GAME CURIOUS MONTREAL

GENDER-BASED CYBERVIOLENCE STRATEGY DESCRIPTION

Bibliothèque et centre d'informatique

Atwater
Library and Computer Centre

Status of Women   Condition féminine
Canada   Canada

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document describes one of the strategies used by the Atwater Library and Computer Centre's project, *Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence Against Young Women and Girls,* funded by Status of Women Canada (April 2014-April 2017). In making this strategy document publicly available, we hope to offer other organisations and communities a tool that can be adapted and used in order to develop definitions of and policies around gender-based cyberviolence. In establishing clear definitions and policies, we believe that organisations and communities will be better equipped to understand, prevent, respond to and eliminate gendered cyberviolence in their respective settings.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Atwater Library and Computer Centre's *Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence Against Young Women and Girls* project was a 3-year project funded by Status of Women Canada. The project sought to develop strategies, in collaboration with stakeholders, that would mobilize participants to work towards the goal of preventing cyberviolence directed at girls, women, LGBTQQI2S[1], and gender non-conforming people. The strategy to develop definitions, policy solutions and responses to prevent and eliminate gender-based cyberviolence emerged directly from the needs assessment we conducted during the first year of the project. Stakeholders overwhelming articulated that there was a need to 'name cyberviolence' through defining cyberviolence. Without clear definitions, there was no way for people who were experiencing cyberviolence to point to a definition and seek help.

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[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Two-Spirit

INTRODUCTION

Game Curious Montréal, a Mount Royal Game Society initiative, was a 6-week long program open to adults and accompanied minors, and its objective to "provide an introduction to a wide variety of video games and discussion topics, in a zero-pressure, beginner-friendly environment" worked towards combating cyberviolence by creating a participatory learning experience, where participants shared their knowledge and experiences about cyberviolence, micro-aggressions, and misogyny encountered while gaming. They explored the need for self-representation and diversity in video games and the gaming industry as a whole, and how design affordances and video gaming communities can shape gaming experiences. The program introduced participants to independent video games, safe gaming communities, and resources for making video games.

From the start of the Atwater Library's Preventing Cyberviolence Project (2014), much of our focus has been on the harassment that girls and women, LGBTQQI2S and gender non-conforming people often face within the video game industry, and as gamers within the video game community. Additionally, the issue of representation of women and minorities in video games has arisen as a key concern expressed by our stakeholders, so we have worked throughout the project with academics in video game research, in the gaming industry, and the indie game community, all to develop strategies to prevent and eliminate gender-based cyberviolence. The Game Curious Program has provided an excellent opportunity to collaborate with these groups, just as it has been with video game scholars along with the indie community divide who provide a venue to introduce the general public to a diverse range of video games and to raise some key questions and social issues around cyberviolence that affects individuals and groups from many different work settings.

Each session began with participants playing video games chosen by the organizers from Mount Royal Game Society, which were chosen based on a weekly theme: Local Video Games; Storytelling through Video Games; Experimental video Games and "Art Video Games"; Video Games and Education; Playing Online; and, Competition, Collaboration, and Community. Participants were encouraged to play each video game among the 7 to 9 different video games allotted per session.

Video game playing was followed by a discussion group, with questions created ahead of time, with the goal of inspiring and prompting further discussion throughout the sessions. The discussion was permitted to go in whichever direction participants led the topic, and finishing each session with a discussion provided participants a space to think critically about the various video games they played. For example, some participants had thought about video games and game design before, while others had not. Through these sessions, participants were given the opportunities to think through their initial thoughts and reactions, and were able to expand their definitions of video games and gaming by exploring the nuances of game design and gamer behaviour.

Promoted as a "beginner-friendly environment", the Game Curious Program attracted participants with no experience of gaming. While participants were encouraged to attend all six sessions, some participants came to every session, and some only attended one. As there were few participants with no gaming experience, most participants had at least some experience, and others came hoping to rekindle their love of video games after having been pushed away by aggressive and competitive gamer behaviour in the past.

Volunteers circulated the room while participants played video games and helped participants with learning how to navigate and play the different games. Instructions were also provided for more

involved or unusual games. As a beginner-friendly event, everyone was prepared to help out each other; participants often helped other players, or worked together to figure out games collaboratively. The use of independent games leveled the "playing field" between experienced and non-experienced participants alike, as most hadn't encountered many of the games themselves.

In anticipation of potentially triggering content in video games and discussions, a safe space policy and handout, including trigger warnings about the video games, were provided at each session. At the beginning of each discussion, organizers reminded everyone of the safe space policy, and made clear to participants who everyone could contact to report any issues.

EMERGING MICRO-STRATEGY

While this was not a far reaching, policy driven, strategy, this series responded to our stakeholders' requests to offer video game examples that did not require a misogynist and/or violent meta-narrative. In the context of the cyberviolence project, this series was a way to provide different examples of gaming to our community in an anti-oppressive environment, and helped broaden the scope of how video games are defined.

INCREASE DIVERSITY IN PLAYERS AND COMMUNITY

A PARTICIPATORY LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Having participants play video games at the beginning of each session provided an interactive experience. During the discussion portion, participants were able to give concrete examples by referring back to the games played, knowing that other participants had likely played the game as well. As each participant played most of the games at each session, and had shared experiences to compare and contrast with others' gaming experiences. Since participants didn't always have to provide prefaces to their thoughts, discussions were able to flow more freely.

During the discussion period, participants drew from their experiences playing the video games earlier in the session as well as from personal experiences in the past; they shared their thoughts on video games and the gaming culture, and, in some cases, elaborated on what deterred them from gaming in the first place. Experienced gamers heard how the current gaming culture might discourage people from joining it, while also revealing that those with less experience were exposed to a gaming culture different from the aggressive and misogynistic culture they may have encountered before. Some participants were surprised to see the scope of video games available.

DE-NORMALIZING MISOGYNY AND MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

Experiences of cyberviolence were shared throughout the weeks. During the Playing Online session, there was a more in-depth discussion about cyberviolence. Participants expressed their concern of playing online and encountering misogyny, micro-aggressions, and abusive language and behaviours. They discussed how demoralizing, draining, and counterproductive it can be to navigate those interactions while playing a video game for relaxation purposes. Further, it was discussed that they viewed these behaviours as an extension of the misogyny and micro-aggressions they already encountered in their offline world. Some spoke about strategies they used to avoid cyberviolence, while others spoke about how they discovered gaming communities that worked to curtail those behaviours. In this way, participants could more freely develop and explore their thoughts and

feelings about video games and gaming culture with others, and having participants with varying experiences and knowledge of gaming generated interesting discussion topics and insights between participants. For example, playing a wide variety of video games, including those discussed below, gave participants the opportunity to compare and contrast them. They saw how both the design of the video game and the social norms of the community could serve to contribute towards providing a safe environment in some instances, while in other instances, could elicit and enable a hostile environment.

For example, in the online first-person shooter game *America's Army*, users competed against each other to complete missions. They were also able to speak with and write messages to each other in a chat room, where some had encountered other users who were aggressive, while still others were using abusive language. In other cases, participants were given the opportunity to play the online game *Journey*, where participants can encounter other users in an exploration-scenario game, the interactions were very limited: Players were only able to "sing" to each other in symbols, and other users were non-identifiable, so they could not speak with each, and there were no chat rooms available. In this former instance, participants commented on the fact that by the nature of the platform, the game design provided benign interactions at best.

A third game widely discussed was *Minecraft*, an exploration and world-building type online game, allowed users to build objects and buildings in the game, while it also allowed them to destroy them alone or in collaboration with other users, which some participants with prior knowledge of the game discussed how mischievously users purposefully destroyed other users' creations for their own amusement. Although the game design allowed for these potentially triggering and hostile behaviours, there are various *Minecraft* communities with community rules that attempt to curtail these behaviours, so to be a member in good standing of a specific community, you must follow their rules.

Through these examples of video game play, participants could find a way to participate in and identify with gaming culture without necessarily submitting to a violent culture. The Program provided a space for new experiences to delink the misogyny of *popular* games from video games in general. The variety of video games introduced in the sessions enabled participants to further explore a wide variety of games that were different from those that were mass produced, goal-oriented, and competitive, such as *America's Army* that they may have previously associated with gaming culture.

DESIGN AFFORDANCE AND GAMING COMMUNITIES

It was agreed by participants that design affordances could be a contributing factor to cyberviolence. For example, some games allow for a variety of interactions and types of play, while others were designed to limit them. Participants discussed how gaming communities can discover and develop game play in a way that was not originally intended by the game designer. These developments can potentially be negative (destroying other users' creations in *Minecraft*) or positive (creating community rules for members to follow). It was further discussed how certain game and community elements can contribute to creating a welcoming environment and benign interactions.

SELF-REPRESENTATION

Many of the games chosen for this program emphasized personal stories and experiences. Participants felt that playing characters they could identify with made them more interested in the game, and motivated them to continue to play, particularly when game developers provide a new experience and perspective for users. Participants felt that many mass-produced games erased or misrepresented minority peoples, and that this can be a contributing factor to cyberviolence in gaming communities. One way in which developers can overcome this is by giving people more opportunities and resources to designers and allow them to create their own games allows that accurately represent themselves. The group discussed how a more diverse development team would lead to more diverse games and better representation of a broader community. Other strategies discussed include:

LIMITING INTERACTIONS

As discussed above, in games such as *Journey*, where by-design, you can't speak to, message, or harm another user, benign interactions are guaranteed. Participants felt that with these limited interactions, there was no way for them to know whether the other users' intentions were malicious. As a result, they did not feel threatened by any interactions in those games.

COLLABORATION

In games where you must collaborate with other users to succeed, participants felt that negative interactions decreased. Some of these games were designed in a way that didn't allow users to harm each other. Participants also discussed finding communities and groups of friends with similar playing styles to their own.

COMMUNITY RULES

Participants discussed different community rules they encountered in games they have played online and in person with groups of friends. By explicitly stating agreed upon rules before playing, members of the community could create a playing experience that was enjoyable for everyone involved.

MODERATION

Moderating interactions was another way in which participants felt helped them ensure feeling friendly and benign interactions would ensue. Some online communities also have moderators and processes for banning threatening users; although it was agreed that this was a lot of work and may not necessarily prevent cyberviolence, moderation could help in curtailing it, and would be a worthwhile expense.

SUBSCRIPTION FEE

Participants thought that moderation, rather than requiring users to pay a monthly subscription fee, may be more effective, especially as users felt reprimanded, and gave a feeling of riskiness for losing money spent on the game. Further, even though as a business model, subscription game operators were perceived to work harder to prevent cyber-violent behaviours, as well as more likely to ban users, such safeguards were seen by participants as a significant deterrent for new users from joining or retaining a current paying customer subscription base.

CONCLUSION

With the objective to "introduce a wide variety of games and discussion topics in a zero-pressure, beginner-friendly, environment", Game Curious Montréal gave participants an opportunity to reframe gaming culture and discover new ways to identify and relate to gaming. Offering a wide variety of games was a great way to showcase independent games, as it demonstrated to participants that cyberviolence is not always a part of gaming. Through discussions, participants shared their experiences and explored the various design and community elements that can often contribute to safer gaming experiences. By providing some inviting lists of games and resources for discovering and making games, participants were able to explore gaming culture beyond their initial understanding. Continuing to offer similar programs as the Mount Royal Game Society's Game Curious Montréal, particularly to beginner gamers, while expanding upon the perception of who are gamers, particularly to attract key stakeholders in the gaming industry, should certainly continue to contribute to changing conceptions of gaming culture as well as gaming communities from within.