Observing Indie Game Devs on Discord: The Scroll-Up Method

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Keywords
Discord, videogame development, labour, community, scroll-up method

INTRODUCTION
"Community platforms" (Greentree, 2025) like Discord, Slack, and to a lesser extent Microsoft Teams, are now so central to contemporary game production as to be mundane. Like much of contemporary creative work, videogame development is increasingly undertaken by small, informal, and geographically dispersed teams. Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Foxman et al., 2024), game developers take advantage of these highly configurable communication platforms to operate asynchronous, remote, and highly collaborative workspaces and communities. Significantly, each of the three major platforms, central to both game development and much of contemporary digital work, either emerged directly from the game sector or were inspired by it. Game development in turn has become the sector *par excellence* for understanding the shape of these platforms in contemporary work and creative practice. These community-communication platforms are highly diffuse and private, which creates new challenges for researchers looking to understand the contours of digital work. However, they also provide new opportunities for researchers in gaining insights to the creative and collaborative processes of digital workers generally and game developers specifically.

This paper details a new qualitative method for studying game production: the scroll-up observation method. As part of a larger project, we developed and deployed this method to highlight how creative work has been transformed to become interoperable with, exploitative of, and dependent on these popular and mundane community-communication platforms. With a specific focus on the structures of independent game development teams on Discord, we make the case for the usefulness of the scroll-up method in understanding how creative practice in game development work functions and surfaces via community platforms.

Observation-style methods have been employed in game production studies to great effect (Banks, 2013; O'Donnell, 2014). These approaches, however, are generally limited to time- and resource-intensive in-person sessions. At the same time, game production studies scholars have argued that game development has always been

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2026

platformised (Chia, et al,, 2020; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The community platforms that are now central to the game production process provide a relatively resource-light alternative to in-person observations as well as an opportunity to witness the increasingly distributed and decentralised vectors and contexts in which game development work is now conducted.

Our project was centrally concerned with questions around how ideation, negotiation, interrelations and other aspects of creative work operate in the day-to-day practice of game development teams. We identified Discord servers as a potential site for observing these practices in a feasible way and thus designed the scroll-up observation method. The scroll-up observation is a digital ethnographic method (Taylor, 2006) in which researchers move back through a workplace or community's activity on a community platform in order to better understand that community's practices and experiences. It bears similarities to methods which aim to move through and trace user practices through digital platforms, such as the "scroll back" (Robards & Lincoln, 2017) and "app walkthrough" (Light et al., 2018) methods. However, the scroll-up observation method's differences lie in its interest in practices rather than infrastructures, and the emergent collective practices of a broader group or community (for example, a work team) rather than individuals.

This paper details scroll-up observations conducted on six Discord servers used by Australian-based game development teams. Four of these were conducted on Discord servers as the teams were actively working on developing and releasing their games. A further two were retroactive scroll-up observations of Discords for games which had previously been completed. We collected data in the form of fieldnotes and screenshots taken as we scrolled-up, paying particular attention to key moments in the game development process, interpersonal interactions, and the resolving of both creative and professional tensions.

We recorded porous boundaries that manifest in these Discord servers around who is even 'in' a studio, which are often elucidated via channel structures and activity levels. We also observed a blurring of creative, technical, and personal discussion in these Discords, which manifested in a visible collapse of work activity with personal relationships. The scroll-up method also allowed us to witness the wildly divergent patterns of time across contemporary game production, including the rhythms of asynchronous work activities, the stratified ebbs and flows between periods of delay and rush, and the presence bleed (Gregg, 2011) of personal life and the game development studio as manifested on Discord. Ultimately our development and deployment of this method illustrates a heterogenous formation of game development styles and frameworks as highly iterative, informal, and social, where teams would, as noted via our own fieldnotes, "chat the game into existence".

This presentation will introduce and critique the scroll-up method in the context of our own project. Our findings in the context of contemporary game production research will be detailed in order to then reflect on the advantages, challenges, and shortfalls of this method for researching the new world of decentralised and platform-dependent digital work.

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BIO

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project is funded by the ARC Discovery Project Artistic Practice in Australian Videogame Development (DP230102727).