

James Kotzian
Ali Shapiro
4/29/15

Street Harassment IV: Hijab Edition

This project is a video game which can be played on my website [here](#).

A couple notes:

The Unity Web Player will need to be installed.

To toggle invincibility, press “i”.

Whenever there is any sort of open-ended project, I usually end up making a video game. Video games are an extremely engaging form of media, and I am especially interested in their potential to change people’s perspectives. When someone actually *becomes* a character in a game, it can be a mind-opening experience where the player re-evaluates how they perceive the real world. That’s why I took this opportunity to make a video game for my hijab topic. My last essay led me into the topic of street harassment for women and whether or not the hijab is effective in deterring sexual harassment. I wanted to further explore the idea of street harassment, this time including other forms of harassment such as Islamophobic harassment and slut shaming.

The main goal of this project was to use the form of a video game to generate empathy for women who are harassed in the street. In particular, I wanted to show the predicament that American hijabi women are in. Hijabis are in a sort of no-win situation when it comes to street harassment in the United States. Wearing either the hijab or American attire simply changes the kind of harassment that the woman faces, and in this way, it is a sort of “pick your poison” situation.

In the game, if the player wears the full hijab (burqa), then they are hammered with Islamophobic harassment and belittling pity such as “Fucking terrorist,” “Go Home,” and “Poor thing.” If they choose to wear clothing that reflects the American modesty standard, then players are the target of sexual harassment, slut shaming, and fashion policing. In this case, players face harassment such as “Hey baby, why don’t you bring that ass over my way,” “Some people just have no modesty,” and “She’s wearing BLUE?” This harassment takes the form of dialogue boxes that are thrust towards the player. If the player is hit with one of these harassments, they become stunned and lose health. If the player’s health runs out, then the level starts over. The player wins when they make it back to their apartment.

I created a beat-‘em-up style game to show the real negative impact of such harassment. One root problem of harassment, especially sexual harassment, is that perpetrators don’t know how their words affect their target. Many think that catcalling is considered flattery, but many women find it offensive and objectifying. Making the game a beat-‘em-up action game explicitly shows how comments such “I like what you got goin on under that dress” can significantly hurt someone. The beat-‘em-up style of the game also serves as an analogy for women who face street harassment. The street is literally a battleground where the number of enemies can be overwhelming, and it can be a struggle and a fight to simply walk around.

I had to make a lot of design choices while making this game, and I tried to echo my claim with all of these choices. I placed a big limitation on the player by making them unable to fight back. This kind of helplessness reflects how many women feel when they are harassed on the street. There are so many “enemies” that the best move is usually to silently walk by and try

to avoid escalating the situation. I also wanted the player to feel uncomfortable and out of place while playing the game. Many victims of street harassment feel as though they are under high scrutiny when they pass people, and as a result, they feel uncomfortable. I tried to replicate this by choosing a red color palette for the environment and the enemies, but a blue one for the player. The enemies also follow and stalk the player, adding to the tension. I also left the label of the “health” intentionally blank. How women are hurt by street harassment varies from individual to individual, so players can construct their own meaning for this.

I also took care in creating the environment for the game. Buildings in the back belong to organizations that are known to be Islamophobic. It is not surprising that FOX News and the Counter Terrorism Operations Center are Islamophobic, but there are lesser known cases that I included as well. HSBC Bank threatened to close the bank accounts of three Muslim groups because they fell of the bank’s “risk appetite,” and The Washington Times has posted articles expressing anti-Muslim sentiments. Having these anti-Muslim organizations served the purpose of making the player feel uncomfortable wearing the hijab. They are a part of the societal pressure for Muslim women to “Americanize” themselves and wear American styled clothing.

There are also pieces of the environment that establish the American standard of modesty. The fashion store sports dresses that are tight fitting and reveal cleavage, and an advertisement sports a woman in a bikini. The purpose of this was to show how there are societal pressures for women to reveal themselves, yet when they do, they face sexual harassment. It is also to show how women are hyper-sexualized in the media, and to show the importance society places on women to look good. These serve as mini-claims within my main argument, and it is told mostly through these background elements.

This game is not intended to be a completely accurate depiction of how street harassment works. Especially in a game with a scope as limited as this, it is impossible to capture all of the complexities of street harassment. For example, clothing options in real life are not binary as “Dress in a hijab or wear an American style dress.” There are many different things that people can wear and many different reactions that other people will have depending on their choice. However, the game is meant to illustrate a focused idea amongst an issue swirling with complexities.

My main target audience for this project is people who do not understand the magnitude of the problem of street harassment. Also, since it is my aim for people to feel empathetic towards the main character in the game, I am also directing the game towards people who harass others in ways depicted in the game. It is my hope that these people would play the game and re-evaluate how they treat others on the street. Having this project in the form of a video game is very beneficial for accomplishing this goal. There is a large male population of gamers, so my project is well equipped to reach males that sexually harass women.

I did everything in the game besides the music. I drew all of the pixel art using a program called Gimp and I programmed the game using a game engine called Unity. The game took a huge amount of time to make. To make any sort of polished game, a developer has to invest a lot of hours, especially if they’re doing both the art and the programming. I definitely underestimated the time it would take to create this, but I’m very happy with what I made. I plan to continue working on this project; I think it is an interesting form of social activism and I’d be curious to see how people react to it. Having a game from this unique perspective

hopefully can broaden the minds of the people who play it and add to the movement of ending street harassment towards women.