

Barriers to Inclusion and Retention: The Role of Community Management and Moderation Whitepaper

Background: AnyKey workshops are private day-long sessions of 10-12 stakeholders and are focused on action points that can be developed in local context/organizations. The goals of each workshop are to identify key areas within the thematic framework and document/brainstorm a range of interventions/supports that can then be developed. High value is placed on case histories, successful prior interventions, learning from failures, and empirical data. Interventions are not one size fits all but should be thought of as a range of things stakeholders can do within their local contexts/organizations/industry. Following each workshop a live-streamed panel is held to help bring these conversations into a public sphere.

Introduction: At the first AnyKey workshop (September 2015) one of the major themes participants identified as posing serious challenges to diverse participation in e-sports was that of harassment. As we noted in the whitepaper for that event: “Many participants (particularly those who are public-facing) spoke of the ongoing gauntlet of abuse and harassment they face. This can range from online chat at sites broadcasting competitions to other social media platforms like Twitter or various websites. Many organizations do not moderate their channels (often hundreds of messages per minute), which conveys the message that all speech ought to be allowed in the space. Live-streamers (who are also often pro players) regularly spend multiple hours per day behind the camera broadcasting online to thousands of viewers. They often rely heavily on volunteer moderators for assistance, but the volume of comments makes this task difficult” (see <http://www.anykey.org/project/anykey-white-paper-1-women-in-esports-workshop-2015/> for the full report). A major goal for the April 2016 workshop was to pick up on this theme and do a deeper dive, looking for models, examples, and strategies that might be undertaken to tackle the issue.

Major themes:

1. Value of chat

There are serious and deep issues of harassment and abuse rooted in live-stream chat spaces that require urgent attention. While a common refrain about live chat is that it is simply irredeemable, writing it off would be a huge loss to the medium’s potential and the life of communities. A number of healthy channel communities have shown the power of chat engagement – not only between broadcasters and audience, but audience members themselves. There is also an incredible energizing power to being in a huge chat crowd, participating in a shared experience through online cheering. Chat offers paths into participation in a scene and community, it allows people to express and share their fandom, it allows for knowledge sharing and building expertise. Refrains that simply suggest one should “hide chat” or just opt out miss one of the powerful hooks to live-streaming space. Unfortunately, many companies and organizations do not prioritize the chat as adding value to their products and it is not seen as a space requiring active community management. While chat components form a regular part of esports spaces, they are often under-moderated (if at all) and attention is only given to coarse metrics rather than a

meaningful assessment of user experience. More data is needed to explore correlations between user chat experience and viewership, analyze how chat contributes to building and sustaining audiences, and how the overall quality of chat is interwoven into product perceptions.

2. Role of technology

Technology, such as chat bots, form a key component to moderating online communication spaces. They can be delegated crucial work to catch particular forms of speech & patterns and help automate moderation processes, especially in large fast moving chats. As one participant put it, “bots take over when humans can’t scale.” Simultaneously, the work of technology in chat moderation is deeply rooted in judgement calls and decisions. Technological choices are social choices and understanding the linking of these two dynamics is crucial in making best use of bots (or IP bans, etc). Understanding emerging social dynamics, as well as thinking about proactive systems, is difficult but important work for community management. While there has been tremendous (often volunteer) labor to produce chat bots, more still needs to be done to build and support the role of technical interventions and assistance in managing online communities, as well as help make these systems easy to install & use to non-technically focused moderators.

3. Preventative versus punitive approaches

A consistent theme throughout the workshop was a push to think about expanding community management and moderation to encouraging positive behavior and communication. While punitive measures will still be needed, frameworks that focus on inspiring or encouraging people to interact positively offer possibility. More needs to be done to explore preventative tactics; modelling behavior, rewarding those who help make the community better, and finding common ground and humanizing each other were all discussed. For those moderating large scale event chats, crowd energy that veers into toxicity can be channeled back into more positive group interactions (via in chat games, cheering, etc.). Learning from channels, large and small, who are building healthy communities and experimenting with proactive systems – ones in which members are invested in helping shape the tone (versus, for example, simply auto-banning bad behavior) – is key (see, for example, the MissClicks network).

4. Training and supporting community managers and moderators

While a handful of esports organizations employ professional community managers, most of the space relies on the volunteer labor of fans. This presents a two-fold problem: 1) companies/organizations need to do more to be accountable and take responsibility for their channels and 2) much more could be done to train and support these people, especially given the toll attentive work in this domain can take on a person. Issues around mental health (Take This is a notable advocate), diversity awareness, and online citizenship can be supported better. While individual broadcasters or esports organizations may want to have better channels, they may not always know where to start (or get support once going). Learning how to build a mod community, finding mods, supporting their tech use, dealing with difficult cases, and in general having help and support to build better streams is vitally needed for those wanting to integrate

meaningful community management (see the work of /r/GirlGamers for excellent examples of informal training being done).

5. Varying levels of participation & entry

Not all participants/audience members approach esports with the same orientation. For some it is a casual, social space. For others the focus is on intense competition. Participants also come in with varying levels of experience, from newbie to pro. Understanding the diversity of experience and orientation is key to building spaces that work for a range of participants. This involves thinking about structures that promote camaraderie amidst competition. Structuring competitions into varying experience levels can offer newcomers an opportunity to participate while also retaining the value of serious high-end competitive matches (for example, Smash Sisters does casual/casual competitive/competitive). And while trash talk can have a place in competitive spaces, it must be balanced against context and interpretation. A pro heavily trash talking a newbie is akin to the comedic version of “punching down” rather than nuanced competitive strategy. Supporting newcomers into the space by, for example, “cheering positively,” can be an important intervention.

Live-streamed panel: The workshop was followed by a public, live-streamed panel at PAX East entitled “Competition for all: Building inclusive esports communities.” Panelists were Anna Prosser Robinson (Twitch & MissClicks), Morgan Romine (AnyKey), Kelly Kline (ESL), and Lil Chen (YouTube & Smash Sisters). A recording of the session can be found at <https://www.twitch.tv/pax2/v/62138024> (audio clears up around 7:25). Several articles were published about the panel including at MMOGames and Game Skinny.