

PLAYERS AS TRANSITIONAL CHARACTERS

How Youth Can “Breakaway” from Gender-Based Violence

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Gender-based violence is a major global health and human rights issue. It is prevalent and takes place in a wide range of forms from discrimination and bullying to sex trafficking and femicide. At least one in every three women in the world will experience gender-based violence in her life time, be it physical, psychological, and/or sexual (World Health Organization, 2017). These traumatic experiences can cause severe damages to individual victims and social institutions (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottmoeller, 2002; United Nations Population Fund, 2017). Exposure to such violence and accepting it as the norm at a young age can significantly increase the risk of an individual becoming a perpetrator or a victim later in life (García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005). Therefore, early interventions among youth are crucial for tackling this complex issue.

As part of the UNiTE Campaign to end violence against women and girls, *BREAKAWAY* is a digital game designed by the Champlain College Emergent Media Center with support from the United Nations Population Fund. The design team chose football (or soccer in the United States) as a universal language to engage young players, particularly those between the ages of 8 and 15, to reflect and discuss gender-based norms, values, and associated behaviors. Since its debut at 2010 FIFA World Cup,

BREAKAWAY has been played by youth in over 180 countries. Gender stereotypes and gender-based violence are deeply entrenched in many countries. However, with events such as the “GamerGate” controversy arising out of misogyny within the gaming community and most recently the #MeToo movement that is breaking the walls of silence against sexual assault, the *BREAKAWAY* initiative is more meaningful than ever.

PATHWAYS TO CHAMPIONSHIP

There are at least two unique characteristics about the *BREAKAWAY* design process that enabled youth to become champions for social change. One is the role modeling structure that guided the character development so the players can be part of the narrative as transitional characters. The other is the participatory approach that allowed the members of the design team to take ownership and transform this project into a grassroots initiative.

Successful games do not always have to include narrative elements (c.f., Gee, 2007). However, when they are thoughtfully incorporated in the game design, the narrative impact has great potential for deeper learning, emotional connection, and positive change (Wang & Singhal, 2009). For almost half a century now, media producers have purposefully created characters and storylines in television and radio dramas to address difficult topics and serve vulnerable population groups such as women and children (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Many of these entertainment-education programs have been inspired by the work of Mexican writer-producer-director Miguel Sabido.

Drawing upon his production experiences and understanding of Bandura’s social learning/cognitive theory, Bentley’s dramatic theory, and Jung’s archetypes, Sabido formulated a production methodology including key elements such as a moral grid

derived from the framework of a specific educational issue; social modeling through the protagonist, antagonist, and transitional characters; epilogues to spur discussions, and infrastructure to provide accurate information and further assistance to change (Sabido, 2004). Among them all, the social modeling approach based on Bandura's social learning/cognitive theory is arguably the most critical part. The audience learn from positive role models through their rewards and from negative role models through their punishment. Even more importantly, transitional characters can demonstrate the change process from tremendous suffering, contemplating about obstacles, to eventually making decisions and taking actions that lead to the ultimate triumph. The Sabido methodology has been used internationally since the 1970s, changing the lives of millions (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

By collaborating with Population Media Center, a flagship nonprofit organization known for using the Sabido methodology in narrative development, *BREAKAWAY* is its first adaptation in video games. The game is set in the context of a football tryout and tournament that takes the player on an epic journey through 13 episodes. Tal is the antagonist who embodies the gender stereotype and shows disrespectful behaviors. He is the Captain of the team who is willing to trade anything for a victory. He doesn't think girls can play or even be around the pitch. Raina is the protagonist who takes courageous actions to challenge the gender norm and stand up for what is right. She is ostracized by other teammates not because she was new in town but for being the only girl on an all-male team. And she quickly becomes a threat for Tal as she turns out to be a football talent and holds the potential to take the team to the final win. Another main character is the player's younger sister Hanna, who is an enthusiastic fan of the player and the team. She is also a target of bullying but learns to defend herself as the game unfolds (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An example of social modeling in BREAKAWAY character development: Raina (left), Tal (middle), and Hanna (right).

The game features three major modes of play: *narrative events*, *tactical football*, and *skill-building training mini-games*. The player's goal is to become a winning football player. Gameplay is based on football performance and on navigating community-based relationships. *Narrative events* provide the story arc for each episode, creating a context in which the player is prompted to respond to situations filled with escalating gender inequity challenges as the situations all lead to the final instance of gender-based violence – abduction of Raina by Tal. As the events unfold, the consequences of each decision are depicted for the player's consideration. Game players explore the issue of gender-based inequality through their choices, which in turn impact their relationships with teammates and the outcomes of the game. The *tactical system* ties together the rapid paced *mini-games*, which provide pure entertainment and appeal for the player, with thought-provoking narrative decisions, which hold the

message and facilitate game-based learning. *Narrative events* have a direct influence over the difficulty of the tactical system by influencing the player's ability to improve his/her skills. It is in this interlocking design that young players come to understand the outcome of their choices. Literally a player cannot win the game if he/she repeatedly choose negative behaviors towards the female characters in *BREAKAWAY*.

What is different in *BREAKAWAY* is that the design team positioned the player in the narrative as the transitional character. By using a "first person" perspective (c.f., Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004), young players start off assuming the gender stereotypes and norms from their social surroundings are acceptable but are soon put through various scenarios that gradually challenge negative attitudes and behaviors toward girls. The educational messages are carefully folded into the character dialogue. The player sees what other teammates would do in these situations as they face tough decisions such as when Hanna becomes Tal's target for bullying. As things quickly build up, the player is asked, "When the game is your life, will you *BREAKAWAY*?" The mechanics of interactive storytelling takes full advantage of digital games that put the player at the center of the actions with high degrees of freedom (Wang & Singhal, 2009). Instead of the vicarious experience with television and radio dramas, the young players of *BREAKAWAY* get a closer "first-hand" experience when they have the chance in the game to make heroic decisions – decisions of self-discovery – that impact the final game score, the team's outcome in the championship, AND gauge their growth in terms of how they are dealing with the issue of violence against women/girls.

Although the scenarios are realistic when it comes to challenges youth commonly face such as peer pressure, gender-based violence is never explicitly conveyed and it does not demand the young players to take on adult violence. In fact to the players, the theme of *BREAKAWAY* is football first and foremost. The

design team even introduced a real-life international football star, Samuel Eto'o, as a walk-on character in the game to lead the discussion about good sportsmanship! Such celebrity endorsement helps enhance the positive attitudes and behaviors the game advocates without having to preach about gender equality. The celebrity role model also provides more credibility to the embedded educational messages, especially for youth who admire successful athletes on the global stage.

Moreover, the game design process involved more than 100 students over the course of three years, allowing these 20-something heroes to tackle complex social problems and learn through the transformative journey. Indeed this strong sense of ownership during game design and development turned a short-term production project into a long-term, global, grassroots initiative. In 2012, a youth camp model emerged from a student who was inspired to bring *BREAKAWAY* to his hometown in the divided West Bank city of Hebron in Palestine. The Champlain team trained local facilitators and organized 3 youth camps, enabling 120 participants to play the digital game and engage in social activities in the local community. They made history by bringing boys and girls together to play football on the street for the first time. In 2013 and 2014, the *BREAKAWAY* team had the opportunity to work with the United Nations Development Programme and the University of Sonsonate to train local facilitators and organize youth camps in El Salvador, a country with one of the highest per capita rates of femicide in the world. In the following sections, we present selected user experience captured through various innovative methods and summarize the lessons we have learned about *BREAKAWAY*'s educational impact based on data collected from youth camps in El Salvador and a 2016 field study in the United States.

MULTIFACETED USER EXPERIENCE

Over the years, the *BREAKAWAY* initiative has used a variety of methods, both conventional and unconventional, to capture the complicated and dynamic user experience. Three insightful approaches have stood out from a number of field studies for the research team: participatory sketching, gamification, and video recording of players' narrative exposure and response. First, participatory sketching offers young players to use pencils and drawings as non-textual tools for their creative expressions. This method is particularly effective among participants with low literacy, high language barrier, and of silenced and marginalized population groups (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). So when we asked the youth camp participants to sketch out their answers, it provided a critical layer of information in addition to the written words (Wang, Wu, & Choi, 2016).

For example, one of the earlier episodes presented a scenario where Tal was bullying Hanna, demanding her to stay out of the pitch because football is for boys. Participants in El Salvador were asked to draw a picture of Hanna to show how she might feel in that situation and add a bubble to indicate what might be going through her mind (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Participatory sketching by BREAKAWAY youth camp participants in El Salvador, showing their empathetic response: “I am hurt” (left) and “I don’t know why they do not allow girls to play if we are all equal” (right).

Second, gamification is an approach that uses game-like thinking, elements, and processes for non-game contexts and common strategies include points, badges, and leader boards (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). We used gamification strategies to motivate youth to participate in activities while providing user feedback. To accompany the *BREAKAWAY* playbook for the camp participants in El Salvador, a set of custom stickers were designed and printed (Wang, Wu, & Choi, 2016). These stickers included images of male and female football players with each assigned 10 points. Additional images included other football related objects such as the football, goal, flag, and trophy, with each assigned 5 points. At the end of each day, facilitators graded the journal entries with points and participants were invited to redeem these points for stickers of their own choice. Many young participants chose to place the sticker of a female football player at the center of their field and even as the team captain (Figure 3).

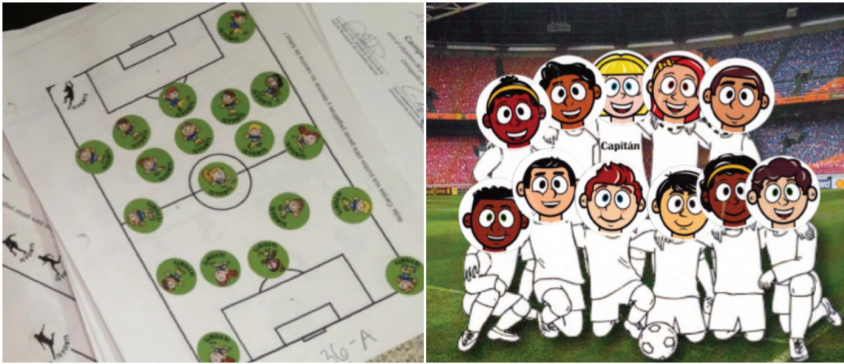


Figure 3. Gamification used for *BREAKAWAY* players to indicate gender preference in football games. Choice of female football players on the field (left) and female captain of the team (right).

Third, building on previous participatory approaches with players' voluntary responses at youth camps, we conducted a field study in December 2016 in Buffalo, New York, where we used iSpring Free Cam to record participants' computer screen activities during gameplay to obtain unobtrusive and objective measurement of their narrative exposure and response to questions. We coded each cut scene in seconds and separated the content between narrative (character dialogue) and questions (with choices of answers). Although the number of cut scenes vary across different episodes, we calculated the average exposure time per cut scene throughout the analysis. This method demonstrated the possibility of more accurately measuring each individual's exposure to the narrative content incorporated in *BREAKAWAY*. For example, the line chart below shows four participants' data we were able to record from start to finish (Figure 4). We found from a total of 18 participants (8-10 years old) who played *BREAKAWAY*, the time they spent to read the narrative content ranged from 11.01 to 118.15 seconds per cut scene ($M = 31.50$, $SD = 24.27$) and the time they took to answer the questions ranged from 2.34 to 14.33 seconds per cut

scene ($M = 7.53, SD = 3.17$). Their narrative exposure is positively correlated to their response time, meaning participants who spent more time reading the narrative content generally also spent more time to think before responding to questions. There were 63 cut scenes directly related to the *BREAKAWAY* narrative with the educational messages seamlessly incorporated in the character dialogue. Among those, the average narrative exposure time ranged from 2.89 to 130.73 seconds per cut scene with the longest exposure being 278 seconds on one particular cut scene. Some of the narrative-related cut scenes caught more attention from the players than others as the story arc unfolds; the dotted line in Figure 4 shows the group average across the 13 episodes.

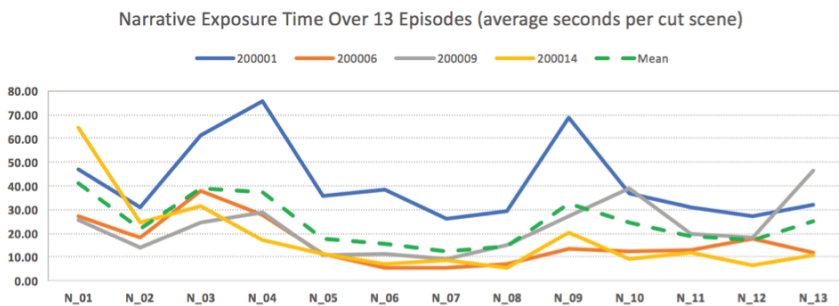


Figure 4. Line chart showing overall trend of narrative exposure data of four *BREAKAWAY* players

When we calculated the rate of participants choosing prosocial answers as opposed to antisocial answers, we found all of them to have a prosocial rate of at least 50%, with the highest being 90%. Overall, the antisocial rate was low, typically 10% or lower with the worst being 37%. This means even in the United States, we didn't have a single participant who chose prosocial answers 100% of the time. In the worst case, the participant chose an antisocial answer to more than one in every three questions.

However, we also discovered that a majority of the participants (83%), at one point or another during the gameplay, went back

to reread the character dialogue before answering the questions. The reread frequency could be as high as 14 times ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 4.58$). Compared to the answers participants chose after having reread the content, 36% of them chose a prosocial answer all of the time and the participants who took part in facilitated group discussions related to the episode they played were more likely to have higher prosocial rates when choosing their answers.

Perhaps it is important for us to point out gender difference tests showed girls generally spent more time reading the narrative and answering questions than boys. The group comparison showed that participants who took part in facilitated group discussions after gameplay generally spent more time reading the narrative, took less time to answer the questions, reread less frequently, and had a higher rate of prosocial answers and a lower rate of antisocial answers.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Digital games offer intriguing opportunities to engage youth, prompt them to observe and contemplate complex social and health problems, and extend the gameplay through other complementary activities to promote deeper learning, positive interactions, and behavior change (Ritterfeld, Cody, & Vorderer, 2009). *BREAKAWAY* is the first adaptation of the Sabido methodology of using entertainment media for social change in the context of video games. The game design centered around role modeling through positive and negative characters, message delivery via carefully designed dialogues, and decision points that algorithmically influence success on the football pitch, taken together these created the possibility for the player to become a transitional character in the interactive stories. Such a user-directed narrative experience allowed youth to explore and discover through their choices and arrive at intended positive outcomes through experiential learning. Insights from the *BREAKAWAY* user experience are consistent with the research

on narrative engagement and persuasion through interactive storytelling (Green & Jenkins, 2014). The game mechanics supported the transformation of *BREAKAWAY* players around the world through their journey to become champions and heroes, which in and of itself is already empowering. However, the behind the scenes story of game design students owning the process and then advancing it into a global initiative with training materials, a youth camp model, and a network of local communities brings the heroes' journey full circle. An important lesson learned here is that a game for change like *BREAKAWAY* can serve as not only an effective educational tool but also a catalyst for transformation for young game designers and the players. Together, they can rewrite the script about gender-based norms and eradicate violent behaviors toward women and girls.

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