

# Disconnection in the Games Community at WPI

An Interactive Qualifying Project submitted to the faculty of  
Worcester Polytechnic Institute in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interactive Media and  
Game Development



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# Abstract

The goal of this project was to get a sense of the community around games and game development at WPI and why it was so disconnected. After considering our options, we decided to conduct a survey to gauge students' knowledge of, access to, and membership in games-related groups. We found that half of students wish they could participate more in the games community than they currently do. Thus, the primary barriers of schoolwork and scheduling conflicts must be addressed in order to address the disconnect in the community.

# Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Tim Loew for being as much a part of the team as the rest of us, to Tom Gilmour for giving invaluable advice when our team was in crisis, and to Gillian Smith for bearing with us.

# Authorship

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# Introduction

Community is a basic aspect of human nature. Humans need community almost as much as they need shelter. On Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a sense of belonging is listed as being only slightly less important than physical safety. (Maslow, 1943) Community is an important factor in the happiness of students, as the level of alienation university students experience has a significant negative impact on their general satisfaction. (Kaçire, 2016, p 43). In academic spaces, students require a sense of community to remain psychologically healthy (Tulane University, 2020)

One potential source of community for college students is video games. 60% of Americans aged 18-29 play games (Pew Research Center, 2017), and these games have become points of connection for students and lead to the creation of whole communities around them. Likewise, games are a big part of the culture at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). The school is home to the Interactive Media and Game Development (IMGD) program, one of the strongest game development programs in the country, currently ranked 14th by the Princeton Review among game design programs at US colleges (Princeton Review, 2023). As such, the games community at WPI has been a place for both casual players and the more than 200 students in the IMGD program who also make games.

When the COVID-19 pandemic became widespread, communities adapted to social distancing by moving to online platforms. As people returned to pre-pandemic life, however, many communities struggled to adapt. We have had trouble finding information about the community even while making a concerted effort to research it despite interacting with the social loops intended to circulate this information. In addition, networking is one of the most important aspects of preparing students for the professional world, doubly so for that of game development. As one of the top game development programs in the country, we have a responsibility to students to bring this community together and allow that networking to take place.

The first step, naturally, was to get a handle on the problem. Therein lies the challenge of the project, the paradox at the heart of the issue- how do you understand disconnection in a community when it's difficult to reach the people who feel disconnected? We struggled to map the community because we didn't know where to start. The majority of our time on the project was spent probing and trying to find the correct way to reach the community.

In the survey we conducted, 50% of survey respondents stated that they would like to participate in more game-related groups than they currently do, with a further 37.5% stating that they were unsure whether they would like to participate more or not, leaving only 12.5% of respondents sure that they are getting their fill of game-related groups on campus. Our intention was to identify some of the barriers preventing both players and makers from joining

the groups that already exist and to examine the significance of those barriers. In order to form a more cohesive community, these barriers must be removed, circumvented, or their impacts otherwise mitigated. However, it is impossible to attack these barriers without knowing what they are; therefore, we must identify them before we can begin to tackle them as an issue.

Through this report, we will establish the context in which the problem of disconnected communities exists, explain how we gathered information, analyze the results of our survey, and discuss potential recommendations for strengthening the games community at WPI and investigating the matter further.

## Background

WPI's Interactive Media and Game Development program spans over 200 students, many of whom share a common interest in games. WPI's games community, however, is not only made of IMGD students, but any student on campus with an interest in playing or making video games as a hobby or as non-majors and non-minors taking IMGD classes. The connection over a variety of physical and digital games allowed students to have in-person interactions with other students outside of their majors. This community, however, would face struggles in the wake of pandemic.

While many problems with the connectivity of the community around games and game development at WPI existed prior to 2020 and the onset of COVID-19, the pandemic exacerbated many of the issues and introduced new ones. Many events and groups whose meetings primarily took place in in-person settings, such as the Worcester Game Pile, a community-based games meetup, could not adapt to the now primarily online settings that reasonable health and safety precautions mandated. Online classes and minimal time spent on-campus also made it more difficult for people to make friends with classmates, thereby limiting their ability to form new groups or hear about existing groups from classmates. COVID-19 also triggered a 27.6% increase in cases of major depressive disorder and a 25.6% increase in cases of anxiety disorders (World Health Organization, 2022) Loss of motivation or interest in hobbies or passions is a symptom of major depressive disorder, while self-isolation is a symptom of both major depressive disorder and anxiety. Both symptoms could lead to a dwindling interest in clubs and organizations from those who are being reached by the messaging, thereby exacerbating the need to expand the number of people being reached to even maintain the community's size, let alone increase it.

The onset of the pandemic in early to mid 2020 drastically changed the world of those attending WPI. This included, but was not limited to, how they would attend school, how they could interact and make connections, and how health care-including mental health care- is received. With the timing of the onset of the pandemic for students coming onto WPI's campus to find the necessary resources or connect with other students. According to the WPI Task Force Report (2022):

"Members of the community report difficulty finding the information they need and are unaware of existing resources, fostering a lack of trust in the university." (p. 6). There has been a struggle to return to normalcy and action in the wake of the pandemic. A lack of community can exacerbate issues with mental health, while a strong community can be a protective force. Activities based around the campus- such as club meetings, game jams, or player meetups- are one of the best ways to get students to form social connections." (Riverside Trauma Center, 2022, p3)

Additionally, the lack of community can impact campus culture, as a "shortage of in-person interactions outside of courses led to a prolonged disruption of student culture that had been well-established in previous years." (Matticoli, 2022, p. 9). Being from the class of 2024, we experienced firsthand the issues associated with the community, and for the same reason, never experienced WPI in its pre-pandemic form. Even the class of 2023 never experienced a full year, as the pandemic hit them during their first C-Term. With them graduating shortly after the publication of this report, soon no current undergrad student, with the exception of those who took more than four years to earn a degree, will have seen WPI's community at its pre-pandemic height. While performing research for our IQP, we would quickly find that the Games Community at WPI is incredibly split, and its scope is difficult to find.

Rather than any material resources, students were in need of direction, in access to the institutional knowledge and community that are what set a school like WPI apart, which has



fallen into disrepair as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Matticoli, 2022, p8) A similar study was performed on the WPI CS department in 2023, which resulted in recommendations including non-professional student organizations and an increase in advertisements and cross-club collaborations. (Plante and Guo, 2023, p108-109)

## Methodology

In order to gather data for this project, we conducted a survey, and followed up in interviews with respondents who wished to be interviewed.

### Survey Design

Our survey design was based upon three overarching research questions:

1. What game-related groups and clubs exist at WPI?
2. How do people find out about these clubs at WPI?
3. Why might people choose not to participate in these clubs or events?

We devised several survey questions that could help us answer those three big questions, using a combination of multiple choice and free response questions to collect both quantitative and qualitative data while accounting for gaps in our own knowledge.

1. What types of games community groups are you a part of on campus? (*"Groups that make games," "Groups that play games," "Other," and "Not part of any group"*)
2. What groups on campus are you aware of that are about making games?
3. What groups on campus are you aware of that are about playing games?
4. How did you find out about these groups? (*"Saw their poster displayed somewhere on campus," "Found them through a school-sponsored Discord Server," "Saw them at the Activities Fair or Accepted Student Day," "Heard about them from a friend who was in the group," "Stumbled upon their meeting spot," and "Other"*)
5. Do you wish you could participate in more groups or events than you're currently in? (*"Yes," "No," or "Unsure"*)
6. What prevents you from participating in groups or events on campus? (*"Schedule conflicts," "Group meetings are late in the night," "Distance from campus makes it difficult to go to meetings," "Schoolwork takes priority," "Groups or events I want to participate in don't exist," "Don't know what groups or events exist on campus," and "Not interested in participating in any groups on campus"*)
7. What kinds of events would you like to see on campus? Alternatively, what kind of events would you like to see more of?
8. What do you like about the games community on campus?
9. What do you think could be better about the games community on campus?

The survey also included the following demographic questions and asked some respondents if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview:

10. What is your gender? (*“Female,” “Male,” “Nonbinary,” “Prefer not to disclose,” and “Prefer to self-describe”*)
11. Which of the following describes you best? (*“IMGD BA Major,” “IMGD BS Major,” “IMGD Minor,” “Non-IMGD Major,” or “Faculty”*)
12. What is your projected graduating year? (*“2023,” “2024,” “2025,” “2026,” “Graduate Student,” or “Not a Student”*)
13. How far from campus do you live? (*“On Campus,” “Near Campus in ‘On Campus Housing,’” or “Off Campus Housing”*)
14. Are you a representative in a club belonging to the games community on campus? (*“Yes,” or “No”*)
15. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview conducted by the games Community IQP regarding your experience running the club? (*“Yes,” or “No”*)
16. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview conducted by the Games Community IQP regarding any difficulties you’ve had participating in any game-related club? (*“Yes,” or “No”*)

We chose Qualtrics as our survey platform. Qualtrics would allow us to set up survey logic so that questions could be hidden depending on respondents’ previous answers, a feature that would prove useful. Logic in the survey design was set up so that respondents would only see some of the questions would be visible to respondents if they answered previous questions.

Respondents who answered “Yes” to Question 15 or Question 16 were given a field to provide contact information in so that the team would be able to follow up with them and schedule interviews.

## Interview Questions

Each interview was conducted using one of two sets of interview questions that were created to gain perspectives on the community from either group leaders or from people who reported not being part of any group. The set of interview questions for group leaders included the following questions:

1. What is the goal of your club?
2. When do you hold your meetings?
  - a. Why do you hold your meetings when you do?
3. Has it been difficult attracting new members?
4. Is there anything you’ve wanted to do with the club that you haven’t been able to do?
  - a. What is preventing your club from doing that?
5. What do you like about the games community on campus?
6. What do you think could be better about the games community on campus?

Questions 5 and 6 are repeats from the survey, which the interviewees would have already completed before the interview. We chose to repeat these questions at the end of the

interview because we considered the possibility that the interviewee might give different answers to those same questions based on their experience as a club leader rather than an individual.

The second set of interview questions we prepared for people disconnected from the community included the following questions:

1. Do you have any interest in participating in clubs?
  - a. If yes: What prevents you from participating in any game-related club?
  - b. If no: Why are you not interested in participating in any game-related clubs?
2. Do you feel connected to a game-making community on campus? Why/why not?
3. What do you like about the games community on campus?
4. What do you think could be better about the games community on campus?

Once again, the last two questions are repeats from the survey. Unlike the set of questions for group leaders, these questions were designed to understand why people might not be participating in the community, and whether or not they feel connected.

## Distribution and Data Collection

We sent out the link to our survey via an email to all of IMGD and in messages in various Discord servers like the ones for IMGD, IGDA, and WPI D&D. The second method was through physical posters on campus with a QR code linked to our survey. These posters were placed in

Fuller, Rubin Campus Center, the Innovation Studio, Morgan Hall, Founders Hall near the Goat's Head restaurant, and the South Village Campus Center. All these locations were chosen for their heavy foot traffic.

While the survey was live, we checked responses for potential interviewees and followed up with them via email. We closed the survey after four weeks so that we would have time to analyze the data. We had 52 total responses, which seemed like a great sample size on the surface, but included responses that were never submitted by respondents and timed out as a result. After filtering those responses out, we were left with 24 responses.

Out of the five club representatives who took our survey, three indicated they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview: one from a casual group with a competitive arm, one from a club with a tighter focus on competitive environments, and one that was focused on making games. Our team was able to coordinate with all three of them for interviews.

There were five survey respondents who indicated that they are not part of any group in the games community. None of them were willing to participate in a follow-up interview, however, so no interviews could be conducted to learn more about the difficulties they have participating in the community.

## Results

We broke survey data into two major parts: demographics and community engagement. Regarding demographics, we met our goal of obtaining a diverse sample of respondents across gender, majors, graduating class, and distance from campus. One of the most statistically

significant findings across all demographics was how respondents learned about different clubs. The vast majority of respondents heard about groups through word of mouth and online communication platforms like Discord (Figure 4.8). Another notable observation in our data was that schoolwork and schedule conflicts often prevented respondents from participating in group activities.

## Demographics

We measured a variety of student demographics in an attempt to understand them and whether or not certain demographics have a major effect on feelings surrounding the games community.

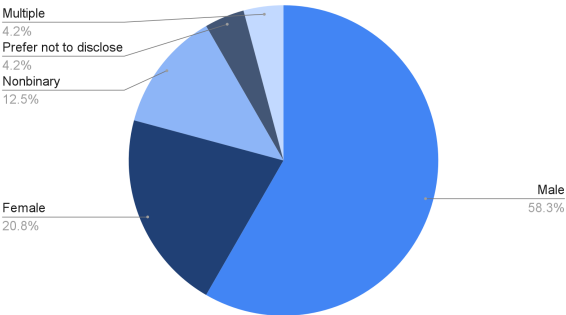


Figure 4.1-Gender of Respondents

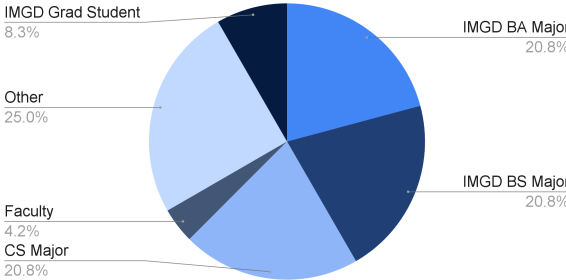


Figure 4.2- Major of Respondents

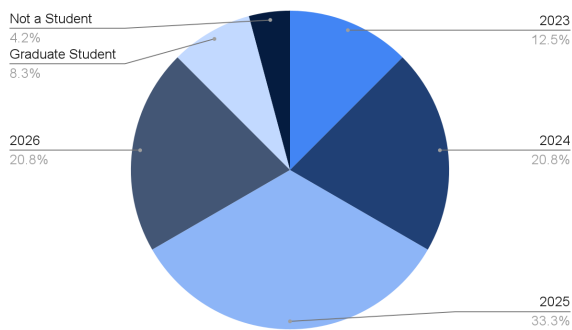


Figure 4.3-Graduation Year of Respondents

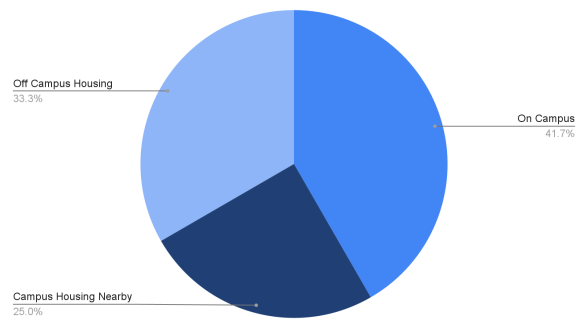


Figure 4.4- Housing Situation of Respondents

In figure 4.2, we queried respondents about their major to ensure we were receiving respondents from both in and out of the Interactive Media and Game Design major, and responses to the survey reflect that. Though half of the respondents are students in IMGD, non-IMGD students represent a significant portion of the data.

In figure 4.3, we asked about graduation year to understand if there was a correlation between class and connection to the games community.

Lastly, as shown in figure 4.4, we asked about students' housing to see if proximity to campus had any affect on students' ability to attend events.



## Groups

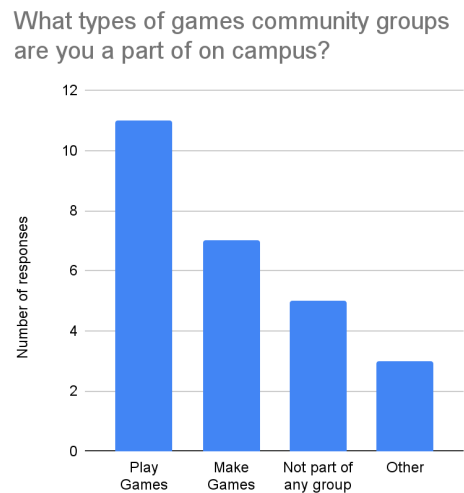


Figure 4.5-Groups Respondents Are Currently In

While our current focus is the students playing games in the games community, it was important to understand the types of games community groups students were participating in, if at all. In figure 4.5, we found that a majority of respondents participated in the game playing portion of the community, with 46% of respondents being a part of the game playing portion, and 29% of respondents only being a part of the game making portion.

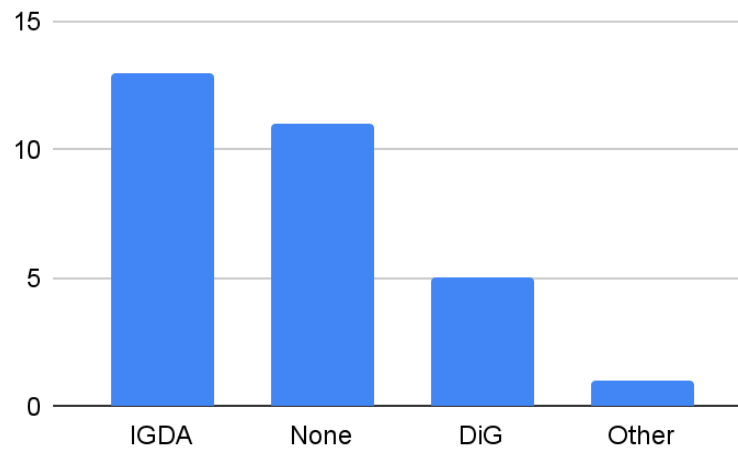


Figure 4.6- Awareness of Game-Making Groups On Campus

As shown in figure 4.6, we found that many students are well aware of the WPI's chapter of the International Game Developers' Association (IGDA), but fewer are aware of Diversity in Games (DiG), and many others weren't aware of either club. With these clubs being a core part of the game-making side of the games community, it's incredibly important that we know how aware students are of them because they provide opportunities to the students who play and appreciate games.

We asked respondents to tell us which clubs they were aware of that are within the game-playing part of the community. Their responses are visualized in figure 4.7.

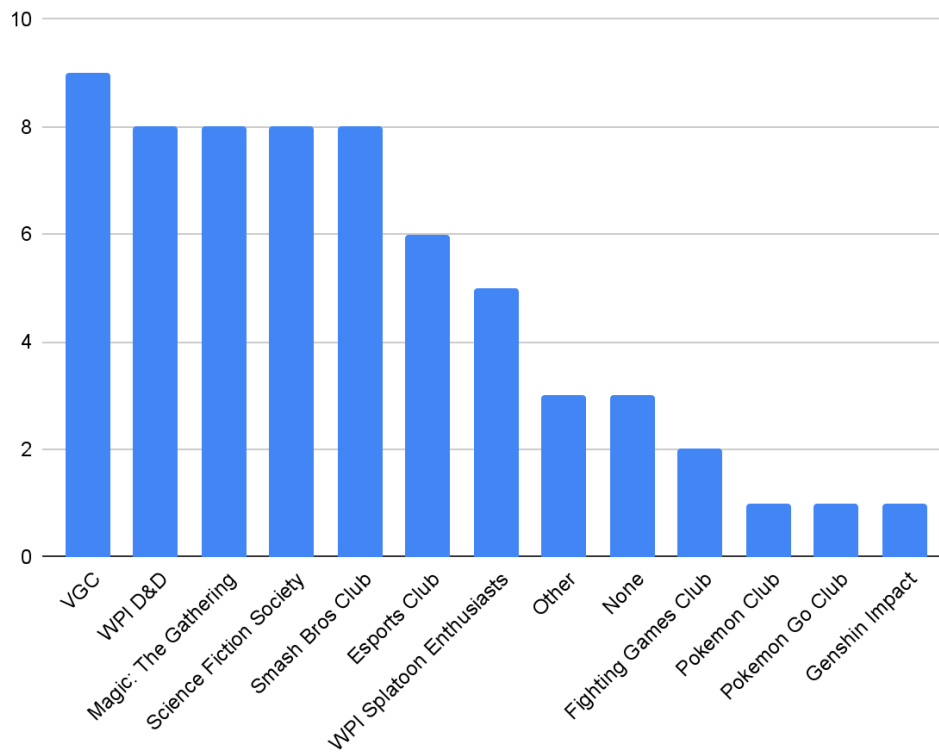


Figure 4.7-Awareness of Game-Playing Groups On Campus

Most students reported they were aware of at least one club focused on game-playing. The biggest clubs, WPI D&D, Magic: The Gathering, VGC, SFS, and Smash Bros Club are all very well-known clubs.

# Knowledge and Accessibility

In addition to which groups respondents were a part of, we prompted them on how they found out about the clubs they're aware of to understand the main channels by which students may be accessing these groups within the games community. Majority found out about them via a friend who was already participating, or through a school-sponsored Discord server.

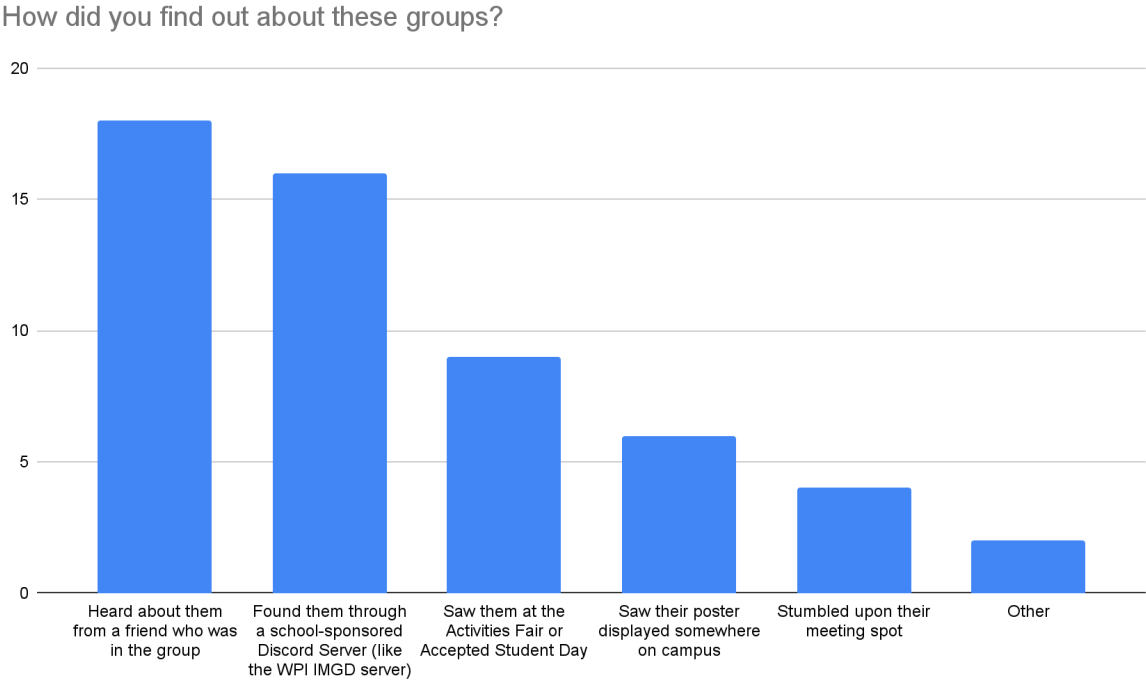


Figure 4.8- Discovery of Groups On Campus

Respondents were also asked about whether or not they wished they could participate in more groups on campus.

Responses to "Do you wish you could participate in more groups or events than you're currently in?"

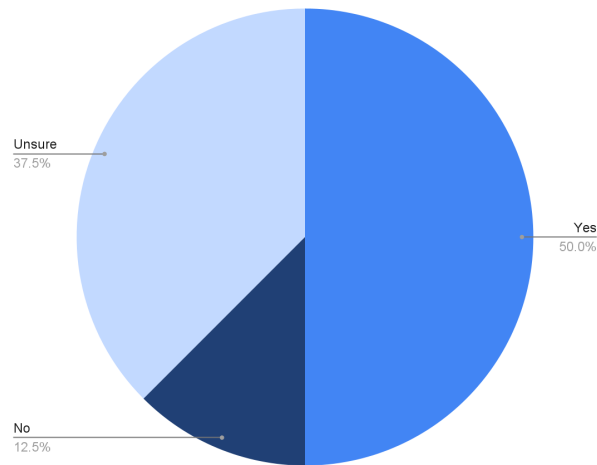


Figure 4.9-Desire To Participate In More Groups

Half of respondents declared they were interested in participating in more groups, leading into the important question below, what was preventing respondents from participating in groups or events. We found that schedule conflicts and the priority of schoolwork were the biggest barriers to participating in on campus groups and events.

### What prevents you from participating in groups or events on campus?

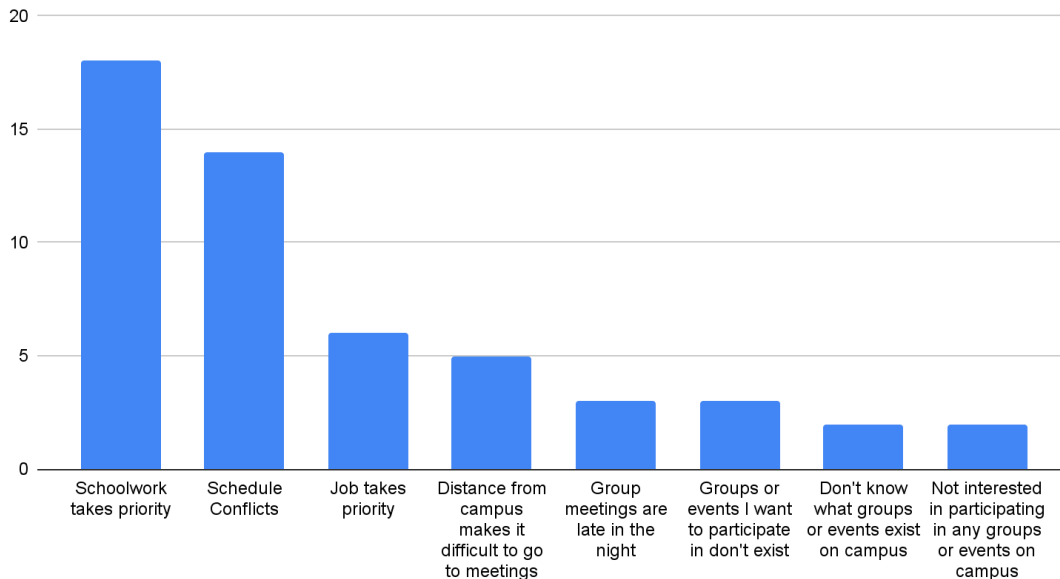


Figure 4.10- Barriers to Entry

We were able to identify several common threads from the survey responses.

Respondents stated that they enjoyed that the community had a wide array of games and interests represented, and there was a specific niche for anyone who might want to find one, saying that “There’s a lot of good niches” and “people play pretty much anything” with “a wide spread of games represented.” However, on the other hand, we also found that they wanted some of the same improvements. Respondents were unsure of what groups were for, when meetings were, or even what groups existed in the first place. Respondents stated that they were “not always sure when the groups are meeting” and that clubs were “hard to discover/get

into” or “often not advertised.” Meeting times were also found to be inconvenient, as respondents said that “[their] main issue with clubs... is getting to them” and that they would prefer “if the meetings were at like 4 or something.”

Representatives of groups playing competitive games were involved in inter-collegiate events, such as the Collegiate Cephalopod Association, an inter-collegiate competitive league for Splatoon 3. Representatives of both eSports and WPI Grizzco Workers’ Union, the competitive arm, or tentacle, as it were, of WPI Splatoon Enthusiasts, have trouble with dwindling membership. The eSports club’s membership is game-dependent, and has already had to fold some teams due to lack of interest in a particular game. Grizzco Workers’ Union has only one member who is neither graduating in 2023 nor 2024, which means that it will also likely have membership issues in the coming years.

Before the current IGDA administration, elected November 2022, both IGDA and the eSports club held their meetings on Wednesdays, which forced potential members to choose one or the other. An IGDA representative cited schoolwork as the biggest obstacle in maintaining IGDA membership, which is consistent with the results of the survey we conducted, and it is difficult to schedule around crunch time. They also wished that there was more inter-club collaboration.

## Discussion & Recommendations

Half of survey respondents were non-IMGD students. Of groups about making games, only three were listed, and only IGDA and “None” received more than 10 responses. The majority of people who had heard about clubs heard about them through word of mouth and Discord. While this means Discord is an effective means of reaching potential club members, it also excludes people who don’t use Discord, or who don’t use it often. 50% of respondents wished that they could participate in more clubs and events, and a further 37.5% were unsure. Many respondents said that schoolwork takes priority- a reasonable decision, but rather unfortunate for the health of the community. Even if they do have the time, schedule conflicts often force students to pick their priorities. Respondents also wanted clearer communication from clubs. Meetings can also be difficult to attend for some students, especially for those who live off-campus. Clubs struggle with attendance, as game clubs have to consider the level of interest in the game as a factor, as well as schoolwork.

We found that the community enjoys that a wide array of niches and interests are represented. We also found a consistent desire for competitive teams to operate in more inter-collegiate settings, and for clubs to collaborate more with each other. The Grizzco Workers’ Union is now an official team under the eSports club, showing that there is potential for other



clubs to connect their leaders with eSports circles and allow inter-collegiate competition and connection in a wider variety of games. A space for club or other group leadership to connect and communicate could help facilitate inter-club connection and allow clubs to have access to a greater web of connections through each other.

The majority of students heard about these clubs through their friends or found them through the campus Discord server.

## Recommendations for Club Leaders:

All three club representatives who we interviewed have either struggled with maintaining membership and attendance or are aware that those will be problems their club will face in the future. While membership in the Esports Club and WPI Splatoon Enthusiasts depends on interest in the games they play, attendance is affected by schoolwork and schedule conflicts. Though club leaders don't have power over schoolwork, they can work with their members to find meeting times that work best for everyone. IGDA did exactly that when they moved their meetings to Tuesdays after getting feedback from students.

Representatives from both the Esports Club and WPI Splatoon Enthusiasts both said during their interviews that they would like to see more collaboration between clubs. A simple way to make this happen would be to create a means for club leaders to communicate with each other in a way that allows them to bounce ideas freely. This could be achieved through an email list or a server on a platform like Discord or Slack.

## Recommendations for Further Research

There were several things we missed during our research that future teams could look into. For one, though we were hoping to get some input from people who feel disconnected from the games community, we were unable to obtain any data whatsoever from them. Needless to say that more work will need to be done to reach these people.

We were also hoping to get data on event attendance from the PAX IQP team since they organize and run all the major events in IMGD. We made an attempt to reach out to them, but didn't hear back.

In talking to our advisors, we learned that faculty have tried to convince students to go to events, but with limited results. It may be worth interviewing faculty to find out what they have already tried doing.

We also discovered during these conversations that we held false assumptions regarding the nature of events like Alphafest and Showfest as events meant for MQPs. It may be worth investigating this matter to see if these false assumptions extend to the general student body as well.

## Conclusion

The most impactful revelation from this study was the fact that no fewer than 50% of surveyed students expressed a desire to participate in more groups as a part of the games community than they currently were, and only 12.5% were fully satisfied with the number of groups in which they were participating. The most commonly cited barriers to participating in the games community were schoolwork (75%) and scheduling conflicts (58%) In order to mitigate the effect of these barriers, club and group leaders could reduce time commitments where possible, and collaborate to minimize scheduling overlap between clubs. In addition, asynchronous participation, such as conversing on a Discord server, could be emphasized in order to allow community members to pick and choose when and how often they engage with games-related groups.

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