



Harassment

Best practice guidelines

Content warning

Sexual harassment, r*pe, stalking, assault, and other forms of abuse are discussed broadly.

Definitions

'**Harassment**' is a term that describes a wide range of unwelcome behaviours, usually performed by somebody with more 'power' than the receiver. Harassing behaviours can demean, humiliate, embarrass, or otherwise make the receiver feel threatened.

To understand harassment, it is important to also understand **power imbalances**. Power is relational, and can be considered higher or lower based on a person's role, authority, experience, age, size, or protected characteristics (such as gender, race, religion, abledness, etc). Power imbalances are easiest to understand through examples:

- A parent has more power than a child because the teacher has authority over the child.
- A teacher has more power than a student because the teacher has authority over the student.
- A doctor has more power than a patient because the patient trusts the doctor's authority and knowledge, and places themselves in a vulnerable position in this relationship.
- A police officer has more power than a civilian because a civilian is legally required to follow the instructions of the police officer, and the police officer is armed and able to use their weapons.
- A tall, large, or muscular person may have power over a smaller person because they are able to use their size as a physical threat.
- A (cis) man may have more social power than someone of any other gender because patriarchal society is designed to empower (cis) men.

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- A sober person has more power than an intoxicated person because the intoxicated person is less able to make informed and consensual choices.
- A person with more societal privilege than another person has more power because society is designed to favour and support them over a person from a marginalised group.

'**Privilege**' describes the systems of power that benefit and disadvantage different social groups, rather than focusing on the discrimination and hardships that can be experienced on an individual level (Cole & Zammit 2020). There are innate benefits to being part of particular races, genders, sexualities, and so on, depending on the cultural and historical context (Ebbitt 2015). The concept of this innate privilege—as well as the inability or unwillingness to acknowledge it—is typically attributed to McIntosh (1989) and her foundational essay 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack'. This essay specifically speaks about white privilege and the ways it manifests, and is recommended reading for anybody seeking a better understanding of privilege in the context of social justice.

Harassment and the games industry

The games industry has a history of harassment. Sexist workplace cultures, power-dynamics at networking events, and excessive drinking of alcohol are all factors in the games industry's ongoing issues of sexual harassment in particular. Harassment occurs from within and without: fans and colleagues are all potential sources of harassment for someone working in the industry.

Workplace bullying and poor working conditions are also common. Working on games is considered a 'dream job' and for many roles—especially entry-level positions—there is a long line of candidates who are willing to replace an individual who demands better treatment. Creative directors who yell at their employees are uncomfortably common, and job insecurity can be used as a threat for keeping staff compliant. The absence of complaints does not mean that such problems are not present; it could well mean that the circumstances make people too afraid to speak up.

Appropriate behaviour

Many behaviours that can be considered harassment are obvious, and to act in these ways requires malicious intent. However, it's important to recognise that well-intentioned or ignorant behaviours can also be considered harassment and can make other people uncomfortable, particularly in situations where a power imbalance is present.



For example, managers need to be careful how they speak to their employees. Shouting is inexcusable in any circumstances, and justifications such as 'stress', 'upcoming deadlines', or 'games are a creative field and we're all passionate' are unacceptable. Directors and leads have a responsibility to protect their team from negative circumstances and unnecessary stress.

The most important technique for reducing the risk of inadvertently making others uncomfortable is **recognising your own social power**.

When attending a networking event, never expect favours in return for networking with or helping new developers or students. You may believe that something is agreed to consensually, but if you have more power in the industry than the person you're speaking with, asking for favours can be a form of coercion. Simple acts of help or gift giving toward someone with less social power than yourself may unintentionally cause that person to feel like they 'owe' you, even if you have no expectations. Be clear and supportive to make sure others understand that there are not expectations, obligations, or hidden conditions attached to interactions with more experienced colleagues.

Similarly, remember the context of these events. Professional events and parties are not an appropriate place to flirt with others. If somebody is nice to you, assume they are networking; do not assume they are romantically interested in you.

It is important to remember that people with less power, such as inexperienced developers or people from marginalised groups, are often on guard at networking events due to being in large crowds, unfamiliar cities, and surrounded by unpredictable, intoxicated people. Even innocent actions can be perceived as threatening or unsafe when a person is already on guard.

To make individuals feel more secure, we recommend:

- Ask them where they would like to meet you, and offer to meet at the event rather than their hotel. Offering to meet at their hotel can be interpreted as trying to figure out where they are staying.
- Pay attention to your surroundings. Following a stranger on a quiet street or out of an elevator can be unsettling for them. Leave space between you and them.
- Avoid showing up unannounced at a panel or event that an acquaintance mentioned they will be at. It can seem threatening if you suggest you have memorised their schedule.



More than anything, remember that harassment is not just about *intention*. Think about how your actions could be perceived in context and strive to make others feel safe.

If somebody tells you that you have exhibited harassing behaviour, it is important to:

- Listen and learn
- Avoid becoming defensive
- Reflect on your behaviour
- Apologise when appropriate
- Prioritise the safety of the person or people involved, and do not force them to listen to your explanations or apologies if they do not feel comfortable

Reflecting regularly on your own behaviour is always important, but especially if you have specifically been called out for your actions.

Allies and bystanders

It is not enough to avoid perpetuating harassing behaviours; individuals have a responsibility to act as allies to victims rather than bystanders. Bystanders witness situations but avoid getting involved because 'it isn't their business' or they aren't sure how best to intervene. Allies are prepared to stop harassing behaviours and speak out about actions that are unacceptable, especially when they have more social power and privilege than the victim.

If you witness harassment—in the workplace, at a networking event, or elsewhere in your life—you should:

- Directly tell the perpetrator to stop
- Help create physical distance between the victim and the perpetrator
- Ask the victim 'Can I help?' or 'Would you like me to stay with you?'
- Report the perpetrator to the relevant authorities (managers, HR, venue security, etc.)
- Call emergency services, if needed
- Be aware of support services that you can direct the victim to

It is also important to learn how to be an ally if somebody divulges details about harassment that they have experienced:

- Listen without judgement



- Always believe the survivor
- Ask the survivor if they know how they would like you to support them
 - This might include accompanying them to make a report or receive a medical check-up, helping them find support and resources, or just listening
- Avoid providing unsolicited advice; give the survivor time and trust their judgement

While it is important to learn how to respond to individual instances of harassment, it's also important to remember that harassment is a structural issue—not just an individual one. Allies can also help to remove the stigma of speaking out about harassment by:

- Speaking with friends about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour
- Sharing strategies for how to be better allies
- Breaking down stereotypes and harmful attitudes with open dialogue
- Calling out discriminatory or dangerous behaviours and beliefs in friends and acquaintances

Proactively avoiding harassment

Workplaces and event organisers need to have procedures in place to proactively create a space where harassment is unwelcome, rather than only reacting to instances of harassment when they are reported.

It is important to develop clear procedures for reporting instances of harassment so survivors and bystanders know who they can speak to, where their reports will go, and where they can find information and support.

Workplaces can also proactively create spaces where harassment is unwelcome by providing allies and bystanders with training so employees are able to protect one another and act if they witness inappropriate behaviour. Creating opportunities to listen to employees about how they can be made more comfortable in the workplace can also help develop policies and procedures that protect marginalised people at work.

Alcohol can increase the risk of harassing behaviours occurring and can create environments where marginalised or at risk individuals feel less safe, especially during events held at night. Providing alternative employee gatherings or networking events in alcohol-free locations during daylight hours can ensure all people have opportunities and are included in social opportunities.



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Resources

The New York Times: Making Video Games Is Not a Dream Job

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/opinion/video-games-layoffs-union.html>

Layoffs and unionisation.

RAINN: Your Role in Preventing Sexual Assault

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/your-role-preventing-sexual-assault>

ACSSA resource focused on engaging men in active sexual assault prevention.

Venture Beat: Sexual abuse allegations rock the game industry again

<https://venturebeat.com/2020/06/24/sexual-abuse-allegations-rock-the-game-industry-again/>

Game industry history of harassment.

References

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