

Campaign against online video-game bullies flops

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It seemed like a killer idea: combat sexist harassment in online video games by unleashing hit squads of talented female players to slay the bullies.

But after marketing agency FCB Chicago launched "Bully Hunters" last week with a splashy livestream, the campaign was mocked by gamers, criticized by harassment experts and disowned by the companies it had enlisted as supporters. Within days, the agency shut it down.

What went wrong?

According to the agency, the demise of Bully Hunters was a case of good-intentioned naivete colliding with the idiosyncratic, often-aggressive world of online gaming. Others, though, say it was the result of cynical opportunism that exacerbated the problem the marketers were trying to solve.

Fighting harassment "is a real, honest-to-God issue which unfortunately now has been tainted by this insincere, totally superficial effort," said Rebecca Rothschild, a Chicago gamer and writer who has endured online bullying. "It bothered me on a lot of levels."

Liz Taylor, chief creative officer of FCB Chicago, said Bully Hunters was a pro bono project for the agency, akin to campaigns it has done on handgun violence, colon cancer and Chicago's bid for the second Amazon headquarters.

Researchers have established that in-game harassment is a pervasive problem, and Taylor said she has personal experience with it: Her teenage daughter endured online harassment so upsetting that she no longer enjoys gaming.

"There were a lot of people in the agency who had a passion around trying to make the gaming environment a safer, more inclusive place for everyone," she said.

But one thing they didn't have was experience. Keisha Howard, founder of a female-centric [video game](#) consultancy and event organizer called Sugar Gamers, said that was evident when she talked with FCB Chicago about the concept.

She said she was bothered by the idea that girls and women need saviors to protect them from gaming bullies. She also was concerned about the title FCB Chicago focused on—Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, or CS:GO, a popular first-person shooter game that is notoriously complex.

"They went for the biggest bear and didn't do their research on the game," Howard said. "It was easily torn apart by hard-core gamers who absolutely understand that title."

FCB said the campaign wasn't a marketing opportunity for brands, but several companies and organizations still lent their support, including SteelSeries, a Chicago-based maker of gaming accessories, and the Chicago chapter of the National Organization for Women.

On April 12, the agency launched Bully Hunters with a livestream from Chicago's Ignite Gaming Lounge. It began with a montage of vicious insults recorded during games, followed by a woman's voice intoning over a countdown: "This ends in three, two"

The set featured "casual gamers" playing CS:GO on computers, while across the room, the "Bully Hunters" waited to enter the fray. An online tool was supposed to summon them into the game, where they would track down and eliminate bullies, leaving a calling card in the chat: "Harassment is not a game."

The livestream included two purported episodes of harassment: In each, a voice that sounded like it belonged to the same man made vulgar, sexist and threatening remarks to female players, only to be dispatched by a Bully Hunter.

The action seemed artificial to veteran CS:GO players, who accurately called it out as fake. One of the livestream's hosts, Nati Casanova, a popular gamer who goes by the handle ZombiUnicorn, later said she flubbed a scripted line meant to emphasize that the encounters were staged.

"We would 100 percent agree that that key message didn't come across," Taylor said. "Our intent was never to mislead anyone. It was to point out this is what could happen in the real world."

But the damage was done. Online sleuths, looking up gamer profiles, revealed that a victim and a Bully Hunter appeared to be the same person. Others picked apart the statistics on harassment presented during the livestream.

PewDiePie, a YouTuber who is the biggest celebrity in gaming, was particularly unsparing. In a video viewed more than 3.5 million times, he blasted the organizers and the participating companies, saying they were exploiting a serious problem to sell gear.

"You did more harm than good here, clearly," he said. "This is so idiotic that no one is going to take harassment seriously. That's how stupid it is."

So don't pretend that you took a step forward; this is taking a step back."

The companies quickly put up statements distancing themselves from Bully Hunters. SteelSeries said its only role was to donate equipment and "support the call for positive change" and that it hadn't been involved in executing the campaign.

The only group that stood by the effort was Chicago NOW. Paloma Delgadillo, the chapter's president, said she wasn't surprised by the blowback but rejected the idea that it harmed the anti-harassment movement.

"As an activist, you never have perfect tools in your toolbox," she said. "I'm of the opinion that if there's a problem, we always need to be looking for a solution. If it doesn't work, it's OK. Hopefully this brings attention to it."

Jesse Fox, an Ohio State University professor who has studied sexist behavior in video games, said Bully Hunters relied on a faulty premise—that harassers can be brought to heel through chastening defeat.

"We know from aggression studies in video games that when they get more frustrated they get angrier, and they're more likely to ([bully](#))," she said. "When someone comes in and wipes the floor with you, you're not going to be amenable to hearing the message."

She said more productive approaches would involve developing online tools to ban the most toxic offenders, and encouraging players to tamp down harassment the moment it takes place, thus denying trolls the validation they crave.

After the barrage of criticism, FCB Chicago took down Bully Hunters'

website and social media accounts. All that remains are YouTube copies of the livestream and hundreds of blistering critiques.

Taylor said while the agency is still processing the hard lessons of the campaign, it is still committed to promoting an anti-[harassment](#) movement among gamers.

"I hope people understand we did this to try to make the world a better and more inclusive place," she said. "That is what is so gut-wrenching and heartbreaking about where it is right now."

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