Community, Storytelling, and Play: Making and Breaking Rituals in Destiny 2

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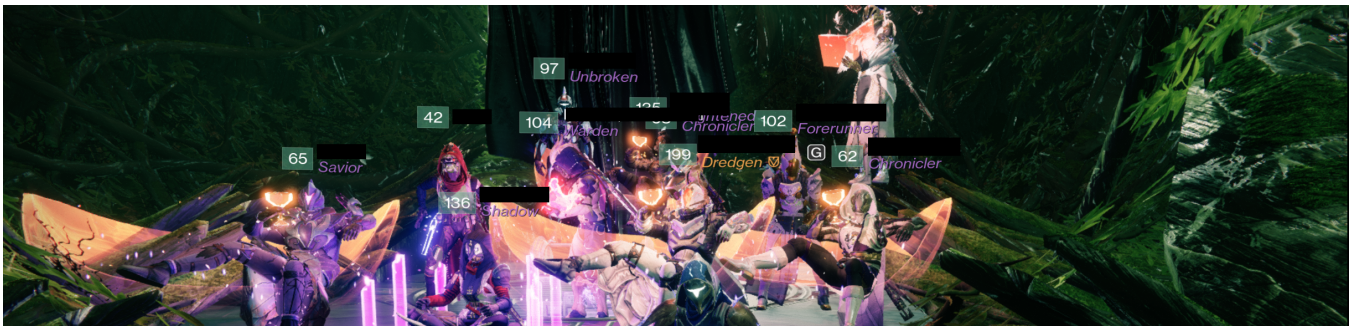


Figure 1: 12 Guardians celebrating victory after finishing a raid with 6 more players than you're supposed to in Destiny 2.

ABSTRACT

Modern video game development relies increasingly on live service models and storytelling, putting strain on developer-player interactions and community management, the success of which is key to the success of such games. In this paper we report on a 2.5-year ethnography study on the Destiny player community, specifically on how players and developers interact and communicate about the game, and how is this interaction is affected by and affects ongoing rituals and storytelling in that game.

Our findings indicate that rituals of play are fundamental. They reinforce the players' collective experiences, created by the ongoing relationship between the players and developers. Players test and break boundaries of rituals, and developers continually adjust and experiment with those boundaries in turn. Our findings show that developers create positive feedback loops from the community when they lean into creativity efforts and boundary-breaking from players, and use storytelling directly as a community management tool.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems** → **Massively multiplayer online games**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Ethnographic studies**; • **Software and its engineering** → *Interactive games.*



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KEYWORDS

online communities, narrative, ritual, community management, ethnography, developer interaction, perennial games, Destiny

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1 INTRODUCTION

In modern video games, there has been a simultaneous rise of concurrent development through live-service games or early access and a rise in the importance, frequency, and quality of storytelling. While these two phenomenae are sometimes separate, perennial [93] games like League of Legends [130], Genshin Impact [110], or Destiny [24, 25] showcase examples where storytelling and live development happen simultaneously. Players are both playing these games on a daily or weekly basis, and engaging with their narrative, establishing community belonging [168], fandoms [71, 78], and social spaces [103, 118]. The online communities that form around these kinds of games are influential to the lives of millions of people, who form life-long social bonds and have formative experiences. However, while there is much research on games and storytelling [51, 54, 77, 80, 84, 136, 137] and on live-service games [6, 16, 47, 49, 102, 122, 158, 166], there is less research on storytelling *in* live-service games. Traditionally, live-service games like MMOs were seen as antithetical to storytelling [81, 90, 97, 102], yet modern games showcase an opposite trend: More emphasis on storytelling and characters, and it is arguably instrumental to their success [63, 93, 131]. Storytelling continues to be an all-important part of human life, and as the modern media landscape has shifted towards subscriptions and services, live-service games are some of

the premier media forms to experiment with storytelling through a long-form structure. It is pivotal that we understand how this storytelling affects the lives of its players and its developers going forward.

With a story told live through over months and years, the storytelling of perennial, live-service games function through repetition and rituals [93, 94, 126]. The new expansions and seasons and patches of a game like Destiny 2 generally fall in expected patterns, giving players new in-game activities and story events, and are supported by weekly blogs, short stories, or other communications from the developers outside the game, which gives players something to expect throughout each week. It is within this repetitive structure that the story of a game like Destiny is told, and through, between and beside this the community interacts with each other and with the developers. Developers have the chance to see live reactions to each story beat and give insights into every moment of the game, and tease upcoming events through their social media presence, which will affect what players know the experience is, will be, and can be.

From a player's perspective, it has never been easier to talk directly to individual developers, give feedback, and discuss the narrative. And from a developer's perspective, it has never been more instantaneous to learn what players think about recent changes, for both good and ill, as the many examples of toxic online behavior towards developers can showcase [1, 45, 82, 91, 148]. The rise in community management, which has become an increasingly important role across giant AAA games like Destiny 2 [25] and indie hits like Cult of the Lamb [107, 152], shows how developers put strong on emphasis building and supporting their communities before, during and after development. And while industrial knowledge is quickly developing on best practices of community management [33, 62, 148, 152, 160, 161], there are still many open questions on how community management and live developer interaction affect the experience of players.

It is at this intersection of storytelling and community-developer interactions that this paper sits. As players engage with perennial storytelling and repetitive, ritual play, and developers continuously evolve that experience, each affect the other in real time. This is an inescapable part of the experience for both parties and the research question of this paper is thus *"How do players and developers interact and communicate about a perennial game, and how is this interaction affected by and affecting the ongoing rituals and storytelling in that game?"*. Our contribution is an increased understanding of how rituals of play communities are created and broken and how this leads to positive and negative effects for the community and the developers. This in turn, is an important component of how they as an online community tell and experience stories. This builds towards an increased understanding of how online communities engage with narrative and play in live-service games, and how online communities create rituals through play.

To explore these questions, we conducted a 32-month long online ethnographic study of the Destiny community, surveying and participating in player and developer interactions across the game and social media such as Twitter, Twitch, Reddit, and Discord in the period of December 2020-August 2023. This methodology was chosen for its ability to draw out an in-depth, nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of a community [7, 15, 16, 35, 116, 122, 128, 129, 158]. Through this, we explore how players of Destiny play within and beyond the rituals of the game, how the developers play with expectation, and how both use storytelling to play with each other.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Perennial Games

This work is framed from the lens of perennial games. Perennial games is a term coined by Larsen and Carstensdottir [93, 94] for long-running, on-going "live-service" games, that describes them closer to how they are experienced as stories, rather than describing their distribution. A perennial game is perpetual, temporally continuous, and has a universal chronicle of events maintained by the audience and the authors [93]. Games such as World of Warcraft [14], League of Legends [130] or Destiny (2) [24, 25] are examples of perennial games. While the term is recent, considerable effort has gone into studying games that would classify as perennial games, while not explicitly referred to as such.

A key example of this is the antropological and design work on MMOs from the early 2000s, done with a strong desire to view MMOs as social spaces and sites of ethnography [7, 9, 15, 16, 83, 116, 122, 158]. Researchers studied the social aspects of these games [31, 38, 102], how communities are built and maintained [9, 96, 150], how these virtual worlds impact identity [40, 40, 52, 75] and their spiritual aspects [5, 58, 138]. Some saw major challenges for authored storytelling in MMOs, such as repetition and lack of causality [9, 81, 90, 97], leading many to dismiss its narrative potential, instead focusing on player-driven, emergent storytelling [15, 66, 67, 120, 122]. Much modern work on MMOs and other perennial games does not stray far from this [8, 65, 75, 81, 106, 138], with a few exceptions [69, 127, 144]. An emphasis has been placed on these worlds as *real* [58, 90], yet they also contain fictional elements, which creates a tension [150]. Krzywinska [90] and Larsen & Carstensdottir [94] offer a framing of perennial storytelling as "myth", which helps alleviate some of the issues with repetition and persistence that made storytelling seem difficult.

Following the anthropological boom, online studies and ethnography is seeing use as a method in games studies. We see examples of researchers studying community through reddit conversations [63, 70, 101, 104]. Outside of games, ethnographies in online communities are also becoming more and more common. Through various monikers like "netnography" [88] or virtual ethnography [16], researchers have adapted ethnographic methods to online spaces with much success [7, 15, 16, 35, 116, 122, 158]. In HCI, researchers such as Ringland et al has done online ethnographies of the BTS ARMY and the AutCraft communities [128, 129].

2.1.1 Rituals of perennial games. Perennial games like Destiny functions through repetitive, communal activities, as players enact, re-enact and retell stories with and for and by themselves, which creates rituals within and outside the game [12, 94]. Ritual has been both connected to myth [115, 135, 145] and play [73, 126], and this relationship between ritual, games, and communal storytelling practices in perennial games has been explored [12, 126]. The rituals of play are manifold, and often express themselves in recurring, expected patterns of play and organized activities such as raids [35] and seasonal events [90, 126]. Rettberg compares the recurring

events in a game like World of Warcraft to real-life ritual events such as weddings and funerals as players will experience them many times yet have shifting relationships to over time [126].

In media and communication studies, ritual has long been a powerful framing. James Carey identified ritual as a second mode of communication different from transmission [29], aiming towards the maintenance of society over time (rather than messages over space). Inspired by Durkheim, Goffman, Turner and others, numerous scholars such as Couldry [41], Silverstone [147], Larsen [95] and Rothenbuhler [132] have investigated how everyday media usage is experienced ritually. Couldry introduced the term "media rituals" to describe the ways media influences social life [41]. Rituals are described as patternized actions or performance [132] that not only describe social order but "naturalize" and "legitimize" it [41]. In modern scholarship, scholars like Trillò et al. [162], Burgess et al. [27], and Gibbs et al. [59] have expanded this term to include "social media rituals" . Trillò et al. define this as "typified communicative practices on social media that formalize and express shared values" [162]. Turner identified that modern rituals were more sporadic and characterized by playful experimentation [95]. This understanding of rituals is decidely useful in perennial games, too, as they are also rituals of interaction, experimentation and practice, mediated through games yet, like Couldry already identified in 2002 [41], expand across many other media.

2.2 Player-developer interactions

An inevitable part of a community's interactions with each other is influenced by how the game is made. For example, Taylor describes how changes in Everquest's market structure changed how players would trade, creating less social spaces because of a more accessible market-board [158]. MacCallum-Stewart discusses how changes to the narrative are read by players [102], and Gursoy looks at patch notes as an artifact that developers use to communicate changes, expectations and storytelling to players[65]. Others show how impactful changes to the game affects the community [122, 144], and this can lead to volatile community reactions [91, 148].

Reversely, players' actions impact how developers design the game going forward. Chen and others [35, 108, 157] show how modding changes play, and how ultimately developers have to adjust their design to accommodate for or work against such modifications. Gustafson et al. shares insights on how players knowing too much about the system can "spoil" the fun for them are also relevant in this context [66, 67]. Outside video games, Jenkins discusses how the leaker community around the TV Show "Survivor" turned spoiling the fun into a game [79]. The 2020 phenomenon Blaseball [105, 159] is a strong example of ongoing developer-community interaction as well, through its live storytelling moments and adaptations to unexpected player behavior. The work on co-authorship [89] is relevant too, as community members in Blaseball were part of co-authoring story details the developers later took into account. This kind of player-made storytelling is present in other perennial games [56, 72, 114, 141], and especially in more emergence-focused games such as Second Life [8, 15], EVE Online [64], and earlier MMOs and MUDs [85, 86, 149].

Koster and Bartles's reflections [9, 10, 85, 86] on the early MUDs and virtual worlds, GDC talks from developers of perennial and live-service games [87, 143, 163], and the recent Polaris report [39] all show the many challenges and opportunities in responding to player activity. These challenges, and especially those concerning the interactions between developers and players are best highlighted through the role of the community manager.

2.3 Community Management

Almost all games today form communities around them, even single player games [133]. Developers have thus found a need for communicating with, managing, and facilitating that community. This is not new. From the earliest online games such as Ultima Online or Habitat [86, 112], the developers noticed the need for a role to "manage" the ongoing concerns of players, to tell people about changes and respond to requests, before the term "community management" had been established [44, 86]. The formalized name comes from the business world as a role meant to build and maintain brand loyalty in a world increasingly relying on social media [44, 45]. Video games have co-opted this term, to describe much more than marketing, acting as a mediator between the interests of the community and the developer[1]. As the work by deWinter and others show [44, 45, 82, 134], a community manager needs to listen to and empathize with a diverse and sometimes conflicting community of players, moderate discussions, funnel generalized insights and feedback from the community back to the developers, be an agent for the community within the development team, and provide insight into ongoing development back to the community. They are often the first line of defense for player feedback and are thus often the most vulnerable to harassment, toxicity and negative community behavior [2, 3, 28, 36, 46, 164]. Yet, they are often hired with little formal training relevant to the job, brought in from the community itself [171], forced to learn by doing, and unprepared for the emotional toll it demands [45, 82, 171]. As deWinter highlights, much of this labor is affecting emotional, social labor, and has been predominantly feminized, neglected, and undervalued. As both the interviews from Sparrow et al. [1] and deWinter [45] show, community managers have been shown apathy and neglect by development studios, who devalue the work emotional labor they undertake, while also receiving the brunt of the outrage from players. Yet, community managers have long been known to be vital for game development [45, 74, 133, 169].

Laato and Rauti [91] suggests that community outrage arises because of much deeper reasons than dissatisfaction with a product, because of the social ties that are created through such a community. Also supported by others [60, 168], players gain a strong sense of belonging with a video game through its community, and when changes endanger this sense of belonging, people lash out (and do so most directly at social and community managers). However, this belonging is also the reasoning for why community and community management can be so powerful: Players will stick around in games much longer if they have a sense of belonging with its community. A community manager can be a strong part in establishing this sense of belonging, working with the community to improve their experience, and collaboratively helping players make the game

[1]The industry has shown efforts to move away from the term "community management", because of its innacurate description of the actual work. See [160, 161]

better [161]. Yet, as we have seen countless examples of (and will see later in this paper) this belonging can backfire.

2.4 Destiny and its community

This paper focuses on the Destiny community and its developer, Bungie. Destiny[2] is an MMO-FPS by Bungie, released in 2014, with a sequel in 2017, and continuing updates to today (2023) and expected into the future. Destiny's player base has been of interest to the academic community for several years. A series of papers presented analyses of Destiny players' telemetry data to investigate a variety of factors, such as motivation [139], player profiling [47, 151] and player networks [124]. Others have gathered Twitter conversations or matchmaking data, to understand the influence of out-of-game information [48, 98, 140, 166, 167], or the impact of influencers [98, 123]. Further, Destiny has been examined in terms of identity [32, 76] (grouping it with other work on MMOs and identity), economics [111], and competitive multiplayer [125, 146]. The storytelling aspects of Destiny has been examined in the context of defining perennial games [93, 94], and canonicity [92]. The aim of this paper is to build upon the previous work on Destiny with an in-depth ethnography, studying the qualitative experience of the community. Destiny is a strong case study because of how integrated its storytelling is with its play. The story of Destiny is intended to operate on a temporal scale matching the real, physical world [93], with a fictional year in Destiny taking a full calendar year to unfold. Destiny attempts to have fictional explanations for typical "game-y" aspects, such as respawning, player versus player combat (PvP), and teleportation. Destiny has referenced actions of the players in the fiction, even innocuous activities, such as dancing or idling in a social hub [18]. Repetitious elements such as recurring missions sometimes have an in-world reasoning behind them [19], and bugs and exploits has been given narrative explanations after the fact [53, 56, 61, 72, 117]. These repetitious elements are fundamental to the rituals of Destiny, and how they are created and maintained by the community is the subject of this paper's study.

3 METHODS

This paper will report the findings from an ethnographic study of the Destiny community, following work in HCI, games studies and anthropology [7, 15, 16, 116, 122, 128, 129, 158]. Data was collected through the community and developer's posts on public social media, such as Twitter, Reddit, Twitch and YouTube, as well as public media shared by the developer on the same platforms and their own website[3]. The primary methods employed in this study was participant observation, which was chosen for its ability to obtain rich descriptions of community behavior [16, 34, 122]. The first author was responsible for all data collection as well as primary work on the analysis. As a Destiny player and part of the general community, the first author had insight into the emerging phenomenae and customs of the community. As will be clear throughout this methods section, the researchers in this project take an abductive [17] stance, and accept that we as researchers stand within our research process, being an active part in constructing the data [34]. As such, this study was done with the goal of supporting a community experience and developer interaction, enlightening how social interactions affect the story experience, while making sure to protect all parties involved.

3.1 Data Collection

The first author conducted the ethnographic fieldwork for this manuscript from December 2020 - August 2023. Over the period of approximately 32 months across diferent social media, the first author collected data through participant observations, including participating in Destiny community activities, capturing screen shots for personal reference, and writing field-notes on everyday practices and events as they occurred on Twitter, Twitch, Reddit, YouTube, Discord servers, and in-game (see Table 1). Following the nature of the various platforms, engagement varied in activity. Much engagement was more passive or sporadic, e.g. watching Twitch livestreams and reading chat, engaging with Twitter and Reddit posts, and watching YouTube videos. In-game engagement was done through actively playing the game with several groups, predominantly smaller Destiny sub-communities already known to the author beforehand.

Due to the nature of playing as a part of the field-work, this work was also inspired by autoethnographic methods of data collection [68, 99], relying on the reflexive consideration of the first author's own experience during this time, as well as that of the larger community. This method of "first-person" research, has gained some traction in HCI communities [68, 100].

Time spent on each platform varied based on current events and community activity. Twitter, Twitch and Discord was engaged with approximately 1-4 hours a day, each, whereas Reddit, and Developer blogs had more weekly interactions (approx 1-3 hours a week). Playing the game, likewise depended on the current events in the game. During new expansions the author might spend as much as 40-80 hours over a week, during weekly seasonal updates it might vary from 2-20 hours a week, whereas during downtime, there might have been no engagement in-game at all. The first author, being a player of Destiny and a member of the community, engaged in a number of activities on each platform, such as watching live streams and videos of followed and recommended creators (from the "Home" or recommended pages), reading blogs and twitter posts, from both the developers and community members. See table 1 for full list of activities.

Due to this shifting nature of game engagement, the protocols of data collection would change depending on the activity of the community and developer updates to the game. As a long-time player, the first author has intimate knowledge of the cadence of Destiny's release schedule and used this to inform when and how data collection was handled. The extended period of ethnography meant it was not feasible to maintain the same intense level of community involvement every day and thus activity would wane in periods, but the understanding of the community and passive engagement through social media and friend-groups (whom they would often play with even in periods of downtime) would make sure to keep an ad-hoc presence and thus follow the pulse of the community. During periods of intense activity, the first author would write

[2]We discuss Destiny [24] and Destiny 2 [25] as a single game. The story is a direct continuation, and they exist in the same narrative world, so there is little reason to distinguish between them other than distribution. Due to the time period of this study, we mostly discuss Destiny 2.

[3]https://www.bungie.net/7/en/News

daily memos and save regular screenshots of the community talking about or playing through events. During less active periods, the author would keep an eye out for surprising events and watch a stream every week or so and note relevant details, but write less frequent memos following the lower cadence of the community. What data was recorded evolved, focusing on new developments and activities within the community and game. The first months of the study were focused on open exploration of how players engaged with the storytelling of Destiny. Over the course of the next year the questions of developer interaction and rituals formed from the data, and the collection shifted to focus on how players talked about the storytelling and interacted with developers as a part of these rituals. The type of data collected were typically Twitter/Reddit posts and comments, screenshots and notes of YouTube videos and Twitch streams (including chat messages). For video content, the author would take notes while watching, noting important phrasing or when players reflected on the storytelling or development.

It is important to note that both Twitter, Twitch, and YouTube, the "home" pages display content based on algorithmical selection, both from those a user follows and those they do not. Therefore, content was a mix of the first author's intentional follows and many others not directly followed by the first author, and thus the list of followed creators should not be considered exhaustive, nor do they cover the potential comments or chat-messages written by other users. Furthermore, who the first author actively played with organically shifted over time, as other people would come and go and engagement with the game would change. This has had an impact on the data gathered, as conversations with close friends would naturally relate to the game and community at large, e.g. by mentioning community creators or events happening in the game while talking privately. The first author is no well-known member of the larger community and is not publicly a community creator for Destiny. Yet, they are an admin of a small Destiny community, and a member of several others, they play the game and discuss it with friends, and actively follow developments, but have no greater following on social media, nor frequently posts publicly about the game. They play the game at a fairly high level, doing end-game content as it releases (has done Day 1 raids and dungeons, for example), yet rarely pursues the extraneous difficulty the game can offer (such as Grandmaster Nightfalls or Solo Dungeons).

3.2 Data Analysis

During analysis, data from the first author's field notes, memos, screenshots were analyzed together. The first author used an iterative, abductive [17] approach where emergent phenomena were identifed, named, and categorized, inspired by the constructivist lens [34].

Throughout the process of data analysis and reporting, the other authors of the paper and members of the first author's close Destiny communities checked and verified the conclusions being drawn by the first author, in accordance to a member-checking process [11, 30].

The data analysis started with looking at the variety collected data through the initial question of "how do Destiny players and developers talk about the game with each other?", with key focus on the storytelling. From this, several key features of their interaction was extracted and used for further analysis. The data was coded for how developer interactions shape the game and story experience and how players interacted with the game and the developers. After this, the first author used thematic analysis to identify key themes of developer interactions and play, and it was through this the key theme of Performing Rituals was discovered, as well as supporting themes on story teasing, the impact of spoilers and leaks, playing with the lore, and reacting together. The data was then reviewed and organized with these themes in mind and analyzed for indicators of ritual construction and conflicts, and how conversations and actions shaped or dismantled those rituals. Qualitative Displays [42] were constructed to visually understand the relationships between players and developers, and see how they interact, based on the data.

Following best practices, the first author was continuously self-reflexive of their position as a member-researcher, and position during the analysis, being aware of the social contexts and constructivist creation of interpretation during data collection and analysis [34]. The first author discussed aspects of their memos and data analysis with other researchers during analysis.

3.3 Ethics, Limitations, and Positionality

Several important decisions were made in regard to the ethics and presentation of the data in this work to prioritize community safety. Due to the various nature of the communities followed, different degrees of consideration for privacy needed to be upheld. Publicly, well-known community creators Twitter posts needed to be treated differently than private conversations in private spaces. The work primarily relied on publicly available data, and the work is exempt from ethics board approval because it involves ethnographic observations of public social media data. What was not publicly available data was not recorded, and only described in the first author's memos as daily self-reflections and autoethnographic experiences, yet never mentioning names or revealing details. Formal interviews were not conducted for this study for this reason, to keep the focus on publicly available data. However, it should be noted that this is a limitation of this study and future work in this area would be bolstered by conducting in-depth interviews with players and developers.

Transparency towards members of private communities was essential, and all private spaces the first author engaged with during the ethnography was told about their status as a researcher prior to any data collection, and updated on the research progress. Furthermore, when public data or new publications were available, this was shared. This kind of transparency is unfeasible everywhere due to the breadth and ad hoc nature of the platforms studied for public data, and so no attempt was done on public platforms to announce their status as an observer, as is the nature of online social platforms. Yet, anonymity is kept throughout this paper for all data, and all conversations and direct quotes have been anonymized and paraphrased, unless otherwise noted. In the case of public personalities and community creators, anonymization has not been attempted in places where relevant content is discussed in the paper, since they present themselves as public figures. All stories and vignettes presented in this paper were derived from the first author's field notes or memos during data collection.

Table 1: Table showing the various platforms used by the Destiny community and the developers, listing what they each use the platform for, and the type of content present.

Platform	Community function	Developer activity	Content types
In-game	Playing the game (primary mode of engagement)	Developing future content, playing	Video Game
Twitter	Discussing current topics, airing feelings on current state of the game, interacting with devs	News, marketing, announcements, server updates, clarifications, questions for players	Posts, videos, gifs, images
YouTube	Guides, Video essays, thoughts and feedback	Trailers, marketing documentaries	Videos, comments
Twitch	Live streams, experiencing new content, live interactions with community creators	Little, Yearly Expansion announcements, in chat	Live streams, chat
Reddit	Community discussions	Mostly passive, occasional posting	Posts, forum discussions
Developer Blog	Reading news	Posting (mostly) weekly updates on new content, patch changes etc.	Blog posts, short stories
Discord	Closer community discussions, grouping with other players, voice chat while playing	Little (servers are usually private)	Chat messageboards and voicechat.

Throughout the research process, the first author considered their own position and reflexivity as a member researcher while writing field notes, memos, and this manuscript, as is standard in ethnographic research [15, 16, 34, 122]. The first author identifies as a Destiny player, fan, and community member, and has been since 2018, and began following Destiny players on Twitch, Twitter and YouTube, before conducting the study. They have played video games their entire life, growing up with online virtual spaces in World of Warcraft and Runescape, and was interested in Destiny before beginning to play it in 2018. The first author also has game development experience, both through studies and professionally, and while they have not worked on a AAA game on the scale of Destiny, they have worked on live development in mobile games and ARGs. They are white, European, and identifies as a straight man, has limited experiences within the community based on cultural constraints and social contexts. The first author's mutuals, whom they played and talked with, can communicate in English, are LGBTQIA inclusive, and are from across Europe and America. It is important to keep this in mind because, as Ringland et al. argues [128], this cultural context affects the data collection since social media like Twitter and YouTube use cultural signifiers as part of their recommendation algorithms, outside the more direct social interactions of sharing content with friends.

A broad limitation of this work in general, thus, is that it does not represent the entire Destiny community overall in any way, but rather the smaller sub-communities the first author was involved in during the time-period of the study. The Destiny community is a large, diverse playerbase, with many contexts, experiences, ways of playing, and values that cannot be described as a unified body of people and no one individual can be said to speak for the entire community. Therefore, when the paper heretofore refers to the "Destiny community" or "Destiny players", we are talking about a subset of the total playerbase, who might have other perspectives and ways of engaging with the developers than captured here. It should also be mentioned there are likely a large group of players that do not interact on social media or with the developers in any meaningful, public way, and thus their perspectives are not reflected in the data. Likewise, Bungie is a large company and no single developer can be said to be responsible or talking for the entire game, company or franchise, and are not treated as such here. When we describe developers throughout this paper, we mean everyone at Bungie who do work for the game, including less direct development such as community managers, social media managers, QA, marketing, PR etc. At Bungie, there are different teams for community management and social media [134], yet they will here be discussed more together as it is difficult to ascertain from the outside which department has done what. It is also important to note that many Destiny developers are players themselves. When this paper describes "developers" and "players" it is describing when people do those activities, not whether they are also a developer. Thus a developer can be in the capacity of a player, talking to a developer, and this is a player-to-developer interaction. Throughout the period of the ethnography, there were reported instances of people who were previously players becoming developers and vice versa.

A final limitation is due to the quickly evolving nature of the subject matter. The ethnography only covers a limited time period in the community and this period is impacted by a range of external and internal factors, which continues to impact the community afterwards, such as employee layoffs by Bungie on October 30th 2023, which included several social media employees and community managers being let go from the company [142, 155]. This happened after the period of ethnography ended, and is not present in the data.

4 FINDINGS

In this section, we highlight how Destiny, Destiny's community and developers create rituals and patterns of play, play with these patterns to achieve or dismantle narrative effects, and how they communicate these patterns with each other. First, we will describe how the rituals are created through design and feedback, then show how rituals get disrupted through glitches and spoilers, and finally report how the communication between players and developers help support and break down these rituals of play.

4.1 Creating Rituals

A game like Destiny creates a number of rituals for its players through its design, that are reinforced through play and development.

4.1.1 Weekly Resets. The first and most prominent of rituals is the "Weekly Reset": Every Tuesday morning (Pacific Time) the game "resets". This is when new expansions, seasons, missions and events are released, and old ones are refreshed, allowing players to earn their awards again. A Reset can bring with it new features surprises, hidden secrets such as the "Vexcalibur" mission, where players had to find and solve a minor puzzle to unlock a secret mission. Yet, most Resets bring expected, familiar activities. Every week in a live season will release a new story episode[4], or a week might introduce a recurring week-long event (such as *"Iron Banner"*) or seasonal events, which appear in specific weeks during the year (such as Christmas or Halloween). This weekly reset was likely created partly for development and technical reasons, giving developers a time they can reset the servers, introduce downtime, and upload patches at an expected pace. Yet, it impacts how the game is played. The expected weekly cadence creates a strong ritual around "reset time" as players always know when new things are being added to the game. Every week has the potential to introduce something new and players will come together to play on Reset day to see what is there.

The weekly reset sits within larger ritual structures, as Destiny 2 releases 1 expansion and 4 seasons each year. You can see Figure 2 for an overview of these releases. Players will plan for upcoming weeks, scheduling in advance to organize play for new events or when it is a good week for farming[5]. Before a new expansion, the most active players prepare by stocking up on resources and clearing out their inventory space. This is known as "vault cleaning", and becomes a popular trend on YouTube and Twitch before each new expansion, as streamers prepare what equipment they bring for the new expansion, sharing with viewers what they decide to keep and why. This serves as advice, but also entertainment, because players will often keep various things in their vault for sentimental, embarrassing, or nonsensical reasons.

As an expansion releases, players rush to share best practices, build guides, and new damage numbers on social media. This culminates in the "Day 1" Raid Race, the race to see who completes the new raid first. Outside of the many players who try themselves, Day 1 is also the biggest streaming event in Destiny, where the game attracts over 500k viewers [50], cheering the players on, and excitedly watching the new spectacle.

4.1.2 The TWAB. Another key ritual is the release of the "TWAB" (This Week at Bungie)[6] every Thursday. The TWAB is a news blog where the developers give insight into new features, balance changes, and otherwise keep the community informed about the current progress in the game. These changes were often so sought after that players would frequently ask the community managers and developers when the TWAB was going to be published on Thursdays, leading to the meme "Where TWAB", and streamers would wait and read it out loud with their viewers. Players will share excitedly with each other when it was a "meaty" TWAB with a lot of new, important information, or be disappointed when the TWAB had little information to share, until next week when the anticipation would begin anew. To showcase just how much it became a meme, "Where TWAB" became self-referential as the developers themselves began asking the question before it had been released, and Bungie later also sold a *"Where TWAB?!"* T-shirt on their online store [26], with some joking conspiratorial designs, leaning in on the joke.

4.1.3 The Danger of Predictability. The formulaicness of these rituals is a topic of discussion in the community. These formulas have been developed over time as the game has changed. While Destiny's release cadence has changed much since 2014, the seasonal model which started in 2018 has been fairly stable since then. In 2018 it was unclear to players what a season entailed, whereas after 20+ seasons, it is much more known what a season can be, and what the developers can feasibly make for a season. This has benefits, as players know what to expect and can plan ahead, yet it also has downsides. With each season, what came with it was predictable. Many players will bring up fond memories of the secrets from the early days of Destiny or Destiny 2 as highlights of their playtime, such as the well-regarded "Whisper"-mission. This made the game feel mysterious and endless, as if new things could always happen. Contrasted to an expected release cycle, where players know how many new missions are coming in a season, this sense of mystery is slowly eroded, with only sporadic, occasional surprises.

Another example of this that showcases the developer communication even more clearly is the seasonal roadmaps. In the period 2018-2021, Bungie would release a roadmap with each season, similar to many other live-service games. This roadmap would detail what features would launch during the season, on the level of new gameplay activities, weapons, etc. Story information was not conveyed in the roadmap, but new activities and weapon releases were. However, even this backfired. For Season of Dawn (see Figure 3), a roadmap detailed a quest for a new Exotic[7] weapon, whereas a secret event named "Corridors of Time", a giant, community-based ARG-like puzzle [55] was a surprise. The community was very excited, wondering what solving the big puzzle could lead to. When they learned it ended with them getting the exotic they had already been promised instead of something new, they were disappointed.

[4]Readers unfamiliar with Destiny's structure can think of a Destiny season like a season of TV, with a new episode of story releasing each week for 4-10 weeks.
[5]Playing the same activity repeatedly in a short span of time to accrue specific rewards.
[6]This was in 2023 renamed to "This Week in Destiny" (TWID), likely to differentiate from the new non-Destiny projects Bungie are releasing in the future. However, the name "TWAB" is still prevalent in the community, and the predominant name used during the ethnography and thus is the name used here.
[7]"Exotic" weapons in Destiny are the rarest, most unique kinds of weapons.

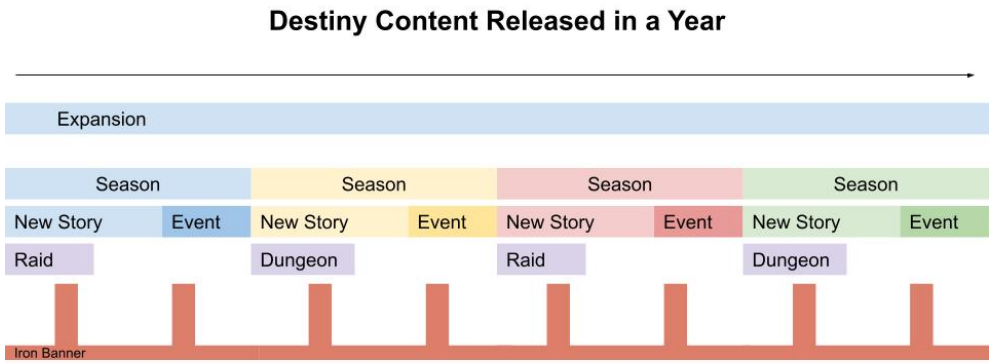


Figure 2: An overview of a typical year in a modern Destiny release cycle. Expansions are released yearly, with 4 seasons quarterly in between, each bringing with them some new story events, activities and either a raid or a dungeon. Seasonal events happen during seasons, often after the story events are over. Other smaller events, such as Iron Banner happen concurrently, two weeks per season. Destiny 2 has followed a schedule roughly similar to this since 2018 and through 2023, although it is likely to change in the future.

Many players today look back on this event fondly, but some remember the sour taste of the reward, still. This balance between expectation and reality is what Bungie is straddling when they release a roadmap, as they want players to know what to expect but also want them to be surprised. After this and similar situations, Bungie has stopped supplying roadmaps to the players, leaving the contents of each season unknown until it happens. Still now they are experimenting with how much to tell players beforehand. For Season of the Haunted, in Summer 2022, they told the players nothing until one day before it launched, not even the name. Players had grown accustomed to at least a trailer one week before and some teasing through the TWAB about upcoming mechanics or gameplay changes, but this time they said nothing. Some players found this maddening, wanting to know how to prepare for it, whereas others found it refreshing and exciting. Other seasons, such as the Season of the Deep had its name revealed over 3 months prior, showing that the developers are still experimenting with what information to reveal when.

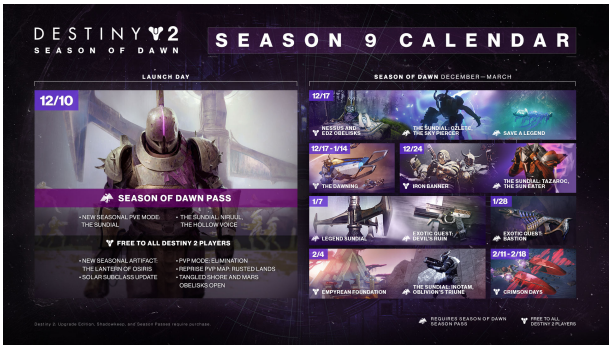


Figure 3: An example roadmap from a Destiny 2 season. This shows the roadmap for Season of Dawn, which ran December 2019-March 2020.

4.2 Breaking Rituals

This section will discuss how the rituals of play break down as players find ways to circumvent the intended patterns of play. An overview of player behavior and changes it causes for development relevant for this section can be seen in Table 2, showing how various elements players do causes changes by the developers.

Previous work has discussed how Destiny's storytelling structure is bound to the real world and how its cyclical rituals are a part of that structure [12]. The fictional passing of time is meant to match real time, as years in the fictional world take real years to unfold. Every action of any player, thus, can be construed as being fictionally what is happening in the world. The game highlights how Destiny players actually play through in-game text, with references to Guardians dancing in the social hubs or calling them "loot-hungry" in the lore. [18]. The story events of Destiny are tied to the ritual structure of the game, with each new story event happening within the cyclical nature of seasons and expansions, while simultaneously allowing players to play and replay the content as they will. This rigidity in the ritual can lead to the story making less sense [94], as one can question why everything important in the Destiny universe seems to happen on a Tuesday and wondering if any fictional character at one point was going to realize this.

4.2.1 Bugs and Glitches. As digital software the artifice of the fictional world often breaks down because of bugs or glitches. Servers have downtime and technical limitations which can cause the game to change involuntarily. When possible, players and developers often try to incorporate these into the fiction of the game, or make fun of how the fiction begins to break down once this happens. When it was briefly possible for players to enter raids with 12 players, which is otherwise only possible with 6 (see figure 1), there were jokes about how the fictional enemies were reacting to seeing this increase in Guardians. This event too, while technically a glitch, was seen as a highlight for many players, as it allowed a new, fun form of play that broke the expectations of what a raid was. Entering a

Table 2: Table showing the various things players do that disrupts the intended rituals, and how developers visibly react. This is not showing the developers' internal reactions, merely how their reactions are shown publically in the game over time.

What Players Do	Find spoilers and leaks	Find glitches and explots	Create strategies and builds	Make story theories
How Developers react	Attempts to prevent	Fixes	Adjusts Balance	Plays on, teases for
How the game changes	Dismantles intended effect. Further Effort spent on prevention. Less hidden material in the future.	Changes how the game is played. Momentary upending of balance. Creating unique moments. Causes disruption in play.	Optimal strategies are changed, changes how players achieve their goals.	Subtly, if at all. Not visibly.

raid with 12 players trivialized many of its encounters, and led to many moments of chaotic fun. Bungie let this bug persist for a few weeks to let players have fun, before eventually patching it before new content was released. Bungie has done similar actions with weapons that were too strong in PvP, leading to everyone using it. Instead of rushing out a patch, they declared it to be an event and gave players an emblem[8] for participating, after which they would fix it. One of the most infamous guns in Destiny is "Telesto", which has caused bugs at least 26 times [53], causing it to become its own meme, with players quick to blame Telesto for every new bug discovered. The developers got in on the joke in November 2022, and created a small in-game event where the gun ostensibly gained sentience, as popup windows appeared from the perspective of the gun "talking" to the players, spreading outside the game to the official Destiny Twitter account and press releases [22, 117]. The Loot Cave [56, 72] is also a prime example of a bug or exploit becoming part of the fictional reality of the game, first in a small, light-hearted way, then more seriously.

4.2.2 Spoilers and Events Out of Order. A more critical example of rituals breaking down the storytelling is how spoilers are handled. As a game telling a linear story, unfolding in real time, it could be said to function somewhat more like history [93, 94], yet players tend to want for an experience of traditional fiction, regardless. As new narrative episodes release, the community will maintain "grace periods" before being willing to discuss events openly on social media, similar to the release of a new TV episode. Public websites work around this too, using Automod on Reddit to warn about spoilers, warning up front about spoilers in YouTube videos, and the community lore archive Ishtar[9] marks new lore entries with a spoiler warning. As time passes, this spoiler marking falls away, and players adjust what they consider talking about and not. Players will prod on whether a certain topic is available for spoiling yet or obfuscate information. As new seasons or expansions are released, older events become more foundational and players will discuss them more openly. This especially is true about content that is no longer available in the game, which is treated much more akin to historical events, without any considerations that a player might not have experienced it (as is it no longer possible to experience first-hand).

However, saying that Destiny's storytelling is linear is only true under ideal circumstances. If a player keeps up every week with new events, the story is told as intended. However, if a player skips a season, or does not play it every week as it releases, parts of the game's ritual storytelling might break down. As an example, after skipping an entire season and joining in the next, the opening cutscene for the prior season might still play when launching the game, giving the player outdated information. New raids commonly cause a change in the world when they are completed for the first time, yet this change is immediate for all players, even players who have not completed the raid yet, leading them to see events "out of order", and sometimes being spoiled about the contents of the raid.

A more intended example of spoilers is seen in the presence of marketing material. Players, for example, knew the pivotal instigating incident of the *Witch Queen* or *Forsaken* expansions, 6 months before it "happened" in the fiction of Destiny because of trailers. When this played out in the opening missions, it was then not to any players' surprise, even if the characters in the game had to react to it fictionally for the very first time. However, it is clear Bungie is intentional in what they show in their expansion trailers, as there were still several twists in the story for players to discover in each expansion, none if which had been spoken about beforehand through official channels.

How players deal with this varies. As a large part of the story experience is communal, players might want to know what is happening if they are unable to play, and thus intentionally "spoil" themselves through friends or content creators to keep up with the current conversation. Players, crucially, are aware of this, and are able to appropriate and reason about a story event's "proper" place in the narrative arc, despite when they experience it. Many players will acknowledge that they saw things "out of order" or "got spoiled" or are seeing events that happened in the past. While they may lament that this happened, they are nonetheless able to comprehend the narrative, and these issues are thus rarely treated as negatives by the players. This, though, does commonly require help from others, and it is not difficult to imagine a single, disconnected player being confused if they are not paying attention to the larger conversation.

[8]Emblems are small visual badges a character wears on their inventory and party screens, which can be seen by other players.
[9]https://www.ishtar-collective.net/

4.2.3 Leaks and Datamining. As Destiny is a video game on players' harddrives, the data for a new season is stored on their computer weeks before they are supposed to experience it. "Mining" for this data is nothing new, but in Destiny it can be impactful for the general story experience. In the beginning of Season of the Deep, a cutscene meant for week 5 was already on YouTube after week 1. Even if players did not want to see it, the YouTube algorithm might recommend it to them[10]. Some players avoid these leaks at all costs, wanting to experience the story as intended, yet others welcome it, and seek out these data mined revelations, and are eager to learn what they can as soon as it is possible to do so, even before it is supposed to have taken place. It is thus not uncommon in story conversations to check the group's feelings on leaks, or have established boundaries in different spaces (such as Discord channels/forums where leaks are not okay and ones where they are), to accommodate for everyone's preferences.

Players also treat different kinds of leaks independently. A leak that a new weapon is coming is treated differently from the fate of a story character. A player might welcome learning the first but shun the second. Before the Deep Stone Crypt raid, dataminers had discovered large parts of the areas the raid took place in, the names of several unique raid mechanics, and the names of the bosses, all before it was intended. Some welcomed this, wanting to be as prepared as possible, whereas others wanted to experience the new content "blind", knowing nothing beforehand.

The developers tend to not approve of leaks for a variety of reasons. From compromising their data security to ruining carefully set up story pacing, leaks and datamining is often something that undermine Bungie's ability to tell stories in the manner they want. Bungie has mentioned the difficulties of properly encrypting data can be too great to warrant it [4]. Many players worried this meant that secret missions, often seen as highlights, were not going to be present anymore, matching existing worries (see section 4.1.3). For the *Lightfall* expansion raid, the data miners found a model they assumed was for a boss. Yet, when the raid launched, no such boss was found, and the model was entirely unused in the raid. Speculation on why was abundant, and it is a common interpretation within the community that the developers intentionally left this model to lead data miners astray. Yet, the community has misinterpreted developer assets before [37] so it is unknown whether this is accurate.

Bungie's communication and stance on leaks has been clear, and has resulted in bans, even for prominent community members [153].

4.3 Communication between Developers and Players

The community and developers communicate in a variety of ways. The broad overview of communication channels can be see in Table 1, yet how these are used are of interest. This can be seen in Figure 4. Concurrently, and reciprocally, players and developers communicate all the time, both directly through social media, providing feedback or posting news updates, and indirectly through the game, as players behavior affects how the game is made and changes to the game affects behavior.

[10]This happened to the first author, and they heard similar stories from others.

4.3.1 Playing with the Community. Some of the communication from developers to players is of an intentionally playful nature, and this is often where the storytelling overlaps with community relations.

The most notable of these events was when a fictional character from the Destiny universe "overtook" the official Destiny Twitter account, and began speaking in character on the platform [113, 165]. Players responded to these positively, finding it fun when the characters responded, and prompting questions of whether this was "canon" or not, showing players are reflecting on the experience as part of the universe. Another similar incident was when a voice actor spoke in character to a team of players [170]. Another time, Bungie posted a "test" patch note, knowing players would not simply take that at face value, and included playful language in the patch note: *"There are no hidden quests or things being added/changed"* [21], which naturally led players to scour the game for secrets. The Telesto incident, mentioned in section 4.2.1, is another example of this.

Players will also find ways to utilize the rules of the game for play. Every weekend, a character named "Xur" will appear in a random location to sell some rare items. Normally, Xur disappears on Tuesday morning at Reset. However, occasionally, Xur has sold items so rare players will have wanted him longer. Utilizing the unique server-infastructure of Destiny, players devised that they could occupy the instance in which Xur was, and as long as any player was present, Xur would not vanish. Players have, using this method, kept Xur "hostage"[11] for days after he was supposed to disappear.

A final example in an event called *Dares of Eternity*. It was designed for experienced players, yet because of a design oversight, new players would be launched directly into this event without the experience, weaponry or skills to complete it. It took a while for Bungie to fix the issue, and in the meantime, the community to would rally to help the "blueberries"[12], loading into this activity to helping them through it. The developers were quick to support this player-organization as well, granting out an emblem to all players who helped a new player through this activity until they could fix it.

4.3.2 Getting to Know the Developer. As players get used to the rituals of play, they also get used to the style of the developer, and begin to know the quirks of the game and the development. Players talk about the developer more colloquially, saying "bungo pls" when they experience recurring bugs or development mistakes. This is almost to the degree of anthropomorphization, treating the developer holistically as an entity that has agency, talking about how "Bungie does X", how "Bungie doesn't care about Y", or "Bungie is incapable of doing Z". This is despite the fact that there are hundreds of individuals at Bungie, many of whom don't work on the same pieces of the game. This goes for both critique and praise, as praise is often done through highlighting elements that "Bungie does well". There are exceptions to this, e.g. when individual developers showcase a specific contribution, to which players might respond with feedback on that specific element, or when interacting with community managers, to which players give direct feedback.

[11]Players did indeed use the terminology "keeping him hostage" or "kidnapping Xur".
[12]"Blueberries" is the Destiny community's mostly affectionate term for new players.

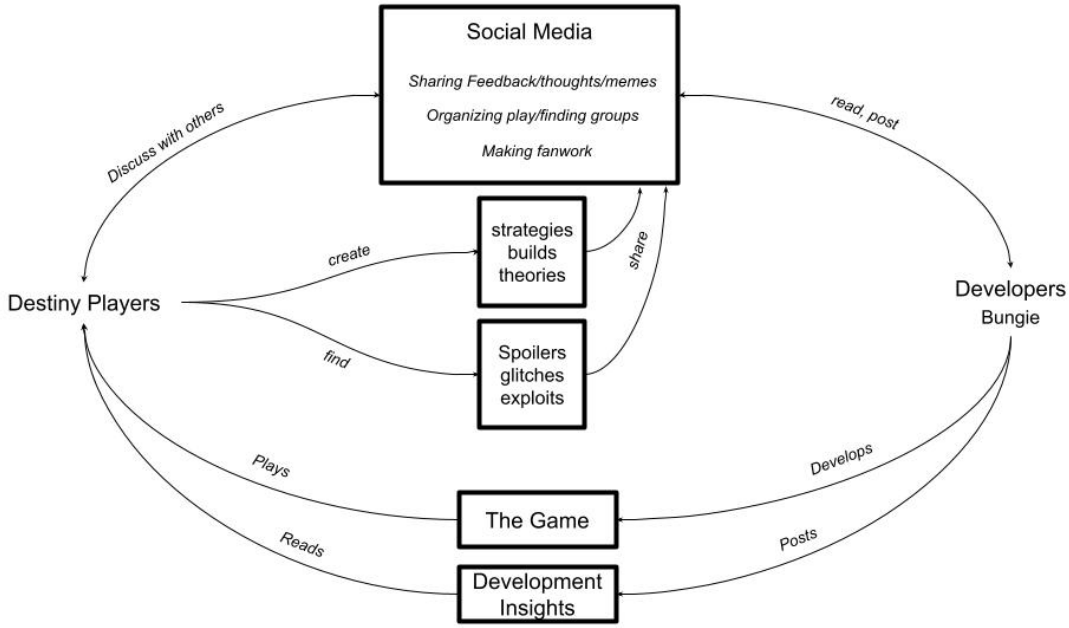


Figure 4: A display of the general relations in the Destiny Community. Various feedback loops exist from the developers and the community. New content in the game is released or shared through developer blogs, and this is consumed (played/read/etc) by the community. Through playing, players find bugs and exploits, and create strategies and theories, which they share with others. There is thus a complete loop for players discussing with themselves, and another larger loop going through the developers.

And while much feedback is in the form of complaints, there is a side to this that is not explicitly negative. Some players have talked about how Destiny is such a well-known game to them they consider it a home, a place they stay in even if it is not in a good state, sticking with Bungie and Destiny like one would a sports team. The knowledge of previous patterns is used to predict future events. Predictions like "we haven't had a Cabal[13] Season in a while" might indicate that one is coming up soon. Another example is how players look at new items in the store for clues for upcoming events, the most notable of this is the release of a gun literally named "Spoiler Alert", which players pieced together teased a future character death. Thus when this gun was re-released in Destiny 2, it brought much fuss [20]. Examples like this show that the awareness is mutual: Both players and developers know that every element is scrutinized and that this can be used to tease, play, and communicate with the players. Players enjoy speculating about the future, and through knowing how Bungie communicates and releases content, get more material to speculate on. Everything Bungie does contributes to or breaks these patterns, and players will inevitably pick up on them.

However, the communication between developers and players does not always go smoothly, and this familiarity can have grim consequences.

4.3.3 Communication Breakdowns. The community goes through periods of praising the game and criticising it. When this is at its best, players provide respectul, constructive criticism and feedback to the developers, sharing insights into how they have enjoyed or disliked certain pieces of content, or not. Yet, as is present in all discussions about online culture, harassment and online toxicity [2, 3, 91, 148, 164] is no stranger to Destiny's community either. When the game is at its lowest, in the community's eyes, this is shown most viscerally. The *Lightfall* expansion was received very negatively by many players, sharing much critique about how it had let them down. This was after the previous years' expansion *Witch Queen*, which is considered one of the strongest expansions in Destiny's history by many.

While harassment has no place in any conversation, the harassment done in the Destiny community has sometimes approached egregious territories, as was publicly showcased through the 2023 lawsuit on harassment against a community manager from Bungie [156]. This also came at a time after *Lightfall*, where the Destiny community reached a "boiling point" [23] of outrage at the state of the game after a series of, in the community's eyes, disappointing releases. This culminated with a "State of the Game"-blog[14] that players felt mis-represented the current state of the game, and misunderstood the community and their desires. After this, Game Director Joe Blackburn made a 15-minute video on Twitter [13], addressing the complaints on the blog-post and, outside of outlining several concrete game changes players had asked for, promised

[13]One of the alien factions in Destiny.

[14]https://www.bungie.net/7/en/News/Article/state_of_the_game_aug_2023

to communicate better in the future. While Bungie's communication tends to be either text or well-produced videos, this was 15 minutes of a man talking into a camera. This was well-received by the community, as he showed a transparency many had felt was lacking. Individual developers might still talk about the game on their personal accounts or ask players directly for feedback, but it is up to their own discretion, and at constant risk of harassment for all manner of reasons. Especially after a more maligned release, such as the *Lightfall* expansion, this harassment becomes more vitriolic, and developers are forced to take better care of themselves, often shutting down avenues to direct communication to players, and it is no wonder they are more hesitant to do just what Joe did, despite it being celebrated.

This harassment has changed how Bungie interacts with players. In Summer 2023, a Bungie developer clarified on Reddit that they have decreased their amount of direct interaction with players and cited harassment as the cause [121]. Previously, Bungie's social and community managers would often act from their own personal Twitter accounts, publicly showing their own personas. However, in January 2023 a "Destiny Team" Twitter account was created to be the primary social media account, creating a step between the individual social and community managers and the players.

Strong negative community sentiment also has a negative spiraling effect within the community, as other players dislike when the community is negative. Some players might outright leave the game because the community is seen as too negative or toxic, something also seen in other games [3, 164]. This behavior thus hurts both the community and the developer.

4.3.4 Lance Reddick. To contrast with the above, and to showcase a powerful moment of camaraderie for the Destiny community, the final story shared here is a poignant moment that intercrosses storytelling, community and development. Lance Reddick was a prominent voice actor for Zavala, a central character in Destiny. And so, when he passed away in Spring 2023, this was grave news for the Destiny community. He was not only a voice actor but also an avid Destiny player himself [154], often sharing his experiences on his personal Twitter account. Thus, his passing is impactful in multiple ways for the Destiny community, who lost a unique voice for a popular character, a prominent, well-liked community member, and a strong voice actor and colleague. The players were quick to organize vigils, standing around the in-game character with honoring emotes, breaking what rituals they would have otherwise done in the game. Streamers held hours of silence or helped bring people together to honor him in whatever way they could. Players were quick to organize wearing the same emblem, as a signifier of him. The developers joined in too, sharing their memories of Lance. As voice acting is done well in advance of the story being released, Lance's voice acting was still present in the season after this happened, and it was uncertain for a while what the future of this character would be.[15] This moment, while truly sad, showed the Destiny community coming together to celebrate and honor a well-liked figure, despite players' current feelings on the game (this happened shortly after Lightfall, likely the game's most contentious expansion), and showing their best side.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Rituals of play

It is clear from the findings that there is a large amount of rituals that surround the playing of a game like Destiny, from the weekly routines to the larger, annual events. These kinds of rituals have also seen in other similar games [12, 58, 93, 126]. Many rituals are created through the design of the game, as this sets the foundation through weekly resets, seasonal events, and recurring delivery mechanisms. Yet, the players themselves are just as responsible for upholding these rituals, and create expected, familiar schedules that utilize the rules for their own gain. Slightly paraphrasing Carey [29], rituals in Destiny are actively being communicated about and through to maintain social community over time. When these get socially reinforced by your friends or favorite content creators being there every week with you, it becomes more than habit and routine [147],and turns into something you do because of the social aspect (if not moreso) than the specifics of the gameplay, echoing the social function of ritual in across society [29, 41, 126, 135]. As with historical and modern rituals, the rituals of Destiny are maintained to express shared values [12, 162] and organise the social space [41] of the game.

The sense of belonging players get within an online virtual world and community can be exhilarating [60, 91, 119, 168]. Together with the familiar rituals, a strong mixture is made, wherein players are kept together socially, habitually, and ritually. This is the case in the Destiny community, as players who have played for up to 9 years are so familiar with the game, its environments, quirks, mechanics, and characters, that they feel a sense of homeliness when entering it. The belonging is shown at its most powerful form in situations where people come together to rally around a common events like new expansions, Day 1 raid races, or honoring Lance Reddick.

The rituals created for Destiny are set up for this purpose: They allow people to come together. The rituals make people tune in every Reset to see the new content, check every weekend what Xur is selling, or read the new TWAB for surprises. The rituals make people prepare and schedule time for new events, so when something new does happen, people are there to witness it together. The rituals thus create situations where players can be there together, to react and participate, making moments that you do not just experience by yourself but together, in the world, on a live stream, or in online chat servers, experiencing "collective effervescence"[16] in Durkheim's terms [41]. The rituals in Destiny are also a clear example of rituals stretching across multiple sites, as Couldry described [41], as they appear on livestreams, Discord servers, in-game, and forums, all at once. The player-made rituals are also intentionally upholding and maintaing social structures [29], such as maintaining spoiler-periods etc., similar to how the Let's Play community maintained communal grace periods [109].

If the game did not operate on ritual schedules or predictable patterns, players would not be able to organize as effectively, not know when to tune in and when to stay away, or when their friends

[15] As of August 2023, Bungie announced that Keith David would take over as the role of Zavala [57]. This will no doubt be a change in the character, as Lance's voice was considered iconic by many.

[16] The feeling of togetherness produced by simultaneously doing something together, such as a ritual chant.

might be playing. The rituals are thus a crucial element in the social development of Destiny.

5.2 A Relationship of Contradictions

The relationship between players and developers is one of contradictions. At first glance, it is a relationship of mutual benefit: Developers create the game for players to play, giving them new content to experience, while players give developers a reason to make things, enact their visions into real life, to the surprise and delight of the creators. They rely on each other: Without the developers, there is nothing to play, and without the players, there is no one to develop for. Yet, they are also at odds. The players want to do everything, play with the most optimal strategies, learn all the secrets of the story, and have fun. The developers, on the other hand, want to pace their storytelling and create curated, pleasant experiences that cater to all players, including those that are not able to achieve the most optimal of play. When players discover a new glitch or potential exploit, it is shared widely across the community, making sure as many players know about it "before they fix it". This puts players, in some ways, in *opposition* to the developers, as they want to take advantage of all possible tools they have, while they can. Players enjoy "getting one up" on the developer, finding a strategy that they had not intended. Activities such as grinding or farming have traditionally been seen as unwanted in game design, as something to avoid, as "unfun" gameplay. Yet, players in Destiny continue to find new ways to do just that.

This kind of optimization goes beyond gameplay strategies and also impacts the narrative experience. Echoing the "Survivor" leakers investigated by Jenkins [79], some players want to learn all they can about the story before they are supposed to, digging through the game's files and breaking the intended experience. For some players, this is rewarding and exciting, as they are at the extreme end of testing the boundaries of accepted play. Yet, it can negatively impact the "normal" play of others, both because they might get spoiled when they don't want to and because the development might be affected by the presence of this advance information. And while the developers might not cater intentionally to dataminers and leakers, they still rely on developers, and many players still utilize the information gathered by datamining and leaks for their own benefit.

It is this tricky balance between mutual dependence, opposition, and play, that community-developer relations—and especially the community manager—must traverse. When this is fun and delightful, they are able to actively play with the community, tease upcoming content, reinforce community, and enrich the experience outside of the game. When it breaks down, it is potentially toxic and harmful. Players become isolated from the developers, losing the sense that they know what the game is and will be. Developers, in turn, lose the confidence to make things *for* the players, because they no longer know what the players want. As discussed in section 2.3 community managers are often neglected and undervalued in development [44, 45, 82, 171], which is in contrast to the players' perspective, where there is less distinction between community managers and developers[17]. When players "talk to developers" they talk *to* community managers or social media managers, and thus the roles are often collapsed for players. The unification of "Bungie" as a single entity (section 4.3.2) also shows this. This is another reason for the precarious position of community managers: They are seen as the "face" of the company for the players, and represent all developers, while they only rarely are considered on equal level as other developers by those companies.

One might ask why players continue to play a game they complain about viscerally. These findings strongly echo the suggestions by Laato and Rauti [91], and further showcases that power of rituals might be one of the reasons why harassment happens. The strong cocktail of belonging [60, 168], ritual, and social interdependence that a game like Destiny creates gives people strong reasons to stay despite immediate dissatisfaction. Because of the familiarity, rituals, and social connections the game has established, it is difficult to break out of the routine and there might not be another immediate place, online or not, that offers the same sense of community and belonging. When players feel their sense of home and social belonging is in danger, they might lash out at what they perceive as the cause of that change. This can become personal and harmful, and it is thus important that each party is protected from the potential harm this can cause.

5.3 Too Much Ritual?

The findings also showed a danger to having too predictable ritual patterns in a game: The game gets boring. Surprises are more memorable than repetition, and players often hope and want things to change. At the same time, players also want to know what is coming, to be able to prepare, schedule for, and look forward to upcoming events. In general, the community tended to appreciate surprises more than expectation in hindsight and in nostalgia, but expectation and anticipation is very important in the moment: If they are not excited about the future, they will lose interest, as much of the promise of a perennial game is that there is more coming. The tricky balance is being able to achieve both: Giving players something to look forward to *and* surprising them with something new. Destiny has shown situations where this succeeded, and where it has failed, as Bungie continuously walk the tightrope between too much and too little.

And it is often when exploring that boundary that players begin to break things and create new fun for themselves. "Kidnapping" Xur or the 12-man raids were enjoyable for the community exactly because it was a way for players to entirely "break" the game in a way that was fun and inclusive. These events create memorable moments for players, that changed the monotony for a time, giving players a new reason to log in and play with their friends. They can be seen as a kind of "media event" [41, 43], but one where the audience (especially content creators) themselves are propagating and mediating the event. Contrary to traditional mass media events, these kinds of events often deliberately shake the foundation of the authors, as players wrestle control of the conversation back for themselves. Using Turner's terminology, they have a "liminoid"

[17]We cannot say definitely how community managers were and are treated internally in Bungie. Yet we do know several community managers were laid off on October 30th 2023 [142].

quality: The rituals of players are de-centralized and transformative, and characterized by playful experimentation, rather than being centrally instigated, and often intended to expose existing systems [41, 95]. These kinds of breaks are often welcomed by players and tolerated by developers (for a time). Rather than immediately clamp down on bugs or exploits as mistakes, the developers had success and most leeway from the community when they leaned into the players' deviance, and let them play within the rules of the game, fixing the bug once the community has had its fun.

Players are also aware that the developers need to fix bugs, and that leaks are undesirable. Players also report bugs, knowing the developers will fix them (and still take advantage of them in the mean-time). They are thus willing to both play the game and subvert it, and it is often in this balance they find the most fun, testing the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and it has often been when Bungie has accepted, leaned into, or supported these breakages that Destiny has created some of its most memorable moments.

5.4 The Importance of Storytelling

Outside of trailers and teasers, when developers talk directly to players, they tend to discuss gameplay changes, and new features, and rarely what happens to characters or new plot details. The reasons for this are not surprising: They want the players to discover the story for themselves. Many players are happy with this, wanting to avoid spoilers or leaks, including official ones. When Bungie thus talk about the story openly, it is often accepted as *part* of the experience, despite its narrative incongruencies. The players have gotten to know Bungie well enough over time that they know how and why they tease events, and what it means, and what Bungie are comfortable telling and not.

As players get to know what to expect, and know how Bungie tell stories, players can predict patterns and infer relationships. When something as small as the name of a new weapon can be used to tease story-events, players know that anything might be relevant. This is especially showcased when Bungie plays with the forms, such as playing as a character on their Twitter account, or reinforcing community memes like Telesto. Players enjoy these moments greatly and what they show is precisely the power of storytelling for developer-player relationships. Telesto becomes more than a buggy weapon: It becomes a story. By incorporating storytelling into the conversation, a simple weapon gains a meaning that players can relate to and resonate with, especially because they were present when the bugs happened and participated in discovering and using them. This is the same with many of the other most successful examples of player-developer communications: It is playing with storytelling, and it is through storytelling that we see play in community relations. It is in reacting to the emergent stories of players, as seen in the Loot Cave, or reflecting on the stories you inadvertently have created, as seen in Telesto and infamous PvP weapons, or forefronting the story directly in communication, as seen Twitter character impersonations. These kinds of communications go beyond the functional of informing players or moderating a community, and involve the fictional experience directly, blurring the lines between the game and the community. This aspect of community management is something not often openly discussed as a part of the community managers' role (see section 2.3), but these findings suggest that this blending of community and storytelling might be a powerful way to both empower community managers by having them be more directly involved in the development, and improve the experience of players.

Taylor [158] asked what designers do after accepting that players will always subvert the intended experience. This kind of storytelling might be part of the solution: By deftly utilizing the players' stories and weaving the into the rituals of the game, players both get to subvert the storytelling *and* be a part of it. It is not fully surrendering control to the players—the developers of Destiny maintain much control over how the narrative develops—yet players do not feel their actions are ignored.

6 DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that there is a clear benefit to utilizing rituals in the core design of perennial games. Creating expected patterns allow players to schedule around them, bringing the community together around specific times of the day, week, and year. The rituals create a foundation for what players expect from the game, upon which the rest of the experience can be built. This however, also has a danger of becoming too predictable. Destiny's strict seasonal model has led players to tiring of its rigidity (section 4.1.3). It is important to maintain flexibility within these rituals, to allow for surprises and unexpected player behavior. Players should know *when* to play but do not always need to know the *what* or *how*.

Developers need to think carefully about how they tease and reveal upcoming events and content to players, as the findings show both the dangers of revealing too much and too little. The findings show us that giving too much detail can backfire and it is important to not have surprises lead to predetermined outcomes, as was the case with the Season of Dawn (section 4.1.3). Bungie generally avoid sharing narrative events whereas gameplay changes and weapon introductions are generally positively accepted in anticipation, even when leaked (yet the border between these can be tricky).

As a developer, it can seem desirable to fix bugs the moment they are discovered. Yet, sometimes, these findings show that players often enjoy finding, sharing and playing with bugs, glitches and exploits, as they enjoy breaking the system and introducing their own breakages in the rituals of play. Bungie has found success in letting players play with exploits for a while instead of rushing out a fix, turning an innocuous bug into an event that players talk about. When Bungie directly responds to players, acknowledging their play with these exploits, or make them part of the game, it has led to some of Destiny's more memorable moments, such as The Loot Cave, Telesto, and 12-man raids. This needs to be handled with care, because some bugs are perhaps too egregious to let be for any length of time, yet designers might benefit from asking themselves before they fix a bug whether players are enjoying their time with it, and whether it could be incorporated into the fiction of the game. If the answer to either is yes, a developer can earn much favor in the community by working with the bug rather than against it, at least temporarily.

Finally, on community management, an insight identified in the findings was how storytelling could be incorporated into community-developer relations, such as impersonating characters on Twitter (section 4.3.1). For example, players really enjoy to see the fictional

characters they know so well interact directly with themselves and fellow community members. Developers can also use blog posts and patch notes to tease and play with the community as well, as they know each element will be investigated by players. Therefore, a developer should not forget the potential for storytelling *within* community management, as it can be used as a direct extension of the narrative, to explain phenomenae and to enrich the experience outside of the game. As several authors have already argued [44, 45, 82, 171], this requires community management to not be undervalued and to be seen as the crucial part of the game experience that it is and has been known to be [74, 133, 169]. The experience of players is impacted by community management every day, and every moment is colored by the quality of the communication of those in charge of talking to them.

These findings have larger HCI implications as well. The activities of the Destiny community share similarities with other online fan communitities such as the "Something Awful" Let's Play community [109] or BTS ARMY [128]. Much of the community play and narrative construction functions similarly, and is influenced by the same technology and media forms. Fan communities respond to authors (bands, writers, video-makers etc) through social platforms, creating rituals, mythologies, and narratives responding to their common media of interest. By understanding how communities behave and use these media, how they play, create and break rituals, using (and subverting) the technology for increased community engagement, and augment existing community practices to support the communitites. This can be used to improve many kinds of online communities that want to build for healthier and more robust social structures, utilizing the storytelling potential of rituals to encourage communal play as well as what dangers to avoid when doing so.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper reported the findings from a 2.5-year ethnography on the Destiny community, investigating the storytelling and ritual play, and the impact of developer-player interactions. The findings show how rituals are a fundamental part of playing Destiny, that allow players to come together, and reinforces the storytelling through repetition and community sharing. The relationship between developers and players is key to maintaining this, yet, as it is a multi-faceted, complex relationship of mutual dependence, playfulness, with both supportive and oppositional structures, the rituals of play are both reinforced and broken down through this communication. As players inevitably play with the boundaries of play, they will test the rituals when they become stale, and so developers should expect their rituals to be broken and new rituals to be formed. The findings also showed that when this happened, players were appreciative of how developers needed to address issues, yet were considerably more lenient if the developers acknowledged their play and were playful back in return, allowing bugs to affect the game for a while or addressing them in playful ways, rather than rote fixes. Storytelling was also seen to be a powerful tool in addressing the community, and something that can be directly used to enhance community management and player relations. Using storytelling in this manner is something that should be investigated more in future work.

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