4-11-2021

An Ethnographic Co-Design Approach to Promoting Diversity in the Games Industry

Florence Chee  
fcche@luc.edu

Larissa Hjorth  
RMIT

Hugh Davies  
RMIT

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/communication_facpubs

Part of the Communication Technology and New Media Commons, Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, and the Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons

Author Manuscript
This is a pre-publication author manuscript of the final, published article.

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Communication: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.  
© Informa UK Limited, 2021
An Ethnographic Co-Design Approach to Promoting Diversity in the Games Industry

Florence M. Chee  
Loyola University Chicago  
fchee@luc.edu

Larissa Hjorth  
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

Hugh Davies  
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

Abstract

Workplace diversity and inclusion are recognised as integral to the internal and public-facing success of organizations. The games industry worldwide has been notably slow to embrace reforms to bring diverse work cultures into practice. Not only does the industry rank very low in the diversity of its corporate profile, but a series of high-profile controversies have underscored major problems with attaining and retaining individual staff and achieving overall corporate diversity. The largely male-centric profile of game companies is increasingly at odds with the changing demographics of player communities that are increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD).

In recent years, a number of games media outlets, organizations and game companies have sought to ameliorate internal social and cultural problems by attempting to facilitate cultural change in the games sector. This paper presents a retrospective analysis of one such response. At the centre of our analysis are the efforts of a leading global game company to tackle issues of diversity in their organization. In order to discuss and address concerns surrounding gender, diversity, and inclusion practices in design and production, the academic research team deployed a series of workshops using participatory ethnographic methodology involving co-design approaches as feminist praxis. Co-design is a useful approach for giving voice to diverse stakeholders in the consultation process leading to better implementation and empowerment. Through their experiences and participant observational data, this paper discusses the challenges and subjectivities in feminist design and praxis that those implementations presented for us, as well as outlining possibilities for future applications.
Introduction

As early as 2004, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) formally acknowledged the importance of advocating diversity in games development (Dean Chan, 2005). The Executive Director at that time, Jason Della Rocca, conceded, “We’re seeing, to a large extent, that the games that are being designed unconsciously include the biases, opinions and reflections of their creators” (Associated Press 2005). Left unchecked, these biases have in many cases devolved into what Mia Consalvo (2012) refers to as “toxic gamer culture.” Yet the global games industry continues to struggle with diversity and inclusion (Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher 2014; Florence Chee 2016; Thorsten Busch, Florence Chee and Alison Harvey 2017). Numerous high-profile controversies have repeatedly exposed the games industry as propagating toxic working environments (Nathan Meunier 2010; Emily Matthew 2012; Melissa Locker 2012; Leah Burrows 2013; Adi Robertson 2014; Aja Romano 2014; Chella Ramanan 2017; Cecilia D’Anastasio 2018).

Notwithstanding the persistent challenges of workplace cultural change, the benefits of diversity and inclusion are well understood in research. Workplaces that successfully promote and build diversity and inclusivity increasingly demonstrate greater creativity and innovation—translating into larger market share (Swati Jain and Richard Lobo 2012; Scott Page 2017; Carlos de Aquino and Robert Robertson 2018). Moreover, diversity and inclusion have become integral to both employee retention and the customer reputation of brands (David Thomas 2004; Richard Lowther 2006; Ernest Gundling and Anita Zanchettin 2007). Beyond important ethics of social equality and representation, championing workplace diversity is an important business proposition.

This paper seeks to generate deeper discussion around diversity and inclusion in the games industry by exploring a series of co-design ethnographic workshops with a major global games company¹. To date, there has been little evidence from researchers working within a games company to understand the challenges and opportunities, as well as key methods, in citing change within the industry. Stories of poor treatment continue to accumulate, yet little structural change is implemented to improve conditions. Researchers outside of the industry continue to critique game industry conditions, but researchers within the industry are vulnerable to retaliation should their work become too prominent or visible. As academic

¹ The company name for this study is confidential as per ethics protocols, and the workshops/data collection were approved by multiple organizational review boards for ethical human subjects research.
researchers invited to share knowledge with a game company interested in the intricacies of workplace diversity and inclusion, we introduced a combination of ethnographic and co-design techniques in an effort to collectively work toward understanding the genesis of some of the practices and perceptions that are currently a barrier to workplace change. In this work, we discuss the findings that provide insights into how games companies and the gaming industry in general may enhance its continuing efforts in embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Drawing from the knowledge gleaned from our series of studies conducted with a major “Triple A” game company in 2016, this paper explores some of the barriers and opportunities encountered in the field during that time period. While some of these practices and perceptions are particular to the specific games company presented in this study, many of the lessons can be applied more generally to the industry. For research integrity and to protect the individuals involved, we have given the company a pseudonym, Global Games Company (GGC). In 2016, the upper management of GGC felt compelled to respond to the aftermath of the highly toxic culture of the #GamerGate phenomenon in 2014, which came to represent controversy over who belonged within game culture and led to the widespread harassment of a number of feminist game makers, writers and researchers. The reasons people have for identifying as a gamer, exemplified in the work of Adrienne Shaw (2012), continues to be fraught due to individual background and motivations.

During what would become a cultural flashpoint in global game culture, questions regarding deep structural misogyny within the gamer community became more prominent. Our own observations of media discourse in the time leading up to this research indicate an increasingly polarized climate in which the risks of conducting this kind of research were heightened. Companies themselves were unsure about how to navigate a seemingly sudden position where they needed to be explicit about their ethics and values in a very public manner. As Kishonna Gray and David Leonard (2018, 1) note, the games industry and its representation of identity tends to perpetuate injustices that “mirror the inequities and violence that permeates society as a whole.” They argue that more in-depth understanding of the racial and gender barriers [to participation in gaming communities] will allow for ways to foster change and social justice. It was precisely these inequities, barriers and cultural understandings that GGC wanted to address within its organisation.

In order to highlight the various obstacles to, and opportunities for, change in the games industry, this paper will move through the following sections. We begin with a broader discussion of diversity and inclusion principles for businesses. Then, a contextualization of the games industry and our specific case study of GGC as a major game company with thousands
of employees and the ability as well as inclination to take leadership in its consideration of diversity and inclusion issues. After describing the specific case study and the methods involved, we discuss the emergent findings from the ethnographic, co-design workshops. We conclude with recommendations for future work and possibilities in the application of feminist praxis. The aim has been to demonstrate, during and after the workshops, the importance of diverse workplaces to those involved. In considering how games workplaces and the technology industry in general have fared regarding progress in diversity and inclusion, it is our hope that the findings and analysis from our study continues to benefit others with whom it may resonate.

**Diversity and Inclusion in Industry**

Diversity and inclusion programs in corporate environments are not new. Constituting a type of change management, such programs work to modify the configuration of leadership teams or staff and work to disrupt outmoded habits and routines. The ultimate aim is to breakdown invisible barriers, renew the working culture in order to cultivate a more inclusive environment into which individuals outside of narrow heteronormative parameters are welcomed as valued colleagues. However, changing internal work cultures is both difficult to achieve and sustain. Research into change management reveals a high failure rate of about 70 percent (Scott Keller and Colin Price 2011).

McKinsey research into corporate environments globally finds that most of these efforts fail due to participants either not believing in the proposed changes or not making them a priority (2015). Diversity and inclusion programs designed to raise the representation of women and minorities in organizations face particular challenges with resistance and inertia arising from unconscious and sometimes overt biases that are often deeply engrained in an organization’s culture (Allen McConnell and Jill Leibold 2001). Successful diversity programs tend to involve clear objectives. These programs are led from the top, and not just by the CEO but by the entire management team. They foster active and organization wide involvement and require the infrastructure to actively manage against targets not quotas to hold individuals accountable for outcomes.

McKinsey identifies seven ways to apply behavioural principles. These include highlighting the positive achievements of peers, priming staff with images and words that discourage biases, ensuring that diversity messages come from trusted opinion leaders within the organization, providing strategic context, triggering emotional responses, making information salient, and appealing to an individual’s self-image (McKinsey 2015). The report’s
findings show a number of barriers to the recruitment of all diversity groups. These include lack of a clear and consistent mandate with visible support leadership and inadequate collection and use of data on the advantages of more diverse organizations. The findings also show that training was limited and exclusive in its content. Training often failed to include people in the target groups. These concerns of overcoming barriers to deliver and maintain positive change were crucial in our development of a nuanced methodology to bring organizational change to GGC.

Understanding the games industry
To understand the context of GGC’s concerns around lack of diversity and inclusion, contextualizing it within the aforementioned controversies associated with #GamerGate is essential. Although GGC had been aware of inequities in gender and cultural representation in the games sector and unhealthy cultures of misogyny, the urgency of reforms became clear in the aftermath of #GamerGate (Kishonna Gray and David Leonard 2018). While women in the gaming community had for some years received significant harassment and vilification, in the period of August/September of 2014, the movement known as #GamerGate viciously targeted several individuals—most notably game designer Zoe Quinn (Bob Stuart, 2014), media critic Anita Sarkeesian (Nick Wingfield, 2014), and game developer Brianna Wu (Gray, et al. 2017) as well as the journalists, designers, scholars, and critics who aligned with them. The #GamerGate included threats of violence so extreme as to ultimately involve both the FBI and the United Nations (Kristin MS Bezio, 2018).

#GamerGate demonstrated the dangerous level to which toxicity in the global game’s community had festered, as well as what global politics would indicate was yet to come. In response, the company at the center of this study (GGC) wanted to ensure that they transformed their global organization and was fostering a diverse workforce that was at once aware, literate and inclusive of gender, race, ability, and sexual diversity. During our listening sessions with GGC, the executive management expressed a need to address complex issues around gender and cultural difference in the workplace as an essential step in the sustainability of the games industry. As feminist scholars invited into these private contexts, we were compelled to participate in a process of co-design and shared problem solving. Our own organizational ethnography, as a result, took place in parallel. By their own reasoning, the GGC hoped to become an industry leader in best practices for diversity and inclusion by mobilizing, much like other major corporations, toward more positive directions.

Although games industry workers like those in GGC are typically highly educated and experienced in their craft, these same workers have identified a number of shortcomings in
their own training and education around intersecting matters such as ethics, gender, diversity and inclusion (Rosalind Gill 2002; Greg Hearn, Ruth Bridgstock, Ben Goldsmith and Jess Rodgers 2004; David Hesmondhalgh 2007). Entire workforces in technical fields find themselves poorly prepared for the social landscape of workplace environments. Games companies and their staff recognize the need and benefit for transformation towards greater diversity and inclusivity but are uncertain how to achieve it. These issues point to the need for greater diversity in education and training environments that feed into sectors such as games development. But in the short term, it is abundantly clear that games companies themselves must take corporate responsibility for addressing diversity and inclusion in both videogame products and the environments in which they are produced (Thorsten Busch, Florence Chee and Alison Harvey 2017).

With this context in mind, we designed a participatory, co-design workshop that allowed us to tap into existing practices and perceptions at GGC as well as ways in which to move forward in changing workplace cultures for the future to be more inclusive and diverse. The next section discusses the methodology we developed to achieve a holistic and empathetic study conducted with the utmost care for participants.

**Methodology**

In 2016, the researchers were contacted by GGC to conduct participatory workshops with their staff about gender and games. The researchers recommended conducting a series of ethnographic co-design workshops with different employees to gain insight into practices and perceptions to inform how change might be instigated. GGC made an open call to their employees to participate as part of leadership training across a variety of the sections in the company such as programming, designing and senior management. Representatives from the various sectors were selected.

Ethnography has a strong history in feminist approaches to critiquing the industry from within—especially through the work of science and technology studies (STS) scholars such as Lucy Suchmann and Anthropologist Genevieve Bell. These feminist scholars deploy ethnography to expose how technology is deeply social. In our workshops, we deployed an approach that coalesced co-design with ethnography to address the complexity of understanding diversity and inclusion. Ethnographic techniques were important because they are about understanding practice and motivations—important factors for addressing cultures—whether it be a country culture or corporate. By using co-design we seek to provide voice to the participants and ideally empowerment through the processes. Co-design has become a
crucial mechanism in many industries as a way to include complex stakeholders in the deciding process and thus implementation of changes.

Our rationale to incorporate co-design in our approach was with the express purpose of addressing diversity and inclusion. It involves techniques that allow for the diversity of stakeholders to have voice and agency in the decision processes. Increasingly co-design is being used to engage participants in the corporate decision making to ensure complex needs, interpretations and understandings are included. In the last decade, the use of ethnographic techniques with creative practice in the form of design anthropology and design ethnography have sought to allow reflexive methods for working with industry to enact social change.

In *Creative Practice Ethnography*, by Larissa Hjorth, Anne Jungnickel, Kat & Gretchen Coombs (2019), the authors use case studies in industry and community settings to illustrate the power of ethnography with creative techniques like design. They argue that creative practice ethnography can allow researchers and participants to consider three key phases—techniques, translations and transmission. Using creative practice ethnographies allow for understanding and development of the three Ts in collaboration with industry and community. Organizations such as EPIC—which are about ethnographers working in industry and praxis—have been important in pushing definitions of ethnography in industry. Combining co-design with ethnographic methods can allow stakeholders to explore their perceptions and practices in reflexive ways (Larissa Hjorth, Anne Jungnickel, Kat & Gretchen Coombs 2019). These ethnographers deploy an action research approach whereby the field is constantly informing and transforming the methods (Pink et al. 2016). These communities provide context for our understanding, motivation and usage of ethnography.

Over the course of three months, four workshops were conducted in three different sites in the US and Asia (two in the US and two in Asia). A majority of the company’s demographic was male and Asian. Women tended to occupy predominantly administrative roles. Our role, in discussion with HR, was to explore the current culture and how, through creative practice ethnographic exercises, we might collaborate to imagine and enact change towards a more inclusive corporate culture. Part of the barriers to diversity and inclusion are often fears and anxieties not based on actual reality. Through co-design methods like cultural probes (Bill Gaver, Andrew Boucher, Sarah Pennington and Brendan Walker 1999) —which act to prompt productive and reflective conversations—we sought to explore some of the existing practices and perceptions and how they might provide barriers. Then, working together, we wanted to co-design a future that was inclusive and productive.
Co-design workshops

The co-design workshops were framed around the “Future of the Games Industry.” Participants came to the workshop focused on this task—how to co-design to imagine the future. However, the structure of the workshop, which drew on co-design techniques like SWOTs, avatar-empathy building exercises, and privilege walkthrough sought to build reflexivity and reflection among the participants. Beyond working within the different cultural settings of the US and Asia, the workshop structure also included onsite participant observation, immersion and consultation at studio locations to the micro detailed level of technical rehearsal and finalization. Workshops with participants and invited guests included an introduction of the facilitators, our roles, methods and ambitions; an overview of the process that invited questions and feedback. The workshop design was as follows:

1. Ice breaker Introduction: This was an opportunity to ‘break the ice’ between GGC respondents and researchers – a setting in which questions could be openly addressed and an opportunity for a personable rapport to develop between researchers and respondents.

2. SWOT exercise (Worksheet + Master group worksheets): This exercise saw teams discuss and co-create a matrix of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats experienced by GGC in relation to diversity and inclusion.

3. Privilege Walkthrough: This exercise aimed to enhance awareness of diversity issues, the value of empathy, and customized according to participant cultural orientations and feedback.

4. Debrief and synthesis: At the conclusion of the workshops, this allowed for feedback between researchers and participants to occur and provided an opportunity to clearly outline the next steps. In this section it became clear that a framework and guidelines were need to enact the changes as imagined by the participants in the workshop.

After the workshop, the researchers then assembled a report informed by the workshops’ recommending future Best Practices and Interventions for GGC.

The GGC workshop in Asia had 2 x 4-hour workshops (one in the morning, one in the afternoon). Each workshop session had 14 participants split into tables of 7. The two US workshops were similarly conducted with roughly 12 participants. Recruitment was conducted by GGC and according to the requested criteria to ensure different areas of the industry including members from HR, leadership, and developers were included. In the US, the
workshops involved a mix of employees, (ages 18-65) sourced by GGC who volunteered to participate.

In the Asian workshops, the participants were solely men in upper management. The irony of this situation was not lost on those who recruited participants for the workshops, but in the local context, this was the compositional reality of the workshops, as well as representative of those typically in senior management. Participants were briefed at the beginning of each workshop that their input was voluntary, confidential, and could be ceased at any time. Participants gave informed consent under the clear understanding that any data collected to be used in future research would also be anonymized, as it appears here.

Each of the workshops followed a similar format. Each began with personal probes (understanding different stakeholders and their perceptions through the creation of representative people), a SWOT Analysis to determine perceived strength, weakness, opportunity and threats, and an exercise in codesign of leadership models for the future. By using cultural probes (Bill Gaver, Andrew Boucher, Sarah Pennington and Brendan Walker 1999) such as personas, participants are enabled to discuss some of the tacit challenges—especially around stereotypes and sexism—without making it personal. These co-design tools seek to empower participants in terms of the direction of both the discussion and the decision processes.
For example, in one exercise, participants took on an “avatar” in order to help develop a distanced understanding of the issues. The avatars participated in a diversity exercise whereby a circle of inclusion and exclusion was provided, and the avatars had to move back in response to questions about whether they had experienced any form of exclusion. The role of personas or avatars to develop empathy and understanding has become a key technique in co-design. The persona can operate like a “cultural probe” (Bill Gaver, Andrew Boucher, Sarah Pennington and Brendan Walker 1999) which allows participants to develop empathy and reflexivity. Through a series of exercises, including SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and empathy via avatar drills, the group developed a heightened awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion and worked towards a series of actions to be implemented.
Having identified barriers, opportunities and threats in their current workplace contexts, participants began working together on a co-futuring exercise. During this exercise, the participants worked together to outline some of the elements and practices the company should reward in order to instil organizational change. Co-futuring, as defined by UNESCO chair Sohail Inayatullah, is a design process that allows participants to relate differently to the past and present (2008). The process engages the participation of critical stakeholders and typically begins by sharing statements of aspirations, identifying the common values rather than agendas and solutions. Ideally it includes three phases: understanding and clearly defining the issue (empathise/define); developing potential solutions (ideate) and finally testing these ideas (prototype/iterate). The process is cyclical rather than sequential and may require reassessing or change at any point in the process.

The workshops combined ethnographic and design techniques to not only frame the processes around participants-as-experts but to also allow for iteration and understanding to be core to the workshop method. Before the workshops in Asia began, we were on-site in a participant observational capacity to gather contextual nuance and confirm cultural protocols with our prospective site informants. This process took place over one week.
Catherine Cassell and Gillian Symon (2006) find that qualitative research in organizations—such as ethnographic approaches—offer the opportunity of cross-disciplinary findings not readily afforded by quantitative methodologies. In order to address diversity issues in nuanced ways, our research utilized participatory ethnography (Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Genevieve Bell and Anne Galloway 2016). This shared ethnographic process opens up ethical and reflexive pathways to understanding, while also allowing for the emergence of creative and playful possibilities (Larissa Hjorth and Kristen Sharp 2014). Within such a framework, participants are viewed as co-collaborators and take on an active role in the direction of the discussion and outcomes. Through this participatory ethnography approach, we invited company and its staff to consider how we can work together to create diverse and inclusive workspaces that could be achieved through a co-futuring process.

Our first research priority in working with GGC was to meaningfully engage with the company environment and structure in order to comprehend its individual and collective motivations. This allowed us to identify existing behaviours and practices and to then tackle attitudes around gaming production and practices. Seeking to develop empathy with the subject of investigation, ethnography aims to meaningfully focus on the ‘why’ of a phenomenon in order to holistically understand culture within its environment, meanings, and motivations. In this way, ethnography aims to understand practices in situ, allowing for insights around motivations and behaviours as relational (Aditya Johri 2015).

The significance of ethnography in organizational spaces has become clear in scholarship examining culture, knowledge, and power (Maryann McCabe 2016). Free from technical jargon and high-wire abstraction, ethnographic approaches enable free flow of information and open rapport between researchers and participants within corporate environments (Van Maanen 2006). Rather than situating ourselves as the ethnographers and the participants as subjects, we introduced a participatory ethnographic approach, in order to create a level field of investigation. Participatory ethnography cultivates the crucial element of reflexivity enabling participants and researchers to self-reflect on patterns in through and practice (Anne-Laure Fayard and John Van Maanen 2015). We aimed to make our participants the experts in helping us to identify human-centred motivations. By asking participants to unpack the conscious and unconscious manner in which they engage with their work and broader practice, we aimed to enable them to recognise tacit knowledge and possible biases.

The role of co-design in helping to inform a participatory approach was also key. Co-design helps to elicit and curate collaborative findings in a way that encourages knowledge sharing, trust and respect. Co-design encompasses a diverse range of design approaches from
research-based, innovation driven, design oriented, and participatory methodologies, but tends to involve multiple disciplines, stakeholders and end users in the design process (Marc Steen 2013). Co-design can also be described as the act of sharing knowledge to develop understanding and respect across a design team towards a process of collective creativity (Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Stappers 2013).

In our situation, the co-design process involved creating conditions where participants could foster a sense of responsibility and common goals. We sought to guide conversations with participants in and around topics such as considering what it means to be part of a global game industry and exploring the current challenges in various aspects of their everyday operations. By improving short and long-term training/education opportunities, it was hoped to bring a common sense of purpose and direction within the organization in terms of “best practices for the future.” The ultimate goal was to identify and change or “offboard” conventional and limited views of diversity in the games industry and to instead “onboard” productive solutions to engaging with diversity. This strategy needed to include collective will or “buy-in” from those involved.

**Scope and limitations**

The second US workshop was limited to one workshop with 12 participants at a rectangular boardroom table. Participation in the workshops was limited to those in leadership roles and available to participate. A notable limitation was the absence of women in leadership roles, an issue that the industry needs to address holistically. (Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher 2015). Some GGC sites did draw from a more diverse pool of participants, but the nature of the roles involved still reflected a broader industry trend of few women in executive leadership roles. Working to include more diverse subjects in the future discussion processes will allow for more experiences of diversity to be included and addressed. Data was collected from the three primary sites of GGC and included audio-visual data, transcripts and worksheets.

**Workshop findings**

During the course of the workshops it became apparent from participant feedback that previous workshops and training in these matters had been abstracted and generalized, not specific and personal as our workshops were. Working alongside the management of GGC also made us aware of their commitment to continued training and learning of the workforce at GGC University Program including the promotion of an inclusive company culture. While the majority of participants saw the need to embrace diversity and gender inclusion for the growth
of the company and industry more generally, they were also concerns expressed about how that strategy would be communicated to the public. Participants identified the greatest threat of backlash not from within the company itself but from among the consumers of its games. Nonetheless, the participants also noted that the opportunities for embracing diversity outweighed the likely risks.

The nature of the hostile rhetoric experienced by our female researchers was in itself cause for analysis. Specifically, what accounts for this hostility during the research process? It also highlights the role of an ethics of care for researchers when working in such toxic environments. For example, feminist scholars Nicola Hendry and Anastasia Powell who explores online gender-based violence and harassment, the importance of an ethics of care around the researcher’s trauma of witnessing is important (2017). In their study of gender in engineering education environments (such as those that produce game developers) Brooke Dresden, Alexander Dresden, and Robert Ridge (2017) suggest that within male-dominated environments, women can be knowingly or unconsciously viewed as a threat to masculinity, often resulting in increased hostility and the construction of a negative work environment for women. Following Vandello et al. (2008), Dresden, Dresden and Ridge note that, as a social construction, masculinity must be nurtured and safeguarded with men often going to significant lengths to defend against perceived threats Bosson et al. (2009) Funk and Werhun (2011). Given the culture of gaming has been commercially structured as male gendered, the very presence of women or non-cis males in game production environments may be interpreted, explicitly or reflexively, as a gender threat.

An ethics of care is a complex term with an interdisciplinary and gendered history emerging from moral development to feminist research that has sought to take seriously the complex role of care in cultural practices and attitudes to ethics (Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto 1990; Virginia Held 2006). The field owes a great deal to the work of feminist philosophers, such as Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto, and more recently Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, who has extended care to the non-human world. Understanding an ethics of care not only involves acknowledging risks for participants in research, but also for researchers when topics have toxic environments such as gender violence. This violence can take many forms and the researchers need to put measures in place to protect themselves.

An ethics of care can be implemented at individual and collective levels. It is at the institutional level that it is most effective in eradicating systemic issues around bias behaviour. Implementing measures such as “relative to opportunity” in interviews can help to evaluate more compassionately the ways in which women’s careers are often shaped by carer
responsibilities. Often these interruptions to career can make people have greater emotional maturity—a key skill in many industries. In a study and analysis of 580 participants, Andreas Born, Eva Ranehill, and Anna Sandberg (2018) found that male dominated environments can have an adverse impact on women’s careers. The researchers found that “women randomly assigned to male majority teams are less willing to become team leaders than women assigned to female majority teams.” Further analyses showed that women in male majority teams were less supported in their roles than their male counterparts, and as a result, were less confident in their relative performance, were less influential and more swayed by others in team discussions.

The intermittent expression of prejudiced sentiments during our exercises were as illuminating about the culture if not more than the exercises themselves. Part of our ethnographic design accounted for this openness that led to an even richer discussion around possible internal threats to widescale on-boarding of diversity and inclusion action plans. Many identified that embracing or being seen to embrace diversity could lead to both opportunities and threats—specifically a “community backlash” while also tapping into new markets/customers by “promoting progressive thinking.” Alison Harvey (2020), in the Feminist Media Studies monograph that follows Liesbet Van Zoonen’s (2004) book by the same name, discusses the risks of being regarded as a “feminist killjoy” is a primary reason why women in these media contexts are reluctant to identify as feminist.

Key Outcomes
From the workshops two key outcomes were developed—A Gender Action Plan that was delivered to GGC and an Ethics of Care framework that was developed for future researchers and scholars in researching in potentially hostile contexts. We will discuss these two outcomes below.

A Gender Action Plan was developed and delivered to GGC intended for roll-out across its global organization. The Gender Action Plan involved specific benchmark activities in order to methodically move toward fostering Diversity and Inclusivity within the organization. Three main foci are: 1) Leadership: ensuring that the movement toward diversity and inclusion was led from the top while also recognized as a leadership capability, 2) Workplace Culture: taking individual and collective responsibility for moving the workplace culture toward an inclusive and welcoming environment, and 3) Succession Planning: guaranteeing that systems, policies and cultures were in place to ensure that the organizational change was both lasting and
sustainable. Each specific action requires ownership, leadership and membership through onboarding of personnel, so are significant undertakings in themselves.

The leadership team would establish a diversity and inclusion committee to develop a diversity and inclusion toolkit; develop KPI targets for diversity and inclusion for executives and senior roles; ensure that 50% of internal and external speakers address diversity and inclusion; nominate male inhouse diversity and inclusion champions, and finally monitor the implementation and reporting of the plan.

Implementing the recommendations for Workplace culture would involve establishing a diversity and inclusion workplace action plan; the implementation of empathy awareness workshops as deployed by the workshop template to create ongoing mindfulness around diversity and inclusion; providing parental leave resources and flexible working hours for care givers; the development of a recruitment campaign focused on attracting diverse employees; and finally the development of a workplace framework for safe spaces whereby discrimination and harassment is not supported. The succession planning would involve the development of strategies around succession planning for women and minority statuses in the promotion process; reviewing and maintaining leadership programs for diversity inclusion; provide enabling workshops and opportunities; the development of retention strategies to compliment recruitment; the co-creation resources (human and otherwise) that work toward responsive curriculum development and sustainability of initiatives. The holistic plan is designed to not require significant financial outlay, but to be culture driven at all levels, awarding groups and individuals the responsibility and custodianship of various aspects of the plan’s implementation.

Secondly, more work is needed around an ethics of care—for researchers and participants. Given that the researchers were female in a male dominated industry, issues around creating processes to support the researcher not to feel emotionally charged by un-reflexive comments made by participants about gender equality was raised. Recognizing the important ethical issues of undertaking research in potentially hostile contexts, a project emerged to consider how an Ethics of Care framework may be developed and extended to the research community (especially to student researchers) in their exposure to toxic material throughout a research project lifecycle. The project was in-part driven by the research undertaken at GGC but more broadly in relation to the study of Gamergate by multiple researchers that pointed to a need to engage with feminist discourses on both the topical and methodological levels. Stakeholders in this project included Twitter authors, targets of online harassment, researchers, students, archivists, and the larger academic community. A full
account of the findings of this project are outlined in Todd Suomela, Florence Chee, Bettina Berendt, and Geoffrey Rockwell (2019), which drew attention to the numerous ways that researchers themselves could be harmed in the process of collecting, handling, and archiving toxic data.

**Conclusion: Reflections for the (co) futures**

This paper explores some key issues around diversity and inclusion within the games industry through a series of co-design workshops. Much of current discussions around gender and diversity are built around misogynist rhetoric that, post #GamerGate, persists in its normalization. Through the deployment of co-design ethnographic workshops conducted with a global games company, this paper provides a deeper understanding into the challenges and opportunities for the games industry to be more inclusive and diverse in the future. The workshops sought to identify key practices and perceptions in order to provide more understanding into what factors could be key in inciting change within the industry and beyond its borders and boundaries. As we note, co-design ethnography is a useful method for bringing stakeholders on board to think about complex issues—especially inclusion and diversity in predominantly homogeneous corporate cultures. The methods are not definitive but rather point to the need for more creative interventions into these complex issues. As we have noted in the findings, two key outcomes were enacted: firstly, an action plan co-designed with stakeholders who would be implementing it. Secondly, an ethics of care framework provided support for researchers doing difficult work in toxic environments.

In our work with GGC, we deployed co-design workshops with staff to reflect on how the games industry could move forward in ways that could be defined as best practice. Increasingly we need to use methods such as co-design with ethnography to provide insight to move forward in inclusive ways. As workplaces become increasingly complex and management becomes synonymous with change, deploying participatory methods like ethnography and co-design helped to engage and empower staff. For the games industry—which has a long history of lack of diversity and inclusion—success in the future requires engaging staff in the ways that make workplaces more rewarding and fulfilling for not just men.

While organizations worldwide have embraced this approach, game companies have been resistant. More work is needed in this area to ensure change continues from within the industry itself rather than stagnating in a constantly changing world. As noted in the introduction, the evidence is clear that embracing diversity and inclusion is key to the future of
successful businesses. The games workplace culture needs reform if it is to survive and thrive as a future industry. There remains much to be done in the games industry. It is still one of the least diverse industries. The issues are systemic. And yet, as player demographics diversify (Kishonna Gray and David Leonard 2018), the only way for industries to remain in business is to engage seriously with diversity and inclusion as a crucial part of contemporary society. This paper is one step in discussion and enacting change in an industry full of challenges. We argue that more feminist approaches, especially deploying action research, are needed to not only influence practices but to also enact change.

References


Hearn, Greg, Bridgstock, Ruth, Goldsmith, Ben and Jess Rodgers. 2014. *Creative work beyond the creative industries*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar


https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659017690893

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2nr871sf


