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Game Changing: Incorporating Technology into Social Work Research for Social Change

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Abstract: In the digital era, technology is being utilized for educational purposes and to develop interventions. There are several known applications of technology in multiple disciplines. However, the social sciences, in particular, have been slow to adopt technologies for intervention, prevention, and educational tools. In addition, for those who want to integrate technology into current programming or develop technology to address a problem, there are no resources on how to engage in the integration or development process. This paper sought to address this gap by documenting the development process of a video game that was created to address the issue of gender-based violence among college students. Specifically, it focuses on the design and piloting of a narrative-based game centered on beliefs and behaviors related to gender-based violence. The aim of the game is to offer an alternative approach to existing prevention programs, particularly targeting emerging adults in college settings due to their prolific and preference for the use of technology, the high rates of sexual and dating violence on college campuses, and their need for more engaging gender-based violence prevention education strategies. This paper intended to contribute to ongoing dialogue and efforts related to the creation and integration of technology in the helping professions.

Keywords: helping professions; technology; intervention; case study; video game development

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1. Introduction

The integration of technology is becoming increasingly prevalent across the helping professions, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Atlas, 2023; Haleem et al., 2022; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Vargo et al., 2021). Social work, as a discipline, is uniquely positioned to lead technological innovation due to its human-centered and social justice orientation. Recognizing this opportunity, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) has named "Harnessing Technology for Social Good" as one of its 13 Grand Challenges, aiming to focus efforts in the field and encourage innovative solutions to national and global problems (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2024). Given this emphasis, information and communication technology (ICT) is expected to play an integral role in advancing social work practice by increasing accessibility and improving service delivery (Torous et al., 2020). While various studies have explored the application of technology in social work, there remains a need for more specific guidelines and frameworks that effectively incorporate ICT into social justice-oriented interventions. This paper explores how ICT, specifically digital game-based learning (DGBL), can be utilized to address these gaps.

Understanding the digital habits of different generational cohorts, such as Millennials (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born from 1997 onward), is essential for developing relevant and effective interventions (Dimock, 2018; Hruska & Maresova, 2020). Both generations are characterized by high levels of social media use and digital engagement, making technology a powerful tool for reaching and engaging these groups. This is particularly important in addressing pressing issues such as gender-based violence (GBV). GBV remains a serious issue among college students, with significant rates of assault, stalking, and dating violence reported. Specifically, studies indicate that approximately 26.4% of female undergraduates and 6.8% of male undergraduates report experiences of rape or sexual assault (Cantor et al., 2020). Twenty-one percent of college students report experiencing dating violence (Christensen et al., 2024). Additionally, estimates suggest that between 6% and 39% of college students experience stalking, with the wide range reflecting the differences in how stalking is defined across studies, the specific populations surveyed, and data collection methods (Christensen et al., 2024).

Existing prevention programs have had limited success in reducing these rates, indicating a need for innovative, engaging methods that improve retention and challenge harmful attitudes (Orchowski et al., 2020; Crooks et al., 2019). Given the digital engagement of younger generations, digital game-based learning (DGBL) offers an interactive approach to education that incorporates graphics (visual elements) and world-building (creating immersive virtual environments) (Tursunovich, 2022). This method enhances learning outcomes and engagement, making it particularly effective for Gen Z and younger cohorts, who often prefer interactive, visually stimulating content due to their shorter attention spans (Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

This paper details the development of a DGBL intervention designed to enhance GBV prevention programming for college students, leveraging technology to create engaging and effective educational experiences.

2. Using Games to Foster Learning

Video games have proven to be effective in changing behavior and preventing violence (Bowman et al., 2020). Educational digital technologies targeting behavioral and mental health concerns include several games and apps for addressing GBV. For example, MyPlan is a smartphone app that has proven effective in preventing relationship violence by assessing relationship safety, creating safety plans, and engaging friends and family as a support network (Glass et al., 2022). Another notable example is Liad, a digital game designed to combat maladaptive attitudes related to dating violence, fostering prosocial beliefs and improving harmful gender norms, with the secondary goal of promoting critical thinking (Navarro-Pérez et al., 2020). These examples highlight how well-designed games and smartphone apps engage players and foster meaningful behavioral change, demonstrating the potential of digital interventions in promoting social well-being.

3. Effective Game Design for Learning

Effective educational games prioritize engagement, encompassing curiosity, rules, challenges, control, adaptability, and enjoyment (Daud et al., 2017). Enhancing engagement involves key elements like interactivity, immersion, agency, and motivation (Chang et al., 2017). Motivation is integral for effectiveness and is cultivated by setting meaningful goals and challenges, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning (Liao et al., 2019). Motivation involves the physiological processes that influence the direction and persistence of behaviors (Erhel & Jamet, 2013). Motivation drives learners to achieve goals. It is a central factor of effective education (Filgona et al., 2020). Strong narratives, integrated with graphics and immersive world-building, significantly enhance both engagement and

content mastery, enabling students to assimilate new information effectively (Breien & Wasson, 2020; Ibrahim, 2017; Tursunovich, 2022).

Although the existing literature in social work identifies effective game elements, a gap in current research is the limited description of development processes for these technologies. To address the absence of a clear framework for developing educational technology in social work this study draws on literature from software engineering, gaming, and computer science. Key components that are essential in educational game development across these disciplines include immersion, realism, agency, interactivity, and motivation. Immersion is achieved when players are fully absorbed, often through authentic contexts that enhance learning (Bollmer & Suddarth, 2022; Hsu & Cheng, 2021). Realistic scenarios connect gameplay with players' experiences, promoting behavioral change and social competence (Vanduhe et al., 2020). Agency provides players with control over meaningful tasks, enhancing engagement (Sawyer et al., 2017). Interactivity fosters active learning and motivation (Costa et al., 2021).

The overlap of effective gaming elements—such as immersion, realism, agency, interactivity, and motivation—across fields like software engineering, gaming, and computer science shows a shared understanding of educational game development. This alignment demonstrates that insights from these areas can enhance social work technology frameworks. These components were carefully considered and incorporated into the project's development approach.

3.1. Current Study: Development Process

Using the case study model developed by Bickman and Rog (2008), the current descriptive case study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by providing a detailed description of a technology development process. Each of the steps of his process were followed, including (1) defining and selecting a case(s) for a case study, (2) using multiple cases as part of the case study, (3) strengthening the evidence used in a case study, and (4) analyzing case study evidence. Because this is not a traditional case study, the flexibility and simplicity of these steps were a good guide for completing the work. Considering the lack of examples of technology being developed in the social work profession, this provides an exceptional case of how to create a digitally based educational tool. However, this is just one representation of multiple potential paths someone could take in developing an educational video game, and focuses on the concrete steps taken during the process (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). This case will use information gathered from multiple sources, including gamers, game developers, and academic experts in fields relevant to game development (e.g., graphic design). Technology is becoming a popular means of implementing programming (Tuma, 2021), which means that more information is needed so that individuals can gain the expertise needed to use technology to help individuals and communities. This information can be used to develop empirical protocols that can be used to create other educational games (Yin, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

3.2. Preliminary Work: Reaching Out to Gamers

A clear framework for developing educational video games in social science research was lacking, necessitating reliance on anecdotal insights from experienced gamers. The author began by soliciting information from gamers within their immediate social circle. First, they discussed different game types, recognizing that this initial decision shapes the content and gameplay direction. The author engaged in a structured inquiry process, questioning gamers within their social network about their experiences with various game genres. These conversations involved targeted discussions on the most popular types of games, such as first-person shooters, adventure games, and role-playing games, allowing

the author to gather valuable insights on gameplay mechanics and preferences. Researchers were advised by gamers to consider the game's purpose when deciding on a game type, (i.e., aiming to shift harmful gender-based violence (GBV) norms while fostering empathy and confidence in intervention strategies). This approach of engaging in informal discussions allowed for quicker access to feedback, streamlining the initial information-gathering process that was necessary for the development of the educational game.

Guided by previous research, the author chose an adventure game format due to its narrative focus and potential for critical thinking through a choose-your-own-adventure structure. A choose-your-own adventure game allows players to make decisions throughout gameplay and those choices dictate what happens in the story. This design allows players to engage actively in decision-making, enhancing the learning experience. Acknowledging that students often disengage from traditional GBV education (Mabachi et al., 2020), the game's format and user experience must resonate with students' experiences. Thus, the development process involved creating an adventure-based interactive narrative game. With the game's purpose and format established, the next step was to assemble a team that could enhance the author's knowledge and address any gaps in expertise.

3.2.1. Step 1: Building an Interdisciplinary Team

The first author used a network-based recruitment strategy, leveraging professional and informal connections to build a team. By utilizing their social connections, the author fostered an environment where individuals felt comfortable discussing their expertise and insights without the pressure of a formal selection process. This method not only facilitated relationship-building but also encouraged creativity, ensuring that team members were genuinely interested in contributing to the project. This open-ended recruitment strategy ultimately led to a cohesive and dynamic team ready to tackle the challenges of game development. An integral component of that success is attributed to having clear objectives so that everyone understands the game's purpose and desired outcomes while also maintaining flexibility in roles and responsibilities, allowing team members to contribute where they excel.

Given the game's objective, the author sought out scholars experienced in technology development across multiple disciplines. They first contacted a colleague within their university department who specialized in creating technologies for older adults. Although their research areas differed, this scholar's knowledge of the technology development process and funding acquisition proved invaluable. This initial contact led to a recommendation for another researcher in public health who had previously developed a game targeting HPV (human papilloma virus) prevention and education among college students. This scholar was well positioned to share insights into the challenges of video game development and the mechanisms that facilitate behavioral change.

At a campus event, the author met a scholar in advertising and marketing, whose expertise in making information "sticky" and influencing consumer behavior seemed particularly relevant. The author arranged a meeting to discuss potential collaboration, discovering that this scholar had a background in game development and cognitive response to external stimuli, making them a valuable addition to the team. The first author sought expertise in feminist theory to ensure the game would promote prosocial norms around gender. While searching the Gender Studies Department's list of faculty affiliates, they found a scholar in journalism who specialized in feminist video gaming and was also an avid gamer. This individual's blend of intellectual and experiential knowledge made them an excellent fit for the project.

To ensure the user interface was considered well during development, the team enlisted a graphic designer. The feminist gaming expert was acquainted with a graphic design

professor and facilitated an introduction, leading to their participation in the project. Lastly, a chance encounter led the author to recruit a social work PhD student with a background in computer science. They met through a mentorship program at a research conference, where the student expressed interest in applying their computer science skills to a social work project. The author invited them to join the team, and they enthusiastically accepted. Once the team was established, meetings were held monthly. The first author led the collaborative effort by utilizing team members in a consulting capacity to respect their individual research agendas. Additionally, the author engaged in training on interdisciplinary team leadership, fostering an environment where each member felt comfortable contributing their expertise throughout the project's various phases. This structured approach ensured that the formation of the interdisciplinary team was intentional and well-informed, aligning with the project's goals.

3.2.2. Step 2: Development of Game Stories

To model the game development process, the team recognized the need for a strong realistic narrative foundation. Creating this realistic narrative foundation required developing stories based on student voices and experiences. Therefore, the team engaged in a mixed-methods study to gather insights from undergraduate college students regarding their dating norms and understanding of gender-based violence. IRB approval was obtained for the study, ensuring participant consent. Participants were informed that their input would contribute to a video game designed for gender-based violence prevention on college campuses. They were told they could decide not to participate at any time. They were also advised not to discuss their own personal experiences, and the questions they were asked reflected this purpose of wanting a general understanding of the common elements of relationships and relationship violence rather than individual personal stories.

The team conducted 23 focus groups where students were asked about their relationship dynamics, consent negotiation, and experiences in both casual and long-term scenarios. Focus groups were particularly effective in this context because they fostered open dialogue. The collective nature of focus groups facilitated a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, enriching the data collected and ensuring that the narratives we developed were grounded in real-life experiences. Students were asked questions like "Imagine you are with someone you just met in your room, and you want to have sex with them. Describe what that process is like for you? What types of things do you do to get the person interested in you?" Or questions like "Imagine you are with someone you have been in a long-term relationship with. How do you negotiate what you are or are not willing to do?"

Students discussed the challenges in navigating sexual relationships because of gender role expectations. For example, male students discussed how they are expected to want sex all of the time and often feel pressured to have sex in their relationships even when they do not want to. Women discussed the expectation for them to be compliant and do what the man wants even if they do not want to participate in sexual activity. For both genders, societal level expectations affected their behaviors when it came to sex and dating. Students also discussed hookup culture and how they navigate sexual expectations when using dating apps or meeting people for the first time at social gatherings. They talked about the need to be direct and use verbal communication when expressing consent because they do not know each other. What is interesting is that they also mentioned the same need for verbal communication in long-term relationships due to the expectation that being in a relationship means consent is always given. Although this is not the full extent of the data provided, it does demonstrate the complexities students encounter when navigating sexual

relationships, and the nuance needed in these discussions to reflect that reality. When embarking to create stories, the team kept that need for nuance in mind.

After collecting the data, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify common elements across responses, organizing them by situational context. We aimed to craft narratives that reflected the complexities of real-life interactions, ensuring players could engage with relatable and impactful stories. This process led to the creation of four narrative scenarios for the game: a student harassing someone at a party while drunk, a friend in an abusive relationship, an incident of sexual assault at a party, and an incident of sexual assault experienced by a gay man.

3.2.3. Step 3: Videogame Design

Game development can be expensive, and the team initially lacked funding. One member suggested using the open-source platform Twine to create a text-based game. The game is based on a scenario where the player is in their dorm room watching Netflix and receives text messages from friends who are in situations that could lead to gender-based violence. As the game progresses, the player is provided with text messages from friends and is given two response options. They choose one option, and that choice dictates how the story progressed. Two of the team members who had experience in creative writing and storytelling wrote the text messages, with the first author being primarily responsible for creating the story. To ensure authenticity, undergraduate students were recruited to review the text messages for accuracy. After incorporating their feedback, the content was finalized. The team member with coding experience built the game, titled *Once Upon a Party*, while the graphic designer ensured that the visuals were aligned with the game's objectives. The user interface was made to look like a cellphone to promote authenticity and help students immerse themselves in the experience. The advertising expert helped enhance cognitive engagement.

3.2.4. Step 4: Feasibility Study

Feasibility studies in technology development ensure that the game's concept and functionality resonate with the target audience while also assessing technology acceptance. The feasibility study conducted in this study aimed to determine whether college students would engage with and find an interactive narrative game effective for gender-based violence prevention. This study also sought to understand if they found the content impactful compared with existing programs. Additionally, participants were asked which game elements resonated most with them and what changes they would suggest.

Before conducting this study, the first author found limited research on the effectiveness of current gender-based violence prevention programs, with results generally indicating a lack of long-term behavioral change (Beaujolais, 2023). The first author also explored whether similar narrative-based games existed, discovering one titled *Ship Happens*. In that game, players navigate common problematic scenarios that college students encounter aboard a spaceship alongside an alien companion. With the alien, the player goes from planet to planet and encounters situations where there is a heightened risk of gender-based violence perpetration. In the game, the player is presented with what looks like comic book pages with sketches of what is happening in the story, with optional illustrations at the bottom for the player to choose. The player is asked to choose the panel that demonstrates what they should do next. The game did not demonstrate lasting change in students' attitudes and behavior. The first author believed that this lack of realism diminished the game's potential for an immersive experience, and therefore its effectiveness, as it made it difficult for players to relate to the situations presented.

To determine if *Once Upon a Party* could address these limitations, an IRB-approved mixed-methods study was conducted. Students were contacted via email to participate in a study assessing whether a video game could effectively communicate gender-based violence prevention education. Participants completed an initial survey, played the game, participated in an interview, and then took a follow-up survey. The initial survey focused on norms related to gender-based violence, including gender norms (Gender Equitable Men's Scale; Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008) and rape myth acceptance (Revised Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; McMahon & Farmer, 2011). During gameplay, the participants were recorded via Zoom, as Twine does not allow one to save players' decisions. Afterward, participants shared their feedback in interviews, responding to questions like "What story elements felt true to college students' experiences?" and "Did the game flow well?"

Following the 43 individual semi-structured interviews, participants completed a follow-up survey with the same scales as the initial survey, minus the demographic questions. Preliminary data analysis revealed that participants enjoyed the game and found its content meaningful and impactful, with 89% of students agreeing that the gaming experience was rewarding. Participants believed it provided a better experience than existing prevention programming, with 98% of respondents stating they were really absorbed in the game. Students felt they were encouraged to critically think about responses to gender-based violence. Students also noted that the current programs felt simplistic and that assessments could often be answered without engaging with the material. They appreciated that *Once Upon a Party* presented challenging decisions that encouraged nuanced thinking. Most suggested changes were minor, such as improving the colors and instructions. However, a quarter of participants highlighted the need for stories that reflect the experiences of queer students and students of color.

3.2.5. Step 5: Modifications

The first author acknowledged the feedback of the participants and recognized the lack of inclusivity regarding gender and racially diverse students in gender-based violence prevention programming (Cayir et al., 2021). Queer communities are often excluded or included superficially—merely by changing names and sexual orientations without addressing the actual content (Cayir et al., 2021). This can misrepresent the unique experiences of queer students that differ from heteronormative experiences. Similarly, students of color are often overlooked, their experiences are not represented, and inclusivity may only involve changing a character's race without any substantial content changes. In the initial development of the game, the decision not to include diverse stories stemmed from a desire to honor authentic student experiences based on direct conversations. In the first mixed-methods study aimed at gathering narrative content, the only queer identity identified was a gay man, and a narrative was created using that data. Thus, identities not shared by students were excluded to avoid assumptions based on stereotypes.

To better include marginalized identities, an IRB-approved mixed-methods study was conducted. Before this study, three additional team members were brought on board to provide expertise in various areas: one focused on the behavioral and emotional health of queer young adults, another on technology's role in preventing intimate partner violence, and the third on gender-based violence within the Asian community. The study involved a community virtual chat, allowing the students to respond to questions online and anonymously through text communication. This approach was chosen to create a comfortable environment for participants who might hesitate to share their experiences in person, even with peers who share similar identities. Each participant selected the identity they felt was most salient to them, ensuring the data was accurate and reflective of individual experiences. Following data collection, the next step was to create narratives based on the virtual

chat responses. Answers were organized by the identity of the participant and question. The data from each identified identity and response to the questions informed the types of stories to include. For example, recognizing that students of color often face additional barriers when reporting sexual assault is crucial in understanding their unique experiences with interpersonal violence. Research indicates that systemic factors, such as fear of racial bias, lack of trust in authorities, and cultural stigmas, contribute to their underreporting. By including a scenario where a student of color seeks help from a campus advocate, the game addresses these complexities and promotes a dialogue about the intersections of race, identity, and the challenges in accessing support services. This approach aims to foster empathy and awareness among players about the nuanced realities faced by marginalized communities. A total of 10 narratives were developed, covering various scenarios including bystander intervention, survivor experiences, and cases involving nonbinary students, LGBTQ+ individuals, and students of color. At this stage of development, the author has connected with a professional video game producer and programmer for guidance on creating an engaging and interactive educational game. Their suggestions will be discussed in the final section.

4. Future Steps

Once all narratives are created, the first author will utilize Miro to design a flowchart illustrating the narratives and their decision points, which will aid the programmer in developing the game. Gaming professionals also advised creating a mobile app version, requiring the consideration of gamification elements to enhance player engagement, such as rewards, compelling narratives, and gradually increasing difficulty. A programmer will be hired for development, along with an artist for illustrations. Suggested open coding platforms like GoDot, Gamemaker, or Construct will allow for a visually appealing game on a budget. An efficacy study will follow to assess the game's impact on reducing gender-based violence on college campuses.

5. Challenges and Barriers

There were multiple challenges and barriers encountered during the development process. The first barrier that was present throughout the development of *Once Upon a Party* was the lack of funding. This situation meant that the team had to be very resourceful, including using students who were willing to volunteer their time for the experience. A second barrier was not having expertise in software engineering or coding. This meant that I was not able to help during the coding process, and that I could not advise students if they encountered issues. However, I did recommend that they find an advisor willing to step in when they needed it, and this seemed to work well. A third barrier was finding time to write the narratives. Being an academic requires multiple job responsibilities, including teaching and research. And a lot of the work completed for this game was not transferable to traditional academic deliverables such as manuscripts; however, it could serve as prior work for a grant. This meant a lot of time was used on a project that would take time to see a return on investment.

Because of the creative nature of writing the narratives, some may struggle with creative writing and storytelling. Therefore, one solution is to have someone on the team who is a creative writer. This could be a student or a professor. A fourth challenge was how to collect gameplay data during the feasibility study, i.e., how to collect data on their decision-making when the tool used to create the game would not allow for the saving of player decisions. A solution was developed by the team. The solution was to have the students log into Zoom and share their screen as they play, and their gameplay would be recorded. It took time translating the visual data into something that could be analyzed.

The final solution meant a research assistant had to manually record all of the decisions that were made in a Word document after the person played the game.

6. Conclusions

The five-year development process, though slow due to limited resources, has provided valuable insights into creating impactful technology. Enhancing lives through technology requires collaboration among helping professionals. Technology can provide us with the opportunity to better enhance the lives of individuals and communities, including developing technology that addresses issues from mental health to racism and oppression. Technology can be an effective tool for change. Social work, as a profession, has a unique opportunity to use technology to facilitate behavioral and attitudinal change. This is a particular case of how entertainment and education can intersect to provide an engaging and immersive learning opportunity that promotes active learning. This manuscript also provides a roadmap to follow in order to harness technology for social good; now those who wish to work towards that grand challenge will have some step-by-step guidance on technology development. However, more guidance is needed to ensure that practitioners and scholars have the information needed to use these tools. Through the articulation of this process, the hope is to provide others with a realistic description of developing a video game in academia, a space that has its unique barriers and challenges. This guidance can also initiate a process where others involved in the development of technology, even those beyond video games, will openly discuss not only their challenges and barriers but also present the specifics of their process, no matter where they are in the adaptation or development process. By sharing this experience, the researchers aim to guide others in navigating the unique challenges of developing technology in academia, fostering discussions that lead to effective implementation strategies for positive change.

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