

How to Manage a Large-Scale Online Gaming Community

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About this talk

- **May seem jarringly practical**
- **Don't share this info with your users
:)**
- **Realize that you are going to need
someone who is a politician**

Forming the community, part I

- **Steal it (Yes, we're serious)**
 - **Co-opt an existing aggregation of potential customers**
 - **Don't be blatant; informative, non-hype info will work if your product is solid**
 - **Always be complimentary of the people you stole it from**

Forming the community, part II

- **Steal early**
 - **Communities are hard to kill, they stick**
 - **It's hard (and expensive) to steal a subscriber from someone else**
 - **The earlier you lock them in the more likely they are to buy the product**

The heart of the game

- **Define your mission or goal**
 - Needs to be something that inspires passion
 - Your early adopters are passionate people
- **Can it in a slogan**
 - Make it a slogan that is inclusive and inviting, not domineering
 - Develop additional catchphrases/vision statements, use them often
- **Proclaim it passionately**
 - Frankly, you better mean it—they'll notice if not
 - So have the person you have talking mean it even if you don't

Early community development

- **You need a place for them to gather—this means web boards**
 - Consider off the shelf solutions like UBB
 - Keep it streamlined—few graphics, quick reload
 - Make sure it can maintain some history
 - Give it search capabilities, profiles (avatar icons)
- **If no money, co-opt an existing venue and pay in patronage**
 - Fan sites love to have devs post
 - Careful—you can ruin a community via your presence

Early community team

- **A key evangelist: someone passionate about the “heart” of the game**
 - **Best if comes from one of co-opted communities**
- **A dev team member**
 - **so that players feel they have access for suggestions**
 - **For trickling out “behind the scenes”**
- **Moderators to keep an eye on the community**
 - **Make clear the difference!**
- **Webmaster so you actually have a site**

Info release

- **Make it a ritual**
 - **Establish a clear periodic schedule**
 - **Stick to it**
 - **Give presents (holidays good candidate)**
- **Track & coordinate ALL info releases**
 - **Tidbits**
 - **Articles**
 - **Media**
 - **FAQs**

Community standards: “soft”

- **Don’t tolerate “broken windows”**
- **Shake your head sadly and tut-tut people who break etiquette**
 - **A little public punishment goes a long way**
 - **Helps co-opt people onto your side, they will enforce for you**
- **Call out role models**
- **Celebrate how cool your community is**

Community standards: “hard”

- **Put them in writing right at the start**
 - Leave outs for unforeseen cases (“must follow the spirit of the rules...”)
- **Take firm action when necessary**
 - Clear TOS
 - Clear warnings
 - Clear punishment
- **The existence of locked threads helps reinforce that action WILL be taken**

Reinforcing community tone

- **You have great power**
 - **Whoever you answer gets reinforced; your attention is status**
 - **Whoever you ignore gets marginalized**
- **Try to seem human**
 - **Corporate/marketdroid speak turns people off**
 - **Use personal touches and humor**
- **Admit mistakes**
 - **You have to seem human first, of course**
 - **Buys you goodwill when you really screw up**
 - **Be HONEST**

More tactics

- **Changing the subject**
 - **Don't answer controversies, you feed them**
 - **New info can derail a distasteful topic**
- **Act aggrieved**
 - **Only works if you have built trust**
- **Closing the topic**
 - **Will alienate some, but will become community standard**
 - **You need to have given enough effort to addressing issues**

Your community composition

- **Realize you are talking to very hardcore people**
 - **Not representative of final market**
 - **...but they ARE the people who generate word of mouth, so keep them happy**
 - **Savvy enough to understand tradeoffs, usually**
- **Remember your silent majority**

Go Live!

- **Community now moves into the game**
 - Primary communication is still the website
 - Keep your in-game presence to CS only except for events
- **Provide clear channels of info**
 - Update center of some sort
 - Patch notes
- **Continue regular access to devs**
 - Periodic chats are a good tool
 - You may have to gag your evangelist now

A full community team

- **Expand to more developers**
 - Use to address SIGs
 - Assign one to be aware of upcoming issues/testing
- **Writers for serial web content and newsletters**
 - You want to become a regular destination
 - Fiction: hold a mirror up to roleplay
 - News: use to create role models
 - “Behind the Scenes”: make community feel like they are part of a secret club

Troublemakers, type I: verbal

- **Can they become ombudsmen?**
 - Do they have a sub-community that sees them as a leader?
 - Do they have their own forums?
- **Can they be ostracized?**
 - Must be seen to make public effort to communicate
 - You'll need to put on a show of sorrow when you fail
 - Make comments to 3rd party about your sorrow too
- **Do you have excuses for banning?**
 - Language is the most common

Troublemakers, type II: hackers

- **Most are prideful**
 - Use admiration/attention as a technique to get their tools
 - Run incognito if you can get into bug boards/etc
- **Many will offer to help**
 - Every game that has tried got burned
 - They will lie and hold back info
- **Some are improving the game**
 - Cure yourself of NIH and use their ideas, or even hire them to write those tools

Troublemakers, type III: grief players

- **Why are they griefing?**
 - **A (very small) percentage is doing it because your design is broken. Fix the design.**
- **Ban them**
 - **Early, often. Even if they were right about the design being broken.**
- **Be scrupulous about the legality of the ban**
 - **(never seem to ban because of spite)**
 - **You cannot afford martyrs**

Community scaling

- **Rule of 150**
 - Shows up in psych, military, religion, sociology, anthropology
 - Reflect it in your game systems
- **Provide subcommunity identity**
 - Wannabe game designers
 - Chatters
 - Fiction mavens
 - Later: specific game system mavens
 - Clans/guilds/etc: give public bragging space

Leveraging player-generated content

- **Major legal issues here**
 - Law is NOT settled at all
 - Make sure you are covered under derivative works
- **Use it as much as you can anyway**
 - Realize your brand **WILL** be diluted
 - (Or pick a brand where that doesn't matter)
- **Showcase via website and newsletters**

Listening to your community

- **Stakeholders**
 - Post proposed changes
 - Get SIG input
 - Actually LISTEN and modify proposals
- **Testing environment/server**
 - Treat just like regular game as far as CS
 - Be properly thankful but do not create sense of entitlement
 - Provide an ombudsman for reporting issues
 - Integrate into QA process
 - Strike teams work great

Understanding biases

- **Source is self-interested**
 - Will usually argue for improvements to their role
 - Diehard player of the role
- **Source has particular expertise in subject**
 - Will often argue for overly hardcore mechanics
- **Source gave up on role**
 - Extremely valuable input
 - May just suck at it though

Feedback loops

- **Volunteers are tricky legal territory**
 - **Get legal advice, there's still ways to do it**
- **Make volunteer-like activities rewarded**
 - **Weave into nature of game (advancement for helping!)**
 - **Spotlight on website**
- **Give special access**
 - **They can brag about it**
 - **You'll likely get good info**

Some resources

- www.naima.com and Amy Jo Kim's work including *Community Building on the Web*
- Raph's website, www.legendmud.org/raph/
- Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* is a good introduction to viral marketing & how it works