

Safety and community at Freeplay Independent Games Festival in 2020

Taylor Hardwick

Swinburne University of Technology
Melbourne, Australia
thardwick@swin.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects on an ethnographic study aiming to understand how attendees experienced safety at Freeplay Independent Games Festival in 2020. I argue that investment in Freeplay's culture and community over time, and the use of an event space constructed by and for community members, resulted in attendees feeling safe and comfortable at the festival. This paper takes a qualitative mixed methods approach to examining experiences of safety at Freeplay in 2020, drawing on a digital ethnography of the event and semi-structured interviews with attendees and Freeplay organisers.

Games industry and public-facing events have been discussed in scholarship as sites of harassment and gatekeeping of marginalised people by those in economic or social positions of power (Consalvo 2012; Oschner 2017; Salter & Blodgett 2012). As a result, marginalised people who make and play games may feel unsafe or unwelcome when they attend games events.

Freeplay was founded in 2004 and is based in Melbourne, Australia. It was created as an alternative space to the exclusionary, corporate studio cultures at the time, and the focus on independent game-making provided a space for those working outside the commercial framework of the industry (McCrea 2013, 206). Over time, Freeplay has acted deliberately to create a space for people who are often excluded from mainstream games communities, particularly by instating gender parity policies and expanding the festival's reach to include game-makers from regions generally overlooked such as South East Asia. This has resulted in a dedicated community revolving around the festival, and strong feelings of comfort and belonging among community members.

Given this context, Freeplay is a useful case study regarding organisational efforts to create safe and inclusive event spaces. The festival discursively positions itself in the *Freeplay Code of Conduct and Safer Spaces* policy as "an explicitly safe space for people to talk" (Freeplay 2020). Safe spaces are spaces intended to be free from violence and harassment, and to generate collective strength among members (Clark-Parsons 2018, 2128). The Roestone Collective (2014, 1347) refers to safety as a "living concept"; in other words, 'safety' is relational. This paper therefore approaches safety and safe spaces as relational concepts, relative to broader contexts, individual identities and lived experiences, and the interactions of participants in the space.

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In 2020, Freeplay moved online in response to Australian government regulations limiting in-person gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Freeplay took place through a combination of live YouTube streams and a virtual space called the Freeplay ZONE. The ZONE is based on the digital gallery space LIKELIKE Online, created by game-maker and academic Paolo Pedercini, which was adapted for Freeplay by community members Jae Stuart and Cecile Richard. The ZONE gave attendees a sense of embodied, co-present interaction in digital space. Attendees could select an avatar, move around the space, interact with other attendees through text chat, and watch live streams through embedded YouTube video in the ‘screening room’.

While the YouTube chat for each live stream was moderated by the Freeplay team, there was little consideration regarding safety enforcement measures and the *Code of Conduct* policy’s visibility during the construction of the ZONE. However, no safety incidents occurred in the ZONE during the festival. Further, Freeplay attendees overwhelmingly expressed during interviews that they felt safe, comfortable and included while participating in the ZONE. Attendees often discussed feeling unsafe on social media platforms generally but feeling a strong sense of community and belonging in the ZONE. The ZONE creators’ intention to create a space for the community was reflected in its inclusive and referential design. For example, fairy lights decorated the space as a reference to a running Freeplay joke. The addition of the pride, trans and Aboriginal flags in one of the ZONE’s rooms clearly demarcate the space as inclusive of people marginalised within games and society more broadly.

While Freeplay’s *Code of Conduct and Safer Spaces* policy is a thoughtful document that aims to foster a safe space free from harmful behaviour, the policy itself was not responsible for the 2020 event being considered safe by attendees. Instead, this paper argues that attendees felt safe at Freeplay because of the deliberate efforts Freeplay has made to invest in building an inclusive, comfortable community, and through the construction of the ZONE as a space by and for community members.

BIO

Taylor Hardwick is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. Her doctoral research examines experiences of safety, accessibility and inclusion at Melbourne-based games events, with a particular focus on digital events during COVID-19. Her other research interests include games industries, online games and fan communities, and representations of gender and sexuality in popular culture.

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