

The Cost of Leaving the Tower: Bungie, Destiny 2, and the Strategic Miscalculation of Social Capital

Dr. Eric Hannel
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Companion Podcast Episode

This research brief is also available as an audio discussion on *The Chipco Preserve Podcast*. The episode explores the paper's findings on social capital, online communities, player identity, and the future of live-service gaming. <https://www.chipcopreserve.com/podcasts>

Video Presentation

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Executive Summary

The decision to end active development of *Destiny 2* generated an immediate and significant backlash from the game's community. Within days of the announcement, a petition calling for the development of *Destiny 3* attracted hundreds of thousands of supporters. At the same time, players organized campaigns encouraging former Guardians to return to the game as a demonstration of the franchise's continuing strength (Middler, "We Want Destiny 3").

The response raises a larger question that extends beyond Bungie and *Destiny*: How should companies value communities that develop around long-running live-service games?

This paper argues that Bungie underestimated the value of the social capital surrounding *Destiny*. While game publishers often focus on revenue, engagement metrics, and development costs, players build communities that generate substantial economic, social, and cultural value beyond what conventional accounting measures can capture. Friendships, creator ecosystems, fan communities, and shared cultural experiences can become some of a franchise's most valuable assets. Bungie appears to have underestimated the social capital, creator networks, and community identity that players built around *Destiny* when it made its strategic calculations.

Introduction

People typically consume books, films, and music individually, with limited dependence on ongoing social interaction. A reader finishes a novel, a viewer watches a film, and a listener completes an album. But online games operate differently. The primary product is not merely the game itself. It is the community that forms around it.

Over the course of more than a decade, the *Destiny* franchise evolved from a video game into a social ecosystem. Fireteams became friendships. Clans became communities. Players met spouses, lifelong friends, and business partners through shared experiences in the game. Streamers built careers. YouTube creators built audiences. Discord servers, podcasts, websites, and social media communities emerged around a common universe.

Traditional metrics such as sales figures and player counts fail to capture the social, cultural, and economic value generated by those relationships. Yet corporate decision-making often attempts to do exactly that.

The *Destiny* community also illustrates the importance of network effects. Economists use the term to describe systems that become more valuable as additional participants join them. Every new clan member, content creator, raid sherpa, streamer, or lore enthusiast increases the ecosystem's value for others. A raid group becomes easier to assemble. More guides become available. More conversations occur across social media. More players remain engaged. As a result, the value of a mature online community often extends far beyond the direct revenue generated by its individual participants. Companies that focus narrowly on sales or player counts risk overlooking the broader network value that communities create.

Understanding Social Capital

Political scientist Robert Putnam defines social capital as the value created through networks, trust, cooperation, and social relationships (Putnam 19). By that definition, *Destiny* accumulated enormous social capital. Many players continued logging in long after completing available content because their friends were still there.

This distinction is critical.

Traditional business models assume that content drives engagement. But community-driven ecosystems often work in reverse. Players sustain long-term engagement through friendships, clan participation, and ongoing community relationships.

Research over the past two decades has consistently demonstrated that social relationships play a central role in retaining players in online multiplayer games. Ducheneaut et al. first demonstrated the importance of social structures within MMORPGs, finding that guilds, group activities, and persistent social networks formed a critical component of player engagement. Subsequent research found that while achievement and progression initially attract players, friendships and

community participation become increasingly important predictors of long-term retention among veteran players (Ducheneaut et al.; Park et al.). A systematic review of social gaming research further concluded that social interaction constitutes one of the defining characteristics of contemporary multiplayer gaming and contributes significantly to the formation and maintenance of social capital among players (Gonçalves et al.).

When communities dissolve, retention often collapses. By ending active development without presenting a clear successor, Bungie risks fragmenting the very social networks that sustained the franchise for years. Once dispersed, those communities are extraordinarily difficult to rebuild.

The Creator Economy Factor

Another overlooked element is the role of content creators. Thousands of creators built careers around *Destiny*. They produced livestreams, build guides, lore analyses, podcasts, news coverage, strategy videos, and community discussions.

Collectively, these creators generated millions of hours of content and served as a powerful ongoing promotional tool. More importantly, they kept players connected to the franchise even when they were not actively playing.

A player might stop logging in for weeks or months but continue consuming *Destiny* content through YouTube, Twitch, Reddit, or podcasts. That passive engagement often translates into future re-engagement. The creator ecosystem functioned as an informal retention network. It extended the product's life far beyond the game client itself.

Henry Jenkins argues that participatory culture transforms audiences from passive consumers into active contributors who create value through interaction, discussion, and content production (Jenkins 3-6). The *Destiny* community represents a textbook example of this phenomenon. Any strategic decision involving the future of *Destiny* necessarily affects that broader ecosystem.

Viewing as Participation

Modern gaming has blurred the distinction between players and spectators. Millions of people engage with games they are not actively playing. A person may spend several hours watching streams, listening to podcasts, or discussing a game online for every hour spent playing. This phenomenon has transformed entertainment consumption.

The value of a franchise is no longer limited to active users. Its influence extends into social media, content creation, discussion forums, and online communities. A player who has not logged into *Destiny* for months may still identify as part of the community. Traditional engagement metrics frequently struggle to capture these forms of participation.

Yet they contribute significantly to a franchise's cultural relevance and longevity. As media scholar T. L. Taylor notes, spectatorship has become an integral component of gaming culture, creating communities whose participation extends well beyond gameplay itself (Taylor 7-9).

The Petition as a Market Signal

Petitions can be easy to dismiss as emotional responses, but the scale and speed of the *Destiny 3* petition give it significance as an organic market signal. It grew rapidly without financial incentives, marketing support, or corporate sponsorship. Within days, it accumulated more than 265,000 signatures and continues growing as community members rally behind the effort (Middler, "We Want Destiny 3").

Unlike commissioned market research, the petition reflects voluntary participation. People invested time and public identity in expressing support for the continuation of the franchise. From an economic perspective, this constitutes a meaningful signal.

The petition demonstrates not merely nostalgia for *Destiny 2*, but demand for a future installment. It indicates that a substantial portion of the community does not view the franchise as complete.

The Marathon Problem

A recurring theme in community discussions is the belief that Bungie prioritized *Marathon* over *Destiny's* future development. Whether that perception accurately reflects internal decision-making is ultimately secondary. Perception itself has consequences.

Many players believe that resources, attention, and long-term planning were redirected away from a successful community toward an unproven product (Gach). And while consumers generally accept innovation, they are less accepting when innovation appears to come at the expense of something they value.

That's an important distinction.

Compounding this concern were reports indicating that *Destiny 3* was not in active development and that Bungie's strategic focus had shifted toward other projects (Middler, "Destiny 3 Isn't in Active Development").

Community as Intellectual Property

The controversy highlights a broader issue regarding the nature of intellectual property. Companies typically think of intellectual property as characters, storylines, trademarks, technology, and art assets.

Yet modern entertainment franchises possess another form of value, community identity. The phrase “Eyes Up, Guardian” carries meaning because millions of people shared experiences associated with it.

The cultural significance of *Destiny* resides not only in its fictional universe but also in the memories, relationships, and traditions created by its players. Those elements are difficult to quantify. They are also difficult to replace.

In many respects, the community itself has become part of the intellectual property. Without the community, the brand loses much of its cultural meaning.

Lessons for the Industry

1. **Communities Are Strategic Assets.** Players are not merely customers. They are participants in a living ecosystem.
2. **Creators Function as Infrastructure.** Content creators contribute to retention, engagement, and cultural relevance. Their role extends far beyond marketing.
3. **Engagement Extends Beyond Gameplay.** Watching, discussing, teaching, theorizing, and creating are all forms of participation.
4. **Social Capital Has Economic Consequences.** Strong communities generate loyalty, retention, and long-term franchise value.
5. **Network Effects Magnify Value.** Every additional participant strengthens the broader ecosystem. As communities grow, they create opportunities, information, relationships, and engagement that benefit other participants.
6. **Endings Require Successors.** When a long-running franchise approaches a transition point, a credible vision of the future helps preserve community cohesion and confidence.

Conclusion

The reaction to the end of *Destiny 2* demonstrates that Bungie's most valuable achievement may never have been the game itself. It was the community that formed around it. For more than a decade, players invested time, creativity, emotion, and identity into a shared world. They created friendships, organizations, careers, traditions, and memories that extended far beyond the game's boundaries.

The scale of the response to the franchise's uncertain future suggests that many players still believe there is a future worth preserving. The central lesson extends beyond Bungie.

In the age of live-service entertainment, the most valuable asset is often not the technology, the content, or even the intellectual property. It is the community. Companies can build worlds, but communities are what make those worlds matter.

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