers create space on forums, Twitter feeds, and other media for the collected memories of the community. In doing so, the
early days of a community and the game are recollected, and the feeling of discovery and wonder of a players’ first encounters with the game can be evoked in the present.

As stated above, community management’s use of memory often takes the form of either a direct request for memory or through an indirect prompt. As an example of an indirect prompt, consider this post made on the official Tomb Raider Facebook page on October 30, 2014 (Figure 3.2). The post itself is a simple image of the protagonist of the Tomb Raider series, Lara Croft. The image, it should be noted employs an older model of the character, much more reminiscent of the game’s early incarnations (as opposed to the nearly photorealistic avatar of more recent games). The post received 7,221 likes and 173 comments from fans of the Tomb Raider Facebook page. The comments offer a range of responses from positive to negative. Positive comments tend to reference memories from the player’s past. Some remembrances offer only a general statement about the nature of the memories the picture evokes (figure 3.3):

![Facebook screenshot – Lara Croft memories](image)

Other comments offer more in the way of specific memories (figure 3.4):

![Facebook screenshot – Lara Croft memories](image)
Even the negative comments frame the early games positively (figure 3.5):

As community members share these memories with each other, they also provide content for the page for other community members to review and comment upon. Notice that the memories both relate to the game itself and to memories about the activities and experiences that arose around the game.

Unsurprisingly, the experience of playing the computer game is one more in a network of memories that exist around a particular time, meaning that the memory of the game is as much a part of the network of memories as any other experience. As such, sharing memories of the game play, situated as they are in the network of other memories, serves to establish the experience of play as an experience of living. And by encouraging the sharing of positive memories, community management can actually create a
more positive view of that particular time period in general by encouraging a positive remembrance of their game in particular.

Further, by encouraging the community to remember the earlier games, the community manager may actually be encouraging members to either buy or re-buy the software:

![Facebook screenshot](image)

**Figure 3.6 – Facebook screenshot – Player action encouraged by memory**

More importantly, however, the community manager can (re)ignite passion for *Tomb Raider’s* future releases by encouraging members to experience their pleasure in the early games again. For instance, in this particular comment thread, there are two comments asking for information about the most recently released games. There are nine comments requesting that the developer, Eidos, release re-makes of the older *Tomb Raider* games. At 1% of comments and 5% of comments, respectively, these numbers need to be understood in the context of the original post. A post, made with material the publishing company already owned, managed to acquire thousands of views and multiple direct comments that engaged with the property. Players expressed passion for the *Tomb Raider* property, engaged with one another, and, in some cases, shared powerfully affective remembrances that reaffirmed their bond with the game(s) and the community. Further, the interaction of one person’s positive memory with another is a real world example of Lowenthal’s statement, “We need other people’s memories both to confirm our own and to give them endurance” (196). Individuals on the *Tomb Raider* Facebook page present their individual memories, putting them into social dialogue with the memories of others, gathering Facebook “Likes” and refreshing, though perhaps altering, their memories. Additionally, these remembrances are an example of Ekaterina Haskins’ “participatory engagement,” with the memories evoked not simply
serving as curiosities in a relic cabinet, but instead becoming vital pathways for discourse among community members and the development organization (407).

The importance of memory to computer game communities is also a reflection of the fact that the community that forms around a game relies on the memory of players to sustain the community during periods with no new content. In the modern market, computer games are released at an astonishing clip with some periods of the year deluged with major releases. On November 18, 2014, for instance, there were eight major computer game releases. Of them, six were brand new releases of wildly popular properties: Dragon Age: Inquisition, Far Cry 4, LittleBigPlanet 3, Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor, Sonic Boom: Rise of Lyric, WWE 2K15 (“Upcoming Video Game Release Dates”). The remaining release was of an already popular property being released on new platforms (Grand Theft Auto V). This list does not include minor releases or so-called “casual games” that a person might play on a mobile device, e.g. Candy Crush or Angry Birds. The effect of such a packed release schedule is that computer game players have an increasingly large number of ways to spend their time, money, and attention. That means that computer game communities are made up of individuals who may actually be a part of multiple other communities. The community manager for a game that does not have a current release must, therefore, find ways to keep the community engaged and retained in order to minimize community attrition. Thus, the evocation of player memory. By encouraging an encounter with the past, the player is reinserted into the discourse of a community without an active release, reinvigorating the discourse on belonging that forms the basis of community. This is an ironic instantiation of Lowenthal’s statement that “Over-indulgence in memory likewise shuts out present experience” (65). Indeed, this encounter with memory does shut out present experience, the experience of no active release for the community. Instead, memory of the past is substituted, providing sustenance for the community.
Community managers, however, do not necessarily have to be the ones who prompt the outpouring of memory from the community. For instance, player INV-Thomgun made the following post on November 28, 2014 on the official Ubisoft forums:

When looking back at E# I can’t imagine how time has fly pass that fast. I still remember when I got an invite in the first closed beta on PC like it was yesterday.

Since then I have been active here, reporting bugs, giving ideas and shared my criticism. I have been playing a few closed beta games (AAA titles) and I am really suprised how much feedback that have been shared and also taken seriously.

Whether u think that these missing features have been totally necessary, like text chat it has been fixed. We have mention 100s of ideas and we don’t know what things that can or will be added but I’m happy that I spent my time here to share my feedback.

That game is soon here and if I know myself, which I do. My time here will be reduced and hopefully spent on the game. So thanks Ivory, Natchi, Mush, the community members and all the rest. Keep up the good work and remember that half of the work on any successful game title is to update but most of all BALANCE the game. Show us that you care about us and our money and we will promise to make this game the game of the year.

BLESS [smiley face emoticon].

Notice how INV-Thomgun’s recollection of the past is not even for a game that has been released yet. Instead, it a recollection of his Beta testing experiences and his interaction with the community management team and developers. Another community member responds with two animated .gifs. One is a .gif depicting a figure overwhelmed by waves labeled “feels.” The next is of a man throwing money out of the top of a car. The first .gif is an expression of how INV-Thomgun’s post has made the community member feel overwhelmed by his emotions. The second is likely a version of the internet meme “Shut up and take my money.” Community manager UBI-Mush responds to these
post with thanks, encouraging INV-Thomgun to continue to post to forums, “And thank you for your feedback [smiley face emoticon] enjoy the game and ensure you still pop in to give us more feedback [smiley face emoticon].” In this same thread, other members of the Beta testing community chime in, expressing their hope that the forum community does not fade away once the game is launched. Ubi-Mush responds by offering reassurance that she has no plans on leaving. In just a few posts in this thread, the importance of memory to the community has been demonstrated. A poster shares a memory, another community member responds to that memory with an expression of his own feeling and his dedication to purchasing the game, the community manager affirms and encourages these practices directly, and community members re-assert their desire to maintain their group structure.

So far, I have examined only individual memories. Player memories, however, exist in networks together. Further, computer games have their own networks of memory that span both the in-game and out-of-game worlds. These networks of memory represent a different type of encounter with the past, history. In the next section, I will examine several theories of history, before moving on to an examination of the role that history, as an encounter with the past, plays in community management in the computer game industry.

3.6 — Theories of History

To begin, I want to offer a brief overview of two influential theories of history, those of Hegel and Marx. After that, I will examine the way that memory has emerged as a sometimes opposing, sometimes complementing phenomenon to such theories. By contrasting these theories, the distinction between history and memory will become sharper, and the type of interaction with the past they represent will become more useful for this project. I begin with an examination of Georg Hegel’s work on history.

Georg Hegel saw history as a series of dialectical steps, with each society attaining (often through bloody conflict and war) it’s potential. This involves identifying the flaws and contradictions
inherent in the society, the decay of the society because of these contradictions, and a new society emerging from the conflict that is the only way to resolve those contradictions. Such a theory assumes history to be a lurching, often violent, series of steps, with “its development . . . a rational process, that the history in question has constituted the rational necessary course of the World-Spirit” (24). Hegel’s philosophy of history makes room for various historical narratives, each emerging from “influences that have formed the writer . . . identical with those which have moulded the events that constitute the matter of his story” (15). History itself, however, forms one giant process of progress toward a rational, perfect world free of contradiction between Liberty and Necessity (54). In this conception, history and the tellers of history are separated (which makes room for multiple histories), with History (big H) representing a phenomenon separate from the humans who develop various narratives of History.

Marx’s theory of historical materialism shares Hegel’s conception of History as existing outside of its tellers, arguing that material conditions “are the key factors that pattern human experience . . . and that history is a record of the changes in the material conditions of a group’s life” (Ritzer G-7). Marx’s theory assumes that societal change occurs because a given economic structure can no longer support and encourage the development of existing productive power. As such, that economic structure must be discarded and a new one established. Marx’s theory assumes, much like Hegel’s, that the vicissitudes of history are rational, based on an identifiable and ultimately universal analytical category. In both cases, various narratives of history can and will be produced throughout the stages of societal development, with the perspective and findings of that narrative shaped by the moment they emerge. In both theories of History, historical narrative itself will become universal as the rational movement of History achieves perfection.

History, in these formulations, totalizes and universalizes the interpretation of the past across all subjects as the conditions of their existence become universal, either in Spirit (Hegel) or material condition (Marx). Conceptions of memory, meanwhile, maintain an individual basis even while they are
socially influenced. David Lowenthal, meanwhile, offers a slightly different method of differentiating memory and history when he says, “Memory and history are normally and justifiably distinguished: memory is inescapable and prima-facie; history is contingent and empirically testable” with memory accepted “as a premise of knowledge” and history inferred “from evidence that includes other people’s memories” (187, 212). Notice that neither Hegel, Marx, nor Lowenthal provide clarity about when memory becomes history. It is a real world example of the sorites paradox, with the question of when enough individual memories compiled together becomes history not only unanswered, but in fact, unanswerable.

The opposition of memory and history also echoes Roland Barthes’ description of myth as “constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (142). Memory, then, serves as a resistance to myth as well as history, holding on to the lived, if incomplete, experience, recognizing that there was a time before the event itself. History, in this formulation, also serves as a bulwark against myth, in that history makes a claim toward accuracy, a remembrance that there was a time before. Or as Irfan Habib puts it, “Historical method embraces . . . an attempt at accuracy” (11). Habib also, however, recognizes that history is a fundamentally interpretative process, one with a “selection of facts” and “the allotting of particular weightage to particular facts” (11). He also claims that history (or, at least, well done history created by people trained in the proper historical techniques) has, “techniques of ensuring that we understand earlier narratives better, identify by critical comparisons their biases, exaggerations, or omissions, in order to establish events as they in reality happened, or circumstances as they in reality shaped themselves” (12). Habib’s position, of course, involves a particularly positivist view of the nature of history, assuming that if the author can simply provide a clear enough description, examining and eliminating as much bias as possible, the reality of the historical situation will become clear. Or as Pierre Nora characterizes the work of such positivist historias, “each of these historians was convinced his task was to correct his
predecessors by making memory more factual, comprehensive, and useful as an explanation of the past” (4).

The definition of history in this project relies on this opposition between memory and history. History, in this project, encompasses more than just the memories of an individual. It instead must draw on fragments of memory from multiple subjects to craft a narrative, that narrative not necessarily requiring total uniformity in the remembrances of what happened in the past, but inevitably reflecting the biases and limitations of the included voices. History, at the level of collective culture, “remains integral to us all, individually and collectively” because it is jointly created among those who narrate the past, “a common heritage because we have changed [our interpretation of the past] in concert” (Lowenthal 412, 362). At the same time, the definition of history in this project does not subscribe to the Hegelian or Marxist notion of an ultimately rational or universal driver of history. Instead, history as a concept as well as particular narratives of history, are deployed rhetorically, meaning toward a particular persuasive purpose. This definition of history also allows for multiple competing histories, with their different weights given to particular aspects, representing a powerful rhetorical strategy. Examples of this power can be easily seen in the on-going fight to include the voices and histories of underrepresented peoples in the canons of literature, art, science, etc. Accepted history within a group, both because of and despite its tendency to flatten and elide the differences among individual memories, serves to provide an at least superficially agreeable set of landmarks from which the present and the future might be created and interpreted. Competing histories between groups, meanwhile, often serve to highlight the wildly different lived experiences of the individuals included in that collective recounting. As discussed in chapter 2, however, conflict, even conflict between histories, can serve as a site for discourse where new communities can coalesce and thrive. This, of course, assumes that all parties with conflicting histories are interested in discourse. Indeed, because histories are used to create the future, conflicting histories can also be sites of devastating social and material violence.
For instance, boarding schools for Native American children were not only sites of physical and sexual violence against individual children, but also staging grounds for attacks on the histories of the families and tribes those children came from. These attacks came through the removal of tribal traditions, symbols, and languages (Pember). Combined, these efforts literally made it harder to pass along the history of the group as the shared landmarks of that history were eliminated from the minds and lives of the children taken into these schools.

History can be deployed to both productive and destructive ends, clearly. In the next section, I will analyze examples from the field of community management that highlight how players’ and community managers’ histories impact their perception of the community and themselves in both ways. Further this analysis shows how community managers can alter the players’ perceptions of the community and themselves by influencing players’ understanding of those histories.

3.7 — Community Management and History

As stated above, history and memory are not concepts with clear distinctions. In computer games, “history” itself has a number of threads that need to be followed. In this section, I’ll be teasing apart each of those threads and offering an example of how community managers interact with and employ those histories to manage community member behaviors and attitudes.

To begin, the in-game world has its own history (often referred to as “lore”). In this particular case, “lore” and the history of the in-game world are synonymous. Outside of the game world, however, those terms are not necessarily identical in either their meaning or application. Both players and developers have a relationship with the games lore, with lore generally emerging from the development organization but routinely being shaped by players’ desires and behaviors. Players encounter lore through in-game interactions with non-player characters (NPC), items, enemies, or through in-game cinematic interludes called “cut scenes.” Players may also encounter lore outside of the game, on official forums, through developer social media, or tie-in products such as books, comic books, or movies about
the game. Different games, of course, may have more or less lore than others. Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGS) can have multiple decades’ worth of lore from which they draw. Other games may have essentially no lore in the game itself (e.g., the original Pac-Man, Galaga, Geometry Wars). Some games, such as the Lord of the Rings Online, have inherited their lore from other media such as a book or movie. Others, like Magic: The Gathering, have started as games with very little lore and then seen it develop through the expansion of the game across multiple media.

Player interaction with the game’s lore allows community members to explain their own actions in the game. But when the game itself does not provide enough information, the community management team may actually provide that information to players. For example, the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game Smite, developed by Hi-Rez Studios, allows players to pit deities from around the world against each other in battle. The game is primarily player-versus-player, with game modes often focusing on tower defense. The game itself provides the player absolutely no context for why the various gods are fighting each other. Indeed, the only lore provided for the game has come from the community team. For instance, a video related directly to the backstory of the game was provided through a YouTube video, posted on August 21, 2013 (SMITE by Hi-Rez Studios, “SMITE – Background Story”). Individual gods also receive “reveal” trailers, with animated introductions detailing the god’s mythological history, along with an explanation of the god’s abilities and how to play him/her (e.g., “Smite – God Reveal – Janus, God of Portals and Transitions”). The Smite YouTube channel has also released a number of other videos related to lore, including “SMITE Drunk Mythology” (based on the Comedy Central show Drunk History) and roughly animated god lore focused more on humor than the more serious god reveal videos. In a game that focuses so much on player-versus-player action, why bother with lore at all? Two reasons: One, as David Lowenthal says, “Those who detach from themselves some part of their past commonly substitute another” (38). In the case of a game like Smite, the lack of a past represents a vacuum of history. Such a vacuum has a tendency to be filled by something, so by
providing an in-game history, *Smite* publisher Hi-Rez controls what that history is going to be. For again, as Lowenthal says, “The surviving past’s most essential and pervasive benefit is to render the present familiar” (39). To make the present of the game familiar to players *in the way that they desire*, Hi-Rez must control what the in-game past looks like. To do so, they produce videos and lore like those discussed above that frame that past in particular ways for their community of players.

Those videos then inform player behavior (producing particular subjects, as argued in Chapter 1). For instance, the god Loki’s lore highlights his sneaky, clever nature (“SMITE God Reveal – Loki, The Trickster God”). He is described as a “villain” who sees his enemies as “fools.” His presence in the game is even explained as Loki having escaped from a prison. In actual gameplay, Loki is an “assassin” type. His powers in the game focus on stealth, misdirection, and quick kills. These powers are justified to players through his lore and its focus on his villainy and sneakiness. Loki could just as easily been characterized as the god of discord or the father of monsters. He is a figure who, as Stefanie von Schnurbein notes, is “staggeringly complex, confusing, and ambivalent” (109). But in *Smite*, his lore as a Norse god is simplified, his complexities smoothed away. It is an alteration of the real world past to fit into the in-game past that lore represents, a reduction of “the diversity of previous experiences to a few themes within a narrow time span or to generalized uniformity” (Lowenthal 349).

### 3.8 — Lore as a Community Concept

The community management team may also play a role in popularizing lore as a concept, as opposed to specific pieces of lore. An example of this can be found in an interview with then *Everquest 2* developer Lindsay Morgan Lockhart, published by the *Everquest 2* community team on April 11, 2008 (“Get to know a dev: Lindsay Morgan Lockhart!”). Out of the fourteen questions asked in this interview, five of them related directly to the lore that Lockhart had developed and the lore that she loved most in the game. *Everquest 2* is a particularly long lived game (ten years old as of this writing) related to an even older game (the original *Everquest*, fifteen years old as of this writing). It is also a game particularly
steeped in lore, a fact best exemplified in the fact that the game had a single story line that stretched across literally the entirety of the game’s 10 year existence, with that story ending in 2014 (though the game continues). Such an enormous stockpile of lore represents a rich resource for community engagement. But players must be introduced to the lore, and encouraged to see it as an important part of both their gameplay experience and as part of the shared history of their community. The *Everquest 2* community team does this by publishing features such as the interview above, but they also encourage players to engage with the in-game history of lore by posting to the company Facebook page and asking players for favorite NPCs or storylines or by creating dedicated “Lore forums.” (Isulith, “History and Lore”). Again, by encouraging a particular interaction with the in-game past (either in arguing with various interpretations or by simply sharing affection for a particular part of the in-game lore), community managers are able to generate participatory engagement from the player base, the lore becoming a part of the community discourse instead of just functioning as window dressing.

### 3.9 — Developer history

The development organization has a history of its own and with its own player base. That includes a history of development for the computer game in question, but it may also be a history that includes other games or even relationships with other development companies. That history is the result of the inextricably connected creative and economic sides of the computer game development process. During different time periods, different types of games or particular properties are in ascendance, and thus more of those games are made. The successes and failures of these projects, determined by present circumstances, become part of the history between the computer game developer and the player base. A sense of history can also, however, pervade interactions between the community manager and community members. I will examine such an example below.

Obviously, companies that have existed for longer have longer histories. Companies like Atari, Nintendo, or Activision has literally decades of player-developer history to contend with. This puts the
community manager, who as Buss and Strauss note is “typically a mix of help desk, ambassador, company spokesperson, parent, camp counselor, and police officer” in a position of importance, especially with players whose history with the company may be marked by strife (100). Of course, strife may be a mark of the member’s tenure, no matter the length of time. Take, for instance, a thread on the official Ubisoft site related to the game *Trials Fusion*. This thread was started by community member funktastic- on December 04, 2014. According to his public profile, funktastic- joined the community on September 2014 and, as of December 2014, had already posted 306 times. The majority of funktastic-’s posts are focused on soliciting advice on and advertising his player made racing tracks that can be uploaded and played by other *Trials Fusion* players. Other responses, however, focus specifically on things he wants to change with the game. funktastic-’s posts began to change in tone at the beginning of November 2014, when he posted the following:

![Forum screenshots – funktastic- comment](image)

In this post, funktastic- is laying out a problem he has with the game and its community which is related to the publisher RedLynx’s earlier releases and their attendant players. Specifically, funktastic- is unhappy that the most recent release, *Trials Fusion* (released 2014), is having its most popular tracks created by players from an earlier release, *Trials Evolution* (released 2012). funktastic- feels that these earlier players have been able to trade on their history with the developer in a way that newer players cannot and that this has led to “sometimes better enjoyable tracks uploaded that get left behind to find in the old evo [*Trials Evolution*] players tracks.” Responses from other community members are generally unsympathetic. In particular, community members complain about the grammatically
challenging nature of funktastic-‘s writing. In later posts in the same thread, funktastic- evokes the specter of history (or, more specifically, his lack thereof) by pointing out that “I don’t have a long history of the game in mind I have the future and history is to be made in mind” (funktastic-). Following this exchange, another player asks if the community moderators are required to read every post in the forums, saying “Wonder if the mods have to read all these short stories. I read the first sentence [of funktastic- post] and I think of got the picture” (dealslv). Trials Community Specialist BlueBadger400 responded simply, “Yup.”

This response resulted in multiple angry posts from funktastic-, claiming that BlueBadger400 had been rude and that the community was ignoring his questions. A different community manager, ShiftySamurai, responded to funktastic-, saying, “A simple question was asked and Blue asked a straightforward answer,” before asking for examples of funktastic-‘s original complaint of favoritism. funktastic-‘s response is extensive, but again invokes his (short but prolific) posting and track making history by saying, “I have posted many of times that alongside with top builders builds i would like to see other build [sic] , builds that also have something good about them not all tracks should have to be just quality.” He also says that, “why dont you take alook at alot of what i do do for this community activity wise?” But it is in a second, quickly posted follow up, however, that funktastic-‘s understanding of his history with the developer becomes most evident. He says to ShiftySamurai:

Figure 3.8 – Forum screenshot – Player – CM conflict

Notice that funktastic- has now almost totally abandoned his original complaint about how the history of Trials releases was hurting him as a new player, and is instead focusing on his perception of the history between himself and the community management team (a relationship that has only existed for
approximately two months at the time of this posting). His perception of that history is that the community management team, specifically ShiftySamurai, has not valued his history of contributions to the community. ShiftySamurai’s response is as extensive as the original post in this thread. Point-by-point, with attendant screenshots, he addresses funktastic’s problems. Many of those response are focused on the original complaint, helping to refocus the discussion on an issue related to the game. But ShiftySamurai also addresses funktastic’s view of his history with the community and the community management team. For instance, he responds to funktastic’s claim that people in the community dislike him for asking so many questions by saying, “Nobody has an issue with you asking questions, and if they do, that's too bad for them. Part of the reason why some people don't respond to some of your posts may be the way that you engage them afterwards. At times it seems as though you don't really care about the answer, or you keep saying the same thing when someone explains why a thing is a thing” (ShiftySamurai). The community manager has offered a different version of events, a different history with the community, for funktastic to consider.

Interestingly, ShiftySamurai finally defuses this particular situation by reviewing the thread itself as history, specifically by categorizing the responses from other players to funktastic- into “a few themes within a narrow time span” (Lowenthal 349). He calls out community members for making fun of funktastic’s admitted trouble with writing and communication, pointing out that they have created an unwelcoming environment by being sarcastic. He then directly encourages funktastic- to keep posting questions and thoughts. The change in funktastic’s attitude is immediate and dramatic:
By offering funktastic- his support, ShiftySamurai has literally encouraged funktastic- to change his own understanding of history. Previously, he was being ignored and picked on by the community and the community management team. Now, those encounters are “not always a bad thing” and many in the community have been “very helpful and decent.” ShiftySamurai has, in fact, employed the opposition of memory and history to his advantage. He has caused funktastic- to question his own narrative, instead treating it as having been presented in a fragmented, incomplete way. What it is replaced with is a (more) holistic vision of his history with the community as “a good place to be” (funktastic-).

funktastic-‘s understanding of his history with the community and the community management team had not only affected the way that he interacted with the community, but also his feelings about the game. Players, however, can also have a history with a development organization that has been shaped by their personal history apart from the computer game itself. For example, I am thirty-two years old at the time of this writing. According to Lisa Galarneau’s “2014 Global Gaming Stats: Who’s Playing What, and Why,” I fall into the largest demographic of computer game players in 2014, age 30-35. I have played computer games since age six. Over the course of my life, I have played numerous games from Activision, Eidos, Sony, Nintendo, Sega, etc. Simply put, if a person has played computer games long enough, they can almost not help but routinely consume products from the same publishers over time. These histories are inextricably connected to both the creative and economics forces of the computer game development process. But they are also inflected by the social and economic realities of my own life. I played games when my parents could afford to buy me one or, more often, when I could
scrape together enough change to rent a game. Further, I grew up during an era where the so-called “console wars” divided players into camps, marking you as either a Sega or Nintendo kid. My choices about the computer games I played, and thus the developers I purchased games from, were influenced by what side of the console wars my friends had chosen (a choice that, in and of itself, was influenced by the economic realities of their lives). These types of relationships are largely outside of the purview of this study because they are not often the focus of a community management team. Community managers may encourage people across social and economic boundaries to interact with one another and to support the game, but they do not provide the money necessary to purchase or rent a game, or make the decision among friends which systems they will buy. That said, Xbox kids or Playstation kids may very well become Xbox or Playstation adults. So, if the community manager is able to influence brand loyalty when they have the chance, that loyalty can be spread amongst the social network of the player. The power of the player’s history with the platform, brand, or property thus exerts an indirect influence on others in the player’s social network. Whether that influence can overcome other competing social or economic factors is outside of the scope of this study, but represents an intriguing avenue for further research.

3.10 — Nostalgia

As we have seen so far, both memory and history represent particular encounters with the past. Neither, however, necessarily implies any particular affective orientation toward the past being encountered. To account for affective orientation towards the past, I turn to nostalgia. Of course, memory and history are often connected with nostalgia. But, as Marcos Natali notes, nostalgia has its own political and emotional implications that are separate from both memory and history while still having its connection to both terms. It is those political and emotional implications that make nostalgia so valuable a concept for community managers. The history of how nostalgia has developed, and how that history impacts current understandings of nostalgia, is the focus of this section.
In his piece “History and the Politics of Nostalgia,” Natali dissects these political and emotional dimensions, focusing particularly on the ways that Marx and Freud dealt with the topic. As Natali notes, “nostalgia” as a term can be traced back to 1688, when Johannes Hofer defined nostalgia as “pain resulting from the desire to return to one’s home” (10). That initial definition emerges as an attempt to classify an affliction particular to immigrants, taken as a sign of their incomplete assimilation to their new homes. Nostalgia, however, was not just seen as a psychological problem of immigrants, but instead as a physical illness, and a contagious one at that. So fearful, in fact, were some of nostalgias deleterious effects that one Russian general took soldiers determined to be suffering from the condition, and buried them alive to prevent further infections (Lowenthal 11).

Over time, the meaning of nostalgia shifted from its medical association as it becomes articulated to history. In particular, nostalgia comes to be seen as a fundamentally “irrational obstacle” to progress as history becomes “necessarily emancipatory, progressive, and rationally comprehensible” (11). This view of history argues that history is the story of humanity’s progress forward from barbarism (as we have seen in the theories of history forwarded by Hegel and Marx), where even the brutalities of capitalism are understood to be necessary, if unfortunate, steps in the progress toward perfection. As Natali notes, evidence of any backsliding of societies was often interpreted “not as proof of the lack of meaning in history . . . but rather of philosophy’s failure to recognize the appropriate signs indicating the laws of historical development” (12).

Of particular importance in Natali’s examination is his recognition that “the past” is itself a coded concept, with certain things being judged to be “past” and certain things seen as “present” (13). Things coded as past can become politically unfashionable, if not outright incompatible, with the imagined perfect future. Attachment to these banished things are coded as nostalgia, its roots as an illness of assimilation re-emerging as a problem of politics. As Kimberly Smith notes, accusations of
nostalgia are routinely deployed in order to encourage a “distrust [of] memories . . . to dismiss them as ‘mere nostalgia’” (515).

The political problem of nostalgia is, however, also articulated to the psychical problem of nostalgia, which Natali associates with Freud’s melancholia. Freud defined melancholy as a pathological attachment of a subject to an object that has been unconsciously lost (17). As Natali’s coverage of Freud and melancholy is brief, Freud’s description of interaction between ego and libido in the melancholic is necessarily elided. For this project, however, Freud’s description of melancholy as the turning of the libidinal cathexis back onto the subject’s ego is useful. As Freud notes, “The self-torments of melancholiacs . . . are without doubt pleasurable . . . a gratification of sadistic tendencies and of hate” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 170). Freud’s understanding of melancholy as pleasurable helps to explain the tendency for subjects to engage in nostalgia in both the personal and the political sense. Through it, the pain of loss is transformed into pleasure, or as Fred Davis has put it, “The nostalgic mood is one whose active tendency is to envelop all that may have been painful or unattractive about the past in a kind of fuzzy, seemingly benign aura” (14). In Freud’s analysis that pleasure, however, arises from the fulfillment of a sadistic urge that ultimately harms the subject who is unable to appropriately grieve for their lost object.

Nostalgia as a term, however, is not often invoked with such an explicitly negative connotation in the modern era. Instead, As Fred Davis argues, “However simply or complexly, crudely or subtly, it is the essence of nostalgic experience to cultivate appreciative stances to former selves. In so doing, it can make the present seem less frightening and more assimilable that it would otherwise appear” (36). This idea, of nostalgia functioning as a coping mechanism for change at both the individual and social level, is quite widespread in the literature on nostalgia. Janelle Wilson expresses this idea when she describes nostalgia as “a form of leisure” allowing subjects to slow down the pace of the world by turning their minds to the past, giving them time to assimilate new conditions and information (29). Lowenthal offers
that “attachment to familiar places may buffer social upheaval” by allowing subjects to feel connected to cherished values even at the same time they fear those values have been lost in the present” (13).

Davis adds the idea that nostalgia allows subjects to address the threat of discontinuity between their past and present selves caused by difficult emotions and memories (34). Across authors, modern conceptions of nostalgia (meaning those separated from the original disease-based understanding of the phenomenon) allow those who experience nostalgia to feel connected to a time different than the now that they look upon fondly. And that time need not have even been particularly halcyon for the subject, as “Almost anything from our past can emerge as an object of nostalgia, provided that we can somehow view it in a pleasant light” (Lowenthal viii).

As with memory and history, the understanding of nostalgia that I employ in this project draws from many sources. The multiplicity of perspectives necessary to construct a functional definition of nostalgia vis a vis community management is both a reflection of the complex history of nostalgia, and of the variety of deployments and purposes for which nostalgia is employed in community management. I share Lowenthal’s, Wilson’s, and Smith’s understanding of nostalgia as being a bittersweet affective experience that creates a sense of continuity with the past by comparing it to the present. That sense of continuity, as these authors state, can help individuals and cultures adjust to and accommodate disruption. I also agree with Lowenthal that, “What we are nostalgic for reveals what we value, what we deem worthwhile and important,” while also agreeing with Stacy Day that nostalgia can be manufactured and with Kimberly Smith that nostalgia, as a term, is often deployed rhetorically in ways that are not necessarily reflective of the actual lived experience of nostalgia (Day 1, Smith 507). In this project, then, I see nostalgia as a phenomenon that has both an individual and social, possibly contagious, affective quality. Further, nostalgia as both an experience and as an idea can be deployed towards a variety of ends. Being nostalgic is a statement about a person’s affective orientation toward memory or history. Nostalgia is then the phenomenon of a bittersweet, affective orientation towards a
memory or history. From this definition, I turn my attention to how community managers employ nostalgia to carry out their work.

3.11 — Community Management and Nostalgia

In community management, nostalgia often serves to reframe earlier events or game conditions in a more positive light. For instance, a community manager for *World of Warcraft* might encourage a shared reminiscence on the first days players spent in the major cities of the game. In doing so, the community may de-emphasize or even recast many of the real issues the game suffered in its early day. For example, the fact that players often could not move in the cities due to the severe server congestion goes from being a major headache and an embarrassing gaffe for Blizzard to become a charming story about the rough edges of a beloved franchise to which millions have devoted years of their lives. This sort of re-remembering is an instantiation of what Ekaterina Haskins has labeled as "participatory engagement" with the processes of "archival preservation and retrieval" (407). This type of engagement, however, is not necessarily the critical engagement that Haskins argues for. Instead, it may well be an example of what Haskin’s refers to as the "self-congratulatory amnesia" of electronic memory, where the bad pieces of an event are subsumed to the “Valentine view” of the past. At the same time, community management practices (as discussed in Chapter 2) discourage total censorship of the negative, including negative memories, because of the productive and necessary role of conflict in community formation and maintenance. So instead, community managers in the computer game industry allow players to speak about that negative memory, while also creating a space where that negative memory can be countered with, and even altered by, the positive memories of other players.

As an example, I want to analyze the following post from the *Everquest 2* Facebook page.
The post in question shows a player avatar from *Everquest 2* wearing a mismatched set of armor and weapons. The caption of the picture reads, “Once upon a time...Before there were appearance slots,” a reference to a time in the game before players were able to modify their characters’ appearance at will. The memory being raised by the post is then a reference to a time when the game was missing a feature that, in my own experience as a person who played *Everquest 2* for nearly a decade, served as a major mode of game play. Nonetheless, the responses to the post are almost uniformly positive. For instance, one player states “My ranger [an in-game character type] ran around in green armor, purple pants and boots and yellow gloves. #fashionforward” (Adams). Further responses include statements such as:

![Figure 3.11 – Facebook screenshot – Style over substance comment](image)

The most elaborate response was an entire story, told with in-game pictures and captions that detail the time before appearance slots:
While all representing different levels of engagement, each of these examples highlights players re-encountering a memory of a time with fewer options, yet also a time they look upon with some fondness.

Another theme in the responses is the number of players who mention that, prior to appearance slots, they would prioritize their appearance over weapon and armor statistics. For example:

Scott Wilson: I refused. I would wear armor way below my level so I was still stylish.

Like · Reply · 1 · December 4 at 4:04 pm
Such responses represent a reframing of player memories through the nostalgic experience. Statements like the one above can be read to say, “The original systems of Everquest 2 were not well-developed enough for me to represent my character like I wanted. Those systems were so under developed, in fact, that I sacrificed in-game performance to meet my needs for proper character presentation.” This is, of course, a reading that extrapolates from a much more simple statement. That said, paired with the earlier statement from a player who’s guild constantly died due to this very fact, it is an extrapolation with evidentiary support.

The previous are distinctly more sweet than bitter. Other responses, however, reflect nostalgia’s characteristic mourning for a lost value:

![Troy Christensen](image1.png)

Troy Christensen Back then we were creative. Sadly today anyone with real money can look anyway they want.
Like · Reply · 8 · December 4 at 2:02pm

![John C Phillips](image2.png)

John C Phillips Yeah, appearance slots kind of added to the blandness of the game. Why quest for stuff when you can just buy it...
Like · Reply · December 5 at 9:16am

*Figure 3.14 – Facebook screenshot – Nostalgia and mourning*

At the same time, such responses are coming from players who, at the very least, continue to “Like” the game on Facebook and read its related posts with enough interests to formulate and post a response. So while the value may be considered “lost,” by these players, such a loss has not been serious enough to sever their connection to it. Such responses are, in fact, a good example of nostalgia as a buffer, creating affective and psychic space for players to make room for changes in the game while still mourning the loss of a value they feel is lost. Additionally, both of the above responses were almost immediately countered by other players, insisting that the appearance slot system was a good thing for the game and for players. This creates a discourse between the negative and positive memories of individual players. This discourse, of course, also means that the positive memory could be soured by exposure to the
negative. The experience of nostalgia, however, is uniquely resistant to the souring of a memory because it is based on a longing for the thing past, not a revulsion towards it. Nostalgia is unique in this respect (in contrast with other types of encounter with the past), because the nostalgic experience requires an affectionate affective orientation towards the past. Loss of that orientation is literally a loss of the nostalgic experience, a pleasure that few are quick to part with.

The Everquest II community team’s post about appearance slots, however, served purposes beyond simple reminiscence on a weekly basis. The post came during the yearlong celebration of Everquest 2’s 10 year anniversary. The community management team’s most elaborate nostalgia inducing communication came through a YouTube video called “Achievement Unlocked! A 10 Year Everquest Adventure.” This video serves as a link to a whole series of other videos, specifically the launch trailers for the original game and for each subsequent expansion. Each of these videos presents the content of the upcoming expansion set to majestic music, with both in-game scenery and cinematic cut scenes. Through these videos, the community management team is able to remind players of the excitement and anticipation they experience prior to each release. Further, the experience of actually playing through the expansion’s content is recalled to the memory, filtered now through the nostalgic experience of the 10 year celebration. As one response states:

> TommyDaGreatest 3 weeks ago
> This expansion IS Everquest II...
> Reply · 🇺🇸 · 🎥

*Figure 3.15 – Facebook comment – Everquest expansion*

While nostalgia is a powerful tool for community managers in computer game communities, it is also one that must be carefully managed to avoid players becoming so enamored with the past that they no longer desire the future. This may be why the Everquest 2 community team largely limits these sorts of reminiscences to special events or “Throw Back Thursday.” Of the last 23 posts on the Everquest 2
Facebook page (as of this writing on 12/7/2014), 22 of them have been focused on current content, server status, or an upcoming expansion. Through careful encouragement of player nostalgia, the past is appreciated, but does not become the primary focus of player attention. Such a focus actually betrays the essence of nostalgia, with the past replacing the present. Nostalgia, after all, assumes that the times being remembered are “safely, rather than sadly beyond recall,” their absence a source of pain but also of (possibly melancholy) pleasure (Lowenthal 28). But what of people, values, and things that may be well and truly gone, their absence unmarked by the sweetness of nostalgia? To examine this final type of encounter with the past, I turn to theories on memorial.

3.12 — Memorial

Memorial, as an encounter with the past, represents a particular type of materialization of history. Memorial, as defined by David Lowenthal, is a sub-type of relic, a “residue of a process” from the past (187). Relics can be old clothes, photographs, buildings, or even natural geographical formations (such as trees or rocks) that have been the focus of some social or individual value in the past. Lowenthal argues that relics propagate as “the past recedes from us” as part of the attempt to hold on to the past. Relics, however, are also allowed to develop signs of “antiquity,” signs that provide evidence of the passage of time to a viewer. Patina, for instance, is a sign of antiquity in painting. Antiquity is itself a type of carefully managed decay, a physical or material deterioration in the relic. Decay may mean the rotting of wood, the collapse of part of a building, or the fading of a photograph (131). The presence of antiquity in a relic provides it with an aura of important meaning, despite the fact that “relics mean only what memory and history can convey” (131). Lowenthal’s point is that a relic’s actual meaning (the meaning conveyed by the history or memory of the relic) is changed, often being considered more important or vital, because it bears signs that time has passed since its creation. Relics, alongside memory, history, and nostalgia, exist in a network of relations that can change their meaning.
Memorial, as a subtype of relic, has these same characteristics. But memorials, as Aaron Hess notes, also represent sites of contestation amongst a variety of voices that seek access to the past, and that the very presence of a memorial is “agenda setting” (813, 819). This is particularly true in regard to what Hess calls official memorials. As he puts it, “Official memorials are privileged in their stature, unhampered and commercially unobstructed in their preferred method of memorializing” (821). Official memorial enjoys support from bodies with regulatory or social force enough to ensure their continued existence and promotion, at least for the foreseeable future. As such, the values and influence of those supporting bodies are being instantiated in those memorials, the politics of people finding their way into material form and setting public agendas for both what and how things are remembered. Unofficial memorials (such as a roadside memorial to a person who has died in an accident), conversely, can conflict with the regulation of public space that may limit its size, the public’s access to it, or its very existence.

The discussion of memorial so far has focused on physical memorials. This study, of course, focuses on computer games and their virtual worlds. What of virtual memorial? Gregory Ulmer argues that virtual memorials (such as 9-11 memorial web pages) are at the forefront of a new type of memorial practice, “a fundamental experience joining individual and collective agency” (xxi). These new memorial practices, he argues, require “electracy,” a new form of literacy that embodies the “kind of skills and facility necessary to exploit the full communicative potential of new electronic media” (xii). Ulmer is arguing that the tools used to develop, promote, and maintain physical memorial will not be sufficient for the unique demands of virtual memorial. Ekaterina Haskins makes a similar point when she says, “Digital memory, more than any other form of mediation, collapses the assumed distinction between modern ‘archival’ memory and traditional ‘lived memory’ by combining the function of storage and ordering on the one hand, and of presence and interactivity on the other” (401). Aaron Hess furthers the distinction between physical and virtual memorial by noting that virtual memorial allows for
updating to respond to a changed context (825). This allows virtual memorials to function in a more rhetorically flexible manner than physical memorials. Further, Hess argues, virtual memorial grants more power to “vernacular communities” due to the greater access to both tools of production and distribution. This greater access means that individual people or small groups can produce, distribute, and maintain a virtual memorial that forwards their particular values to a far greater degree than that same group could have managed through a physical memorial.

Ekaterina Haskins, however, offers a valuable warning that other virtual memorial theorists have neglected. She says, “It is one thing to collect and digitize large quantities of memorial artifacts; it is quite another to display them in ways that stimulate not only spectatorship but also meaningful participation” (408). Haskins argues further, “If archival preservation and retrieval are not balanced by mechanisms that stimulate participatory engagement, electronic memory may lead to self-congratulatory amnesia” (407). In both cases, Haskins is highlighting a fundamental feature of both material and virtual memorial: viewer response. Both types of memorial ask that the viewer somehow respond to the encounter with the past. That response may be an initially affective one, such as grief or happiness about the past manifesting in the present through the encounter with the memorial. But memorial encourages a viewer not only to experience that feeling in the moment but also to let the feeling spur some type of action or attitude. In the case of Hess’ 9-11 memorial websites, for instance, the goal was to encourage a particular mode of support for military action, or even to encourage viewers to question or reject the official historical record about the attacks.

These various theories provide a useful framework for the examination of memorial in community management. Clearly, physical and virtual memorial share some features, such as a call for viewer response, but virtual memory also has unique features, such as vernacular access, that physical memorial theories cannot adequately account for. At the same time, Lowenthal (and to a lesser extent, Hess) and his connection of memorial to relic remind that memorial not only represents a process of the
past made manifest, but also that what values memorial valorizes represent not only past but present political projects. In this way, memorial can be seen as an attempt to recover the thing, often a value, which is seen as lost. As such, a memorial’s literal subject is often only a part of that which is being memorialized, and through memorialization, anchored into the present. Additionally, memorial shares characteristics with history, in that memorial often represents an eliding of the lived experience of what is being memorialized. Memorial, in fact, can create history for the community by influencing how history is remembered. But this is fundamentally history as myth, the lived experience of individuals becoming indistinct, and the time before the event becoming difficult to even remember, as the inciting event becomes more and more distant in time. What is left is a community altered in both its memory and its memory of the memory, a feeling that “this is how things have always been” around both the site itself, and of the event that is being memorialized. As such, my examination of memorial in the remainder of this chapter will focus not only on what can be learned from what is being memorialized, but also the agenda setting call to action that is instantiated by the act of memorialization.

3.13 — Community Management and Memorial

Memorial, especially in computer games, often requires many more resources than memory or history. Sanctioned or official memorials, for instance, often require hours of developer time to create in the game world. Those memorials are incorporated into the game world through player discovery or announcement. As such, they become part of the fabric of the community, a reminder of an absence that the memorial commemorates. And if, as Aaron Hess argues, "The process of commemoration, simply by what is or is not commemorated, is inherently ideological in its formation," then these memorials instantiate some part of the development organization’s values. Thus, my examination of these memorials will focus on if/how a variety of memorials instantiate recognizable values of community and how those values are encouraged not only through the memorial but also through the community manager’s promotion of those values.
Some such memorials are small, such as the decorated headstone to late Blizzard employee Jesse Morales, while others are quite elaborate, such as the Shrine of the Fallen Warrior dedicated to Michel Koiter. Both of these memorials, however, are of a type reflective of the material world, digital analogs of the type of marble and statuary based memorials commonly found in actual graveyards or capital cities. The digital plasticity of computer games, however, also allows for another type of memorial: the NPC. For instance, Blizzard entertainment’s World of Warcraft contains multiple NPC characters named after real-life employees and players who have passed away. These NPC characters are often based on the deceased individual’s in-game avatar and they may even carry out behaviors consistent with the player’s habits while alive. In the case of the late Ezra Chatterton, his voice was actually recorded and is now used by an NPC.

Such official memorials serve to blur the line between the virtual and the material, and even the living and the dead. Assuredly, the material body of the player has been lost to death. And that avatar has, in some sense, died along with the person. Yet the avatar is also transferable, it is data. All of its features (stats, clothing, achievements, etc.) could be reproduced by someone who was very exacting. But, inevitably, that avatar would not be the same avatar, because the original avatar existed in a social network in both the material and the digital worlds and its behaviors were partially driven by the social/cultural forces of the respective material/virtual worlds and their myriad interactions. Thus, memory about and memorial for the dead person and avatar becomes a double bind of the permanently lost (the material body) and the infinitely, imperfectly reproducible (the avatar).

3.14 — Memorial Examples – RibbitRibbit

The next site of study I want to examine highlights the fluidity of memory and how it can slide into memorial. It concerns the sad story of a six year old boy who had been diagnosed with cancer. The boy’s mother and father were long-time Everquest II players and had taken to playing the game with
their son. The boy’s in-game avatar was an anthropomorphic frog named RibbitRibbit. As his mother, forum name Myrose, stated in a post on the official forums of *Everquest II*:

He has a frog that he likes to run around Tenebrous Tangle Island on; however, it is sparse and he has requested to add trees, fences, stairs, animals and all kinds of other items to make his island fun and exciting.

Are there any decorators out there that would be willing to assist in adding these items (and any others their imagination poses) to help me make the island even more fun for him. I don’t know how much I’ll be able to accomplish on my own while still providing him quality time to enjoy it.

The child’s mother quickly found her request met by hundreds of players from across the world. Players paid to transfer maximum level characters to the Guk server where Myrose’s son played and formed a guild called Lilipad Jungle. These players then began completing quests called “writs” en masse in order to gain the various forms of in-game currency and status necessary to upgrade RibbitRibbit’s island home. Maximum level crafter characters also transferred over, using their in-game crafting skills to create a variety of furnishings, toys, and pets for RibbitRibbit to play with on his island. This included a large variety of items that do not technically exist in the *Everquest II* world, including a roller coaster, an aquarium full of fish, and a hopscotch court. These items were create by cleverly combining items that already exist in the game in novel ways. Players then went on to purchase further plots of in-game land for RibbitRibbit (purchases largely made with real world currency) and to fill them with toys and decorations for the young boy. *Everquest II* community manager Colette “Dexella” Murphy, along with community members and others on the *Everquest II* staff, then organized a weekend community event in the newly built homes to celebrate RibbitRibbit and his family. The gathering was reportedly so large that it threatened to crash the Guk server. The outpouring of community goodwill to RibbitRibbit was heavily reported on by gaming media outlets. *Massively.com* ran four separate stories that dealt with
community reaction to RibbitRibbit, with three of the articles published between March and April of 2013. There was also a small amount of mainstream coverage, with the Toronto Star news running a story about the outpouring of community support (Menon).

Massively.com’s sister site, Joystiq, ran a story on May 26th, 2012 that reported on the passing of RibbitRibbit. MMORPG.com, a site where news is largely generated by user posting, had multiple posts memorializing the boy’s passing. Allakhazam.com, perhaps the premier MMORPG reference site in the world, compiled all of the stories about RibbitRibbit, including a video scrapbook that had been created for him by community members, into a Wikipedia like entry. Finally, in March 2013, Community Manager Drexella held an event called “RibbitRibbit Day” on the Guk server. She described the event thusly, “RibbitRibbitt Day is being held close to the anniversary of the original Lillipad Jungle Project. We hope to have an event every year with a chance to tell stories, add to the memorial and remember what it is to be a true community” (Dexella). At the time of this writing, Lillipad Jungle still exists with 51 unique accounts as members. RibbitRibbit’s character is still among them.

RibbitRibbit, and the celebration day named after him, represent a memorial holiday, as opposed to a memorial like a grave or statue. This is of particular import because of the nature of what is being memorialized. As stated above, many players who have passed away have received in-game graves or representations of their characters. In this case, however, what is being memorialized is not just RibbitRibbit but also the community that came together in reaction to RibbitRibbit’s illness and death. The day of memorial, the homes still in existence, and the still extant guild represent a memorialization of the values of that community (kindness, sacrifice, community itself). As witnessed by the relative inactivity in the guild after RibbitRibbit’s death, these communities and the attendant values are often ephemeral. Without the core task to focus on, players drift back to the demands of their own lives. At the same time, players desire a way to stay connected to those values, hence the need for a memorial. Further, because the homes, guild, and day are still active, players are still able to interact
with the memorial in a participatory way by hosting events and celebrations of RibbitRibbit and his attendant community. These opportunities for interaction allow the community manager to constantly reinforce the values and norms of the community, and to create a continuity for those values and norms that extends from the past all the way into the present day, hopefully ensuring the presence of those values and norms in the future.

3.15 — Helm of the Blind – WoW

The next memorial came to my attention through a website dedicated to news about the popular game World of Warcraft. Wowinsider.com posted a story on January 12, 2012 about two players, Hexu (real name Ben Shaw) and Davidian (real name Owen), both members of a guild called “Die Safe” (Poisso). Due to injuries sustained during the fighting in Basra, Iraq, Hexu had both eyes surgically removed. In order to allow him to play (including playing in large, complex raid encounters), Davidian had taken up the role of Hexu’s in-game guide dog. Through a system of voice communication and in-game add-ons, Hexu and Ben had progressed with the other members of their guild through many of the game’s most challenging encounters. The responses to that story on Wowinsider were effusive. Comments such as, “[T]his is such a cool story. it’s always great to hear about the amazing people we have in our community : )” were common among the literally hundreds of comments (Tabardsrock). The next piece of this story did not come until September of that same year, when both players were honored with in-game items named after them.
Each item is designed to be worn by the honorees’ avatars. Unlike RibbitRibbit, however, neither of these players has passed away. Instead, what is being instantiated in these relics is the value of friendship and support that their behavior represents. Community manager Draztal reinforces this conclusion in a thread started by the guild leader of Die Safe in which she thanks Blizzard for creating the items. In his reply, Draztal says “Blue tagging the thread so more people can read more about what you’re doing at Die Safe. Simply. Amazing.” Blue tagging is what Draztal has done simply by responding to the post, meaning that other players can see that a Blizzard employee has commented in the thread, using the distinctive blue font reserved for employees. These blue tagged posts receive far more attention from community members because they often represent official statements from Blizzard on issues of community concern. Overall, the thread had 195 community replies, each one expressing admiration and happiness about the creation of the items, items that continue to be a relatively hot commodity in World of Warcraft. In creating these items, and then through blue tagging a post, Blizzard has set an agenda for what sort of behaviors they wish to see in the game. Davidian and Hexu have stopped being just players, and become embodiments of the sorts of community values that Blizzard (at least publicly) values. By memorializing the players and these values through in-game items, those values are anchored in the present of the game where other players can model them. For the community manager, such memorials represent a source of reinforcement of community values that
does not require the community manager’s direct action. The memorial is “agenda setting,” in the words of Aaron Hess, and the agenda it establishes is one that serves the development organizations (and the community managers) goals (813).

3.16 — Preliminary Conclusions

In this chapter, I have examined several types of encounters with the past and how computer game community managers interact with and employ those encounters. As I have shown, sometimes the community manager is able to produce these encounters for specific purposes (Everquest II’s 10 year anniversary celebration, Hexu and Davidian’s items). At other times, the community manager enters into a discussion with the community, the past already playing a powerful role that must be managed (ShiftySamurai and funktastic-). In either case, however, the past demands to be addressed. Though memory, history, nostalgia, and memorial are different types of encounters with the past, the distinctions among them are often slippery and unstable. For the community manager, the slipperiness can be a boon, because it allows bad memories to be reconsidered through nostalgia, values thought lost to be resurrected through memorial, and history re-written through the resistance of memory. In each case, I believe that much more research is possible about specific instantiations of these phenomena in computer games. Further, there are interesting avenues available to study the rhetoric of history in games that have no history (Bungie’s 2014 Destiny, for example), but those particular cases are outside of the scope of this study. Instead, I will turn next to the ways in which community managers can effect play, community behavior, and community discourse through careful management of the community member life cycle.
Chapter 4 Newbz: The Membership Life Cycle and the Management of Sub-Communities

4.1 — Introduction

So far in my discussion of community management in computer game communities, the focus has been on managing interactions, specifically conflict interactions or encounters with the past. This chapter will not abandon this focus, but it will expand the field of vision for analysis. In particular, I will be extending my analysis to the structures used to manage the various sub-communities within the larger community. In this chapter, I argue that well-developed communities can become so large and complex, with so many sub-communities, that no reasonably sized community management team can effectively manage them. Instead, community managers employ “structures of membership” that allow members to govern themselves. These structures of membership represent social positions within the community, relatively bounded in by standards of knowledge of and responsibility to the community, both of which encourage behaviors supportive of the community’s health. Through these structures, community managers encourage self-governance, as well as cultivation of elders deemed suitable by the community manager.

In order to frame this discussion, I first examine literature regarding communities of practice and learning communities, establishing their relationship to one another along a spectrum. From this base, I develop a model which allows me to map various activities and sub-communities according to the scope of their focus, as well as their placement on the learning community - community of practice spectrum. Next, I examine how Amy Kim’s membership life cycle, developed in Community Building on the Web, can be mapped against these axes. Together, these concepts provide me with an analytical frame through which I can examine how community managers are able to establish structures of membership that help them to manage the otherwise unruly tangle of sub-communities. In the end, this chapter provides a better understanding of how community managers encourage self-governance in sub-communities, a move that helps to sustain and develop the larger community through the
cultivation of sub-communities. Before that, however, I want to articulate a bit of my own past with a sub-community, an experience that provides a brief, situated history of one way that sub-communities can support play.

4.2 — Positionality

Cooperative playing of computer games started for many people in the living room or den of their homes. In these settings, the earliest home players would attempt to conquer games such as Joust, Pac-Man, or Tempest, continually refining their strategies through both painstaking trial and error and through commiseration and communication with others in their social circle(s) playing the same games. My own history with computer games began with the Nintendo Entertainment System in the mid-1980s, my brother and I swapping the controller back and forth as we attempted to conquer the hops and jumps of Super Mario Brothers. As many first time computer game players do, I would jerk the controller up when I wanted to make Luigi jump (as the younger brother, I was always Luigi). My brother, Jeff, would harangue me about my wasteful movement, telling me to stay still and focus on the controller and the small hand movements that would help me overcome the level’s challenges. Working together, we got better and better. But he eventually moved away from computer games, and towards BMX and other outdoor sports. I stayed inside and delved deeper and deeper into computer games, particularly Role Playing Games (RPGs) like Shining Force and Final Fantasy II.

These games, however, presented difficulties far beyond controlling my kinaesthetically mimetic movement in Super Mario, or mastering the aiming challenges of Duck Hunt or Contra. Instead, these games presented me with puzzles, mazes, inventory management, and far more involved, sometimes emotionally challenging stories. Because I no longer had my brother to play with, I asked my parents for a subscription to Nintendo Power, a monthly magazine by Nintendo that provided both guidance and propaganda about the most recent Nintendo releases, every issue tagged on the cover as, “The source for Nintendo players straight from the pros.” Being particularly susceptible to advertisement of any sort
as a child, I accepted every piece of information in *Nintendo Power* as the proverbial Gospel truth. Wanting to be part of the *Nintendo Power* team, I even submitted my own tips and tricks to the magazine (mostly about the game *Star Tropics*) as an official player-agent.

When my parents purchased a Sega Genesis and, later, a Sega CD for me, *Nintendo Power* lost my loyalty. During this period, I generally managed to overcome each game's challenges by myself. Until *Lunar: The Silver Star*. This game was one of an influx of Japanese Role Playing Games (JRPGs) available on the Sega CD in the mid-1990s. Having played through a large portion of *Lunar* successfully, I suddenly found myself unable to find my next quest objective. Even after hours of searching and fighting seemingly endless waves of monsters, I had made no progress. So I began a concerted begging effort to convince my parents to allow me to call a pay-by-the-minute help line, hosted by Sega itself if memory serves. The most effective strategy, and the one that seemed to cause my parents to relent, was that I had no one to ask for help in my friends or family. So I could struggle with the game, alone, or they could let me pay them cash for a few minutes of computer game advice from a knowledgeable stranger. Thankfully, my parents gave me permission, and a two minute conversation with the helpful agent pointed me in the correct direction for a small fee.

As the console generations rolled on, I continued to buy the most up-to-date systems (now with my own money), and I found friends who could play with me. We figured out the challenges of each game together, often calling one another late at night to ask “Which direction is the boss in?” or “Do you remember the motion for this move?” My hometown did not have widespread internet access (and my family did not own an internet capable computer) until the late 90s, but when I did finally get access to the Internet, a whole new world of support opened up. Individuals or small collectives of friends would set-up makeshift websites to celebrate their favorite computer games, offering guides, tips, and tricks for free, untethered by the corporate demands of my previous support sources.¹ To this day, the internet continues to be my primary source for information about how to overcome computer game
challenges I can’t seem to master on my own. Sometimes these resources provide the solution to a puzzle (in the case of games like the Professor Layton series with its seemingly endless and devilishly hard puzzles). Other times, it is an ability rotation in an MMORPG like World of Warcraft, or how to properly juke in a MOBA like League of Legends, or a question about the lore of a particular character in Rift. Sites like GameFAQs, YouTube, and a variety of fan and official forums have provided me with guidance on almost every aspect of the games I play. It is from this position, as both an active user and active contributor to the above mentioned helper sub-communities, that I carry out my analysis in this chapter. As a first step in that analytical process, I want to cover two important theories of community: the learning community and the community of practice.

4.3 — A Note on Terminology: Community vs. Communities

In the first three chapters of this project, I have often referred to “communities.” In particular, I often refer to communities that community managers manage. The plural form, “communities,” has been purposely used. Indeed, reference to “community” can be misleading because it can lead to the assumption that computer game fan communities are monolithic and unified, when they are actually often an assemblage of many smaller sub-communities, each with their own goals and interests. In this chapter, I will often be referring to sub-communities within the larger community. In an effort to avoid confusion for the reader, references to “community” are to this articulated collection of sub-communities, not the sub-communities themselves.

4.4 — Learning Communities

The literature on learning communities can be roughly divided into literature that focuses on primary and secondary education (Smith) versus literature that focuses on workplace or professional learning communities (DuFour; Wiseman, Arroyo, and Richeter; Buch and Barron). There is some overlap between these categories (Lenning), but distinct boundaries neither exist nor does the literature seem to be particularly concerned with establishing such divisions. Instead, the literature ranges widely across
topics such as an explication of the features of learning communities (Kilpatrick, Barret, and Jones); the
development of learning communities from both the ground-up, and in existing school systems
(Groundwater-Smith; Love); ethnographic research on learning communities (Cocklin); learning
communities as sources of professional development for teachers (Butt; Laufgraben and Shapiro), as
well as the ethical challenges of learning communities (Coombe). In each case, however, learning
communities are differentiated from other types of educational communities, because learning is
established as “what is important in the work of the school” (Johnson 28). This may, on its surface, be
seen as the point of any school. The development of learning community theory, however, has emerged
as a response to the feeling among educators that the school system has become overly regimented and
focused on individual student performance on tests. This has led to a reduction in the opportunities for
student-driven learning and professional development opportunities for teachers. As Thomas
Sergiovanni puts it, “The identification of learners and learning as central [to a learni
8ng community], as
the core work of the school, is critical when schools are striving to reduce intensification and overload,
and establish priorities for action” (28).

Further, “Learning communities . . . not only facilitate the sharing of knowledge, but have the
potential to create new knowledge that can be used for the benefit of the community as a whole and/or
its individual members” (Kilpatrick, Barrett, and Johnson 3). These definitions position learning
communities oppositionally to schools that focus on skills training for future employment. Skills training,
obviously, is a form of learning, but a learning community places the goal of learning ahead of all else.
This means that skills training can be sacrificed to the larger goals of “learning” in a learning community.
Further, “In a learning community the aim is to maximise learning for all members of the community”
(Johnson 30). Such an orientation requires that learning opportunities for the whole community must be
valued above the individual learning goals of community members. In a learning community, learning is
a fundamentally collective endeavor. In fact, argues Richard Butt, “A group of individuals does not
become a learning community unless and until collective agendas are established and collaborative
efforts are undertaken” (60). Individual advancement and learning are valued, but those individual gains
and goals are measured against the gains and goals of the community. Again, this contrasts with a vision
of schooling and education where a student’s individual grades or test results are seen as the primary (if
not the sole) mark of success in education.

Such contrasts establish that learning communities are not simply a different theoretical
orientation towards learning, but also a distinct material and political orientation toward education. It is
this orientation that makes learning communities of such interest to this study. In particular, learning
community theory provides a way to account for the behaviors of communities whose primary function
is exploration, not a movement towards any particular goal or project. Further, learning community
theory accounts for the way that communities may begin as one thing (a skills focused or grade focused
learning organization) and transition into something else (a learning community). Learning communities
are a type of community that becomes, often emerging from an already pre-existing system of
education, with such emergence requiring not only a theoretical shift towards the work of school, but
also a change in the politics around education in general. The first level of change is often about
changing the culture of the educational system in question. As Neville Johnson notes, “The school
‘culture’ is about the internal conditions of the school community in that, at one level, it provides
information about: what is important in the work of the school (vision, goals, objectives and learning
outcomes valued); how the school goes about doing this work . . . and how people in the school
community relate to each other” (27). This means that becoming a learning community may require that
the existing goals of the school or organization be modified or outright abandoned.

The literature referenced so far has focused largely on education in K-12 and post-secondary
education institutions. But learning communities have also been studied outside of this context. For
instance, Peter Senge offers a definition of what he calls a “learning organisation,” which he defines as
“organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together” (3). This definition is, obviously, utopian in its view of the learning organization. Andy Hargreaves offers a valuable counterpoint by asserting that the language of the learning organization can obscure (either on purpose or by accident) the deeply rooted economic motivations of the professional world (Coombe 87). Economic motivations, it should be noted, that also impact K-12 and postsecondary education systems. The primary differentiation between a learning community and a learning organization, then, is largely the setting itself, with the literature on learning communities referencing schools, and the literature on learning organizations referencing businesses. Obviously, the learning communities under examination in this chapter are not part of the educational system, nor are they business learning communities. Instead, the communities in question are the clients of a business. Nonetheless, the literature on learning communities provides valuable analytical categories to this project for examining certain sub-communities and community behaviors in computer game fan communities. In particular, computer game fan communities, just as learning communities do, often produce and consume knowledge collectively. In addition, computer game fan communities often have specific sub-communities whose primary focus is on learning. As mentioned above, this does not mean that the “community” as a whole functions as a learning community. But learning communities do exist as sub-communities, and their influence can be seen throughout other sub-communities.

My review of the literature, then, leads me to the following definition of learning communities, and the one that I will be employing in this chapter: A learning community is an organization of collaborating members dedicated to facilitating both the learning and the knowledge production goals of its members. Learning communities can emerge in a variety of settings (educational, commercial, social, etc.), but regardless of their site of emergence, they must be actively cultivated in order to
encourage the success of the collective learning goals of their members. Particular goals or markers of success and failure may change, but the overall goal of a productive learning environment underlies all others.

4.5 — Communities of Practice

Learning community theory, however, does not adequately address the behaviors and practices of all of the sub-communities under examination. In particular, learning community theory focuses so intently on “learning” as the work of the community that it cannot accommodate communities where learning primarily occurs in service to other practices. For instance, in an MMOPRG raiding community, learning the intricacies of a particular raid encounter is not done for the sake of learning. Instead, learning occurs so that the encounter can be defeated. Learning, as a practice, is thus articulated to other types of practice as a mechanism by which those other practices are carried out successfully. A community of practice, as defined by Lave and Wenger, is “a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping Communities of Practice” (98). Etienne Wegner, arguably the foremost proponent and theorist of communities of practice, has continued to develop this definition through later collaborations, defining communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder np). This later definition offers more concrete markers for what type of relationships and organizations count as a community of practice. Communities of practice are organized not around job title, employment, and so on, but around a shared set of problems or concerns. This means that communities of practice can and do often emerge from workplaces. Wegner’s research, in fact, often relates directly to the use of communities of practice within business organizations. Such a focus is undoubtedly a consequence of Wegner’s assertion that his research on communities of practice is not the creation of a new idea, but the recognition and naming of already extant relationships between
master and apprentice, and between colleagues trading stories (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder np). These inter-personal relationships form the foundation of any community of practice, with knowledge passing from senior members to new members, and with new members bringing innovation and new ideas to their seniors.

Of course, with so much knowledge circulating among community members, knowledge management becomes a concern. In particular, managing knowledge so that it remains accessible to community members, as well as updating and correcting that body of knowledge as necessary. Communities of practice, according to Wegner, et. al., provide organizations with a way to manage knowledge, particularly the embodied knowledge of members that is difficult or impossible to document and codify otherwise (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder np). Wegner argues that not only does knowledge management impact the performance of individual practitioners in a domain of knowledge, but that it also presents companies with a valuable asset in the competition “for talent—for people with the expertise and capabilities to generate and implement innovative ideas” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder np). In the computer game communities under examination in this work, players (especially the kind of players who will frequent forums, Twitter feeds, and YouTube channels looking to both contribute and consume knowledge produced by the community) are the talent. Companies and games that succeed, particularly ones that succeed over the long term, are in a fight for talented, dedicated players. Strong communities of practice that employ a robust knowledge strategy are valuable tools in that competition for talent, and the community manager can play a vital role in talent acquisition and recruitment.

According to Kimble, Hildreth, and Wright, communities of practice are a particularly effective way to manage hard and soft knowledge. Hard knowledge is “those aspects [of knowledge] that are more formalized and that can be structured, articulated and thus ‘captured’,” whereas soft knowledge is “more subtle, implicit and not so easily articulated” (221). Wegner also makes a distinction between
types of knowledge, though he discusses it as explicit (hard) knowledge versus tacit (soft) knowledge, noting that tacit knowledge is much more difficult to gather and maintain because it is embodied in the activities of people and that, “Sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling, conversation, coaching, and apprenticeship” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder n.p.) In both formulations, the distinction between types of knowledges comes down to whether it is relatively easy to articulate and capture. Hard knowledge, for example, is a recipe for a pie. The steps have been laid out, the oven temperature clearly marked, and the card the recipe is written on can be easily archived and organized. Soft knowledge, conversely, is the experiential knowledge that lets a pastry chef know that the dough is too wet or dry just by its look, or that the crust is just a second from being perfectly browned. Interaction with hard knowledge (reading the recipe) can create soft knowledge through experience, and vice versa, positioning hard and soft knowledge not as distinct types of knowledge, but simply knowledge that has been recorded and transferred differently. After all, the baker’s soft knowledge of when the crust is done could be written down and shared in a cookbook, only to have a new baker take and alter the recipe as new situations arise.

This review of the literature leads me to the following definition: Communities of practice form around particular interests and the associated problems of that interest. They connect members who share those interests across organizations, geographies, and demographics. The community of practice, however, does not efface those differences. The community of practice instead encourages members to leverage those differences, turning them into an engine for innovations that solve the problems that the community of practice is involved with. Finally, the community of practice allows members to create, share, and deploy knowledge, both hard and soft, about their area of interests.

4.6 — Learning Communities and Communities of Practice: Why both?

Learning communities and communities of practice obviously share many similarities. They both value and encourage collaborative learning. They both represent approaches distinct from conventional
visions of education and business. They also promise more functional, effective, and fulfilling experiences for members who wish to improve themselves and their practices. Considering these similarities, what is the value of employing both terminologies in this chapter?

Both terms are valuable because, as Benedict Anderson says, “Communities are to be distinguished . . . by the style in which they are imagined” (20). And learning communities and communities of practice are different imaginings of community despite their many similar features. Learning communities represent an understanding of community focused on attitude toward learning. This attitude can cross disciplinary, linguistic, and class differences without necessarily effacing those differences. Learning communities encourage exploration and experimentation, but because the focus is on learning as the work of the community, there is a low threshold of required information for new members to participate. This allows a learning community to have a wide focus, with members’ many different topics and interests able to be accommodated. Communities of practice, in contrast, represent an orientation toward action. This understanding of community is focused on how community can improve the performance of its members, and solving the problems particular to their interests. Communities of practice have a narrow focus, organized around particular disciplines, languages, or jargons. Together, learning communities and communities of practice form a continuum, describing the width of focus that the community accommodates. Note, however, that learning communities and communities of practice still share many features. Learning communities always already contain some of the features of a community of practice and vice versa. So while these terms are a useful shorthand to describe a community, a sharp distinction between the two is neither useful nor necessary. Together, they form one axis of the analytical apparatus that I will employ in the rest of this chapter.

The other axis I employ focuses on the structure (or lack thereof) that describes both the players’ behavior and the products of the players’ work in the community. “Unstructured” activity describes activities where players have little guidance from the game, the developer, or other players.
Activities such as exploring the world, flaneur-like, experimenting with different character builds or types, or browsing through a developer’s Facebook or Twitter feed, are all relatively unstructured. In contrast, a structured activity would be following a quest line from zone to zone, reading or writing a guide on a particular raid encounter, or taking part in a tournament. The unstructured-structured spectrum also maps usefully to the hard knowledge vs. soft knowledge spectrum discussed above. Unstructured activity is more likely to produce, and more likely to transfer, soft knowledge as unstructured activity favors discussion, stories, and experiential learning. Structured activities, meanwhile, are more likely to produce “hard knowledge” that is easily archivable, such as a how-to guide. Together, these axes allow both sub-communities and players to be charted in particular moments of time and circumstance. This will become particularly useful in relation to the membership lifecycle that I will discuss in the next section.

4.7 — Sub Communities in Computer Game Communities

As noted above, a community is often made of any number of smaller sub-communities articulated by some overarching interest or domain. This overarching domain provides a shared foundation that sub-communities arise from. It also means that members of one sub-community have the option of exploring other sub-communities, assured that their new sub-community shares interests derived from the overarching domain. This means that community members can and will move from sub-community to sub-community based on their current interests and needs. These

![Figure 4.1 – Map of community focus and structure](image)
Sub-communities may exist on a forum, in a Twitter feed, on a YouTube channel, in-person, or as a mix of any or all of these forms. The community manager’s job is often to encourage and cultivate a limited number of these communication channels. As Deborah Ng explains, “The problem with having groups . . . spread across all the different social networks is that it can drive traffic and conversation away from the main website, and keeping up with dozens of different networks can prove challenging” (16). Amy Kim echoes this warning, noting that “successful, long-lasting Web communities usually start with relatively few gathering places,” because too many gathering places can spread a young community too thin, making “a community appear to be underpopulated and poorly managed even if it’s not” (66). The idea, then, is to draw people to a small number of initial gathering spots, let them build connections and community there, and then expand and diversify the possible gathering spots as the community grows and the needs of community member’s change. Members’ needs may change for a variety of reasons. One key factor, however, is the amount of time the member has spent in the community. That may mean that the member has progressed through a game, changing the activities they are participating in. For instance, a player who is starting a new character in an MMORPG may find himself more deeply immersed in a game guide community as he studies the guides created by that group. Later, that same player may spend more time in a role-playing community or with a group focused on in-game lore as he develops his character’s story more fully. Amy Kim describes these types of transitions as the “membership life cycle” (117). This life cycle can be mapped against these axes, allowing the various types of activity in sub-communities to categorize not only by its scope and structure, but also by the amount of time and the position community members have in the community.
To begin this mapping process, I will discuss Kim’s membership life cycle, with the various stages being more fully explored with illustrative examples later in the chapter. Kim’s life cycle starts with “visitor” status, defined as “people without a persistent identity in the community” (117). Visitors are often determining if they are interested in the particular game or topic, and they may visit various game related sub-communities any number of times. According to the rules of the community, a visitor may even be allowed to respond to comments with an anonymous or temporary identity. Upon establishing an identity by, for instance, liking the Facebook page or registering with a username, visitors become novices, who “need to learn the ropes and be introduced into community life” (Kim 118). If charted on the graph, this new member has moved from an unstructured, wide focus into a structured, wide focus (as detailed more fully below). Novice members are still discovering what interests are even possible in this particular learning community, so the community (and the community manager) provide guidance to the myriad possibilities. As the community member continues to participate and learn more and more, they transition from novice to regular. A regular has interacted enough that they have become recognizable to other members, with their presence and voice in the community being accepted and expected. According to their particular interests, regulars may move through any number of sub-communities and activities. This movement can lead them to many combinations of structured vs. unstructured activity, as well as narrowing or widening the focus of the member’s interests. At this point, some members will remain regulars indefinitely. Others may instead transition again into community leaders. Leaders, in Kim’s definition, take on responsibilities for the community, such as welcoming new members or

![Figure 4.2 – Visitor to novice movement](image-url)
establishing and enforcing community norms\(^3\). These leaders inevitably shift toward more structured activity because they help establish structure through their position as leaders (again, a process detailed more fully below). Eventually, however, “some leaders will tire of their day-to-day activities and step down from their official roles,” making a final transition to “elder” (119). Community elders are “respected sources of cultural knowledge and insider lore” (119). In a computer game community, an elder may be a player who participated in the game’s Beta testing or one who has developed a relationship with one or more of the development team over time. Elders, while having removed themselves from the day to day administration of the community, can still wield enormous influence over the community and its activities. From visitor to elder, each of these stages can be mapped against the axes established earlier, revealing how a player’s continued interaction in the community over time can shift them between a narrower or wider focus, and structured or unstructured activities and products.

This, of course, is all a bit too neat. In reality, people may leave the community at any time, short-circuiting the life cycle. Too slavish a devotion to the idea of a membership life cycle can also encourage the monolithic conception of community I warned about earlier, because it can encourage a totalizing, linear vision of community life. In reality, a player may be a part of several sub-communities at once wherein they may re-enact part or all of the membership life cycle. Further, sub-communities may engage in activities that combine structured vs. unstructured elements. For instance, some MMORPGs have player groups that conduct high-end raids, but as role-playing events. Players speak in

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**Figure 4.3 – Community member movement from visitor to elder**
character and the events of the evening (especially if they end in triumph) may become part of an original song or legend for that role-playing group. This means that the more structured raid activity occurs at the same time, and in fact may support, the more unstructured work of role-playing. The converse is also true, with the role-playing activity encouraging and supporting the work of the structured activity.

So if this map cannot provide a stable map of community members and their activities, what value does it have? First and foremost, the value of mapping in this chapter is not that it establishes stable subject positions for members, permanently placing “two extremes according to ‘closer’ and ‘further’ or by drawing a clear line that places ‘everything on one side or the other with nothing on both sides at once” (Lossau 68). Such an approach to spatial organization forgets that spatial organization is just another way of organizing things and people in the mind of the observer. This includes the organization of people and things in social, emotional, or political discursive spaces, such as referring to a person’s politics as left- or right-wing. Further, a focus on fixedness forgets that mapping people and things into fixed positions also serves as the basis from which all manner of further judgments can be hung. For instance, the phrase “the wrong side of the tracks” relies on the organization of people and things along both material and discursive lines. If one side is the wrong side, then the other side must be the right side. Therefore the people who live on either side of the tracks are imagined to contribute to and be marked by the rightness or wrongness of their side because of their placement, not because of their actions or characteristics. And the more fixed those mapped placements are imagined to be, the more it is assumed they reflect a stable reality. Or, as Jeremy Crampton puts it, maps “make reality as much as they represent it” (18).

My maps make no such claims about stability or fixedness. Instead, mapping in this chapter provides a way to organize disparate characteristics of both members and their activities in particular circumstances. As these particular circumstances are mapped, patterns can emerge, but even those
patterns do not represent universal truth. Instead, mapping members and activities against this chart helps me to locate particular moments and compare them with more general trends, while still refusing a view that attempts to assign community activity and membership stable positions. To assume that these *in situ* mapping exercises represent permanent or universal truths about the community would, in fact, serve only to obfuscate the complex reality of the mapped event. Playing a computer game is an interpretative act, the player creating meaning from the intersection of their own subjectivity with the subjectivity of the development organization that has been instantiated in the game itself. This is to say nothing of the additional complexity added when other players, modders, commenters, news sources, etc., are added to the equation. In the end, understanding these mappings as necessarily contingent and situated in a particular moment provides an opportunity to grapple with this complexity. Assuming stable, non-contingent positioning simply does not.

This mapping exercise, so far, has eschewed too deep a dive into any particular stage of the membership life cycle. But as the general outlines of the cycle have now been established, I want to turn to more specific instances. Beginning at the beginning, I want to examine the transition from visitor to novice to regular.

**4.8 — Joining a Community: Visitor, Novice, and Regular**

I first heard about the game Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) *Smite* when it was a subject of some controversy. In *Smite*, a player chooses a deity to fight as, engaging in pitched battles with other players playing other deities across a variety of game modes. But, the deities available are not only from supposedly “dead” religions. The controversy that brought the game to my attention came from its inclusion of Hindu deities, particularly the Goddess Kali. This controversy included a call from Rajan Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, to call for the removal of all Hindu deities from the game, as “he said putting the deities under player control trivialized them” (Sheridan)⁴. All of this attention did lead me to the game’s website, where I spent a small amount of time watching
concept videos and early gameplay footage. All in all, I was not impressed. It was only years later, not long after the game’s official launch, that I took another look. While I was still uncertain of my exact feelings about a fighting game involving deities, I was intrigued enough to continue watching game footage and, eventually, to download the game and try it. The moment I signed up for the game, taking on a permanent in-game name, I transitioned from visitor to novice.

The transition from visitor to novice is the transition most extensively addressed transition in the literature on community management. Richard Millington has an entire section of his book *Buzzing Communities* dedicated to increasing the number of page clicks on the registration page, and increasing the number of completed registration forms (71). This includes advice on where to place registration buttons and how to format e-mail confirmations. Similar advice is offered by Anna Buss and Nancy Strauss in *Online Communities Handbook*, by Patrick O’Keffe in *Managing Online Forums*, and Deborah Ng in *Online Community Management for Dummies* (74; 97; 180). Ng also advises a special set of welcome structures (e.g., FAQs, a welcome message) that novices should have immediate access to (186). Tharon Howard takes an interesting and unique approach to the registration structure by encouraging the community manager to make the registration page an application page, complete with questions like “Please explain how you expect to support and contribute to the community” (61). Amy Kim’s advice involves setting up a visitor center, as well as creating a clear and explicitly stated statement about the value of membership. This value might include access to the forums or a special avatar (131). In the case of *Smite*, liking their Facebook page granted me access to a special skin for the God Ra that I could use in the game. This skin was only available from liking the Facebook page.

At the beginning, I was extraordinarily bad at *Smite*. As in most things requiring any skill, practice is necessary. I had completed the game’s in-game tutorials (itself a more structured form of exploration aimed at novices), so I understood the very basics of the game. I could pick a god, level up his or her abilities, and buy items. I was literate in the game’s internal grammars, but I was far from
skilled (as my win/loss ratio can attest to). At the time of this writing, I would still hesitate to call myself skilled. On their surface, MOBA games such as Smite, League of Legends, or Dawn of the Ancients seem rather simple. Hit your opponent until his or her life bar is empty, doing so before they empty your life bar. In practice, however, MOBA games are dizzyingly complex. Smite has 63 gods to choose from. There are literally hundreds of items to choose from, each one having a different effect on different gods and different play modes. Additionally, each play mode has its own objectives, strategies, and geography to master. For me, the largest uptick in skill came when I began watching a series of YouTube videos, produced by Smite developer HiRez, called “Know Your Enemy.” I had been struggling against players who had chosen the Greek God of war, Ares, and had gone to the internet looking for ideas. “Know Your Enemy,” hosted by popular vlogger TrendKill, laid out the abilities, strengths, and weaknesses of Ares, making clear to me what dozens of rounds playing against him had not. I went from a stab of panic every time I saw him across the field, to surety that I could hold my own against anyone playing Ares. I repeated this process with videos on Loki, Scylla, Anubis, Hou Yi, and a dozen other gods. Through these videos, I expanded my understanding of the game beyond simple literacy into something approaching expertise. But to do so, I required the support of more experienced teachers.

The distinction between literacy and expertise is an important one because it encompasses the movement from novice to regular in the community member life cycle. The movement from novice to regular can, in fact, be characterized as the development of literacy in both the grammars and mechanics of the game, as well as the discourses of the various sub-communities. Relying on McMillan’s understanding of literacy as a fundamentally political and social phenomenon with material consequences, literacy in this case is having the necessary facility with the discursive and mechanical tools of the game to translate my desires for action into reality (as limited by the computer game world) (163). Outside of the game world (forums, social media feeds, etc.), literacy means having enough facility and familiarity with the discourse of the community and sub-communities to convey a member’s
desires and ideas with a reasonable amount of consistency and facility. These definitions share elements with, but are not identical to, Luehrmann’s definition of computer literacy as, “If you can tell the computer how to do things you want it to do, you are computer literate” (qtd. in McMillan 163). Luehrmann’s definition of literacy, however, leaves open a wide variety of possible skill levels. If, for instance, my only real goal was to move my character left and right, and I managed to do that at will, I could consider myself literate in the grammars of the game that mattered to me. Literacy, however, is also impacted by the social and cultural expectations of the context in which I am literate. So while I am able to move my character left and right, by the standards of the community, I am not fully literate. Indeed, only after mastering any number of skills, might I be considered to be what McMillan calls “Principal Comperacy,” with comperacy sitting in for “letteracy,” coined by Papert to mean “special skill involved in reading words made up of alphabetical letters” (qtd. in McMillan 163). Comperacy, however, also fails to address what I as a player am doing because of its singular focus on interaction with the computer. Computer games, even before the era of ubiquitous internet connections and multiplayer modes, require a player be able to navigate the social discourses of other players and of development organizations. Instead of comperacy, then, gameracy may be more appropriate. Gameracy means that I have the special skills involved in translating my desires into action in the game world. When I am confidently able to do this on a routine basis, I am likely to be considered literate/gameracy by the community.

Standards of gameracy are inevitably set by the community or sub-community over the course of months or even years. But the community manager also helps to establish those standards, especially in the early days of the community. The standard markers of gameracy can be determined through several means. The first, and the simplest to determine, is by examining the categories of knowledge established by the community management team in their forum community. For example, the MMORPG *Cabal II* has eight sub-forums at the time of this writing (June 2015). Three of those forums
(Rules & Guidelines, Game Announcements, and Community Announcements) are tagged in the forum structure as “News & Information.” Threads in these sub-forums can only be created by community managers (universally referred to as GMs in this community) and the number of posts is very small, with the “Game Announcements” forum being the smallest with only two posts. Posts in these forums are often comment locked at the time of creation, meaning that no community member has the ability to comment on the original post. As such, these sub-forums serve to provide information to the community, information deemed important for them to know. But this is not a space designed for dialogue. Instead, it is simply information presented to the community for its consumption. Knowing this information, however, translates into gamerate power in the other sub-communities.

The following example demonstrates this expression of gamerate power by showing how a “regular” member of the community uses her gameracy to reinforce standards of gameracy for a novice member. In a thread started in the “General Discussion” sub-forum, community member DazBones asks, “So is there going to be a wipe after this Open Beta!?” (DazBones). Community member Pixi responds with a screenshot of a post from GM Icee, the screenshot covered in added arrows and red circles to indicate the important text. That screenshot shows GM Icee saying, “There will be a CBT [closed beta test] wipe.” Pixi also says, “Please stop creating 10000000000000000000000 of these threads! Just go on the GM profiles and look for the latest posts....” (DazBones). In Pixi's judgement, community member DazBones is demonstrating insufficient familiarity with what he/she apparently considers basic information. Not only that, DazBones is demonstrating that he/she is not familiar with the search functions of the community forums themselves, a skill set that could itself be seen as a part of gameracy. In both cases, gameracy (knowing the information and knowing how to find the information) is judged to be superior to a lack of gameracy. Thus Pixi has leveraged his/her knowledge of the future plans for the game’s beta test, knowledge gained from a community manager, into an expression of his/her personal gameracy and, in doing so, enforced a standard of gameracy on DazBones.
Novice players gain access to gameracy through other sources than just the forums, however. Continuing to examine *Cabal II*, the game’s Facebook page introduces a totally new viewer to the game with the following description “CABAL2 is an action-MMO with fluid, skill-based combat that offers the genuine MMO experience that made the genre so popular” (*Cabal II* Facebook). Notice, however, that the viewer is already expected to have a certain limited gameracy in the discourse of MMORPGs. Terms like “action-MMO,” “skill-based combat,” and “genuine MMO experience” all assume that the viewer has enough knowledge of the genre to understand why any of these terms indicate positive features. Some of this information is, in fact, available from the game’s Facebook page. That information, however, is contained in posts from December 2014. These posts are not immediately available to a viewer of the page and they, in fact, grow ever more distant as new posts are put up on the Facebook page. Additionally, the pertinent information is actually found on the *Cabal II* YouTube channel. Even then, the information is not actually contained in the earliest YouTube videos, and is instead found in much more recent videos from GM Icee, videos which I will discuss more fully in a later section of this chapter. Clearly, there is an expectation of gameracy, or on the ability to acquire gameracy, being established, though this expectation may be unconscious.

Novice community members, however, are not just expected to achieve gameracy about the details of the game play or when it will be released. They are also expected to achieve gameracy in the social conventions and expectations of the community. This can be seen most clearly in areas such as the *Smite* “Introduce Yourself” sub-forum. Categorized as a “community-orientated” sub-forum by the community management team, this forum is intended for new members to introduce themselves to the community. Forums such as “Introduce Yourself” represent another structure of membership. In particular, the “Introduce Yourself” forum creates a structure wherein newly established member identities can be presented and begin the process of integration into the social fabric of the community. This approach differs somewhat from the strategies of community management I have discussed in
earlier chapters. In the first chapters of this project, I often focus on examples where the community manager does her managing through direct interaction with players or groups of players. In this case, however, the community is being managed by the structure of communication channels themselves. As I mentioned in chapter 2, community management can entail creating particular communication channels, establishing their purpose, and then simply allowing players to use them. Forums (or Facebook pages like the one for Cabal II) are exactly this type of channel. Further, they represent exactly the type of unstructured, wide-focus interaction that characterizes learning communities. These are spaces designed for players to share stories and anecdotes, to establish identities and relationships among one another, and to learn the rules and standards of the community. It would be a mistake, however, to characterize this sort of community management as “passive.” Instead, I would characterize it as indirect. The community (and its constituent sub-communities) are cultivated like flowers in a planter box, with the organic wildness still present in a limited sense, but guided into an appealing order by the boundaries established by the community manager. Further, these cultivated structures make it possible for a much smaller number of community management professionals to manage a much larger community than would otherwise be possible.

A perfect representation of the struggle between an ordered and chaotic community, however, is that the most recent post (at the time of this writing) in the Smite “Introduce Yourself!” forum. Written by community member Suntorias, the post is titled “Better late than never!” The post is as follows:
Examining this post, a few things become obvious. First, this poster has been playing the game for a not-insignificant amount of time (2-3 months) before introducing herself to the community. The user also says she has attained “level 30 and I’m going to start ranked as soon as I ironed out some of my bad habits” (Suntorias)\(^7\). Together, these facts establish that Suntorias is a novice member of the forum community, but not necessarily a novice player of the game. In the amount of time she has been playing, in fact, Suntorias could have easily established herself as a regular member of the player community. Further, Suntorias makes several other statements to establish her gameracy regarding the game’s mechanics. Statements like “got her to 10” (the maximum level of mastery for a Smite god, attainable only through repeated play) and “I’m best as an ADC, ok as a mid, supp and solo, but I can’t wrap my head around proper jungling” simultaneously establishes Suntorias gameracy in the game’s primary play discourse (often referred to as a “meta”), as well as establishing Suntorias as a new community member open to becoming more gamerate. In particular, the statement “I can’t wrap my head around proper jungling” establishes a weakness, acknowledgement of which can be read as a show of modesty to more experienced community members. Suntorias also offers a vision of her approach to games (one that, at least anecdotally, is very popular in the MOBA genre of which Smite is a part) when
she says, “I found that the pattern of overloading on theory and then working on execution works wonders in Smite as well.” As mentioned above, Smite’s variety of mechanics can lead to a nearly overwhelming complexity. In articulating her process of “overloading on theory and then working on execution,” Suntorias establishes that she is not only seeking to be gamerate in the game’s mechanics, but that she is also seeking to be an *expert* in those mechanics. This will be important later, because this desire for expertise is one way that a player might find her way into certain communities of practice.

The forum community of *Cabal II* demonstrates a different way that a player might be cultivated and established. Namely, through posts like this one from community member mihaivev, as well as the response from community member jam:

![Figure 4.5 – Forum screenshot – Forceblader tips](image)

mihaivev’s post contains several interesting rhetorical approaches to gaining knowledge from other players. First, he says “For those who had the privilege to participate on CBT [Closed Beta Testing].” Players who were granted software keys to the Closed Beta are presented as having privilege. The underlying message of his communication seems to be, “You were privileged, now share the spoils of that privilege with the rest of us.” He then goes on to ask specific questions, some of them informed by his play of the previous game, *Cabal*. His questions are quite specific, asking for information about the
class difficulty, the class’s ability in both PvE and PvP game modes, and the type of skills and abilities players should develop. Meanwhile, community member jam responds with specifics in turn. Responses make references back to the first *Cabal*, as well as very specific references to abilities in the game with no explanation of what those various abilities are or what they do. The assumption is that minhaivev already knows this information, that he is, in other words, gamerate. minhaivev can expand his gameracy, but in order to do so he will need to do foundational work on his own. But despite their differences, both Suntorias and minhaivev posts illuminate an integral feature of gaining gameracy. Namely, that both players proving their gameracy, and that players seeking to cultivate their gameracy, perhaps inadvertently, serve to establish the standards for what counts as gameracy. For those trying to prove gameracy, like Suntorias, they may have to demonstrate through both in-game and discursive action that they are competent in using the tools of gameracy. For those seeking to cultivate gameracy, they must turn to those with more experience, community members who have already established their bona fides. In doing so, they give the experienced player even more opportunities to establish their competence, a vital form of social capital in the computer game world. For the community manager, this recursive process of “prove and reinforce” establishes a contingent of members who answer questions, enforce rules of behavior, and organize community generated information all on their own. Beyond creating a community that is able to care for itself, this process also relieves some of the workload of the community management team, an issue I will discuss in much greater detail in Chapter 5.

But players also gain gameracy through relatively structured, but still widely focused, activities and interactions. These activities may be as simple as a pattern of play, defeat, and replay that allows the player to slowly learn the skills they need to progress. Other players may also help the novice player directly. For instance, the *Dark Souls* series of games has systems that allow players to actually enter one another’s games to assist other players or to leave short notes on the in-game geography about upcoming dangers. Many novice players, however, rely on tutorials. Tutorials provide novice players
with the tools they will need make their way through the game world and with the basic tools (vocabulary, locations, etc.) they need to enter in the community’s discourse. In the 1980s and 1990s, most tutorials I encountered were found in an instruction manual that came with the game. These manuals often contained a small bit of introductory story, descriptions of major characters, and a guide to what the various controller buttons did. As computer game technology improved, more and more of the information from instruction manuals migrated into the game proper. This change has lead, in the present day, to in-game tutorials being the default method of developer created instruction for a novice player. Many games, in fact, no longer even come with an instruction manual. Instead, the developer has coded instruction directly into the game itself.

That instruction, obviously, has been designed and implemented by the designers and coders. But the community management team may also produce tutorials for players. For example, the MMORPG Cabal 2 has released videos narrated by ESTGames (Cabal 2’s developer) employee GM Icee. The first of these videos released found GM Icee highlighting Cabal 2’s unique combat system. In this video, GM Icee guides players through a step-by-step guide to the various intricacies of the combat, including movement, ability rotation, and even in-game vocabulary (“Cabal 2 Feature Spotlight # 1: Combat”). These videos are also posted on the official Cabal 2 Facebook page, Twitter page, and Twitch TV channel as, through cross-platform posting, the community management team can direct player populations to the same content. This strategy serves a double purpose. First, as recommended by Ng and Kim, when most of the players are novices and limited in number, the community management team needs to concentrate community members in a limited number of communication channels. Second, it creates specific spaces for discourse between the developers and the players, one dedicated to learning about the game and its intricacies. Being a YouTube channel, of course, the discourse is not solely about the video nor is it all positive. As covered in Chapter 2, these sorts of conflicts are not only necessary, but healthy for the growth and development of the community. But between the flame wars
and complaining, comments such as this one from metalsnak27 show players sharing tips and ideas for how to play the game, “A hint about combos: You’ll know when to press the next skill when you see a hit confirm aura appear on your target (you can see it when Icee is firing her skills at the target).”

This sort of player-to-player interaction may, in fact, be the most important effect of a tutorial like GM Icee’s. These interactions serve not only to reinforce and enrich the content provided by the community management team, but also to encourage the attitude of sharing and communal exploration that defines the learning community. The cultivation of such an attitude is, as Neville Johnson noted earlier, about the culture of the community being made hospitable for the work of communal learning (27). The cultivation of such an environment, as can be seen from the above examples, requires not only rhetorical savvy in direct communication between the community manager and the community member, but what might also the construction of what might be called rhetorical architecture, where discursive structures (such as the positions in the membership life cycle) guide communication when the community manager cannot intervene herself. Influence on community culture, however, is not influenced equally by all members, or by all positions in the membership life cycle. The community culture can, in fact, be powerfully influenced by the presence of a small number of influential members, often referred to as community leaders. In the next section, I will examine how the community manager creates conditions which encourage the emergence of leaders who help manage sub-communities.

4.9 — Expertise, Leadership, and the Gap Between

Gameracy allows a community member to both play the game and, if they desire, to engage in the discourse of the game community, at least to some extent. Gameracy, however, is different than being considered an expert by the community. In fact, being an expert in a computer game often requires a level of knowledge about the inner workings of a computer game that gameracy does not. After all, McMillan notes, the vast majority of computer users are not communicating with computers through computer language (binary), but instead rely on a system of other interfaces to translate the
computer language into a form that a user can understand and vice versa. At least in this respect, computer games are no different than any other computer application. Expert levels of play, however, find players understanding the workings of the game at a much deeper level than simply translating their desires into action. Techniques such as frame counting, animation cancelling, damage formulas, power curves, etc., all require a player to understand the mathematical calculations being done behind the scenes that can involve extensive testing, collaboration with other players, and even examination of and interaction with the code itself. This reflects not only an understanding of the spatial grammars of the computer game world, but also a mathematical and structural understanding of the code that undergirds that world. This transition in the quality of understanding between novice and expert is reflected in Robert Hoffman’s definition of expertise as, “a progression from a superficial and literal understanding of problems (a qualitative mark of the cognition of novices) to an articulated, conceptual, and principled understanding (a qualitative mark of the cognition of experts)” (85). This progression, however, does not occur in a vacuum. Expertise in computer games routinely, and perhaps near universally in the age of ubiquitous internet, develops in the context of a learning community that cultivates a desire to explore and know more about the game. That expertise is refined and honed in a community of practice where players can develop the “articulated, conceptual, and principled understanding” of the issues that they have focused on.

The transition from gameracy to expertise does not, however, necessarily equate to the transition from community regular to community leader. Expertise is a measure of the player’s knowledge and skill. Leadership meanwhile, according to W. Glenn Rowe, is “a process” (1). Additionally, Rowe argues, “leadership involves influencing others . . . leadership happens within the context of a group . . . leadership involves goal attainment, and . . . these goals are shared by leaders and their followers” (1). Expertise can, however, translate into social capital within the community that can be used to engage in the leadership process. For instance, a player who has established expertise is able to
influence the activities and opinions of other players, and even the game’s developers, as we saw in chapter 2. But Player A’s attempt to exert influence through expertise can be contested by another player’s expertise, or through attacks on Player A’s expertise. Player A may also have reputation as a jerk, a cheat, or a bad teammate. The player’s expertise may be considered compromised or outright useless in the face of such social disapproval. Clearly, the line between expert and leader is more complex and unclear than it might seem on the surface.

Notice, however, how closely Rowe’s definition of leadership parallels the definition of a learning community. In particular, the leadership process requires a community with shared goals. How those goals are determined, and who is involved in determining them, is one of the key areas of intervention for the community manager. As mentioned earlier (see endnote 3), the community manager’s authority in the community arises, at least initially from their position with the development organization. That position likely also gives them moderation privileges in official forums and social media platforms, which can allow them to shape the discourse of the community by encouraging some discussions while foreclosing others. That, however, does not necessarily translate into the community manager having a position of leadership in the community. That requires, as Rowe notes, the ability to influence others, as well as being able to help the community reach its goals. While community managers may be able to exert influence and help the community reach its goals, the community manager is also dedicated to the goals of the development organization. This tension, productive as it may be, does not lead to an easy hold on leadership. In fact, it may make the community manager a bad candidate for leadership within the community. Instead, the community manager is better served by creating opportunities for leaders to arise from within the community, and then to recognize that leadership through access and influence within the development organization. In effect, the community manager can attempt to produce the leaders the community needs. Arguably, this might even be the community manager’s most important job.
For instance, Blizzard Entertainment has a system of “Most Valuable Poster” for community members who “answer other players’ questions consistently and accurately” (Zahrhym). As CM Zahrym explains, “MVPs promote constructive posting wherever they can. They contribute to the community and encourage polite discussion throughout the forums. When you see an MVP post, listen to what they have to say—they were also chosen for their knowledge of the game” (Zahrhym). Community members can tell when an MVP has contributed to the discussion because their posts are highlighted with a bright green color, meant to differentiate these posts from the blue color of official Blizzard employee responses. Such distinction is akin to the “Leadership ritual” that Amy Kim recommends (118). These rituals are meant to mark the conversion of a regular member to a leader, a liminal space where the roles and social position of the regular member can shift and change.

In the case of Blizzard’s MVP community members, the ritual begins with either a self-nomination or by being nominated by another player or the community manager. These nominations go to a special e-mail box where they are reviewed by the Community Management team. Those reviews are based on “a large set of criteria,” but “the key to being a strong candidate is having a solid posting history” (Zahrhym). If selected, the new MVP not only gains access to the distinctive green text color, but also “a direct line of communication with the community managers that allows [MVPs] to ask them questions or bring things to their attention” (Poisso). Thus the transition to leader is not just a posting color. It entails a change in the relationship between the player, the community manager, and the development team. Leadership, as Rowe noted, requires the ability to influence people. The Blizzard MVP program increases the ability of its chosen few to influence others by not only raising their profile in the community visually, but also by increasing the amount of influence they may have on the development team by providing them with a new, more direct line of communication with less “noise” from the mass of community conversations. As other players know that the MVPs have this more direct line to the development team, they are also more likely to look to the MVPs for guidance and answers.
Postings from the MVPs can cover any number of topics. The subject of a post, however, is not what is important about the MVP program to the management of the community. Instead, it is the type of response that the MVP has to a topic. In the *World of Warcraft* General Discussion forums, many of the responses are simply answers to questions. For instance, community member Yseora posted a question about her *World of Warcraft* software license. MVP Freyja posted a short clarifying question, a clarifying question that had, in fact, been asked by multiple other responders. The different between those posters and MVP Freyja, however, can be found in the actual thread link:

![Forum screenshot – MVP forum flare](image)

*Figure 4.6 – Forum screenshot – MVP forum flare*

The small green “MVP” next to this post in the General discussion thread list indicates that a MVP community member has posted in the thread. Further, clicking on those green letters will take a viewer directly to the MVPs post in the thread. Together, these features raise the profile of particular conversations. And within those conversations, certain kinds of responses are elevated. In particular, the community manager can elevate the kind of accurate, positive responses which led to the MVP’s promotion from regular member to leader in the first place.

Constructive and accurate posts, however, do not necessarily mean that leaders must avoid conflict. For instance, community member Thanatosia began a thread to complain about changes to an in-game system, a change that he felt would hurt players developing a second or third character, known as an alt (Thanatosia). In this thread, two MVPs responded. The first response comes from MVP Lissanna, but her response is just a joke about the new system. MVP Tiapriestess also responds in the
thread, but to a different community member. Her response is actually slightly negative, due to the reference to being “SOL” (shit out of luck).

But having a negative response to a Blizzard decision is specifically singled out as not being disqualifying for the MVP program. CM Zahrym, in his FAQ post about the MVP program, specifically states, “Those chosen for the program aren’t official representatives of Blizzard, and they don’t have to agree with every decision we make” (Zahrym). He expands on that idea in an interview with now defunct gaming site Joystiq.com when he says:

I really make an effort to try and hang onto the names of constructive, eloquent posters -- whether or not they're critical of some of Blizzard's decisions. The MVP program is really meant to be a reflection of the diversity within our community. Its members are just a collection of folks from the community who are embraced by their peers for their knowledge and personality, to the extent that we want to give them official recognition. (Poisso).

CM Zahrym’s rhetoric seems specifically designed to address the problem mentioned above, namely the idea that the CM herself is a bad candidate for community leadership due to her association with the development organization. In both the FAQ and the interview, it is stressed that the MVP posters are
not representatives of Blizzard. Further, it is stressed that the MVPs can openly disagree with the
decisions that Blizzard makes. These statements work to solidify the MVP as a member of the
community, without the divided loyalties of the CM. At the same time, the MVP has the proverbial ear
of the developer, granting them status within the community. The program thus allows Blizzard to
influence who will lead their communities by magnifying particular voices, while still allowing the
community (through their leaders) to have a voice. This, of course, gives the development organization
an immense amount of control over the topics and projects that the community takes up, with influence
from both without and within.

The development of community leaders maps fairly easily to my analytical graph. Leaders,
because their function is to help influence the behaviors of others toward the completion of goals, tend
toward structure. Further, leaders of in-game sub-communities will tend to be leaders in particular things, such as
combat, role-playing, crafting, running a social organization, updating a wiki, etc.
This leads to further compartmentalization of sub-communities, leading us closer and
closer to the problem-oriented focus of communities of practice. The leader’s job in these more focused sub-communities is often as an agenda
and standards setter, leading the sub-community as it works on the problems that interest it. But what
happens when leaders decides they want to set aside their duties? Or what about community members
who have an enormous amount of knowledge about the game, but who did not necessarily ever take up
leadership responsibilities? These members represent the next step in the membership life cycle, elders.
This is also, however, the point where mapping becomes the most complicated, and the division between stages of the membership lifecycle become most muddled.

4.10 — Elders: Leading from Behind

Elders, in Amy Kim’s definition, are community members who pass along their wisdom and the community culture. Elders may come from the ranks of leaders who have decided to set aside their leadership responsibilities, or they may be accomplished and well-respected regulars looking to take on a different role in the community. But as Kim notes, “Being an elder isn’t always a clearly defined role” (147). Elders sometimes continue to carry out tasks that keep the community running (answering questions, resolving disputes, etc.). Elders may also withdraw from the daily life of the community, emerging only to offer some larger project (a completed guide, for instance) or to mark a moment of particular import to the community. In either case, elders generally act only when they choose to. The distinction between elder and leader, then, is primarily that an elder’s contribution to the community is less structured. Leaders have duties, things that their authority in the community requires of them. Elders, meanwhile, have interests, things that they have chosen to do. Some of those activities may involve leadership, but an elder no longer has an official role requiring their leadership. Instead, as Kim notes, elders serve as exemplars of community cultures and values, including serving as mentors for both novice and regular members alike. Through mentorship, elders can help to pass on the collected wisdom (the soft knowledge) of the community because of the length of time they have been in the community. Additionally, elders may play an integral role in contextualizing and expanding the hard knowledges of the community. The position of elder, however, is primarily to maintain and extend the culture of the community or sub-community. As with leaders, Kim recommends that the transition from community regular or leader to elder be marked with a ritual of some sort, but that position assumes, despite her own statements to the contrary, that “elder” is a fairly well-defined position with responsibilities that can be readily marked out. Instead, becoming a community elder may be a gradual
process, one that goes totally unremarked by both the elder and the community. And the projects and activities that an elder engages can be so idiosyncratic that a solid definition of elders may only be possible within the particular community or sub-community under examination.

My experience with an elder in the MMORPG *Everquest II* highlights this particular characteristic of elders. This particular player was both an elder in the game and elderly in real life, a woman mostly known as “Gma.” Gma had been with the guild since long before I joined. She was a near constant presence in guild chat, on raids, and on the guild forums. Gma, however, was a terrible player. She struggled to move her character, to follow even simple quest directions, and her presence on raids was felt most keenly through our voice communication program, with the sound of a glass of margaritas breaking as it fell off her desk. She was, in fact, an active hindrance to every activity focused on in-game goals. She was, however, also a deeply beloved figure in the guild, because she embodied the guild’s culture so fully. The guild, Rage, describes itself as “a family guild based on friendship and fun. We care about the individuals behind the characters and recognize that real life and its obligations should always come before the game” (Zheelsu). This guild community prided itself, first and foremost, on being an extended family. That was sometimes quite literal considering the enormous number of families that play the game together as members of Rage. These sorts of values are one example of unstructured, soft knowledge that elders maintain and transmit. Gma supported these cultural values in-game by inquiring about people’s out-of-game lives, by remembering anniversaries and birthdays, and through a generally friendly and welcoming demeanor. Outside of the game, Gma was a constant presence on the guild forums. When novice members posted their introductions, Gma was always one of the first to post a welcoming response. She would also give updates about her family and her health (which was always fragile), as well as checking in on members who had been absent or on members with a new baby. Gma’s role as an elder in the community was defined not by her skill as a player, but by her status as a
role model who gives novice, regular, and leader members a living example of the values of the community and the behaviors attendant to those values.

An elder’s work as a role model in the community may also be aspirational if they are a figure of great achievement. Consider, for example, Minecraft YouTube steamer Thorlar Thorlarian. On June 19, 2015, Thorlar posted video of himself placing the last few bricks in what had been a 23.5 week project wherein he created an enormous piece of art inside of the Minecraft game, one so large that he claims it is in fact a world record (Thorlarian). Essentially created pixel by pixel using in-game materials, Thorlar’s completed work of art was celebrated on the official Minecraft forum’s blog by Content Administrator Sacheverell. Community members responded with comments like, “Am speechless this is amazing,” and, “That is so cool!! You should be Pablo Minecraftso” (Minecrafttech, DriftsonX). Thorlar’s video has been viewed more than 1.5 million times at the time of this writing, with his Twitch channel raising nearly $3500.00 for charity. There, of course, have been accusations that Thorlar cheated by using software to produce the enormous image. But regardless of the controversy, by promoting Thorlar’s work, the community manager has set him in the position of an elder: highly accomplished in the work of a particular Minecraft sub-community (i.e., the creation of enormously complex, large scale projects), but without official community duties. Thus he serves as an exemplar of a community of creators that Minecraft encourages. This gives other ambitious builders something to work toward and serves to reinforce the goals of the community.

Gma’s and Thorlarian’s disparate types of elder-hood suggests that elders tend to function as living memorials (as discussed in Chapter 3). Elders, by their very presence, can be “agenda setting” (Hess 819). In computer game communities, this may be an agenda set by the elder of a particular sub-community. For instance, if a sub-community elder has focused on a particular set of problems, those concerns can be reflected in new work produced by those sub-communities. The elder may also, as Gma did, set the agenda of the community through her behavior, serving to reinforce the standards and
practices that the community has adopted. And just as with memorial, if the elder is particularly available, either through circumstance or planning, the values and concerns of that community are rooted in the present through her or him. It is better, however, to not leave that to chance. As Amy Kim notes, “Although elders will emerge naturally, you can strengthen the social fabric of your community be creating specifics ways for them to share their knowledge” (147). She recommends that structures such as advisory board positions be set up to keep community elders engaged and their collected wisdom flowing to both the community and the development organization (148). Tharon Howard offers further strategies, cautioning that “Elders can become a bit of a bore in a community if they aren’t given sanctioned opportunities to have influence” (118). He expresses particular concern that elders “can even undermine and challenge the authority of advisory councils if their influence needs aren’t being met” (118). He recommends that the community manager do interviews, podcasts, and have elders host social events. But as seen with the earlier stages of the membership life cycle, the community manager manages elders more through structure than through explicit discourse. With such structures and sanctioned activities in place, community leaders know they have a path to advancement should they grow tired of day-to-day leadership, a path that does not involve simply leaving the community. Indeed, the presence of the structure can actually encourage elders to emerge, largely because the position is available to be filled. It should be noted, however, that neither Gma nor Thorlarian have emerged as elders through such structures. Instead, both of them emerged organically because of their achievement and persistence in their respective areas. As I mentioned above, eldership is the area where the analytical graph becomes the most muddled. And so it seems to be with the production of elders. Community managers know that elders are something that communities need. But there is not necessarily a fool-proof way to produce them.
4.11 — The Life Cycle Interrupted

Assuming, of course, that the community produces elders at all. Some computer games simply do not have communities that have existed long enough or developed enough of a following to produce elders, or even, in particularly dire cases, community regulars. Examining such a game further illustrates what happens when the membership life cycle breaks down. Take, for instance, Airtight Games’ *Dark Void*. Released in 2010, *Dark Void* promised a unique combat system and level design built around the protagonist’s jet pack. On release, however, the game received aggressively middling reviews, with the both the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions receiving a Metacritic score of 59/100. Reviewer Greg Miller summed up the general attitude towards *Dark Void* when he said, “*Dark Void* is one of those games you’ll play, beat, and forget ever existed.” A review of *Dark Void*’s forums show that between June 4, 2008 and June 30, 2015, there were only 144 individual threads started (“*Dark Void* Official Group”). The only presence *Dark Void* has on Facebook is a topic page with only 734 likes (“About Dark Void”). *Dark Void*, like many unsuccessful games, never developed a community from which an elder might emerge. Looking back to the earliest posts on the forums, there are inklings of a learning community developing, with threads asking about the story, about the possibility of multiplayer, the game’s musical score, and media coverage of the upcoming release. It is noticeable, however, that these sorts of threads disappear completely after the games release. Questions about issues with game patches, game codes, and controls dominate the discussion, but these threads are quickly answered and discarded. There is no evidence that the community is engaging in the sort of extended interaction that leads to sub-communities of practice. It is no surprise, then, that few players even rise to the level of regulars in the community, let alone leaders or elders. Games such as *Dark Void* highlight an important addendum to the membership life cycle. Namely, that not every community will flourish, whether or not the community manager has attempted to cultivate it. Some games are bad, and can never establish a community. Whereas some games are good, but simply cannot draw a large enough audience to sustain
the development cycle, or a community of dedicated fans. These communities wither and die, if they ever sprouted at all. This places an important, and perhaps too easily forgotten, limit both this project in particular and on the work of the community manager in general. Rhetorical skill and dedication to the job are no guarantee that that the community manager will successfully grow her community. Changes in the computer game marketplace, staffing decisions in the development organization, or even just the state of the general economy are just a few of the nearly infinite influences on the success of any particular computer game. As such, each community manager can only carefully study the needs of her community, deploy both direct and indirect rhetorical strategies appropriately based on those needs, and then hope that the stars have aligned.

4.12 — Shifting Communities to Shifting Circumstances

If there is a membership life cycle that community managers can use to help them manage the various sub-communities they have cultivated, what happens to that life cycle when the needs of the development organization change or when the game undergoes some sort of major shift? This leads to the second, and perhaps the most important, addendum to the membership life cycle: it is not necessarily unidirectional and it can be recursive. If, for instance, an elder in one sub-community becomes bored with the topic or finds a new interest, she may decide to explore new sub-communities. That elder may now be a novice in another sub-community. She may also be able to leverage her status in one sub-community into immediate status as a regular or leader in the new sub-community, according to the amount of overlap between the two communities. Regardless of the particular outcome, community members may inhabit different stages of the membership life cycle simultaneously as part of their roles in different sub-communities.

This also means that sub-communities change as players move in and out of their discourses. Additionally, the size and influence of the communities (and the strategies needed to manage those communities) may shift according to events in game, events both diegetic and non-diegetic. Diegetic
events reflect changes in the game world, either as a reflection of the game’s story or because of new releases by the development organization. Such changes might include the release of a new game play mode or area, or balance changes among character types. Diegetic changes can cause portions of the community to change the way they play, as new opportunities provide novelty in a game that might have otherwise begun to feel stale. Non-diegetic events occur outside of the game world, but can still have a powerful impact on the in-game world. Non-diegetic events might include the expansion of a game to a new platform, or layoffs at the development organization. For both diegetic and non-diegetic events, the changing circumstances may require that certain sub-communities increase in visibility and import for both the community and for the development organization. For instance, when Hi-Rez studios MOBA Smite recently launched on the Xbox One gaming console, the technical support forums became far more active. As the new gaming platform came online, PC players began posting to the support forums more frequently as they encountered issues with merging their Xbox and their PC accounts. But as the new platform stabilized and the influx of new players on the platform matured, the technical support sub-community became less active. What happened to those posting players? Largely, other sub-community absorbed them, waxing as one community waned. But this movement of players between sub-communities, still contained under the umbrella of the larger community, does not necessarily function in such a zero-sum manner, with sub-community A losing players to B then to C, then back to A. The mix of diegetic and non-diegetic events is simply not that predictable, and players, as are all consumers, can be fickle in their tastes and interests. Despite this lack of predictability, the community manager can and must encourage different sub-communities at different times to meet the needs of the overall community.

For instance, the publisher of the Assassin’s Creed series of games, Ubisoft, used its Facebook page to advertise an “Assassin’s Creed Cosplay Meet Up” at the 2015 San Diego Comic-Con. The event description promised, “We’ll be taking pictures, handing out swag (while it lasts) and you’ll get to SKIP
THE LINE for our Assassin’s Creed Experience!” ("Assassin’s Creed Cosplay Meet Up"). Why would this particular sub-community, cosplayers, be receiving special attention at this moment? Because San Diego Comic Con is arguably the biggest pop culture event in the United States. Starting as a comic book convention, it has expanded dramatically and become a major event for entertainment companies of all stripes. Every year, San Diego Comic-Con sees the release of exclusive movie trailers, it hosts panels with top-flight celebrities from around the world, and it enjoys near constant media coverage both during and after the event. Ubisoft, at the time of this writing, was attempting to raise the level of excitement for their upcoming release, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, by leveraging the eye-catching technical skills of its cosplay enthusiast fans. The attending cosplayers will have met with the community management and development teams, they will have heard the pitch for the new game, and then they will then be out on the San Diego Comic Con floor with special merchandise. This positions these cosplayers as perfect community boosters, having been given special access (and thus positioning them as potential leaders of the community of fans), as well as being walking attractions for visitors who may not yet be familiar with the franchise.

Further, an event like a meet-up gives the Ubisoft community manager a chance to meet and make a connection with the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise’s most impressive cosplayers because, as mentioned before, growing a community is in fact a war for talent. And the time, resources, and skills of expert cosplayers can be valuable. Photos of their work routinely make their way around sites like Reddit, they are featured on gaming journalism and hobbyist sites, and they can even garner mainstream attention in some limited circumstances. The investment required from Ubisoft is miniscule compared to the benefit gained from having a contingent of spectacularly costumed representations of their flagship gaming franchise circulating through thousands of potential purchasers.
A meet up such as the one Ubisoft is holding is, however, only one strategy for cultivating a particular sub-community at an opportune time. Cultivation might also mean publishing guides sourced from the development organization to help players manage the transition when game systems change, or offering new stories on a lore forum to excite players for an upcoming release, or posting polls or videos asking for feedback on the game’s Twitter feed if players have begun to seem disengaged or unhappy. In each case, the community manager can direct the community’s energy in a particular direction, and assuming the community has been well-engaged and primed to respond, interest can be encouraged to develop in a particular direction. This will result in certain sub-communities growing in size and influence while others either shrink or fail to grow, all in service to the needs of the development organization.

4.13 — Conclusions

Using my mapping exercise as a frame, my analysis presents several preliminary conclusions. First, membership in the community is likely better understood as membership(s) in sub-communities. Community members may have multiple, simultaneous affiliations, which also leads to community members inhabiting different stages of the membership life cycle simultaneously. Second, this complexity makes it difficult, if not outright impossible, for community managers in the computer game industry to effectively manage each sub-community. Instead, community managers employ structures of membership (membership programs, forums and social media feeds, and standards of gameracy) to
encourage communities to largely manage themselves, as well as to produce leaders and elders with desirable characteristics. Third, sub-communities may wax and wane in import to the community manager based on events (both diegetic and non-diegetic) in the game. When this happens, community managers seek to cultivate selected sub-communities so that, perhaps stretching the metaphor to its limit, the particular produce needed for the community’s health may be harvested.
Chapter 5 – Sticky: Community Management and the Intersection of Play and Work in Computer Game Communities

5.1 – Introduction

Discourse on computer games, both in the academy and in the popular media (including, at times, this dissertation project), tends to place developers and players on opposite sides of the computer game production cycle. And often for good reason. Developers are explicitly involved in the production, marketing, and distribution of the game, all working together as part of the computer game industry. Players, meanwhile, play the games that are developed. They purchase (or sometimes steal) the game, and engage with it through acts of play. Players, based on their material and/or affective investment in the game, or in the development company itself, may also engage in what Matt Hills describes as "the performance of fandom," a performance that is "part of a cultural struggle over meaning and affect" (xi). This bifurcated conception of the computer game developer and the computer game fan reflects, however, an increasingly antiquated view of computer game development, one where the work of development takes place exclusively (or nearly exclusively) within the developer’s own business structure by paid employees, and where play occurs outside of that structure as part of the community.

But as McAllister and Ruggill argue in their book Gaming Matters, “The [gaming] medium” and its attendant “audiovisual and kinaesthetic prompts . . . lend themselves to the blurring, and even transmutation, of play into work (and vice versa) (83).” This chapter argues that this blurring is especially prevalent, and often intentional, in development organizations with engaged community management teams and well-established structures of membership (as discussed in Chapter 4). In such communities, the work of computer game development (testing systems, generating new ideas, “balancing,” and even code solutions) occurs across a whole network of actors, both in the development organization and the player community. Coupled with the expansion of active development beyond a games official release
(and with the notion of “release” itself becoming more and more ambiguous) this collaboration between development organizations and their communities has become ever more vital to the computer game development process. At the same time, the use of player communities as a labor force raises serious ethical issues about the relationship between fan communities and development organizations.

As the process of development has changed, discourses about who is a developer and who is a player have become more complex, the boundaries of each subject position becoming increasingly unclear. Compounding this blurring of subject positions is the definitional ambiguity of work and play as concepts. In particular, this chapter examines how this definitional ambiguity means that activities that look very much like work can feel like play to the people doing them, and vice versa. In this chapter, I demonstrate how both development organizations and communities are taking advantage of these ambiguities in order to achieve their respective goals. Particular attention will be paid, of course, to the ways that the community manager intervenes in these discourses to encourage players (and sometimes members of the development organization, including the community manager) to blur the lines between work and play. This chapter returns to the methods of discourse analysis outlined in Chapter 2 in order to carry out its work, focusing largely on communication between players and the community management team. I will again turn to how discourse between the community and the community manager functions as an expression of power, and how discourse encourages particular behaviors and attitudes from a variety of actors. This chapter pays particular attention to the way that the blurring of lines between work and play relies on the types of rhetorical strategy already discussed in earlier chapters of this dissertation. My examination of this discourse will also maintain the suspensionist position outlined in Chapter 1, focusing more on deciphering what is occurring, instead of determining whether those events are necessarily “good” or “bad.” Further, this chapter will expand its focus to structures of membership (as discussed in Chapter 4) as a further form of discourse, one that establishes official spaces for players to carry out their work. It should be noted, however, my suspensionist position
extends only so far. In particular, I want to maintain that position vis a vis the specific community managers whose work I examine in this chapter. At the same time, this chapter will offer sometimes critical commentary and analysis of the larger trend of player-workers in the computer game development process.

To begin, I will offer a brief overview of definitions of work and play. Next, I analyze concrete examples of how both players and developers are able to take advantage of the rhetorical ambiguity of work and play throughout the development process. Finally, I'll end with a few thoughts about what the changes in discourse in computer game development might mean for players and developers in the future. But first, as in previous chapters, a brief note on my own positionality vis a vis issues of work and play in computer game communities.

5.2 — Positionality

Raised from a very young age to see the world as a puzzle to be solved, my most pleasurable experiences in playing computer games have always centered on the finding of solutions to the problems that a game raises. I am not limited, however, to the problems the game sets out explicitly. I also enjoyed finding ways to break the game or complicate the story. I would make multiple save files to try out every option in a role playing game (RPG), learn and write down the moves of every character in a fighting game, and find every single secret in action adventure games. As mentioned in Chapter 4, I even had a brief foray into sharing those secrets with *Nintendo Power* readers. Moving into the age of the internet, I still frequent message boards, FAQs, and YouTube channels to see the newest and best information on how to play a game. That often includes games I do not play. I am, in fact, a daily reader of the *World of Warcraft* enthusiast site *Blizzard Watch*, despite the fact that I have not played that game in nearly 10 years. I am particularly fond of the columns written about how to play individual classes.

I also sometimes contribute fan fiction to contests for games I enjoy, and I have written multiple
play guides for _Everquest II_. I have taken part in Beta tests for the MMORPGs _Rift_ and _Warhammer Online_. I routinely supply feedback to the MOBA _Smite_ through surveys distributed by the Hi-Rez studios’ community manager on Reddit. I have also contributed to a number of different Kickstarter campaigns for computer games. Finally, I have routinely answered other players’ question on Facebook, Twitter, via online forums, as well as in a variety of game worlds. I am, perhaps, actually more comfortable with the role of player-worker than I am with the role of player. Understanding this about myself and my positionality is particularly important to this chapter, because I find myself highly resistant to the notion that player-work is necessarily exploitative. I am aware of the transaction I have entered into when I perform labor for a developer as part of my play. I am trading labor for something I want, usually access. But I am also cognizant that not every player necessarily shares that understanding of the relationship. Some may enter the player-work relationship and leave feeling exploited. Some players assuredly _have been_ exploited, even if they do not necessarily recognize the relationship as exploitative. Still others may leave feeling as if they have overcome the development organization as a conqueror. Most, in my estimation, fall somewhere in between. What my positionality on this subject urges me to insist most of all is that the relationship between play and work is complex, and that the reasons for the increasingly blurry line between the two in computer game development emerges from an intersection of technological, economic, and social forces. As such, I enter this discussion assuming that there is something more to discover. To begin that process, a few terms need to be defined.

5.3 — Defining Work and Play

At the center of this discussion are the competing and ambiguous notions "work" and "play." In both cases, I am less concerned with actual usages of the word, i.e. the number of appearances of the words “work” and “play,” than I am in how, when, and why behaviors or practices are organized under one category or the other. Further, work (and the connected but not identical concept of “labor”) and play are not easily nor clearly differentiated. Nearly all humans expend some amount of energy to the
end of continuing their existence. This might be effort in the gathering, preparation, and consumption of food. Or it might be effort expended to learn a new skill or trade in order to gain access to either more resources or even just for a vital, personal sense of satisfaction. All people play (at some point) as well. This might be a computer game played on an expensive, high-tech console. Or it might be an impromptu game of “Guess who gets called to the desk next” at the DMV. Work and play, then, are foundational to all human civilization. The specific instantiations change wildly between circumstances, but work and play as concepts exist as close to universality as one is likely to get.

Importantly, however, whether a thing is considered work or play is not always clear. At this chapter argues, that definitional ambiguity actually sits at the heart of the community management practices under examination. In a more general sense, however, whether a particular action is work or play depends on who is looking at the situation being considered. That person’s social position, their affective orientation towards the situation, or their personal history with an activity can all play a role in judging whether an activity should be considered work or play. And when the question of work is further complicated by the introduction of labor, the definitional waters become even muddier. The three terms might be imagined as analogous to the Red, Blue, and Green values on a color circle (Figure 5.1). Each particular spot in the circle consists of an identifiable ratio of red, blue, and green. But when the circle is examined as a whole, the difference between two shades of blue can be much harder to parse. Such is the relationship between work, labor, and play. Any particular moment might be examined, and broken down into a ratio of the three. But that judgement is limited to that particular moment. When dealing with work, labor, and play across a wider range of actors and behaviors, those individual moments are compiled into gradient swathes. Each point in that swath of color has its
individual hue, and together they provide a general sense of the ratio for a set of activities. But the
individual values remain unique, and the judgement used to determine those values remains subjective.

All of this is to say that the review that follows will help to establish some general parameters
for work, labor, and play. It does not, however, provide clear and definitive boxes in which terms can be
neatly isolated from one another. In truth, work, labor, and play more often function as a
complementary set in the logic of capitalism, with work (and/or labor) providing the resources to allow
for leisure, while leisure reinvigorates a subject for more work. What, then, do work and play look like in
a general sense? And, more importantly, what sort of work, labor, and play is under examination in this
chapter? In the next section, I will examine several different possible features of work in an effort to
paint a slightly clearer picture of what it means when discussing the work of players and developers.

5.4 — Work and Labor

In an attempt to offer a frame for the definitions of work, labor, and play offered below, I want
to present the following hypothetical situation. Imagine a player. She has signed up for the Beta test of a
still in-development game. During the Beta testing period, this player takes their avatar through the
game world gathering herbs, making potions from those herbs, and selling the potions to other players.
At points, this player may have even used an in-game form to report a glitch or bug she found as she
played. For this player, the activity was fun. She explored the world while engaging in an activity she
found enjoyable and, at least within the game world, productive. She even has in-game currency to
show for her in-game work, and that in-game currency can be exchanged for other in-game items the
player desires. On the development organization’s side, the player’s efforts have generated an
enormous amount of useful data. The development organization would be able to track, for example,
how many herbs this diligent player could gather in a play session, how much other players were paying
for her potions, and even to judge the impact of those potions on other aspects of the game they are
creating.
Was this player’s activity work? From her position, perhaps not. She was, after all, engaged in activity she enjoyed, as well as being an activity she chose to do. And as Chris Provis notes, when referring to "work" in its most general sense, we "often have in mind that it was difficult and demanding, and perhaps unpleasant" (Provis 128). This might instead be an example of what Ruggill and McAllister call “playing at work” (90). Ruggill and McAllister use an example of playing at work an individual in *Ultima Online* spending literally months making iron ingots in the game (90). Other examples might include a player who comes home from their day job to fish in *World of Warcraft*, or a person who wakes up early in order to complete maintenance on his town in *Animal Crossing* before taking his children to school. These players are engaged in play that mimics many of the common features of work. It can be tedious, it requires expenditure of energy (both physical and mental), and it is “productive” (at least in the world of the game). Despite these similarities, however, these activities exist as part of the player’s leisure activities. They mimic, but are not the same as, the type of work that people engage in when they spend time cleaning their homes or working at a job.

At the same time, however, had this player not spent her leisure time wandering the virtual hills to gather herbs, the development organization would have either simply not had as much data to work with, or they would have had to pay someone to carry out the task for them. In either case, the developer would have faced a cost for the lack of data, e.g. bugs in the herb gathering code, or unknowingly providing players with over-powered potions that trivialize other portions of the game. Quite simply, the player’s play has completed work for the developer. So the developer may in fact count these activities as work completed. This contradiction, then, reveals the first part of this chapter’s definition of work. Whether an activity is classified as work or not will depend on who is making the judgement. And that judgement will be influenced by the subject position of the person doing the judging.
In my hypothetical scenario, the player and the developer could also be said to have engaged in an act of exchange. The player gets to play the game early. In return, the developer uses those play sessions, coupled with player filed bug reports, to determine what changes need to be made to the game. The transaction between the player and the development organization introduces the distinction between work and labor. Work, in Marx's definition, is the effort put forth by a person to access the materials needed to live his life. In particular, a person works when, “He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature” (Marx 256).

Work, however, becomes labor “when effort is expended to create materials that are to be bought and sold rather than used immediately and locally,” or as Engels puts it in his editor’s note in Capital, “The labour which creates Use-Value, and counts qualitatively, is Work, as distinguished from Labour, that which creates Value and counts quantitatively, is Labour as distinguished from Work” (Ruggill and McAllister 91; Marx 69). More simply, labor involves the sale of a person’s time and ability to another in order to “earn a living.” Therefore, an artist designing new characters for Electronic Arts would be considered a laborer. An indie developer, on the other hand, works to produce a game that will be sold to players. In either case, however, it is the expenditure of time and energy in order to live the desired life that characterizes work. It is only when that time and energy is sold to someone else that work becomes labor. So has our hypothetical player engaged in labor for the development organization? Again, this depends on the subject position of who is being asked. The player may not see her time in the game world as anything more than fun. The data collected and the bug reports submitted may, in fact, simply be part of the game for her. Her activity, however, could be counted by the developer as player-work done in place of labor. By this I mean that the player’s in-game activity, an
activity she may have considered play, has completed work that the development organization would have otherwise had to pay someone for, i.e. they would have had to pay someone to labor for them.

This hypothetical also highlights that labor often exists in the context of employment. And the player is most definitely not considered an employee. She does not receive a paycheck, she has no Human Resources assigned title, and she has none of the benefits or legal protections of an employee. The Terms of Use Agreement from game developer Trion World, for instance, explicitly outlines the player’s position as a non-employee, saying “Trion owns, has licensed, or otherwise has rights to all of the content that appears on the Site, in the Game (including Game-related Virtual Items, if any) and Game Client(s), and through the Service. You agree that you have no right or title in or to any such content, including without limitation any other attributes associated with any Account or stored on the Service” (Trion Worlds). Legally, then, the player may be closer to a volunteer, having provided “services without any expectation of compensation, and without coercion or intimidation” (Nonprofit Risk Management Center).

So the player has gathered herbs as part of her play, but that play has completed work for the developer, work that was completed without paying the standard cost of labor, i.e. money. The player has essentially labored for free. Why would she do such a thing? It is because, as Chris Provis notes, that "working" and "being a worker" are often highly socially valued, and that the performance of work allows for subjects to inhabit different social positions than those who do not work, whatever that may mean in the particular context. As shown in the examples offered later in this chapter, the social value of “being a worker” plays an important role in the communities that form around computer games. In my hypothetical example, by working for the developer in the Beta test, the player gains access to a different social position, both within her community and possibly even in the development organization. For example, players who participated in the Beta test for the MOBA Smite gained access to a special character model and player icon that Smite developer HiRez studios has promised to never offer again.
under any circumstances. That character model and player tag represent a permanent, developer-produced symbol of appreciation for the player’s work. As such, it also marks a distinction in the relationship the developer has with players with these items versus those without them.

Work, Provis argues, is a term deployed rhetorically, its meaning powerfully shaped by the situation in which it is being deployed (126). Robert Weiss and Robert Khan argue a similar point, noting that “a task, to be clearly work, must meet a number of criteria, but there will be disagreement among men about which criteria are essential” (142). As such, the specific criteria that qualifies an activity as work or labor in this chapter will be kept few and simple, and they are offered knowing that situations will arise that they simply cannot account for. Work in this context, therefore, is two things: One, work is an activity that requires the expenditure of either physical or mental energy to complete. Two, it is productive. Returning to the hypothetical that frames this section, this means that if the player’s herb gathering had not been set up to generate data for the development team, it would not be considered work because it would not have produced anything. Instead, it would have been considered playing at work because the only thing produced were materials created by and for play. Labor, meanwhile, retains the two criteria of work while adding a third criteria: Labor requires the exchange of a person’s time and energy to another individual or organization in order to gain access to desired resources. In our example, the player has gained access to a resource she desires (the game) in exchange for providing data to the developer they can use to make their game more saleable. She has, in fact, completed labor for the development organization, at least from the development organization’s perspective. From the player’s perspective, however, all of this activity might simply feel like a part of how she plays a game. How, then, should we define play?

5.5 — Play

Just as with work, the definition of play can be challenging to pin down. Luckily, in detailing the challenges of defining work, some of the same difficulties of defining play have already been addressed,
i.e. that play shares the same ambiguous nature as work. Play’s ambiguity is so much a part of its nature that author Brian Sutton Smith wrote an entire book about the various definitions of play called “The Ambiguity of Play.” Sutton Smith’s book offers extended examinations of a wide variety of theories of play, arguing in the end that "ambiguity" itself may be the most defining feature of the play experience, meaning that play’s rhetorical slipperiness, it’s tendency to show up in unexpected places, bent towards a wide variety of purposes is, to borrow the phrase, a feature and not a bug. He argues instead for a definition of play that is broad in its coverage of subjects (including animals and children), that does not rely solely on Western definitions, that does not forget that play can be both passive and vicarious, that does not define play in moral "good or bad" terms, and that remembers that play is always characterized by "distinct performance and stylization" (217). For my purposes, the most important pieces of this definition are performance and ambiguity. In particular, this chapter assumes that the performance of play is only part of play. This is important to this discussion because it means that something can very much look like play without actually being play (i.e., the performance looks playful). If, for instance, the herb gathering player of my hypothetical situation filed bug reports, that activity could easily be mistaken for play because the majority of the performed activity (the exploring, the gathering, the potion making, etc.) looks like play. But as was detailed in the previous section, whether an activity is work or play depends at least partially on who is making the judgement. It is precisely because play is ambiguous that something that looks a great deal like play can be presented as a part of play to the community, despite the fact that it would be work if a member of the development organization was doing it.

In the case of both work and play, then, the fundamental ambiguity of the terms is central to this analysis. Whether an activity is work or play can depend on the social position of the subject carrying out the activity. And activities can look very much like work or play without necessarily being work or play for the person carrying out the activity. In short, people will disagree about which is which.
Further, being a worker or player is itself a social position. They are terms that allow subjects to inhabit various social positions, they are deployed rhetorically to a variety of ends, and they both have both theoretical and materials consequences based on how, where, and why they are deployed. At the nexus of these denotatively and connotatively slippery terms then, computer games and computer game development presents a unique opportunity to examine how these rhetorical dynamics are manipulated by community management teams. This nexus will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter, beginning with the examination of a popular new funding model for computer game development, the Kickstarter campaign.

5.6 — Pathfinder Online

Kickstarter campaigns as a source of funding for computer game development are of particular interest to this chapter because of their implications for how it blurs the lines between work and play in computer game communities. The particular example examined here also highlights, however, how community management itself is suspended between the realms of work and play, and how the issues of gameracy discussed in Chapter 4 can impact both getting and keeping a community management job in the computer game industry. To begin this discussion, however, I want to examine how this particular Kickstarter campaign exploits the ambiguity of work and play, before moving on to how it impacts the community manager herself.

Kickstarter, first launched in 2009, is a platform through which individuals and organizations are able to crowd source funds for their projects. Those attempting to raise funds offer various tiers of rewards for “backers,” with larger and larger “donations” earning more and more elaborate and luxurious rewards. The particular case examined here regards computer game developer Goblinworks raising funds to develop a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPGs) based off their already wildly popular tabletop game, *Pathfinder*. The release and development of an MMORPG entails years of work from hundreds of programmers, visual and musical artists, writers, and animators, and
development easily costs upwards of a million dollars, with many projects costing much more. But MMORPGs routinely fail to find an audience and, thus, represent a risk for investors\(^2\). Untested properties or developers can thus struggle to find funding for their projects. In the case of *Pathfinder Online*, Goblinworks attempted to circumvent such problems by coming to Kickstarter twice, hoping to raise funds off the enthusiasm of fans of its tabletop game. The first crowd sourcing excursion raised $307,843.00 (more than 250,000 over its stated goal) for a “Technology Demo” of the proposed game, Goblinworks describes the technology demo to its backers thusly:

The Technology Demo will be fully playable, integrating account management, character creation, a virtual world server, multiple simultaneously connected clients, middleware used for rendering landscapes and characters, basic game mechanics, and player communications. The demo will only support a few simultaneous users exploring a couple of small locations, so the general public won’t be able to play it, but we will produce a short video of the demo that everyone will be able to experience, and a special longer video exclusively for backers of this Kickstarter.

Backers of the Technology Demo are further told, “Your support of the Technology Demo will help us raise awareness of *Pathfinder Online* and will show potential investors what the game is really about. Funding this demo will also signal to potential partners that *Pathfinder Online* has an audience that's large enough and dedicated enough to allow the long-term success of the MMO.” This statement is important for two reasons. First, Kickstarter backers are not investors, and they have neither the legal protections nor the chance to profit from the game that investors have. Investors in a project can expect to see some sort of return should the investment property increase in value, but backers receive their backer reward no matter how much the project ends up being worth. Mind you, they also run the risk of getting nothing should the Kickstarter fail after funding\(^3\).
As testified to by the sale of Kickstarter backed virtual reality developer Oculus Rift to Facebook for $2 billion dollars, there is very big money to be earned from select Kickstarter projects. But backers are not earning that particular windfall. In fact, backers are instead positioned as a resource, as they “will show potential investors what the game is really about,” as well as, “signal[ing] to potential partners that Pathfinder Online has an audience that’s large enough and dedicated enough to allow the long-term success of the MMO” (Goblinworks “Pathfinder Online Technology Demo”). Backers are presented to investors as a proto-consumer, willing to serve as a customer before a product even exists. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the plea is asking backers to engage in a particular action, making them the agents in this scenario, agents whose “work,” so to speak, is to affirm their loyalty to the project through monetary donation and evangelizing to others about the project.

Backers, however, are also encouraged to see themselves as insiders in the development process. And, as long as non-disclosure agreements are in place and honored, they are. For instance, backers who donate $30 or more become members of the “Goblin Squad,” and gain access “special alerts letting them know about new information first, and we’ll give special priority to Goblin Squad members throughout the development process. This is your chance to identify yourself to us and to the community as a key supporter of Pathfinder Online.” But notice in this statement how the onus of action is again placed upon the backer to signal that they are “supporters” of the development process. Larger donations net even more distinguished titles, with $250 dollars earning a “Goblinworks Founder” title, and $500 earning “Goblinworks Executive Founder.” Regardless of funding level, however, Goblinworks wants “a very close symbiosis with our customers, getting their feedback on our design ideas and, once the game is launched, iteratively adding content to the game based on their feedback.” This closer relationship, however, does not mean that the player has become a part of the development team. It is only that they have been encouraged to feel as if they are part of the team. In the end, though the language of the Kickstarter attempts to occlude the differences, developer and backer remain different
subject positions, with different expectations of the type of “work” required of them to be a part of the development process. The denotative and connotative slippage of “work,” however, allows for each subject position to have its action characterized as “work.” But only one type of work (that of the development team), will see any of the profits should the project succeed. The backer, in fact, is told that only through their “work” as fundraisers and cheerleaders for the project will the opportunity for play arise.

Pathfinder’s second Kickstarter campaign continues some of these rhetorical themes, as well as introducing new ones. The project, funded at $1,091,194, gives backers further titles, including Adventurer, Music Lover, and Crowdforgers Pioneer (Goblinworks “Pathfinder Online: A Fantasy Sandbox MMO”). Importantly, many of the tiers also offer backers “access” to Alpha playtesting sessions, and early access to the game Beta testing process. For those unfamiliar, Alpha testing generally takes place with in-house testers, and with major game systems missing and a wide variety of so-called “game breaking” bugs. Beta testing occurs after the Alpha test, with outside testers playing the game, and many of the game systems in place but with the search for bugs continuing unabated. Beta testing tends to progress from a small group of testers up to literally thousands of testers, each of those testers reporting bugs as they find them so that the development team can fix them before the official commercial release of the game. By offering backers a place in the Alpha and Beta tests for their game, Goblinworks has convinced backers to pay for the chance to do work for them, work that would have otherwise been labor to be completed by a paid Quality Assurance tester. In fact, the backers’ work finding bugs requires that they play the game. Thus the player’s action in the game can exist as both play and work at the same time, held in a sort of rhetorical superposition that only collapses into one state or another when the viewer determines how they see the situation.

Regardless of what position the viewer takes, however, it is the rhetorical slippage of “work” and “play” that makes it possible for the situation to exist at all. Backers are “part of the team” when
doing the work, but they are not part of the team getting paychecks. Instead, they become player-workers, paying for the privilege, one which, it should be noted, carries a certain amount of cultural capital within the community of players itself. Further, players may find the activity fulfilling as it provides for a social or emotional need they may not meet be able to meet otherwise. Because of this, I wish to exercise a certain amount of caution in evaluating the relationship between the development organization and the player. In particular, I want to be cautious that in framing the relationship between developers and players, I fall neither into the trap of seeing players as nothing but dupes, nor do I dismiss the value of players’ emotional and social experiences simply because those experiences are not monetary. As I noted in the opening of this chapter, some players assuredly enter into this exchange relationship with the development organization aware of what they are trading, i.e. play-work for access. Others assuredly do not. At the same time, the value that players’ find in their experiences working for development teams, even if they don’t see the activity as work, cannot be assumed to be non-exploitative just because an exchange has occurred. The question of whether the exchange is a just one is vital, and represents an on-going avenue for future research.

5.5 — Work and Play for the Community Manager

In addition to highlighting the rhetorical slippage of work and play for players, *Pathfinder Online’s* development also highlights how troubled the distinction between work and play is for the development organization. This can be seen through the fact that Goblinworks early pleas for player-workers were not coming from the community management team. Goblinworks did not, in fact, even hire a community manager until 2014, 2 years after they began development of the game. The advertisement for the job itself, however, illuminates the tension between play and work in computer game communities and community management. The job ad for *Pathfinder Online’s* community manager was posted to a standard company “Careers” page on the Paizo webpage, Goblinworks parent company. But the job listing was also posted to the *Pathfinder Online* forum boards by Ryan Dancey,
then CEO of Goblinworks. As noted in chapter 1, the position of community manager can be filled early in the development process (and the community management literature reviewed in Chapter 1 would recommend that scenario), but in reality many development organizations only hire a community manager after community forums and social media platforms have been established. In this case, Dancey’s job posting to the community forum, in fact, relies on the fact that the community has already formed, as well as assuming that the community manager will come from that community. For instance he says, “We are only interested in candidates that can hit the ground running.” By this, he means, that Goblinworks is seeking a community manager with, “A knowledge of the MMO community space – who the guilds are, who key thought leaders are, how to use access points like forums and social media to connect with the MMO social graph” and, “Good selling skills – ability to close.” Dancey’s job posting highlights the discursive slippage between work and play for not only players (as detailed above) but for the community manager herself. Keep in mind, this is a job posting for a game that has not even been released, and is still, in fact, in the development phase. At the time of this job posting, Pathfinder Online was still in pre-Alpha stages. And yet, Dancey expected a successful applicant to have both mechanical and social gameracy regarding Pathfinder Online. How would an applicant have that sort of knowledge of a game that had not yet been released? The only option would have been to buy into the development team through the Kickstarter campaign. The successful applicant was expected to pay to play, play in the service of work. That play-work then opened up the possibility of being an official member of the development team, moving from the social position of player-worker to simply worker.

And upon moving to that position, it is now part of the community manager’s job to keep player-workers producing for Goblinworks. Jane Snow, the newly hired Community Manager, makes her first post to the community forums on July 07, 2014. That forum post provides players with the instructions on how to record and stream their play in Pathfinder Online (Snow “Guide to Twitch Live Streaming”). This includes instructions on how to gain access to branded Goblinworks overlays and
graphics to use in these streams. Her third post is a list of those early access players (who, again, paid for the privilege to play early) who are participating in video live streams (Snow “List of Live Streamers”). Her sixth post provides players with more details on the Crowdforging program and encourages them to promote their ideas to the development team for consideration (Snow “How to Crowdforge: please read before posting!”). Until her sudden departure in 2015, Jane Snow continued posting encouragement to players to stream, to make guides, and to invite their friends to join the community. Additionally, she made dozens of posts welcoming new players to the community after their first post, as well as answering questions and writing patch notes. Her work, in fact, comports perfectly with the duties of the community manager laid out by Ng, Kim, et. al. All the while, as made clear by Dancey’s job posting, Snow was expected to stay gamerate in both the mechanical and social aspects of *Pathfinder Online*, a player and a worker in a single package. In effect, subjects, both players and the community manager herself, work and play at the same moment. As I will detail in the next section, some development organizations have developed ways to deploy the rhetorical ambiguity of play and work in order to have players directly develop content for their games. The development organization in question, however, has also established a system through which at least some players see a financial return for their work, in addition to whatever emotional and social value they find in the activity.

### 5.6 - Players Studio — Sony Online Entertainment

This section focuses on a Sony Online Entertainment project called “Players Studio,” a project that spans across the games *Everquest, Everquest II, Everquest Landmark*, and *Planetside 2*. The Player’s Studio is described thusly, “SOE players are some of the most dedicated, emotionally invested players in any virtual world. You now have the opportunity to create parts of our world by designing new in-game items.” In effect, player’s become developers through the Player’s Studio project, developing items that will appear in the game. Player’s Studio is particularly interesting, however, in that player-made items appear in an in-game store where items are purchased with real world currency, with the player-
designer earning 40% of the net amount SOE receives from the sale of the item ("General FAQ"). Player-created items are produced by players on their own time, with their own computers and software, and submitted to SOE for approval. That approval process requires that the item meet certain standards for style and design, as well as to ensure that the item fits with the aesthetic of the game world and the current game storyline. As such, player-workers must be players, knowing the style and story of the world well, in order to engage in the work of development. As was seen in *Pathfinder* online, work and play overlap in this activity. Here, however, we can see how the overlap of player and work can be used to encourage other players to spend more money with the developer and to play the game more, i.e. players buy the new items, which provides them with more content to consume, extending their play time.

The appeal of this system for the developer is immediately obvious. SOE has effectively outsourced a portion of the work of development to their community, a group who may be more familiar with the art, story, and community of the game than developers themselves. And, recalling *Pathfinder Online*’s job listing for a community manager, it is important to note that this is now the second time in this analysis that the development organization has had to rely on the community to provide information about the in-game world. But whereas Goblinworks needed information on the workings of their community, i.e. they are seeking information about what already is, SOE is asking players to turn their efforts to what will be. They are, in fact, asking players to help them invent the future of the game. The monetary appeal to players is also obvious as Player’s Studio submissions provide an opportunity to earn income for their work, as long as their submissions are accepted. But the player-worker also has the chance to earn prestige in the fan community, as their work is sold to the entire community with either their in-game or legal name attached to it. Those new items are also posted on community sites, such as the popular *Everquest* fan community site *EQHammer*. Through these distribution channels, the player-worker can gain prestige and social capital within the fan
community, becoming a star of sorts to those who purchase and view their original items. And because their work now exists in the virtual world, the player has effectively become a part of that world forever, carried on the virtual bodies and decorating the virtual homes of other players.

A post from CM Luperza (figure 5.2), however, reveals the discursive work necessary to maintain a productive relationship between the development organization and player-workers in the community. On May 1, 2014, Luperza made the following post to the official Everquest II forums (Figure 5.2):

![Forum screenshot](image)

**Figure 5.2 – Forum screenshot – CM Luperza explains Player’s Studio**

In this post, Luperza provides players with information regarding the planned roll-out of the Player Studio program to international audiences. Due to the fact that players can earn real world income for their designs, the deployment of the program is, understandably, a complicated matter. Luperza’s rhetoric is designed to highlight those complications, while ending with an affirmation of the player-workers insider status, as well as establishing an expectation of the player-workers’ continued dedication to the program.

The complex nature of the program is highlighted by phrases such as “For the last several months we’ve been working hard . . . with a number of improvements.” She also explicitly calls out the “complicated initiative” and “the intricacy of the program.” The overall impression for the reader is that
the roll out of the Player Studio program to international audiences has been a long-term, complex undertaking. Work, therefore, has been going on behind the scenes. This post, in fact, serves as a way for the development organization to make the scope of that work clear to an audience that may be frustrated by the delay. This disclosure is paired with a statement about SOE’s belief “in a fully transparent approach to game design and development” that “is central to [their] company philosophy.” Together, these statements presents player-workers with a view of the development process as difficult work, hopefully creating a sympathetic orientation to the developer, as well as creating a sense that the player-workers and the development organization share a sense of frustration over the delays. The post ends with a statement thanking players for “your continued support and . . . patience.” In this sentence, Luperza has established the development organizations expectation for players in the program: continued support and patience. Luperza continues to encourage this attitude from players interested in participating later in the same thread when she responds to Canadian player Tinkrbelle who says (Figure 5.3):

![Forum screenshot – Tinkrbelle question](image)

Notice that Tinkrbelle is demonstrating exactly the sort of patience that Luperza has established as the expectation. Notice, as well, that this post does not contain a question. Nonetheless, Luperza responds to this post, saying, “We’re working on it! We want you to be part of the program too. [smiley face emoticon].” This response not only serves to reward the player for engaging in the desired behavior (i.e., patience and continued support), it also affirms the development organizations desire for players to become player-workers through the Player Studio Program. Much as I have discussed in earlier chapters,
community management is a process through which community members are encouraged to take on desirable attitudes and behaviors through discourse with the community. This exchange exemplifies that process, with the community manager encouraging patient, supportive players without ever actually directly asking for the desired behaviors.

5.7 — Balance Suggestions and Player Analysis as a Part of Play

Players may also do extensive analysis as part of their play. From the outside, however, this play can look very much like work. This can be particularly true when players, myself among them, see extensive analysis and writing about the games they play as a part of their play. For a reader unfamiliar with this portion of computer game communities, imagine that the thing you love most in the world is, in your opinion, less than perfect. Now imagine that you access to a whole community of people who use advanced data analysis tools, exhaustively researched theories, and old-fashioned argument to address those imperfections. That is exactly the situation for computer game fans, with almost every game that is released having official forums, or a Twitter account that is managed by a community manager, or a team of community managers whose job it is (at least partially) to read your feedback and pass along information to the development team. When players create the sort of extensively researched documents detailed in this section, it is another case of player-work subbing in for developer labor, but in this case, the development organization does not necessarily need to encourage the player activity through direct dialogue. Instead, they can rely on structural elements of the community, particularly by creating specific, prominent spaces for the produced work. To begin the analysis in this section, I focus on the sorts of work that players produce for their community. Then, I will move on to how the community manager encourages and employs this player work.

An excellent example of the kind of work players are doing can be found on the forums for the 2014 game *Call of Duty: Ghosts*. In a post from community member MuscledRMH, the community member has drafted what amounts to 3 pages, single-spaced, of detailed arguments and suggestions for
making *Call of Duty: Ghosts* more “balanced,” meaning more fair to all players (for more on the highly contestable notion of “balance,” see Chapter 2). At the beginning of his post, MuscledRHM says, “There will be NOT HATE and there will be NO BLAME in this post, this is pure [sic] to help Infinity Ward tweaking and improving their game!” This rhetoric positions MuscledRHM as a supporter of the development organization, his critiques accompanied by explicit statements about how much he enjoys the game and how he thinks the development team is doing a good job. Much as was seen in the earlier examples, the player is establishing himself as “part of the team,” offering very specific suggestions about changes to the game. These suggestions are broken down into seven separate sections, with each section composed of a paragraph outlining MuscledRHM’s problem with the current state of the game and a short suggestion on how that particular issue should be addressed. At the end of his post, MuscledRHM writes the following (Figure 5.4):

```
I hope this was a very good and constructive post towards Infinity Ward and I hope they take this thread very serious and work on all the things I talked about in this post. I’m enjoying Ghosts and can’t wait for the DLC and future smaller maps in Ghosts but I really hope they keep listening and adding these changes called above in-game.

@Teanah @InfinityWard @JoeCecot

#NoHate #Respect #NoBlame

This thread is created by the Official @CODINT3L Twitter.

For more COD News or Questions about this thread contact www.twitter.com/CODINT3L
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*Figure 5.4 – Forum screenshot – MuscledRHM feedback*

Again, MuscledRHM states his desire for his work to be seen as a positive contribution to the community, as well as that his work be taken seriously by the development organization, Infinity Ward. He also includes the Twitter handles of two of the games multiplayer developers (@Teanah, @JoCecot) and the official Infinity Ward Twitter account. The post also establishes that, “This thread is created by the Official @CODINT3L Twitter.” By including this information, MuscledRHM position his post as “official” in some capacity, as well as framing his suggestions as coming from one organization,
CODINT3L, to another, Infinity Ward. This is all to say that MuscledRHM is contributing to the community discussion because he expects to be heard. That there is an expectation of being heard and even responded to makes clear the development organization is expected to have someone listening, i.e., the community manager. As mentioned in chapter 4, structures of membership encourage the development of desirable community members. Here we can see that a structure of employment, the corporate discipline of community management, also encourages player engagement because it provides a designated interlocutor for players who want to engage in work for the development organization.

Player-work can also dive even more deeply into the underlying mechanics of the game than MuscledRHM’s post, going so far as to examine the mathematical formulas that make a game work. For instance, the Guides and Strategies sub-forum for the MOBA League of Legends hosts a wide variety of in-depth discussions on the mathematical formulas and values that underpin gameplay. A post from community member Stumpster, for instance, offers in-depth explanations of game mechanics such as dodge. To illustrate the complexity of this information, a portion of this post has been included below (Figure 5.5):
Throughout Stumpter’s approximately 2000 word post, other players’ contributions are also cited, such as when he credits player Ezreal for information on how lifesteal mechanics work⁸. A community manager then highlights and, in fact, lionizes the work of these players further by tagging this post in such a way that it is one of the very first posts that come up on the forum page, no matter how many new posts have been created. This is a process colloquially known as “stickying,” as in making the post stick to the top of the thread list in a forum. These stickied posts are, in fact, a common tool for community management across many industries forum communities, but they are particularly useful in computer game communities that demand a high level of gameracy from their members. One of the most useful features of such a post is that it tends to answer questions that come up repeatedly. So instead of being forced to either answer the question themselves, or hoping community members will answer the same questions repeatedly, the community manager can simply sticky the post. In a perfect world, players would simply read through stickied posts before posting a question. In the real world, of course, players may simply make a new post. Even in these cases, however, by stickying a post, the

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**Figure 5.5 – Forum screenshot – Stumpster explains dodge calculation**

Q: How does dodge work?

A: The best way to show how dodge works is an example, let’s say you have 10% dodge in your runes.

10% dodge.

You grab Ninja Tabi, which gives 11% dodge.

11% dodge + (89 * .1) = 8.9% dodge

For a total of 19.9% dodge. (Note that the 89 comes from the percent remaining from the previous dodge percentages have been calculated.)

You then get Phantom Dancer, which gives 20% dodge.

20% dodge + (80 * .11) = 8.8% dodge + (71.2 * .1) = 7.12% dodge

For a total of 35.92% dodge.

---
community manager has made it simple for other players (or the CM herself) to supply a link to the answers the player seeks.

Stickying a post may also encourage the original poster or other players to keep informational posts up-to-date, with the posts increased visibility creating community pressure to do so. For instance, a guide created by *Smite* community member Flareb00t first posted in March of 2014 received a substantial update in February of 2015. Flareb00t’s guide, “The Word of Thoth,” includes extensive discussion of the mathematical formulas for figuring the amount of damage various non-player characters can do to player characters, as well the formulas used for determining a wide variety of effects that a player may be subject to during a round of play. Again, an illustrative example of the kind of work that Flareb00t has done is included below (Figure 5.6):

\[
0.2D(T + 4) \frac{100}{100+X} \text{ where } D \text{ is the tower damage, } T \text{ is the shot number on a god, and } X \text{ is armour.}
\]

So for the first shot on a Tier 1 tower, it would be \(0.2(170)(1 + 4)\frac{100}{100+X}\) where \(X\) is armour.

*Figure 5.6 – Forum screenshot – Tower damage calculation*

Flareb00t’s original post was first stickied by volunteer Forum Moderator KingScuba in December of 2014. Before the update in February, the sticky post also received a comment from community member TigrisCallidus asking, “What changes will there be in the Season 2 version?” Flareb00t responded just a few weeks later with season 2 updates to the guide. I am not suggesting that the updates to the guide emerged solely because of this response post. It is far more likely that Flareb00t was already planning on or working on those updates. Nonetheless, the position of prestige that Flareb00ts guide had found by being stickied has created a more demanding exigency for those changes to be made, an exigency
apparent enough that it encourages comment from the community. After all, had the game changed in Season 2, and the guide not been updated, the sticky designation could have been removed by the community manager.

It should also be noted that Flareb00t himself is a volunteer for the community. In particular, he is a volunteer “bug” reporter and collector. So in this one post, we see three examples of ambiguity involving player-work. The first is in the creation of the guide by Flareb00t. As noted above, the discursive ambiguity surrounding work and play means that the creation of this guide could easily be seen as play, especially if Flareb00t enjoyed the process of creating the guide. But consider for a moment that if such a guide had been posted by an official member of the development team, the creation of the guide would assuredly have been seen as a work product. As I have established throughout this chapter, work and play often exist side-by-side, with the judgment of which is which depending on the judgement of who is looking. As such, Flareb00t’s guide can exist as both part of the play of the game and as work being done to support the community all at once.

The second example involves the stickying of the post by volunteer Forum Moderator ScubaKing. ScubaKing’s action is, in fact, community management through a structure of membership. As discussed in chapter 4, structures of membership established by the community manager create opportunities for the community to manage itself. This is such a case, with the position of volunteer forum moderator literally structuring forum discourse by stickying Flareb00t’s post. It is the community manager acting through a proxy, a player doing work for the development organization. Additionally, the lionization of Flareb00t’s post through stickying establishes standards of behavior within both the game world and the community that has arisen around the game. In particular, Flareb00t’s analysis of the game’s underlying systems can not only encourage other players to play in a certain way (i.e., playing in a way that reflects an interest in and concern for the mathematical formulas of the game), but can also serve to establish standards of gameracy for players. The third moment of ambiguity is more
speculative, but can be reasonably traced back to Flareb00t’s position as a bug reporter and collector. In particular, the deep knowledge that Flareb00t displays regarding Smite’s inner workings may be a reflection of his experience in the often technical, detail-oriented work of identifying and reporting software bugs. This, of course, presents a “chicken or the egg” question. Did Flareb00t’s analytical approach to the game emerge as a result of his position? Or did he get the position because of his analytical approach? I personally lean towards the latter rather than the former, but regardless of its source, Flareb00t’s approach has been legitimized by his appointment. This legitimization can then serve to encourage him to more fully develop and then share that point of view with his fellow players through artifacts such as this guide. Further, Flareb00t’s legitimated point of view, instantiated in his guide, also works to establish the focus, scope, and manner of community discourses, as well as community standards of gameracy. Flareb00t’s voice in the community has become amplified, and that amplified voice will help shape the community going forward.

5.8 — Player-workers and Community Managers Outside of the Forums

It can be too easy, however, to focus on the ways that players labor in the game world or in the official community forums, forgetting that those spaces are far from the only available spaces for player-work. In the following section, I examine two ways that community managers from the MMORPG Rift both carried out player-work themselves, as well as the ways that they employed the community’s player-work to benefit the development organization. In each case, these interactions still embody the discourse driven ethos of community management, but they occur outside of official forums, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds.

One increasingly popular place for player work is podcasting. One such podcast was The Rift Podcast, begun by community members Arithion and Desikis in 2010. The Rift Podcast actually began while Rift was still in pre-alpha. The show notes for that first podcast even say, “Remember as Rift is still in pre-alpha stages, a lot of this information may be subject to change before actual release” (Arithion).
In their podcast, Arithion and Desikis would discuss the most recent news about the then upcoming game, discussing topics such as the release of new character classes, and even the earliest television ads related to the game. Of particular note was the recurring presence of the *Rift* community manager, Cindy “Abigale” Bowens. Bowens made her first appearance on the podcast in Episode 3. She then made thirteen more appearances over the course of the next 41 episodes, her final appearance coinciding with the final episode of the podcast. Additionally, *The Rift Podcast* often hosted other members of the development organization, including then executive producer Scott Hartsman.

Cindy Bowens’ appearance on the third *Rift* podcast is particularly illustrative. Cindy Bowen is joined by assistant community manager Jives, and player Ciovala, a fan responsible for the *Rift* wiki *Telarapedia* and *The Rift Nexus*, a community site. The interview begins with Jives discussing what her job entails, but the hosts of the podcast focus quickly on the amount of time that Jives spends in-game as part of her work. They also describe how Jives has posted many screen shots. As this podcast was released before even the first round of closed Beta testing, these screenshots were players only route to access the game. Later, one of the hosts asks, “In your time playing the game, what is your favorite role?” Jives explanation of what role she prefers, the rogue, includes what mechanics and aesthetic characteristics she enjoys about the particular role, giving players even more of a “sneak peek” into the upcoming release. In answering this question, Jives is, in fact, engaging in a performance of fandom for the players who have not yet had enough access to the perform it themselves. The hosts of the podcasts are engaged in their own performance of fandom by hosting a podcast about the show, of course. But they do not yet have access to play the game. As such, Jives is has given them access to vicarious play. Her play, of course, is also work because it is part of her job to be aware of the intricacies of the game. And the hosts of podcasts are also engaged in an ambiguous performance of work and play, discussing a topic that they are interested in for a property that excites them. But putting out that podcast also involves managing the schedules of themselves and their guests, editing audio, managing the
upload/download standards for iTunes, and managing the podcast’s website (including responding to their own community who post comments). And that work is being encouraged and supported by numerous visits from the community manager and other members of the development organization. That this work was produced at the time it was is particularly important, especially considering the dearth of content available at the time. Arithion’s and Desikis’ work in creating the podcast produced content for a content hungry audience, which helped keep the community involved and interested in the game prior to its release.

The Rift Podcast obviously enjoyed a high-level of access throughout the course of its run. Part of this was likely the fact that they were the “only game in town,” as the saying goes. Additionally, the amount of access that the Rift podcast enjoyed can possibly be traced back to Trion Worlds positioning of Rift as a contender for the throne of MMORPG success against the wildly popular World of Warcraft. This was made particularly clear in television ads stating “We’re not in Azeroth anymore” (“Rift Commercial”). Such an aggressive positioning made it all the more vital for Trion Worlds to grow a community of players even before the game was released. But this required additional forms of outreach beyond the Rift podcast. One additional method of outreach was live Internet Relay Chats (IRCs) with community manager Cindy Bowens. As seen with Jives’ discussion with the hosts of the Rift podcast, Cindy Bowens’ time playing the game often took front and center in these chats. For instance, in a July 09, 2010 chat, Cindy actually pre-empted player questions to discuss her play experience. She says, “I thought maybe before I take questions, I should tell you a little about my play time lately. Then you can ask me questions about it :)” (“IRC Chat Q&A with Cindy “Abigale” Bowens”). She goes on to describe the two different characters she is playing, as well as mentioning that she has gained experience with “solo and group content.” In doing so, she establishes the parameters of the questions she can answer, a particularly vital move considering that the discussion takes place at a time when the game is so early in development that players could otherwise spend the entire chat speculating wildly.
When the fans in attendance do get the chance to ask questions, they focus on issues of game mechanics, such as the use of abilities, as well as the pace of combat and character progression. But players also ask questions about the in-game settings, the music, and the amount of time a player would need to spend in order to feel like they had made progress\textsuperscript{11}. The IRC chat reveals a player base desperate for the experience of play, even if they can only have that experience vicariously. This vicarious play is, however, work for Cindy Bowens. As mentioned many times in this dissertation, community managers inhabit a space held in tension between the player community and the development organization. Cindy Bowens’ experience of work as play and play as work is simply another example of this phenomenon. And it further demonstrates that this position of tension is not undesirable in the work of community management. It is, in fact, necessary, because it allows the community manager to have a proverbial foot in both worlds, and to engage in discourses from a position of knowledge to both communities at the same time. In the case of players, it is the community managers association with the development organization that provides players with access to inside information. And for the development organization, the community manager has a ground-level understanding of the communities needs and desires that can only emerge from close, frequent discourse.

5.9 — Conclusions

In each of the above examples, what we see is that work and play’s fundamentally ambiguous definition allows for player communities and development organizations to achieve some of their goals. Further, this discursive ambiguity allows the community manager to encourage players to help her manage the community, as well as creating content for both the development organization and the community itself. In the end, whether a particular task qualifies as work or play seems to depend more on how the particular actor feels about the tasks than whether it would be considered unpleasant or whether the actor is being paid. In the case of the development organization, tasks that represent
difficult or expensive work for the development team can be repackaged as alternate forms of play for the community. And for the community, taking part in activities that feel like play (Beta testing, item development, analysis) allow them to feel like part of the work of development, to be part of the team. Across each case, the community manager can exploit her own ambiguous positionality between the community, and the development organization to encourage players to engage in player-work behaviors that the development organization finds desirable.

Regardless of whether discussing developers or players, the ambiguity of work and play raises serious issues for the computer game development cycle. The first is that, from the position of developers, having access to fan communities willing and able to do work for free, or who will even pay to work for the developer would seem to be a simple case of corporate profit mongering. And it would be foolish to dismiss the powerful influence of a drive for greater profits. At the same time, at least some of the reliance on player-work is a result of the ever increasing complexity and cost of developing a computer game, especially a major market release. On the side of AAA developers, development costs can routinely run 20 to 50 million dollars (Superannuation). And while it may be an outlier, *Halo* developer Bungie reportedly spent $500 million dollars of publisher Activision’s money to fund the development and marketing for its game *Destiny* (Pitcher). Even “low budget” games routinely cost more than a million dollars. Part of the increase of that cost comes from the ever increasing technological complexity of features such as sound and graphics, to say nothing of the increased cost of releasing, sometimes simultaneously, a single game across multiple platforms. As such, computer games require extensive testing that even larger development companies may not be able to comfortably afford. Small developers almost assuredly cannot. And thus they turn to their communities for support. But only a community that is provided with structured, focused ways to help affords the development organization the opportunity to defray the cost of development. Left to their own devices, player-work would likely be too unfocused and infrequent to be of much use.
On the player side, access to the development process can function as a form of social currency for members of the community. As discussed in earlier chapters, having the ear of the developers, being part of the history of the development, and engaging in discursive conflict are positions of social prestige in computer game communities. So rather than just benefitting the development organization (and proving the value of the community manager’s work to that organization), giving players opportunities to work for the developer can also serve as a way for players to attain their own goals, both in-game and in the game’s community. Whether those goals are centered on the play of the game (defeating a boss, solving a puzzle), creative (decorating a player home, role-playing an epic love story), or social (spending time with friends, creating a network of support), players performances of work and play with and for the development organization have complex motivations that work towards a variety of ends. That does not mean, however, that the relationship between the developer and the player is not exploitative. As was seen in the example of Pathfinder Online’s job listing for a community manager, development organizations can have frankly unreasonable expectations of what their player base can or should do to help support the development of a property.

Regardless of the balance of power between the two sides, it is the community manager who enables and encourages the discourse between communities and development organization. Their inhabitation of both the development and player worlds creates a productive tension between themselves and the parties on both sides. And that tension creates a discursive space ripe for disruption, dialogue, and engagement. It requires constant management of the community manager’s persona on all sides of the equation, as a team player for the development organization, and as a trusted source of information and help for the community. Community management in the computer game industry requires deft rhetorical performance every day, threading a constantly moving needle. As I said at the beginning of this project, I am uninterested in making value judgements on the methods of community managers in terms of them being “good” or “bad.” But I must, at the end of things, make the judgement
that the work of community management requires a rhetorical awareness and skill that scholars of computer games, of professional communication, and of fan studies should find worthy of respect and further study.
Notes

Chapter 1

1. As concrete examples of these phenomena, see Halo 3's world map of currently online players, or Dark Souls 2 in-game obelisk which tracks how many player deaths have occurred over every instance of the game played in the world.

2. Take, for example, the recent release of the Destiny: The Taken King, an expansion to the 2014 release Destiny. At least anecdotally, players have flocked back to the game precisely because of the huge diversity in experience the new expansion offers. A concrete example of this phenomenon can be found here: http://kotaku.com/players-discover-secret-destiny-mission-with-an-awesome-1732590474.

3. While not definitive or necessarily scientific, threads such as the one linked here are representative:

   http://www.reddit.com/r/MMORPG/comments/1zlxin/do_you_play_multiple_mmos/, offer a glimpse into this phenomenon.

4. It should be noted that McLaughlin himself takes pains to establish that he certainly sees no difference in the value or worth of vernacular vs. academic theories.

5. danah boyd does not capitalize her name.

6. A concern, it should be noted, shared by this study.

7. Kim's recommendation here, and at many other points in her work, assume that the community manager will have a direct hand in the design of the primary website. How much control the community manager may actually have, particularly in the computer game industry, can vary wildly between organizations.

Chapter 2

2. What constitutes acceptable behavior in a given community arises, of course, from both members of the community and from the development organization. That might include descriptions of how players interact with one another, but it can also include rules regarding the use of cheat programs, player’s in-game names, or even the sorts of in-game communications systems that players should use.

3. The different soul builds in *Rift* could often function to change the method by which a player would play the game (ludic changes) and the various combinations of souls would often influence things such as the base number value of an attack or change the way that the underlying program would compute critical hits or other key combat statistics.

4. The abilities of Pyromancers were the most widely debated on the *Rift* forums due to their perceived power at the time. Chiron101 makes it clear he’s aware of the argument by referring to Pyros and mentioning their “6k crit[s]”. Signaling his knowledge of the argument is part of establishing Chiron101’s *ethos*.

5. “Re-rolling” is when a player creates a new character and starts the game over. The term comes from Dungeons and Dragons practice of rolling dice to determine a new characters abilities and statistics or stats. “Re-rolling” generally refers to a player who is creating a new character as their “main”, or primary character. If a player makes an “alt” or secondary character, the practice is generally referred to as “rolling.”

6. Threat is a numerical representation of a computer controlled enemies attention. “Tank” characters attempt to generate threat in order to keep the enemies attention focused on them, instead of other, more fragile character types.

8. This post refers to the employees as “GMs,” meaning Game Masters. The role of “Game Master” often refers to a person who responds in-game to player concerns. The division between a GM and a Community Manager (CM) will often depend on the organization of the particular organization. The general duties of a GM (addressing player complaints, general customer service, community events, etc.) are nearly identical to the common duties of community managers described in chapter 1.

Chapter 3

1. Or in the case of Nora, that memory is actually swept away by history.

2. It should be noted that neither Howard nor Delanty deal with the question of national imaginaries in much depth. Collected vs collective memory in national imaginary is, however, a topic that could be its own project.

3. While outside of the scope of this particular project, it should be noted that player’s routinely develop history for their avatars, especially in role playing games. These histories may or may not comport with developer approved game histories.

4. The differences and impacts of diegetic vs non-diegetic lore are more fully explored in chapter 4.

5. These charming stories can also function as a form of social currency for players, of course. That idea will be more fully explored in chapter 4.

Chapter 4

1. Though assuredly still subject to their own brand loyalties and play preferences.
2. “Rotation” refers to the order different abilities should be used in. Rotations can be based on a number of factors, but an optimal rotation can significantly change a player’s performance in a game. “Juking” refers to a type of evasive movement.

3. Notice that these activities are also common activities for the community manager. In Kim’s formulation, however, community leaders draw their authority from their history with other community members. Community managers, on the other hand, draw their authority (at least initially) from their position as an employee of the community owners.

4. Rajan Zed is a figure of some controversy himself. The Universal Society of Hinduism is also, it should be noted Rajan Zed’s own creation. I do not present either his words or the Universal Society of Hinduism as proof of any large scale outrage amongst the Hindu community in regards to Smite. Instead, I offer it only as an example of the type of controversy the game courted.

5. A “skin” is another name for the appearance of an avatar.

6. A wipe is when all character avatars and progress are deleted from the game’s database. A wipe after a closed beta session is extremely common in MMORPG development as it means that all players start at the same point of progress when the game officially launches.

7. Level 30 is the maximum level possible in Smite, and one prerequisite for ranked play. Ranked play is a game mode where each win contributes to a player’s overall rank against all the other ranked players in the world. Ranked play, especially at higher ranks, is extremely competitive with top ranked players often being recruited by professional teams.

8. Though Sacheverell’s official title is “Content Administrator,” the work he does in the forum community (providing updates on the game, answering questions, creating video content for the community) falls well within the boundaries of community management examined in Chapter 1.
Chapter 5

1. It should be noted, however, that some scholars, such as Ken McAllister, categorize both developers and players as “agents” in the computer game complex. An agent, in McAllister’s definition, is “Any person or organization that participates in an exchange of rhetorical agents” (199). For more on the work of agents in the computer game complex, see: McAllister, Ken S. *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture*. Tuscaloosa, AL: UAlabama, 2004. Print.


5. The person hired for this position was community manager Jane Snow (forum handle). She left the company in January of 2015.

6. Streaming is a process where players broadcast themselves doing some activity (in this case, playing a game) live. Streams are also often recorded and posted to sites like YouTube. The most popular live streaming platform in computer games is Twitch.tv. Streaming is a computer game fan activity with implications for community management, but it also a subject that could serve as the subject of its own dissertation. As such, it is outside of the scope of this project.
7. In 2015, Sony Online Entertainment was sold by their parent company, Sony, and became Daybreak Games.

8. Lifesteal is a relatively common game mechanic in which a player’s character gains life from doing damage to another enemy.

9. MOBA games often operate in seasons akin to a sport like football. These seasons are largely determined by the professional competitive leagues schedule for the year.

10. Azeroth is the name of the world in the *World of Warcraft* series of computer games.

11. Some MMORPGs, especially MMORPGs such as the original *Everquest*, or MMORPGs from Korea, can require many hours of play to make even minor progress. Modern Western MMORPGs tend to allow players to progress substantially in much player sessions.
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