Is There Room for Community Ethics in Game Design Education?

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INTRODUCTION

Game industry professionals are constantly grappling with the ethics of how to design multiplayer games and manage gaming communities (referred to in this paper as "community ethics"). Finding fair, appropriate and feasible ways to tackle disruptive or toxic players presents a particular challenge in this regard. For instance, deciding when and how to suspend or ban a player can be difficult given widely varying views on what kind of play is acceptable or valuable (Sparrow et al., 2020; Carter, 2020). Despite recent industry efforts toward addressing community ethics (see e.g. McAloon, 2018; Wawro, 2020), the games industry is still criticised for utilising largely arbitrary ethical guidelines in community management (Busch, Boudreau, & Consalvo, 2015).

At the same time, many game design graduates enter the industry without having engaged in structured discussions surrounding toxicity and community ethics. In Australia, game design education programs tend to focus on particular skills—either on "training employees, entrepreneurs, [or] artists" (Keogh, 2019)—and these specific paths mean community ethics are often absent from curricula. Community management, a role that requires frequent and direct engagement with gaming communities, is increasingly recognised as important in confronting toxicity and maintaining revenue—yet it is rarely approached in game design education, mirroring its largely marginalised status in the game industry (see Kerr & Kelleher, 2015).

This raises the question of how game design education can aid in tackling toxicity and promoting further discussions on community ethics. Is there room for community ethics in game design higher education? If so, how can educators incorporate these discussions into their curricula, and what are some of the obstacles they may encounter in doing so? How can these discussions be effective in preparing prospective industry professionals to deal with toxicity?

These questions have arisen from an ongoing wider research project that aims to examine the ethics of multiplayer game design from an industry perspective. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was performed on the results of 21 in-depth interviews with a range of games industry professionals (including community managers) and educators.

Data analysis is still ongoing, but coding of the interview data has generated a set of domains reflecting perceived obstacles and opportunities in the development of community ethics in game design education. Across these interviews, many participants commented on an overall lack of engagement with community ethics in their own educational experiences. And while participants recognised that other forms of ethical discussions are a (usually small) part of some game design courses—covering discussions of accessibility, diversity, ESRB content ratings, and industry practices—they advocated for further development in community ethics as well.

In terms of obstacles, the first and largest issue that many participants identified was the difficulty of "finding room" for community ethics in game design programs given the need to teach much more foundational or practical skills focused on functionality, artistic design, and so on. One participant commented that multiplayer game design is a "complex and massive field" that requires considerable attention, and thus would not be achievable in most existing programs. Other obstacles included the perceived rigidity of existing curricula; the concern that community ethics programs or modules would be either too simplistic or too philosophical to be useful in practice; and that many educators would not be adequately equipped to teach multiplayer game design and community ethics.

Interviewees offered a number of opportunities for community ethics education as well. Firstly, they identified avenues for expanding already-existing material to take community ethics into account without needing to make any drastic changes to curricula. In particular, they highlighted 'player interactions' as a good place to expand from, tying community ethics to concepts revolving around "interaction mechanics", "being kind to the player", "player experience", and "target audiences". Secondly, some participants advocated for more focus on (and funding for) a more holistic model to game design teaching, emphasising "people-focused" skills in marketing, business communications, and community management that could better account for community ethics. Finally, participants also highlighted ways to frame engagement with community ethics as a practical and useful skill given the immense impact that decisions in this area can have on the success of a game. Teaching real-world case studies was often pointed to as potentially helpful in that regard.

These domains demonstrate overarching concerns with the practicality and functionality of integrating community ethics into game design education, extending existing concerns about the adequacy of game design education in general (Keogh, 2019). Amidst a wider call for a more holistic approach to game design education, opportunities for further development tended to emphasise the practical benefits of discussions on community ethics regardless of a program's focus.

In future work, we hope to further explore these understandings and refine these domains through interviews, workshops, and/or questionnaires to create a shared framework of discussion points for integrating community ethics into design education.

BIO

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