Games Support, Game Mastering and Community

New Products for the Games QA group

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Overview

Games QA provides quality assurance services on multi-million dollar games for the electronic games publishers, developers and platform manufacturers. The objective of Games QA is to get the games to market faster and less expensively while ensuring the quality of each game on the different consoles or platforms.

This paper describes a new service offering for the practice area.

Game Mastering

Game Mastering is a function in a multiplayer game of acting as organizer, arbitrator, and official in rules situations. Typically these services are used for massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) in which a large number of players interact with one another within a virtual game world.

This function includes the monitoring of existing campaigns and quests (game play) and the creation and management of daily in-game events.

Typically a MMORGP is comprised of player characters (PC) which are your online users and non player characters (NPC). NPCs might be allies, bystanders or competitors to the PCs.

NPCs vary greatly in importance, from the NPC innkeeper seen once by the player characters, to the NPC arch-nemesis who comes back time-after-time again for an entire campaign. While every inhabitant of the game's world except the PC's are NPC's, very few are given any detail by a Game Master (GM).

A GM's duties in an online game are performed by either an experienced volunteer player or an employee who enforces the game rules, banishing spammers, player killers and hackers.

For their task they use special characters with special abilities like teleporting to players, summoning items and browsing the player logs to help them in their moderating tasks.

GMs in MMORPGs are usually employees of the game's host or developers of the game themselves.

Often players who feel dissatisfied with the service will blame the GM directly for any errors or glitches. This is a common mistake as most employed GMs are not developers and cannot resolve the problem themselves.

There is some debate about how much work a GM should put into an important NPC's statistics; some players prefer to have every NPC completely defined with stats, skills, and gear, while others define only what is immediately necessary and fill in the rest as the game proceeds.

There is also some discussion as to just how important fully fleshed-out NPCs are in any given RPG, but it is general consensus that the more "real" the NPCs feel, the more fun players will have interacting with them in character.

Some MMORPGs, such as World of Warcraft by Blizzard, have employee's working as GMs to help users with various problems in game play, chat and other things like account and billing issues.

Other GMs create newsletters for in-game news and they also create and manage all incarnations of NPCs.

The objective is to bring life into the virtual world and involving players in fascinating stories and adventures, keeping in mind their constant demand for entertainment.

Typically Game Mastering should start when a game is still in beta. This allows our staff to get used to the universe and to the specific game-mastering tools provided, and raising your beta testers' interest.

Moreover, testing the game mastering tools and using massive events as an opportunity for scheduled stress tests is an excellent way to catch bugs that would otherwise show up after release.

VMC creates a game mastering manual just for your game. This document goes into every detail about:

- The synopsis, the scenario, several methods to escape routine of the game
- Character spawns
- Common issues and how to avoid them
- Repetition of information
- NPC management techniques (main, one-shot, secondary)

- Methods to renew players' interest, improvisation, thoughtful integration of online support, control and moderation of the online community... and many other useful tips.

Game support

Game support is a range of services providing assistance to users with Game software and hardware such as consoles, mobile phones, PCs and Macs or other electronic devices.

Our comprehensive multi-channel solution blends a proven value-based methodology with an active rules-based engagement engine and deep domain expertise to increase first contact resolution, improve customer satisfaction and reduce attrition rates.

VMC can provide this service in more than 22 different languages. Statistics show that 57% of European Internet users prefer using a language that is not English. We have excellent results in multilingual email and online chat services. We have the methodologies, technology and talent it takes to "globalize" an online help service system.

Email – VMC's email Game support service allows a quick solution to every problem encountered inside and outside the game, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Offering the best service to any client on demand is our top priority. We create specific service level agreements (SLAs) for you and your different games allowing us respond to different situations within the time frames that you require. We have active knowledge bases which allow us to provide scripted answers and FAQs for your game. We can target e-mails to your user base for surveys or to get feedback on upcoming features.

Chat and VOIP – VMC's online Chat support solutions are perfectly integrated to the dynamics of online games, and use a whole range of products that have been adapted to our specific needs. From active knowledge bases and in- and out-game ticket management systems, we have a high level of real-time interaction with users.

We have three different types of Chat support services for our customers:

- **Dynamic Chat:** Place chat buttons on sections of the game giving the customer a choice of engaging immediately with a live chat agent, versus waiting for an email response or being placed on-hold in a phone queue. The chat button is

visible only when agents are available to chat, ensuring that help is offered solely when it can be delivered quickly and efficiently.

- **Proactive Chat**: Target specific behaviors that indicate when customers are struggling to complete their game play , such as encountering username or password errors when attempting to log into the Game, or clicking through multiple FAQ articles in a short period of time. The proactive engagement of a live chat agent increases the opportunity for first contact resolution, unlike email, which delivers only a 40 percent first contact resolution, with the majority of issues requiring multiple follow-up correspondences.
- **Proactive Voice**: Target valued customers for a 'white glove' experience. For instance, provide click-to-talk invitations to targeted customers, allowing them instant access to top agents for any potential need or question. Or, proactively engage customers who indicate their intent to cancel their accounts, giving specialized agents the opportunity to win back the business.

Community management

Community management in video games is a new way to think about the communication between a publisher or developer and its customers. Most closely associated with MMO games, it has scattered very fast to all genres of gaming, including popular online multiplayer games.

Community management is mainly about public relations, in-game moderation and forum monitoring, thoughtful selection of beta testers, and permanent website updates.

If the people who play your games feel part of something bigger -- a network with its own rules, its own stars and its own language -- they will be less likely to move to another game, because they will remain loyal to where they belong. Just as it can be difficult for someone to leave their country, it can be hard to quit a community.

People join a community because they're interested in your game, but if the community brings them what they need in term of entertainment, gaming experience, socialization and accomplishment, they will be more likely to remain loyal to the publisher or the developer who brought it to them.

In the end, a community is also a source of infinite ideas. Give your customers the right tools to express themselves, and they will talk about what's right and what's wrong in your products, allowing you to improve them or build a solid basis for the next version.

Community management is also about community creation and extension: a regular feedback to the community ensures its loyalty and allows the transfer of suggestions and ideas to and from the development team.

To do this, we do not hesitate to support emerging groups of players (clans, factions) with logistic assistance and with website hosting services. We gather every idea developed by the subscribers and send them in regular reports to the development team.

But beyond technical tools like a website or a forum, a real community is characterized by something that's not material: community spirit. This strange thing expresses itself in many ways, but the point of it, in the end, is to keep the players together.

It is what motivates players to write strategy guides for other players, to create fan sites, to lead guilds, to create events on their own, to post on the forums even when they're not looking for any specific information, to give more than they receive, and so on. In the end, community spirit is what makes players feel they're part of something bigger, and sometimes, an *important* part of this "something".

Networks and Meta-Communities

As community websites grow, they often join a network and contribute to build a meta-community. Not all networks are meta-communities, but all meta-communities are networks in some way.

Website networks are just gatherings of many websites in a similar web architecture, to share tools, structures, costs and audience in an overall scaled economy. Some of the best-known networks are lead by professional editorial teams which create many specialized sites to expand their audience and land more advertising, but they may also be lead by regular gamers willing to provide others with information about their hobby.

It can be hard to tell the difference between a community, a network and a meta-community, but again, it's all in the "community spirit".

A meta-community is a community of communities. Basically, it works like a network, with many fan sites and forums linked to each other on a same platform, but beyond the audience, these fan sites will share their community to create a bigger one with

common rules, codes and habits the newcomers will have to understand before being integrated. Even if they play very different games, the people will still feel part of a unique community, and that is the whole difference between networks and meta-communities.

As it can be very difficult to distinguish a network from a meta-community without being part of it, here are some examples to discover: JeuxOnline.info (French), GuildCafe.com, The Warcry Network, and Stratics Central.

The Community Manager

As we said earlier, a community needs almost nothing to start, but to keep it growing, you will need someone able to help it, and this person is the community manager (or CM).

Role and Behavior of a Community Manager

Basically, the community manager is the link between the community, and the publisher and/or development team. Positioned between Game support and the public relations, his role is really diverse and includes the management of community tools provided to the players, the organization of events (both in-game and real), the transmission of information from the dev team to the community, and the transmission of reports, feedback and suggestions from the community to the team.

The community manager is the official interlocutor of the community, and bears the word of the publisher and the developers to the players. It means that he is in charge of the direct communication in times of crisis, but more important: it means that the CM is the first person bearing the image of the company and contributes to building it.

The community manager is a vector of image building and branding, and that is the reason why his behavior has to be without any blame, because one and *only* one mistake can spread very quickly through the communities, meta-communities, networks, and so on, all over the internet, in less than six hours.

The community manager also bears the authority of the developers among the players, and he has to be respected as such, because if he doesn't earn the respect of the community, everything he says will have no value, and his mission will fail. He

also has to make sure the rules are respected by making sure everybody knows them and can understand them.

A community manager is not just a player; he is a communication and Game support professional, and that is why he needs the proper skills and experience -- and thus proper consideration and remuneration.

Recommended Skills

In the past five years, plenty of companies have hired community managers with no skills or experience. Why? Because experienced CMs are very rare, because they didn't want to take the time to provide the right foundation, or simply because they didn't know, and thought that talking to players wouldn't require any special skills.

That lack of experience and consideration from higher management lead some of these companies to bigger problems -- because when a community manager loses his nerves and insults players in the official forums, the word spreads very fast and the public doesn't appreciate it. What can the players rely on, if the representatives of the developer are not reliable anymore?

When you need to hire a community manager and think it doesn't require many specific skills, just ask yourself a question -- would you hire a marketing manager without any particular skills just because selling a good product is, in fact, not that hard?

It is important not to underestimate the importance of the people you hire to talk to your community, just because community management doesn't provide you immediate and calculable results, as marketing can. The people who currently say that community management isn't important are the same who said almost 100 years ago that public relations was not important -- before Ivy Lee came and proved them the contrary.

All the same, that's a fact, as community management is a new profession, and experienced people are extremely rare. To balance this lack of staff, once again, look to your community. To help you find out the good one, here are some of the skills a community manager will use in her work:

Communication skills

> **Talking:** A CM will have to be present at conventions and shows, talk on stage and answer interviews. Self-confidence will be useful in these exercises.

> **Writing:** The majority of the communications will be written, on the forums, via press releases, chat, or other formats. It sounds obvious, but don't hire someone who isn't capable of writing a one page article without one spelling mistake on each line, unless you want to give your company a "special" image.

> A standard of academic writing is also recommended. I've seen a few community managers writing about their game like "This game is so coooooooool ! There are monsters and fighters, and even cars ROFL!!!!! Come and play to have fun LOL!!! <3 :))))" This doesn't show me the ability of the publishers to manage a game, and even less a community. As a player, I don't want to rely on someone who behaves like an 8-year-old to run a game correctly.

Knowledge

> **Gaming knowledge:** The CM has to have a basic knowledge of the type of game she will be working on -- enough to fully understand the point of view of each person in your community. Hiring a member of your game's community could be a good idea, but it's also a great risk. The CM is not a player; much more, she's a communicator, in touch with both the community and development team. If she comes directly from the community, she might have difficulties with the perspective change -- and fail to understand the dev's or the publisher's point of view.

> **Linguistic skills:** Video games are now international -- except a few exceptions (I bet hurling games are only sold in Ireland). Players take their information from different sources. For the CM, she must of course be fluent in his community's primary language, *as well as* English. German basics could be a plus, because German video game networks are huge and active -- even compared to the English-speaking ones.

> **Media:** Depending on the responsibilities the CM will undertake, having a good knowledge of the gaming media is a strong advantage. As she communicates with her community, she might be able to do it through several different channels -- and magazines and websites are important

channels to use. Media knowledge will also help in coordinating communication plans with the PR and marketing departments.

Experience

Community: Fan site, forum moderation, game server administration experience is very useful. All type of community-related experience is a strong plus.

Media: As we saw above, experience in relations with the media is always good to have. If you hire someone who already knows how to behave in front of a camera, you don't have to teach her.

Development: A background in developing games or other software would help the CM to understand better the dev team's point of view.

Emotional Qualities

These advantages go without explanation, and could be of great help for the job of community management, although I admit they are very difficult to detect in one, two, or even three job interviews: patience, empathy, self-confidence (but not too much), teamwork, management skills, humility, rigor, ability to listen, etc.

Common Mistakes

The following errors have been made in the past by publishers or developers -- and they had lots of regrets afterwards. As we must all learn from our own mistakes, it's also very important to learn from others' mistakes. Bear in mind: this list isn't exhaustive.

Sending community managers into the lion's den without proper information and/or backing from management

By underestimating the importance of community management, it can be easy to set someone to work without information or backing at the very beginning. It can lead to critical mistakes that can be avoided.

Not providing enough support to the CM's team/not managing the community team

The management of a community, especially a big community, is very hard on the nerves, and there have been some very famous community managers' nervous breakdowns. You can read about them if you do a little research.

The community managers have to form a team, with a team leader managing and providing the support his colleagues need, so they can rely on each other when they have problems, before losing their cool and insulting a whole community on the official boards.

Underpay/under-consider the community team

Community management is an important part of communication in the gaming industry, but as it is still relatively new and formative, it is very often under-considered.

Always keep in mind that the community manager is the first interlocutor with the players, and that he bears the image of your company. So don't expect him to do a quality job without the proper respect from his management -- and the proper salary.

Underestimate the importance of coordination between marketing, public relations and community management

Marketing, PR and community management are the three most common ways to communicate with the public. To maximize the effectiveness of this communication and avoid contradictions, good coordination is necessary.

Having the PR manager saying one thing to the media, and the community manager saying something else to the community, is always a bad and confusing thing.

Building and Management of a Gaming Community

Don't misunderstand the title of this part: a community will be created, grow, and live -- with or without management from the publisher or developer. The purpose of community management is to help it grow faster, ensure it won't die, and use it in a constructive way.

In my opinion, a whole book could be written on community management without being exhaustive about everything that has to be known -- so the following lines are just clues to begin the work.

By the way, as we've seen before, a community can exist without help, but the job of a community manager is to help it grow faster, and live in a good way -- and according to the publisher's strategy.

To do this, the first thing would be to prepare tools to help players build their own fan networks, meet other players and begin talking about the game. This is the easy part. Then begins the real work: keeping "control" of the community, and feeding it, to avoid an early death.

Common Community Management Tools

Official website. The game's official website is the only totally reliable source of information for fans. Interviews in the media can be misquoted, fan sites can be wrong or deliberately lie, but all information in your official website *must* remain reliable. It is the center of your community and the meeting point of all of your different communities around the world.

Official boards. Some community managers choose not to have official boards for different reasons: if you provide official boards, you have the responsibility of their technical support, moderation, and so on. This is very hard work, and if you're not

Official boards can be useful if you want your community to remain at your website and not disperse to fan sites. This is very important if you want to show your existing community different products, or if your website is a vector for marketing (for example, free-to-play online games or merchandise sales).

Official boards are also a fast and direct way to gather your community before a real fan site network is created. In the end, official boards also are a good way to collect feedback and suggestions from your community, without wandering around a huge number of fan site forums.

It's hard work, but if you have a realistic vision of your objectives for it, it can really be worth it.

Fan site kits. These packs of downloadable files should include every asset needed to start a proper fan site. We're talking about banners, site designs, screenshots, artwork, and sometimes even information.

The purpose of these kits is to avoid the problem of having 2000 empty fan sites about your game littering the web. Don't forget that fan sites bear the image of your game, and I'm sure any publisher would prefer to have fan sites showing proper,

high-res, official screenshots than crappy, low-res pictures that came from who-knows-where.

Blogs. To be honest, blogs are a great tool, but very hard to handle. If your CM or someone from the dev team wants to start a blog, be sure it's not to talk about his life. Being a "celebrity" among a given community can sometimes lead people to write things they shouldn't write about -- at least not under an official position.

Blogs allow CMs to communicate in a very different way, close to the community, but they must not replace the official website or boards, and they must have a special purpose and be controlled and managed properly.

Newsletters. These are useful tools to give information to your community on a regular basis. A part of the community won't visit the website, the official boards, or on any fan site regularly, if at all.

The newsletter is a good way to summarize what has happened within the last week (or month) and focus on the important points. Be careful with the frequency of the newsletter, because an empty newsletter is most likely to go directly to the trash bin or the spam box.

Many more tools can be used by the community team, as well as by the PR team: podcasts, wikis, social networks, community videos, and more. I won't talk about them all here, but keep in mind these questions when you're thinking about using one of these tools: is it relevant?

If it is, can you correctly handle and manage it? If both answers are "yes", you should start considering what this particular tool will bring to your community, how much it will cost in terms of time and money, and after all that, start using it within your communication plans.

Keep "Control" of Your Community

First of all, you will never be able to really control a community, but you can try to lead it the right way -- at least, the way which is right to you.

Community rules. By establishing clear rules of conduct from the very beginning, and making sure they're respected, you can establish and influence the structure by which your community will live. It's always easier to establish rules from the beginning than applying them afterwards. When you set up the rules -- for example,

the code of conduct -- think of *anything* that could happen, because a code which changes too often loses reliability.

Community education. The first adopters of a game -- the "early adopters" in marketing terms -- are likely to set the example for others. Teaching your community, and especially these community leaders, what behavior you want them to adopt from the very beginning will help you later on, because the community will manage and moderate itself.

Community managers and moderators can't be everywhere, but if the players are involved in the process of moderation and management of their own community, it will be much easier. I'm not talking here about players with special powers and accreditations, like the helpers we can see in some games; I'm talking about a community that controls itself using social links and peer pressure as a means for moderation. Unfortunately, this tends to stop working when the community gets too big.

Fan site programs. Fan sites will be created and grow without your help, but fan site programs allow you to nurture the development of quality sites and reward the best ones. Don't forget that fan sites about your game do contribute to the image of the game. By rewarding quality and showing the best fan sites on your website through a community program, you will encourage the webmasters to do their best, and thus promote your game at their best.

Trust and reliability. The trust and respect of a community has to be earned. If the community team doesn't earn it, don't expect it to control anything. This is related to the "role and behavior of a community manager" section.

Feed the Beast: Inform and Entertain

Like any other social organism, a community has to be fed to go on living. The people have to have something to talk about -- otherwise, what's the purpose of communication tools like boards or even chat systems? There are two ways to feed it: information and entertainment.

Information. The purpose of any fan site or fan forum is to gather information about the fans' favorite game, and it's the community manager's job to dole that information out, in cooperation with PR. Frequent updates and information broadcasts will regularly feed the community, keep the fan sites up to date and give people something to talk about in the forums.

Be aware that everything you say to any media can be relayed *directly* to your community. If you answer the questions of a Spanish or German fan site, those questions can be translated into any language published on a French or English website.

Be aware of the distance you have from your players. If you maintain a habit of being very close to them, forget about media exclusives -- because if they learn something important in a magazine or a famous website instead of your websites and forums, they'll denounce it as treason.

Entertainment. Special events or contests will also give the community something to talk about for weeks and months, while gathering the players in a unique and common subject -- which is very useful to strengthen the links between them.

Don't forget that players want or need to feel part of something; they want to be important in the community, and contests are good ways to foster that, by rewarding their creative talent. Having a big community is good, but having an active and productive community is much better.

Community and Game Development

Now, it's time to turn our attention to how you can harness the power of your community to affect the way in which your development team can interact with the game's fans.

Community management and Game support

In lots of big companies, the community team is part of the Game support department, and the community managers are also very often involved with support. As we said earlier, community management is located *between* Game support and communication. By their actions, and their communication, the community managers provide support to the players, and have to work very closely with the support team.

The game can't run any more after the last patch has been installed? Even if the CS will gather the information via e-mail or other support tools, the community managers will be busy communicating on the forums, explaining to the players what information they need to send in order for the devs to find out where the bug comes from, keeping them up-to-date about what the technical team is doing to solve the

problem, calming the community down by moderating the forums and keeping them informed.

Can't play on patch day, after you announced servers would be back up at 2 PM? The community managers will ask the devs for technical information and estimations, translate it into language understandable for people with no programming background, estimate their own deadline from all available information, and then inform the players of their conclusions.

Working on a critical issue but can't solve it yet? Again, the community managers will do their best to inform the community, and the players will be much more reassured to know that the devs are working on it -- instead of not knowing anything.

There are too many examples of the use of community management in Game support to write them all here, but the idea is that CMs pave the road to communication for the support staff.

Feedback and Suggestions

When developers create a game, they have their own ideas of what will work and what won't, and they know what they want to put into their game. Most of the time, their plans are also based on experience, marketing studies and polls, and the opinions of many people from the PR, marketing, sales, and QA departments. But remember that in the end, the only people who will judge your game will be the players, so why not directly ask them what they want? Gathering and directing players' feedback and suggestions can be a very difficult task, but it can also be very rewarding.

First of all, you need to provide your community the tools to usefully communicate their feedback. Many tools exist for this purpose, but two important ones may be website-based Game support ticket software, and of course your official boards. Using the board, the players will not only communicate to you, but also discuss *with each other* in a big online brainstorm that can be very productive in terms of ideas... but also in terms of useless things.

After you have provided your community with the tools it needs to provide you feedback, you'll have to gather all the ideas and advice of your players. As it can take a very long time, I recommend doing it on a regular basis.

Keep in mind that developers don't have the time to read 1500 suggestions -- even if

they are all very good. It's the job of the community manager to pick which suggestions are genuinely relevant and forget the others. Once she's picked the 10 or 20 best suggestions she could find, her job will to translate the ideas of excited players into words that make sense for both the development and the business parts of the company. A good suggestion report should at least include:

- A short and precise description of the suggestion
- The target (is this improvement made for hardcore gamers, players that have not yet bought the game, casual gamers, business partners?)
- The positive impact it could have (on sales, marketing, Game support, community management, or anything relevant)
- The impact on the development team (what will they have to do?)
- The impact on the business (will it cost you money?)

After that, the report is sent to a dedicated person within the development team, and is used to improve the current game, prepare the following one, and so on.

As these reports are not always read by the dev team or anyone on the business side, it can be good to regularly merge all the reports you have, make a selection, and then send it to the dev team again. For example, if you sent a report with 10 suggestions every month for the past six month, just select the 20 best suggestions from these six reports and send them again as a digest.

Community and Communication

Most of the advice people learn in PR and communications studies are also relevant for community management, and I often think that the best community managers should have a PR and customer service background. This section will discuss some important points no community manager should forget.

Rule I: Know Your Community

A gaming community is like a country, with its own language, its own culture and rules, and even if a community manager does not have to be part of it, he has to know it well. Knowing the slang of your community is fundamental, as abbreviations can come from very diverse origins.

As an example, in the French community of *Rappelz*, we had players who came from the U.S. servers with their own language, others coming from *World of Warcraft* or

from other games with their own habits, and in the first weeks after the release, these languages fought for domination, while another slang, coming from the new players, was created. This was a very interesting time to experience, but could be very confusing for community managers.

Knowing the language of your community also means understanding who your players are, what they do and where they come from.

In one game, the game masters were very strict on swear words and insults; I saw some players insulting each other with Japanese slang from the anime they watched, so the game masters wouldn't understand it. In that kind of case, having a community manager coming from the community itself may be very useful.

Knowledge of the community is also very important for understanding how it works, who the leaders are, what the implicit rules among players are, and more. Finally, knowing your community also means knowing your game.

It may be hard to understand why your community is crying about special areas in a particular map that give an advantage to one type of player, if you have never played in this map -- or even in the game.

Rule II: Communicate

This may be the second rule in community management, but it's the first and most important one in communications. As Paul Watzlawick said: "One cannot not communicate." This very famous sentence means that everything you do -- or *do not* do -- will be interpreted by your community, by the media, by your business partners, by everyone.

If you don't communicate, somebody else will do it for you, and then you can't control it. Any communications professional will tell you that uncontrolled communication is a prelude to disaster.

That's why you have to communicate, on everything, and with every tool at your disposal. Even the smallest maintenance has to be announced in advance and explained; any gameplay change has to be documented.

You have to communicate in a way that will be understandable to your players -- so ban technical language. If you're planning to apply an unpopular but necessary measure to your game, don't even think about trying to hide it.

If you do that, the players will find out in less than 24 hours and simply burn you alive. The best way is to communicate, discuss, and explain why this measure is important and why you have no choice but to do it. It's rare to have a chance to explain your customers why you do something, and talking to them directly will establish a real discussion, so don't miss out on it.

Of course, you can't tell your players everything -- and they don't have (and don't want) to know everything. So when you have to answer a question, just sit, look at the question, look at the information you can give them, and formulate the best answer you can with what you have. That's the best you can do.

Players are starving for communication. They constantly ask for it, and even if you want to be the most communicative company in the world, they will still think you refuse to give enough information.

If you communicate frequently, you'll minimize the risk of uncontrolled communication. If you communicate enough, players will read rumors, and think, "Our community managers didn't tell us anything about it, so we should just wait for official information." Isn't that the dream of anyone in communications?

Rule III: Be Honest

This rule is simple: if you're not honest, you're not reliable, and if you're not reliable, everything you say has no value at all. If a community manager doesn't earn the trust of her community, or loses it by lying or favoring certain players over others, then it's useless to communicate, because her own community will prefer trusting other sources -- most of the time unofficial -- instead of the official one.

If you're thinking about lying about an unpopular patch applied into the game, or hiding it, realize that you're better off communicating about it than risking losing the trust of your community. The companies who lie to their customers are the ones that underestimate the power of community, and it never brings anything good.

Rule IV: Don't Underestimate Your Community

The power of a community is both huge and impressive. A common mistake is to underestimate what a community can do for you *or* against you, and therefore not invest enough in community tools and community personnel.

Making this mistake can lead you to miss some of your biggest support when it comes to media, testing, moderation, and many other things. It can also lead to an angry community. You don't want to see 5,000 angry players posting in all the gaming forums they know that you don't care about your community.

Underestimating community also means underestimating players, which can lead to other mistakes, like hiding some of your game's modifications because you think the players won't see it, giving information to a foreign magazine and thinking that the European players won't hear about it, not protecting your game files enough because you think the players won't be able to view (and modify) them, and a number of other problems. The history of video game development is full of mistakes made by people who underestimated their players.

If something is possible, then there will be at least one player within your community who will do it.

Conclusion

A gaming community is a wonderful thing. It's living, growing, changing. It can help you by providing bug reports, feedback, and suggestions about your products. It can help you by spreading your word around the world through the internet, and even more. But it can also react in a manner you won't like.

To help it grow it in a good and productive way, the job of a community manager is to provide tools, entertainment and information to feed the beast, and then keep it alive and active by constant attention.

Everyone realizes that traditional marketing and public relations have changed thanks to the internet. Even so, community management is a newcomer in the media relations family, and all companies will have to adapt.

The community phenomenon is growing and changing with the arrival of new tools and social networks, and online communities have become more and more organized. I won't be surprised when we see a gaming community file a class action on a publisher in a few years.

Placed in the middle of Game support and public relations, community management should be part of all media and marketing plans in the gaming industry.

Focus Groups

Focus group testing is the easiest way to get a Publisher or Software Developer's attention and business for Game Mastering & Support and Community management. It determines independent cross category product opinions, where each product is unique and may require individual focus group conditions. Focus group testing can center on different areas and the scope of test may apply to evaluating use of packaging, marketing or playability and quality focus.

Playability and quality focus group testing centers more deeply on the playability of a product. This type of focus group testing can be separated into three areas: pre-play, play through and post-play analysis. The group is asked to focus on expectations for the title during pre-play analysis, followed by the play through; where intuitiveness, controls, environment (quality of game engine), storyline and replayability are assessed. The post-play analysis allows for in-depth discussion on likes and dislikes within the group, as well as fulfilment level of expectation.

For **marketing focus group testing**, a shorter time is devoted to product play through, with more attention devoted to overall game concept, presentation and initial impressions and marketability of the game. The focus group is asked to play through the product on a limited basis and compare pre and post-play opinions.