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Cultivating Digital Safe Spaces: The case of Women Game Jam on Discord

Emergent Research Forum (ERF)

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Abstract

This paper explores the creation and cultivation of digital safe spaces. We study this in the context of the Women Game Jam (WGJ) on Discord, a multipurpose digital platform characterized by its popularity for community creation. WGJ is an annual game jam (speed run event to build video games from scratch) for women interested in video game creation. We unpack what a digital safe space is and how it can be manifested and cultivated in such a digital platform through observations, participation, and interviews with the organizers of the WGJ. Our preliminary analysis reveals the heavy work and resources needed to create and maintain a digital safe space. Our research adds to the current discussions on cultivating safe spaces on digital platforms.

Keywords

Safe Spaces, Game Jams, Discord, Digital Platforms.

Introduction

Safe spaces are broadly defined as digital or physical spaces where groups of people, usually marginalized communities, can express themselves freely without outside prejudices or harassment (Clark-Parsons 2018; The Roestone Collective 2014). Safe spaces are conceptualized as “a living concept” (The Roestone Collective 2014 p. 1348) that constantly unfolds rather than a static and pre-defined concept. Therefore, safe spaces need to be cultivated and continuously maintained. Safe spaces can be created for different purposes to serve marginalized groups in various contexts, such as the video game industry.

In the video game industry, the presence of women¹ and minorities² tends to be small (Sheffield Haworth 2021). Existing research suggests that the video game development industry suffers from sexism, homophobia, racism, and other types of discrimination (Ferraz and Gama 2020; Kerr 2021). To mitigate the toxic environment and help reduce the imbalance of participation in game development, different organizations and events, such as game jams, have started to create spaces where women and minorities can safely create video games (IGDA 2021; Into Games 2021). A game jam is a space where people team up to develop games (usually prototypes) in a short amount of time (IGDA 2021; Shin et al. 2012).

In this research-in-progress paper, we have followed the Women Game Jam (WGJ) organizers in their efforts to create and cultivate a safe space for women who are interested in video game development. The game jam has taken place on Discord—a multipurpose digital platform that includes text, image, video, and audio communication channels (Jiang et al. 2019)—that is widely used by video game communities (ibid.). We answer the following research question “*how to create and cultivate a digital safe space in the digital platform Discord?*”

Despite a growing interest in digital safe spaces, we still know relatively little about how digital platforms are used to cultivate them. There is some recent work on safe spaces that have been studied in the context

¹ We understand women as any person that consider themselves/self-present as one.

² We understand minorities as populations that experience disadvantages in comparison with dominant groups based on different characteristics or practices (e.g., ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, disability).

of digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Brownlie 2018; Clark-Parsons 2018), and specifically on Discord, the focus has been on learning and educational safe spaces (Kruglyk et al. 2020). Yet the resources required for cultivating safe spaces, given such platforms' characteristics, are still under-researched. This short paper will provide the reader with an initial understanding of our empirical work and preliminary results about the cultivation of digital safe spaces, specifically on Discord.

Literature Review: Safe spaces – Video Game Context

Safe spaces can have different purposes, such as 1) offering “emotional or psychological refuge from external threats without surveillance by the dominant groups” (Linabary 2017, p.76), 2) cultivating “collective identity and solidarity” (ibid., p. 77), and 3) providing “a site for organizing and resistance” (ibid., p. 77).

With the digitalization, many safe spaces are created in digital platforms—digital environments that allow communication between different actors such as systems and people (Constantinides et al. 2018; Tiwana et al. 2010). These digital safe spaces aim to serve marginalized groups. Existing research on digital safe spaces has addressed various issues, for example, the role of moderators in such spaces (Gibson 2019). In another study, Clark-Parsons (2018) focuses on the constant construction of the dimensions of boundary work in a feminist digital safe space on Facebook. She identifies the dimensions as *safety from*, *safety for*, and *safety to*. *Safety from* is to “what and whom the group provides *safety from*” (p.2133). *Safety for* is “who the group provides *safety for*” (p.2133). And *safety to* is “what the group provides the *safety to do*” (p.2133).

Women and minority groups have been an example of marginalized groups who have been facing challenges related to inclusion in the video game industry (Sheffield Haworth 2021). The number of women participating in game development is skewed (only around 30% worldwide (Clement 2021)), which is surprising as almost half of the population that play video games are women (Sheffield Haworth 2021). A few studies that have explored the reasons behind their participation in game jams have talked about the lack of perceived knowledge in game development (Kerr 2021). Other reasons respond to the fact that women and minorities have to deal with sexism, homophobia, racism, and different types of discrimination in these spaces (Ferraz and Gama 2020; Kerr 2021). To our knowledge, there have not been studies about how game jams could provide a safe space for marginalized groups such as women.

Method: Case Background, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

The Women Game Jam (WGJ) is a global event that originated to provide a friendly and safe space for women who share an interest in video game development. It is a space for team building, learning, empowerment, and encouraging women to create portfolios for job applications in the video game industry. In general, there are three roles in the WGJ: the organizers (representatives from each participating country), the volunteers (mentors and monitors), and the jammers (the participants). The WGJ was organized physically in each country, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, the event was held online on Discord with more than 40 participating countries.

Our data sources include participation in the WGJ, observation of organizers' meetings, and interviews. We also have access to the internal documents (12 documents) and chat logs of the Global WGJ Discord server. The organizers granted access to the meetings, documents, and the Discord server once we contacted them. Table 1. shows more details of our data sources.

Activity	# Times	Total hours
Participation (WGJ 2021)	1	96 hours
Observations	6	7 hours 30 minutes
Interviews	9	13 hours 15 minutes

Table 1. Data collection summary

We were inspired by (Gioia et al. 2013) in collecting and analyzing the empirical material in parallel. As we engaged in reading the literature on safe spaces (The Roestone Collective 2014) and digital platforms (Constantinides et al. 2018; Tiwana et al. 2010), we were able to cluster the first and second-order codes

into two aggregate dimensions: “Setting up a Digital Safe Space,” and “Safe Space Custodians.” We will briefly introduce these dimensions in the result section.

Preliminary Results

Through interviews with the organizers, we identified two main dimensions for creating and maintaining the WGJ as a safe space: 1) setting up the digital safe space and 2) safe space custodians.

Setting up the Digital Space: Selecting participants and configuring the platform

During the interviews, the organizers shared that one of the essential tasks was to secure who would be included in their space. They negotiated about insiders and outsiders and considered that women (cis and transgender) were accepted. In addition, they decided that men and non-binary people were welcomed but, especially men had to meet specific rules: *“...we made the rule that: “Okay, you’re a man, you want to participate, you’re totally welcomed, but please bring a friend that must be a woman or identify as a woman.”*” – Organizer 4.

Organizers spent a significant amount of time and resources selecting the participants (jammers). They created a (digital) registration form that was distributed weeks before the event to understand the applicants' intentions and filter out the inappropriate ones. It contained open questions such as personal introductions, reasons or motivations to participate, and areas of expertise. *“If you have like an open space, you are going to get haters, you are going to get trolls anyway. So, we try as much as possible to make this a space like safe in a way of not receiving haters and not receiving spam, and not receiving trolls, or not receiving like hate mail for example, or people that might be looking for spam or stuff like that. So, we try to make [it] really invitation-only, inscription-only.”* – Organizer 5. Specifically for men jammers, the organizers designed specific rules for their participation; for example, there could only be one man in a team, and he was not allowed to take the team-leader role. The selection of jammers was made by each of the organizers separately (in each country). After acceptance, the organizers sent an email to the applicant with an invitation to the WGJ Discord server. This invitation included a message not to share the invitation link anywhere. The jammers had to accept some rules before being let into the Discord server, such as *“Do not Spam. Respect Everybody. Discrimination of any kind is not tolerated. Make Everyone Welcome!”* Organizer 4 elaborates: *“We actually have like a set of rules [...] Because at the end of the day, the thing of any Game Jam is about we all want to learn. And the Women Game Jam especially is about the safe environment.”*

The organizers also made a careful selection of the volunteers. The volunteers could be mentors (people with some expertise in game development) or monitors. Since these roles were power-sensitive, the organizers wanted to ensure they did not include people who could be a potential risk for the jammers. The volunteers could be of any gender, but they searched for what they called *“positive masculinity”* for the male volunteers. They also considered selecting people who hold important positions in the game development industry to make the participants meet potential job opportunities. *“The mentors I chose are mentors that have also important decisions inside the studios. And so, it means that these mentors can hire these women.”* – Organizer 1

Organizers used Discord to hold the WGJ since they found it optimal for community building. Due to the Discord's complexity, they used third-party developers to help configure it to fit their purposes. One of the organizers commented: *“Discord is a very new platform, and you can customize [it] as you want, but you need someone who is an expert in this, and no one is an expert in Discord. So, you need a person who can make these changes in the platform, in your server.”* They also added different “layers” of security to avoid unwanted people disturbing the digital space. The first “layer” or filter was a waiting room where the participant had to be verified manually by one of the organizers. Along with the manual verification, they implemented a bot that would allow only people with verified Discord accounts to stay in the waiting room (new Discord accounts must verify their emails). After the manual verification, the participant would finally be able to see the other channels in the WGJ server and start participating in the jam. *“(...) the waiting room is a place where you will stay until someone from the organization team verifies your username, comparing that to the usernames in the spreadsheet that has everyone who has been accepted in the jam. So, if your username is not on the list, you will stay in the waiting room forever... That’s how it works.”* – Organizer 4

Cultivating the Digital Safe Space: Safe space Custodians

Once the WGJ started, the organizers and the volunteers had to maintain the space safe. The organizers mentioned that they not only monitored the different channels on Discord but also tried to make the participants feel comfortable and cared for in a friendly digital space. They acted like custodians of the jammers, in the sense that they took the role of being both caregivers (by being very attentive and caring to all the jammers' needs) and protectors (by acting if they saw something was wrong). "So, we really pay very close attention to every single person in every single team, we want them to feel supported. We want them to feel as they would feel if we had them on site, and we were able to just hand them some tea at night, and, I don't know, just... we kind of have the jammers surrounded in cotton." – Organizer 3

The organizers and the volunteers had to collectively divide the work of monitoring and maintaining the WGJ Discord server. The volunteers, working closely with the jammer teams, were supposed to inform the organizers if they saw any activity that could be problematic. On the other hand, the organizers were attending to the direct messages they were getting from both volunteers and jammers, as well as overseeing the entire space. One crucial aspect mentioned was that, unlike physical game jams where organizers could witness unwanted behaviors, in the digital space, the participants themselves had to speak up if they experienced any uncomfortable situation. This situation was because on Discord, the teams are working in private channels, and the interactions between participants cannot be monitored there. "We [needed to] remind the jammers that: "Hey, if you need help, if something is going on, DM us. Like these are organizers to each country, you can talk to whichever you want." – Organizer 4

Preliminary Discussion

This study analyses different dimensions of creating and cultivating digital safe spaces in events such as the WGJ. We have identified similar aspects to the ones described by Clark-Parsons (2018) in the three dimensions of a safe space (safety from, safety for, and safety to) when setting up the digital safe space, especially in the selection of the participants. We expand these aspects by including the platform's configuration, which is crucial when establishing digital safe spaces. We also see that the cultivation of the digital safe space and the role of the custodians are connected with the monitoring work in digital platforms (Gibson 2019) and the policing work in organizations (Crawford and Dacin 2021; Dacin et al. 2010; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). To our knowledge, the role of the "custodians" is not mentioned in either the literature on monitoring or policing. We argue that, in line with The Roestone Collective (2014) and Linabary (2017), digital safe spaces should be maintained; and we investigate how this is done in the case of Discord as the digital context for the safe space.

Conclusion

In this research-in-progress, we have exposed our initial analysis of the case of the WGJ. We identified two main aspects when building and cultivating a digital safe space: 1) setting up the space by selecting the participants and configuring the digital platform, and 2) cultivating the space with the custodians. We expand the literature on digital safe spaces by analyzing the role of the digital platform and the custodians of the space.

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