Civic Engagement Project 2020: Written Reflection

East Metro Teen Gaming Conference presented by Erienne Nelson, Kimberly Delveaux, Matthew Bruess, Pierre Young, and Rachel Brodt

What was the inspiration for the project?

We undertook this project for several important reasons. First, most of us worked with teenagers who are avid video game players, and all of us have a deep personal interest in video games in our personal lives. Second, we believed that video gaming is educational and that video game related skills such as coding and design can help lead to high-paying jobs in a growing 21st century industry. Third, we were aware that there are many social barriers that exist in the gaming industry and community, where women, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and LGBTQIA+(Lesbian, Gay/Gender Fluid, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Aromantic/Asexual) are underrepresented in games, gaming jobs, and the gaming community as a whole. Finally, we believe video games have the power to break down barriers and bring people together for something they love, so we wanted to foster this attribute among the youth of the East Metro area. Our goal was to create a space that welcomes and encourages diversity in gaming, letting everyone know that you do not have to fit a certain mold to be considered a "gamer," and that if gaming is your interest or passion, you can achieve what you want to in the community.

We continued with the project post-COVID for several reasons. One, we were relatively far along in developing the curriculum and so we decided to take that final step in completing and putting it out there, because if nothing else it would exist for future CTEP use. Two, most of the curriculum and schedule translated fairly well into a remote format. Three, we felt that our project was still important, and we desired to forge the connection with teens despite the distance. If anything, we felt the need to make those connections was made more relevant because of COVID. Given the isolation and uncertainty surrounding our lives we wanted to give our audience an outlet where they could have a joyful break away from it all.

Finally and most importantly, when executed properly, video games have a profound ability to foster empathy in their players through being a mode of storytelling that fully immerses the player through their choices having consequences in real time. Every one of us in this group has experienced this immersion, and we wanted to highlight this aspect of gaming. Through gaming, you can experience racial inequity, sexism, physical or psychological handicaps, and much more. Yes, video games are mere simulations and will not give the full scope of any problem, but they can encourage individuals to think critically about the experiences of others and have a better understanding of what they might go through. Skills such as empathy and critical thinking are more needed now more than ever.

What stumbling blocks did you encounter, and how did you try and overcome them?

Like many other civic engagement groups, our largest stumbling block was the COVID-19 pandemic. After physical locations were shut down in March, we had to adapt our original plans for an in-person conference into an online model. It took some legwork to fully make the transition into a digital format, but overall, we were still able to stay within the scope of our

original project. However, COVID-19 had far-reaching consequences, and it significantly affected important logistical details of our project beyond a change in format.

With the pandemic came an inability to advertise via flyers and word of mouth. We attempted to use social media to promote the conference, but this proved ineffective at garnering any real attention. We sent word out to our individual sites for promotion purposes, but that did not yield results either, since our sites were experiencing their own challenges reaching teens. Another issue related to advertising was that several of our sites are government organizations that were operating within an emergency mode due to COVID-19. Due to this emergency mode, all information that was to be released by the organization had to go through a strict approval process by multiple entities. This means that even trying to post a single flyer online required several days to a week from submission to post, which was problematic when trying to promote an event that was constantly undergoing changes. We believe this was the primary reason why stream turnout and overall attendance for the event were rather low. If this project is able to continue in the coming service term, then making changes to the advertising campaign will be one of our top priorities.

We also believe that the timing of the event contributed to our problems with publicity. We were forced to change the event date multiple times, which further exacerbated difficulties of promoting the conference. We had also originally planned for the conference to meet just after the school year was over. If we had, there might have been more interest in the event due to the excitement of summer starting and teens looking for things to do at their local library. Particularly, both Saint Paul Public Libraries and Ramsey County Library (two systems most of us work in) have massive summer reading and activity programs during the summer, so we hoped to take advantage of the influx of teens in the building to advertise and entice them into the event as the room at Arlington would be near the front desk.

Thus, these stumbling blocks in publicizing the event led to a severe lack of attendance. Despite our extensive preparation in moderator training and chat filters, very few outside attendees participated in the Twitch chat function. On one occasion, we had one individual asking to join a *Minecraft* game before leaving immediately when we did not respond affirmatively. We are unclear on whether this individual or any of the others who watched our stream were part of our target audience. Other than that individual, we did not have any outside attendees participating in the Twitch chat function. Additionally, we did not have any interaction in our Kahoot trivia games, which in turn meant that we were unable to give away any of the prizes that we had available.

Another consequence of switching to virtual mode because of COVID was having to rely on personal devices and wifi to host a virtual space. Wr faced several technical issues when streaming, but we resolved most of these problems by switching to another facilitator with a more powerful computer and reliable internet connection. Unfortunately, with PC power we were limited on who was able to stream with Pierre being the only member of the group with a computer powerful enough to constantly stream in a 4K quality. Pierre was willing to jump in and stream whenever we ran into issues with another device, and his streams were a big reason we were able to create a high quality product on Twitch. Pierre also had a capture card that allowed for streaming via Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and Nintendo Switch, which allowed us to stream a larger selection of games.

Do you feel like your project achieved the goals you set out for? How and how not?

Our project achieved mixed success across the various aspects of what we originally envisioned.Wome the one hand, we successfully created a website to house all the curriculum we wished to cover, meaning that we now have a comprehensive archive that could be used as a resource for both in-person and virtual events in the future. Plus, the events themselves went relatively smoothly, and we were satisfied with our ability to facilitate through both streaming and moderated discussions in the chat. Not to mention we compiled activities which can be repurposed in the future in gamifying education as well.

However on the other hand, we did not achieve our goals when it came to attendance, as mentioned in the previous section. The viewers of the conference were primarily members of the CTEP cohort supporting us. We are unclear if the other viewers could be attributed to actual viable attendees that fit our target demographic or if they found the stream by chance without knowing what it was. We suspect due to the lack of participation and understanding that our outside viewers fall into the latter category, but we cannot know for certain.

With all that in mind we still feel that our project was mostly a success. Outside of attendance, we achieved our personal goals for every other major aspect of the project and are prepared, if given the opportunity, do better in a future iteration through a CE project.

What were you able to accomplish? Try to be as detailed as possible. How does the impact of your project match with the goals of CTEP on our tracking sheets? And on which CTEP member's tracking sheet are these results represented? (just choose one to enter all results)

One of our biggest accomplishments was the website we created, which assembled all of our curriculum into one place. The website included information on a multitude of topics that can be reduced to few main categories. The first was overview of the conference & its goals which covered: what the conference was, where/when it would happen, what the schedule would be, and most importantly why we were doing it including answering how gaming can be beneficial. The second was how to get into gaming for the first time which covered: an overview of the different gaming platforms and types of games, cost-saving tips for both, a curated list of game recommendations, tips and tricks for learning the controls and becoming a more skilled gamer, and a guide to the various slang used by the gaming community. Third one was abour how gaming can be used to further one's academic and career goals and covered: getting started with coding and game design mechanics and software, how to be more analytical and knowledgeable about gamings impact and design, how to get a degree in game design and theory in the twin cities, and how to turn gaming/game design into a career. Fourth and final one was about how to connect to and creat way of connecting to other gamers who share your identity and passion and covered: lists of various gaming conventions where teens could meet other fans and share passion about their favorite games, local library and game store programs that provided weekly gaming spaces and supplies, most of them free, and organizations dedicated to promoting diversity in gaming.

Expanding further on the items we created on the website of the overview of the conference category, some of the most useful materials we made include: premade trivia questions and answers & scavenger hunts/game making competitions ala google forms style which can be used to increase retention of educational benefit of gaming; codes of conduct, a

registration system, and a disciplinary system which help provide structure and security to a future conference whether in person or virtual; and finally the schedules of days structured round theme with recurring event which can be used as a blueprint to isolate what worked against what did not. In short, every single page of the website can be repurposed and be utilized in the future.

Moreover, almost all the materials on the website can be used to indirectly teach several digital skills (such as basic computer skills, internet basics, safety online, and media project production skills) through the process of streaming, guided courses on coding, gameplay, and streaming, and supplemental materials that reinforce learning outcomes. Not the mention that by moderating the chat and making sure the event was secure and family friendly, we ourselves gained experience with general technical skills, online social skills, and facilitation.

As far as the CTEP tracking sheets go, we had hoped to collect data for tracking sheets via a Google Survey that was embedded in our website and linked within Twitch Chat. However due to lack signups and the fact that Twitch members operate under usernames, meaning that there is no way to identify stream viewers without knowing who they are beforehand we were unable to get anything more than attendance numbers.

What opportunities (if any) exist for continuing the project into the future?

Plenty opportunities exist because first and foremost, four out of the five CTEPs who worked on this civic engagement project are enrolling in a second year, and all four have expressed interest in revisiting this project. Moreover it is those of us remaining that the COVID-19 health crisis will be more contained by Spring 2021 than it is now, and that we will be able to host a video game conference in-person that is more in line with our original vision for the project. If that is the case, we would plan to organize an in-person conference for teens at Arlington Hills Recreation Center or at a site that has a big space that can facilitate an entire conference. Such a conference would surely take advantage of the beginnings of a relationship with Target and Minnesota Computers for Schools for fundraising purposes we had before COVID-19 happened. We would start by obtaining snacks from Target via fundraising and purchasing lanyards. Then, we would continue to cultivate our relationship with Target and Minnesota Computers for Schools in the coming year.

If we are unable to safely conduct the conference in-person next year, we could always revisit the online model via Twitch, although we would make several changes that would hopefully address the shortcomings that we faced this year. For starters, we would start planning and advertising for the event well in advance. This would give us more time to make sure teens are aware there is an event that is happening and also give us time to introduce Twitch as a platform to anyone who is not familiar with it. Additionally, we would be going into the event with one year of digital content creation experience under our belt, which would no doubt make for a much more entertaining stream.

All in all, we have materials to continue this program no matter what format we decide or have to adapt to. We may have had poor attendance for the event this year, but that also provides us with an opportunity to revise the event next year and reach a wider range of teens. We feel as though this year has been a learning experience, and has really shown us what kind of steps we need to take to prepare for a successful conference.

If CTEP would do long term group civic engagement activities next year, what would you change about the experience?

First and foremost, if CTEP members are interested in revisiting this project next year, we would put forth a concerted effort to establish a stronger social media presence for promotional purposes. Additionally, if it was safe to hold the conference in-person next year, we would still expand it to include digital activities in addition to the in-person events. This would provide ample opportunity to reconnect with attendees online and find out whether the conference had any positive impact on them. Additionally, we would consider altering the timeframe of the conference to occur over the course of an entire week, rather than three days. The additional time could help us further elaborate on our topics and will give more time for the scavenger hunts and activities. We would also have more freedom to go in depth about big topics, like different kinds of diversity in video games.

However, if COVID-19 makes it necessary to retain the purely digital format next year, we would increase our presence to be more country-wide, or at least across the Twin Cities or the Midwest as a whole, as opposed to focusing on the east side of Saint Paul exclusively. There are very few video game conferences in the Midwest, and the handful that do exist tend to be more geared towards adults than teens. Therefore, widening the geographical scope of our focus would not only significantly expand the pool of teens attending the event, but also make up for the comparative lack of options Midwestern teens have for video gaming events. Thinking within a much longer-term timeframe, this teen gaming conference could even potentially become a recurring seasonal event, provided that enough new CTEPs share a similar passion and interest in such a thing.

What did you learn about civic engagement from this experience?

Despite our struggles in finding community members we could engage with due to COVID constraints, we still learned a lot about civic engagement from this experience. First and foremost, we became aware of bureaucratic aspects of civic engagement. In the early, pre-COVID stages of the project, we learned how to reserve a meeting space, secure donations, and manage a budget. Furthermore, we were exposed to how the systems of the libraries and non-profits work, namely in regard to time needed for advertising and event planning. The post-COVID stages further solidified these lessons of logistics of advertising and planning far in advance, as effective publicity and approval processes take a lot long time than firts assumed.

In addition, the project's Twitch streams gave us practice speaking with the public and improved our overall teamwork. We learned how to create entertaining content in a digital realm, and how to do so in a collaborative nature. We also ended up having a lot of fun working together, and the experience helped us bond as a group and as gamers. As a result of this conference, we have made additional plans to game together in a personal setting, as we discovered that many of us enjoy the same kinds of games. We have connected on different platforms such as Steam and Discord and hope to continue to play together for years to come.

Include at least 5 pictures/video that shows the work of the program, with written descriptions for each picture (not included in page count)

A record of what our stream ending up consisting of can be found at the [following link](). Additionally we have included screenshots of the stream that highlight the best parts below.

Computers on Milirary bases/university research centers first used games. Research centers like NASA used them to simulate conditions in space.

Pierre played Overwatch, a more mainstream game than the rest we played this day. However, there is a very diverse cast.

Birdo was the first LGBTQ representation in 1988. Poison followed one year later in 1989. Morrigan is from a 1994 game. Jun debuted in 1999.

Matt built a chicken coop for Joel :)