

‘Keeping PAX safe and secure for everyone’: Problematizing safety and inclusivity in PAX Aus’ code of conduct policy

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INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that, despite recent academic and trade press conversations around harassment and exclusion in videogame communities and convention spaces, the code of conduct policy governing behaviour at Penny Arcade Expo Australia (PAX Aus) does not explicitly address issues around safety and inclusion in regard to vulnerable groups who are often described as marginalised in these spaces. By examining ‘silences’ or gaps in PAX Aus’ code of conduct using Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR) framework for textual policy analysis, this paper will consider how these problems could be addressed in order to more effectively create safer, more inclusive spaces for convention attendees.

Keogh (2019), in problematising the term ‘industry’ in the context of Australian videogame production, argues that the videogame industry is instead a cultural field located within economic, social and political contexts that constitute particular activities and identities. Given this context, the videogame industry and the culture surrounding it are focused on, targeted toward, and dominated by men and their perspectives (Gray 2012). Despite clear evidence that a significant percentage of people who play videogames do not fit the ‘gamer’ stereotype, the culture, industry and communities surrounding videogames remain defined by the marginalisation of those outside the stereotypical norm (Chess 2011) such as women, people of colour, LGBTQI+ folx, and people with disability. These groups are often described as marginalised, invisible, and excluded in videogame scholarship regarding their online and offline participation in games and gaming communities.

Conventions such as PAX Aus, which takes place in Melbourne, are an example of physical co-present spaces organised around sharing and performing fandom, primarily focused on the coming together of fans to celebrate their favourite popular culture texts or media. Individuals who attend conventions are imagined to be “hard-core fans” (Kohnen 2014), particularly because they tend to be repeat attendees - displaying loyalty to not only the fandom, but to the convention itself. Given this, the convention site becomes a space for the formation of communities based on the social relations of fans who attend and have attended several times, and who have formed relationships with other fans who have attended the convention before.

However, fan conventions are also often discussed in scholarship and trade press in relation to the harassment and exclusion of marginalised individuals. The safety of a space is predicated on its inclusiveness for people who are otherwise excluded. As

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Shaw (2009) notes, not being hostile is not the same as being inclusive, and exclusions still occur in the absence of oppression and harassment based on identity factors such as gender or race. The way leadership is organised can directly impede participatory processes (Jenkins & Carpentier 2013), and the conditions for inclusion within videogames culture tend to be defined by those with the most privilege. If the people in charge of constructing convention spaces are buoyed by intersections of power and privilege, the capacity for people who are marginalised based on intersections of oppression to participate is lessened. The organisational leadership for major ‘mainstream’ conventions are mostly heterosexual, white men (Liao 2017), and therefore the decisions that trickle down can be non-inclusive of marginalised individuals.

As the largest videogame convention in Australia, PAX Aus will serve as a case study to examine representations of safety and inclusion in a videogame convention space. PAX’s safety and accessibility policy (which forms the code of conduct for attendees) is referred to as the ‘*Six Rules of PAX*’, with the six rules comprising: ‘drugs are bad’, ‘don’t steal’, ‘don’t punch or kick people’, ‘no cheating’, ‘don’t harass anyone’, and ‘don’t mess with things that aren’t yours’ (Penny Arcade 2019). Applying Carol Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR) framework for policy analysis, this presentation examines the ways in which the *Six Rules of PAX* represent the problems of safety and inclusion, and aims to understand how these policy representations can be situated within the wider discourse surrounding the harassment, safety and inclusion of marginalised groups in videogames culture.

This paper argues that though the *Six Rules of PAX* purports to “keep PAX safe and secure for everyone”, it does not explicitly address safety and inclusion in a way that is consistent with scholarly and trade press understandings of these issues in videogame convention spaces and communities. Through examining these ‘silences’ or gaps in the policy, this paper will consider how these issues could be approached at a policy-level in order to create safer and more inclusive spaces for attendees to participate in videogame conventions.

BIO

Taylor Hardwick is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. Her doctoral research is concerned with experiences of marginalised groups at videogames conventions and festivals, particularly in regard to safety and inclusion.

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