

# In the Stand Against Sexism, SXSW Falls Down

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In its attempt to avoid so-called “security issues” at its 2016 conference, South by Southwest (SXSW) Interactive has wound up stepping into deeper and wider trouble than it had originally feared. The misstep by the Austin festival that bills itself as “An incubator of cutting-edge technologies and digital creativity...” , a conference that pays “...strong attention to diversity...” , and which boasted more than 33,000 participants from 86 countries in 2015; has led to accusations of [hypocrisy](#), [misogyny](#), and outright [cowardice](#) from a growing multitude in the tech industry. [Buzzfeed](#), [Vox Media](#), and numerous other participants have announced that they will boycott the conference if SXSW fails to correct its blunder.

So what did SXSW do to make everyone so mad?

The controversy revolves around two discussion panels that were scheduled for the conference. Both panels were canceled earlier this week due to “threats of on-site violence,” according to representatives of SXSW, though no particular “threat” was ever cited.

Let’s call it #PanelGate.

One panel, called [Level Up: Overcoming Harassment in Games](#); featured speakers Caroline Sindors of IBM Watson, Katherine Cross of the CUNY Graduate Center and a writer for Gamasutra, and Randi Harper of the Online Abuse Prevention Initiative. From the title and the identities and positions held by the speakers, it is obvious what the panel was about: the harassment of women in the gaming industry.

The other panel involved, entitled *SavePoint: A Discussion on the Gaming Community* , featured Perry Jones of the Open Gaming Society as moderator and adult film actress Mercedes Carrera, game developer Nick Robalik, and Journalist Lynn Walsh as panelists. The title of the panel seemed innocuous enough: just a “discussion of the gaming community.”

No big deal, right? Just two panels discussing their concerns and issues; audience members asking questions, panelists craning their necks to emit serious tones into microphones perched on table stands, and all the usual dry drowsy panel stuff, right?

Well, not really.

It turns out that there has been a wee bit of “history” between the members of the two panels and a couple of the groups they represent ostensibly and, as many claim, covertly.

Though neither panel mentioned the term “GamerGate” in their proposals submitted to the conference, Sindors, Cross, and Harper have all suffered online harassment and threats of violence from the loosely knit “#hashtag” movement due to their outspoken views supporting gender and racial equality in the gaming community and their direct criticism of GG. They could all be spokespersons for #1ReasonWhy, a hashtag started by and about women working in the tech industry. Sindors’s harassment reached the real world level in April of this year when someone, supposedly with GG, called in a fake report of an active shooter at her mother’s home. This led to the arrival of the local SWAT team. Luckily, no harm came to Sindors’s mother or anyone else. GG is also believed to be behind terroristic threats against SpaceKat’s Brianna Wu and culture critic and founder of *Feminist Frequency*, Anita Sarkeesian. Those threats became so severe in 2014 that Wu fled her home for an extended time and Sarkeesian canceled an

appearance at Utah State that fall.

On the other hand, those involved with *SavePoint* are, according to several observers in the industry, a big and active part of the GG movement, and have been accused of actively and passively encouraging harassment of women developers, journalists, and enthusiasts. In their defense, members of the panel and the GG movement claim the group is not about harassment or keeping women and minorities out of gaming, but about honesty and transparency in gaming journalism. This “honesty in journalism” claim dovetails with the so-called “Quinnspiracy” involving Depression Quest developer Zoe Quinn and *Kotaku* writer Nathan Grayson, which happened concurrently with the rise of the hashtag #GamerGate and the sharp increase in online harassment aimed at women in the industry. Though both Quinn and Grayson admitted to having an affair, the parties claimed, and *Kotaku*’s own internal investigation found, no conflict of interest resulting from the affair since all reporting by Grayson about Quinn and her work as a developer had been done prior to the commencement of the relationship. Despite this, GG has continued its attacks on Quinn, publishing nude pictures of her provided by an ex-boyfriend.

An uproar from both Pro and Anti GG forces about the two panels had been growing since the panel schedule was announced in September. It began to reach fever pitch in the final two weeks of October, as both sides leveled accusations and insults at each other via social media and other platforms. To make matters worse, less than savory facts about some of SXSWS’ actions related to the panels came to light.

Prior to the panel schedule release, the atmosphere had already become uncivil. *Level Up*’s submission page on the SXSWS website was bombarded with [misogynist](#) and harassing comments as well as countless “downvotes” which were purportedly cast by 4chan and 8chan users involved in GG.

SXSWS began to see the two panels as volatile polar opposites that could create a hostile atmosphere at the conference. Rather than seek clarification of the motives of the *SavePoint* panel, as had been urged by *Level Up* and its allies, or seek to mediate between the two panels, SXSWS decided to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It canceled both panels, claiming it wanted to avoid what it called a “compromised ... marketplace of ideas.” The excuse is not only funny, but absolutely dumbfounding considering SXSWS had already compromised its own principles and procedural rules while creating that “marketplace of ideas”.

According to procedure established by SXSWS and posted on its website, all panel proposals for the 2016 conference were to be submitted by July 26, 2015, posted on the conference’s website on August 10, and voted on by the public with “upvotes” and “downvotes” until September 4. When the conference made its decision in September about which panels to invite to the conference, the public votes were weighted at 30% in the decision, the balance being determined by an advisory committee (40%) and SXSWS staff (30%).

Each panel proposal page includes a comments section. According to parties that watched the proposal pages during the voting period, most panel pages got two or three comments at most. The *Level Up* proposal page received over 150 comments. [Another panel about online misogyny](#) organized by Brianna Wu and Shireen Mitchell of Digital Sistahs received more than 100 comments. Many of the vile comments appearing on both pages were allegedly posted by GG members. Both panels asked that SXSWS delete the comments on their pages. It refused to do so, citing a need for open discussion of the topics. Eventually, it did close those comments sections. The Wu and Mitchell panel was not invited to the conference. The pages and comments for both panels are still posted as of this writing.

Oddly enough, the proposal page for *SavePoint* received no upvotes, downvotes, or any comments. It turned out that this was not the result of some conspiracy of GG hackers blocking potential downvoters from the page. There was a very simple reason for it. The page never existed. *SavePoint* not only submitted its proposal after the established submission deadline, but after the online posting and voting period. The panel was accepted though it was never subjected to the same procedure and scrutiny as the

other hundreds of panels that applied. It was later revealed by an advisory committee member that the committee never saw, much less considered, the *SavePoint* proposal. It is likely that SXSW Staff did not see or consider it either.

No one is sure who made the decision to accept the *SavePoint* panel despite the flaws of its application submission. It just mysteriously appeared on the schedule. Upon learning of *SavePoint*'s bypass of the panel evaluation process, the *Level Up* panel, its allies, and supporters were less than pleased at the unequal treatment. Shortly thereafter, SXSW decided to cut the cord on both panels which made an even bigger mess.

SXSW is now scrambling to make amends for its ineptitude in #PanelGate and save itself from a massive boycott and a huge blow to its august reputation. [Recode.net reported on Thursday](#) that SXSW was considering an all day event devoted entirely to online sexism. Still, no official announcement of such an event has been made by the conference. Hopefully, whatever their decision to resolve the conflict may be, conference officials won't make things worse this time. No matter what happens, #PanelGate will haunt SXSW, the *Level Up* panel, and many others, both anti and pro GG, for some time to come. How's that for a Halloween story?

UPDATE: Friday afternoon, 10/30/2015: [SXSW ANNOUNCES ONLINE HARASSMENT SUMMIT FOR 03/12/2016](#).