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The Cost of Anger: Gender and Collective Violence in Technology

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The Cost of Anger: Gender and Collective Violence in Technology

In the current climate of social media profiles, forums, message boards and online communities we have never had more opportunity to express ourselves digitally. These spaces have been theorised to act as an emotional pressure valve, an outlet, allowing users to release pent up emotions which may otherwise cause “major disruptions to the social order” (Farrall, 2012, pp. 428). The issue with this line of thinking is that it allows for the possibility that online behaviour can be seen as being consequence free, in terms of the possible “real life” impacts on recipients of this behaviour. As we have noted in our own research, the distinction between online and “real life” in our digital age is arbitrary at best, and online actions can and do have offline consequences.

These consequences were clearly demonstrated in the recent controversy surrounding the treatment of Jessica Price. In July 2018 Price, a narrative designer on the popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) Guild Wars 2, wrote a Twitter thread sharing her expertise and experiences around writing characters for games. Her tweets solicited a response from a member of the Guild Wars 2 playerbase, a popular male streamer of the game (someone who shares gameplay and commentaries through services such as Twitch and YouTube), offering both disagreement and unsolicited advice. Price responded, stating *"Thanks for trying to tell me what we do internally, my dude 9_9,"* before later remarking on the gendered nature of this exchange, tweeting *"Today in being a female game dev: 'Allow me--a person who does not work with you--explain to you how you do your job.'".* Further Tweets from Price expressed clear frustration, e.g. *"like, the next rando ass that who attempts to explain the concept of branching dialogue to me--as if, you know, having worked in game narrative for a fucking DECADE, I have never heard of it--is getting instablocked. PSA."* Price's colleague, writer Peter Fries offered (since deleted) Tweets of support, strengthening the assertion that this was in fact a gendered issue by suggesting

that as a man, his experience in terms of such unsolicited “advice” was different to that of Price.

The following fallout was almost depressingly predictable, with fans (and non-fans) wading in to participate in a “dogpile” of angry comments, expressing their anger at the alleged ill treatment of a player and streamer of the game. A discussion thread on the Guild Wars 2 community Reddit board focusing on this interaction garnered 4.5k comments, ranging from those minimising or denying the inherently gendered nature of the interaction, to outright calls for Price to be fired, interspersed with what Jane (2014, p. 532) labels as e-bile, referring to “the extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse”. Other threads urged players to stop supporting the game financially until a “satisfactory” resolution was reached (i.e. the removal of Price). Both Price and Fries were subjected to a barrage of abusive Tweets and comments, whilst discussions continued to blaze in other online spaces, including the official forums of Guild Wars 2. Company president and co-founder of ArenaNet, Mike O’Brien issued the following statement on the official discussion forum (O’Brien, 2018).

“Recently two of our employees failed to uphold our standards of communicating with players. Their attacks on the community were unacceptable. As a result, they’re no longer with the company.

I want to be clear that the statements they made do not reflect the views of ArenaNet at all. As a company we always strive to have a collaborative relationship with the Guild Wars community. We value your input. We make this game for you.

Mo”

Both Price and Fries had been fired. To many this was a cause for celebration, and framed as a successful outcome, as though this was an obvious consequence of Price and Fries being “disrespectful”.

Although this is not an isolated incident, the severity of the outcome is unusual. This event raises three key areas of concern for feminist psychologists interested in how gender, power and labour operate in and through online spaces. First, we must consider the blurry line dividing personal and professional, something which becomes increasingly important in our ever more connected workplaces. We must also take note of the phenomenon of collective emotion, in this case anger, and the potential ramifications of this. Finally, we must attend to the notion of “acceptable” behaviour for women during personal and professional interactions, again considering affect, and where and how this can be expressed.

It is interesting to note here that the spaces in which this incident played out can be conceived of as both public and private. Price and Fries’ Twitter streams operated as both a personal arena, and a space for their work at ArenaNet. Whilst Price and Fries are incapable of anonymity due to their professional responsibility, the individuals who chose to participate in the subsequent dogpile attack are afforded the security of anonymity, should they choose to mask their offline identity.

Critical organisational scholars such as Islam and Zyphur (2009) note that the boundaries between our work and personal lives have become muddled, something which is increasingly true for those working in the 24/7, “always on” culture of technology work (Messersmith, 2007). We would argue that, in the case of video game development, there is potentially even more scope for these lines to be clouded. Fans of games look to interact with game developers not only through message boards and social media platforms, but also within the space of the games themselves. Alongside regular social media postings on

official company accounts on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, ArenaNet developers are identifiable in Guild Wars 2 through the presence of a badge next to their avatar's name, a small red ArenaNet logo, which serves as a visible marker signifying that a seemingly anonymous character is someone important. Through such channels, a company can work to weave their employees into the community of players, blurring the boundaries between work and play, professional and personal, public and private.

As per O'Brien's statement, Price and Fries had *"failed to uphold [ArenaNet's] standards of communicating with players"*. Their social media accounts had become extensions of their work spaces, and their personal time had become governed by the expectations of the company employing them. The lines between personal and private were in this instance, blurry enough to be indistinguishable.

At what point then, does dogpile cyberviolence enacted upon highly visible technology workers cross the line from a personal to a corporate responsibility? How can we begin to think about this in line with existing conceptualisations of workplace harassment? We suggest that this particular incident can be characterised as a form of gendered workplace violence, and as such ArenaNet had a responsibility to protect their workers. There is no single solution here - if this harassment were to happen in the game, moderators could intervene and players could be temporarily or permanently banned. But outside the game, in spaces where ArenaNet has little to no control (e.g. Twitter, Reddit), we suggest that cooperation between companies and social platforms needs to be at the forefront of responses.

This is not solely about professional conduct, this is about cultivating a socially palatable response which at once satisfies the "niceness" quotient expected of women in relation to their performance of acceptable femininities, and also the unemotional professional

rationality that is required of women working in technological spaces. We should note the expectation that Price should not only pay attention to those seeking to offer their unsolicited “advice”, but that she should remain “nice” in her interactions with them. The expectation placed on Price to perform emotional labour in this manner, managing the emotions of those who feel entitled to comment on her professional work, is palpable. Speaking to The Verge (Farokhmanesh, 2018) Price states *“By the time that guy came along, I was so tired of having random people explain my job to me... where I had to just smile and nod that it was like, ‘No. Not here. Not in my space’”*.

As Chowdhury (2018) argued in her paper exploring women’s emotion management in the workplace, anger is absent from women’s accounts of their affective discursive practices. Where men’s anger (and that of women in more powerful or senior positions) is legitimised, even rewarded, women are not permitted to express their frustration and anger. When Price expressed hers, she was duly punished with both personal and organisational violence. This can be read as a stark warning to behave appropriately online, reminding women that they are visible, but not permitted to be vocal (Drakett, Rickett, Day & Milnes, 2018).

Nissenbaum (1999) noted that a key element of online anonymity is “unreachability” referring to the distance that exists between parties online due to the inability to connect directly. In the case of Price, this unreachability was not a two-way exchange given the public nature of her online interactions as part of her role at ArenaNet, however those targeting her were able to act anonymously and violently intrude upon her private space outside of work time. Price had no access to recourse during these exchanges, due to the anonymity of those targeting her and the expectation that she should manage those exchanges in a socially palatable way.

As noted by Kenny (2018), within much of the existing research exploring cyberviolence, there has been a tendency to adopt an individualist perspective which postulates that such incidents can be conceptualised as occurring in isolation and between individuals. In a similar manner to Mortensen's (2016) conceptualisation of the self-organising anger and hostility of #GamerGate as a "swarm", Price's experience demonstrates the shift towards a mentality of collective anger that utilises social media spaces to generate group hostility and mobilise groups of individuals in direct action against a specific individual, often with the assumed security of being "anonymous". We argue that this virtual group setting appears to amplify the emotions of the individuals concerned and acts as a catalyst for increasingly hyperbolic and violent exchanges, which are legitimised by their contagious and self-sustaining engagement with cyberviolence.

The issue here is not that an individual took offence at Price's response to their "advice" but the speed with which this relatively minor disagreement morphed into a vitriolic dogpile attack on Price and mobilised into a campaign to have her removed from ArenaNet. What is important to emphasise here is the entitlement these users displayed, in their calls to have her removed from her position, and then the glee with which they celebrated their achievement.

We find stark warnings in the work of Harvey & Fisher (2014, p. 8), who speak about the tension that comes with being a "visible feminine subject" in games, and the fatigue that comes with this. This fatigue is wholly unsurprising, understandable, and ultimately unhelpful. We argue that there is a need for solidarity and collective responses in the face of collective hate. Scholars such as Harris (2001) and Jane (2016) have noted the potential for online spaces to serve to as platforms for the mobilisation of feminist activism and protest. Jane (2016) has highlighted the issues in promoting "digilantism" as a means of addressing cyberviolence, in particular, speaking to the tensions between individual and collective

responses. Whilst this can be empowering for women and can lead to a feeling of taking back control of our online spaces, this continues to move abuse from public to private spaces by suggesting that we should be able to manage our own abuse. This individualistic view removes the responsibility of platforms and companies like ArenaNet to proactively address the abuse of their users and employees, and becomes increasingly complicated when the lines between public and private spaces are murky, as in this particular case.

The firing of both Price and Fries can serve as a warning to those who speak out against injustice online. Where Price's outspoken political views had come under scrutiny and marked her out as a potential target for criticism and abuse since her initial hiring at ArenaNet in 2017 ("Jessica Price joins ArenaNet narrative team", 2017), speaking to the dangers of being a visible and vocal woman (and feminist) online. In addition, it is interesting to note the treatment of Fries, who was also punished and made visible as a result of defending Price, raising questions about men's engagement with feminist action in online spaces.

In the aftermath of this incident, it is important to remember the consequences for Price who, following a Twitter storm, found that her career had been irrevocably damaged. The actions of ArenaNet should raise serious concerns for those working in the gaming industry, and others working in similarly connected and visible spaces. Considering the company's previously excellent reputation for inclusivity and diversity, both in and out of game, it is disappointing that it appears that ultimately, pandering to profit over progress was paramount, defending customers and bowing to dogpile cyberviolence. This particular instance serves as an example of how our engagement with technology, be that for work or pleasure, in public or private space, is complex and ephemeral, intimately bound up with gender and power, and that the implications of this can have tangible and serious effects.

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