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Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat

Addressing Gender and Race in Inclusive Gaming Conference Design, Critical Educational Practice, and Intersectional Research

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Abstract

One of the pressing issues in gaming over the two last decades has been the continued lack of diversity. Recent events that highlight continued harassment and negative stereotypes against women and non-dominant groups have highlighted that this issue is still alive and kicking. In this panel, we not only discussed these issues but also moved forward with proposals on how to address them in design, research and practice. Panelists presented work on how to set up research labs that invite critical discussions, how to design public conferences that are inclusive in participation, and how to conduct research that examines how gaming communities foster inclusivity.

Overview

The inequalities in game culture along gender lines, with work exploring its intersectional nature across race, gender identity and sexuality have received renewed attention in light of recent events. In particular the continued gender stereotyping and harassment in #GamerGate, the death threats against Anita Sarkeesian, and the continued lack of diversity in gaming and technology in Silicon Valley, have revealed that these issues have not been resolved. In *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai, Richard & Tynes, 2016) we revisited together with game designer Heidi MacDonald (MacDonald, 2016) the discussion on gender, diversity, and gaming with new perspectives on who plays, how, where, why, what and with whom they play, and most importantly, how we can diversify research, access, participation and designs. In the panel, we focused on key issues and provided concrete illustrations in intersectional research, inclusive conference design and educational practice.

Examining the Critical Gaming Lab to Influence Social Justice in Game Design

The Critical Gaming Lab explores not only creation and content, but also the dissemination of these works within culture paying particular attention to reception, impact, and use. By providing space and infrastructure, this increases engagement with research and progressively influences game design. Exploring texts as persuasive, narratives as exclusive/inclusive, and content as ideological projects, etc, we explore games as having the power to deliver meaning and messages. The immersive nature of the Critical Gaming Lab connects students in game development, education, social justice, cultural studies,

sociology, and other academic disciplines to explore the interdisciplinary and intersecting nature of contemporary gaming—they aren't just one thing. It is important to highlight the contradiction between ideals of inclusion espoused within the video game industry and society as a whole and the persistence of injustices within the structural and institutional context in which they may have developed (Gray, 2016). This can only occur when collaborative space is created, valued, and sustained. Students are empowered to view the research space as an extension of the classroom where learning still takes place but the participatory nature of the collaborations foster research in generating knowledge. By nurturing these affinity spaces, the *Critical Gaming Lab* is developing the community of practice where this level of game design and criticism will explore games from this progressive and holistic manner to improve conditions within gaming culture.

Designing an Intersectional Space for *Different Games*

In just four years, *Different Games* conference has grown from a small student-run event on diversity in games, into an annual event that draws hundreds to NYU's downtown Brooklyn campus (Schoemann & Asad, 2016). We discussed how through a mixture of accessible programming, from hands-on workshops and discussion groups to lectures and panels, attendees are part of challenging conversations about the ways players, designers, and critics are moving games forward, to create a more inclusive games culture. Crucial to this annual event remaining open, dynamic and accessible, is the organization behind the conference, a collective of more than a dozen members, collaborating from across different educational, professional and ideological positions. Drawing from experiences as members of grassroots political movements, housing cooperatives, art collectives and pockets of the North American indie games scene as much as from knowledge of academic game studies or critical theory, the conference is designed to reflect a radical approach to the politics of identity and inclusion. The conference has built a reputation for modeling practical ways that both academic and industry spaces can address issues of accessibility and inclusivity, from removing financial barriers of entry to implementing alternative security procedures and de-gendering our restrooms. Through a collaborative approach to articulating shared values through the design of its events, *Different Games Collective* has been creating a unique and timely celebration of underrepresented voices in games since 2013.

Researching Inclusive Gaming Communities of Practice

Female-supportive gaming communities can serve as models of inclusive learning and for equitable trajectories in STEM (Richard, 2016). One example is the PMS Clan which has diverse membership and participation across gender, demonstrates evidence of higher cross-gender self-efficacy and identification in gaming, as well as trajectories for women in the game industry and computing careers. Self-efficacy and identification are important moderators of persistence in learning and career pursuit, as well as what has come to be termed “non-cognitive factors” that undergird achievement. However, PMS has also been a source, not only for resiliency, but also for resistance strategies to expose and resist the hegemony and vitriol directed at women in game culture. Members were involved in creating fatuglyorslutty.com, a site that documents and exposes abuse in online gaming and can serve as a model for game-based informal learning for marginalized and underrepresented groups. However, it has also demonstrated fragility in supporting intersectional diversity through its singular focus on gender support. Some of the limitations of this community, and future directions for exploring emerging sites and communities for viewing and combating marginalization in gaming (i.e., Twitch.tv) were discussed in the panel.

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