

Cops & Rubbers: A game promoting advocacy and empathy in support of public health and human rights of sex workers

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ABSTRACT

Cops and Rubbers simulates the systemic consequences the police practice of using condoms as evidence of prostitution has on sex-workers' lives internationally. By embodying a marginalized sex worker met with unconscionable adversity, players experience the emotional struggle this population endures because of a policy that violates their health and human rights. This serious game serves as a captivating alternative advocacy tool and interactive demonstration of these policing practices that elicits heartfelt reactions and independent conclusions about the policy from average constituents to essential policymakers.

Keywords

Serious games, humanitarian games, advocacy games, social justice, public health

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS estimated 34 million people were living with AIDS (UNAIDS 2012). While the infection rate is steadily declining, there were still 2.5 million people newly infected with HIV in 2011. Condoms have been proven to significantly reduce the risk of HIV transmission through sexual exposure, and global health organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and UNAIDS continue to request the accelerated promotion of condoms in AIDS prevention and care programs (UNFPA et al. 2009). However, in countries around the world – including in the U.S. – police carry out legal and illegal searches of sex workers and confiscate or destroy condoms found in their possession even when they are not engaging in sex work. A female sex worker in New York reported, “A few months ago they locked me up.... because I had a condom. I wasn’t even prostituting. They took the condom” (Shields 2012). In many cases, prosecutors then used the possession of condoms as evidence of prostitution. This treatment of condoms as contraband forces sex workers to make a choice between safeguarding their health and staying safe from police harassment or arrest. In 2012 Open Society Foundations released its report *Criminalizing Condoms*, which documents these practices in six countries and identifies their consequences on sex workers' lives, including their vulnerability to HIV. The report launched at the 2012 International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C., alongside *Cops and Rubbers*, a simulation game based

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on the *Criminalizing Condoms* report in which players take on the role of street sex workers trying to survive.

This paper presents findings on the use of *Cops and Rubbers* at the 2012 International AIDS Conference (IAC) in raising awareness for the human and health rights violations suffered by sex workers because of the condoms as evidence policy. Additionally, the paper addresses how the game provides procedural rhetoric and affords players to better relate to a sex worker's struggle for survival through interactive simulation. The dynamic nature of a game with its many combinations and therefore outcomes also provides players a medium by which they can explore the greater system and the many ways in which this inhumane policy manifests itself in the form of sex worker abuse by law enforcement. Furthermore, the game enables players to challenge the policy with a simulated first-hand experience as opposed to a static curated account in written form. This paper also makes the argument that the game can more readily attract attention to the report findings, particularly in a physical gathering of thousands of people like the 2012 IAC, than the written report itself. In effect, the report and the game work in tandem to advocate an end to police confiscation of condoms and to the condoms as evidence policy.

BACKGROUND

Condoms as evidence policy

The treatment of condoms as contraband is an under-represented issue plaguing sex work communities worldwide. Prior to 2012 there had been no formal research on the condoms as evidence policy yet sex worker organizations consistently heard accounts of related sex worker abuse by law enforcement in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia. In 2012 Open Society Foundations' (OSF) Public Health Programs, with the help of its international partnering organizations, surveyed 139 sex workers and 40 outreach workers in Russia, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the United States. The respondents in these disparate locations stated that they are profiled as sex workers and routinely searched for condoms. If caught, they face financial extortion, physical or sexual abuse, or imprisonment. OSF launched their *Criminalizing Condoms* report at the 2012 International AIDS Conference alongside a similar national study conducted by Human Rights Watch reporting on this same practice in Washington, D.C., New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

International AIDS Conference

The International AIDS Conference (IAC) is the premier gathering for those working in the field of HIV including policy makers, people living with HIV, and others committed to ending the pandemic. At the 2012 biannual conference in Washington, D.C., over 20,000 delegates from nearly 200 countries came together to assess the current landscape, recent scientific developments, and future plans to fight the AIDS epidemic (AIDS 2012 2012b). Every IAC features a Global Village, a diverse and vibrant space where community from all over the world come to meet, share, and learn from each other. Visitors to the Global Village can see how hard science translates into community action and intervention (AIDS 2012 2012a). The Global Village is an expansive exhibition site with networking zones, lively discussion sessions, and spaces for both fine art and performances.

GAME OVERVIEW

Cops and Rubbers is an interactive demonstration of policing practices witnessed in six countries and highlights their negative consequences on sex workers' livelihood. Players take on the role of sex workers trying to achieve basic health and financial goals but who are challenged with obstacles, including extortion and exploitation by law enforcement, as a result of the criminalization of condoms. The game enables players to embody a marginalized sex worker met with adversity and to experience the emotional struggle this population endures due to violations of their health and human rights. As a result, *Cops and Rubbers* serves as an alternative advocacy tool that attracts a diverse audience with its visual, interactive, and simple design.

The physical game's visual design is intentionally conspicuous. The game components used as much illustration and as minimal text as possible, and all the items shared a cohesive bold color palette.



Figure 1: This is a sampling of Cops & Rubbers' graphic and colorful game components

The game easily scales up from one to six players with each player assigned one of six characters – one male, three female, and two transgender female characters. Each character's game components begin in front of the respective player and are color-coded for ease of recognition.

Writing the actual game content, in order to be tactful and not offensive to the point of incredible, proved challenging. Being too direct and colorful in language could be interpreted by players as an exaggeration and therefore propagandistic. The game development team, which included informed researchers and advocates, labored over the game text to ensure that the language and tone did not make light of or misconstrue reality. Sex workers and sex work advocates also played early prototypes of the game and provided invaluable feedback for how to portray sex work and the scenarios in which sex workers find themselves. For example, character empowerment cards were added to the

game to show that sex workers are not completely defenseless. Also, the outreach worker event cards, which primarily serve to determine whether or not a player will have a condom to carry that round, include narrative reminding players that outreach workers provide many services that can assist a sex worker when confronted by law enforcement. Additionally, each of these cards was carefully crafted to prevent reading fatigue, especially for players whose first language is not English and particularly when reading out loud to the group. Finally, the use of text on game components is limited to the player character cards and the cards controlled by the game's facilitator. This allows the game to be easily translated since less than 25% of the game components would need to be printed for a given language's expansion pack.

Another major narrative concern was how to word the police cards that a player must draw when his or her game character is caught in possession of a condom. The development team struggled with the tone and voice for these cards and, after much discussion and testing, decided that a player should read these cards in the first-person (instead of a facilitator speaking from the perspective of a police non-player character). It is also important that players understood that the narrative on the police consequence cards was not completely fabricated and in fact based on interviews conducted with the sex workers surveyed for the *Criminalizing Condoms* report. Therefore, each card includes a relevant quote from an actual sex worker, which is also read out loud for the benefit of all people playing and observing the game, to reinforce the authenticity of these events.



Figure 2: This is an example of a police consequence card that is read out loud by a player whose game character is caught in possession of a condom by law enforcement. The top section includes the game narrative and consequence. The bottom section includes a related quote from a real sex worker to reinforce the authenticity of these events.

Attracting a diversity of players

Cops and Rubbers launched at the 2012 International AIDS Conference (IAC) in its Global Village, the largest physical component to the IAC with over a hundred organizations competing for the attention of thousands of delegates. Many groups resort to visual and aural spectacle to attract participants, including parades, demonstrations, and musical performances, and organizations must be strategic to get someone's ear – or eyes as was later discovered. *Cops and Rubbers* originally was created as an accompanying resource to the official *Criminalizing Condoms* report, and ultimately the physical game attracted a greater audience to the issue because of the inherent spectacle and level of engagement a tabletop game creates.

The official game launch took place on the first day of the IAC within the walls of the Human Rights Watch networking zone, and therefore mostly attracted attendees familiar with the condoms as evidence policy such as sex work advocates. After the official launch, the game was set up on portable tables and placed just outside the confines of this networking zone. Moving to a more visible location and closer to the foot traffic resulted in a much more diverse group of participants. Also the portability of the game allowed game facilitators to take the game into other areas of the convention center, which were well populated with delegates attending formal presentations and panels. Over the course of four days 100+ participants from 15 countries on six continents played *Cops and Rubbers*. Players ranged from delegates familiar with the policy in their home countries to Washingtonians who had no idea this policy was active in their own backyard.

The game's graphic appearance and bold color palette decidedly attracted players. One IAC attendee specifically asked if the game was designed for deaf people. She herself is deaf and appreciated the game's visual design and tactility amidst a conference full of verbal dialogue and elusive presentation slides. While it was not originally designed for that type of accessibility, the game certainly allows deaf members to engage with the game and interact with other conference delegates, and all at a comfortable pace.

Many of these players would not have encountered the condoms as evidence issue or voiced their concerns and disapproval for the policy if they had not seen or played the game. Game facilitators occasionally solicited passersby to play the game, but at least a quarter of the players had walked by and seen a group of people getting emotional and vocal playing the game, stayed to observe the rest of that game session, and then decided to join in the next game session. At least a handful of players were referrals – one person would play the game and then tell others to come over and play. Those unfamiliar with the issue were utterly shocked that condoms could be considered contraband and found the policy absolutely ridiculous and “stupid”. Many were not that surprised to hear that such practices were in effect in developing African nations but were in disbelief to hear that law enforcement in major U.S. cities like New York City were also exploiting this same archaic policy.

Surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, some players described this game about discriminatory violence against sex workers as “enjoyable” because of its accessibility with quick and easy gameplay and its high level of engagement. By taking on the role of a sex worker whose personal story develops over the course of the game, players become invested in achieving the game goals and visibly react when they are able to make a safe transaction and even more so when they are confronted with corrupt police. For these reasons, a handful of players chose to play the game again.

The gameplay is straightforward enough that by the third of six total rounds, the players often are eager to announce the next event. While other AIDS organizations in the Global Village try to attract attendees to their individual agenda with branded paraphernalia (T-shirts, pens, notepads, etc.), *Cops and Rubbers* alone served as an attractor to the bigger issue. Admittedly, select participants, who came over coveting an unattainable *Cops and Rubbers* t-shirts, still actively engaged in the game and post-game discussion for the more modest reward of a *Cops and Rubbers* button. After finishing the game the majority of players asked how they could learn more about the condoms as evidence policy. They then received either a copy of the report (while supplies lasted) or a card listing the report's web URL.

One passerby who chose to join in a game session turned out to be a member of Australia's parliament. Criminalization of condoms is not an issue in Australia, but the parliamentarian was very familiar with the policy and was interested in sharing the game and the report with government officials from ally countries where this practice is still an active problem. The ideal audience for both the report and the game is policymakers and anyone able to advocate and elicit policy reform, and it is not likely that the parliamentarian would have engaged with the *Cops and Rubbers* team and asked for more information regarding the report if not for the game. The parliamentarian's engagement with the game confirms that the game is a viable communication tool to use policymakers with the caveat that they are open to the use of such innovative and interactive resources.

IT'S NOT JUST A GAME, IT'S (A SAD) REALITY

Roughly five percent of players self-identified as current or former sex workers and found truth in the game's narrative. They all expressed agreement when reading game events that described situations they were all too familiar with from their own street work experiences. One player in particular not only identified with her character JoJo's profile – in exact age and gender identification as transgender female – but also described her risky in-game behavior and fortuitous game outcome as true to life. This same player now does advocacy work with sex workers in the Boston area and wanted to get copies of the game to use as an advocacy tool with her partnering organizations. Many sex worker advocates also described the game as an effective advocacy tool that genuinely depicts the interconnections between the policy, targeted abuse of sex workers by law enforcement, and an increase in health risks by sex workers. They also want their ally organizations to play *Cops and Rubbers* so they are familiar with the systemic problem of considering condoms as contraband. Many sex work advocacy organizations focus on getting condoms in the hands of sex workers, but these outreach programs also need to realize the importance of also enabling sex workers to keep and use the condoms they receive (Shields 2012). As the game shows, carrying condoms can actually put a sex worker's sexual, physical, and mental health at great risk.

Almost every individual who played *Cops and Rubbers* at the IAC found the condoms as evidence policy unnecessary and unjust. While there is not evidential data showing how much each player knew about this issue or their perceptions prior to playing, it is clear that both players and observers alike had emotional reactions to the game's narrative and verbal opinions about these police practices. One player concluded the game by calling the mistreatment of sex workers by police a "sad reality". Other players lingered behind to strategize uses for the game. One astute observation made was that law enforcement officials and officers should play the game; even if they claim the game is full of lies, having law enforcement roleplay as a vulnerable sex worker should make them think twice before engaging in such practices.



Figure 3: Conference attendees playing *Cops and Rubbers* in the IAC Global Village with onlookers observing the game.

Procedural rhetoric engages players in a serious matter

In his book *Persuasive Games* Ian Bogost (2007) coins the term “procedural rhetoric” to explain a game’s capacity to simulate how things work. Unlike other communication mediums, including print or video, games allow a person to engage with a subject matter in a more experiential form. A person participates in a game by making choices that affect his or her game character and enable the player to better understand the relationships between the game objects. This same ability that allows an individual to explore a larger interconnected system and to play the game again and again also enables and motivates players to come up with their own conclusions about the depicted system and even challenge how it could change for the better. *Cops and Rubbers*’ procedural rhetoric is what encourages individuals to engage and react with the facts of this somewhat obscure issue through simulation.

Well-designed games are intrinsically motivating because they provide players with clearly defined goals and constantly provide feedback to the player on how his or her game actions contribute to the game outcome (Salen et al. 2003). In *Cops and Rubbers* the goals are really simple: save \$25 dollars for a personal goal (like education, job prospects, or caring for your family) by the end of six rounds without developing a sexually transmitted infection. As players earn money from client non-player characters they collect tangible money cards that visibly show their progress towards their financial goal. As players encounter corrupt police officers they must choose to give up some of their earnings, by physically returning one of these money cards, to bribe an office who has caught him or her with a condom or forgo earning any money this round. Furthermore, if the police has confiscated a player’s condom leaving him or her without any “protection” then the player can only earn money by having unprotected sex. Each time a player engages in unsafe sex, he or she also receives a tangible red “exposure” token. These token also serve as feedback or a reminder to the player just how risky he or

she has been and that there could be serious ramifications for each in-game exposure to sexual health risk. It is in these moments that players are forced to make difficult decisions and thus can really identify with a sex worker's struggle to survive.

CONCLUSION

Cops and Rubbers is a unique advocacy tool that makes the highly politicized yet obscure issue of using condoms as contraband accessible to average citizens and critical policymakers alike. Both the *Criminalizing Condoms* report and the *Cops and Rubbers* game were based on findings from a global study of the human and health rights violations that result because of the condoms as evidence policy. And at the 2012 International AIDS Conference, the game ended up attracting a wider audience to the issue than the launch of the report alone. Unlike most serious games, *Cops and Rubbers* does not teach a skill or provide information that players might use for personal fulfillment or that originates from a personal interest. Instead the objective of this game is to build awareness for this terrible and unnecessary policy by positioning a diverse audience of individuals in order to see the negative effects of the policy from those most negatively affected: street sex workers. In July 2012 over 100 players from 15 countries worldwide familiarized themselves with the condoms as evidence policy that is plaguing both developing and developed nations around the world.

In their report on the criminalization of sex workers, Shannon and Csete (2010, 573-574) concluded that, "Eliminating law enforcement practices that inhibit condom use (such as using condom possession as grounds for arrest) and protecting sex workers from violence are critical for the prevention of HIV/STI acquisition and transition." Players of *Cops and Rubbers* understand this genuine need to decriminalize condoms in order to protect the health and human rights of sex workers after experiencing the violations and developing empathy towards them. It is through the game's procedural rhetoric that players become familiar with the targeted mistreatment and risks experienced by a marginalized group that rarely receives sympathy and begin to identify and address – in an apolitical context – the need for policy reform.

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