Understanding Content Creation: An Exploration of the Social, Technical, and Professional Elements of Video Game Content Creation

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ABSTRACT

Video games act as digital playgrounds in which players can build social networks, interact with technological systems, and develop both hobbies and professional skills. This exploratory study inspects the reflections of eight video game content creators to understand how engagement with video game spaces and communities develops an understanding of the social, technical, and professional elements of content creation. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews from a broad range of creation roles (game journalism, modding, audio creation, physical merchandise production, etc.) with thematic analysis used to identify shared topics of significance from social risks to competitive industry. Findings reflect the unique social and technical skills developed through creation and the challenges presented by platforms, video game stakeholders, audiences, competitors, and their own aptitude when approaching audience-focused, platform-dependent labour.

Keywords

content creation, precarity, agency, parasocial relationships, labour, video games

INTRODUCTION

The assertion that video games serve as digital playgrounds provokes curiosity toward new patterns of play and learning that can develop in these immaterial arenas. Video game content creation is an evolving practice turned industry that marries play, labour, and hobbyism within and beyond these playgrounds – creating a complex system of engagement and output for analysis. By valuing creative roles, we can see how players build social networks, interact with technological systems, and develop both hobbies and professional skills. While celebrity creators and enviable salaries have popularised the streamer and video creator profiles of video game content creation, a gap in scholarly interest has developed toward non-audience-facing

creative roles. To that end, this article will include the perspectives of multiple creative roles to compare and contrast the experience for a holistic, industry understanding.

This research linked the shared perceptions of diverse video game content creators on topics of social, technical, and professional significance to structure an outline of industry-wide concerns faced by current and emerging creators. To that end, questions were structured to explore, in their own words, *what* their content creation entailed (to explore commonalities)? *Why* they create content (to understand motivations, access and commitment)? And what they *want* from their content creation, in terms of both individual or industry expectations (to outline role awareness and digital media literacy)? This line of inquiry served to explore content creator perceptions of industry support for both themselves and emerging creators. Thus, this research provides a current representation of content creator perceptions to inform industry development and audience preparedness when considering creation roles. Across all participants, obstacles were experienced that challenged the creators in social, technical, and professional aspects. These challenges came from the platforms they engaged with, video game stakeholders, competitors, audiences, and even themselves when faced with constantly evolving cultures, frameworks, and regulations. This reiterates the need to understand what challenges content creators are currently facing and the methods in which they deal with such.

Key findings include a want for better communication towards the additional duties involved in content creation, such as marketing, networking, and the constant development of technical skills. Interviews also shared desires for both platforms and community spaces to be more active, tolerant, and supportive in individual career development. Overall, interviewees shared expressions of optimism and enjoyment towards their creative labour and the position it held in their lives, both as a creative outlet and a source of supplementary income. However, there was a shared sense of resignation towards the risks present in online spaces and a want for better tools from communities and platforms to manage these risks. These commonalities, which achieved the goal of understanding the shared experiences of various content creation roles, were also nuanced and relative to each of the roles, prompting further research into how beneficial aspects of one role may be transferred in the culture of another.

Video Game Content Creation: Here and Now

As a broad arena of hobbyist passion, fan creation, and career development, video game content creation can struggle to be recognised for its breadth of diversity in creation roles. Among the topical creators, there is the live-streamer (streamer), who broadcasts themselves and their gameplay digitally in real-time. The modder, who modifies existing game software and/or hardware (mods), and the video creator, who publishes pre-recorded video content. From the less observed roles are the game journalist, who creates editorial, written content. The community manager, who moderates audiences on behalf of a brand. The physical merchandiser, who produces physical content, and finally the cover artist, who creates new audio experiences from existing game media. It is through recognising the shared experiences around social, technical, and professional elements of creation from all creation roles that a holistic industry awareness can be developed.

Many factors have led to the emergence of video game content creation as an industry and the creative roles we observe today. Jenkins (1992) established the

seminal definition of 'textual poachers' to explore the early creation of fanfiction (fan-made narratives derived from existing media) as a method of both community development and fan prestige for pop-culture fandoms (fan communities). Individual creativity, early platform compensation options (such as payment structures for commissioned art or modded content), and monetisation tactics (the process used to generate revenue or income for either the platform or the user [Lee et al. 2021, 334]) have also served as motivators to intersect fan creation, hobbyism, and game development since the 1980's (Nicoll and Keogh 2019, 31). However, the current prevalence of video game content creation is primarily associated with the evolving popularity of video games as a significant form of entertainment media and the low-bar access to creation tools for aspiring and practicing professional producers of content.

The Digital Australia 2022 report from the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association (IGEA) and Bond University (Brand & Jervis 2021) observed that over seventeen million Australians play video games with game consoles present in over eight million homes. Smart devices (phones, tablets, laptops, computers etc.) capable of recording, editing, and distributing content and video game consoles with similar affordances – the features of software or hardware that enable various user actions (Falahatpisheh and Khajeheian 2020) – have made content creation an accessible option to many (Raun, 2018, p. 323). Low-skill media editing resources like Photoshop, game development platforms like Unity, or streaming and video hosting platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, all ease access into professional creation roles (Woodcock & Johnson 2019a, 327). Further, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a motivator in the recent uptake of video game content creation for both audiences and producers as individuals turned to digital entertainment, hobbyism and upskilling throughout quarantines (Deloitte 2021).

What is video game content creation in an era where play and design are ubiquitous and embedded within the technologies we use day-to-day? A functional definition of a video game content creator is an individual who specialises in professional user-generated content (UGC) be that text, video, audio, software, physical merchandise, etc., inspired by the core media product of video games within the video games industry (Kim 2014, 358). This definition however oversimplifies the nuances of navigating platforms, communities, and cultures surrounding video games in that production of content. Thus, Jenkins' exploration of 'textual poachers' (1992), Van Dijck's (2009, 46) definition of co-creation, and Bruns' term of produsage (2008, 3) also need to be contextualised.

Jenkins offered an early fan-based amateur definition, in which the cultural significance of fan creation could be seen in the unique environments of pop-culture fandoms, that also shape content creation through community culture and audience networking (1992, 23). From a technical angle, co-creation aligns with the use of creation affordances provided to audiences by platforms, video games, and game consoles. These affordances allow users to create, publish, and distribute UGC (Van Dijck 2009, 46), such as in-game customisation tools (e.g., making a unique shirt design in *Animal Crossing*) and network sharing affordances. Intersecting with co-creation is produsage, referring to digital audiences who create as well as consume media through their interaction with platforms (Bruns 2008, 3). Produsage is interpreted to range from active UGC creation and distribution of diverse users to the passive creation of user data from their activity on platforms and software (Kröger et

al. 2021, 3). By building upon the works of Jenkins, Van Dijck, Bruns, and Kim we approach a more nuanced definition of video game content creators, both professional and amateur:

Video game content creators are individuals who develop, distribute, and publish video game UGC (either physical or digital). They are dependent on evolving technological structures of both consumption and production that, in a professional or hobbyist capacity, exist within and are influenced by, a unique network of game development stakeholders, fan communities, and creator peers.

For clarity, this definition (that equally flattens and expands upon the discussed frames of user creation) serves to better articulate the significance of 'video game content creators' over just 'content creators'. Unlike other fields of creation or media production, there is a relationship with the core media (video games), professional development, and fan-based production that is unlike other areas of cultural production that intersect with digital interaction.

Peripheral concepts also include Kücklich's distinction of 'playbor' (2005, 87), Kitzinger's interpretation of 'active audiences' (1999, 3), and Toffler's 'prosumer' (1980, 282). While not included directly in this definition, these concepts collectively highlight similar ideas about the role of fans, audiences, and creators in adding paratextual content and economic value to digital products through their activities and labour. It is also important to note they signal to a longer history of research articulating how audiences can create as well as consume digital media and the importance of recognising the unique communities in that creation (Jenkins 1992).

Game Studies and Content Creation: Sharing the Spotlight

Current research into video game content creation provides insight into the core platforms used for creation, publishing, and distribution. Twitch, and to a lesser extent Facebook Gaming, are key platforms of focus for live-streaming discourse (Woodcock and Johnson 2019, 321). YouTube and TikTok are of focus for video hosting (Kumar 2019) while the platforms used for text, imagery, and networking are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and previously Tumblr (Floegel 2020, 795). Discord and Reddit provide similar communicative affordances with additional structure towards distinct community development (West 2020, 11). While the above platforms are well established in digital media research, Etsy, a digital storefront for the sale of handmade or vintage goods, and music hosting platforms such as SoundCloud and Spotify, are notably absent from scholarly thought concerning video game content creation.

While an understanding of the platforms used for content creation is present throughout existing literature, the complexities of how such spaces interact or inform creation within the video games industry require further investigation. Johnson and Woodcock provide a rigorous foundation through their numerous studies on Twitch and while referring to streaming as a "*gold rush*" (2019b, 338), they note that interest in the field has only been recent. Separately, Johnson (2019, 815) marks that individual, labour-orientated studies are lacking within the discourse surrounding Twitch. This sentiment is reinforced by Van Doorn (2017, 909), in their exploration of creative platform labour, which calls for further ethnographic studies to represent the differentiating workforces and cultures present across different digital arenas. While

the omission of interest in content creation is noted by many, Caplan and Gillespie put it best:

> *"These complex arrangements of labor, compensation, and governance are not just imposed; they are lived, felt, anticipated, exploited, and negotiated. We do not know enough about these arrangements and their implications, but we know even less about how users and creators encounter them, understand them, and work around them in their own production practices* (2020, 4).*"*

Despite the lack of holistic, comparative scholarly analysis into broader video game industry content creation roles, there is nonetheless a foundation of research and analysis to build upon. The work of Fisher and Mohammad-Baksh (2020, 45) is notable for interviewing freelance game journalists to understand how publishers, platforms, and organisational cultures manipulate editorial content creation. Further, DeWinter, Kocurek and Vie's (2016, 42) investigation into the emotional labour and performative communication of video game community managers continues to represent the diverse and distinct roles of content creation. While in the unique community spaces of video game fandom, (2016, 42), Hong explored the mental and emotional exertion of modders when engaging in the labour separate from their core creation, being the marketing, networking, and distribution of their work (2013, 995). Through these isolated explorations, a thread of platform manipulation and emotional labour sets the foundation to link creation roles together for a summary of the shared experiences in video game content creation.

Video Game Content Creation: A Call to Action

From the popularity of video games, technical accessibility, and developing labour frameworks, video game content creation has evolved to range from a whimsical hobby into a serious career pathway. In this role, individuals are situated in an evolving environment of consumption and production that intersects social, technological, and professional dimensions of affect. In this access is the concern for emerging content creators who may be unaware of an audience-focused, platform-dependent industry that has had time to establish capitalist structures and toxic cultures. Throughout the above sections, an outline of platform dependency and social risk is presented for video game content creators. Yet even this could be better defined as the minimal studies into video game content creation roles beyond streaming and video production cannot be said to be comprehensive. That is why this current study is well situated to provide a cohesive account of video game content creation roles, analysed under a consistent framework. The disconnected literature in this field, argued to be from a lack of participation interest from creation communities by Caplan and Gillespie (2019b, p. 338), should now be rectified with rigour as creators find their voice and share their experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This research was inspired by personal experience with video game industry content creation via various hobbyist practices and professional roles. The experienced social, technical, and professional aspects of content creation informed a deductive framework for the design of interview questions and the following inductive thematic analysis.

As this research sought to source and understand the experiences of video game content creators in an exploratory and evolving context, a constructivist framework and methodology were applied. A mixed approach of deductive design (in interview questions and analysis focus) and inductive analysis was used to navigate and explore subject experiences (Bingham and Witkowsky 2022, 133). This hybrid approach allowed for thematic analysis to be constantly evolved and reprioritised over interview sessions to better capture the shared perceptions of content creators (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, 91).

The choice for semi-structured interviews was inspired by Caplan and Gillespie's methodology for interviewing YouTube creators (2020, 4). Supported by Cote and Raz (2015, 93–116), semi-structured interviews present a uniquely flexible interaction from which to gather data beyond the perceived scope of the interview. Cote and Raz also identify the salience of this method when discussing video game design and production concepts.

This sample included representatives from various fields of video game content creation including, modding, community management, streaming, video creation, graphic design, physical merchandising, music creation, and game journalism (see Table 1). This research also bridged the experiences of professional creators with amateur or hobbyist creators to further develop a comprehensive representation of creation roles. Amateur creators can still perform professional tasks in the endeavor to achieve financial compensation. The perceptions and experiences of all content creators, both paid and unpaid, are invaluable in creating a comprehensive understanding of the video game content creation industry.

Name	Creator Handle	Role	Gender	Primary Platforms Used
Chris Middleton	ClassicMiddleton	Streamer, Video Creator	Male	Youtube, Twitch, Hover
David Driver-Gomm	Kralich	Modder, Community Management	Male	IndieDB, ModDB, Discord
Eduard Gafton	NA	Editorial and Written, Community Management	Male	Twitter, Facebook, various game journalism publishing sites
Nicolas Woudstra	GhostInTheMachine	Streamer (Partner), Video Creation	Male	Twitch, Youtube, Twitter, Hover
LN_310	NA	Modder	Male	Twitter, Discord, GameBanana
Nile Wilson	Harpsona	Cover Artist (Audio Creation and Remixes)	Female	Twitch, Youtube, Spotify
Paulina Milan	Thatgalpaul	Streamer (Affiliate)	Female	Twitch, Youtube
Rose Hammer	NA	Physical Merchandiser, Artist	Female	Etsy

Table 1: Content Creator Handles, Roles, and Platforms.

All interviews were held remotely through Zoom with audio later transcribed using Adobe Premiere Pro. Interviews lasted up to two hours with core research questions sent in advance. This allowed for interviewees to prepare comprehensive answers in advance and to be comfortable with the flow of the interview. Real-time notetaking and quote recording informed further questioning where appropriate and additional analysis of earlier interview transcriptions. Representation and diversity were sought in this sample but due to the limited scope and time constraints, this sample does not include a range of diverse representation to comprehensively reflect the shared perceptions of age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, ability, or culture. The analysis from this sample should instead be considered a starting platform from which to pursue more rigorous data collection projects with greater diversity and representation across demographics.

Subjects were presented with the option to either remain anonymous or be identified by their name or content creator handle (see Table 1). This choice was inspired by Bryman and Cassell's *The Researcher Interview: A Reflexive Perspective* (2006, 47) which, while not connected to game studies, detailed interviews with other published researchers on interview structure without withholding their names. Since the information to be published was not negatively impactful to their career or social standing, being identified could be beneficial to interviewees. As such the same option was made available to the video game content creators as contribution could be promoted as industry advocacy or assist in brand building. All eight content creators elected to be referred to by their real name or handle.

The participants were recruited through two forms of non-probability sampling techniques. Convenience sampling (Emerson 2021, 76) was used through pre-existing social and professional networks to arrange an initial cohort of subjects. During the recruitment and interview stages, snowball sampling (Leighton 2021, 38) occurred by initial interviewees referring additional contacts. The justification for snowball sampling to acquire further participation for this research was inspired by Thirunarayanan et al.'s*, A Survey of Video Game Players in a Public, Urban Research University* (2010, 314). Due to video game players already existing on social platforms, connections were easily available to drive sampling. These same connections exist for video game content creators, even when seeking different roles of content creation, as these roles are intrinsically bound to social networks. The use of convenience and snowball sampling methods ensured a breadth of possible subjects, respectful of diversity that was congruent with the aims of this research.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This research applied a deductive approach of three key areas (social, technical, and professional) to semi-structured subject interviews with video game content creators which were then analysed through an inductive thematic analysis (Bingham and Witkowsky 2022, 133). This thematic analysis took form through an evolving coding of interview data that aligned with the deductive approach as well as concepts researched through industry and academic texts. Throughout data collection, sub-themes emerged among the three key areas. Reflections on social experiences came to focus on social risks and network development. Technical considerations became synonymous with platform dominance and additional practices beyond core creation tasks. The professional element soon came to identify motivations and origins as well as the recognition of a distinctly competitive and unsupportive industry.

The Social: Audiences, Peers, and Toxicity

The social aspects of content creation served as the primary area to investigate knowledge development, community engagement, and industry networking. A recurring theme throughout interviews was the importance of healthy peer networks that share similar conditions of labour for support throughout working as a content creator. However, most interviewees reflected that their initial networks were with physical world contacts with mixed regard for online communities. All creators shared they received support, validation, and interest from either friends, family, or peers early on in their content creation, as well as during times of concern. Interviewees noted that while not every emerging content creator will have a network of support to start with, finding spaces to connect with communities early on is critical. When questioned on whether resources or tools from platforms or games assisted with early skill development, interviewees responded that no such instruction existed. Instead, they turned to wider online networks and community spaces to learn how to develop technical skills, navigate legal issues, or deal with online harassment. Even in these spaces, information sharing and skill development were confusing and poorly communicated. Chris referred to upskilling as a content creator as "*nomadic*" in nature, jumping from one community or platform to another to learn how to best create content. Many interviewees referred to isolated learning through YouTube and Google searches. David shared a similar experience from modding community hubs that suffered from elitism, gatekeeping, and harassment for creators who didn't conform to expectations set by older generations. This sense of competition and isolation was shared by Eduard as he reflected upon the difficulty he faced in his early skill development:

"In my experience, this is kind of a very much dog-eat-dog kind of world where like everyone is kind of out on their own. No one really wants to let you know how they do their job because they are afraid that you will then be taking their job."
- Eduard

Beyond relationships with peers and communities, parasocial relationships evoked the most emotional response, ranging from confusion, resentment, and excitement. Parasocial relationships are the perceived development of intimacy or connection with a personality that is not present or reciprocated (Ferchaud et al. 2017, 89-90) which content creators may not be prepared for. Boyd provides that "*without control over context, public and private become meaningless binaries, are scaled in new ways, and are difficult to maintain as distinct*" (2011, 49) articulating that without support from industry or community, these social contexts present hazards for unprepared content creators. Paulina, Nile, Ghost, and Chris all reflected upon their parasocial experiences with examples of platform-originated audience members interacting with content creators in concerning ways when encountered in the physical world. Such as the invasion of personal space and privacy at a convention, short periods of stalking, and interacting with the creators in a 'star-struck' or otherwise heightened manner that hindered authentic connection. The constant presence of these social risks, despite noting that their renown was not comparable to that of a celebrity, disarmed the content creators who then indicated they find it hard to consider what life would be like with greater levels of fan interest.

Upon reflecting upon broader online cultures, networks, and communities, the risk of marginalisation and direct abuse came to light. Almost a decade since Gamergate

(Salter, 2018, 247), video game communities and culture are still weathering toxic practices with invasive, ignorant, and malicious practices observable in social media (Romana 2021), game development (Perreault, Perreault and Suarez 2022, 257), platform politics (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021, 375), and even in the actions of celebrity creators (Meaney 2022). When queried, most creators signalled that the culture was 'not as bad as it was before' before sharing recent examples of firsthand or vicarious experiences of abuse. Both Nile and Rose shared firsthand and broader views on marginalisation present on their platforms and communities, both reflected that their interaction 'wasn't that bad' or 'didn't happen too often'. Rose noted that as a physical merchandiser, she remains the retailer and not the product while Nile suggested that the audiences that come for music covers, tend to be less aggressive than other fan audiences. Nile and Paulina both expressed concern over the rise of hate raids on Twitch (where bots or aggressive audiences are sent or led by one streamer to abuse another [Pandey 2021]), a recognition that informed Nile's decision to not use the platform. Paulina shared similar experiences of personal challenge in combatting sexist assumptions and stereotypes:

"It's really daunting as a female to try and get into a community space where
the main demographic of a lot of games was targeted towards guys."
- Paulina

Despite toxic experiences and a unanimous want for emerging creators to better understand the social risks of creation, the interviewees shared how their ongoing actions were resisting the negative cultural elements. To that end, each creator shared insight into how they provide direct support to their current communities or toward other creators through feedback, documentation, guide creation, collaboration, resource sharing, or skill advocacy. Positive change within Nile's communities grew from supporting transparency around instances of abuse and marginalisation. A Discord server that openly shared 'good, bad, and weird' YouTube comments to begin discussion on how to approach and react to such, served to normalise conversations about these comments and the impact they have. David reflected upon personal growth in leadership and community change in modding spaces by presenting open, welcoming spaces and by being more aware of both explicit and implicit behaviours of marginalisation. Nicholl and Keogh promote a "democratization dispositif" (2018, 113) as a result of the open use of a platform, in which self-governance and collaboration is reinforced rather than the empowerment of market or industry stakeholders. This concept sets the groundwork for identifying that while early content creator communities were competitive and isolated, the experiences of emerging creators are shaping game spaces into more democratic, collaborative, and tolerant arenas.

"You gotta have the mindset that you're content sharers, you're resource sharers
and that to me is like the tribal foundation of what content is."
- Chris

Overall, most interviewees shared a desire for tolerance, diversity, and inclusion in the spaces they operated in. There was an unfortunate awareness that most methods of removing risks were post-event, relying on reporting and moderation systems. Proactive steps, education, and readjustment were not seen as tenable tactics. Interviewees did highlight that the majority of their audiences and communities were non-toxic or otherwise lovely people who supported their creation roles. However,

the bad actors, who could illicit far more damaging and impactful behaviours, were noted to be an unfortunate and inescapable by-product of online presence.

The Technical: Platforms, Tools, and Media

By exploring technical elements of creation an outline of *where* video game content creators worked and *what* technological dimensions shaped their experiences developed. A prevalent concern for video game content creators is the minimal power they hold when faced with platform politics and moderation. Moderation can be understood as the action by platforms to maintain established rules as a mediator for both content and audiences (Gill 2021, 175). Both automated processes and human workers govern the moderation of content platforms such as Twitch or YouTube to maintain community standards while also creating a barrier between the creator and the immediate systems they engage with (Pan et al. 2022, 18). When asked about the platforms and spaces that the interviewees engaged with, answers were consistent with popular platforms (Twitch, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) except for select platforms that were role-specific (such as GameBanana, a mod-sharing platform). Twitch was the primary platform for live-streaming, though Ghost had been partnered for a short duration with Facebook Gaming before leaving due to a perceived conflict regarding the content Facebook Gaming appeared to prefer. YouTube was the foremost video-hosting platform for core content production while TikTok was used for marketing. Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Discord, and Reddit were all mentioned as avenues for cross-promotion, networking, and community engagement. This outlines a consistency in the platforms and cultures differing content creator roles are exposed to. Nile used various audio publishing and distribution platforms such as Spotify and SoundCloud, LN_310 shared content on GameBanana, while Rose used Etsy as the primary online distribution point for physical products. Eduard published various content on relevant game journalism platforms and David shared content across the modding platforms in which he operates as a community manager. These bespoke platforms for content creator roles reflect the broad web of community spaces that creators must engage with.

The interviewees held singular emotional perceptions towards the platforms they engaged with. Interviewees were frustrated about the lack of engagement and support from their primary platforms, though displayed only a want of improvement rather than explicit condemnation. Through their exposure to numerous platforms and digital spaces, interviewees lamented poor design choices on various platforms and the time wasted trying to contact official support channels. As an exception, platform algorithms, as used by Twitch and YouTube, were consistently condemned. Nile shared that her content creation was particularly impacted by YouTube's current algorithm preference for longer, reaction-orientated videos which is at odds with the standard two-to-three-minute length of music covers. Nile also shared that a fellow cover artist was adapting to the restraints of the algorithm by creating longer, compilation or album-style videos of numerous tracks. This example shows the constant need for content creators to develop new behaviours and skills due to platform changes. Platforms were also noted to streamline and improve content as shared by Rose and Nile towards their exclusive delivery platforms (Etsy and SoundCloud/Spotify respectively). Both remarked on new tools and features that made their creation roles easier. For Nile, it was new copyright-proofing and trademark automation, while Rose noted delivery reminders and options to streamline her postage. The content creators who were already achieving financial compensation shared exasperation towards payment structures by the platforms they

used. Similar exasperation was noted regarding platform communication practices, with interviewees noting a lack of discourse on such topics as payment plans, industry structure, or developmental tools to assist with career progression.

Beyond core creation duties and the task of presenting such across platforms, all creators indicated hours spent in the generation of additional media, sometimes requiring different creative skills. Eduard also reflected upon 'absorption time', being time spent researching current video game and content creation industry news. This required the consumption of professional and fan media as well as the completion of trending or relevant video games (a significant task depending on the length of the game). Words such as 'overwhelming' were used to indicate the scope of additional roles faced by video game content creators and the importance of time management to stay abreast of what is considered standard for the role. Paulina and Ghost expressed enjoyment over streamlining certain tasks in promotion and networking but also reflected that there was always something new to learn or fix. Paulina commented on the challenges present in developing technical skills in a constantly evolving environment with a saturation of instructional media:

"Technology has had so many updates. So there are resources out there and I was able to find a lot of them that helped me but trying to navigate which was current, which was worth my while, and what actually helped me, was definitely a feat in itself."
- Paulina

The experiences of content creators in their unpaid or tangential labour match responses from earlier studies on digital health from Johnson (2019, 515) and Hong (2013, 995). The study identified unpaid, tangential labour as an area of non-improvement for content creators and the additional labour they need to balance.

As a point of comparison to time spent in creative, networking, or absorption tasks, creators revealed little regard for platform or legal research that would impact their creation. Overall, content creators either expressed minimal or no active research towards topics such as copyright, IP, or trademarking that would alleviate the risk of strikes beyond an initial upskilling at the beginning of their content creation pathways. Answers typically revealed awareness and use of royalty-free audio and a strong use of networks, social media, or peers to inform their awareness. Chris remarked that through social media, or *"through the memes",* he remained somewhat aware of the issues. In contrast, Nile highlighted how the platforms and tools she used (SoundCloud and Spotify) had recently begun to modify and develop better services in music licensing and copyright avoidance, but still felt largely uninformed about how the core game industry interacts with her content:

"When it comes to the covers and any sort of distribution, I will cross my fingers and hope that things are okay."
- Nile

David was the exception by proactively contacting developers of the games that he wished to mod. While a time-consuming activity, David indicated the benefit to this precautionary approach, as he had frequently received development information that he would not have access to normally. David linked his rigor to self-preservation as he did not want to work on a project for it to be taken down, thus by spending more time

on precautionary tasks earlier on, he was safeguarded from future wasted time. David also reflected that while fan creation and copyright concerns were still an obscure area for modding, there were areas of increased support in his community over other fan creation spaces, regarding Valve and Steam as a generally supportive space for mod development and publishing. Instead of proactive engagement with resources to mediate copyright and legal consequences, there was a pervasive and uniform concern that what might be acceptable today could be taken down tomorrow. Rose put it simply as "*I think fan art generally does nothing but help an IP*", reflecting that content creators have an active, current awareness of how their content intersects and impacts the core media of video games. Automated moderation processes on YouTube and Twitch evoked similar sentiments of resignation. Regarding the functions as serviceable 'band-aid' fixes that fail to address root issues with tools for removing or blocking bad actors needing to go further. It should be stressed that these issues were felt by each creator, even LN_310 in their hobbyist capacity who, in reference to trolling behaviour on Twitter remarked "*Trolling is kinda normal there*".

The Professional: Time, Money, and Motivation

The professional aspects of content creation were identified by seeking how the interviewees situated their creative practices within labour structures such as compensation, scheduling, and development. All interviewees shared similar points of creative inspiration for their creation roles, being the early exposure to video games, or a peer network already involved in video game content creation, a finding that reflects the work of Johnson and Woodcock (2019b, 343). The interviewees shared a noticeable level of digital competency and experience that assisted in their approach and adaptability to video game content creation. Further, most indicated experience with other content creation roles and pathways beyond their main creation output. Rose was an exemplar of this by developing an indie game alongside her creation duties. This provided unique insight into how content creation can overlap with indie game development – as noted by Banks and Cunningham (2016, 128). Interestingly, Rose discussed how to approach design aspects to incorporate UGC affordances within the upcoming game, indicating a cycle of creation.

Each interviewee noted that their creation was at one time primarily scheduled around other commitments such as education, relationships, or careers. Even Ghost justified working twelve hours per week at a local pop-culture store. While having developed an income from streaming that surpassed his previous employment, he recognised the need to ensure a baseline of income in the face of the inherent precarity of content creation:

> "*But it's always so fragile as well. Some months I'll make double what I made at my old wage and sometimes I make just under...*"
> - Ghost

In allocating time towards their content creation, all interviewees (except Ghost who committed to four days a week), reported 'finding time' after more demanding duties were completed. Ghost shared that this was only a recent transition as previously he had worked on his content for five days a week until that negatively impacted his health and well-being. This experience in over-working was shared by David who, in his work with larger scale mods, described lengthy periods of time committed to their creation with concerned feedback being given from friends and family about his

health. Upon reflection, both content creators shared sentiments of regret and saw those experiences as teachable moments for self-care, which in turn informed their future labour practices. These experiences indicate a space for better support, instruction, and sharing for individuals exploring entrepreneurial and self-managed roles in combatting the negative impacts of overworking within the content creator industry.

In contrast to situating creation within daily schedules, the creators shared an appreciation for the creative freedom, agency, and responsibility of their work. Yet pragmatically, a common understanding was seen toward the precarity present in relying on their creation roles as a primary source of income. There was also the valuation of their content creation serving as a method for upskilling and resulting in transferable technical knowledge toward their primary careers. Ghost was the only creator who expressed a clear desire to expand their creator role, whilst other content creators were satisfied with maintaining their creation as a source of supplementary income and a creative outlet not structured by financial demands. In response to this, David shared his rationale for not considering a transition into the core game development industry. Despite having generated an appropriate skillset through modding, the constraints to his creative freedom were of no appeal:

"The thing is when you are only ever making stuff for other people, it means there is very little room for personal expression."
- David

A constant theme throughout interviews was a sense of resignation and detachment towards the risks present in the spaces they operate in. Johnson (2019, 515), noted this acceptance or developing resistance towards online abuse as another area of non-improvement, seeing the hazard as one of permanence, to be adapted to rather than expect change. The numbness and resignation towards these issues seemed consistently tied to a developed sense of digital literacy and a comprehensive understanding of the requirements for successful content creation and audience generation. Being visible, reachable, and relatable are all elements that positively impact online content delivery and the platforms we use provide the locative affordances to make our personal lives accessible even when trying to conceal them. Creators consistently referred to compartmentalising, 'just coping', or expecting toxic behaviour in online spaces. To reinforce the sentiments of isolation noted through the social analysis above, interviewees regarded the development of coping and management skills to be primarily from personal perseverance, rather than community or platform resources or training. David shared impactful experiences in community management where bad actors would send graphic images of death and gore rather than discuss the moderation applied to their behaviour:

"It's all pretty awful, it's one of those things I've unfortunately developed a bit of a thick skin against. I don't think you ever really want to develop a tolerance for it but it is what it is. It has been necessary. I see it enough that otherwise I would be up thinking about it all the time if I wasn't able to compartmentalise it."
- David

Overall, interviewees took immense pride in the creativity and the originality they were able to express through their roles. This work ethic translated to a grounded appraisal of their content creation roles, with most interviewees remarking they

would cease their creation easily if in need of stable income. This revelation proposes that, from this sample, creators would prefer to engage in creative practices in a supplementary capacity rather than a disruptive behaviour towards traditional career choices as Taylor and Luckman advocate (2020, 267).

Analysis Reflection

Through the challenges, concerns, and issues raised by the interviewees toward the social, technical, and professional elements of creation, a sense of optimism was present that circumstances would improve for current and emerging content creators. Despite the notable social risks, platform dominance, and competitive industry, the message to emerging content creators was the need to understand the role fully.

"There's so much more technically, personably, and emotionally that you need to be prepared for with streaming that I don't think people consider."
- Chris

Each content creator interviewed in this study had felt unprepared to deal with some element of the creative practices at some point or another. While games act as digital playgrounds in which players can build social networks, interact with technological systems, and develop both hobbies and professional skills, that experience does not communicate the multifaceted expectations of content creation. However, there are communities and spaces that facilitate that learning. While this sample of content creators resonated with the nomadic practice of jumping from network to network for skill development, they communicated ongoing practices to change the learning experience for emerging creators. As such, through trial and error, networks, research, and outright play, content creators must fully understand the social, technical, and professional elements of content creation for the sustainable management of such.

This sample of interviewees supports that a developed sense of digital literacy provides grounded reflexivity and adaptability towards platform precarity and online risks. Yet while the collaborative playgrounds continue to "get better" there are still stark omissions in knowledge transfer and preparation for content creators as their play and creative practices warp into professional and liable activities. In a sentiment shared by Nile and David, there is so much good on the internet, but the bad can be truly traumatic if under-prepared without networks of support to rely on. Ghost accurately and simply framed the reality of online profile development as "*once your life is out on the internet, your life is out on the internet*". So, for creators to come, an understanding of the affordances for accessibility and identification is critical while being conscious of the loss of privacy inherent to online profile development.

The focus of this research through design, data collection, and analysis was committed to exploring the commonalities the creators shared across their diverse roles. While this research was broad, it also developed distinctions of significance between various video game and professional industry content creator roles. Audience-facing creation had noticeably more concerns regarding para-social relationships and toxic audiences than physical merchandisers or modders. Professional cultures ranged from institutionalised support in grassroots streaming to conservative gatekeeping in modding communities. Future research will return to these distinctions between roles to consider if broader culture bleed or transfer could occur to share the best aspects of video game content creation in all roles. This in turn would prepare emerging

creators to identify creation roles that are not only relevant to the individual's skill set or passion but also towards a cultural or professional alignment.

CONCLUSION

The ambitious goal of this study was to identify the shared experiences of a broad range of video game creation roles to detail how understandings of social, technical, and professional elements of creation were developed from game worlds and orbiting social spaces. While the themes for analysis were arranged deductively, reflecting a bias informed by personal experience, findings can be said to correlate with previous studies into video creation and streaming. Previous scholarly examinations of video game content creation separate these roles into singular studies of live-streamers (Gandolfie 2016, 63-82), YouTubers (Caplan and Gillespie 2020, 1-13), modders (Postigo 2001, 300-313), or game journalists (Fisher and Mohammed-Baksh 2020, 45-49) with little interest in the behaviors, cultures, and challenges that connect these roles. This study has shown that various video game content creators share similar formative experiences with a mutual want for better communication of the risks and challenges of creation available to emerging creators.

Video game content creators are clearly networked with other roles of creation via their platforms, audiences, and content origin and so warrant further inspection of such connections. As platform labour is rife with examples of accessible yet precarious opportunities for compensation, understanding how video game content creators navigate and engage with both platforms and niche communities, can yield insight into digital practices that can be applied to other industries. Results could inform platform work such as ridesharing, food delivery, or task outsourcing via services like Uber or Airtasker or evaluate digital entertainment services and audience engagement. However, these services have received far more academic scrutiny and policy upheaval since their activation (Carli 2021, 235; Minter 2017, 438; Zhang et al. 2022, 374) without platforms such as Twitch or YouTube taking note of improved worker arrangements or transparency.

In what began as an exploration to understand the journey from audience to creator, this qualitative study into video game industry content creation revealed a web of social risk, platform dominance, and competitive industry. Through this research and the clear signposting of an industry that will continue to grow, the broad arena of video game content creation demands more attention. Firstly, to improve the rigour of existing discussions but also to better educate and prepare emerging creators for the expectations of their roles. It will only be through understanding the experiences of diverse content creators concerning the social, technical, and professional elements of creation that change can be implemented to improve these domains.

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