STATE OF THE DISCOURSE: A SURVEY OF MARGINALIZED GAME DESIGNERS ON ONLINE DISCUSSION SPACE

In November of 2019, I published a survey and put out a call on Twitter for participants who were marginalized game designers. As someone who used to be very active on Google+ before its demise, I’ve been thinking for much of the last year about the lack of safe spaces for marginalized designers to talk about design without being drowned out, talked over, or actively pushed out by cisgender white men.

Personally, I know that I feel far more isolated from the design community, and that my ability to design games without a community to run designs by has greatly suffered. And while I know better than to assume my experience is universal (I know Google+ wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea), I also know that I am not alone in feeling that way. However, it’s next-to-impossible to talk about solutions without knowing the scope of the problem, which is the reason for the survey, and consequently this report.

This report is a lengthy document, and will cover in detail:

- The demographics of survey respondents
- Usage of Google+ and commentary on its features
- Shift over time in channels used to talk about game design online
- Analysis of responses to sentiment questions
- Short-answer responses – common themes and notable comments
- Appendix A: Complete copy of survey questions
- Appendix B: Definitions of terms used in qualifying questions

Because it was promised that all survey responses would be kept confidential, I will not be releasing my raw results, though a copy of the original survey questions is provided for reference in Appendix A (see page 24).

However, before diving into the results, it’s important to address a few important questions.

SURVEY DESIGN, GOOGLE+, AND QUESTIONS OF BIAS

Whether you loved Google+, hated it, or didn’t really have an opinion one way or another, it’s impossible to deny that Google+ was an important and widely used platform for tabletop game designers.

During the inception of what would come to be the indie TTRPG design community, The Forge was the only real space for online discussions of game design. Eventually, that discussion expanded into forums like RPGnet and Story-Games – but forums were notorious for posing problems for marginalized designers looking to take part in game design discussions. All too often, marginalized people would have their contributions to threads argued with, shouted down, or outright ignored.
So when Google+ was launched, it seemed to many to be an ideal solution, as it was the first social network to allow for rigid curation of content and audience. It also offered robust and granular privacy settings, which allowed users strong control over who was able to interact with their content.

**As is the case with every social network, it wasn’t for everyone.**

However, it is apparent that I didn’t do a good job of framing the questions around the section on Google+, because it caused the perception by some respondents that I was unduly biased toward Google+ as a positive force in online game discussion, as exemplified by one respondent who wrote at the end of the survey,

“I did not expect this survey to have such a bias that G+ was good.”

**It’s probable that others had the same impression, so I feel it’s important to clarify the intent of including so many questions about Google+.**

For many years, Google+ was the default social network for online discussions of game design. As such, I included so many questions about use of the platform because I felt it was important to get a picture of the shifting landscape of online discussion. And, love it or hate it, the removal of Google+ did force a major shift in the platforms that people use to talk about game design online, as I will examine in later sections of this report.

Additionally, there were also responses from some designers of color that claimed that people of color **hated** Google+, and that I was creating problems by attempting to have this discussion. In their words:

- “I hated Google+ … I miss nothing”
- “I'm glad it's gone. It was nothing but ostracizing." and "POC HATED GOOGLE+. I'm sure you're trying to but please think about why before spinning up those same problems "

Those responses troubled me, so I took special care to delve into the responses of designers of color regarding use of Google+ and sentiment toward it. And while I’ll provide supporting evidence in following sections, I can say that (at least among my survey respondents) there were more designers of color who felt positively toward Google+ than those who hated it. Among the things that other designers of color said about Google+ were:

- “It provided a space where I met a lot of geeks of color.”
- “[my favorite feature was] the ability to deactivate comments on any post”
- “[I miss] the long form discussion behind curated and safe garden walls.”

Further, white designers were **more** likely to not use Google+ than designers of color (see Google+, page 6). As well, designers of color were more likely to have said they used Google+ on a daily basis than white designers.

That said, I won’t claim to have written a perfectly unbiased survey; while my education in marketing taught me a lot about what makes for good survey design versus bad survey design, this was still a project undertaken mostly on my own – with a minimum of consultation on the demographic questions by the inestimable James Mendez-Hodes (who goes by @LulaVampiro on Twitter and is well worth a follow). Still, I feel confident that the results are unbiased **enough** to provide a useful look the phenomena and sentiments that I wished to study.

So, with out of the way, let’s get on to the survey results. **(Or, if you’re feeling impatient, you can jump directly to the conclusions, page 21)**
The first section of the survey contained demographic questions focusing on number of years design experience, games published, crowdfunding experience, and axes of marginalization. While I could have collected more information with regards to publishing efforts, the primary objective of this section was to provide information needed to differentiate between the responses of different groups. I also was reluctant to ask for too much personal information, given that respondents had only my word that I wouldn’t share their survey results.

As such, I made a point of asking for only a limited amount of demographic information.

There were 94 total responses received to the survey before it was closed. Of those responses, 1 response was eliminated for being a duplicate submission. Additionally, 4 responses were disqualified for not meeting the definition of “marginalized” (see Appendix B for definitions of terms, page 27), while a further 3 responses were disqualified for being bad faith responses. This left a total of 85 unique qualifying responses, who will thereafter be referred to as “the respondents”.

When asked to self-identify their axes of marginalization, respondents gave the following responses:

The most common marginalizations experienced were not being heterosexual (80%) and being neurodivergent (60%), although a surprising datapoint was the fact that nearly half (48.2%) of survey respondents said they were not cisgender. Among less common marginalizations, slightly more than a third (34.1%) of respondents said they had an invisible disability. And just under a quarter (22.4%) of respondents said they were a cisgender woman, a person of color, or living outside the United States or Canada. And only one person said they had a visible disability.
I’ll admit that I definitely had hoped for more responses by designers of color, and probably could have gotten more responses with some active recruitment. But the responses I got were strong enough that I felt okay making comparisons between POC and non-POC respondents.

In looking at the number of years of design experience and number of games published, I slightly screwed up the wording of my final two options and ended up having to collapse those two categories of responses. However, the results show that there was a wide range of experiences reflected:

It appears that among the respondents, number of years of design experience maps roughly to the number of games published. Nearly a third (28%) of respondents said that they had between 0 and 2 years design experience. Another third (33%) of respondents said they had 3-5 years experience, which is pretty comparable to the group (37%) that answered they had published 1 – 3 games. Lastly, 39% of respondents said they had 6 or more years of design experience, compared to 41% of respondents who said they had published 4 or more games.

Further, it feels important to call out the fact that while designers of color were in the minority of respondents, they actually overrepresented in terms of experience and games published:
POC were less likely to be inexperienced designers, and were more likely to be experienced designers. The results are similarly comparable in terms of numbers of games published, with very similar percentages for designers that published 0 games and designers that published 1-3 games. The only finding in comparing the performance of designers of color and white designers is that white designers were 17.1% more likely to have published 8 or more games, which isn’t terribly surprising when you reflect on the realities of existing as a marginalized person and the effects that dealing with daily marginalization can have on your creative output.

Additionally, designers of color were much more likely to have crowdfunding experience than their white counterparts:
Slightly more than half of total respondents (55.3%) said they had no crowdfunding experience, as compared to only a quarter (26.3%) of designers of color. This means that designers of color were significantly more likely to have run their own crowdfunding, contributed to someone else’s crowdfunding, or contributed to both theirs and someone else’s crowdfunding.

The important point highlighted by this data is that the common narrative that people of color have only recently started designing and publishing games is patently false. Designers of color have more years of experience and higher involvement in crowdfunding campaigns than their white counterparts. The only metric where white designers outperform designers of color is in terms of quantity of games published, which isn’t surprising given how much time and emotional bandwidth is typically required to finish and publish games.

GOOGLE+

The second section of the survey contained questions about Google+ usage, features used, and what aspects of the social network users missed now that it is gone. One of the things I wish I had done better with this section was making it possible for users to skip this section if they didn’t use Google+, but I never quite figured out how to set that up with Google Forms.

In retrospect, I should have taken the time to ask for help, because I did aggravate at least a few of my respondents. But given the high proportion of respondents who did use Google+ and the responses provided about how they used it, I don’t regret choosing to have an entire section of questions about use of the platform.

USAGE

Overall, nearly 60% of respondents said that they used Google+ at least occasionally, and about a third of respondents said that they used it either frequently or daily:
Of note is the fact that designers of color were significantly more likely to have used Google+, and that they also had a higher incidence of being daily users. Only 31.6% of designers of color said they had not used Google+, as compared to 41.2% of all survey respondents. Another 31.6% of designers of color said they used Google+ daily.

**CIRCLE CURATION**

The rest of the questions in this section focused on how people actually used the platform. For the remaining questions in this section, the responses of people who said they did not use Google+ were removed, and only the responses of people who indicated they had used Google+ were considered. In response to the question “how aggressively did you curate your circles?”, the options that were provided were:

- I added anyone who added me
- There were a few people I would not Circle, but not many
- I was somewhat cautious about who I would Circle
- I was moderately cautious about who I would Circle
- I was selective in circling and would only Circle people that had mutuals in common
- I was extremely selective about who I allowed into my Circles and frequently did not Circle mutuals

Because of my personal experiences with online discussion as a marginalized designer, it was my hypothesis that among users of Google+, designers of color would be more likely to use the contact curation features in order to be selective about who was able to see and interact with their content. And while the results were a bit mixed, it appears that that hypothesis is at least partly supported by the response data.

Designers of color who used Google+ were slightly less likely to say that they added anyone who added them, but they were also slightly more likely to say that there were few users that they wouldn’t add, and much less likely to say that they were somewhat cautious in their approach to circling. However, designers of color were about
equally likely to say they were “moderately cautious” in curating circles, and much more likely to say that they were selective in their approach to circling.

Overall, however, the numbers still tell a clear story; more than three quarters (77.1%) of respondents said that they were at least somewhat cautious in how they curated their Circles, and just under half of respondents (47.9%) were at least moderately cautious in their Circle curation.

**FAVORITE FEATURES / THINGS MISSED**

In looking at how respondents actually used Google+, I felt it was important to ask not only about favorite features but also about what users missed about the platform since its demise – since both would provide insights into what made Google+ valuable to its users. These questions were open-ended questions, with a pretty wide range of responses, but in looking at the comments, they tended to fall into the following rough categories:

Equal numbers of respondents said that their favorite feature was either the ability to create topic-specific Circles (9.7%), their ability to curate their community (9.7%), or how accessible it made the TTRPG community (9.7%). Slightly more than a quarter of respondents (25.8%) said that their favorite feature was the ability to curate the community that they interacted with.

The next largest groups were the equal numbers of people that said that they appreciated G+’s UI (12.9%) and who gave a variety of miscellaneous answers as their favorite feature (12.9%). The remaining 12.9% of respondents said that they either didn’t have a favorite feature or they hated Google+. 
What I found interesting in looking at these numbers is how these larger categories of answers boiled down into an even simpler categorization. Those who said that some aspect of the UI was their favorite feature made up 19.4% of respondents. And what slightly more than half (51.6%) of Google+ users identified as their favorite feature was the ability to control the conversation.

This became even more clear in going back and re-reading the open-ended responses to what was users favorite feature, which included:

- “The ability to tightly control your space with circles.”
- “The community (and the curation tools that allowed me to build said community)”
- “Being able to Turn off comments without deleting a thread.”
- “fine-grained privacy options”
- “Threading, formatting in comments, ease of integration with Hangouts and google Contacts.”

Whether you identify Circles, community curation, an accessible community, or the ability to turn off comments on posts as your favorite feature, all of those things are aspects of being able to control the user experience on Google+.

Of course, the fact that 29% of Google+ users either said that something not in those two categories was their favorite feature or said that they didn’t actually like Google+ is still significant here. As stated before, there’s no such thing as a social network that is good for all users. And while certain aspects of Google+ may have made it an appealing platform for a significant number of marginalized designers to talk about game design, that clearly was not the experience of all marginalized designers who used Google+.

Interestingly, the themes that came up in response to the question of what did Google+ users miss about the platform were somewhat different:

Nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) said that the thing they missed most about Google+ was either the community (12%) or the people (12%), while another 8% said that they most missed the accessibility.

Another 20% of respondents said that they most missed the design conversations that happened on Google+. But the majority of respondents at nearly a third (32%) said that they missed the longer format of Google+ posts as compared to Facebook or Twitter, and how that encouraged slower, more nuanced conversations.
In their own words:

- “When I look at Facebook or, really, even Twitter, there's all this other stuff taking up most of the real estate on the page. On Google+ the focus was on text and content.”
- “[I miss] connecting in a deeper thoughtful way about topics with people, fewer rage mobs attacking the current outrage target”
- “[I miss] a semi-centralized public square that isn’t an endless hellsite like Twitter. A medium that made long form discussion legible and accessible”

### SHIFT IN COMMUNITIES / CHANNELS USED TO DISCUSS GAME DESIGN

The goal of this section was to collect information about the various channels or communities that marginalized designers used to talk about game design, and to get a sense of how the channels they use have shifted over time.

To collect this information, I asked respondents to identify “which channels, networks, or communities did you use to discuss game design?” both prior to April 2019 and after April 2019, and provided the following choices.

- Google+ (pre April 2019 only)
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Tumblr
- Forums (i.e. Story-Games, The Forge, The Gauntlet)
- Discord
- Itch.io
- Other (Specify)
- I no longer discuss game design online (post April 2019 only)
While some respondents identified other channels not included in my question like Reddit and Slack, the numbers of other channels were extremely small and the change in use of these platforms was not significant.

In looking at how use of platforms shifted after the death of Google+, there are some mixed results. After April 2019, there was significant increase in the use of Twitter, Discord, and Itch. Meanwhile, use of Tumblr and forums saw significant decline, and use of Facebook remained essentially flat. Also of note, 8.2% of respondents said that after April 2019, they no longer discuss game design online.

The channels that declined are an interesting data point; I had anticipated that some channels would see significant increase in use, but not that some channels would see a sharp decrease. And in truth, the decline in usage of Tumblr probably has far more to do with the change in Tumblr’s TOS that banned “pornography” and led to Tumblr – notoriously one of the thirstiest content platforms - alienating a huge chunk of its user base.

But what about the decrease in forum usage? It begged the question – what could be learned by splitting these results into G+ users and non-G+ users? (Non-significant platforms not included to make these charts more readable)

Interestingly, aside Facebook – which remained completely flat – there were far more dramatic shifts in platform usage by former G+ users – which makes if you consider that people who considered Google+ to be their primary “home” for game design would need to find a new “home”.

Twitter and Discord seem to be the primary platforms that people adopted after the end of Google+. Use of Twitter increased more than 20% from less than two thirds (61.5%) to more than three quarters (82.1%). The increase in use of Discord was even larger, going from a third (33.3%) to more than two thirds (64.1%) for an increase of 30.8%. And Itch saw a more modest 10.2% increase, going from 10.3% to 20.5%.
However, the notable declines in use of Forums and Tumblr are much more pronounced for former G+ users. Forum use decreased more than 20%, from just over half of G+ users (51.3%) to just under one third (30.8%). One possible reason for this is that people may have counted Google+ communities as forums? It’s a bit hard to get at the reason for that, though, as none of the data I collected provides much context.

And, again, while the decline in Tumblr usership probably had more to do with Tumblr’s new owners shooting themselves in the foot than the shuttering of Google+, it is interesting that there was a much sharper drop-off of Tumblr usage among users of G+, going from nearly half (46.2%) of former G+ users to almost none (2.6%).

Lastly, former G+ users were more likely (10.3%) to say they no longer discuss game design online.

The overall story is largely similar for respondents who were not former Google+ users, although the platform shifts are (logically) less dramatic:

- Use of Twitter still increased, although by a more modest 13% (67.4% to 80.4%). The increase in use of Discord was even more modest, going from 65.2% to 71.7%, for a total increase of 6.5%. The only dramatic change was the increase in use of Itch from 15.2% to 34.8%.

- Similarly, use of Tumblr and forums also decreased among respondents who didn’t use Google+, but the declines were also much less pronounced. Non-G+ users had used Tumblr at lower rates than G+ users (28.3% compared to 46.2%), but they abandoned the platform at lower rates. After April 2019, use of Tumblr by non-G+ users decreased only 10.9% to 17.4%. This suggests that whatever the cause of the decline in use of Tumblr, former users of Google+ were far more polarized about the changes in the platform than non-users of Google+.
For those who used forums, the decrease was nearly negligible; non-users of Google+ saw only a 4.4% decrease in forum use, as compared to a 20.5% decrease in forum use by G+ users. And there were slightly fewer respondents who answered they no longer discussed game design online (6.5%).

RESPONSES TO SENTIMENT QUESTIONS

While it’s useful to have data regarding platform usage, I also felt it was important to get a clearer picture about how marginalized designers felt about the platforms they were using to discuss game design in order to better understand the scope of the problems faced. The ideas I was interested in exploring were issues of exclusion, erasure, lack of safety, disconnection, and barriers to participation.

To that end, respondents were asked a series of sentiment questions, in which they were given a series of statements and asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagree. Possible responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree), with 4 being Neutral. The statements are as follows:

1. I feel excluded from discussions of game design
2. Currently-existing communities/networks feel unsafe for me as a marginalized person
3. Game design discussions are dominated by cishet white men
4. There is no space that keeps marginalized people from being drowned out
5. I avoid using existing communities because they contain specific people who are unsafe for me
6. I would rather not discuss game design online than participate in existing communities
7. The lack of safe discussion space keeps me from making connections with new people
8. The lack of safe discussion space has hurt my ability to design / publish games
9. I have considered quitting game design because of the lack of safe discussion space

While the answers to these questions are not open-ended, the results – especially when considered in relation to each other – are quite informative. In response to the first survey question, “I feel excluded from discussions of game design”, results were split.

I feel excluded from discussions of game design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>POC</th>
<th>Not-POC</th>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
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I feel excluded from discussions of game design: (POC vs. non-POC)
Overall, nearly the same number of respondents agreed (40%) as disagreed (42%), with the remaining 18% saying they were neutral. However, it’s worth noting – perhaps not surprisingly - that feelings of exclusion were moderately more pronounced among designers of color than white designers. Designers of color were nearly 10% more likely to agree that they felt excluded, and white designers were 9.4% more likely to say they were neutral in response to the question.

However, results were not split in response to whether respondents felt more excluded now than they did previously. Only 32% of respondents said they agreed with that statement; this ratio did not vary substantially for designers of color. So it appears that whether respondents feel excluded or included, for most respondents those feelings have remained persistent over time, regardless in the changes in platforms used for discussion.

With regards to feeling unsafe in currently-existing communities, the results were pretty striking:

Only slightly more than a third (35%) of white respondents agreed that they felt unsafe in currently-existing communities, and nearly half (44%) disagreed. However, when you look at responses made by designers of color, a meager 16% of respondents disagreed, and more than half (53%) agreed that they feel unsafe. There is also a higher proportion of neutral responses (31% of POC as compared to 21% of white respondents), which suggests a higher degree of complicated feelings on the subject of safety within communities.

The fact that designers of color were 1.5 times more likely than white designers to agree that current communities feel unsafe for them is unsettling. But the fact that white designers were 2.75 times more likely to disagree with the premise outright is telling. (And of course, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that designers of color feel less safe in existing communities than white designers. At least not if you’ve been paying attention.)
Something that didn’t differ significantly between white designers and designers of color, however, was responses to the statement that game design discussions are dominated by cishet white men. The clear majority (74%) of respondents agreed with that statement, with nearly a third (32%) strongly agreeing with that statement. Further, only 15% of respondents outright disagreed with that statement, with only 3% of those saying they strongly disagreed.

Given those results, it’s perhaps not surprising that a majority of respondents either agreed with or were neutral to the statement “there is no space that keeps marginalized people from being drowned out”, or that designers of color agreed with that statement at higher rates than white designers. While disagreement was nearly the same (31.6% of POC versus 30.3% of white designers), more than half (52.6%) of designers of color agreed with the statement, as opposed to 43.9% of white designers.
When it comes to the question of whether respondents avoid existing communities because of people who are unsafe for them, the survey results were eerily symmetrical. Exactly the same number of respondents agreed that they do this (41%) as said they do not do this (41%), with nearly equal levels of strong sentiment on both sides.

And while on its face, it might seem to be positive that a minority of respondents agreed that they avoid existing communities because of unsafe people, the fact that the proportion of those who agreed is so high is rather depressing.

However, when asked to rate their agreement with the statement “I would rather not discuss game design online than participate in existing communities”, the majority of respondents did not agree with that statement; 29% said that they agreed, while nearly half (47%) disagreed. There were almost as many people who were neutral as who agreed (24% neutral versus 29% agree), which indicates a high degree of mixed or ambiguous feelings about this topic.

Additionally, when you compare the results of those who agreed to those that disagreed, those that agreed did not do so as strongly as those that disagreed. Nearly half of those who disagreed did so strongly, while only about a third of those who agreed did so strongly.

The remaining few questions focused on assessing the affects of a lack of safe discussion space. In response to the statement that “the lack of safe discussion space keeps me from making connections with new people”, the results were clear:
Overall, a clear minority (30.5%) disagreed with that statement. However, even among that minority, white designers were more than two and a half times more likely to strongly disagree than designers of color. And while designers of color and white designers agreed with the statement at about the same rate (68.4% of designers of color compared to 65.2% of white designers), white designers were more than twice as likely to respond that they were neutral to that statement.

The results were when respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement that “the lack of safe discussion space has hurt my ability to design / publish games”:

For white designers, the issue was polarizing, with nearly an equal number indicating that they agreed (43.9%) as disagreed (42.4%), and agreement comprising an overall minority of white respondents. For designers of color, however, the majority (57.9%) of respondents agreed that their ability to design or publish has been impacted, with more than twice as many respondents in the agree camp than in the disagree camp (26.3%).

This shows clearly that whatever a designers personal feelings about the merits of participating in existing spaces that privilege cis/white men may be, the impacts of inequitable communities fall disproportionately on designers of color.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement “I have considered quitting game design because of the lack of safe discussion space (see charts next page):
The majority (58%) of respondents disagreed with this statement, with those who agreed being in the clear minority. Interestingly, however, white designers were 1.68 times more likely to agree that they had considered quitting design than designers of color.

**SHORT-ANSWER RESPONSES – COMMON THEMES AND NOTABLE COMMENTS**

It’s very difficult to tackle this sort of issue in a purely quantitative format, which is why I didn’t even try. The last section of the survey consisted of two open-ended questions, which I said “may be shared anonymously, either in part or in full”:

1. What is the best solution to the lack of safe discussion space for marginalized game designers to discuss game design online without being drowned out, shouted down, or otherwise pushed out by privileged game designers (esp. cishet white men)

2. What else do you feel that is important to know about this topic that wasn’t covered by the questions?

Half (50.5% of respondents) chose to answer the first question, while about a third (30.5%) chose to answer the second. In reading through these answers (which were interesting and mostly great), some major themes emerged (see left).
The major themes (as I saw them) were:

- **Barrier**: concerns about cliques and toxic tribalism
- **Barrier**: The problem of abusers and harassment
- **Barrier**: Different language and cultures
- **Structural**: comments about the platforms and features that would be required to support inclusive discussion for marginalized designers
- **Refutation**: Actually, I DO have a safe community
- **Aside**: I’m currently in the closet
- **Resignation**: This is just the way things are now
- **Objection**: G+ sucked / this survey sucks

If you take the first three categories together, a significant number of short answer responses focus on barriers to feeling included, barriers like tribalism, the presence of abusers and prevalence of harassment, and language and culture barriers:

- **(Tribalism)**: “I built up quite a bit of scene cred back when I was still passing as your average straight white middle class male, and that’s stood me in good stead since G+ closed down. Still, the fragmentation has been tough - and I’ve already fallen afoul of abusive people setting up small communities on discord etc and using that as an opportunity to groom and abuse others. So even when we’re forming communities of marginalised people there’s an increased safety risk there.”
- **(Tribalism)**: “The function of lateral violence in keeping marginalized people out of spaces — multiply marginalized people beating each other up or talking past each other without a sense of a larger foe”
- **(Abusers)**: “My issue is more specific unsafe people in those spaces. I won’t go where they are. I know others feel the same. There will need to be some decent anonymous reporting or something to keep unsafe people out if you actually want the people currently left out by the loud unsafe people to thrive.”
- **(Harassment)**: “I’m unable to participate in Twitter discourse because of the way Twitter privacy works — silencing the person locking their account rather than allowing them to be seen by others they intentionally @. As someone who is currently in the process of a divorce that involves domestic violence, a temporary restraining order, and a custody battle, I can’t have a public account. This prevents me from participating in discussions or meeting other game designers. I’m also currently unable to publicly name my abusers for legal reasons, and so often can’t ask my online friends and communities to help keep me safe or keep my information and posts out of their hands.”
- **(Language)**: “there is a language barrier and also a barrier for those of us with social anxiety even in online interactions”

A slightly larger number of responses focused on the structures, rules, or considerations needed for an inclusive discussion space. (Most of these comments were longer, so I’ve bolded sections for emphasis, but that emphasis is purely mine):

- **“Curation of a small network of semi-public and private spaces where the hyper-privileged are forbidden access, communities focused especially on concept of development and support in addition to being an archive of resources”**
- **“More stringent rules against racism, sexism, etc along with clear definitions lay people can understand. Pinned threads highlighting lesser-known things such as alt-right dog-whistles.”**
- **“We need a platform and a culture focused on allowing designers to connect in smaller, more intimate groups. The Forge is only monolithic because it was a public forum at a time where knowing about it was**
unlikely but in retrospect we can look back to the discussions there and the games that came out of it and say "wow, that's important." We need a shift in culture away from this idea that "the discourse" encompasses all of the internet and get away from structures that allow takes to go viral as the benefits (reach and exposure) don’t outweigh the flaws (getting dogpiled by hundreds of people who don’t want to engage with the discussion but yell their opinion at a wall). I never broke into Google+’s tabletop space mostly because I had no idea how to get there, and I think that’s the thing that needs to be focused on: we need a structure that directs people into safe and healthy communities, not one that’s solely focused on uplifting individuals

- “G+ clone with the communities feature working like it used to; but also, let those of us who are willing help moderate/educate the ones doing the shouting down. Marginalized people shouldn’t have to do that labor, but it’d be good to have a community for discussing strategies to teach, since someone’s going to have to. They’re definitely not doing it on their own, and as much as straight up discarding folks is satisfying, except in a few situations (Zak = trash forever, thanks), it doesn’t work well as a long term strategy, and eventually turns on itself.”
- “We can’t go, "oh let’s just set up some rules for everyone to follow"— white people trying to be helpful will weaponise the heck out of those too, and keep pushing people out. There has to be room to both protect people who have been repeatedly hurt by bad actors, and allow people who are in good faith, but aren’t forward in the conversation around these things to get onboarded. I mean, I’m willing to do that kind of work, coz colorism privilege is a thing. But folks need to realise that none of this is a binary situation.”

(Yes I know I bolded pretty much all of that last comment, and that’s not how emphasis should work. But dang it was just so good and so on point, so I stand by it.)

A somewhat smaller portion of responses focused on existing discussion space for marginalized designers:

- “Erm, there are already safe design spaces. Twitter just isn’t one of them. I use Discord to be a part of design communities that are democratic and curated.”
- “It seems that these kinds of discussion spaces have moved to discord and that the marginalized people inside of them are actively curating who is allowed in, so that those with more privilege are not drowning out the marginalized. Not that that’s necessarily a solution, but it’s what I have seen working.”
- “I don’t think there is a lack. I belong to multiple communities that create productive spaces for QTPoC. They succeed by keeping groups small and/or aggressive moderation”
- “I do not have a lack of places to discuss game design as a marginalized person. I am in multiple discords that are entirely marginalized people which are wonderful boons for my discussions.”

A very small portion of responses focused on personal experiences of being closeted along lines of either gender, sexuality, or both. I won’t quote these responses because some of them are more intensely personal. But as someone who was so deep inside the closet for many decades that I didn’t even realize there was a closet, it was pretty heart-breaking to note that nearly every one of these comments discounted their own experiences of marginalization by saying something to the effect of ‘naturally their experience didn’t matter because other people had it worse’.

Another significant group of responses seemed rather resigned to the current state of affairs, seeming to take it for granted that this is the way things are and it wasn’t likely to change:
• “I don’t know, I’m trying to make a safe space, but finding folks who are not us based is hard as there is no physical place to make strong connections”
• “I wish I knew. There are a fair few FB groups of non-cishet-men designers, but even they get flooded with cishet men. Or just men.”
• “It’s hard to build a community on a new platform. I’ve mostly retreated to slack or private messages to have deep conversations.”
• “G+ was a great tool but primarily because it wasn’t ~as~ shitty as the rest of the capitalist hellscape that game design operates in. It was, essentially, a handbasket that was descending slower than all the others. I’m not sure we can rig something that actually ascends (to strain this metaphor to its limit) without a full-on global socialist revolution.”

Aside from responses that boiled down to ‘G+ sucked / this survey sucked’ (see the introduction for my response to that, page 2), the only remaining group of responses didn’t fall into any obvious category. Some of these are also pretty personal, so even though this was the largest category, I’ll only cite a few:

• “Organize smaller, active/activist groups that play and promote each others’ work, and fuck the mainstream.”
• “nonmixity channels are good. I sometime feel the lack of mixt but strongly moderated, or politically oriented channels though.”
• “Further balkanize the design spaces of the hobby. Rely less heavily on Forge-influenced game design theories.”
• “We need our own space.”

CONCLUSIONS

While it is baffling, not everyone has the deep and abiding love of charts and statistics that I do. So for those who want to skip past all of that (though I do recommend you read the section on short-answer responses, as it will provide much more context), here are my conclusions.

(And if you read all the preceding sections to get here, then gold star, you awesome person, you!)

ON PLATFORMS

• **Google+ was a significant platform, and its disappearance left a void that has not been filled** for everyone who had found a home there. Ten percent of G+ users no longer discuss game design online – which is a significant gap, especially when we are talking about designers who are marginalized.

• **Being able to have granular control over conversations and interactions** was the most popular aspect of the Google+ platform, while the most-missed aspect of G+ was the length of posting and resulting nuance of conversations. The fact that there are no currently-existing social networks that provide both of these
features is the largest reason why there are so many marginalized designers that have given up discussing game design online.

- **Facebook is terrible for discussing anything in a meaningful way and everyone knows it.** Even Twitter saw a major jump in usage, and it's also just really bad. Even the people who use it regularly call it a hellsite.

- **Also some folks already have pretty sweet sounding communities for game design, and damn that sucks.** If I had answered my own survey, I'd be in the "I don't discuss game design anymore" group, and I've pretty much stopped designing games because of it? Which fucking sucks. So, uh. Someone hook me up?

### COMMUNITIES

- **Game design discussions are dominated by cishet white men.** It's just the facts, don't @ me.

- **The common conception that POC are "new" to publishing and design is trash.** If a white designer meets a POC designer, odds are good that they have at least as much design experience as you, if not more.

- **Barriers to inclusion force marginalized designers to compromise between safety and openness, and those compromises negatively impact the ability of marginalized designers to make new connections.** Further, the impacts of those barriers are experienced more strongly by designers of color than white designers. Additionally, a majority of designers of color say these barriers have hurt their ability to publish games.

- **Nearly half of marginalized designers feel excluded from discussions of game design;** designers of color are more likely to feel that way than white designers, and these problems have been persistent over time, and that is a big damn problem.

- **More than half of designers of color feel unsafe in existing communities, but white designers were nearly three times as likely as designers of color to say that communities did NOT feel unsafe,** and that is also a problem. It is a problem that so many people feel unsafe, and it is a problem that so many white people are blase to the things that make communities unsafe for people of color.

- **It is bad that so many marginalized people avoid existing communities because of unsafe people.** Like, great for the 40% of folks who don't do this, but damn.

- **People feel unsafe because of tribalism, harassment, and protection of abusers, in addition to language and culture barriers enacted by spaces created and designed for white English-speaking North Americans.**

- **Most marginalized designers still feel it is worth the effort to participate in online discussion communities,** and people who consider quitting are more likely to be white. (Should that be surprising to me as a white person? I don't know how I feel about it. Maybe designers of color are more resigned to bullshit being the price of admission?)
NEEDED RESPONSES

- Aggressive curation to keep hyper-privileged folks out when they are not wanted
- More awareness of bad faith discussion tactics and alt-right dog whistles
- A questioning of what existing platforms encourage and whether that benefits us as a community
- Awareness that white people weaponize every major diversity initiative and run roughshod over people of color

THANK YOU FOR READING!

If you’ve gotten this far, thank you very much for reading. This survey took a lot of work to produce by myself, as I had to write questions, promote the survey, organize data, analyze results, and then write about the results. All told, it’s probably at least a week of 8-hour days; that work wouldn’t have been possible without the generous support of my patrons on Patreon.

If you want to see me take on similar projects in the future, or you want to see me write more content about how we can help communities recover from legacies of hidden abuse, please consider supporting me on Patreon.
APPENDIX A: COMPLETE COPY OF SURVEY QUESTION

DEMOGRAPHICS *

ALONG WHICH AXES DO YOU EXPERIENCE MARGINALIZATION?

- I am not cisgender (i.e. trans, non-binary, agender, two-spirit)
- I have an invisible disability
- I have a visible disability
- I am a cisgender woman
- I am a POC
- I am neurodivergent (i.e. mental illness, autism, ADHD, PTSD)
- I am not heterosexual (i.e. bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, asexual, gay)
- I live outside the United States or Canada

DESIGN EXPERIENCE *

You have been designing games (including small hacks, free games, design feedback on playtests or drafts, LARP design, or intentionally playing RPGs not as written) for:

- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 10+ years

PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE *

(Note: publishing includes small hacks, free games, ashcans, alpha drafts, LARPs, or other RPG books like supplements or settings.) How many games have you published?

- I have not published any games
- 1-3 games
- 4-7 games
- 8-12 games
- 12+ games

CROWDFUNDING EXPERIENCE

What describes your level of experience with crowdfunding?

- I have not been part of any crowdfunding campaigns
- I have written materials (i.e. core material, stretch goals, etc) for someone else’s campaign(s)
- I have run my own crowdfunding campaign(s)
- I have both run my own crowdfunding and written for crowdfunding campaigns by others
GOOGLE+

How active were you on Google+?

- I did not use Google+
- I occasionally used Google+
- I frequently used Google+
- I used Google+ every day

How did you use G+? (check all that apply)

- I did not use G+
- I made public posts
- I made circles-only posts

How many topic-specific Circles did you have, roughly?

- I did not use Circles for specific topics
- 1-5 Circles
- 6-10 Circles
- 11-15 Circles
- 15+ Circles

How aggressively did you curate your circles?

- I added anyone who added me
- There were a few people I would not circle, but not many
- I was somewhat cautious about who I would circle
- I was moderately cautious about who I would circle
- I was selective in circling and would only
- circle people that had mutuals in common
- I was extremely selective about who I allowed into my circles and frequently did not circle mutual

What was your favorite feature of Google+?

What do you miss most about Google+?

OTHER COMMUNITIES / CHANNELS

What other channels / avenues / networks have you used to discuss game design?

PRIOR TO APRIL 2019 (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

Prior to April 2019, which channels, networks, or communities did you use to discuss game design?

- Google+
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Tumblr
- Forums (ie The Forge, Story-Games, the Gauntlet)
Prior to April 2019, which channels, networks, or communities did you use to discuss game design?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Tumblr
- Forums (ie The Forge, Story-Games, the Gauntlet)
- Discord
- Itch.io
- Other

**SENTIMENT QUESTIONS**

Please rate the following statements by how strongly you agree or disagree, with 1 being Strongly Disagree, 7 being Strongly Agree, and 4 being Neutral.

- I feel excluded from discussions of game design
- I feel more excluded now than I did previously
- Currently-existing communities/networks feel unsafe for me as a marginalized person
- Game design discussions are dominated by cishet white men
- There is no space that keeps marginalized people from being drowned out
- I avoid using existing communities because they contain specific people who are unsafe for me
- I would rather not discuss game design online than participate in existing communities
- The lack of safe discussion space keeps me from making connections with new people
- The lack of safe discussion space has hurt my ability to design / publish games
- I have considered quitting game design because of the lack of safe discussion space

**SHORT ANSWER**

Almost done! This last section contains optional short-answer questions. Answers to these questions may be shared anonymously, either in part or in full. Answers are not required, but are greatly appreciated.

**POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS?**

What is the best solution to the lack of safe discussion space for marginalized game designers to discuss game design online without being drowned out, shouted down, or otherwise pushed out by privileged game designers (esp. cishet white men)

**WHAT ELSE SHOULD WE KNOW?**

What else do you feel that is important to know about this topic that wasn't covered by the questions?
APPENDIX B: DEFINITION OF “GAME DESIGNER” AND “MARGINALIZED”

Before we can get to an analysis of results, it’s important to clarify the definitions that were used to qualify survey respondents.

DEFINITION OF GAME DESIGNER

“Game designer” is a term that gets used very differently by different people and can mean many different things. However, I’ve never been a fan of the restrictions that the community commonly places around who gets to self-define as a game designer and who doesn’t, as it “somehow” always seems to result in privileging the work of cisgender white men. (I know, I know. Gamers moving the goal posts to exclude people who aren’t white dudes? Shocking, I’m sure.)

Hell, I refused to call myself a game designer for a full two years after my first game was published because of how strongly we as a community celebrate the work of white male designers while discounting, dismissing, or outright ignoring the work of marginalized designers.

Thus, it was very important to me that my initial call for survey participants be explicit that I was defining who counted as a “game designer” as widely as possible. In my call for respondents on Twitter, here’s how I ended up defining it:

“when I say game designer, I mean ANYONE who designs ANY kind of game, including small hacks, free games, design feedback on playtests or drafts, LARP design, or intentionally playing RPGs not as written. You do NOT need to publish games to count”

DEFINITION OF “MARGINALIZED”

As for “marginalized”, I didn’t specify what I meant by “marginalized” in my call for respondents on Twitter because I wanted to cast as wide a net as possible. In the initial demographics / qualifying questions, I provided a multiple selection question that let people identify along the following axes of marginalization:

- Cisgender woman
- Not cisgender (i.e. trans, genderfluid, non-binary, agender, etc)
- Person of color
- Someone with a visible disability
- Someone with an invisible disability
- Not heterosexual
- Neurodiverse
- Living outside the U.S. or Canada

This list was developed by myself with consultation from James Mendez-Hodes, and for the most part, these responses are pretty broad categories, as I was trying to balance the desire to differentiate between different experiences and the need to not reduce my response rate by overwhelming respondents with too many options. It’s perhaps worth noting that the initial version of the demographics question used the term “visible minority / racialized person” — which was changed to “person of color” when I learned that those are terms specific to Canadian social justice discourse.
With regard to the final option, there was some discussion between Mendez and I as to how to include an option that drove at cultural and language barriers experienced by people who don’t belong to the dominant American and Canadian Anglophone community. In the end, we settled on “living outside the U.S. or Canada” – although given that there were some respondents who complained that I was making assumptions about peoples’ ability to speak English it seems likely that I could have done a better job of framing my intent behind that option.

Unfortunately, however, many stereotypes about North Americans are true. Once upon a time, I was bilingual, but I lost my Spanish when I came to Canada 15 years ago, and while I would have loved to offer this survey in more languages than just English, that would have expanded the scope of the project beyond something that I was able to manage in my spare time in between parenting and managing the transition from unemployment to the start of a stressful new job.

The wording of the final option also caused an additional obstacle; there were four respondents who only selected that they lived outside the United States and Canada as their only axis of marginalization. This means by process of elimination (if you look at the answers that they didn’t select) that four people who are cisgender white neurotypical able-bodied straight men completed surveys meant to record the experience of marginalized game designers.

I took to Twitter to complain about this, along with the fact that people (men) get predictably abusive when you try to start conversations about the experiences of people who aren’t straight white men, on Twitter. Consequently, I found out that someone who follows me had passed along the survey to a bunch of their Italian friends, which may have been where those results came from. This caused a bit of a dilemma for me. I know a fair number of Italians who don’t identify as white and who resent having whiteness imposed on them, so I wondered what to do with those results for a bit. Ultimately, though, I decided to respect the self-selection of those respondents, which meant disqualifying those survey results.