Building Bridges

Game design for individual and community LGBTQ+ identity

Table of Contents

The mission of Building Bridges is to alleviate the isolation and communal disconnect that LGBTQ+ people face. Building Bridges uses the spirit of game nights to create a virtual space for conversation, community, and connection.

Abstract

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Executive Summary

Building Bridges has evolved dramatically from its inception. It is in many ways stronger, despite unforeseeable roadblocks created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially intended to be played in-person, the game now focuses on online engagement, with a printable version available for download. We were forced to focus on aspects of the game that would allow its continual growth, allowing for a greater sphere of influence. Rather than a specific target age, it has been developed with all LGBTQ+ identifying people over the age of eighteen who use online games.

In considering this, we were able to think about what a digital-based, transmedia approach could look like as supporting functions of the game itself as well as its larger purpose: connecting individuals to community, especially in a time of physical distancing. Rather than creating a space, we developed a tool that allows LGBTQ+ people to create their own spaces online.

To understand the feasibility of using Building Bridges as a tool to create a virtual space similar to an in-person game night, we conducted a formal study with players. This included semi-structured interviews with players and reflective feedback forms. Our findings ultimately show that while there is room for growth in terms of game structure, Building Bridges is ultimately successful as a tool for self-reflection and strengthening relationships. Additionally, we've offered recommendations for individuals and organizations on how to better utilize these findings in their own lives and work.

Background

Initial research into agency and adultism led us to consider the LGBTQ+ population, after insights were shared by a project partner about the compounding effects of these concepts within this community that faces added bias and stigma. We realized that this was an area worth exploring and something with potential positive impact. After several Phase 1 interviews, themes surfaced that related back to the original ideas, including a disconnect between young and old LGBTQ+ people and a desire for mentorship that would bring larger connections to community and history. Not only did the participants feel that there was a lack of physical spaces to connect organically with other LGBTQ+ people—spaces that naturally create networks to community and history—they also felt that current online mechanisms had their limits as well.

This expressed need drove us to conduct a general audit of current research, and we found that there was a lack of information on this level as well. Much has been written on the positive effects of intergenerational engagement for older people, but hardly anything is shared through the lens of its effect on younger people, let alone LGBTQ+ populations. What could it mean for young people's sense of agency, identity and belonging to have more opportunities to connect with community members and its history?

The conversations with LGBTQ+ young people led us to ask, how might we bridge this divide and what could be the larger outcomes of such an effort? In the spirit of interdependence, what does it mean for the LGBTQ+ community to have its individual members have space and place to connect and engage? And to expand that, what does it mean for society to have the LGBTQ+ community have these opportunities?

These musings were the inspiration for our vision and mission and were part of the brainstorming process when working with LGBTQ+ young people (18-24) to identify their individual visions of the future. We then facilitated conversation on what it would take to get to those futures. How would we do it? Who needs to be involved? It was here that we started in the direction of creating a game to build that space.

EARLY 2020

Why a game? Informal spaces are where communities often form and grow. Public spaces play a significant role in that, as do private businesses. Coffee shops, music venues, and other "hangouts" where people gather provide the opportunities for consequential connections, a term referring to cultural and social environments that support informal activity and create opportunities to build connections and relationships. These culturally specific spaces are limited for LGBTQ+ people, a frustration that came up repeatedly in our conversations. The effect of this was feeling unmoored—if you do not know where and how to meet others who identify similarly to you, how can you feel grounded in a larger identity?

At the same time, many are exhausted and turned off by formal efforts for "round tables" and "community forums" designed as one-off engagements on isolated issues. These are often built by others, not the community itself. Informal, fun opportunities to connect with others is when we as people are the most open to perspective and connection. Which is why the young people we worked with felt that the spirit of "game night" was the most effective approach. As stated, together we created concepts for questions and structure for playing, trying it out as we went along. This process of engagement and iteration was working nicely until external variables forced us to re-consider our application of the game concept.

COVID-19

We must acknowledge the affect that the coronavirus pandemic, particularly the stay-at-home orders, had on our work. Our deep investment in Building Bridges as a relationship-building tool translated heavily into a face-to-face, group interaction that was no longer possible. Additionally, most participants were overwhelmed by the changes in their communities and their own lives. The shelter-in-place orders further solidified the need for spaces designed for social connection. A need for these spaces exists for all peoples, but especially those part of non-dominant cultures, who face alienation and isolation due to social bias. The pandemic further isolated these populations, forcing most human connection to online platforms.
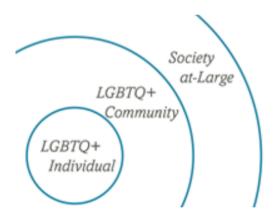
We acknowledged quickly that further engagement in the game's design was no longer realistic, and moved to create a game that, if it could not replace that need for in-person connection, could exist as a tool to alleviate some of the anxiety and isolation many felt. Instead of ending our work prematurely, we decided to move the game and its purpose online, a goal we had held for future phases. We were at a point where we had enough game structure to make this pivot and necessity required the leap. In transitioning from an "in-person game that had an (envisioned) online component," to an "online game with a downloadable DIY paper option for in-person play," we widened our vision to include transmedia engagement as supporting functions to the game itself and its larger purpose, which is that of connecting individuals to community, especially in a time of physical distancing.

One might think the physical-to-virtual transition would be the biggest hurdle when shifting to an online platform, but we found this to translate seamlessly, as the foundation of the game structure had already been designed.

The change that most significantly altered the perception and approach to the game was that, by being online, it was no longer designed specifically for intergenerational purposes —yes, it could still be used for unique engagement between young (<24 years old) and old (>65 years old), but it was now open to any LGBTQ+ person, and any range of people could play together. It could be played with a group of people with very nominal age differences. What did that mean for the framing of questions? And how did that change the game's structure? We had to test it and find out. And we had to build it in order to test it.

The most relevant changes we have made have been:

- Building Bridges is an online game first and in-person second.
- The game can be printed out and played at home, but that is not the focus.
- Opening the location and age of LGBTQ+ people
- Engaging people on the co-designed questions via Twitter

We were also keenly aware of the digital divide created by the move to a virtual environment, knowing that not everyone has the capability to access it. While we were limited in what we could do to overcome that gap, we have been able to increase accessibility by making the game accessible for smartphones and tablets, as well as creating a DIY downloadable "print and play" version, for those who can access the internet but may not have the capability to navigate the game online, or who simply would rather play the game with others in-person.

Purpose of Formal Research

The creation Building Bridges was inspired by the sociocultural relevance of game nights, and the connection and relationship-building that this sort of informal environment can achieve. With the effects of Covid-19 exacerbating an already expressed need for organic spaces that act as social hubs for interaction, mentorship, and community for LGBTQ+ people, we wanted to now know if the Building Bridges game was successful as a tool for creating a virtual space to connect and if having this space online helped emotionally during times of physical distancing. This topic was chosen because LGBTQ+ people have shared in social media spaces their feelings of anxiety, depression, and fear due to the social isolation caused by COVID-19.

PHASE 2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean for LGBTQ+ people to connect through the online game Building Bridges when their connection is limited to online?
2. How can the online game Building Bridges build relationships amongst LGBTQ+ people during times of physical distancing?
3. Who benefits from playing the online game Building Bridges?

This phase, like the earlier, is filtered through the lens of our immediate goal in creating a relevant LGBTQ+ game that individuals can interact through, as well as our broader goal of exploring how these individual connections can strengthen larger community infrastructure.

Participants in this phase of research had to have online access and the capability to use a virtual game board as well as use an audio/video connection like Discord or Zoom. Once the game was played, we scheduled a brief interview with them asking eight questions, including:

1. How would you describe the experience?
2. Can you describe one interesting interaction you had?
3. What did you learn about yourself?
4. How would you change the game?

Methodology

Building Bridges was born out of research initially conducted surrounding LGBTQ+ community dynamics. Phase 1 of our research involved connecting with community members via flyers, social media, and directly with Chicago-based LGBTQ+ community and student organizations. Through individual sessions and larger focus groups, we listened to conversations grow from a series of prompts designed to explore how members of the LGBTQ+ community engaged both online and offline with friends and family, as well as media and its sources. These conversations were recorded with approval by participants and kept confidential through permissions-based storage.

Through this research, we began working with a group of young adults from Columbia College Chicago to co-create a designed engagement for LGBTQ+ people. This quickly grew into the first iterations of the Building Bridges game and involved building questions to identify areas of social and historical interest. Alpha versions of the game were tested amongst the group. What was the right balance of fun and purpose?

These tests were informed by human-centered design theory and our commitment as researchers to have an experience created by and for LGBTQ+ people.

Phase 2 began after an online version of the game was developed. We reached out via email to previous participants as well as state and national organizations for feedback. Getting user feedback was essential in our continued work developing a relevant tool for LGBTQ+ people. Two qualitative research tools were used in this later, more formal research: semi-structured interviews and reflective, anonymized online feedback forms. We conducted interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals who played the online game with at least one other person and, with their permission, recorded their feedback. As with before, these interviews were kept confidential through use of permissions-based storage. Because the interviews could touch on sensitive subjects, we supplied information about processing emotions from several national organizations at the end of these interviews.

These methods were chosen as being the best for maintaining our larger goal of co-creating, to the best of our ability, the game within the community.

Feedback and Findings

Our findings can be broken down into 1) thought-process, or how the participant player was thinking through interactions and expectations from beginning to end; 2) gameplay, or how the participant player engaged in the game structure; 3) group dynamics, or how the participant player perceived the engagement between all players; and 4) areas for improvement, or pain points experienced throughout the entire process.

Players shared their experiences with Building Bridges as a tool for self-reflection. Some discussed their experience with a new approach to gameplay, with some offering suggestions for improvement. Many players discussed group dynamics, especially the discomfort that might come from sharing intimate stories and the chance to recontextualize those stories. Finally, players expressed confusion around technical aspects of the play and suggested areas of improvement.

VALIDATIONS

Players found that their thought-process was changed after experiencing the online game Building Bridges. Players initially said that they came in with no expectations, but later noted that they had preconceptions of how the game would differ from in-person games and what they would be able to get out of it. Despite having relationship-building at its core, Building Bridges also worked as a tool for personal development, an outcome not directly part of the research although tied to the larger vision of relation-building experiences as methods of developing individual agency. Players noted that they learned more about themselves and were able to contextualize their experiences through talking about them.

Many players shared common topics and responses to conversations during the game. Players reported sharing stories and memories they had never shared before, and many conversations lasted over half an hour. A common experience was players discussing experiences in which they did not have the proper language to describe their feelings, and only now were they able to look back and put words to their experience.

STRUGGLES

There was a common thread regarding group dynamics throughout each interview. Players shared the experience of playing in their groups and the varying levels of discomfort that came from sharing personal thoughts with them. Both those who played with close friends and those who played with acquaintances could not imagine playing with strangers. It was noted that the game's immediate dive into sharing possibly sensitive experiences threw players off at first but was energetically engaged in once they adjusted to it.

Players noted some struggles in terms of gameplay, stemming from structural issues, and offered some suggestions for improvement. Among the most common was the need for higher or clearer "stakes"— an element discussed throughout development. Players noted that there was little motivation to work together after one player made it to the end and suggested that presenting a losing scenario could encourage players to complete the game.

Finally, players noted areas for improvement, including technical difficulty and general confusion. Set up proved to be the most challenging part of the process. Some noted difficulty learning to use the platform, while others had not expected that they would need to create an account to access Building Bridges. One player had trouble with some game rules, namely understanding the purpose of a specific card. Overall, players struggled more with the platform that the game itself.

Conclusions

The ability to have moments and environments to "contextualize experiences and be able to talk about them" is the foundation of self-discovery and the bedrock of community identity. In this regard, Building Bridges does indeed seem to offer that platform.

Our research shows that accessing and using a game like Building Bridges that is specifically designed for LGBTQ+ people is a welcomed opportunity to socialize, especially as fewer organic spaces to develop and build on conversation and camaraderie are available. The added stress of lost in-person engagement and other ramifications of quarantining made the platform even more vital, as it differed from other social media outlets in approach and form—rather than post a written statement and asynchronously receive comments on it, participants playing Building Bridges were able to talk "face-to-face," in real-time, about experiences and hear immediate reaction and support via similar experiences shared by other players. Additionally, they were able to approach these topics indirectly through the process of a voluntary game, alleviating undue pressure that can come with formal, directed engagements.

It was found that Individuals who took part in interviews benefited from reflection on their own experiences of social isolation as well as their relationship to and as part of the LGBTQ+ community, contextualizing their experiences as simultaneously personal and communal. The value of "seeing yourself in others" can reduce feelings of isolation and depression. In reflecting on their experiences and how that might relate to the LGBTQ+ community, the game provides space to consider what role the participant currently "plays" in the community, and how that role could be different.

As such, the LGBTQ+ community benefits by having a specific online game space, like Building Bridges, to gather and converse in a casual, low-stakes setting that allows for understanding how others are experiencing the community, building trust, and strengthening networked social infrastructure. With more opportunities to gather and engage in these group dynamics, the community is better positioned for its own 'self' reflection and to advocate for its members within a larger cultural setting in which they are a non-dominant population group.

It's in this context that society benefits. The knowledge that there is value in online games like Building Bridges that offer specific communities (in this case, LGBTQ+) inclusive opportunities to express, engage, and experience relationship-building in informal ways means that there is a realistic and viable option for essential, consequential connections to be developed, despite current limitations to physical and virtual social spaces.

As was noted in our findings, the adjustment to sharing personal experiences and thoughts caused some to question whether they would feel comfortable playing the game with those whom they do not know. This brings up important considerations regarding Building Bridges' applicability and use: How do different group dynamics serve distinct functions in community-building and how does that change the purpose of a game like Building Bridges that is designed for engagement. It may have different uses depending on the dynamic of those playing it.

Recommendations

In listening to participant feedback, expanding the game's structure to include more of an experience of "stakes" must be part of future research if we are to create a truly relevant game that can be utilized to its full potential as an informal mechanism for community-building. This, as with all our research, will be done in cooperation with LGBTQ+ community members.

The game has already been updated to address the participant feedback regarding discomfort in playing with casual acquaintances or strangers. While the card deck is populated at random with questions that vary in intensity, we have added structure to the game by creating an introductory first round of "blue" cards, which represent the least intense questions. This offers the opportunity for players to get comfortable with the game and with each other.

We currently have an anonymous form on the game site for players to share suggestions and feedback. This is so we can continue to have the game be co-created, but it is also to ensure we are not overlooking inclusion and access. Our concern for accessibility drives us to expand the ways in which community members can play and engage. This includes:

- Creating a free downloadable "print and play" version of the game that is also available in large print.
- While the game is tablet- and smartphone-friendly (allowing for more ways to participate) we are planning to optimize the game for screen readers, which will give those with limited vision the opportunity to participate

- Having a website that acts as a hub for participants to connect to the game platform (Tabletopia), the social media engagement, the print and play, as well as engage with a site-specific interactive community map that allows them to log in and connect with other LGBTQ+ members in answering the community-built game questions. By logging an answer to a game question, a person can then see how/what other people share for that same question.

Because of the game's positive and constructive ability to create a social setting and engagement that encourages community, we envision these steps as part of creating a transmedia platform that will more fully serve the LGBTQ+ community.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PERSONAL USE

Individuals, such as those represented in our research, can play the game with family and friends as part of a traditional game night as 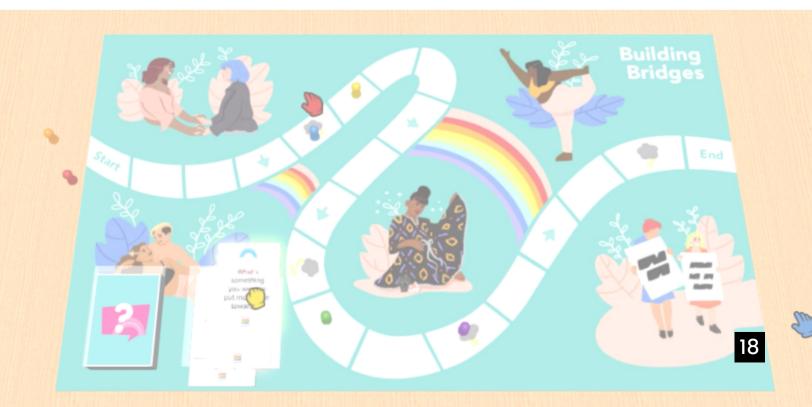well as an intentional bonding activity. Family, for many in the community, is who we make it. Anyone, of any age, can play Building Bridges, and it is designed so that while playing virtually is an option, it is not the only option.

Playing together on one computer, in-person, is possible using Tabletopia's "hot seat" option. One participant suggested that it could be a tool for families to explore how to best support a family member, though no research has been done on this. No matter the collected group a person brings together, playing Building Bridges will deepen the connections between the players.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL USE

LGBTQ+ organizations, student organizations, community groups and others can use these findings to create more online opportunities for connection and relationship building. By incorporating the game into their own programming, they create valuable space that encourages conversation and thought sharing, providing the organization an opportunity to learn more deeply about their members and what motivates them. In turn, organizations can better serve these members through this understanding.

One way to do this is for an organization to host or sponsor a weekly digital "game night," where a staff person or volunteer hosts the game on Tabletopia and emails invites to interested members. Whether used for intergenerational or for general relationship-building, Building Bridges provides a proven platform to explore LGBTQ+ history, identity, and community that fits alongside many organization goals.

Appendix

BIOGRAPHIES

Serene Arena (She/Her/Hers)

Primary Investigator, Designer

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Serene is a visual strategist, designer, and educator with 15+ years of experience working with social impact organizations and teaching design.

Dean Strauss (He/Him/His)

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Dean Strauss is a media coordinator, disability educator, and perpetual student. Through his educational work he has facilitated workshops on disability justice, queer history, media representation, and the intersections of queerness and disability.