



Call of Duty Companion App: Combating Toxicity

Brief

Activision's Call of Duty Companion App team approached our classroom for Interaction Design and challenged students to consider how can Call of Duty companion app create social features that keep players engaged with the game and each other.

Problem

The problem that keeps players, especially female players away from being socially engaged with the app is the toxic culture that prevails in the Call of Duty player community.

Client	Activision
My Main Role	User Research, UI Design
Type	Solo Project
Tools	Figma, Premiere Pro
Timeline	8 Weeks

Solution

The concept I proposed to this problem includes suggestions that would involve organizational change at Activision, as well as a range of considerations when designing a companion app. The solution to a systematic problem involves a solution that could be implemented at the level of the companion app: making it more accessible to both active and inactive players, and advertising of career opportunities within Activision form within the Companion app.

Concept Video

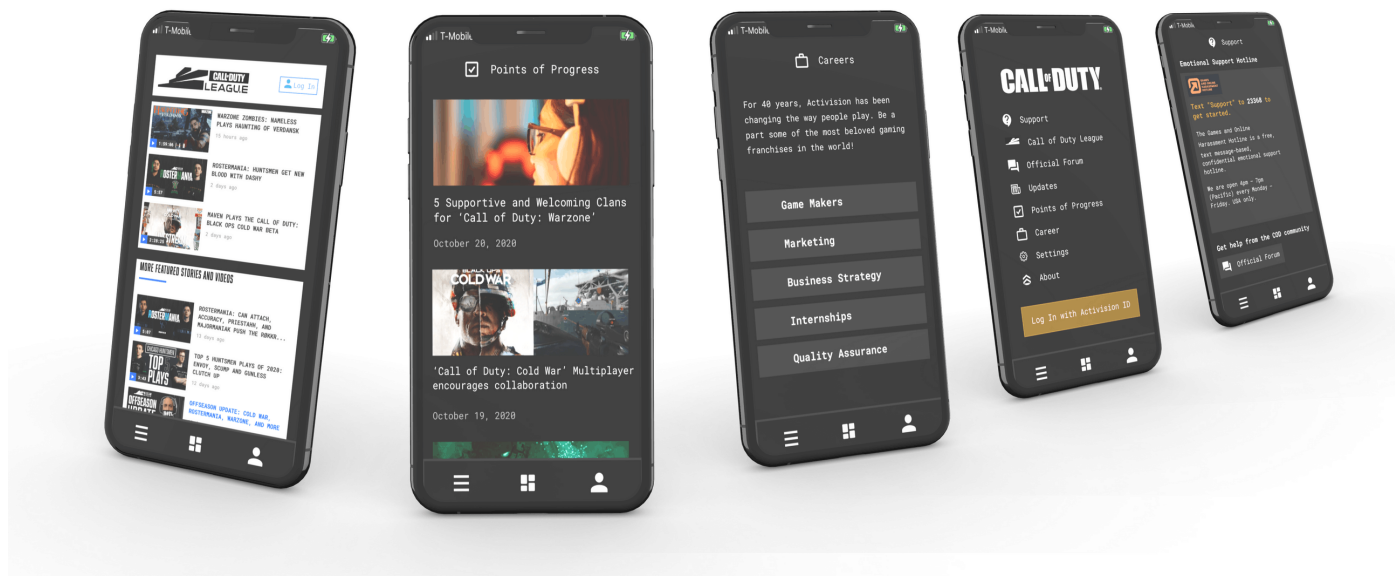
The final submission to show the concept is a video.

The goal of this concept video is to highlight the need for top-down progress pushing towards a more equal future from Activision, and outline some tangible, small steps the Call of Duty companion app could do to help in this endeavor.

COD Companion App for Inclusive and Accessible Culture



Concept Graphics



0. The Problem

The problem that keeps players, especially female players away from being socially engaged with the app is the toxic culture that prevails in the Call of Duty player community.

Stakeholder Interview - Summary

In order to define the problem, my class conducted an interview with Drew and Mark, who work in Activision's user experience team focusing on the companion companion app. Mark is involved in the design of the companion app, and is the head of a team of mobile designers and front-end developers for the MyCOD site. Drew has been working in the Consumer Tech Design Team at Activision.

"How can we create something that exists in the app that we own?"

"Think about the ways it could go wrong"

"The main goal of the COD companion app is to create more engagement."

"Our core audiences are leaning into play, give rewards, and social features"

Domain Expert Interviews

An interview with domain experts, two men who work in game industry also informed the research section of the project.

"The companion app solves a company problem, not a user problem"

"Best in the Genre"

Product Review

I played CoD as part of a product review process and documented my experience.

my CoD experience

Week 1

I thought I wouldn't like this game, since the only FPS game I played before was resistance on PS3, which was shooting aliens. So shooting people seems too much. However when you think of it, it was similarly gore-y so it's not really that different because the more I play this game, the more I stop seeing the people as "people" but more as robots of other players because they are all the same, and the characters revive after each game, there is not a sadness associated with your favorite character dying in a TV series. What turns me off still about the aesthetic of the game is that it's just too real, and it can be depressing because it makes me think of war in real life. I'm sad every time I see the poor robots get dropped from the plane because they are all going to die. That being said, I did actually enjoy playing it with other classmates because we can plan strategies together and it could be very collaborative. The experience of getting the game to work is not great because I have to use a PC. It took me months to get a PC ready and actually install the game.

For some reason this game takes days to download. And then on-boarding of trying to get an account is also not the best. It was fairly confusing as there is the Blizzard account, and there are other accounts, so I don't actually know what I was doing I just wanted it to be done. There were so many pages of text and agreements. The game itself is a much better experience than getting the game to work. Within the game, there are three trials that I can do to learn how to play the game, but they were not sufficient in learning how to play the game. I did not understand at all what was going on the first time I played the battle Royale. However, the voice guide and details in the game made it kind of okay to figure out what is going on. The game works fine and the details of the buildings etc in the map are beautiful.

Week 2

I played COD with Armel and Porfirio. I just wanted a break so I logged on to COD. I see that Armel is online on Discord, so I sent him a message to join. I wanted to play some mini games to practice shooting while waiting for Armel because I just wanted to feel more “flow” instead of getting a solo Warzone game started because I might get too focused and not see that Armel is ready to join. I tried to find the mini games and they are gone! The mini games are not there anymore because it was a summer event... now I didn't know what to do so I started looking at the guns in the loadout, but am getting very confused. I used to use the mini games to try out the different guns to see what they do, but now I'm just reading some statistics that mean nothing to me. Once Armel came online, Portfolio came along too. I joined the team and played a really fun game together. I think we did really well and were able to collaborate even though Porfilio didn't have a functioning mic.

Week 3

This week I went to visit Chase and I played COD on the playstation with him. It is much harder to play COD on playstation because I haven't touched a playstation controller in 10 years. I got used to it pretty quickly, but I still couldn't manage to do any damage in the game. Chase and Christian did much better in the game than I did. I think it's because I don't actively practice doing it very much. We turned off the voice chat in the playstation immediately after we went in since it was just too much chaos to hear anything useful.

Week 4

This week I played COD on mobile. I downloaded the COD game mobile, and opened it up. It took a minute to download onto my android pixel 1 phone which is an old phone, however it opened up quickly. Once I'm in the game, I'm immediately in an onboarding tutorial. The tutorial was really well made and I understood immediately what to do. The game is more like multiplayer of 5 v 5 like on playstation. I liked onboarding a lot and I even learned things I could use in the PC game. However, the multiplayer game is really easy, I guess it's because I was matched with other people who are very low-level like me. It was not very satisfying to win since I was not playing with skilled players.

Secondary Research

For secondary research, I wanted to understand why women do not play Call of Duty (CoD) as much as men. I surveyed the existing literature on non-male players' experience in gaming.

Di_Xu_Secondary_Research : Sheet1			
Author	Year	Main point	Why would women not play COD?
Jocoy et el.	2012	direct, face-to-face social interaction on responding to violent and nonviolent video game play do not support GAM. It suggests that: Video games might facilitate social interactions and have positive outcomes even if the game is violent.	
Flores	2020		
Meg Jayanth	2014	According to a UK study in 2014, majority of gaming audience is made of women. This percentage has been growing over the years. However the male gamer stereotype persists. The appeal of mobile games lies in accessibility: it allows players to be any gender or sexual orientation.	Being told over and over that "proper" gam women. Small amount of female protagon women working in game industry is shock game designers, and 3% of programmers
Lucas, K., & Sherry, J. L.	2004		
Garry Crawford	2008	there is an increasing awareness of the need to include an understanding of the role and importance of gaming within its social setting, such as how people talk about games with friends and family, how they fit into our leisure patterns and everyday lives, and how they can inform some people's identity and sense of who they are (Crawford and Rutter 2007).it is impossible to categorize this as either wholly "good" or "bad." Video games are often violent and can be sexist, homophobic, and racist—as can any media form, such as film, music, and literature. However, video games are also an important industry; they allow people to relax, and can be a source of conversation and identity for many.	Women's leisure time is more restricted a games continue to be marketed towards n "masculine" themes. Gaming machine pos belonging to women.
Nick Yee	2017	The frequent saying that 50% of gamers are women is not accurate. Using an online survey, 2over 270, 000 gamers took the survey worldwide to find out the gender breakdown of video game genres and 12 motivations were measured. Tactical shooter and sports game players are least likely to be female. The percentage of gamers in each genre varies from 2% to 70%, making an overall statistic for all gamers misleading and confusing.	Game dev still operate under the assumpt their audience are women. Genres with m emphasize completion and fantasy (top 2 women). Genres for men emphasize comp destruction (top 2 motivators for men). Ga as much tend to not have female protagon with strangers online, and have a lot of rap which lead to motion sickness. Low female in certain genres may be a historical artifa andpresentation have been bundled toget
			This means that men's motivations are mc harder to cover, whereas it's easier to cov among female gamers. So for example, th men account for just a little over a third of

Using the result of a self-selected online survey, researchers compared the primary motivations of different demographic segments

36.2%), whereas the top 3 for women cover female gamers (at 47.7%). It may be an artifact of games marketed to women, a self-fulfilling prophecy, or a genuine difference in how men and women play in general.

Secondary Research - Summary

Viscious Cycle

Since the marketing of video games towards boys in the 90's, playing video games became a gender identity for males. When girls and women played video games, they experience misalignment of their actions and their gender identity. This led to fewer girls playing video games than boys. Because of this, fewer women went into the game industry than men. This led to the creation of video games that appeal more to men, and a culture that tolerates blatant sexism and other types of toxicity. The cycle starts again with more boys play video games than girls.

Communication

The in-game communication and the way the game provides feedback & rewards pushes players towards toxicity.

Mismarketing

The lack of diversity in games marketed to women in comparison to the vast market of different gaming styles marketed to men is indicative of how the industry (mis)understands women.

User Interviews

I interviewed two women with different levels of experience of CoD.

Interview Script

What to learn:

What do women players think of Call of Duty?
What drives non-males away from Call of Duty?
What would make women want to play Call of Duty?
What do women think of gaming?
Where do women find community in gaming and keep updated?
What motivates women to play games?
How do women find out about what to play?
What do women want to do on mobile that would relate to the games they play?
producer at riot games legends on rune terra.

1. Introduction, Context Setting, Rules

How are you doing today? Thank you for taking time doing this with me today. This interview is going to last around 15-30 minutes. You can stop at any point. Do I have permission to record for my own notes?

2. Background Questions

What types of games do you play? (2)
Could you describe to me a day when you would play ____ (game).
(Same but for another game).
How do you find out about new games that you want to play?
Do you play games with other people?
(if yes) How do you find people to play games with you?
(if no) Why not?
Why do you play games?
How do you improve your skills in a game?

3. Specific Questions

What comes to mind when you think of female gamers?
What comes to mind when you think of Call of Duty?
Have you played Call of Duty before?
(If have) What do you like about it, and not like about Call of Duty?
(if not have) Who do you think would play Call of Duty?
What changes need to happen for you to want to play Call of Duty?
Are you aware of the companion app?
Who do you think the companion app is for?
What would make you purchase a new game?

Do you ever spend money in a game?
What type of things would you spend money on?

User Interviews - Persona

	Name	JP
	Age:	26-35
	Hours per week:	15 hours of video games playing per week
	Genres:	RPG (Role play game), RTS (Real time strategy), story-based games
	Identity:	Gamer
Motivation	"I grew up playing video games." Looking for social experiences with long term friends, being challenged in strategy and skills. Watching ESports to feel excitement as in regular sports.	
Frustrations	Seeing these games that literally glorify and gamify the horror and the real violence of [war] just makes it kind of cheap.	
Ideal Experience	"And we've curated a friend group that's very much like no one's a creep or like a gatekeeper. So it sort of doesn't matter. We have, ah, a broad range of gender identities in the group."	
Quote	"No, make room for me. I want to be here. You have to let me in and let me do these things"	

Name	SD
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Age: 18-25
Hours per week: 2 hours of video games playing per week
Genres: mobile games, board games, puzzles
Identity: Non-Gamer

Motivation

"I do not like sitting down and doing nothing. If we were just not doing anything, then I'm gonna want to play. I want to keep busy" She is motivated by completion, and social interactions.

Frustrations

I don't like to play [Call of Duty] a lot just cuz like I said I do like problem solving, but the thing that ... The only reason I play call of duty is for the community and not as much for the game.

Ideal Experience

Playing when she has time away from school; and playing with friends.

Quote

"Before getting into it [Call of Duty] I read about the community but then it seemed like something separate, and not for me, and it's just there and not for me. Now it seems a lot more inclusive. I would totally consider the people I talk to when I play those games... a friend."

User Interviews - Notes



User Interviews - Summary

Young and new player

"Before getting into it I read about the community but then it seemed like something separate, and not for me, and it's just there and not for me. Now it seems a lot more inclusive. I would totally consider the people I talk to when I play those games... a friend"

Experienced female player

"And then all of a sudden as a teenager. It is like this gatekeeping is the word usually used for it, like: "Oh, you're not really a nerd. You just do it for boys' attention". which is like such a bizarre and egotistical thing like, I just want to be sweaty and play video games. Why would I think that would be

Long time male player

appealing to anyone. Um, and why would I be attempting to entice you?"
The culture around it is pretty toxic, just the people. I'm pretty sure I'm generalizing but my experience with people who play COD is that they are really really serious about it, if you mess up their game they will curse you out, and they will make fun of you if you like a certain gun or something.

Insight

A toxic community decreases engagement from potential new players, experienced players that are both male and female. In order to create high engagement of the companion App, we can address the root of the problem by creating ways to promote progress, and to lead by example.

Competitive Analysis

Looking at other companion apps on the market. Made in collaboration with Gaby.

Gaby_Di_Competitive_Analysis : Sheet1					
	Call of Duty	Destiny Companion	Star Wars: Battlefront Companion	Zwift	HO
Discoverability				Very easy. On the Zwift website they have a big picture of the app on the phone together with the computer that you play Zwift with standing next to each other. The app is advertised together with the game itself as a feature. However, if you install the zwift app in the play store, it's actually the	I have no i

	Easy if you search COD on browser. Zero ads within the game itself	Easy. Displayed prominently at the bottom in the Destiny website.	No idea	game itself. You have to know to search for Zwift companion app to find the companion app. For some reason the companion app is a different color than the game app, making it confusing.	
Main purpose of the app	Big on stats, small social features (liking an update from a friend) Getting players to join clan and the clan moving together.	Forum connecting players. Sharing creations. See news of what's coming up in the game.	stats, progression and engage players to continue earning points even when they are not in front of a PC	Communicating with other players while playing the game.	Hold daily, games for
User Interface	Monochromatic color scheme makes everything blend together. Confusing IA. Confusing design in general.	Easy and simple. User still able to access information without signing up or signing in. After signing in, you can see more specific content about playing the game such as joining clans, firearms, and seeing the stats of friends.	Intuitive and clean interface.		Clean and
Onboarding	No tutorials or any onboarding. As a beginner there is no tutorial or explanation.	Not much onboarding but the interface is easy enough to understand because it matches other apps such as discord/slack. After signing in it is still easy to get around.	Guided by tutorials. The card game has a VERY long tutorial, but it's needed. Users reviewed the game as "challenging, but the challenges are fun and put my old brain to work"	several screens at the beginning to onboard showing how you can connect your app and what you can do with it.	
# of downloads on app store	134k #31 in utilities 4.8 rating app store	256K + on Google Play store 4.4/5 rating	8.2k	500K+ on Google Play store, 4.6/5 rating	133k #81 i ratings app

Sheet1

Heuristic Analysis

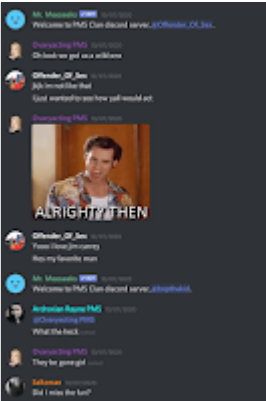

Examining the heuristics of the companion App. Made in collaboration with Gaby.


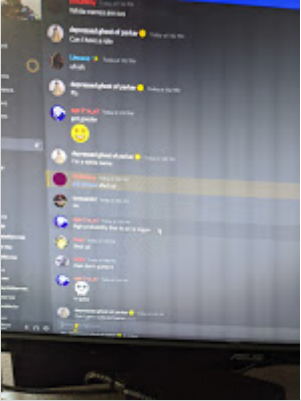
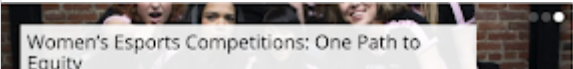
Insight

The companion app use complicated and specialized language that maybe alienating for a beginner to experience. It does not show enough consideration with accessibility in its design.

Netnography

Netnography is a simplified version of ethnography research method aimed at exploring and documenting online consumer culture. I examined several sources of online communities for CoD gamers: Disocrd, Reddit, and Blogs.

Netnography : Di				
#	Screenshot	Link	Source	
	<i>Take a screenshot of an interesting comment or post that represents a relevant conversation and behavior; insert it in the cell</i>	<i>Insert the link of the entire conversation or post from which you took the screenshot</i>	<i>Insert the source from which you took the screenshot; write down the channel and the specific group</i>	<i>V fi tl</i>
1		https://www.pmsclan.com/	PMS Clan. PMS Clan is a video game community committed to breaking down walls, stereotypes, and boundaries for women in gaming.	
				

2		https://techcrunch.com/2014/11/19/mattel-pulls-sexist-barbie-book-i-can-be-a-computer-engineer-off-amazon/	TechCrunch	B
3		https://discord.gg/callofduty	Call of Duty is a first-person shooter video game series developed by Treyarch, Infinity Ward, and Sledgehammer Games and published by Activision. This server is a developer-recognized community focused on the franchise.	C
				

Di

Insight

Pockets of progress exist in the Call of Duty online community. Women who play Call of Duty have banded together to create spaces that are welcoming and supportive. These spaces are great communities not just for women, but for players who identify as other genders as well because the culture in these communities encourages prosocial behaviors, and the rules in place filter out antisocial behaviors in their community members.

1. Design Question

How might we allow marginalized groups of players have a better experience in Call of Duty game and have it manifested in the companion app?

2. Prototype

Wireframing

I wanted to offer an arrange of concepts address the same design question to Activision to consider. I started by creating Wireframes of what that might look like, and went on to make more detailed screens.

Screens

I wanted to offer an arrange of concepts address the same design question to Activision to consider. I started by creating Wireframes of what that might look like, and went on to make more detailed screens.

Log In Page: ability to access without logging in

Users should be able to access many functions of the Call of Duty app before logging in. In this app, players and non-players alike would be able to engage with Call of Duty's marketing.

Accessible Participation with ESports

The inclusion and highlight of ESports with Call of Duty will hopefully increase the accessibility of the game. Players who previously played can still enjoy the game even if they cannot play anymore.

Highlight Points of Progress

Through marketing efforts that highlight the points of progress in the Call of Duty community makes it clear that Activision is taking a stance against toxicity. Promoting the communities that support players and cultivate a safe and fun gaming atmosphere for all players.

Recruitment for Careers in Game

One root cause of toxic community in gaming is the lack of diversity in the hiring process of gaming companies. Many game developers still think women do not play games. This is a misconception. Creating a platform for hiring that is transparent and easy to use will help.

Offer Support and Moderation

Support system already exists for gamers. Call of Duty companion app could highlight these resources, making them easily accessible.

Blocking Players

The easiest thing that makes the social experience better for women and minorities is to create a blocking feature.

3. Reflection

Scope of project

With feedback from stakeholders, I understood that some of the concepts I proposed were unfortunately not within the purpose of the companion app, and needs to be more an initiative from the Activision company than the companion app in terms of implementation. However, the support for female gamers is something that is being discussed.

Discover remains a question

Assuming the concepts I've shown here allow a better experience for female gamers, I did not outline how these gamers would discover the app. It is useless to have great content within an app if the users are not able to discover the app itself in the first place. In going forward with this project, I will consider outlining the journey of a specific user, and solving the problems of discover, use, and loyalty along the way.

Valuable learning experience

The process of research and understanding the problem of the experience of marginalized groups in gaming is a sobering experience. From the stories I've heard, the articles I read, the situation is much more dreadful than I previously thought. So many of these stories had my blood boiling. I can see how some designers might be scared off from tackling this problem, because it seems so tangled, and seems more like a social issue than a design issue, without clean, straightforward answers to solve it. However, I think design problems are intimately connected with social problems. We cannot responsibly talk about design without addressing ethics, and social consequences of these designs. Problems should not be ignored just because they are difficult to solve. The players have been telling us about their experiences for a long time and voicing their concerns very loudly, but so many have refused to listen. If there are designers and researcher in the room will not advocate for the players who are marginalized by the community of current player of our product, then who will?



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