

WHEN FRUSTRATIONS TURN INTO A FIRESTORM: THE COMMUNICATIVE CONSTITUTION OF A COLLECTIVELY FORCEFUL VOICE

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INTRODUCTION

At the 2018 *Blizzcon* fan convention, game developer *Blizzard* revealed its new mobile game *Diablo Immortal* for its long-standing *Diablo* franchise, which left players disappointed, shocked, and angry. In online game communities, especially on *Reddit*, fans rallied together to vent their anger and resentment about the mobile version of their beloved game, and almost overnight, an intense online firestorm emerged that hit the company's reputation tremendously.

To better understand how players formed this strong vocal resistance and shared voice toward *Blizzard*—with many speaking on behalf of the fan community and, hence, for one another—we raise the following research question: *How does a community constitute a collectively forceful voice?*

Organizations have long acknowledged the importance of online communities for they offer easy access to customers' or fans' opinions, perspectives, needs, wishes, and so forth (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011; Kerr, 2017). At the same time, however, they tend to be wary of the small degree of influence they have over these communities, with essentially no control over disseminated and/or discussed content matters (Porter, 2004). Online communities, such as on *Reddit*, can establish themselves as more or less independent, powerful, and persistent places for enthusiasts and think-alikes to connect and exchange. For companies, who to address and how precisely to do so remains an intricate puzzle, as topics change not only frequently but can also oftentimes not be traced back to particular users who hide behind the veil of both collectivity and anonymity (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2018).

Specifically, online game communities are characterized by a high degree of players' involvement in design and development (Perreault & Lynch, 2022), e.g., as players use their online communities to critique updates and changes (Švelch, 2019) or to influence design choices by suggesting new ideas themselves (Prax, 2019). Discussions in online communities around video games are hence often bustling, messy, and plurivocal, with numerous ideas, opinions, and sentiments continuously being brought forward, signaling players' attachment to 'their' game (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Especially persistent game communities (like those on *Reddit*) typically bring together players with similarly high degrees of engagement, which helps players collectively form a shared preferred game culture (Muriel & Crawford, 2018) and represent a

somewhat shared front toward game developers to bring forth their suggestions, recommendations, and critiques with more weight and power (Bennett et al., 2014; Švelch, 2019).

As games turn more and more into co-constructed products (Badrinarayanan et al., 2015), when developers tend to ignore a community's considerations and concerns, players share their aversion and distrust toward developers in the same online community (Murphy, 2014). Along such a fierce *us-versus-them* dynamic, collective efforts are directed *against* developers, from a few scattered fiery responses to a large firestorm building up (Pfeffer et al., 2013), as in the *Diablo Immortal* case.

These interlinkages between online communities and game companies all happen online across various social platforms and, consequently, in and through *communication*. It is through situated sayings and doings that players become organized as one shared front or a collectively forceful voice, either in harmonious or tension-filled relations with game developers. This paper explores exactly that dynamic.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

While extant research has convincingly demonstrated the importance and impact of a collectively forceful community voice (e.g., Salamon, 2023; Leybold & Nadegger, 2022; Frandsen & Johansen, 2018), we lack a precise understanding of how this voice takes shape in the first place—that is, of the process of its situated emergence and subsequent solidification. As stated earlier, we thus ask: *How does a community constitute a collectively forceful voice?* Indeed, when users start raising their voices to communicatively address another actor (here *Blizzard*, the game developer) as a shared front, the question is not *who* is talking as a representative of the community but how many raise their voices as a collective in polyphonic unity (Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017) and how precisely they do so to make themselves heard. By focusing on a specific firestorm and detailly scrutinizing the situated communicative practices unfolding in an online community, we open a particularly illuminating window into these dynamics of how—among a sheer multitude of diverse voices—a powerful voice becomes collectively unified.

Conceptually, we ground our inquiry of how such a collectively forceful voice emerges and gains in power and strength in communicative constitutive thinking (see e.g., Basque et al., 2022; Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). Communication constitutes organization (CCO) scholarship operates from the fundamental premise that all organizational phenomena and organizing processes form, stabilize, and alter in and through situated communicative practices (Basque et al., 2022; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). In other words, organizational phenomena are assumed to be acted, talked, and written into existence as people ‘tune in’ to one another in communicative processes of co-orientation (Brummans et al., 2013; Cooren et al., 2011), which includes extending the concept of communication from the linguistic to the material as non-human actors beyond signs, systems, or procedures (Cooren, 2004) can also express themselves. For example, non-human actors such as attitudes (van Vuuren & Cooren, 2010), strategic visions (Nathues et al., 2021), or technological affordances (Myles et al., 2020) participate in communication too, and are hence able to make a difference in how organizing efforts turn out.

A CCO lens has been applied on many of today's social movements, communities, and forms of resistance that happen to be organized to various degrees in and through social media platforms as digital discursive spaces (e.g., Albu & Etter, 2016; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Leybold & Nadegger, 2023; Jarvis & Eddington, 2021; Laaksonen & Porttikivi, 2021; Myles et al., 2020; Schou et al. 2022; Smith, 2023). However, the emergence of a collective vocal expression following an event-triggered, explosive, or spontaneous happening (such as a firestorm) continues

to be less understood. Although there have been forays toward understanding fluid collectives like *Anonymous* (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), when the phenomenon is not categorizable as a social movement or lacks any organizational structure at all, the precise emergence of a collective voice remains obscured, figuratively ‘coming out of nowhere.’ Firestorms aim to *force* a reaction from a target, and such collective action is most effective when the collective voice speaks in polyphonic unity. To achieve this, members must build on the momentum of a situation (Smith, 2023) and organize a representative voice amidst uncoordinated postings (Jarvis & Eddington, 2021), sharing attitudes and emotions as well as utilizing technological affordances (Etter & Albu, 2021; Nadegger, 2023) within the online community (Cooren, 2020; Duncan, 2013).

Without a shared voice, a collective is merely a mixture of interests with varying levels of engagement. As Taylor et al. (1996) state: “The key term here is voice. It becomes an organization at the moment that an agent is authorized to speak in its name.” (p. 26) The emergence of a collective voice is thus crucial for recognizing actions, such as firestorms, as collective undertakings by community members and, possibly, other stakeholders. Online communities are often referred to as actors (e.g., “The community wants...”), giving them an organizational character. However, who is speaking for the community—i.e., with a collective voice—and with what intention tends to remain unclear and situationally shifting. Some CCO scholars have started better scrutinizing the emergence of such unified voices. For example, Benoit-Barné and Martine (2022) note that speaking with one voice involves unifying multiple voices, grounded in multi-voice. In their turn, Trittin and Schoeneborn (2017) suggest focusing on the inclusion and exclusion of specific voices to better understand organizational polyphony.

We use these valuable, earlier insights and draw upon *ventriloquism* (Cooren, 2010) as an analytical lens to understand the formation of a unified voice in online communities. Metaphorically inspired by the artistic performance of ventriloquists who simultaneously speak for themselves and their puppets, this concept argues that whenever people are interacting, they make present voices beyond their own. For instance, when an online community member invokes a recent gaming experience of both her and a fellow player, we can hear both her voice and the voice of the other player talking, possibly about a feeling they both share toward the game. Adopting a ventriloquial lens helps distill the various voices that take part in interaction and scrutinize their complex interplay—how they clash or merge, push together or pull apart, rub off on each other, travel across interactants, forge connections or force disconnections, as well as how eventually a new, collectively forceful voice emerges from the many singular voices that made it up in the first place. Ventriloquism has been applied to digital platforms to understand movements like the ‘Yellow Vest’ resistance on *YouTube* (Clifton & La Broise, 2020) or vigilantism on a web sleuth *Subreddit* page (Myles et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study’s data was gathered from *Reddit* (subreddit *r/diablo3*) with 131,000 subscribers in November 2018. The data corpus included 124 posts with 4,664 comments/replies from the first post addressing the *Diablo* mobile game announcement at *Blizzcon* until 60 hours thereafter.

Data analysis followed Nathues et al.’s (2021) four-step methodology for ventriloquial analysis. Data was coded topically in data preparation, and categories were built to structure player discussions. We focus on how a new collective voice emerges among players, opposing the game developer *Blizzard* and the mobile *Diablo* game. Through *identifying (step 1)*, we raised three ventriloquial questions to scrutinize the various voices players expressed, focusing on how a collectively forceful voice emerged. By *grouping and relating (steps 2+3)*, we aimed to understand

the emergence and solidification of players' unified voice, grouping voices into three clusters: *Blizzard*, *Diablo Immortal*, and the *community*. When relating ventriloquial figures, we identified three ventriloquial moves in how player contributions align, select, and unify voices in the subreddit.

(1) *Othering Blizzard and Diablo Immortal from the player community* involves members positioning themselves as spokespersons of the community, using the collective 'we' and spokesobjects like previous *Diablo* games, the PC as the core gaming platform, and memes to visualize this separation (Gaudette et al., 2021). This is done by using positive vocalizations (e.g., loyal, faithful) to represent the community and negative vocalizations (e.g., arrogant, greedy, lazy) to portray *Blizzard* as business-oriented or greedy, indifferent to the game community's concerns.

(2) *Silencing critical voices within the player community* occurred as more users joined the subreddit. Some players criticized submissions' negative emotionality and intensity as exaggerated and entitled. Community members countered these voices by either (a) arguing rationally, using solidifying vocalizations, (b) ridiculing comments through negative vocalizations, or (c) insulting members ad hominem. Critics were meta-ventriloquized as *Blizzard* employees (e.g., 'company skills') or silenced through platform affordances (e.g., downvoting) and calls to silence opposing comments (e.g., 'downvoting into oblivion').

(3) *Legitimizing the collective voice for the player community* involved members animating ventriloquial figures of time (e.g., childhood memories), collective attitude (e.g., 'we built *Blizzard*'), and ventriloquizing *Blizzard's* pre-*Blizzcon* announcements in August and October 2018 as deceiving and responsible for players' anger. *Blizzcon*, an event for the core PC player-base, was vocalized as the wrong venue for announcing a mobile game, legitimizing players' 'right to rage.' Community members demanded an official apology or explanation by vocalizing what '*Blizzard* should have said' and disseminating official or third-party media announcements and employee quotes to amplify their efforts.

In the following, we *show (step 4)* one vignette from our dataset for illustration.

VIGNETTE

The ground-zero post from November 2, 2018, garnered significant attention with a score of 3,072, a 93% upvote rating, and 931 reactions, serving as a centerpiece in the collective co-orientation and negotiation of community members. In a longer interaction within this post, Member 24 attempts to *silence* Member 23's pro-*Blizzard* attitude and critical voice.

- 1 Member 21 **(POST, +3K)** FOR FUCKS SAKE. THE BIG ANNOUNCEMENT IS MOBILE GAME?
- 2 I AM SO SALTY NOW.
- 3 edit: Anything but mobile game. Why is it so hard to check what community wants. Does
- 4 any of you asked for a mobile game? People love to play games while taking crap. I don't
- 5 think there are that much players consider smart phones as gaming console.
- 6 Member 23 **(COMMENT, -7)** I know I'll get downvoted to hell but I'm excited. I play mobile games. I'm a
- 7 working adult with a family and sometimes I just want to dick around on my phone for 10
- 8 minutes when I have some time.
- 9 And frankly, ARPG's are a big genre on mobile and it's low-hanging fruit for the king of
- 10 ARPG's to step in and take a slice of the pie. And we all know that this game is going to
- 11 fund development of D4.

- 12 The sky isn't falling. It's just another game you don't have any interest in. There are plenty
 13 of them around, even ones made by Blizzard. Deep breaths...
- 14 Member 24 **(REPLY, -1)** Its a big kick in the nuts for diablo fans. That resources are spent on fake
 15 gamers like you instead of the people that made the franchise big
- 16 Member 23 **(REPLY, +1)** Begging the question fallacy.
 17 Look, I'm sorry you and others feel personally disappointed. But that doesn't mean
 18 anyone who doesn't agree with you is automatically a "fake gamer" and not a fan of
 19 Diablo. Take your ridiculous entitled anger out on the people who made the decision to
 20 make this game, not on those of us who want to just enjoy ourselves.
- 21 Member 24 **(REPLY, +1)** It's easy, mobile gaming is the death of a serious gaming industry why would
 22 a firm spend more money on a non mobile game when a mobile game costs less and
 23 gets in that sweet quasi gambling microtransactions
- 24 Member 23 **(REPLY, +1)** People have been saying this for years and it hasn't happened yet.
 25 To answer your question, the reason why they'd spend on a non-mobile game is
 26 because, as people on here won't shut the fuck up about, PC gamers don't want a mobile
 27 game. They're two different markets that don't compete with each other. Blizzard can
 28 make two games that don't cannibalize each other's sales and make double the money.
 29 It's pretty win/win for them.

Member 21 lays the ground for collective action by explicitly animating their anger and frustration with exclamations in capitals over the mobile game announcement, formulated as a rhetorical question (lines 1-2). This is followed up by several aspects: Amongst others, Member 21 *others* the mobile platform as the wrong platform for *Diablo* players and *Blizzard* as deaf to what the community is expecting.

Member 23 comments on this post, appeasing the community that he is aware that his argument stands in opposition to the already forming collective voice of the subreddit community. He expects collective punishment (line 6) when outing himself as an avid mobile gamer (lines 6-7), addressing the already vocalized *othering* between PC and mobile gamers. He directly points to a seemingly accepted *silencing* practice in the subreddit and does indeed receive community members actions of downvoting (the comment scored on -7). Member 23 presents himself as a gamer but argues that he has little time to play because he is a “working adult with a family” (lines 7-8). He implicitly animates his personal gamer experience by praising Diablo as the ruling “king of the ARPG¹” genre (line 9), and kings have the right to take a slice from the lucrative mobile market (line 10). He positions himself inside the Diablo community, voicing that “we all know that this game is going to fund development of D4” (lines 10-11); the expected sequel game to be announced at Blizzcon. He signifies that he is also disappointed and empathetically sides with the angry community voice (lines 12-13).

Member 24 replies to Member 23’s rational comment with an angry one (line 14) and dramatically re-establishes the line between the *Community*, *Diablo Immortal*, and *Blizzard*. He enforces this *othering* by stating that *Diablo Immortal* is stealing resources (lines 14-15), ejects Member 23 from the *Diablo* community, and so directly *silences* him. He *legitimizes* this action by stating that Diablo fans like himself (line 15) have the right to voice their anger and to be upset.

Member 23 responds, stating how they feel sorry for Member 24 (line 17); here addressing Member 24 as a representative of the angry voices of the community and relating to the ongoing emotional player discussions (line 17). He reminds Member 24 though that the developers (lines 19-20) should be the addressee of their voiced anger and not insulting those rational in the *Diablo* community players (line 20).

Member 24's response *legitimizes* the collective outcry and vocalizes a fight for life or "death of a serious gaming industry" (line 21); materializing the already ongoing emerging narrative between PC vs. mobile as the real battle taking place. Mobile games "cost less" (line 22) and include malicious business practices (line 23).

Member 23 replies and speaks rationally, juxtaposing angry and rational voices in the community that "People have been saying this for years", but that the death of the industry "hasn't happened yet", but that the death of the industry "hasn't happened yet" (line 24). He then strengthens the voiced *othering* between PC *Diablo* fans and mobile gamers. He directly points at the angry voices in the community, arguing that Blizzard understands "PC gamers don't want a mobile game" as these community members "won't shut the fuck up about" (line 26) this.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we explore how online communities, despite their dispersed and multivocal nature, can form a unified and forceful voice during moments of collective frustration. By examining the firestorm ignited by *Blizzard Entertainment's Diablo Immortal* announcement, we show how online discourses on platforms like *Reddit* enable spontaneous yet organized resistance. The practices of *othering*, *silencing*, and *legitimizing* transform individual expressions into a powerful collective front. These practices unify internal voices and amplify collective expressiveness, allowing the community to influence organizations and public discourse.

Our findings highlight the dual nature of online communities: while their independence and anonymity foster inclusivity in giving a voice to everyone, they also facilitate exclusion and polarization, as seen in the silencing of dissenting voices. This paradox underscores the complexity of digital resistance (e.g., Etter & Albu, 2021), as well as demonstrates the potential for online platforms to act as spaces of both empowerment and contention, where communities negotiate their identities and collective goals (e.g., Gaudette et al., 2021; Smith, 2023).

This research highlights the importance of meaningful engagement with online communities for organizations. Companies should view these spaces as valuable participatory environments for feedback and innovation, especially in times of crisis (e.g., Dobusch & Kapeller, 2018; Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). Failure to do so, as seen in *Blizzard's* case, risks alienating core audiences and intensifying public backlash. We call for further research on cross-platform dynamics, the role of algorithms and platform affordances in amplifying or dampening collective voices, and the long-term consequences of firestorms for communities and organizations. As social media discourses become increasingly powerful, understanding the formation of collectively forceful voices is crucial for digital engagement.

ENDNOTES

1. ARPG = Action Roleplaying Game – the genre type that *Diablo* has established in 1996.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR(S)