

Games, UX, and the Gaps: Technical Communication Practices in an Amateur Game Design Community

Research Paper

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ABSTRACT

Because professional game design processes and practices are often obfuscated, it is difficult for researchers to study how game design happens. In an effort to fill some of those gaps, this paper explores an amateur game design community with visible ongoing documentation practices. This research is meant to help establish cognates to professional game design practices in the service of building out the broader game design ecology. This discursive case study presents a way into a practice often closed off from technical communication scholars, UX specialists, and instructors attempting to train students in the daily work and technical communication practices of game design.

CCS CONCEPTS

- **Human-centered computing** → Collaborative and social computing

KEYWORDS

Technical communication, gaming, player experience, user experience, game design, amateur, iterative design, participatory design

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1 INTRODUCTION

The games industry is growing so rapidly that according to recent analysis [1], revenue from the global gaming industry is on track to eclipse global revenue estimates from the traditional sports market. With projections of software sales alone predicted at \$143 billion by 2020, it's safe to assume that as technical communication educators, more and more of our current and future students, particularly those in STEM fields, may end up attached to the gaming industry in some capacity. Thus, it behooves us to gain a better understanding of game design and other industry practices; however, in the gaming industry, insider practices, behaviors, and discussions are often opaque. Professional game design practices are often either purposely obfuscated to protect development teams or hidden behind a maze of nondisclosure agreements meant to guard intellectual property [2]. Technical communication is well positioned to enter into analysis of the broader games industry, due to the field's unique ability to study work and fan practices, user experience, and interface design—qualities that, among others, make the games industry a unique challenge for researchers [3,4].

In this paper, we present an option for studying transparent, accessible game design practices in the moment, via an ever-evolving community of amateur game designers. The MafiEra community is one of dozens of groups dedicated to playing asynchronous forum-based social deception games wherein participants fulfill all the functional roles that might be observed in a professional organization—administrators and project managers, game designers, and Q&A testers—as well as players themselves. The result is a community engaging in iterative, participatory online design with high player expectations for game balance and smooth user experience, and as such, this community offers a perspective that can be applied to game design organizations as a whole, both for researchers and technical communication educators.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

At present, there are few studies on game design processes and practices available. Across the interdisciplinary fields that

make up games studies, and within technical communication, with its burgeoning interest in the gaming industry, options are limited due to the practice of secrecy in the games industry. We can study artifacts—the games themselves—as well as play and play practices, such as metagaming and theorycrafting, and games culture. We can study the visible parts of design, through frameworks such as Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric [5], or through analysis of visible iterative and participatory design, as with Cody Reimer's study of Riot Games' *League of Legends* [6]; we can study industry practices, as with Rudy McDaniel and Alice Daer's study of one (now defunct) company [7]. But many of these studies are distanced from in-the-moment design practices and decisions; the day-to-day functions, interactions, and decision-making practices within the games industry are purposely opaque due to ongoing concerns over harassment of game developers via social media platforms [2,4]. Without the ability to study professional practice, researchers must piece together moves within the industry through studies like Reimer's, thanks to Riot Games' transparency with data and visible choices in design via patch notes and communications with players [6].

But in Reimer's study [6], one artifact in particular demonstrates a gap in technical communicators' ability to study industry practice. Reimer includes a snippet of a conversation on reddit between a *League of Legends* player suggesting changes to Lucian, one of the game's premier characters. Riot Games designer Daniel Z. Klein responds, reporting that some of these ideas had "been suggested around the office a bit, but [were] ultimately rejected for a bunch of reasons" (253). While Klein delineates some of the reasons those suggestions were "ultimately rejected," readers are not privy to those discussions in the moment, or to the ways those conclusions were reached. To study decision-making practices in game design, researchers must find a way to observe those practices in the moment, unfiltered through the distance created by interviews or the after-the-fact reporting that happened in this reddit conversation.

In their 2016 article, DeAnda and Kocurek review three major game design textbooks, both to reveal the state of game design education and to establish game design as part of the field of technical communication [8]. While the books they review often fall back on video games as the standard form, they sometimes also incorporate experiences from other types of games (tabletop, board, and even hopscotch and tic-tac-toe). DeAnda and Kocurek argue that the standard game design textbooks frame the field as one of technical communication, citing practices that reach beyond computer code in video games to encompass iterative design, playtesting, and attention to user experience (209).

Citing Kalbach [6, 9], Reimer references the concept of "UX debt," which explains that the gap between expected user experience and actual product creates an expectation for improvement from users (327-8). Over time, when developers fail to meet user expectations, there is increased potential for

poor user experience (and the resulting consequences - users abandoning the product, offering negative feedback, etc.). Reimer offers "perpetual, live iteration" as the solution to this problem, though he is careful to caution that even as developers begin to use big data to address UX, they must remain in touch with the people behind the numbers in order to truly meet their needs; in short, they must maintain a dialogic approach to user feedback. While amateur design communities and MafiEra specifically may not have the capacity to collect and analyze big data to improve game design, they certainly have lessons to teach regarding dialogue and iterative design.

2.1 Online Social Deception Games

Social deception games such as Mafia and Werewolf can be traced back to the mid-1980s, where Mafia was created by psychology students in a Russian university as a study of the interactions between an informed minority and an uninformed majority [10]. Mafia and Werewolf, in their original forms, involve a group of players taking on roles as either innocent townspeople or secret villains. The game features alternating phases: a day phase in which players debate in an attempt to determine the identity of the mafia members, ultimately choosing a suspect to eliminate, and a night phase, in which the mafia members secretly agree on an innocent to "kill," removing them from the game. The phases continue until all of the members of the mafia have been caught and eliminated, or until the mafia members reach majority via removing innocents.

Typically, Mafia and Werewolf in their contemporary forms are considered party games played by groups of 3-10 at social gatherings, or by the dozens at gaming conventions in sprawling variations like One Night Ultimate Werewolf. Live versions may wrap up in as quickly as ten minutes or extend to an hour or so. Forum-based asynchronous games, however, are quite different. Whereas in quick live games, heated face-to-face debate and analysis of body language and other physical cues are important, in asynchronous play, often referred to as "forum mafia," games take place on discussion boards without the benefit of physical cues, and unlike their live counterparts, may last weeks. A single "day" may comprise 2-3 days (or more) of discussion, with heavy reliance on logic and extended arguments. Because players can access all statements made within a particular game at any time, and may play at their own pace, considering actions carefully before posting, forum games are often complex, with unusual roles and rules adding new twists to game forms, and due to the introduction of Mafia World Championships within the past several years, the stakes have risen for players, with communities seeking to increase skill in order to produce viable competitors in the yearly championships.

2.2 The MafiEra Community

The MafiEra community originated on the NeoGAF forum in 2014, but moved to the new ResetEra forum upon its founding in October 2017. Games are primarily played on the main forum, but a satellite site provides support for extra discussion threads for individual games (such as secret chats for a game’s mafia team), as well as hidden discussion threads for spectators to discuss ongoing games without disrupting play. Over time, the community has grown and changed, adding new members and losing old, but during the time studied in this paper, the community held relatively steady at approximately 100 active members, with the greatest fluctuation around the time of the shift to ResetEra. Of that 100, approximately 20-25% of the members are also working at any given time as game designers, planning, preparing, or running games, or assisting with community moderation duties (or have served in this capacity in the past). Roughly 5% serve as administrators only, and while they may design and run games, primarily they work as managers, schedulers, moderators, or game reviewers, who work as QA testers to assist designers with game balance and mechanics. Members of the MafiEra community are spread across six continents and use the online chat platform Discord to socialize between and during games, discussing movies, video games, politics, and more. It is difficult to set benchmarks for active status in this community, particularly as the shift to ResetEra continues to impact community numbers (in ways both positive and negative), but future plans for this research include a census to get a better fix on population.

Because of the community’s shift, most of the review threads included as part of this study were originally posted to NeoGAF; one appeared on the satellite site, and one on the new forum, ResetEra. The shift impacted data in other ways as well, as the move to a new forum necessitated administrative and rule changes, and further inspired discussions of accessibility due to the new forum’s expanded toolset for cosmetic additions to posts, such as font and text size changes.

Games at MafiEra are run in multi-month “seasons” that represent a carefully curated selection of games. In a particular season, individual games range from more standard “vanilla” games with straightforward roles and powers, much like original Mafia and Werewolf, to games with an abundance of powers and mechanics that could not work as well in live Mafia, such as games with resurrection powers for dead players, or extended secret mechanics that would not be possible with all players in the same physical room. Each season features a sign-up thread, in which upcoming games are introduced so potential participants may express interest. After each season (which usually consists of 5-7 games), administrators post a review thread in which the community discusses issues from the season such as game balance, player-proposed rule changes, and player experience. This cycle is shown in [Figure 1](#). For researchers, one of the primary

advantages of this forum-based mode of play is that all actions are visible, without need to record or otherwise track play; in the MafiEra community, player feedback and game design discussions are also visible and archived in post-season review threads, making the in-the-moment iterative decision-making process fully available and thus creating a viable site for technical communication and games studies scholars to study game aspects like design adjustments, delays, discussions of mechanics and balance, narrative framing, and cancellation of ideas that prove unworkable. Similar to the work of McDaniel and Daer with the independent studio n-Space [7], analysis of amateur communities like MafiEra may provide insight into professional design practices and assist in understanding the wider game design ecology.

2.3 Research Questions

Building from the gaps identified in Reimer’s chapter, and the portrait of game design practices at n-space by McDaniel and Daer [7], this paper seeks to identify design practices in MafiEra, in order to evaluate such amateur game design communities for further study in constructing a more accurate game design ecology. Using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s structure for a single case study [11], we sampled the post-season discussion of sixteen months’ worth of games to investigate the following: What can we learn about game design practices from studying amateur game design communities? Can amateur communities serve as accurate cognates for professional game design processes? What pedagogical potential does such study of amateur game design communities offer?

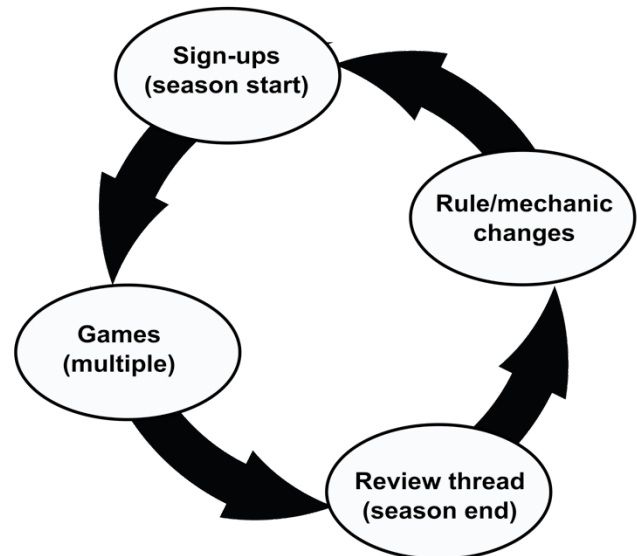


Figure 1: Visualizing the iterative discussion flow within the MafiEra community.

3 METHODS

To examine the MafiEra community, we used a single-case exploratory study design suited for exploring the holistic factors impacting the community's design, structure, and play patterns as reflected in the season-ending review threads. Because we wanted to be able to compare, as closely as possible, to a professional game design studio, we worked with a model similar to McDaniel and Daer's single-case study of n-space [7], though we did not conduct interviews as they did—here, it was deemed unnecessary for a beginning, exploratory study due to the amount of discussion we could observe in a more natural setting, which was possibly because of the community's forum-based structure. Data was collected from season-ending review discussions from seasons 7-11, which comprised sixteen months of games. While feedback is often ongoing during and around games, from players, spectators, gamerunners, and administrators, these review threads serve as a hub to discuss all games run during a given season, and to examine overall trends in the community. Proposed rule changes are discussed here as well, with the community weighing in before gamerunners and administrators make final decisions.

Individual comments ("posts") directly related to discussions of games and the community were manually scraped from the five review threads, in order to avoid completely unrelated content, such as banter. This manual collection resulted in a sample of 225 entries from the review threads. During coding, individual entries were broken further into separate statements, with boundaries marked any time the participant changed topics within an individual post, resulting in an adjusted sample size of 574 individual statements. These entries were then coded by both researchers using James Gee's "Making Strange" tool for discourse analysis, which allowed the researchers—who had differing backgrounds and experience with the community, with social deception games, and with forum-based play in general—to come to the data with fresh eyes [12]. These samples were then coded for content with the following tags, based on what participants were addressing:

- Accessibility
- Administrative/community oversight
- Balance & mechanics
- Personal conflict
- User experience

An "other" tag was also employed, allowing the researchers to mark important discussions that lay outside of the boundaries of the primary coding scheme, though in these instances, "other" was backed up with some additional in-the-moment codes, such as "Other-discussion of player time zones."

In order to discern what impact these discussions may have on the frameworks and structures of the community

itself, as well as the games, rule changes during the time period studied were also tracked, along with shifts in gameplay, mechanics, and community structures (such as responses to accessibility concerns). The combination of review thread discourse and community shifts allows for a holistic portrait of the MafiEra community's approach to game design and player management.

4 RESULTS

Based on the results of this study, it is clear that user experience is a primary concern for the MafiEra community, and that positive user experiences are developed through community and game/rule changes and through an iterative approach to game balance and mechanics (Figure 2). The sample of 574 comments yielded 576 relevant tags, due to double coding many and flagging some entries as "other," and of those comments, more than half—316—related to user experience. Figure 3 demonstrates combination codes, revealing how user experience issues were addressed. Due to the preponderance of community rules and approaches discussed during this time period, most often the fix for user experience problems was identified as an administrative issue (65 entries), with balance and mechanics identified as the second most common fix for user experience issues (51 entries).

When entries appeared, too, is important to note; accessibility only became an issue after the move to the ResetEra forum, due to that forum's increased number of formatting features. While the number of entries is low overall, had it appeared in all five review threads rather than only the last, accessibility might have been a much larger concern, and is an important issue to watch in future studies of this community. Personal conflict appears most often in the season eight review discussion, due to a particularly contentious game that fostered some lingering ill feeling. Discussions about impact of low activity and the corresponding ongoing adjustment of rules regarding player activity in games grows more intense throughout the review threads for season seven to season eight, culminating in interpersonal conflict within the review thread itself, but shifts somewhat in later seasons due to rule changes and the rise of other community issues.

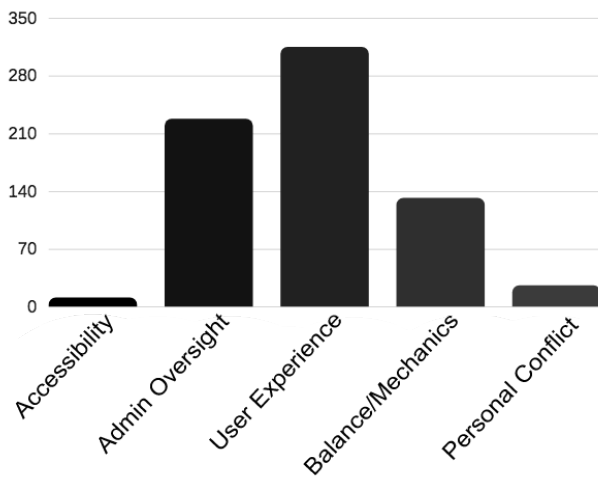


Figure 2: Number of occurrences of each code in MafiEra season review discussion.

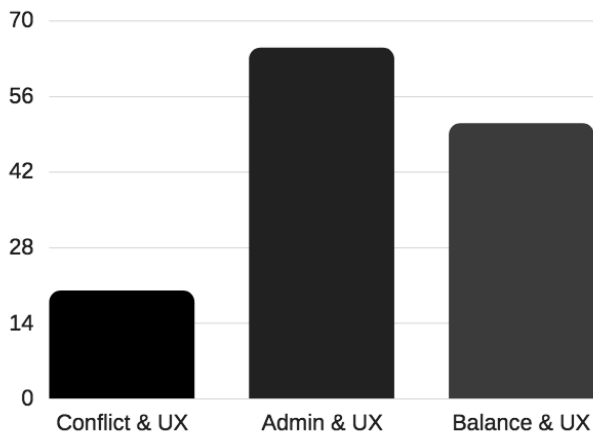


Figure 3: Instances of combined coding in MafiEra review discussion.

4.1 Community Impact

Because of the iterative, player-focused nature of the community and its overall design, discussions in review threads lead to immediate changes during subsequent seasons. During the period studied, the following adjustments to community rules and structures were observed:

- **Minimum player activity during games:** in games before season seven, the only requirement was one post per *day phase*; during the period studied, minimum activity levels were raised to five player posts per day phase, and then to ten. This number, and the administrative solution

for handling players who fail to meet the minimum, is an ongoing point of discussion.

- **Scheduling changes:** during the time period studied, length of game seasons and number of games per season varied, but with the advent of season eleven, a scheduling team was put into place, with a highly structured system for balancing types of games run during a season, as well as maintaining a priority list based on when designers submitted completed games.
- **Individual game balance issues:** from the discussions studied, it was clear that the community experiences cyclical shifts of more highly powered “town” vs “mafia” teams in games. During the period studied, mafia teams were questioned as being too strong, with designers implementing some handicaps for mafia teams. However, in early review threads, it is clear that the stronger mafia designs were in response to a period of stronger town designs (before the period studied).
- **Player conflict:** rules regarding interpersonal conflict were revisited and clarified during the time period studied.
- **Day/night cycles:** Prior to season nine, nearly all games were run on a 72-hour day/48-hour night cycle; with season ten, gamerunners began experimenting more often with new forms.
- **Mentor system:** With the move to ResetEra, a mentor system was added, to provide additional support for new players (to improve user experience).
- **Voting:** With the move to ResetEra, new structures for player voting on daily eliminations had to be explored to match tools available on the new forum.
- **Accessibility:** With the move to ResetEra and the addition of new formatting features, the community decided to disallow extreme format changes to maximize readability and usability.
- **Mechanics and balance:** During the period studied, particularly in the latter half, there was a move toward more role-intensive games (as opposed to “vanilla” games).

In ongoing studies of the community, we will continue to track outcomes, rule changes, and shifts in gameplay and mechanics, in order to observe the impacts of the season-ending review discussions.

5 ANALYSIS

Similar to McDaniel and Daer’s study of n-space [7], this study indicates that the best way to study game design practices is

to “observe directly” the people responsible for making games; only in this case, we are observing amateurs who operate with similar guidelines, procedures, and outcomes as professionals (157). Administrators and game designers in the MafiEra community share a goal with game studios: they want to keep players happy and involved, which means constant updates and attention to user experience, à la Reimer’s study of *League of Legends* [6]. The season-ending review threads and ongoing discussion conducted there can be compared to metatextual game discussions such as the subreddit referenced in Reimer’s work [6], and the discussions with developers. The only difference in MafiEra is that the hierarchy is flattened; while administrators may make decisions, players and community members are not afraid to push back against decisions, forcing further changes until everyone is pleased, or as close to consensus as possible is reached, thereby improving user experience all around.

That flattened hierarchal structure also appears in McDaniel and Daer [7]. Freedom of communication and openness in discussion in MafiEra may be more reflective of the lack of distance between player and creator—in MafiEra, they exist in the same virtual space—but Reimer’s study reflects that distance between player and creator is collapsing in professional spaces as well, thanks to social media and developer availability [6]. In MafiEra, we see similar structures, but because the discussions and decision-making processes are visible and open, we are able to track exactly how user experience is treated and how the notion of UX debt is handled.

UX seemed at the core of every issue raised in season review threads, even when it was not directly mentioned or referenced; this became clear when we examined instances of double coding (Figure 3), where UX was a consistent additional code. Player discussion could be broken down into two categories: suggestions for community-wide improvement or changes (this was especially true when ideas for administrative changes were offered) or suggestions grounded in a player’s own experience. Constructions such as “I think,” “I feel,” and “in my experience” were very common, and community members seemed very accommodating of the notion that the community populace represented a wide variety of play styles, preferences, and participant limitations such as time zone difficulties. This may reflect one of the ways that MafiEra is different from a professional studio: because players and designers overlap, the group as a whole may be more concerned with accommodation than an organization producing a product for financial gain from users who are more removed and distant.

Personality conflicts between players were part of the community rules that were addressed during the period studied here, but they were also part of the discussions themselves; as players posted their opinions and suggestions based on their experiences, they disagreed, called others out, refuted, and argued. Much like the community’s

accommodation of varying play styles, expectations, and limitations, the players seemed to accommodate discord and usually were able to come to some sort of consensus. In the moment, however, discussions were messy and often heated as players’ differing experiences butted up against one another. While Reimer’s study showed Riot’s remarkable transparency, it also showed the polished, public-facing image Riot maintains even in direct communication with players [6]; amateur communities like MafiEra, whose documentation includes the messy and the heated, offer a different angle on game design processes that can help games researchers and technical communicators better understand the “perpetual, live iteration” and dialogic negotiation Reimer describes, rather than the after-the-fact narrative designers choose to share.

5.1 Wider Implications

DeAnda and Kocurek’s textbook review identified UX as one of the driving forces for game designers to make the choices they do and showed that, in the game design classroom, design is about creating the best possible play experience for users via iteration, testing, and communication, processes which place game design firmly in the realm of technical communication [8]. MafiEra’s review threads show an ongoing cycle of iteration, testing, and communication, complete with issues of gameplay, user experience, balance, and community moderation, all of which play extensive roles in many kinds of games. The flattened hierarchy of MafiEra, where players are often game runners and vice versa, provides a way to understand how a game designer can balance multiple perspectives to better work for players. DeAnda and Kocurek’s textbooks advocated for game designers to engage in active listening and communicate with their teams as well as with players, and the MafiEra community does just that as they negotiate a wide range of player needs to continue improving their games [8]. This and other amateur communities seem to provide accessible, detailed models for the kinds of processes that games researchers and textbook writers advocate; they constitute an area of untapped potential for learning and growth in the games industry.

5.2 Future of the Research

A next step in this research may require the study of review discussions for games as they are being designed, to observe the QA analysis of balance as individual mechanics are adjusted and tested at the game level. MafiEra also produces a great deal of “official” documentation (spreadsheets tracking information on all games, sets of guidelines for development and review, strategy guides for players, etc.) that would be worth studying in comparison to professional game design documentation.

A census survey will be administered, in order to better ascertain community numbers and roles, and to get a better

sense of how to compare a more diverse amateur population to a more homogenous professional population. While we hesitate to draw early conclusions, there may be potential to compare diversity data between professional and amateur communities with other studies of people who leave STEM fields, to track the potential of people who may feel unwelcome moving toward amateur communities to seek acceptance.

6 CONCLUSION

Communities such as MafiEra have a great deal to offer in filling gaps around game design for technical communicators and games studies scholars, as there are overlaps here with scholars studying theorycrafting and powergaming, gaming groups as teams and organizational structures, and much more. But it is the approach to iterative, participatory design that offers immediate potential, as this amateur community pursues what is a very professional approach, with the structure of game reviews, Q&A testing and updates similar to what is seen in professional design studios developing and maintaining long-running games.

There are some key differences that must be kept in mind, however. As a fully digital community, MafiEra includes members from all over the world, and may be more diverse than some professional games studios. Further research is required to develop a community demographic profile. But as one of the researchers is a participant within the community, we know that while MafiEra is primarily composed of White males, a not-insignificant number of participants are women, LBGT+, people of color, etc.—populations often underrepresented in professional game development studios to any significant degree. Second, the fully digital status of this community will always differ from the face-to-face environment of most game development studios. This does not make the data or study useless, however; it only means some translation to face-to-face development processes is required.

But most key here is the development of a method of study that is generalizable to MafiEra and other amateur gaming communities engaging in participatory design. This single case study reveals a way into looking at how communities come together to work toward a stronger user experience through a variety of methods and approaches, and those methods and approaches may be compared to professional designers with similar aims. This study indicates research of amateur communities may be able to help scholars build a more robust view of the games design ecology, and as these communities are far more accessible than professional studios (and perhaps more numerous as well), this study of MafiEra may help present a way to study what has otherwise been very difficult to study. In this way, we can learn more about how game design decisions happen, what experiences and ideas

are privileged, and how organizational structures and approaches to discourse impact game experiences.

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