

# Gaming Against Violence: A Grassroots Approach to Teen Dating Violence

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## Abstract

Teen dating violence is a pervasive problem that affects millions of adolescents worldwide. Although there have been various approaches to addressing this problem, using videogames had not been employed before 2008, when Jennifer Ann's Group, an Atlanta, GA-based nonprofit organization, created an annual competition. The Life.Love. Game Design Challenge rewards game developers for creating videogames about teen dating violence without using any violence in the games themselves. The resulting videogames have increased awareness about teen dating violence and provided educational information to assist adolescents, parents, and teachers in identifying abusive relationships.

## Introduction

OVER 40 PERCENT OF ALL students in the United States will have been in an abusive relationship by the time they graduate from college,<sup>1</sup> with nearly 1.5 million high school students physically abused by a dating partner every year.<sup>2</sup>

Jennifer Ann's Group, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is educating to prevent teen dating violence (TDV) by increasing awareness of the issues involved, providing educational information about warning signs, and advocating for legislation to better protect adolescents from TDV. Since 2008, one of their most successful programs has been the Life.Love. Game Design Challenge, an annual contest that rewards game developers for creating videogames about TDV.

## TDV

TDV is defined as physical, sexual, or emotional violence occurring between two teens in a close relationship.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 25 percent of all teens report having been abused by a partner within the past year.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, by the time they graduate from college, 44 percent of all undergraduate students in the United States will have been in an abusive relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Although young women (16–24 years of age) experience the highest rates of dating violence,<sup>5</sup> TDV is an “equal opportunity problem,” affecting teens throughout the United States regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup> Victims of TDV are adversely affected, tending to have lower grades in school<sup>7</sup> and

have also shown higher incidence of binge drinking,<sup>7</sup> suicide attempts,<sup>2</sup> and violence in future relationships.<sup>2</sup>

## Complicating Factors

Although TDV and intimate partner violence share many common traits, issues of awareness and treatment by the court system further complicate solutions to address TDV.

The United States began recognizing the first week in February as National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week in 2006. In 2010, Congress first recognized the entire month of February as National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. Prior to these campaigns, awareness of TDV was low; the American Bar Association cited a 2004 study revealing that “eighty-one percent of parents surveyed either believe dating violence is not an issue or admit they don't know if it's an issue.”<sup>8</sup> Further complicating awareness among parents is that only 32 percent of teens who have been in an abusive relationship have confided in a parent—and when they *have* spoken with a parent, 78 percent have stayed in the abusive relationship despite the advice of their parent.<sup>9</sup>

States vary in their treatment of TDV, with less than half (currently only 19 states) either requiring or encouraging the inclusion of TDV in the curriculum. In 2007, Jennifer Ann's Group participated in passing legislation in Texas, the first of its kind in the United States, requiring that all Texas school districts, *inter alia*, develop safety plans, enforce protective orders, and educate students about TDV.<sup>10</sup> Other states have since followed suit with their own legislation, but not all impose the same requirements.

In addition to disparate treatment by school systems, requirements for getting a protective order through the state courts also vary from state to state. Some states do not allow a minor to *seek* a protective order, whereas other states do not allow a protective order to *apply against* a minor. Other states will not grant a protective order against a dating partner unless they have lived together or have a child together. This patchwork of laws further complicates an already labyrinthine problem, discouraging adolescents from seeking protection through the court system.

### Jennifer Ann's Group

Jennifer Ann's Group is an organization working to prevent TDV through awareness, education, and advocacy. It was formed in 2006 in memory of Jennifer Ann Crecente, a high school honor student who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend the day after Valentine's Day, February 15, 2006. The organization was founded by Jennifer's father.

The organization got its corporate charter in June 2006 and received its 501(c)(3) status from the Internal Revenue Service in September 2006. Since its inception, Jennifer Ann's Group has been working with other nonprofit organizations throughout the United States to address TDV through awareness, education, and legislation. There are no paid staff positions, and the organization is managed from the home of the executive director. Because of its small size and correspondingly small budget, Jennifer Ann's Group leverages technology as much as possible to most effectively reach its target demographic while remaining within its limited budget.

Jennifer Ann's Group approach to TDV prevention entails awareness, education, and advocacy:

1. *Awareness*: Informing young people, parents, teachers, administrators, and legislators about TDV
2. *Education*: Informing people how to identify abuse, how to be safe, and how to seek help
3. *Advocacy*: Informing the government of the importance of equal treatment of protective orders and the need for legislation that requires schools to adopt formal policies about TDV

Beginning in 2007, Jennifer Ann's Group began development and distribution of educational resources to better address its awareness and education goals. The first product was an educational card made from the same process used to create credit cards. In partnership with the National Dating Abuse Helpline, they developed the "10 Warning Signs of an Abusive Relationship" and included this information along with safety tips and the toll-free number for the Helpline. Schools and other organizations valued these cards: They were made from recycled plastic and therefore durable; additionally, the form factor made the cards easy to place in a wallet or purse, appearing much like a school ID card or library card and therefore much less likely to draw attention from an abuser compared with a traditional trifold brochure.

In 2010, Jennifer Ann's Group began development and distribution of educational bookmarks to target older high school and college students. The bookmarks incorporated the same safety and assistance information as the educational cards. In addition, the bookmarks include a ruler, commonly misspelled words, and common math formulas to encourage students to retain the bookmarks as a useful school resource.

To date, over 500,000 of these resources have been distributed at no cost to schools, churches, police departments, and other organizations throughout the United States. Although the educational resource program has been very successful, the cost and logistics of printing, storing, and distributing these printed materials exceeds the capabilities of this small organization, and therefore a better solution was needed.

### Life.Love. Game Design Challenge

Videogames are an ideal tool for confronting and preventing TDV. They have been shown to be more effective than traditional training approaches, with a 2010 study showing 11 percent higher factual knowledge, 14 percent higher skill-based knowledge, and 9 percent higher retention rate compared with traditional training tools.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, through a videogame, adolescents are able to explore specific aspects of TDV at their own pace and in the privacy of their home without feeling "preached to" by parents, teachers, or counselors. And, importantly for Jennifer Ann's Group, online videogames are a resource that does not incur shipping costs or the logistic problems associated with tangible products.

To include videogames in its educational resources, in 2008, Jennifer Ann's Group launched the Life.Love. Game Design Challenge. The contest posed the intriguing question: "Can you design a videogame about teen dating violence...without using any violence in the game itself?" First place that year was \$1,000, with \$100 prizes going to two runners-up and a door prize. The door prize was a random drawing among the nonwinning entries and was included to encourage developers to enter the contest even though they might believe that they lacked the ability to win the contest.

The judges were divided equally between subject matter experts on TDV and prominent individuals in the videogame industry. This combination of judges ensured the accuracy of the educational component of the games, while at the same time allowing registrants the opportunity to have their work critiqued by thought leaders in the game development sector, thus providing them additional incentive to enter the contest. Judging scores were based on educational value (40 percent), playability (20 percent), replayability (15 percent), innovation (10 percent), graphics/music (10 percent), and intuitive nature of the game (5 percent).

The use of videogames, often vilified for their use of violence, as a tool to prevent dating violence helped the contest receive attention from budding game developers as well as from the media. The contest received coverage from *Newsweek*, *Kotaku*, *Gamasutra*, and others.

Since 2008, the contest has been run annually, launching on February 15th of each year to coincide with the anniversary of the death of Jennifer Ann Crecente. The prizes have increased each year, with a first place prize of \$6,000 in 2013. Although the majority of the winning games have been from the United States, this changed in 2013, when all of the winning games were from other countries. The 2013 winning games came from Argentina, Ireland, Thailand, and Belgium. Media coverage has remained fairly consistent. In addition to videogame industry coverage, the contest has also received attention from CNN, NPR, The Huffington Post, Wired, APA's Monitor on Psychology, Fast Company's Co-Exist, and others.

## Impact

The primary beneficiaries of the Life.Love. Game Design Challenge are students ranging from the age of approximately 11 to 19 years, with a primary focus on those 13–17 years of age (the contest rules suggest that developers focus on a target audience of 13 years of age or higher). According to the 2010 census, there are approximately 21 million students in this age range currently enrolled in schools throughout the United States,<sup>12</sup> with an estimated 16 million students living in those states that have not yet passed TDV legislation. By making the winning games available via the Internet, nearly all of these students have the opportunity to access these games for free via a Web browser at home, school, or public library.

Secondary beneficiaries are school districts, parents, and game developers. The games provide teachers, staff, and administration with a ready-to-use resource that addresses the issue of TDV at little or no cost. Parents also benefit by educating themselves about the warning signs of an abusive relationship and then using the games as a catalyst for conversation. Writing in *Wired*, “Geek Dad” Andy Robertson said of the 2010 first place winning game, “Grace’s Diary”: “I was surprised how much I learned about my own relationships as well as having some really useful conversations with my family about establishing healthy boundaries.”<sup>13</sup>

Game developers also benefit from the knowledge they learn about TDV. In preparation for designing their entries, game developers research TDV and regularly remark on the impact that the contest has had on them. The hope is that this knowledge will influence them as they design games in the future. Comments from game developers include:

- “Creating these stories was a rewarding challenge itself, but the real lasting impact on myself from this game’s development was everything I learned about Teen Dating Violence” (personal communication by e-mail from Paul Andrew McGee, Ireland).
- “Making an education game on this subject require[s] you to do a lot of research on the subject matter, which in turn educat[es] you about the subject” (personal communication by e-mail from Thongrop Rodsavas, Thailand).
- “It’s a great experience to develop a game, and I’ve learned quite a lot about abuse while researching” (personal communication by e-mail from Bo Banducci, United States).
- “My only hope is that my game can someday somewhere help someone realize they might be in an abusive relationship and do something about it before it’s too late” (personal communication by e-mail from Jean Hehn, Belgium).

## Selected Games

### “Grace’s Diary”

The winning game in 2010 was “Grace’s Diary,” developed by GPTouch of Bangkok, Thailand. Reviews of the game commented on the effectiveness of the game in having the player identify with the teenaged protagonist’s attempt to help her friend, Natalie, who is in an abusive relationship:

The delicate, sketchy quality of the art and the restrained music quickly establish a sense of intimacy. I felt as if I were really being let inside Grace’s mind as she struggled to decide

what to do about her friend. It may seem like a minor challenge compared to escaping from a ghost or mad man in a horror game, but the very reality of the situation made it scary in a way that those games could never be. Grace’s Diary by GPTouch manages to seamlessly integrate the theme of relationship abuse into a sensitive and moving visual novel.<sup>14</sup>

“Grace’s Diary” is also the first game that Jennifer Ann’s Group has released for Android™ (Google, Mountain View, CA) devices. It is available at no cost through the Amazon Appstore.<sup>15</sup>

### “Janie’s Sketchbook”

In 2013, GPTouch received second place with “Janie’s Sketchbook,” their follow-up to “Grace’s Diary.” Although the gameplay mechanic is very similar to that of “Grace’s Diary,” an important distinction is that this time the female is the abusive partner. This highlights the fact that TDV affects males as well as females. “Janie’s Sketchbook” has been called “a beautiful, thoughtful game whose decision to approach abuse from oft-ignored angles and victims should be applauded.”<sup>16</sup>

### “Love in the Dumpster”: A serious game about TDV

The winning game in 2013 was “Love in the Dumpster,” developed by Jean Hehn of Brussels, Belgium. This ambitious game presents dating violence in seven acts, allowing the player to experience dating violence from the perspective of both Lily and Tomas. The developer explains, “I tried to write an engaging story and dialogue and included two main characters (of both genders) to try and have people relate to them, and also show that both genders can be victims.”<sup>17</sup>

Reviews have called “Love in the Dumpster” “a quirky narrative driven experience that has the player dealing with the ups and down of high school dating”<sup>17</sup> and that it “[...] provides a rather eloquent method of outlining significant phrases and behaviours that will help one to identify an abusive relationship.”<sup>18</sup>

## Next Steps

In addition to continuing the contest (the Seventh Annual Life.Love. Game Design Challenge launched on February 15, 2014), Jennifer Ann’s Group is also working to make more games available to a wider audience. By making the games available for mobile devices on Android and iOS platforms, the games will be easier to incorporate into a school’s curriculum as well as use by the general public. Additionally, the organization wants to provide these games to other countries as they begin to address dating violence and are pursuing localization efforts to make a subset of the games available in a variety of languages. Also, the group is actively seeking partnerships to have a study performed on the effectiveness of these games in increasing awareness and affecting attitudes about TDV. It is expected that a corporate sponsor would be the most likely approach to facilitate the accomplishment of these goals.

## Contact Information

For further information about the Life.Love. Game Design Challenge and to explore the videogames, please visit [www.JenniferAnn.org/games](http://www.JenniferAnn.org/games)

Jennifer Ann’s Group is a 501(c)(3) charity, and donations are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law. Online



donations are accepted through [www.JenniferAnn.org/donate](http://www.JenniferAnn.org/donate). For corporate sponsorship and underwriting opportunities, please contact Drew Crecente at [Drew@JenniferAnn.org](mailto:Drew@JenniferAnn.org)

### Author Disclosure Statement

D.C. founded and is the Executive Director of Jennifer Ann's Group.

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Jennifer Ann Crecente at 16 years of age.

Jennifer Ann's Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention of teen dating violence. Since 2008 they have sponsored the Life.Love. Game Design Challenge, which rewards game designers and developers for creating videogames about teen dating violence. Jennifer Ann's Group was founded by Drew Crecente who speaks internationally about the organization's use of videogames to prevent violence.