# A Study on the Interaction Between Fan Community and Game Developer in the Process of Game Development and Its Impact in the Digital Era: A Case Study of Baldur's Gate 3

Xiao Xiao
*College of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Maritime University, Shanghai, 201306, China*

Keywords: Fan Community, Community Influence, Two-Way Interaction.

Abstract: With the rapid development of digital technology, the role of the fan community in game development is becoming more and more prominent. Taking Baldur's Gate 3 as a case study, this study analyzes in depth the two-way interaction process between Larian Studios and the player community in the feedback mechanism. This study also uses thematic analysis to interpret the content of the interaction between Larian Studios and players on the official forums, and further explores the challenges posed by this mode of interaction, such as the complexity of the feedback screening, the fragmentation of the development process, and the restriction of the developer's freedom of creativity. The findings provide new perspectives on the understanding of the interaction mechanism between the fan community and developer, as well as important references for future game design and development practices on how to strike a balance between satisfying players' needs and maintaining developers' originality.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's society where digital technology is booming, fan communities are gradually expanding their voice on major media platforms. They are no longer just consumers, but have become content creators and feedback providers. Game fan communities are no exception. They establish an interactive channel with developers through game platforms. This two-way communication profoundly impacts optimizing game content, improving player satisfaction, and adjusting development direction.

Both domestic and international studies on the interaction between the game fan community and game developers have made certain progress. Most domestic studies analyze the impact of interaction on fan communities based on the theory of participatory culture. For example, one researcher points out that the domestic mobile game Onmyoji indirectly supports and maintains community vitality by establishing the official QQ group, namely a virtual space, during development. This interaction enhanced players' sense of belonging and identity, formed a decentralized support system, and strengthened the connection between players (Ying, 2018). This study also shows the increasing prevalence of fan involvement in game development through feedback, reflecting the growing influence of fan communities in game development.

Overseas scholars have explored this issue more systematically and theoretically, mainly focusing on the impact of interaction on game developers. As early as 2011, some researchers observed that developers are provided with opportunities to gain inspiration online by fan communities (Gidhagen et al., 2011). In recent years, studies have shown that game distribution platforms, like Steam, proactively offer continuous updates to players and are willing to encourage game owners to post commodity news to promote interaction (Svelch, 2019). These studies reflect the intention of game developers to improve their games by integrating player feedback, as well as the increased importance developers place on fan communities.

This study takes the development process of the video game Baldur's Gate 3 as a case study to analyze the specific manifestations of this interaction in the actual development process. This study also adopts a thematic analysis to explore the theme of two-way communication between fan community and developer and its impact by interpreting in detail the specific content of fan feedback in official forums and exploring how it affects the actual outcome of game design.



Xiao, X.
A Study on the Interaction Between Fan Community and Game Developer in the Process of Game Development and Its Impact in the Digital Era: A Case Study of Baldur's Gate 3.
DOI: 10.5220/0013961900004912

In *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Innovative Education and Social Development (IESD 2025)*, pages 11-16
ISBN: 978-989-758-779-5

# 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing related studies can be categorized into three types according to different emphases. The first type of research focuses on fan communities, which in the early stage focused on the construction of community identity and later shifted to the user interaction mode within the community. An early domestic study illustrated the construction process of fan communities through case studies and interviews, in which fan communities would internally regulate members' behaviors through clear rules and regulations to ensure that new members could quickly integrate and identify with the community's norms, thus expanding the scale of fan communities (Wang, 2017). In another recent foreign study, the researcher studied topic interactions in fan communities through Cyber-ethnography, pointing out that interactions within the community enhance fans' sense of belonging and loyalty to the community (Popova, 2020). It can be seen that most of the existing studies focus on the self-organization of fan communities and their internal culture, and fewer explore the external connections of fan communities and their impact.

The second type of research focuses on the game developers' focus in the game development process. Most of the researchers have explored the two perspectives of game development technology and game content management. From the perspective of game development technology, researchers test different game engines to find the best solution to improve the graphics performance and gameplay. They argue that the emergence of the game engine Unity has lowered the threshold of game development, enabling game developers to present games in a more creative and immersive way (Nicoll et al., 2019). In terms of game content management, when designing a game, developers must maintain a balance between entertainment parts and serious parts containing educational, health, and other purposes. A well-presented effect is achieved by ensuring that the serious part does not detract from the player's gaming experience, while at the same time, the gaming experience must not undermine the effectiveness of realizing the serious part (Caserman et al., 2020). It can be seen that existing research tends to focus on exploring internal game factors, and lacks in-depth exploration of interactive feedback from the fan community, which is also an important external factor.

The third type of research focuses on the relationship between fan communities and game development. In recent years, researchers have argued that this interaction plays an important role in the game development process, not only shaping the player's gaming experience but also influencing the direction of game design (Livingston et al., 2011). It has also been shown that feedback from fan communities can significantly influence game design decisions (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011). However, most of the existing studies have focused on the positive effects of community participation, and fewer have analyzed the pressure or design conflicts that player feedback may bring.

Existing studies have explored the interaction between the fan community and game developers to some extent, but obvious research gaps exist. First, existing studies usually focus on the unilateral motives of fan communities or game developers, and rarely build bridges between the two. Second, existing studies mostly rely on interview data, which is easily influenced by personal opinions or emotional factors, resulting in a lack of objectivity and an inability to fully reflect the facts. This limits the understanding of the complex interactions between fans and developers, and leads to an incomplete study of the positive and negative impacts.

This study focuses on the two-way communication between the fan community and game developers in the development process and its impact in the digital era, mainly researching the main question of how two-way communication affects the design decisions in the game development process. This study aims to fill the aforementioned gap, and provide new perspectives on fan-developer interactions as well as references for game developers' future design decisions.

In summary, the interaction between the fan community and game developers is an area that deserves in-depth research. Although existing studies have provided important perspectives, there is still a need to explore the specific mechanisms by which fan communities influence game development. This study will examine the main question of how two-way communication influences design decisions during game development, laying the foundation for further research on this topic.

# 3 METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Theoretical Framework

The concept of game community is so broad that some researchers have subdivided it into three different types, namely developer type, player type and tester type. First, there is the developer type,

which consists of users with high technical skills. In some cases, developers choose to develop certain parts of their games with the help of this type of user community, which often allows for direct interaction with the developers. Next is the player type. They tend to use specific techniques or tools to enhance or fine-tune the game, or to create additional content, making their work available to other users in the form of mods to enhance the game experience. At the same time, they also offer help to other players on major platforms. There is usually more interaction within the communities and less direct contact with the developers. Finally, there is the tester type, which consists of users who test the game during the development phase. Their main duty is to look for bugs or inaccuracies in the game program, as well as to make suggestions for game content (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011). This study is based on this theoretical framework and uses the community of tester type as the main object of study.

### 3.2 Study Design

In order to analyze the two-way communication process between the fan community and game developer in the process of game development in the digital era and its specific impact, this study adopts qualitative research, choosing Baldur's Gate 3 as a case study and selecting the interactive content between the game's tester community and the developer, Larian Studios, as the main text for analysis. The data of this study comes from the posts in the Suggestions & Feedback section under the classification of Baldur's Gate 3 in the Larian Forums. The number of replies is used as a filtering criterion to sort the posts in descending order, and the posts with several replies higher than one hundred are analyzed in a focused manner. Based on the themes and trends of the interactions in the posts, this study analyzes the impact of the feedback from the tester-type community on the direction of the game's development.

## 4 TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION BETWEEN FAN COMMUNITY AND GAME DEVELOPER IN THE GAME DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

### 4.1 Case Introduction

Baldur's Gate 3 is a role-playing game set in Dungeons & Dragons created by Larian Studios. It was released on October 6, 2020, as Early Access and on August 3, 2023 for the full version. After the release of Early Access, the game created a lot of discussions within the player community, and a fan community was formed based on the game. The fan community provided feedback through various platforms, including the official Larian Forums, and Larian Studios made adjustments and changes based on this feedback. In 2023, the game won several awards for its great production. In 2024, the game was also nominated for Best Community Support at the Game Awards. This study considers it to be typical.

### 4.2 Interaction Mechanism

During the development of Baldur's Gate 3, the interactions between the fan community and the developer show the following two patterns: first, the developer is usually the first initiator of the interaction; Second, the fan community is usually the first to provide feedback. Developer-directed interactions usually take the form of news announcements, development updates, and patch updates, to keep in touch with players at all stages of game development, collect feedback, and guiding player expectations. In contrast, the feedback provided by the fan community is usually in the form of player reviews, community discussions and bug reports. Players are empowered to directly influence early game content and functionality at all stages of a game's development, especially during the testing phase.

From the timeline, the game developer takes the lead in releasing a version of the game. After playing the game, players post their suggestions and feedback through relevant platforms, which constitutes a basic interaction. After seeing the feedback, the developer will adopt the reasonable content, and the adjusted content will be sent back to the players in the form of a patch. After the release of the patch, players will again make suggestions on the adjusted version, which constitutes a cycle of interaction. For example, Larian Studios released the Early Access of Baldur's Gate 3 at an early stage and built Suggestions and Feedback section in the official forums to collect feedback from players. In a post titled Focused Feedback: Spells, the posting player offered a detailed analysis and suggestions for spell skills in the game. He compared the spells in the Dungeons & Dragons worldview to those in the game, listed the skills that were missing from the game, and suggested that some of them - such as Cloud of Daggers - be implemented. The forum's administrators locked and

topped the post after seeing it, signaling the importance of this. In a subsequent hotfix update, Larian did indeed add some of the skills mentioned above. In a post titled Spell timing and other spell issues, a player suggested that Dagger Cloud's spell duration was too long, and gave a specific setting for Dagger Cloud in the context of Dungeons & Dragons, which he hoped Larian would modify. This started a cycle of interaction and feedback.

Baldur's Gate 3 has gone through multiple feedback loops during its development, with each round of feedback pushing the developers to make adjustments to the game, from rudimentary player suggestions to the latest bug fixes. And as the development process progressed, the content of the interactions between developers and players changed. Initial communication focused on adjustments to the game's framework and basic design. As development progressed, player feedback became more in-depth and specific, involving all aspects of the game, such as character design, combat mechanics, and plot pacing. At a later stage, more technical details and optimization directions became the focus of discussion. Through multiple updates and fixes, the developer further optimized the game content on the basis of absorbing player feedback, thus ensuring the high quality of the final game version.

Specifically, through the early test and repeated polishing, Baldur's Gate 3's framework and basic settings tended to be rigorous and solid. In the months after its official release, the main direction of game patches 1 to 3 was the plot flow and combat gameplay adjustment. In 2024, the game patches mainly focused on optimization and repair, and patch 6 made rich optimization adjustments to the interface UI and character details. With the release of Patch 7, the game itself was almost complete. As the timeline went on, the content of the game patches was gradually refined from macro to micro, implying a steady improvement in the quality of the game, which could not be separated from the active communication between the fan community and Larian Studios.

## 4.3 The Influence of Interaction

Admittedly, this two-way interaction model has significant affordance between both the fan community and the game developer. For the fan community, players are able to express their personal preferences, suggestions, and expectations through interaction, prompting developers to customize the game experience. This interaction not only allows players to feel that they influence the direction of the game's content and design, but also enhances their sense of belonging to the game. For game developers, this interaction allows them to identify problems at an early stage, avoiding tedious post-release fixes, and patch updates can respond more quickly to player needs, thus improving game quality and player satisfaction. In addition, by actively interacting with players, developers demonstrate the importance they place on player feedback, boosting player trust and loyalty, promoting a word-of-mouth effect, and attracting more new players to join. However, there are two sides to the coin, and this model also has certain constraints.

First, from the perspective of the interaction model itself, the constraint is reflected in the complexity of feedback screening and information integration. With the development of information technology and the increasing popularity of media platforms, traditional tree-structure network communication has been replaced (Choi et al., 2015). Researchers have studied the information patterns exhibited on popular platforms, and they have concluded that individuals are now unable to cope with the overwhelming amount of data that continues to grow on such platforms (Han et al., 2014). This is also true for developers. On social platforms, only a small number of actively vocal fans or opinion leaders are likely to have their suggestions taken on board by developers, which can lead to a tendency for developers to ignore the less active but still importantly opinionated player base. For example, in a post titled Early Access Feedback/Suggestions | Spoilers, the poster made nine detailed suggestions for the game's Early Access, most of which, such as character appearance and spell types, fit the general needs of players. In addition to this, he brought up a less discussed point, namely item count balance. He argued that the excessive number of items in the game, such as scrolls, potions, and explosives, should be avoided to prevent players from using them uncontrollably, as a way to enhance the preciousness and strategy of the items. However, this post did not gain much discussion, with only 256 views and 0 replies, while in the actual gameplay, the supplies were still abundant, and even often overflowed.

Second, from the perspective of the game development model, the constraint is reflected in the fragmentation of the development process and the decline in development efficiency. Traditional game development usually follows an established linear schedule, including conceptual design, prototype testing, formal development and final release, emphasizing the structured and staged nature of the development process. In today's digital era, however,

players instantly offer suggestions and opinions through social media, forums, or in-game feedback channels. This real-time feature conflicts with the traditional game development cycle. The traditional waterfall development is no longer adaptable, and developers are forced to turn to fragmented agile development. Every time they collect feedback and make adjustments, developers need to pause the original work plan and reallocate resources and time, which will, to a certain extent, reduce the game's development efficiency. As a matter of fact, the Early Access of Baldur's Gate 3 was in operation for nearly three years, and the release of the full version on the PlayStation 5 platform has been postponed from August 31st to September 6th. This shows the magnitude of the workload.

Third, from the perspective of game design decisions, the constraint is reflected in limited creation. Developers' over-reliance on fan feedback may limit their expression, leading them to make adjustments only within the framework of players' expectations, without daring to make big innovations or risky attempts. Some innovative changes in-game updates may even be abandoned because they do not meet the needs of mainstream players. For example, in Hotfix 21 update in early March 2024, Baldur's Gate 3 changed the development of the romance between Minthara and Dark Urge. If Dark Urge is free from the control of his father god, Bhaal, Minthara will break up with him. This upset many fans and the forums were filled with opposition for a while. Although some professional game executives such as Rhiannon Bevan and James Troughton pointed out that the change was justified in terms of characterization, Larian subsequently claimed that it was an unintentional change and patched it (Bevan,2024; Troughton,2024). The question of whether or not this change was intentional has been under debate, but it is possible to find that the fan community sometimes generates extreme feedback due to strong favoritism or antipathy towards a character or storyline. This type of feedback is contagious but sometimes irrational, and developers who pay too much attention to and pander to this negative sentiment may result in increased pressure to weigh the balance between satisfying player needs and adhering to original design, and characterizations that lose their original conflict and dramatic tension, further affecting the game's artistry and narrative depth.

# 5 CONCLUSION

Game development in the digital age is facing a profound change in the interaction model between players and developers. By analyzing the case of Baldur's Gate 3, this study explores the mechanism of two-way communication between the fan community and the developer and its impact on the game development process. The study shows that this interaction model not only changes the traditional development path, but also pushes the development process in a more dynamic and open direction. However, the challenges beneath it can not be ignored either. As discussed in Section 4, interactions face limitations such as underrepresentation of feedback, development fragmentation, and limited innovation. It is essential to understand these issues and actively seek solutions.

The research in this paper provides empirical support for academics in the field of user engagement and co-design, filling the gaps in existing research on the specific processes and limitations of two-way interaction. It also provides food for thought for actual game developers to find a balance between managing player feedback and maintaining creative freedom, namely reflecting on and improving the management of interactions in order to avoid over-reliance on player feedback and to ensure creative freedom and the long-term competitiveness of their products.

Although this study delves into the two-way communication between the fan community and the game developers during the development of Baldur's Gate 3 and its impact, there are still limitations. This study only focuses on the single case of Baldur's Gate 3. Despite being a representative game, its interaction patterns with other game projects may differ significantly and cannot be fully representative of all games. Second, this study mainly relies on the feedback posts and player interaction data in the official forums of Larian, and fails to comprehensively cover all feedback channels. As a result, the results of the study may not fully demonstrate all voices of the fan community, especially the views of silent players who have not expressed their opinions in public forums.

Future research can explore the interaction patterns between fan communities and developers and their impacts on different types of games through comparative analysis of multiple game cases to more fully understand the universality and specificity of fan community-developer interactions. It can also start from the more specific topic of the mechanism of the role of fans' emotional expression on game design

decisions, and analyze the process of influence in detail.

In the future, the collaborative relationship between fan communities and developers will play a more important role in the game industry. Related developers may pay attention to the long-term impact of the interactive model on the development process, actively adapt to this change, and seek a new balance between development efficiency and creative expression. It is hoped that a better integration between fans and developers in the near future will create vibrant and innovative games together, and inject sustained momentum into the development of the game industry.

## REFERENCES


Burger-Helmchen, T., & Cohendet, P. 2011. User communities and social software in the video game industry. *Long Range Planning*, *44*(5-6), 317-343.

Caserman, P., Hoffmann, K., Müller, P., Schaub, M., Straßburg, K., Wiemeyer, J., ... & Göbel, S. 2020. Quality criteria for serious games: serious part, game part, and balance. *JMIR serious games*, *8*(3), e19037.

Choi, D., Han, J., Chung, T., Ahn, Y. Y., Chun, B. G., & Kwon, T. T. 2015, November. Characterizing conversation patterns in reddit: From the perspectives of content properties and user participation behaviors. In *Proceedings of the 2015 acm on conf. on online social networks* (pp. 233-243).

Gidhagen, M., Persson Ridell, O., & Sörhammar, D. 2011. The orchestrating firm: value creation in the video game industry. *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal*, *21*(4), 392-409.

Han, J., Choi, D., Chun, B. G., Kwon, T., Kim, H. C., & Choi, Y. 2014. Collecting, organizing, and sharing pins in pinterest: interest-driven or social-driven?. *ACM SIGMETRICS Performance Evaluation Review*, *42*(1), 15-27.

James Troughton, *Minthara Is Right To Leave Redeemed Durge In Baldur's Gate 3*,2024.3.8, 2024.12.4, https://www.thegamer.com/minthara-is-right-to-leave-redeemed-dark-urge-in-baldurs-gate-3/

Livingston, I. J., Mandryk, R. L., & Stanley, K. G. 2010, May. Critic-proofing: how using critic reviews and game genres can refine heuristic evaluations. In *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the future of game design and technology* (pp. 48-55).

Nicoll, B., Keogh, B., Nicoll, B., & Keogh, B. 2019. *The Unity game engine and the circuits of cultural software* (pp. 1-21). Springer International Publishing.

Popova, M. 2020. Follow the trope: A digital (auto) ethnography for fan studies. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *33*.

Rhiannon Bevan, *Baldur's Gate 3 Update Changes Minthara Romance, Fans Furious*, 2024.3.8, 2024.12.4, https://www.thegamer.com/baldurs-gate-3-minthara-romance-breaks-up-with-redeemed-dark-urge-update/

Švelch, J. 2019. Resisting the perpetual update: Struggles against protocological power in video games. *New Media & Society*, *21*(7), 1594-1612.

Wang, Y. 2017. Research on the formation mechanism of fan community in the Internet era —— Take Lu Han fan group "Deer fan" as an example. *Academics in China* (03), 91-103 + 324-325.

Ying, R. 2018. *Social interaction in games: Community communication analysis of mobile game players* Master's thesis, Shaanxi Normal University.