Microaggressions

Best practice guidelines

Content warning

Transphobic, homophobic, racist, and sexist remarks are mentioned.

Definitions

Microaggressions are verbal and non-verbal comments, jokes, or insults related to gender, sexuality, disability, race, and other forms of marginalised identities that are made often unintentionally, subtly, and indirectly.

Microaggressions are pervasive and difficult to confront due to unconscious biases and perceived lack of harm due to the small scale of the aggression; however, they cause enough harm to individuals when they are bombarded with them on a daily basis.

There are three forms of microaggression (University of New Hampshire 2021):
1. microassaults: overt insults, avoidance, or discriminatory actions that are more likely to be done consciously.
2. microinsults: remarks revealing hidden stereotypes and biases, often subtle and unconscious
3. microinvalidations: exclusionary messages that 'other' the target individual or identity, negating, and dismissing their experiences and feelings.

Examples

It is impossible to represent every single instance of microaggression or even all the experiences within each marginalised community, therefore some liberties and generalisations have been made when representing examples below.

A person of colour may hear questions like 'where do you come from?' due to the assumption that they are not white and therefore must not have been born in that country. They may hear comments like 'you

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look so exotic' due to the same bias, or questions and comments about their hair, or unprompted statements like 'I don't see colour; we're all equal here'.

A gay man may hear a comment about how he must dress up so well since he's gay, the assumptions that he will become the gay best friend and gossip with straight women, or even the common 'that's so gay!'.
A woman might get constantly interrupted by the male voices around her, might get told by others she's 'one of the boys', or be called 'bossy' for being assertive.

A trans woman may hear 'you look just like a real woman' as what appears to be a well-meaning compliment, or a remark such as 'I didn't know they could make men look like women'.

Despite being presented under the guise of potential compliments, many of these remarks carry connotations that associate the targeted person to a series of harmful stereotypes that refer to their marginalised identity and end up being extremely damaging.

Harm

The constant exposure to these pervasive stereotypes and comments lead to the accumulation of emotional labor necessary to deal with them, and may cause individuals to experience stress-related symptoms on a physical level (like headaches and heart complications) as well as on a mental one (increased likelihood of depression, for example).

The fact that these remarks seem so minor and the biases they reveal are often buried deep underneath cultural layers that helped normalise it makes it hard for targeted individuals to speak up about the ways in which they hurt them. However when they do speak up, microaggressions are often considered as harmless, which leads to the denial of their lived experiences and dismissal of their feelings.

As microaggressions happen frequently, they quickly become tiring. This means it can be exhausting for a targeted individual to speak up each time a microaggression occurs, even if they are willing to educate others. This can also lead to second-guessing whether it is worth pointing microaggressions out.

Microaggressions and games

Much like in everyday life, microaggressions are felt in different parts of the game industry. Event hosts may make comments like 'you play pretty well for a girl', advertisements often equate games with

masculinity in marketing, small jokes made at the expense of marginalised creators and then perceived as harmless by the gaming community that reflect hidden bias.

Similar microaggressions can be found within the developer side of the games industry. At events, women might be asked whose wife they are, making the presumption that they aren't there on their own merit. Language like 'guys' or 'dudes' alienates people with marginalised genders, and may even cause dysphoria in nonbinary and trans developers.

Combating microaggressions

The most important way one can deal with the topic of microaggressions is by striving to **understand the emotional labour** required to deal with these comments day after day, and not minimise these comments or remarks. Instead, game development companies and event organisers can foster a safe environment where calling this kind of behavior out isn't considered nitpicking, creating room for dialogue that allows people to put their defensiveness aside and simply learn how to do better. Education is naturally just as important, and reaching out to organisations and individuals that offer sensitivity training and sensitivity reading can have positive outlasting effects for any development team, as well as the mentality of striving to do better and being kinder to others.

On an individual level, it is necessary to perform a constant reevaluation of one's **hidden biases** and make a conscious effort to rid ourselves from them by engaging in positive representations free from stereotypes about marginalised communities. If you recognise a comment as a microaggression, and you are not personally affected by it, you should bring attention to it so that the emotional labor of explaining why something is a microaggression is not left to targeted individuals.

When it comes to game content, developers should re-evaluate whether the inclusion of microaggressions benefits the narrative of the game itself in any way, and whether these remarks are being **framed in the correct setting** or can be very easily de-contextualised in a way that normalises microaggressions even more.

If the inclusion of microaggressions is deemed necessary to a game's narrative, developers should strive to make their audiences feel comfortable whenever they present heavier content as some people play games for escapism and do not want to be confronted with the same situations they deal with on a daily basis. To support this, you should consider including content warnings, trigger warnings, or content notes.

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Resources

Killing Me Softly
https://fobettarh.github.io/Killing-Me-Softly/
Game that demonstrates the experience of suffering microaggressions over a prolonged period.

Microaggressions
https://www.microaggressions.com/
Collection of user contributions sharing their experiences with microaggressions.

Vox: What exactly is a microaggression?
https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions
Article explaining what microaggressions are and why they matter.

References

Sue, D W. 2010. *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation.* NJ, United States: John Wiley & Sons.

University of New Hampshire. 2021. 'Making the Invisible Visible: Gender Microaggressions'. *UNH Advance.* Accessed 7 June 2021 from
https://www.unh.edu/sites/default/files/departments/office_of_the_provost/Academic_Admin/gendermicroaggressions.pdf

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