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# Take Care Game Jam

Strategy Summary

Atwater Library and Computer Centre  
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## Strategy Summary

### **Impetus for Strategy:**

The idea for the Game Jam as a strategy to prevent and eliminate cyberviolence directed at girls and women emerged from interviews with stakeholders within the video game and technology industry, educators and girls.

Stakeholders within the video game industry expressed that encouraging diversity amongst the technology industries, particularly amongst those who create online spaces is key to ending cyberviolence against girls and women. As long as these industries are dominated by a homogeneous group of white, heterosexual, males who market to a similar demographic stakeholders expressed that they believed the existing misogyny, racism and discrimination based on sexual orientation would remain a constant. Our stakeholders, both men and women within industry recommended that we implement a strategy that would disrupt normativities regarding how things are done within the industry.

Additionally, stakeholders in education observed that girls and women are not choosing to enter technology related fields because they perceive them to be inhospitable. It was suggested that there is a perception on the part of girls that technology related jobs are dominated by men, that you work long hours in isolation in dark rooms eating stale pizza. One educator at an all-girls high school explained that the girls expressed wanting to enter fields that are collaborative, involve helping people and provide healthy work environments and they don't believe that those things describe technology related jobs and particularly not the video game industry. Stakeholders questioned the ethics of encouraging girls and women to enter industries that might be considered exploitative to employees in general but particularly so to women. It was suggested that perhaps the solution lies in encouraging girls and women to re-envision what these spaces might potentially be and re-create them from the ground up. In order to encourage the diversity necessary to eliminate misogynistic cyberviolence within spaces of design and

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development, we would need to find ways to encourage girls, minorities and marginalized people to start developing online spaces, apps etc.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of stakeholders expressed the belief that the way in which online spaces are designed can serve, to enable, actively encourage or conversely mitigate and eliminate cyberviolence. Therefore, teaching people who design and develop these spaces to consider the ethical, social and cultural implications of their design choices would go a long way in addressing cyberviolence, which is what this strategy aims to do.

Stakeholders were very enthusiastic about organizing a game jam for girls and women that would be an antithesis to a traditional game jam.

### **What is a traditional Game Jam?**

A game jam is a gathering of game developers for the purpose of planning, designing, and creating one or more games within a short span of time, usually ranging between 24 and 72 hours. Many game jams have themes. There has been a recent trend of critiquing the practice of Crunch as it exists within the Video Game Industry and is replicated in Game Jams. Crunch is common practice within the industry whereby employees are expected to work unreasonable amounts of unpaid overtime, sometimes spending days on end at the workplace without sleep or weeks without seeing their families. Crunch usually means eating unhealthy food at erratic hours and sleep deprivation. It creates an unhealthy and exploitative work environment which critics have referred to as immoral and sometimes illegal. Crunch is a potential reason that girls are reluctant to enter the industry.

“A 2014 survey by the International Game Developers Association found that 81% of polled game developers had crunched at some point over the previous two years. (50% felt crunch was expected in their workplaces and a “normal part of the job.”) Few would take issue with a boss asking his or her employees to work late for a few days or even a week toward the end of a project. It’s when these requests become excessive or even normalized—when standard 40-hour weeks morph into 60, 80, 100 on a regular basis—that it turns into a bigger problem.” <http://kotaku.com/crunch-time-why-game-developers-work-such-insane-hours-1704744577>

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### **The Take Care Jam Premise**

The premise of the Atwater Library and Computer Centre's game jam was that it would be the antithesis of the traditional game jam characterized by video game industry crunch – it was designed to be an 'anti-game jam' proving that things didn't always have to be done in the way mainstream video industry dictates, with no loss regarding the quality of work or productivity of developers. Potentially there are other ways of coming together to develop games and online spaces.

Traditional game jam spaces typically mirror industry spaces and are dominated by a fairly homogeneous group of participants. Often these are spaces that are inhospitable to women and non-binary people. Therefore, the stakeholders who we had invited to help organize the event decided to make it a women and non-binary folk only game jam which would be called *The Take Care Jam*. *The Take Care Jam* would attempt to create a game jam space where some 'power houses' within the indie video game community could come together and work around the issues of cyberviolence and 'taking care' – of ourselves and each other. Over the course of this project against the landscape of Gamergate, 'taking care' had taken on new meaning: taking care to avoid becoming a target of cyberviolence; taking care of the emotional consequences of working in this environment; taking care of the physical impacts of a work culture that valorizes Crunch; and taking care to listen to the needs of those who still feel and experience marginalization.

### **The Intention**

Our intention was to facilitate our stakeholders in developing the game jam strategy as their own intervention. While we provided space, ideas, support and funding we really wanted to enable the participants to create a strategy of their own that would then take on a life of its own – continuing to generate results long after the project has ended.

Initially we had envisioned the game jam as being directed at young women aged 18-25. We felt that it would provide an opportunity to skill-up some young women and initiate them into the world of game design. We invited a director of Pixelles (a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering more women to make and change games <http://pixelles.ca/about>) Stephanie Fisher to take the lead in organizing as both she and

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Tanya Short (Pixelles co-founder and director) have been very involved in and supportive of the cyberviolence project. Stakeholders in general have raised Pixelles, and Women in Games Initiatives like it, as a way forward in generating meaningful change in the video game landscape through encouraging diversity. Pixelles had wanted to develop a mini-pixelles to work with girls so this seemed like a perfect collaboration. However, after pitching the project in the indie, feminist video game community we came to the conclusion that due to the intensity of the issue the most responsible and ethical course of action would be to organize a trial run with a group of young game designers and scholars who were familiar with gamergate, issues of gender in video games, and issues of inter-sectionality. A focus of the initiative was to create a safe space to come together and engage with some very intense difficult issues around cyberviolence. However, as the weekend progressed we came to realize that perhaps the topic of cyberviolence was more intensely fraught than we had anticipated.

The *Take Care* theme had been implemented as a way to address cyberviolence against girls and women in a way that might be less likely to act as a trigger – as many of the participants are at the epicenter of the issue. By uncovering what helps people who live and work in an environment where cyberviolence exists (where there is a constant hum of cyberviolence on a continuum from moderate to extreme) we became aware that this takes a tremendous emotional toll. By creating an intervention that acknowledges this reality we are provided with structural clues to strategies that can help create better ways of doing things that prevent and eliminate cyberviolence.

### **Description of the Game Jam:**

The jam brought together a group of game makers who identify as belonging to a group that is often disproportionately affected by on and offline violence (e.g. women, genderqueer or genderfluid individuals, LGBTQ, racial or ethnic minorities, mental health) and come from a range of different contexts for game making in Montreal (e.g. academia, indie-alternative developers, informal community programs, etc.) to try out and discuss the effectiveness addressing the issue of cyber-violence through a game jam. All participants were under the age of 30.

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During the jam, these individuals (1) worked on building six games using “cyberviolence” as a broad theme, (2) explored how the affordances of different game-based technologies and the format of a ‘game jam’ can work towards the goal of creating positive, supportive, and safe spaces to engage in deeper conversations with this important topic, and (3) provided critical feedback to the organizers on their experiences, from their perspectives of being a witness and/or survivor of cyber-violence.

The jam started on Friday night and ended Sunday evening. Friday night was an introductory session for participants to discuss the theme, and start to think about games they might develop. The game jam began on Friday evening with the participants gathering to learn about the cyberviolence project in order to contextualize the issue. Shanly Dixon Ph.D., our project co-coordinator, gave a presentation on the project and the findings. This was followed by a screening of the documentary film on cyberviolence produced by the youth at LOVE as part of the needs assessment for the cyberviolence project. The participants finished the evening by engaging in a moderated discussion of cyberviolence directed at girls and women and non-binary people. It became very clear during the course of the discussion that this was an issue that many of the participants had experienced and were more emotionally impacted than anyone had realized. It seemed that because the topic was so fraught it would be challenging for some participants to work on games directly addressing cyberviolence so they focused more on the Take Care aspect, exploring the impacts. Participants responded to statements made in the film and to each other’s observations. We also took care of housekeeping duties (e.g. going over the rules of the library and developing social media posting guidelines). Participants also built a “cozy-space”. The cozy space was a fort built out of blankets with an air mattress inside, and was intended to be a ‘hideaway’ where participants could take a break or rest during the jam. Having a cozy space was a wellness strategy we employed to encourage rest and relaxation instead of “crunching”. Other wellness strategies we employed during Take Care included: optional group yoga twice a day (morning and afternoon), healthy snacks and meals, and a wide selection of teas. Participants worked individually or in teams to develop game ideas on Saturday and Sunday. The jam space was open each day from 9AM-7PM. At the end of the jam, we had a “show and tell” session where each game was described and/or played through as

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a group. We closed the jam with a small gardening activity using seeds from Atwater Library's Seed Library Project, as a symbolic act of "taking care" and a living memento of the jam.

Point form notes on each of the games are provided at the end of this document. In addition to the games that were developed, participants also generated a list of inspirational resources and ideas, including alternative game designs, storylines, and wellness activities for future iterations of Take Care or other interventions.

### **Take Aways:**

Every time we speak about cyberviolence against girls and young women as a social issue we 'de-normalize' the practice. A key outcome of the event was that the participants, who are on the front lines of the issue and have the ability to generate change, were re-enforced in their belief that gendered cyberviolence is unacceptable.

### **How this game jam created safe spaces to build the capacity of girls, young women and stakeholders to prevent and limit the effects of cyberbullying?**

Preventing and eliminating cyberviolence is impossible to do within the spaces we already work and play in. Simply put, we need to also fix what's broken about our current systems at the same time. Take Care was intentionally designed as an intervention that does it, in that the design of Take Care is also addressing the problematic aspects of digital game production. This can include normalizing exploitative working conditions or expectations such as crunching (a large amount of work in a short amount of time with no consideration for personal health), rewarding makers who produce commercially viable products over more creative, artistic, or experimental games (the ones that are better suited for the affective care and labour required to adequately address difficult topics), and even the concept of having a "winner" of a game jam (often determined by this exploitative criteria). Moreover, by debunking the notion that Crunch is somehow necessary in game development, it opens the door to further critique other "tried and true" industry practices that position women working in games at a disadvantage.

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**The game jam contributed to promoting greater consultation among key actors so that we can better recognize cyberviolence while preventing and intervening**

Each participant in Take Care is involved in an organization that promotes a diverse and inclusive digital games industry and communities (e.g. Pixelles, Mount-Royal Games Society, FemHype, Different Games Collective), lead and design programs to achieve this goal (e.g. game making incubators like Critical Hit, or ‘game literacy’ programs such as Game Curious, exhibitions and arcade such as Toronto Comic Arts Festival, Princess of Arcade, QG Con) and also have a strong/influential presence online through social media and personal websites where they write blog posts and share games they make. Participants will share their experiences participating in Take Care with their personal and professional networks, through a combination of online and offline knowledge mobilization strategies, including but not limited to: blog posts, tweets, making their games available, text and audio interviews, conference presentations and lightning talks, and participating in future events on the Cyberviolence project. Moreover, participants frequently consult with studios, non-profits, and government organizations at the municipal and provincial level on topics related to equity, diversity, art and technology. In short, the ripple effect of Take Care will be noticeable with this group of individuals, and be able to create a larger community of stakeholders from “the front lines” (victims of cyberviolence reaching out to others affected by the same thing to form a supportive community).

Social media engagement guidelines were discussed and developed together as a group at the start of the jam. This was out of respect for the participants, and to ensure that everyone was comfortable with what would be shared with the larger community. The hashtag #takecarejam was used. Most participants chose to use Instagram (a social media platform similar to twitter where users share pictures and videos with followers) and Facebook to share their games during the jam.

**How this game jam served to develop and collaborate in the implementation of a strategy to prevent and fight against cyberbullying**

The strategy was initially proposed to be a jam for girls and young women who were inexperienced game makers. Jams like that provide young women with confidence and



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self-esteem in their technical abilities, as well as a community able to support them in pursuing a future in computer-related fields. While we still believe that this kind of jam is instrumental to combating cyberviolence in the long term, we also required expert consultation on how to (re)-design a safer space for this kind of learning, sharing, and critical engagement to take place. Simply put, we did not want to use a game jam as an empty container in which we can pour “cyberviolence themes and content” into it, but rather also think about how the typical structure and design of a game jam can both enable and work against the goals of a cyberviolence jam. This is our reason for only inviting experienced game makers who could consult while going through the process themselves.

### The Games:

The strategy was originally imagined as a straight forward activity to use videogames to deliver an anti-cyberviolence message but was transformed through the guidance of the participants. The participants, who were all leaders in the independent, gender activist and forward thinking video game making community, directed the activities towards what they felt was necessary to manage their emotional exhaustion and the very concrete offline consequences of online harassment. This activity re-organized itself as an instrument to address the long-term effects of a hostile online environment. Dealing with the how the participants feel after experiencing everything from constant low level online abuse and trolling to acute events of personal attacks which has made many of the participants afraid to be online. The work created helped re-imagine how people who have been attacked or abused online can “shake off” their feelings of fear, sadness and professional paralysis.

Through the process of un-covering what helps this group of video game developers recover, we can find clues about what needs to change in the structures of online communities.

Game: “Take Care Teller”

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- A game using a password protected Google Form, requires the password to play
- The game is about making strangers who come to Take Care Teller feel better after they experience or witness cyberviolence. Players can contribute positive messages for other people to read, or read messages to cheer themselves up
- A virtual “take a penny, leave a penny” space but for positive/emotional care
  - o Instead of developing a game that tries to take on fixing a systemic issue, we focused on “how can we take care of each other”
  - o This game is an immediate form of care that lifts people up and can provide self-confidence and self-esteem. This works towards preventing those on the margins from leaving technology because they feel excluded from online spaces and cultures.
  - o This is also an example of an ongoing form of support or “aftercare” (post-jam support)

## Game: “Cat Drama”

- A dialogue based game which is a cover of the popular game *Animal Crossing*, which is a very popular game series amongst girls.
- The player moves into a new town and has to talk to towns’ people to figure out the social dynamics. Depending on who you talk to, and the way you respond to them affects how they treat you. They also wanted to include a virtual mailbox in the world, and the way you respond to those letters also affects how they treat you.
- The game is about navigating and exploring relationships, replicating “teen drama” scenarios. The player is negotiating the social politics of the town, and in the end the player learns that they are experiencing “normalized misogyny”
- You have to choose between 3 responses when a character is being mean to you. Townspeople can become hostile and exile you if they don’t trust you.
- Each cat is a different character/personality based on common stock characters in games – e.g. there is “naïve and unaware” cat, a “jerk” cat
- Note: the game developers used a new tool to create this game (“Fungus” for Unity)

## Game: Alice’s Bad Week (A Card Collecting Game)

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- This is a participatory game that can be played with a group of people; roles: narrator, voice actors,
- A “choose your own adventure” narrative game that is based on lived experiences. In other words, it is a fictional story but also kind of auto-biographical because it’s based on real experiences.
- The player is starting CEGEP (high school) in a big city. You just moved from a small town.
- Alice, the main character, experiences 7 days dealing with bad social interactions. Each day, through these interactions, you collect different cards representing different forms or structures of oppression (e.g. The Patriarchy; Capitalism) – at the end of all the bad experiences you meet a friend who understands what you’re going through!
- The game teaches the player about intersectional oppression, having experienced it through Alice

## Game: Emotional Labour Simulator

- A tamagotchi type of game played on a tablet type device (e.g. smartphone, iPads). You have to take care of a virtual pet that is in distress. The pet has a health bar that is in continuous declines, and you have to keep petting it to keep it alive.
- The player can pet with a full swipe across the screen (no half-ass swiping)
- This was originally envisioned as a game that could be played for over a longer period of time (representing the long term care needed by victims of violence); also envisioned that the pet would say things to you (e.g. “thanks for taking care of me” or cries for help “I’m feeling really bad today” or just be straight up mean to you when it’s really distressed)
- If you leave it in the red zone of the health bar, it would be in danger of randomly dying, but unlike a Tamagotchi type digital pet, you don’t know exactly when it is going to leave the screen (die)
- Statement game: A lot of emotional labour is involved in healing from violence!
- The game is a comment on the emotional labour involved in providing “continuous care” as an individual, and suggests that an individual who is providing care should also reach out for help, too; taking care of each other properly is a lot of work!
- Also, part of your own self-healing process is to help others deal with their emotional health (self-care can be difficult)

Game: Collaborative Twine Piece

- The game where anyone in the room could add to the game. The idea is very similar to that pen-and-paper game where you would write a sentence on a piece of paper, and then fold the sheet of paper over so nobody knows what you've written and they keep adding to the story. However, in this case you would be able to see the previous text, and you could add alternative choices or storylines.
- The game developer was editing a passage called "Beyonce" and then all the rooms tried to link to the Beyonce passage, and then all the text was changed to Beyonce (basically, there was a technical snafu that ruined the end result of the game)
- The concept being tested here was "what if a game jams could be more like a music jam?" – e.g. be ephemeral, focused on moment-to-moment communicating, less fixed in terms of the groups you were working with (encouraging cross-pollination of ideas and creativity by frequently changing groups) - "I wanted to create a game making situation that was more fluid; be less interested in the polished product but the process of collaboration!"
- What if the intention of game jams was to create community, not results/products/games? This is in direct response to the criticism that the game making/game development process is typically neither very interactive nor collaborative, despite games themselves actually being interactive and collaborative!

Game: Cozy Nest

- This was a physical game that could be played to reduce anxiety over online interactions - a travel sized nest.
- It was originally conceptualized as a collaborative weaving process that involved others, because making physical things is relaxing, and a literal interweaving of stories to "make something strong and supportive"