



EMPOWERING THE GAMING INDUSTRY

Strategies for Addressing Hate,
Harassment, and Extremism in Online
Communities

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Executive Summary

- While the games industry has made progress in recent years, it continues to lack widespread knowledge and readily available tools to combat hate, harassment, and extremism in digital gaming communities.
- These behaviors have real-world impacts for players, such as psychological distress, and studios, such as a reduction in player base and revenue.
- When asked, players agree that studios and their moderators are responsible for creating and maintaining safe spaces.
- In an effort to advance discussions around addressing hate, harassment, and extremism as an industry, Take This held a series of focus groups in 2023 with professionals across the video games industry.
- Industry professionals reported they had little confidence that the industry has the tools needed to address these concerns.
- Aside from the efforts of a few collaborative groups, progress in this space remains siloed within individual studios or behind third-party paywalls, restricting innovation as an industry.
- Gaming communities are interconnected across studios, and, as such, the most effective solutions will likely be cross-studio collaborations.
- Community-based, proactive efforts are of particular interest as they are designed to reduce the prevalence of disruptive actions rather than simply reacting once harm has been caused.

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Introduction

The game industry has struggled to effectively mitigate various forms of disruptive behavior in games. Peer-to-peer social disruptions are of particular concern, such as sharing hate speech, harassing other players, and the propagation of extremist rhetoric. Most players have witnessed the expression of hate speech,¹ and witnessed or been a direct target of harassment,^{2,3} with a significant proportion experiencing sustained harassment over time.^{3,4} The prevalence and intensity of these experiences are magnified among marginalized communities, such as women and people of color.⁴⁻⁶ Extremist rhetoric is also commonplace, with extremist ideologies such as misogyny, racism, Islamism, white supremacy, and white nationalism being reported as relatively commonplace occurrences.³

The concern is not only in the prevalence of these actions, but their repercussions for players and the industry alike. Players report negative repercussions of witnessing or being the target of hate and harassment, such as increased feelings of isolation and anxiety, depressed mood, and suicidal ideation.^{1,3,7,8} Players place responsibility with studios and their moderators to create and maintain

safe spaces,² and these expectations have an impact on the industry - research continues to demonstrate the negative effects disruptive and “toxic” behavior have on a game’s revenue and active player base.⁹⁻¹¹ Harassment of developers directly is also a persistent concern within the industry.¹²

While the industry has made significant strides in addressing hate and harassment in online gaming spaces, there are still many avenues for improvement.^{3,12} For example, there is little available information about how industry-led, proactive community efforts are being fostered. There are efforts to mobilize communities to cultivate healthy (i.e., lower rates of hate and harassment) environments such as the Honor system in League of Legends (Riot), Commendation System of Rainbow Six Siege (Ubisoft), Commendations System in Destiny 2 (Bungie), and even the community guidelines of Valorant (Riot). However, it is unclear how effective these initiatives have been to shift community norms towards healthy communication and inclusion, as well as increase the ability of the community to push back against disruptive behavior (including hate and harassment). Community resilience efforts such as these

aim to address hate, harassment, and other disruptive behavior by shifting community norms and empowering player communities to respond effectively to problematic behavior within their communities. Such proactive efforts to support community resilience are of particular interest as they are designed to reduce the prevalence of disruptive actions rather than simply reacting to the disruptions once harm has been caused. Organizations such as the Fair Play Alliance are actively making strides in this area through their “Digital Thriving Playbook” (in development), and resources on effective community management.¹³

Gaming communities are interconnected across studios, and supporting healthier norms across communities will likely spill over as well. Players often play more than one game, and behavior norms developed in one game will be brought with them to the next.

Additionally, even the most effective solutions can only have a limited impact when siloed within a single studio.¹² Today, there is limited exchange of knowledge around concerns, mitigation efforts, or development of strategies to address hate and harassment in games. Apart from the efforts of collaborative groups, such as the Fair Play Alliance, the majority of progress in this space remains

within individual studios or behind third-party paywalls, restricting innovation as an industry. A lack of knowledge sharing prevents industry-wide progress as many studios must start from scratch instead of building on solutions that have already been tried and tested. Additionally, smaller studios often lack the resources needed for dedicated development of community and safety tools. Gaming communities are interconnected across studios, and supporting healthier norms across communities will likely spill over as well. Players often play more than one game, and behavior norms developed in one game will be brought with them to the next. In this way, when players migrate from a community with norms of hate, harassment, and extremism, they may spread these norms to any new community they join. As such, increasing the entire industry’s ability to create healthy and safe spaces - from indie to AAA - can positively impact even those studios that have plenty of resources for their own development of community resources. In an effort to advance discussions around these areas for improvement (i.e., community resilience efforts and cross-industry information sharing), Take This held a series of focus groups in 2023 with professionals across the video games industry. Fourteen focus groups were conducted with a total of 34 professionals from AAA, AA, and indie studios, as well as publishers and studio adjacent companies, such as moderation and player support companies. Participants in the focus groups were largely in design related roles (46%), followed by community management (26%), and trust and safety (26%). They had an average of about 12 years working in the games industry, with a range

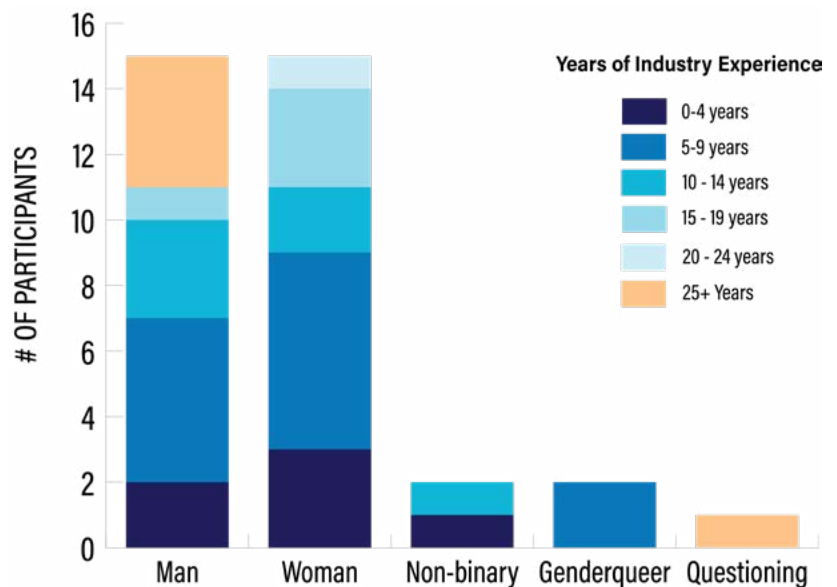
of 1 to 34 years. Across the groups, 1,170 minutes of conversation were gathered as a jumping off point to develop resources to support the industry.

Specifically, focus group members were asked questions around their current efforts, challenges, and hopes for the future when it comes to developing resilient communities in games. We asked them about how they try to proactively address disruptive behaviors within their online gaming spaces, including hate, harassment, and extremist exploitation of gaming spaces. The insights derived from these discussions are presented below.

It is important to note that these groups were conducted as part of a larger project being done in collaboration with Middlebury International Institute and Logically AI and funded by the Department of Homeland Security with an original focus on understanding industry awareness and

readiness to address extremist exploitation of game spaces. However, within these conversations, broader discussions around hate and harassment frequently emerged, allowing new insights into the landscape of solutions and barriers to addressing all forms of disruptive behavior in games. While hate and harassment are often discussed in parallel to extremist exploitation of games, even “joking” and “trolling” internet culture can normalize extremist rhetoric and ideology.¹⁴ Furthermore, increasing knowledge on the ways in which “toxicity” or hate and harassment may create vulnerabilities to extremist exploitation demonstrates the importance of reducing hate and harassment of all kinds across online games. For example, misogynistic language, common in multiplayer video games,^{15,16} is related to core tenets of radical right/extreme right ideology and is utilized in the radicalization process.¹⁷

PARTICIPANT INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE



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We are not prepared

Industry readiness to address hate, harassment, and extremist exploitation

The games industry is aware that hate, harassment, and extremist exploitation of gaming spaces is a problem and one that they see themselves as unprepared to tackle.

When asked about their perceptions and experiences with hate, harassment, and extremism prior to engaging in focus group discussions, industry professionals reported that these issues are a problem for games (toxicity 6/7, extremism 5/7, Table 1), and that they had little confidence that the industry has

the tools needed to address these concerns in games (toxicity 3/7, extremism 3/7). Many developers – especially those in community management, moderation, and trust and safety roles – verbally expressed that current mitigation efforts often feel like an endless game of whack-a-mole. Further, increasing awareness and willingness to discuss such concerns, especially those around extremist exploitation, was noted as a necessary step to effectively address these issues.

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

Toxicity is a problem in games



The industry is equipped to deal with toxicity



Extremism is a problem in games



The industry is equipped to deal with extremism

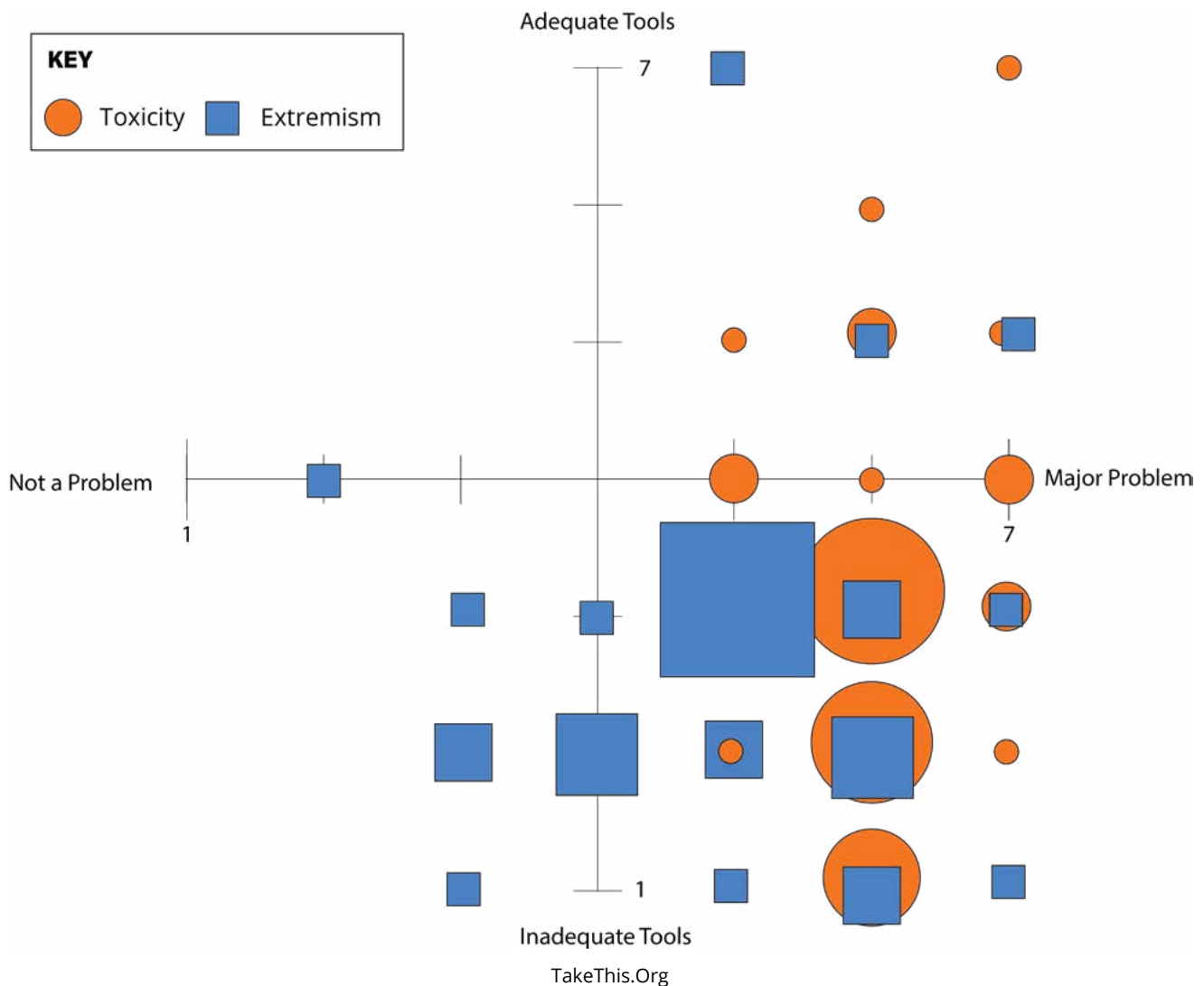


Table 1. Severity and preparedness of industry to address hate, harassment, and extremism.

Question	Mean
How big of a problem do you think toxicity (e.g., trolling, sexual harassment, doxxing, etc.) is within the gaming community as a whole?	6.10
I believe the games industry has the tools needed to effectively combat toxicity (e.g., trolling, sexual harassment, doxxing, etc.) in games.	3.17
How big of a problem do you think extremist exploitation of games and gaming communities is for the gaming industry?	4.97
I believe the games industry has the tools needed to combat extremist exploitation in games.	2.63

*Responses were given on a 7 point scale, with 1 meaning the not a problem or strongly disagree, and 7 meaning the biggest problem or strongly agree.

Figure 1. Visualization of Table 1.



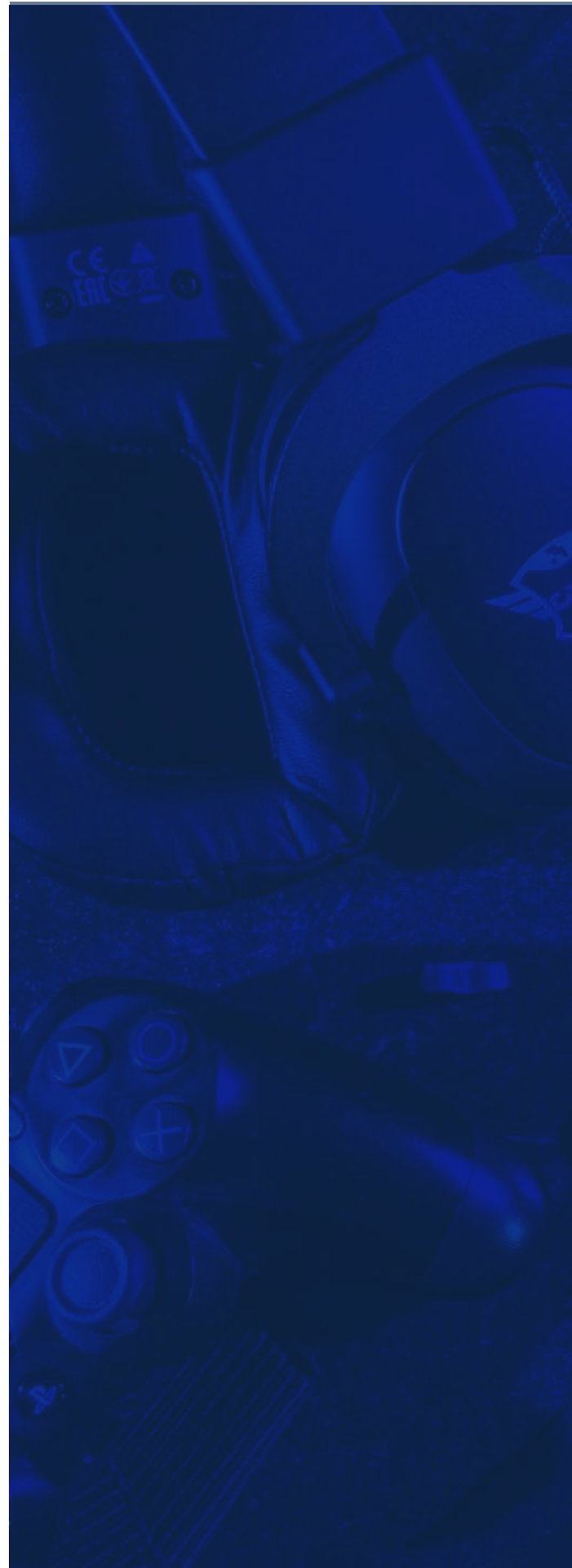
“ There still are a lot of folks that don't really understand how pervasive this stuff is. They know how bad it can get but assume that's one in a billion not one in 1000. And so getting better at understanding the density to motivate that. I think that's a big part of how we get towards where social [media] is today - social had a lot of those big breakthrough moments where they realized it was everywhere. And I think we're still kind of working on that in the gaming side.

- Participant 29; Trust and Safety, Consulting

While most of the industry professionals we interviewed noted that they have had at least one conversation about extremist exploitation of games in their studios (69%), it was clear that these conversations were rare unless someone was specifically in a role designated to address hate and extremism - which many studios don't have. Many of the individuals in community management or player support roles reported frequent exposure to extremist content as part of their role, but little training or support on how to best mitigate this content or manage the personal impact it has on them.

“ I've heard of some companies that are just like, we can just ignore it. And it might just go away, and it doesn't go away. {{No it gets worse.}} On and on and on. So it really is like deleting the comments blocking people like you really do need to be extremely proactive to make sure that your community stays the way that you want it because there will always be people who come in and are unkind or say extreme things and they're not invited. You gotta get them out. Because if you don't, it'll just keep going.

- Participant 23; Community, Indie



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Strategies for change

Foundational steps to building resilient communities

While there was a general, shared sentiment of unpreparedness, several foundational steps were identified within these initial conversations related to how the games industry can start developing communities more resilient to hate and harassment generally as well as its more extreme forms, such as the active exploration of game spaces by extremists. These are discussed in more detail below, with an emphasis on curtailing extremist exploitation.

Talk to the Public

It was clear that conversations within studios about extremist exploitation of games are rare, and when they do happen, they happen behind closed doors. Though a studio's strategy to combat exploitation shouldn't be

transparent enough for easy circumvention by extremists, the results of these conversations shouldn't always stay opaque to consumers. Clarity about a studio or games' values and community expectations can be a powerful tool in supporting community resilience.

One developer in the focus groups shared the story of a pivotal moment in their studio's decision making around public statements on world events and community guidelines. Early in gamergate, the studio made the decision not to make any public statements about the controversy as they were worried such statements could draw trolls to their game, and they wanted to keep their community safe with their limited resources. Unfortunately, the outcome was the opposite of what they intended:





For [Studio] during the time of Gamergate the community leadership at the time was of the opinion, well two things “Republicans buy shoes too,” which is “don’t make any outward statements of how wrong all of that was because you might offend paying customers and threaten your bottom line or whatever.” And two “we want to protect our community from Gamergate. So by being silent, we will avoid inviting the pro Gamergate crowd to our forums into our community.” I would say that is one of the largest community failings that I had been privy to at the time and to this day, really. Because like there’s - the what’s the line - like “if you’re silent then you’re actively harming the situation.” So like, I understand from that leadership body at the time, they were taking into account they didn’t have the time, the personnel, the funding to actively protect their community through appropriate moderation. And they didn’t have [moderation company], they didn’t have the tools to handle what could be an influx of people coming in to attack. So instead of challenging it head on, they avoided it. And by doing that, though, they created this kind of safe space for pro Gamergate folks to go and talk in private groups that were unmoderated because they weren’t a part of the public forums. And they were never really dealt with. They were never given consequences. They were never banned. And thankfully, over the years that became something that [studio] actively challenged.

- Participant 14; Community Management, AAA

Without an explicit statement from the studio that toxic, misogynistic behavior was not welcome, the studio found that pro-gamergate individuals assumed the studio's game was a safe space for them to build community. The studio was now stuck with the task of pulling back their community norms to a more inclusive and safe space from the pro-gamergate individuals who felt empowered to spread hate in this space by the lack of comment by the studio.

By choosing to not take a public stand, by not making a public statement, this studio made the choice to let their community and the larger community make assumptions about their stance.

This studio's experience is likely not an isolated one, and can provide insight into effective messaging for studios moving forward. By choosing to not take a public stand, by not making a public statement, this studio made the choice to let their community and the larger community make assumptions about their stance. While this is a practiced strategy by many companies who want to sell to "both sides of the aisle,"¹⁸ this strategy can increase in complexity when what is being sold is

not a pair of shoes or a soda, but access or increased participation or status in an online community. When studios attempt to allow their community to choose the community norms and values through opaque policies and silence around relevant social topics, it's typically not the whole community that has the power to set the tone. That would require everyone in the community's voice to be valued equally. Instead, they may be empowering a small, vocal, and privileged part of the community to set the community norms.¹⁹

Decisions about what subjects should be addressed publicly or included in community guidelines will be influenced by the game, studio values, and other contextual factors. Further, the level of active voice that studios, and corporations more broadly, are expected to make is a moving target that can be challenging to navigate.^{18, 20} Recent examples of companies publicly addressing societal topics include Humble Bumble's Black Developer's fund during the Black Lives Matter Protests²¹ and the host of studios who made public statements following the overturning of Roe V. Wade.²² Studios may find it valuable to consult with experts in community management, public relations, and counterterrorism to develop strategies for updating community guidelines and for determining what, when, and how to address world events that may impact the player community.

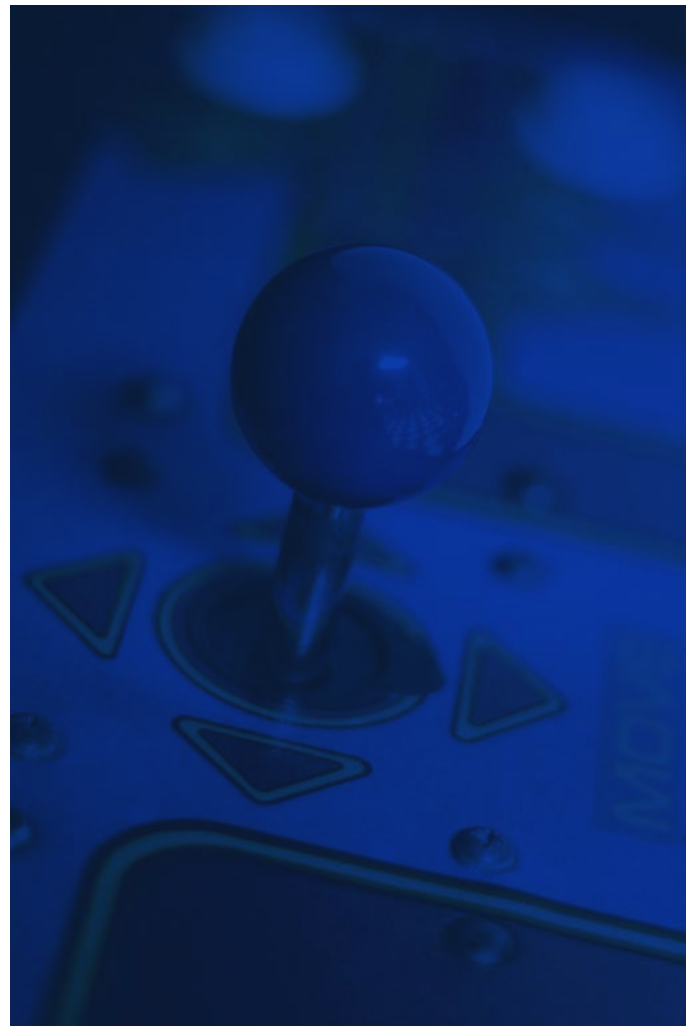
¹Gamergate was an online harassment campaign beginning in 2014 rooted in misogyny, primarily targeting feminism, diversity, and progressivism in gaming culture.

Talk to Each Other

Sentiments expressed in the focus groups reiterated observations drawn more generally from panels at industry conventions and discussions with among developers and other researchers in this space: Discussing hate, harassment, and/or extremism can feel daunting and dangerous for industry professionals. Developers who work hard to create games may feel frustrated and hopeless when their games are leveraged to spread hate, or their communities include players engaging in harassment towards others. Trust and safety teams may feel unprepared to address changing community norms and assess hate and extremism within different cultural lenses. Community management professionals often feel overwhelmed by the pressure of being the conduit between an anonymous player base and their studio teams. And those in leadership positions often feel constrained by arguments that they perceive do not support an increasing bottom line, which they may need to keep their teams employed and the lights on.

Further, games continue to be widely misunderstood and vilified by the public and policymakers, which can increase the concern developers have about talking about challenges in games for fear the “video games cause violence” myth will be reinvigorated. As games have become increasingly online and the home to larger and larger global communities, these games have to contend with all the social complexities and challenges that can arise in a global community of people - but most game developers don't have training or experience on navigating or

designing for such complex social dynamics. The fears related to these challenges - fears that games will be unfairly maligned, that studios may be held accountable for problems they don't have the tools to fix, or that studios may invite further hate by speaking poorly about a topic or speaking about the wrong topic - contribute to a culture of silence around the challenges of hate, harassment, and extremist exploitation in games. These challenges were discussed in the focus groups - as one developer stated “...a lot of us are really protective of our gaming culture, right. Like a lot of us grew up as gamers a lot of us lived through like the moral panic and are just really fucking tired of like negative images being painted.” (Participant 7; Design, AAA).



These fears even impacted who chose to participate in the focus groups. One individual who declined to participate in the groups stated “I don’t think there are safe spaces for game companies at the moment to discuss topics like extremism.” This person was in leadership at a AAA studio; such studios have significant power to influence the culture of the industry broadly. If individuals in leadership at these studios are unable or unwilling to participate in conversations about extremism, this will have wide-reaching, negative implications for the entire industry’s ability to develop solutions. The concern that leadership is unwilling to address hate and exploitation was reiterated by participants in the groups, with some participants expressing frustration and anger. From feedback from members of leadership who did participate in the discussion groups, it was clear that many members of leadership care deeply about creating safe gaming communities. However, they also seem to harbor a sense of disempowerment that prevents them

from engaging in meaningful and productive conversations. Though their individual intent may be positive, the negative impact remains the same.



Though the culture of silence is pervasive, there is evidence that this culture can change. Participants across the groups provided feedback that participating in a focus group helped them feel more heard, less alone, and gave them actionable strategies to take back to their team. Though these groups were designed to gather information, not directly impact participants at this stage, group members reported positive impacts of participation, with most participants reporting they learned from the conversation itself (average response 5/7).

If individuals in leadership at these studios are unable or unwilling to participate in conversations about extremism, this will have wide-reaching, negative implications for the entire industry’s ability to develop solutions.

“ So that’s also the part that if we are more vocal about it, maybe we can also convince studios to work with researchers to address the problem. And so that’s part of the education. Hey, there’s a problem and it’s hitting your profits because, you know, first of all, FTC can give you a fine and second of all, people who are being harassed are going to leave your game. So we need to address it - to address it and we need more research because right now we don’t have enough and then you can join and then based off of that, we can have precise valence.

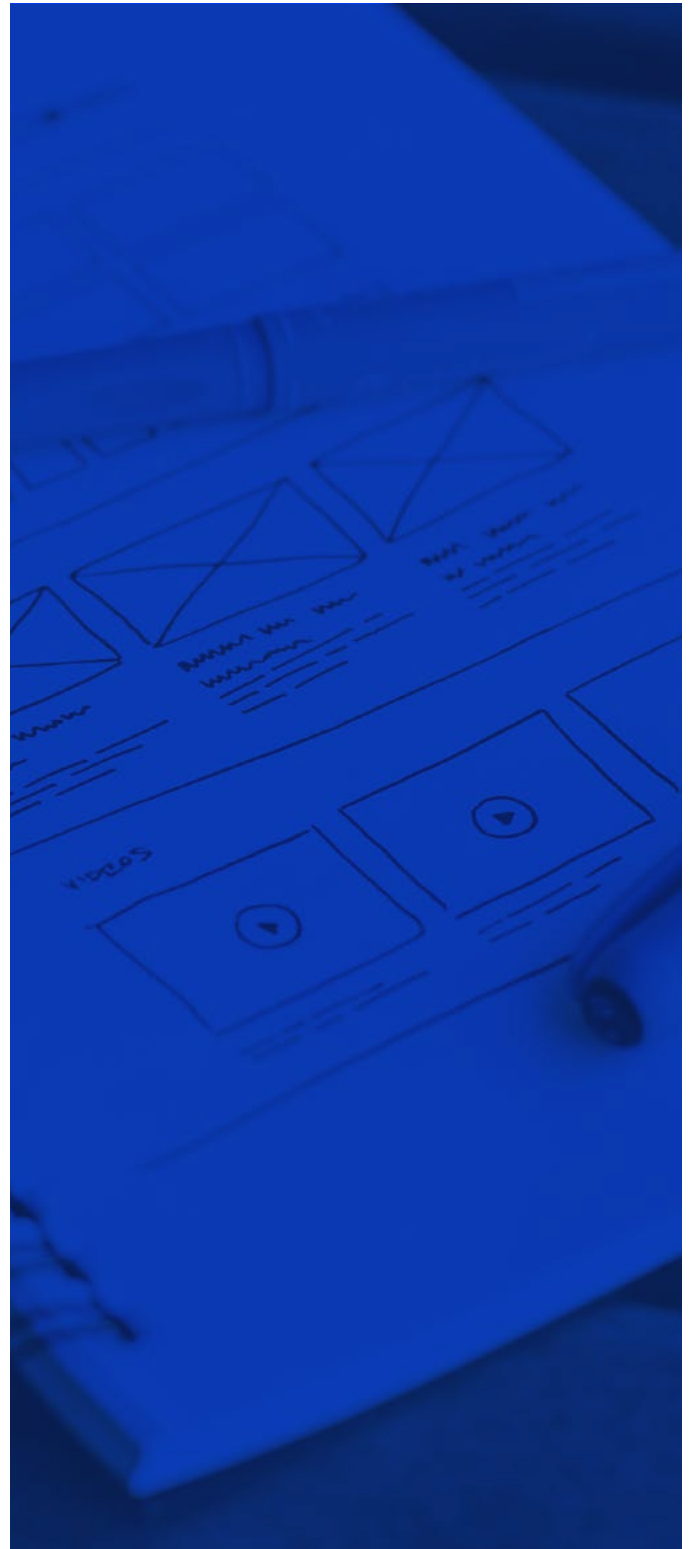
- Participant 5, Consultant, Design

“ It did challenge me to think about bigger-picture and more long-term initiative possibilities.”

- Participant 1, Trust and Safety, AAA

“ I did appreciate getting to hear additional folks’ thoughts on the state of extremism in the games community. I found the conversation about language and it’s use (both in fostering misconceptions about the industry as well as normalizing of more radical ideas) particularly interesting as I’ve been thinking around those ideas but hadn’t been able to speak to them in the ways I heard today.

- Participant 17, Community, Publisher



“ It was helpful to see that other companies were experiencing the same problems as my company.”

- Participant 27; Trust and Safety, AAA

Talk to Subject Matter Experts Early

Game developers often wear many hats, and it's common for them to jump in and learn new technologies or techniques on the fly. Though this can create amazing opportunities for further innovation and serve a fast-paced environment well, this is typically related to adapting established skills, not developing a new area of expertise. Many game design programs and established game developers don't have expertise in building community resilience and mitigating hate, harassment, and extremism. As such, it's important that studios consult with experts in key areas early in the development process. Consultants in the areas of accessibility, inclusion/diversity, and user experience (UX) have become increasingly common and expected in game development.²³⁻²⁷ These experts can help studios develop games to be available and interesting to a wider audience, as well as advise studios on navigating potential pitfalls related to cultural differences or accessibility needs. Similarly, increasing consultation with counterterrorism and community design experts can further support developers in creating a game that is well-suited to support a healthy and resilient community. Developers across the focus groups had varied access to experts across these domains, but these differences were further exaggerated when it came to counterterrorism and community experts. Participants from smaller studios often reported the studio as a whole had little to no access to experts, while some participants from larger studios described regular access, and others reported little to

no direct access because of the siloed nature of the studio structure.

Focus group members with access to such experts (either through their work or because that's a role they themselves held) stressed the value of bringing experts in early in the design process:



There was a project I was working on where we were really, really early on in development, and we actually had a marketing and like community person, come and sit with us and actually just talk to us about “what do you want this community to look like?” Because it was a competitive multiplayer game...two years out from launch, like, “what do you want this community to look like? And how do you architect your marketing materials?...how you talk about your characters, ... how do you think they will respond to it?” So we did a whole bunch of like focus groups about that. We did like a bunch of like user research just so we could have at least some data to start with. So we didn't just watch the game and then be like, “Oh, crap, that was bad.” Like, you know, he's, so there's so I think a lot of it is like on the dev side. There's a lot of like, intentional architecting you can do.

- Participant 6; Design, AAA

Participants discussed the way many studios treat experts like inspectors - brought in at the very end, and let the studio know what must be removed, changed, or added (and those additions will be expensive). Experts across disciplines are often much more effective when their role begins as early design consultants. When studios report frustrating experiences with experts because they recommend costly fixes or their advice is primarily restricting or removing work that has been done already, they are likely being brought in too late. Bringing experts in earlier may radically change a studio's experience with said experts.

The kinds of strategies and tools studios use should be tailored to each studio's game(s) and community, but it's unlikely such games and communities are so unique they cannot benefit from existing tools. Groups repeatedly discussed experiences building moderation or management tools from scratch that already existed elsewhere. Experts can help studios identify existing tools to tailor and prevent duplicating work.



Fundamentally, I think game design is an empathetic profession that we have to be obsessed with the experiences of the player ...

And if you don't feel responsible for that, then I don't even know what you're doing in games.

- Participant 8, Design, Indie



05

Summary

Building resilient communities and changing existing norms of hate, harassment, and extremism in gaming communities is a complex and time-consuming process, requiring resources and buy-in from stakeholders across the industry. However, the game industry is familiar with constant change and adaptation, and has demonstrated incredible innovation in the last decades to grow to be one of the biggest forms of entertainment. This industry has the power to create incredible change in its ecosystem when that change becomes a priority. The most consistent theme across the focus groups was how much developers cared – about their games, their teams, and their communities. Hate, harassment, and extremism are roadblocks to that.

The industry currently lacks widespread knowledge and readily available tools to combat hate, harassment, and extremism, but there are pockets of innovation around these topics in studios of all sizes. To develop strategies around early detection and community resilience, studio and industry-wide conversations about these topics are vital. Building these resources and knowledge within the silos of individual studios will likely serve to widen the gap between studios with

many resources and those with few, harming the ability of the industry as a whole to address these issues.

This means examining the way decisions are made about the priorities and resources allotted to development, and intentionally prioritizing safety and community health. Increasing the industry's ability to mitigate extremist exploitation, and combating the hate and harassment that exists in gaming communities means developers will be able to spend more time making games and sharing them with the communities they care about most.

Moving Forward

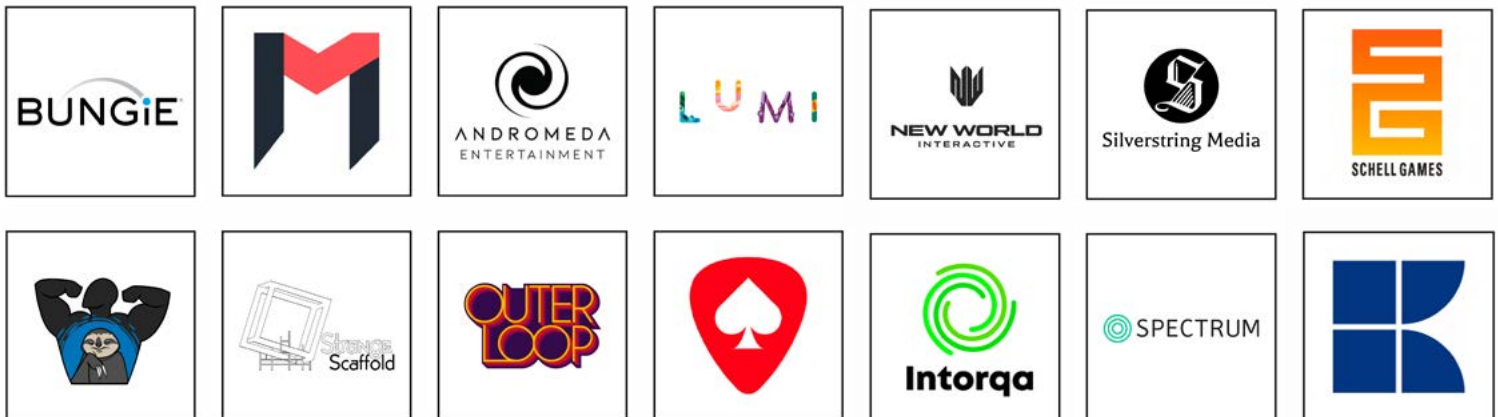
These conversations were designed to prepare Take This to develop new interactive workshops focused on building community resilience. The authors have used this opportunity to collect information on industry knowledge and needs, which has been and will be further collated, magnified, and reflected back to the industry and beyond through research and interactive workshops. To learn more about the workshops, including how to bring one to your studio, reach out to Dr. Elizabeth Kilmer.

For more information about hate, harassment, and extremist exploitation in games, see the following resources:

- [Extremism in Games: A Primer](#)
- [Resilience in the Face of Hate: Standing Up to Extremism in Gaming](#)
- [Disruption and Harms in Online Gaming Framework](#)
- [Being Targeted about Content Moderation: Strategies for consistent, scalable and effective response to Disruption & Harm](#)
- [Caught in a Vicious Cycle: Obstacles and Opportunities for Trust and Safety Teams in the Games Industry](#)
- [From Avoidance to Action: A Call for Open Dialogue on Hate, Harassment, and Extremism in the Gaming Industry](#)
- Building Game Communities Resilient to Hate and Extremism: Solutions from the Industry (Coming soon!)

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- Keywords Studios (Trust & Safety)
- Modulate
- Andromeda Entertainment
- Lumi
- Innersloth
- Strange Scaffold
- Outerloop Games
- The Game Band
- New World Interactive
- Bungie
- Schell Games
- Intorqa
- Silverstring Media
- Spectrum



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