

Participatory Cultures of Digital Games: The Double-Edged Sword of Being a Reddit Community Moderator



DANIEL NIELSEN, PhD Student, Charles University, Czech Republic;
Daniel.Nielsen@fsv.cuni.cz

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer community moderators are at the centre of a multitude of conflicting views in the media and society, while being continually exposed to inappropriate content and risking their mental wellbeing. On Reddit.com, their specific interest in a topic drives them to volunteer for moderation responsibilities to nurture the participatory community; however, this puts them in the uncertain position of being neither a member of the community nor a representative of the social media platform tied to the community. By adopting Nico Carpentier's concept of participation as a site of political–ideological negotiation, this article explores the precarious conditions and expectations of community moderators around digital games after the 2020 COVID-19 struggles, with more people turning to social media, which increases demand for platform moderation. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with community moderators associated with online media communities (subreddits) of different games on the social media platform Reddit. It draws two conclusions: Firstly, the field of subreddit moderation involves multiple actors, such as content creators, content generators, moderators, and game studios. Here, moderators hold an assumed absolute power in two processes of decision-making: (1) ensure that content abides by the sitewide rules and subreddit specific rules; and (2) promote content that is sensitive to the subreddit's cultural context. In decision-making moments, the tools that are afforded to moderators from the Reddit platform put moderators at a disadvantage, as they are forced to implement their decisions using negative reinforcement as opposed to achieving change in the subreddit through positive reinforcement. Secondly, community moderators exist within a participatory process of checks and balances, making any moderation actions a double-edged sword where any intervention by moderators can result in backlash or disagreement from content creators and content generators, and material advantages largely determine actors' involvement in these participatory processes.

KEYWORDS: Participatory Culture, Digital Games, Moderators, Communities, Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Moderation of inappropriate content – whether deemed inappropriate in relation to social media platforms’ financial interest, the community code of conduct, or society at large – is work that is done in secret but crucial for how all social media is experienced today. Right-leaning social media users perceive moderation as censorship, whereas left-leaning users see it as inconsistent (Shen, Rose 2019). For corporations, moderation is increasingly causing financial problems, whether because of public outrage over inconsistent or wrong moderation, such as when Facebook took down the “Napalm Girl” photo, which Norwegian journalist Tom Egeland had included in the newspaper *Aftenbladet*, for violating its standards (Gillespie 2018: 3), or work standards, such as in the “Reddit Blackout”, when volunteer moderators of over 2,200 subreddits forced Reddit to renegotiate moderators’ virtual working conditions (Matias 2019). As such, moderators are at the centre of a multitude of conflicting opinions and interests in the media and society while being exposed to inappropriate content every day and risking their mental wellbeing (Dwoskin 2019). Some moderators’ dedication to a topic of interest drives them to take on the moderation responsibilities to nurture the participatory community (Jenkins 2006); this is what Caplan (2018) refers to as community-reliant moderation, where the platform relies heavily on users to volunteer to moderate subcommunities of the platforms. They are then responsible of upholding site-wide rules, that usually prohibit sexual content, involuntary pornography, and harassment, etc. Furthermore, moderators have the opportunity to create rules specific to their subcommunity which is useful for maintaining sensitivity to cultural

context (Caplan 2018: 21); however, in this position, they are neither purely members of the community nor representatives of the social media platform tied to it (Postigo 2009; Terranova 2000).

Online communities around digital games and game franchises have proven especially problematic for fostering a toxic culture that valorises geek masculinity. This culture is typically united over certain events, where sociotechnical platforms, such as Reddit, are used for coordination and harassment (Massanari 2015: 333). In August 2014, Eron Gjoni wrote a blogpost about his breakup with Zoe Quinn, including images of their Facebook conversations. The post implied that Quinn’s success as a game developer was largely a result of intimate relationships with game journalists, and it stirred a hateful campaign that came to be called #GamerGate (GG), which aimed to delegitimise women in the gaming industry and games journalism (*ibid.*, 334). The GG movement claimed to be rooted in a call for more transparent and ethical games journalism; according to Braithwaite (2016), this caused a war-like mentality among the participants, who perceived the movement as a battle “between Gamergaters and agitators, between customers and critics” (5). Yet, GG quickly came to target all women, games journalists, and anyone who sympathised with them, even individuals of various capacities outside the digital game industry were targeted in aggressive and sexualised attacks (*ibid.*, 7).

An inquiry into why and how the far-right geek masculine members of the digital gaming culture use sociotechnical platforms for coordination and harassment of individuals both within and outside digital gaming culture is essential. Existing research primarily focuses on online newspapers or newspapers’ social media

channels and moderators' everyday activities (Kalsnes, Ihlebæk 2020; Wolfgang *et al.* 2020) or editors' attempts to maintain the same standards in their online channels as in print media (Ihlebæk, Krumsvik 2014). Alternatively, it considers social media controversies and what caused them, as well as the role that sociotechnical platforms played in their prominence, such as in GG (e.g., Blodgett 2019; Braithwaite 2016; Massanari 2015, 2018; Mortensen 2016). According to Postigo (2003), the internet is a place of labour and wealth, "yet those who do the work of generating and maintaining the Web remain hidden away under the rhetoric of volunteerism or hobby" (219). Therefore, it is relevant to explore community moderation in the context of digital games in particular, as these community moderators appear especially challenged by the user-generated content they have to moderate.

In the context of social media controversies, and in relation to moderators' role(s), with COVID-19 increasing demand for platform moderation (Gerrard 2020), this article examines how moderators understand and react to community members of the platforms they moderate, elucidating moderators' relationships and agency in an everchanging political-ideological environment. I ask the following questions: who are the actors involved in the negotiation regarding what and how moderators of digital game subreddits ought to moderate; and how does the political-ideological nature of the participation of these actors manifest? The topic of moderators and moderation fits into a larger school of academic interest in user-generated content (UGC), participatory cultures, amateur expertise, and peer-level social networking (Benkler 2006; Burgess 2007; Jenkins 2006).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Gaming culture on social media

Bergstrom and Poor (2021) explore the fluidity and attachment of fan membership in Reddit gaming communities, by observing three subreddit communities dedicated to

three different game franchises at the time of a new release or sequel to the franchise. The presumption is that fans and their consumption are deeply connected, to the extent that fans ought to want to migrate to the new subreddit community dedicated to the new release in the franchise. However, their findings show that fans' commitment to the community is higher than their commitment to a franchise (*ibid.*, 8). Similarly, what makes users volunteer for community moderation has largely to do with community commitment (Matias 2019).

Robards' (2018) emphasis on neo-tribalism in subreddits and how they are meticulous when it comes to content being relevant to the topic of the subreddit provides a deeper understanding of Bergstrom and Poor's (2021) findings on fluidity in fan commitment to subreddits. Robards (2018) suggests that Reddit users are interlocked in the sense that they are also members of other subreddits that are remotely related to the 'umbrella' subreddit, such as in the case of the subreddits dedicated to Bethesda's game franchise *The Elder Scrolls*, and *Fallout*. In these interlocked subreddits the primary object of interest is not necessarily the game itself but a specific feature related to the game, such as economics, cosmetics, screenshots, and lore (*ibid.*, 202). As such, Reddit users seek out content that is relevant to their particular interest and not necessarily the latest release within the franchise, and the level to which a subreddit can provide this content determines their engagement. This is what van Dijck (2012) points towards with protocols and interfaces. An interface is what the user sees and interacts with, while a protocol comprises the rules, such as algorithms or artificial intelligence, "that appear to 'mediate' people's social activities, while in fact steering social traffic" (*ibid.*, 145). Yet, the culture of connectivity is not technologically determined because the protocol is socially dependent. Some users may form profiles and interactions to steer the platform algorithms to achieve a more desirable outcome (*ibid.*, 147). Van Dijck's point is that, to assess user agency,

both the technological, social, and cultural aspects of social network services and UGC sites must be considered (*ibid.*, 154). My point, in turn, is that interfaces and protocols are functions that moderators largely fulfil on social media platforms such as Reddit. They are not only protectors of site-wide rules, but also facilitators of relevant content.

Labour

Roberts (2019) explores the working conditions that commercial content moderators have to endure in the post-industrial society of today in their employment. Roberts is concerned with how the public is unaware of this hidden digital labour that is essential to our everyday media lives (*ibid.*, 23–24). By interviewing commercial content moderators of various big multinational corporate media platforms spread across the world, such as Silicon Valley, Canada, Mexico, and the Philippines, Roberts explores the low wages and social status, and psychological trauma that commercial content moderators are forced to accept (*ibid.*, 60–67). Commercial content moderation falls into a grey area in which the labour is similar to that of post-industrial call centres, maintaining its industrial characteristics by being monotone and repetitive (*ibid.*, 59). However, it requires cultural and linguistic knowledge to moderate content, which is evident in the way corporations outsource certain tasks that are less sensitive to cultural and linguistic knowledge (*ibid.*, 49–50). The working conditions for commercial content moderators are created by the media corporations, due to the paradox of economic incentives for facilitating user generated content while being unable to find a solution to content moderation that does not involve human beings (*ibid.*, 207). While volunteer moderators are not contracted to work nor are they paid for it, there are similarities between the free labour that they do and that of commercial content moderators. In my sample, inadequate technical support (*ibid.*, 83), as well as the flagqueue (*ibid.*, 90) are frequently mentioned as a cause of prob-

lems or fatigue. However, by comparison, volunteer moderators have a level of agency in the decision-making process regarding these work conditions, as they are free to use supportive tools that are crowdsourced, such as bots or limitations and requirements on the posts made by the subreddit users. This stands in contrast to the corporate need for moderators to be aware of brand protection, and to maintain user engagement by not making them think that they are being censored (*ibid.*, 159). Roberts perceives the relationship between society and moderators to be a symbiosis through which users can engage in a platform that is sensitive to them because moderators are safeguarding it from all the inappropriate content (*ibid.*, 220). However, this situation is not sustainable with the current labour conditions and with no foreseeable solution to automated moderation (*ibid.*, 208). As corporations are unlikely to limit the amount of user-generated content on their platforms, Roberts' study is a good example of what Terranova considers to be the mutation of the internet and capitalism, which will grow until one of them bursts.

According to Terranova (2000: 36), the workers of the digital gift economy, volunteers for America Online, contributors to the online zine NetSlaves, and Amateur Web designers want affective and cultural production that has value to them because it is socially shaped. Conceptualising today's online media participation and forms of engagement as immaterial labour or *free labour*, Terranova contextualises what it means to participate beyond today's opportunistic and managerial hype (*ibid.*, 38). To Terranova, the internet and being online is where two ends meet – the capital and anti-capital – and the question is whether the internet will incarnate or refuse capitalism (*ibid.*, 54). Terranova identifies the unsustainable state of the marriage between neoliberalists and capitalism at large and volunteers', users', lurkers', and content creators' affective production. Paradoxically, capitalism – which is supposed to sustain labour – risks exhausting its labour supply because of multiple issues,

“[from] burnout syndromes of Internet start-ups to underretribution and exploitation in the cultural economy at large” (*ibid.*, 51). Therefore, Terranova offers a critical view on today’s online media environment, concluding that the internet will neither incarnate nor refuse capitalism; instead, it is a mutation that will grow until one bursts (*ibid.*, 54). Although Roberts (2019) is addressing commercial content moderation as paid labour, corporations attempt to minimise the costs of this paid labour, making it similar to that of Terranova’s free labour, as labour is also at risk of exhaustion even though it is paid.

Volunteer community moderation, in the case of Reddit, lies within a grey area between the commercial content moderators that Roberts describes, and Terranova’s example of digital volunteer workers. On the one hand, volunteer community moderation is highly laborious and repetitive. On the other hand, moderators are not unnoticed, so much as it is their actions that are unnoticed. They are highly represented in the subreddits that they moderate, and as a result they are also frequently targeted by hateful acts and threats from users, in addition to all the inappropriate content from which they have to safeguard the subreddit community. In regard to Terranova’s view of the internet and capitalism bursting as a result of its mutation, Reddit adopts a hands-off approach that allows for different communities to emerge and thrive, from democratic to authoritarian or totalitarian systems of power. This is relevant in the context of volunteer community moderation, as it gives them the power to determine which system is the most suitable for the community they moderate, which is negotiated with the moderator labour force available. As such, volunteer community moderators can regulate the internet and capitalism, which increases the longevity and survival of the participatory culture within the opportunistic and managerial hype. In many ways, volunteer community moderation has much more to do with community management and being a community manager than moderation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (PARTICIPATION)

As previously mentioned, engagement is largely driven by affective and cognitive involvement and the connection between individuals and groups. By contrast, participation – as that which lies beyond engagement – has a political-ideological nature. The study of participation has primarily been conducted from a sociological perspective: mediated social interactions or politics on the level of equality, or power, evident in participatory processes (Carpentier 2016: 85). Carpentier calls for a critical perspective on participation through analysis of the intensity of participatory processes in terms of how equal or unequal they are, then by evaluating the desirability of the power relations (*ibid.*). For Carpentier, there are two distinct types of participation – participation “in” media, such as content generated by amateur creators, or “through” media by participation in decision-making processes regarding structural circumstances of participation in particular media networks (Carpentier 2011a). Media participation in decision-making processes is a struggle between actors to maximise or minimise equal power positions, power positions that are omnipresent in media and all social spheres (*ibid.*, 11). For Carpentier, participation should not be confused with normative cooperation; it can manifest in multiple ways that are not necessarily perceived as positive or abiding, and participatory processes should be distinguished from their outcomes (Carpentier *et al.* 2019: 21).

Carpentier (2011a) emphasises how audiences influence their mediasphere of everyday life through participatory practices. Via contributions or active involvement and communication, audiences can change the structural limitations of their everyday mediasphere (*ibid.*, 520). In comparing formal organisational structures, such as YouTube, with online participatory practices, Carpentier illustrates how participatory processes are limited in intensity because of the absence of power and involvement in decision making, which

makes “interaction” an adequate description of what is going on (Carpentier 2011b: 201–202). This is especially true when the platforms are “organisations, where audience members can effectively produce media content, without allowing them opportunities for (equal) decision making [...] to ensure that consumer freedom evolves in the ‘right’ way” (Carpentier 2011b: 205). Carpentier is concerned with the celebration of the discursive active audience – or the condemnation of dark participation – and how it disregards an in-depth understanding of the structures surrounding media participation and production activities.

Inspired by Pateman’s (1970) definition, Carpentier identifies three components of participation in society as follows: (1) participation in media production, (2) participation in society through the media, and (3) interaction with media content. Here, the first component consists of the three following elements: access to media production, interacting with media production, and participating in media organisations (Carpentier 2011a: 521). This study on moderators addresses the first component and its three elements.

Carpentier (2016) proposes a four-level analytical model as a framework for unravelling the complexity of participatory processes. The analytical model consists of the following levels: (1) *process and field(s)*, (2) *actors*, (3) *decisions*, and (4) *power relations*.

Process and Field(s)

The purpose of the process and field(s) level is to identify and restrict the object of analysis to avoid overambitious claims. The process is a series of related goal-oriented activities performed by individuals who relate to each other in some way (*ibid.*, 77). The field(s), inspired by Bourdieu, is about contextualising the process within “knowledge, positions, interests, stakes, commodities and histories” (*ibid.*, 78).

Actors

The purpose of the actors level is to iden-

tify the actors involved in the process. Carpentier acknowledges that actors can take many forms, meaning that they are better understood as entities or units that are equally important for the participatory process. These actors and their relations must be mapped, and their positions, roles, and identities within the process should be identified. Their positions, roles, and identity are what Carpentier considers material in the participatory process. Material is the access to resources and types of capital that actors have within the process, leading to the discursive meaning-making of actors’ identities, which leads to certain expectations regarding behaviours from all actors involved, depending on their role (*ibid.*, 79).

Decisions

The purpose of the decisions level is to chart all decision-making moments in the process and actors’ responses in these moments. Here, it is important to pay attention to the definition of decision. In the context of moderators, this could be anything from deciding on new rules for the subreddit to the process of responding to mod-mails¹, but Carpentier explains that decisions have to be something that brings the flow of the process to a momentary halt, where power is exercised (*ibid.*, 81). Carpentier distinguishes between decision-making about who has access and whether they are allowed to interact, as in producing content and under which circumstances. Once the decision-making moments have been charted, the question for each moment that needs to be answered is, “who does what in the different moments of decision-making, and how is this related to, and supported by, their material positions, identities and roles?” (*ibid.*, 81).

Power Relations

The purpose of the power relations level is to identify the power manifested in a multitude of strategies. Carpentier adopts Foucault’s power model when identify-

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Modmail is a messaging system shared amongst all moderators for regular users to reach the moderator team instead of messaging them privately.

ing restrictive, generative, and resistant strategies, followed by asking, “what can each actor generate and what is generated for them, what is restricted for each actor and what is restricted by them, and which actions (of which actor) are resisted by which other actor?” (*ibid.*, 82). What is important to note here is whether those who decide consulted other actors about the decision beforehand, whether actors resist the decision and try to influence the decision, and how actors are restricted in the process. After all power relations have been analysed, the aggregate power positions can be compared to determine how equal the power relations are in general, which will address “whether there is any power-sharing present at all” to determine if the process is participatory (*ibid.*, 84).

The aim of this study is to understand community moderators’ everyday experiences when going about their community tasks that involve multiple decision-making moments. Carpentier’s framework addresses exactly this, by paying attention to decision-making processes, the actors involved, and the power relations. By taking a political approach to participation, the framework offers a critical view on participation and allows the researcher to ask how participation is negotiated amongst actors.

METHOD

To analyse moderators’ everyday experiences of actors’ involvement in political-ideological negotiations around their unique form of participation, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with moderators from the United States, Belgium, France, and Sweden. To explore the details of the participatory cultures’ (1) process and field(s), (2) actors, (3) decisions, and (4) power relations, interviews were adopted as the method for this paper (Baym, Markham 2009) to better grasp the meaning of being a moderator for gaming communities on Reddit.

This study collected data via oral online interviews. I contacted moderators of a set of subreddits related to games, such

as r/Battlefield, r/Overwatch, r/leagueoflegends, r/pokemongo, and r/CallOfDuty, by private messaging the moderators of each subreddit and the moderator mail. I reached out to 61 moderators; 9 responded, and 5 agreed to participate. Some respondents who declined claimed that their subreddit policy forbade them to participate in interviews. Through interacting with moderators via the Reddit direct message feature, I found out that many moderators will not address moderator-related matters in private chat. I was urged to reach moderators through a dedicated “message moderators” button for each subreddit. Other moderators did not feel comfortable conducting an interview with someone unfamiliar, or due to fear of impersonation. One of the interviewees who agreed to participate requested a verification of identity before we could proceed. Overall, moderators are very cautious when strangers reach out to them, as they are frequently victims of doxxing – the release of personal information online. As such, ignoring messages from strangers is likely to be a widespread approach to personal safety on the part of moderators – and a reason that so few respondents agreed to participate in this study. The interviews were conducted online using voice over internet protocol (VoIP) software, such as Discord and Zoom; they were recorded with Open Broadcaster Software and later transcribed. All material was collected between the 20th of April and 16th of May 2021, with an average interview length of 79 minutes. Due to the nature of moderating and its associated frequent harassment, some informants requested anonymity, which required anonymising all personal information of the informants as well as leaving out information in the transcript that could otherwise identify them, such as the name of the subreddit or the game to which the subreddit was dedicated. The informants were reached in two cycles – the first reached as many moderators as possible through convenience sampling, and the second reached female moderators via quota sampling.

In terms of limitations, all moderators

who decided to participate happened to be male, and the second attempt to recruit female moderators was unsuccessful. Because of time constraints, the study proceeded without representation from female moderators. While the sample covers three subreddits, moderators rarely moderate for only one subreddit, which suggests that moderators are inherently cross-media (Schröder 2011). To emphasise this, I asked all the informants if they had moderated or were currently moderating for more than one community, and 10 was the average amount of subreddits they were assigned. Therefore, while the interviews can be perceived as representative of a small fraction of the Reddit gaming community, the workload of the moderators challenges this view. For this reason, the sample size suffices to represent moderators of gaming communities on Reddit and their everyday experience and interactions with other community members; the study is not attempting to quantify this data by saying to what extent.

To analyse the data, I adopted Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step thematic coding process. Following the thematic coding process, in the context of subreddits, I identified actors as moderators, Reddit administrators, content creators (influencers, YouTubers, streamers, games journalists, etc.), content generators, and content consumers, as well as the game studio of the intellectual property and/or franchise to which the subreddit was dedicated.

From the thematic coding process, I formulated ten codes. Relationship, labour, passion/commitment, community ownership, exhaustion, community underbelly, unnoticed, exclusion/lonely, retaliation, and inadequate technical support. Relationship refers to tasks that specifically demand some kind of attention from the moderators in relation to other actors within the subreddit community, aside from reacting to the modqueue, modmail, and flagged content. Labour refers to the tasks that are labour intensive, such as modqueue, modmail, and flagged content, as well as any account where moderators categorise

their tasks as labour as opposed to hobby. Passion/commitment refers to accounts where moderators' activities are motivated by passionate concern or commitment to the subreddit community. The community's ownership of the subreddit community was frequently underlined by moderators, motivating their actions through features such as pinning content, or making limits and restrictions on posting content to the subreddit. Moderators emphasised the laborious nature of their everyday tasks, where some would spend a whole day per week performing moderation tasks. This relates to the sense of being primarily connected with the community's underbelly. Going unnoticed was typically associated with 'good' moderation, which also led to a sense of exclusion or loneliness from the community as a whole, leading some moderators to seek out other communities where they could be 'regular' members, or formulate moderator communities on other platforms such as Discord. In addition, they also frequently reported the hands-off approach from admins to be frustrating. Surprisingly, it was not uncommon for moderators to experience retaliation from content creators and active users that were unhappy with a decision made by the moderator(s), which can take multiple forms, such as brigading in the case of content creators, where they mobilise their followers/fans; or witch-hunting in the case of active users, where they forge some kind of documentation to stir a conspiracy about another actor (moderator, content creator, game developer, etc.). And, while Reddit is community-reliant when it comes to moderation, it offers very few tools to perform everyday moderation and these tools are generally focused on negative reinforcement, whereas positive reinforcement would be much more effective according to some moderators.

PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN GAMING SUBREDDITS

Process and Field(s)

Moderation on subreddits has two general

processes. First, there is moderating content of the subreddit that breaks Reddit's content policy or the rules of the subreddit. Reddit's content policy addresses several issues, such as harassment, cyberbullying, threats of violence, spamming and voter manipulation, revealing personal or confidential information, impersonation, and sexual content involving minors. These rules apply to the whole Reddit domain and every subreddit. The subreddit rules are unique to each subreddit, created by moderators associated with the subreddit. Second, there is management of content that appears on the subreddit, which can be done in many ways. Informant D gives a few examples:

If there is a request for such a thing, we can pin one or two threads to give a prominent spot to certain topics, so something can be discussed. But that should come from the community. You got the generic stuff like the Saturday question thread, where new players can ask any and all questions and more experienced players can join and talk and help the new players, stuff like that. But yeah, most of those generic ones stem from the [intention] to keep the community a nice place to be because a lot of new users will hop in and ask questions that have already been asked a thousand times.

Within these processes, history has a significant role to play, as already outlined in the introduction to GG, among other controversies, such as the Doritos-gate scandal (Florence 2012) or the GameJournoPros (short for games journalism professionals) secret mailing list (Milo 2014). Such issues have led to criticism of games journalism in the recent history of the online gaming community (Totilo 2012). This has affected the gaming subreddits, as Informant B explains,

The Gamergate controversy has definitely been visible long after the event in just how it has amplified a lot of the negative aspects of the general gaming community. [...] We are extremely strict when it comes to not allowing any forms of sexism or transphobia, and so we've become accustomed to simply having to ring the bells whenever topics of this nature are discussed so that we can get all hands on deck and deal with it.

Beyond history, the stakes are different depending on the actor; for the moderator, the stakes are to keep a healthy and positive culture in the community. As Informant D explains,

Our tasks exist to facilitate the community, to make the subreddits a nice and inviting environment and place for users, that it is the place that users want it to be. [...] It all boils down to being decent people and being part of the community and not [causing] drama. Other than that, it is up to the community to shape itself and see what it wants. Does it want to create a lot of fan artwork? Does it want to share stories, analyse tactics and strategies? All that is outside the scope of the moderator.

Subreddits share traits with other social media platforms as an intermediary between amateur content creators, corporations, and advertisers (Gillespie 2010: 12). On subreddits, moderators are the protocol (van Dijck 2012: 145) of the platform, as opposed to most other social media platforms where the protocol consists of the platform rules, such as algorithms or artificial intelligence that stir user activity. As such, moderators have social-relational power to shape users' experiences of the subreddits in particular ways. Power is

best exercised swiftly and unnoticed, which means moderators are embodying the platform to an extent that regular users might not even be aware of power being exercised. However, this power increases the precarious nature of moderators' everyday tasks, as Informant D elaborates:

You're a good moderator if you are not noticed. So, it is something you just donate your free time to, you are not getting any benefits whatsoever of the material kind, and if you are doing the moderation the way I think is the proper way to do it, you are not even getting any recognition for it either. So, what's left? What do you get from it?

Here, Informant D refers to the absence of recognition as a positive result of being proactive and removing content before regular users see it. Thus, the embodiment of the platform protocol is truly completed.

Within the process, where moderators exercise social-relational power, moderators have assumed absolute power by managing content on the subreddit. This power should be perceived in the context of moderators' selection; most commonly, users who are passionate about a subreddit community apply to become a moderator through a formal process, as Informant D explains,

The team made a google form questionnaire of multiple pages, through which they verified if the applicant was properly aware of the subreddit rules, and gave us cases and asked how we would moderate those. And they also checked our availability time-wise, how much time we could contribute for moderation tasks.

As such, the power is presumably absolute in the sense that there is no formal process for ejecting a moderator or for a user to file a complaint that positions the moderators

for investigation. The only exception is the moderator being removed by admins for breaking site-wide rules.

Additionally, moderators set the subreddit rules themselves and determine the degree to which they want to be transparent about their process, as Informant B explains,

We have our own internal behavioural policies for moderators. However, we keep everything within the team both out of respect for the individual moderator and since we think that having such discussions publicly does not do the moderation team or the subreddit any good.

Therefore, the power in the decision-making moment is assumed to be absolute within the limits of Reddit's site-wide rules, as moderators themselves make the rules/guidelines for the subreddit.

Actors

To map actors and their relations and identify positions, roles, and identities in the process, it is useful to understand how actors can be differentiated in their dependency on the field and involvement in the process. As I have illustrated in the analysis of field and process, the field changes depending on the actors and their stakes; for content creators and game studios, the field of the subreddit is about economic importance (see **Figure 1**). However, before going into detail on this, I want to explain how I identify the remaining actors. Aside from moderators, content creators, and game studios, the actors who are involved in a subreddit are Reddit administrators, content generators, and content consumers. Administrators become involved when there is a breach of Reddit's content policy or when situations escalate beyond the moderators' control. Content generators are Reddit users who are not creators, but they generate content by interacting with the content on the subreddit, such as by writing comments, upvoting,

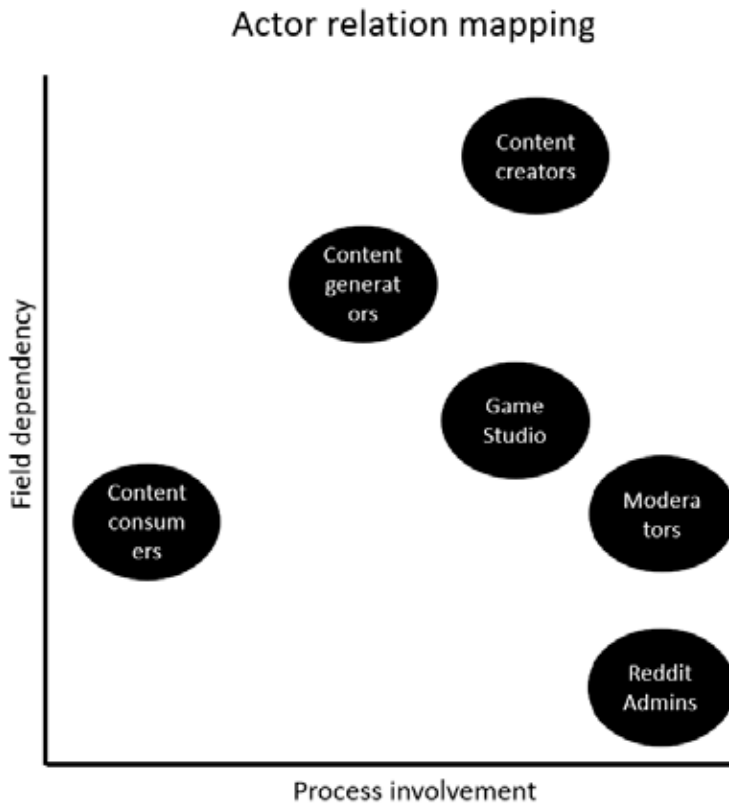


FIGURE 1. Actor relation mapping in gaming subreddits

and posting memes. Content consumers are the lurkers of the subreddit, constituting the majority that does not participate significantly in the community.

Figure 1 illustrates how the different actors are involved in the two processes of promotion of cultural context and moderation and how they depend on it in relation to each other, from the perspective of moderators and how they experience the involved actors within the participatory culture.

Process involvement is the degree to which an actor is actively trying to influence the subreddit, whereas field dependency is the degree to which the actor depends on the subreddit as a place to achieve their ends. As mentioned above, content creators have an interest in their content gaining traction, and thus, have an interest in being involved

in the moderation process. As Informant B explains,

Content creators, influencers, and journalists can launch their careers off of the subreddit [...], and as such, they have an ideal view of the subreddit that tends to differ [from] what other users that don't stand to make money have.

Similarly, game studios have an interest in disseminating their information to the dedicated community; as Informant A explains,

We have been moderately involved with [the] game studio; they sometimes give us a heads-up a few hours before surprise releases,

inform us about upcoming events they want to do on the subreddit, and offer to have AMAs ['Ask Me Anything', a discussion where an individual, typically from a certain profession, opens themselves up to any kind of questions from other users] with their development team.

While content creators and game studios share an interest in the subreddits, they do not have the same leverage within the process of moderation. As mentioned above, the moderators strive to create a community where members decide on content, and most members of gaming subreddits are there primarily because of the game and a wish to be closer to the developers. As such, the game studios have a naturally advantageous position compared to that of content creators, and can create a significantly better relationship with the moderation team. Sometimes, the moderation team will even dedicate time to supporting the game studio; as Informant D explains,

The company that creates the game may not have the time to be 24/7 present on various Reddit communities and forums, and social media. So sometimes, we have this channel set up where we can inform them about community reactions to changes that they make in the game. Just small summaries about how the community is feeling.

This support from moderators is arguably a case of free labour mutation (Terranova 2000: 54); it is not pure exploitation, but rather, exploitation relating to the digital gift economy and its values of cultural and affective production being socially shaped (*ibid.*, 36). For moderators, the game studios' commitment to the subreddit community is largely considered a blessing, where the level of involvement of the studio is something that significantly enriches the community. As Informant D continues,

For a lot of gaming communities, what they want is to be part of the community, part of the game, and if there is somebody from the game studio who will visit the community and talk with people, then they feel heard and a part of the game.

Content creators must comply with subreddits' rules and are not equipped to negotiate their position. According to Informant E, this is mostly a problem for less experienced content creators trying to become known: "Most of the big content creators don't really care, as they are established people, but for new content creators, it can be really tempting to just try get past the system, which is honestly dumb." For moderators, this results in a general perception that content creators can be detrimental to the community's wellbeing.

Content generators, or users that interact with posted content or leave comments, are not significantly involved in the moderation processes, although they are the audience that moderators are most often in contact with on a daily basis. They are typically either rule breakers that the moderators have to warn or ban, or users with strong opinions about the moderation aspect of the subreddit. As Informant E explains,

Some users are more interested in the moderation aspect of a subreddit, so we hear from them more, which is not a bad thing honestly. So, there are some users that we know by name because they have been a long-term user, and they have been quite vocal about their points.

In this sense, the content generators have some process involvement in that a few individuals frequently share their opinions about the current state of moderation and where it is heading for the community. Informant E's comment that this is not a bad thing suggests that moderators

appreciate this kind of feedback from the community and will probably take it into consideration in the process. As stated above, the moderators rarely have any stakes in the direction of the community, so there is no conflict of interest.

The different positions of advantage or disadvantage in the processes of moderation result in certain expectations toward actors, such as the community's expectations of moderators. As Informant D explains,

There is also that expectation from the community that we treat it with a certain level of professionalism. Because you want moderators to be [...] impartial, the community don't necessarily see us as just volunteers. For them, our job is to ensure that the subreddit has a certain level of quality. So, while unpaid, it is truly a job.

However, Informant E has a different impression of the community and its expectations of moderators:

I think a lot of comparisons that you will see is that moderators are janitors, they are here to clean up shit, which is not a flattering comparison, but a fairly fair one. But it also has that idea that moderators are only there to clean up the shit and not necessarily to ensure [...] quality.

This exemplifies just how different the communities are for each subreddit. This can also be due to moderators' approaches to moderation, where they either go unnoticed or have a much more community-involved approach.

Within the process, there are several actors, primarily content creators, content generators, moderators, and game studios. I have identified how game studios and content creators are situated within an economic field, while not having the same

position to negotiate in the process. Game studios have the material advantage of being able to enrich the community with a sense of inclusion in the development of the game, which puts them in a unique position to establish a good relationship with moderators. By contrast, content creators – especially inexperienced ones – come across as detrimental to the community's wellbeing, often trying to bypass the rules. In terms of expectations, the community has varied expectations toward moderators, from upholding a certain quality of content to just ensuring content that breaks the rules is removed. What appears central to these expectations is the absence of consideration of moderators as volunteers; they are rather viewed as an extended arm of the Reddit corporate team. Moderators expect content creators to push the limits of the rules and sometimes even try to get away with breaking them, but they expect game studios to be relatively uninvolved. If they become involved with the community, it is perceived as an opportunity for the moderation team to bring valuable content to the subreddit community.

Decisions

There are two types of decision-making moments in everyday moderation. One is cultural context promotion, where the moderator decides on a case-by-case basis which content should have prominence on the subreddit. This is much more reactive rather than proactive, and does not have a specific sequence. The other decisions are strictly moderation tasks that are more laborious and rigid in their structure. To illustrate this structure, I take the example in **Figure 2**. The figure illustrates the typical flow of a moderator going about daily moderation tasks. In each task, there is a moment when the moderator needs to decide and exercise power.

For moderation, it is only the moderators who take part in the process; no other actors are allowed to participate. Informant E breaks down the different steps as follows:

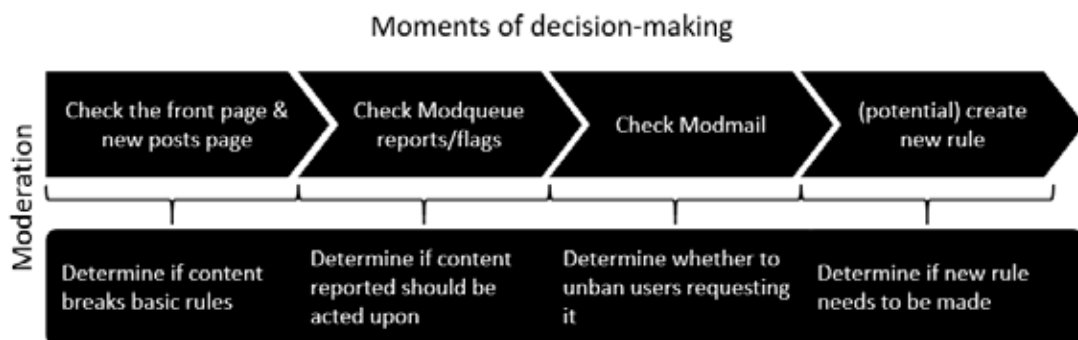


FIGURE 2. Moments of decision-making in gaming subreddits

On Reddit specifically there are like, five or six main tasks. [The] first one is to check the front page, the most basic, and you check if any posts break the rules. That's the page most people are going to see [...]. Then you check New [posts] for rule-breaking posts. Then we have this tool called ModQueue, where everything that users report and everything that gets filtered or flagged by AutoMod will end up in ModQueue for moderator review. [...] Then there is the modmail section, so when someone sends a message to moderators, that's where it ends up, and that's where banned people will often try to contact moderators to get unbanned.

At each stage, the moderator has to decide whether to warn, ban, or unban members. In other cases, when the rules do not allow them to make judgments because the case is a borderline one, the moderators have to change or add new rules.

For cultural context promotion, the moderators decide on content to pin to the top of the subreddit page; create dedicated subpages for certain content; arrange events for the community; or make rules that dictate criteria for posts that will, if not

met, be reported to moderators in the Mod-Queue for review. As Informant B explains,

When we use the word “curate,” we generally tend to refer to the balance of content that appears on the subreddit, particularly on the front page (the top 25 posts). We do this by putting in artificial limits on content, whether that is by deciding what falls under the umbrella of relevance to the subreddit or by creating requirements for posting about certain topics.

Sometimes, the cultural context promotion is done following a request from the game studio. According to Informant D,

They request to post their Twitter news in the community and pin them on the top. In that case, we said yes because it's very relevant content for the community. And it also helps to guide the community on the latest updates. [...] It's more like collaboration and working together, both the community and the creators of the game.

Cultural context promotion can be enacted in different ways and often reacts to the current state of the community. Compared

with moderation, the decision-making for promoting cultural context can include other actors, such as the game studio, but this is primarily because of the unique content that the game studio offers and again reinforces the community's feeling of being close to the developers. On the moderators' side, establishing a relationship with the game studio is a positive achievement, and the moderators achieve a sense of delivering something unique to the community with which they otherwise have mostly negative interactions. For Informant A, this is a platform-related problem:

Reddit doesn't equip moderators with many tools other than removing posts, so most of our interaction with the community is negative or taking their posts away. We wish we had ways to reward our best members or positively reinforce the good ones.

Thus, while it can appear that moderators are primarily an authoritarian force on Reddit, it is largely a matter of limited tools. The tools that the Reddit platform gives moderators generally only have the purpose of negative reinforcement because that is what moderators are expected to do. However, in reality, moderators take on a multitude of roles, sometimes bordering on community management; as Informant C explains,

In addition to managing the subreddit, I also manage the Discord server and subreddit's Twitter account. I announce things. Ask people for feedback. Keep things up to date. Organise and manage events. And most importantly, make decisions for the better[ment] of the community that I, along with my team, manage. So, because of the different areas of constant work that each of us do on the moderator team, it can be comparable to that of being community managers.

The expectations of what it means to be a moderator permeate the Reddit gaming community; many users appear to attach strong discursive meaning to the formal title of the moderator, finding it difficult to accept moderation that is not aligned with their ideas. Informant D explains how users react verbally as a response to moderation:

One other thing I try [...] to keep in mind is, the subreddit belongs to the community, not the moderator, which sometimes when we have to take moderator actions because people break the rules, there are those voices that will speak of moderator overreach. And people who have no power in real life try to lord it over and abuse power on the internet.

In charting all the decision-making moments in the processes of moderation and the actors' different responses, I have identified that moderators exercise their power primarily because of the material affordances of the Reddit platform, where moderation limits them to implementing negative reinforcement on subreddit community members who break the rules. For promotion of cultural context, the decision-making moments are much more retroactive as a response to other actors' requests, especially from game studios, and this can result in an invitation to the decision-making process. The flexibility of promoting cultural context is important because it becomes the only means of positive reinforcement with the community for the moderators. At the same time, it is not naturally part of the intended repertoires of moderation.

Power Relations

Power has been mentioned throughout the analysis; in this subsection, I go into more detail to identify how power manifests itself in a multitude of strategies that can be broadly categorised as restrictive, generative, or resistant. Informant B explains the strategy of the moderation team for

gathering feedback from the community as follows:

When a community reaches the size of our subreddit, it's categorically impossible to please everyone; however, we [got] the impression that most people are satisfied with the way the subreddit is experienced and [run] when we did an anonymous survey...

Gathering feedback to guide future decision-making moments is largely a generative strategy; it invites such actors as content consumers and content generators, who otherwise do not have the means to be vocal within the decision-making processes. However, the attempt to be generative can also result in restrictive strategies. Informant B continues:

We used to have a separate subreddit for meta discussions about the subreddit itself, and on that subreddit, we would also archive all posts that were removed from the front page of the subreddit (the top 25 posts on the /hot category). [...] We simply found the harassment that occurred there to be too much, and it would often become an avenue to brigade posts when people within the community disagreed with individual removals, whether it was because they disagreed with the interpretation or enforcement of the rules or just that they enjoyed the individual post. [...] The subreddit has now been replaced with more frequent feedback threads on the main subreddit, and we generally feel that they are much more constructive as we are able to have better discussion with less harassment, less brigading, and a less self-reinforcing platform to discuss it.

The attempt to be inclusive resulted in users taking the opportunity by intervening with resistant strategies. Brigading is a common phenomenon on Reddit and well-known to the gaming subreddit moderators. It is one strategy among others that falls into the category of active harassment of the entire community as a response to moderation actions; it is often championed by content creators with a significant number of followers that fall into the actor categories of content consumers and content generators. Informant E explains the power game that occurs between moderators and content creators as follows:

The main way content creators try to influence moderators is brigading, which is a concept for using an external source for sending people to brigade the subreddit to impact the vote on decisions and stuff. They generally will complain on Twitter, for example, about one of our decisions, and people will find the post and start commenting on the decision post. But that's a very ineffective way to impact the moderators as it only creates noise.

While this has little effect on the moderators and the decision-making moment, content creators and their followers still restrict the moderators here by blurring the image of what the community wants. In addition, it disrupts the communication channel between the moderators and the community, resulting in the strategy – which was otherwise intended to be retaliation towards moderators – restricting the community at large. This especially affects the content consumers, preventing them from having their voices heard and being included in the decision-making process. While Informant E does not consider brigading to be effective, Informant A has a different view:

We cannot keep track of where and when they get organised, so

it risks going under our radar; hence, it is more serious when we can't report it to the admins or can't prevent harassment.

The strategy that content creators and their followers – who are content generators – adopt takes advantage of being cross-media to limit the advantageous position that moderators otherwise have on the subreddits in terms of assistive tools to perform moderation tasks. It also prevents moderators from collaborating across subreddits and warning each other about particular individuals. In that sense, this strategy limits moderators' capability, and if organised and executed successfully, bypasses the decision-making process. This level of tribalism is something moderators have to actively keep in check, whereas other moderation tasks are more passive.

Content creators are not the only ones to adopt cross-media strategies against the moderation team. Informant B explains how corporations can react toward moderator decisions:

Since our only goal is to make the subreddit offer as much value as possible to the subreddit community, this often means that other stakeholders feel that we're not taking them into account, including the game studio. We have [...] had public-facing personalities within the esports community criticise us on their own platforms (i.e., Twitter accounts), and while we do take that criticism into account, this once again comes back to the issues regarding a disparate point of view.

This strategy is similar to that of brigading by content creators, which seeks to put public pressure on the moderation team from an environment where they are not in control. While these strategies are largely restrictive on moderators, they can be perceived as generative for the content

consumer and content generator, as the strategy informs them about a subjective understanding of potential power misuse, empowering the actors who are outside the decision-making process to distort a moment of power. The strategies and moderators' interactions with the community being reserved for the "underbelly" have consequences on moderators, such as Informant D withdrawing from the community:

I stopped being a part of the community I guess, if I am truly honest to myself. Which is funny, because in the case of the subreddit I moderate for, I still go visit other subreddit communities on the same topic, where I am not the moderator. The one where I moderate, I just connect to it via the modmail and modqueue mostly.

In this section, I have identified how moderators attempt to include other actors in the decision-making process, while maintaining absolute power; however, some actors will use this as an opportunity for intervening with resistant strategies, making any moderation actions a double-edged sword, where solving a problem can potentially cause backlash or disagreement. This is especially the case with brigading, a strategy adopted to corrupt the results of a poll or drown a debate in noise. Brigading is often championed by content creators with a lot of followers, and it takes advantage of cross-media to become organised outside of the Reddit environment, beyond where moderators have an advantage. While content creators have economic incentives and agendas for engaging in the subreddit, their ability to mobilise users can be interpreted as a generative strategy where they empower users to resist the decision-making process and restrict the moderators. Game studios can adopt similar strategies toward moderators, although they are less explicit.

While the decision-making processes of moderation are not a formal participatory

process, as the processes assume that moderators make the decisions exclusively, they have indirect participatory elements in terms of how moderators adopt generative strategies to include all users indirectly in the decision-making processes, as well as in how moderators seek to establish relationships with vocal actors to find a common ground that is best for the community. Other actors' strategies toward the decision-making processes have a similar indirect participatory result: the actors who reside within the economic field (content creators and the game studio) can vocalise their disagreement with the moderators and the decision-making processes on other platforms to circumvent moderators' power and mobilise the less vocal users, such as content consumers and content generators. While the content creators and game studios have an economic incentive for mobilising the less vocal actors, it remains a case of power sharing, empowering the less vocal actors to resist the decision-making process and participate in attempts to restrict moderators.

CONCLUSION

Moderation on subreddits is a case of continual checks and balances between the different actors involved, making moderation actions a double-edged sword, with which solving a problem can potentially cause even more problems in the community's reaction. Moderators must perform tasks that are not necessarily identified with the discursive meaning of moderation, and therefore, are often subject to misinterpretation and confusion among other actors when facing, for example, the promotion of the cultural context decision-making process. History suggests that moderators of gaming communities are especially exposed to potential conflicts and controversies, and game studios, game journalists, and content creators have clearly identified the significance of moderators in their own trajectory. This study shows the continuous wrestle to appease all these actors in various resourceful positions, to the extent that it is impossible

to only credit volunteer community moderators for keeping social media safe and free of harassment, but it is crucial to also acknowledge their dedication to maintaining a positive connection between everyone involved in the participatory culture.

The analysis showed that, while moderators' primary task is to keep the community healthy and satisfied with the balance of content, they must find common ground with the actors, who have the material advantages to prevent tribalism, unrest, and manipulation within the subreddit community. In the decision-making processes of day-to-day moderation, moderators of video game subreddit communities engage in multiple relationships with other actors. While the moderators hold absolute power over the decision-making processes, they continually invite the other actors in the subreddit community to participate indirectly by providing feedback, or more directly by offering them a say in the decision-making process.

The actors in a gaming subreddit community are moderators, Reddit administrators, the game studio the subreddit is dedicated to, content creators, content generators, and content consumers. Upon interacting and establishing common ground with actors who have economic incentives, moderators become a free labour mutation (Terranova 2000: 54). Each actor has different perceptions of moderation and moderators, as well as motivations for engaging with the community that are either cultural or economic; the most striking of these is the game studios' attempt to incorporate moderators into their community feedback loop as a give-and-take relationship in return for the game studio being dedicated to the moderators' community and delivering relevant content. Moderators appreciate this dedication from game studios because they do not expect them to become involved or contribute to the gift economy. In comparison, content creators frequently try to push their content on the subreddit with a purely economic agenda to create traction for their content, sometimes disregarding the community rules.

The political–ideological negotiation between moderators and other actors is largely influenced by expectations of what it means to be a moderator, as well as the platform limitations of Reddit. Actors do not expect moderators to curate content, and the Reddit platform does not offer moderators any tools except for those related to moderating content and negatively reinforcing the rules of the subreddit. Promotion of cultural context is not naturally part of the discursive meaning of moderation. Still, moderators include the community in the decision-making process by gathering feedback through discussion forums, polls, and questionnaires. This moment of power sharing suggests that moderators act largely in good spirit for the community at large, while being forced to favour the needs of the more vocal actors for the sake of the community. On the side of content creators, there is an economic incentive for engaging with the subreddit community, where the approach to this engagement is widely different from that of the game studios. Content creators do not have the material advantage that game studios have, and cannot enter negotiations in the same way with the moderation team. Therefore, some content creators resort to such strategies as brigading, the mobilisation of their fan base, to go against the moderators and sabotage a debate forum or poll to circumvent, resist, and restrict moderators and

their decisions. What has proven effective is to adopt a cross-media or cross-platform approach to eliminate the technical advantages that moderators possess on Reddit. While mobilisation can be perceived as taking advantage of content generators and content consumers to further the economic incentives of the content creator, it remains a case of power sharing because it empowers the less vocal actors to indirectly participate in the decision-making process.

This study has shown that gaming community moderation is crucial for the relationship between corporate actors, content creators, game journalists, and the players, where moderation is largely an altruistic action that often results in moderators feeling more alone or isolated from the community at large, as they primarily derive pleasure from seeing the community thrive, while the everyday tasks become mundane and associated with labour. This is largely because everyday tasks are primarily about dealing with the underbelly of the community. To better the conditions of gaming community moderators, future research should focus on the platforms and game studios, as these appear to be the resourceful actors who could actually help out community moderators by improving the tools available or committing to the community through a dedicated, rather than exploitative, relationship with the moderators.

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