Hearing "Lady Game Creators" Tweet: #1ReasonWhy, Women and Online Discourse in the Game Development Community

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Abstract

This paper examines the rise of the #1ReasonWhy hashtag on Twitter during November 2012. It looks at how the @replies and RTs used within the hashtag built a picture of the issues facing women within the field of game development. The discourse and sharing of experiences amplified through the hashtag provide a broad picture of gender discrimination and sexism within the industry's culture, along with potential community-driven methods for confronting these entrenched traditions of harassment. In particular this paper uses the conversations developed by women during this period to understand how Twitter acted as a tool to build solidarity and amplify the message of gender discrimination within the industry.

Keywords

#1reasonwhy; gender; game development; social movements; twitter

Introduction

The demographics of the game industry skew towards men: in an industry survey in 2012, women were a minority in most industry disciplines, making up only 3% of programmers, 13% of artists and animators, 11% of designers, 6% of audio developers, and 5% of QA testers (GameCareerGuide.com, 2012). These demographics reflect strikingly poor gender diversity even in disciplines more traditionally gender-neutral, such as art and animation, which only slightly edge out the technical positions in representation. Responses to this strong disparity vary, and are subject to the same challenges as any STEM discipline, with blame centered on the "leaky pipeline" or assumptions that women don't enjoy games or the disciplines that produce them. The culture of the game industry continues to reflect this dynamic, with regular appearance by booth babes dressed as game characters at major industry conventions and game publishers touting the improved "boob physics" of their releases (Cardoso, 2009). This is in spite of a far greater gender equity among players of games: according to the ESA, 42% of game players are women (Entertainment Software Association, 2011). Yet it is difficult to document the correlation between this game development culture and the number of women making games until that discourse moves into the public sphere, revealing the larger patterns of sexism within the community and suggesting change on the horizon.

Case

In November of 2012 female game developers took to Twitter under the hashtag 1ReasonWhy in response to game designer Luke Crane's tweet, "Why are there so few lady game creators?" (Crane, 2012). The women and allies detailed their own experiences with sexism in the field of game development along with other obstacles that prevent women from joining game development as a career. Details that women shared varied from being mistaken as the office secretary, to being physically assaulted, to having their work outright dismissed by peers and reviewers. This outpouring was one of the first self-motivated instances of a minority group within the industry sharing their experiences en masse. It highlighted the commonality of many of these issues and identified major areas of the culture of game development which excludes, harasses, or forces out women. This sharing raised its own slew of hostile responses from other members of the community and participants on Twitter who unintentionally reinforced the validity of those shared experiences through further

harassment and attempts at silencing or drowning out the hashtag. In most instances, these attempts were quickly overtaken by those supporting the original message and who worked to refocus the topic.

Methods

The authors collected tweets in a spreadsheet using the Twitter Archive Google Spreadsheet (TAGS) template (Hawksey, 2013). The data was collected hourly from November 26th through November 30th. This period reflects some of the heaviest use of the twitter hashtag with participation dropping off significantly after the week. Periodic captures were completed after this period using Tweet Archivist in order to estimate the continued interest and community discussion about the issue as well as to determine how if late stage hashtag hijacking would be successful. Through an analysis of dominant @replies and RTs this paper examines how the #1ReasonWhy hashtag created opportunities for female game developers to connect with one another and build a community voice regarding harassment they faced within the industry.

Building upon existing work using both Twitter other social media sites, this paper follows the conversation that developed as individuals built networks of @replies to advance a conversation across the social networking platform or RTs to amplify and increase points which they jointly found moving, important, or exemplary (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2011; boyd, et al., 2010; Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). This data was analyzed with the goal of understanding how Twitter acted as a tool for solidarity building and message amplification within the protest like atmosphere of the #1ReasonWhy hashtag (Goldsmith & Siegel, 2012; Harlow, 2011; Caren, et al., 2012; Bennett, 2012).

Analysis

While the conversation began as an airing of grievances prompted by the initial question, it quickly transformed in response to backlash from hecklers and "trolls" within the hashtag itself. The discourse further moved from an observation of problems to discussions of methods and resources that might improve working conditions for women within the industry. The discussion spawned additional hashtags dedicated to those solutions, including the #1ReasonMentors hashtag for women to find support for their efforts to enter the industry. Given the persistent issues that are faced by female players attempting to integrate with the hardcore fan community that surrounds games, increasing the number of women developers has been seen as a key resource in improving these issues across the board (Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

The use of twitter and the #1ReasonWhy tag were important steps forward in identifying issues within the culture of game development. Particularly, these highlighted the experiences of women within the industry, rather than outside forces like academia, and presented not only clear instances of problematic behavior but also the frequency of such transgressions. The women's use of Twitter challenged typical usage to create a point of solidarity building and connection between many separate individuals who received public recognition of their private hurts and experiences. It also acted to amplify the message that the issue of why there were so few women in game design had nothing to do with women.

Conclusion

This case is one example among many instances in the last year which show that the game development and consumer communities are in the midst of reorganization of their thinking about gender, inclusiveness, and participation. In particular, it represents one of the most visible instances of a joint vocalization by women who participate in the community. Given that this movement was also based upon women's experiences with harassment and hostility, it is surprising that the story was taken and shared among many major news sources including Kotaku, The Guardian, and Forbes. This research builds upon existing work studying message amplification in social networking and

grassroots movements, as well as solidarity building. It identifies how this twitter hashtag not only caught on with a larger than intended group, but also how that group dynamically identified and put forward shared issue-shaping stories. The effects of this research support an expansion of qualitative methods into the areas of big data and social media and theorize a transformational shift in one of today's largest entertainment media as the discourse starts to reflect the gender diversity already present among consumers if not developers.

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