Designing Games for Ethics:

Models, Techniques and Frameworks

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Chapter 16
Power to the People:
Anti–Oppressive Game Design

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ABSTRACT

This chapter defines basic principles of anti-oppression and its ethical implications. Anti-oppression is a framework used in social work and community organizing that broadly challenges power imbalances between different groups of people in society. This chapter positions these principles in the realm of game creation and argue for their use—particularly in the development of social issue games that in one way or another seek to spotlight and challenge social power imbalances. While the chapter outlines some essential theory, it ultimately takes a practice-based perspective to make a case for and support the incorporation of anti-oppressive principles in game design and development. It features the work of five organizations from around the world about their strategies for implementing equity in game/interactive design and development, and closes with broad guidelines to support integration of anti-oppression principles in game creation.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009, a Danish advocacy group that initiates public awareness and education campaigns released an online game entitled *Hit the Bitch.* Produced by Børn og Unge i Voldsramte Familier (Children Exposed to Violence at Home), the game allows the player to enter the experience from the perspective of a man's hand, which can be swung to strike a woman's face by proxy using a mouse or webcam. A slider appears at the top of the screen. As the blows multiply, the slider creeps from one end, labeled "100% pussy," to the other, "100% gangsta." The woman in the game becomes increasingly upset, bruised, and bloodied. She eventually falls to the ground in tears, and a caption, "100% IDIOT!," concludes the playing experience. Following the end of the game play, players hear the voice of a woman issuing scolding words in Danish and on-screen statistics, presumably about the prevalence of violence against women in Danish communities.

Unsurprisingly, the release of *Hit the Bitch* evoked a flurry of commentary beyond borders, given its content and the group behind its development. In fact, traffic to the website was so heavy that access to it was limited to users from Denmark. A surface examination of online reactions reveals a common underlying question: is *Hit the Bitch*'s approach successful in denouncing, challenging or preventing violence against women? Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux writes that, despite noble intentions, "the method it uses is so offensive, misguided and disgusting that the message gets completely lost within sexualized violence and abuse" (2009). A blogger on *Feministe* says that the game "is supposed to convey to everyone that hitting women is bad. After you've played a game that rewards you for hitting a woman. Color me unconvinced" (Jill, 2009). *Hit the Bitch* "seems like the end result of some people sitting around a table trying to figure out how to make domestic violence edgy and attention-grabbing," another blogger writes, although she goes on to say, "then again, no one in mainstream media talks about domestic violence unless it happens to a good-looking famous person … are they on the right track by trying to be aggressively controversial?" (Ganeva, 2009).

Like other games on social issues, *Hit the Bitch* incorporates controversial messaging open to a wide range of interpretations. Just how the game fulfills presumed advocacy, awareness and/or educational goals concerning violence at home is difficult to determine. Players may struggle with those goals as much as critics have, given that the game places them in an abusing role and the game play does not delve into complexities inherent to violence against women. While a number of reviewers explore the controversy that surrounds *Hit the Bitch*, most of them do not comment on the game's use of "pussy" and "gangsta" or its use of background hip hop music. Besides a note that the music is "sad rap" and that the word "gangsta" is "an offensive stereotype of a black man," incorporation of "urban" artifacts into the game and their inescapable race and class implications seem to have gone unnoticed (Ganeva, 2009).

While satirical in its approach to violence, *Hit the Bitch*'s ambiguity does not sit comfortably in the context of anti-oppression. A game on gender-based violence designed with anti-oppressive principles in mind would open space for players to rethink the commonness of this violence—most often perpetrated by men against women they know and trust—with the goal of challenging, reducing and/or preventing it. *Hit the Bitch*'s uncritical inclusion of stereotypical "urban black" culture, whether intentioned or not, is at odds with an anti-oppressive approach. In the process of designing an anti-oppressive game, developers would be conscious of inserting any uncritiqued stereotypes into the game's look, feel, and play. They would resist associating gender-based violence with any single group of people, for example, challenging the Western tendency to blame violence against women on communities of color (Jiwani, 1997).

In this chapter, we argue that applying anti-oppressive principles in game design and development results in more purposeful, directive and transparent messaging and game play. Anti-oppressive practice, typically associated with social work and community activism, openly challenges discrimination and promotes rights and voice of those groups on the margins of society. It is grounded in specific understandings of equity and incorporates a sense of ethics that requires an individual to reflect upon their own behavior and assumptions, as well as society's norms. It encourages an individual to work toward closing the "power gap" between those who experience oppression and those who hold greater social privileges (Clifford & Burke, 2008, p. 16-23; Global Exchange, 2006, p. 2; Strier, 2007, p. 858).

This chapter introduces the application of anti-oppression principles to game creation, first defining basics of anti-oppression and touching upon various implications for individuals who use it. We discuss anti-oppressive principles in the context of video game design and development, particularly games that in one way or another spotlight social issues and seek to promote social change. Next, we share insights and examples of game partnerships and collectives, including those of Take Action Games (TAG) and the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), who partnered to develop *RePlay: Finding Zoe/ReJouer: Où est Zoé?* The contributors to this chapter speak to how they implement anti-oppressive practice and equity principles in their development and design processes. Finally, we conclude with broad guidelines to support integration of anti-oppression principles in game creation.

We outline essential concepts of anti-oppression as a starting point. However, a comprehensive overview of anti-oppressive theory is beyond the scope of this chapter. We take a practice-based perspective to support incorporation of anti-oppressive principles in game design and development. Despite some critiques of the mainstream game industry, our intent is not to disparage dominant practices of game design and development. Instead, we wish to encourage alternatives that ultimately support transformative social change and build the voices and access of marginalized communities.

BASICS OF ANTI-OPPRESSION

As already noted, the fields of social work, grassroots activism, and community development typically use an anti-oppression framework. It is broadly defined as efforts and actions to end social injustices and inequalities, particularly those based on factors like race, gender, sexuality, age, class, ability, and religion (Dumbrill, 2003, pp. 102-104). We can view the term and practice of "anti-oppression" as an umbrella concept with a great deal of variability. It encompasses ideas found in a number of theories, frameworks, and perspectives, including: feminism, critical race analysis and anti-racism, disability analysis and postmodernism. Theorists and practitioners often distinguish anti-oppression by contrast and by what it works against. Therefore, the concept of oppression deserves analysis. In the next section, we define oppression and its corollary, privilege. We then move to a definition of personal "reflexivity," an important concept in anti-oppressive practice, and touch upon anti-oppressive ethics.

Oppression and Privilege

Clifford and Burke (2008) define oppression as "the exploitative exercise of power by individuals and groups over others" and "the structuring of marginalization and inequality into everyday routines and rules, through the continuing acquisition and maintenance of economic, political and cultural capital by dominant social groups over long periods of time, reflecting the existence of major social differences" (p. 16). Oppression entails a great deal of "baggage." Individuals who face it

often experience exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and outright violence (Young, 1990, pp. 48-63). Mullaly (1997) also pulls oppression out of the individual experience, describing it as domination of subordinate groups by a group or groups more powerful in the realms of politics, economics and culture (pp. 104, 145-146). To understand how oppression works, we have to recognize how groups interact with each other (Frye, 1983, pp. 8-10).

Groups that hold more money, political clout and sway over mainstream culture tend to become more powerful. By virtue of their power, the world they live in suits their needs, ideas and interests, undoubtedly undermining the needs, ideas and interests of groups with less power (Young, 1990, pp. 56-58; Chater, 1994, p. 102). Quite simply, "power is the ability to act" and "the more access to resources one has, the more options one has." Power is unequally distributed and impacts how people interact as individuals and groups (Adair & Howell, 1993). Clifford and Burke (2008) note that unequal distribution of power leads to the experience of everyday oppressions against groups with less power, and this oppression further exasperates social divisions between those with less and more power. They show that the experience of oppression is both constant and in flux, impacted by the changing circumstances of different groups. Usually resilient over long periods of time, the divisions between groups can vary quickly in intense periods of social change (p. 16). Young (1990) says that oppression is "a central category of political discourse" (p. 39) for contemporary social movements and activist organizing, even if many in the Western world hesitate to apply the term to injustices they perceive around them.

Anti-oppression activists and thinkers have identified different forms that oppression takes—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism and ableism, to name the most common. Despite the heady analysis, we can view oppression more simply. Some groups of people are considered less worthy of power, rights and respect than others. Those "less worthy" of power, rights and respect in today's society are racialized, women or transgendered, living in poverty, physically or mentally disabled, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, elderly, and/or young (Young, 1990, p. 40). Other social divisions factor into a person's experience of oppression, such as their immigration status, their HIV status, and the social isolation or connectedness of the region where they live (Clifford & Burke, 2008, p. 19).

Since oppression is based on "unquestioned norms, habits, symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules," it occurs on both a personal and systemic level (Young, 1990, p. 41). It impacts how individuals and communities view and treat themselves and others; how they behave and communicate; and how they envisage their position, worth, entitlement to resources, and validity in the world. Women, for example, share a collective experience of discrimination where they tend to be paid less for doing the same jobs as men (Johnson, 2009). Women are also statistically more likely to be murdered by male intimate partners or family members—the violence is a manifestation of systemic sexism women face in society, reproduced in their individual lives and most intimate experiences (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005; Porter, 2006, pp. 25-27).

People who employ anti-oppression principles name, dissect and challenge society's mainstream systems and structures, that is, the "normal" way of life or the "way things are", making visible the invisible. They acknowledge that what most people view as normal is determined by the perspectives, interests and desires of powerful and dominant groups. Dichotomies are often used to define groups and assign characteristics to them—white and black, man and woman, gay and straight, and rich and poor. This is how individuals and groups who are less powerful are placed on the far end of the spectrum of normalcy (Collins, 1986, p. S20). Those who are less powerful may be labeled exotic, special, fringe or different, but

in dominant thinking, they tend to be marked as "Other" (Young, 1990, pp. 58-59). Individuals who face oppression can internalize this otherness and develop negative understandings about themselves, taking them in even if they logically know them to be untrue. In a similar way, people who belong to dominant groups learn favorable messages about themselves. They internalize their own dominance and privilege (Sinclair, 2003, p. 127). Anti-oppression, on the other hand, argues for multiplicity of voices, opinions and ways of thinking and being of marginalized groups in order to counter the narrow dichotomies. Dalrymple and Burke (2006) explain that "different perspectives on the truth" are necessary because "no one group or individual possesses the theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute truth about other people's experiences" (p. 11).

Personal "Reflexivity" and Anti-Oppressive Ethics

Employing anti-oppression as an individual requires reflection about the power one holds and oppression one faces. It requires sensitivity to the reality that anyone can unintentionally oppress other people and experience oppression at the same time (Clifford & Burke, 2008, p. 18). It encourages an individual to examine personal values, internalized dominance and oppression, and deeply held stereotypes, biases, and prejudices—the same ones so often reproduced in systems like the media, government, law and education.

Making reference to social workers, Kondrat (1999) says that self-awareness involves understanding one's own "social location"—that is, where a person's membership in various groups places them in society's matrix of power, privileges, oppressions and access to respect and resources. It is an examination of personal values and behaviors, how they may reproduce oppression or challenge it (p. 464). Those in grassroots, community, and activist circles have stressed that anti-oppressive self-reflection, or "reflexivity," cannot be left to theory. It must penetrate the very core of who one is and how one thinks of themselves and their place in the world. Barbara Findlay reveals that scrutinizing her own social location "in the world as a white person" was "painful and shameful" and that "the work of looking at internalized dominance is very difficult" (1992, p. 47).

Anti-oppression practice is often referred to as a conscious decision, an individual choice to be challenged in order to promote values like equity, justice, inclusion, and a shared quality of life. Clifford and Burke (2008) note, "the aim of anti-oppressive ethics is to provide guidance to oppose, minimize and/or overcome those aspects of human relationships that express and consolidate oppression" (p. 16). While they do not assume that a fully articulated position on anti-oppression ethics exists, they speak to a useful approach to ethics using anti-oppressive concepts that incorporates a critical analysis of power, social differences and divisions, the impact of social systems and relationships, and the histories of individuals and groups.

In general, then, anti-oppression involves an analysis of power imbalances between groups and involves thinking and action, where individuals understand their place in groups and the broader society. Anti-oppression is deeply personal. People must consider the privileges they hold and oppressions they perpetuate in order to act ethically, based on reflection and critical thinking.

ANTI-OPPRESSION AND GAMES

Anti-oppression's encompassing analysis can extend beyond the realm of activism and social work. "Practitioners" of anti-oppression argue that the areas of governance, education and policy development should implement anti-oppressive principles. And while a range of opinions may exist about how to implement anti-oppression into life and society, practitioners have noted

that anti-oppressive principles support equity, justice and inclusion to the benefit of marginalized groups. We assert that game makers may apply the principles of anti-oppression to the design of games and their development, particularly games that in some way call attention to and/or seek to challenge unequal power dynamics and inspire players to contribute to equitable social change.

Theorists have spoken to how oppression tends to get reproduced in the media and entertainment industry, in those dominant ideologies reproduced and disseminated by it. Stuart Hall (2003) argues that the media is "part of the dominant means of ideological production" and that it produces "representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work" (p. 90). Popular media, including popular digital games, tend to mirror the power imbalances of society, privileging the interests and perspectives of those in power.

Paolo Pedercini, the designer behind the Molleindustria game collective that develops online games that seek to express alternatives to dominant forms of gameplay, explains that the game industry "relies on a highly trained workforce, which is produced by universities." The industry's "[technologies and processes] are inaccessible to most people" and democratizing the system proves difficult because its structure lacks personal connection and original contribution by most participants (2010). Unequal power dynamics infuse the mainstream game industry's development practices and human resource processes and norms, as well as its most familiar perspectives.

Yet digital games, particularly those designed outside of the industry, are ripe for the incorporation of anti-oppressive principles. Ian Bogost (2007) explores how video games embody a "procedural rhetoric" that shifts opinion or motivates action of players (pp. 28-29). Video games make arguments about a social system's structure that can help support or challenge it. In the words of Clay Shirky (2005), games "offer the opportunity for players to change their worldview rather than to impart mere information."

Because video games have the ability to persuade or inspire people to critically examine mainstream norms and behaviors, we embrace the implementation of anti-oppressive principles, practices and ethics. Game makers can design their work to identify and challenge society's everyday dynamics of oppression and privilege. They can inspire players to act in new ways to break down those dynamics and divides. They can illustrate what players can do to affect anti-oppressive change in the real world, allowing them to practice and share their strategies for change with each other. By applying anti-oppressive principles in the process of building games, game makers can consciously provide a frame to alter the mainstream's typical *modus operandi*, where a small set of experts determine content and methodology. An anti-oppression-inspired process can seek out and incorporate the ideas and perspectives of players and non-players who do not usually have voice in game creation in order to challenge assumptions, stereotypes and norms that inform the look, story, arguments and rule sets of games.

In the next section, we move out of the realm of theory to explore insights of game collectives and partners. Their goals, thoughts and design processes enlighten how anti-oppression principles have been and can be applied in game design and development.

INSIGHTS AND EXAMPLES FROM GAME COLLECTIVES AND PARTNERSHIPS

To build an applied understanding of anti-oppression in game design and development, we interviewed individuals from game collectives and game development partnerships. This section includes contributions from Susana Ruiz and Ashley York of Take Action Games, Wendy Komiotis of the Metropolitan Action Committee

on Violence Against Women and Children, Mary Flanagan of Values at Play, Barry Joseph of Global Kids, and Paolo Pedercini of Molleindustria. Their insights and examples enrich this chapter's practical application and inform the anti-oppressive guidelines outlined at the end. Given the novelty of anti-oppression language in the field of game creation, we asked each contributor to answer general questions about "equity" in game and interactive design and development. An important concept in anti-oppression theory, Lopes and Thomas (2006) define equity as "equal access to goods, services and opportunities in society" (p. 267). We asked game collective and partnership representatives how they implement equity in their design process, challenges and lessons they have encountered in the process, and advice they would share with other developers to increase the inclusion of equity in game creation. In this section, we highlight these game makers and explicate some examples of their games.

Take Action Games

Take Action Games (TAG) specializes in casual games for change. It uses games to address topics of social and political significance, employing design and content that traverses computational art, narrative, documentary, activism, and ethics. Susana Ruiz, Huy Truong, and Ashley York co-founded TAG in 2006 and launched their first game that year, *Darfur is Dying,* an activist game they developed as an MFA graduate thesis project (with the support of a number of students and colleagues) at the University of Southern California. Its development was sponsored by mtvU in partnership with The Reebok Human Rights Foundation, The International Crisis Group, and interFUEL.

They designed *Darfur is Dying* as an informational entryway to the humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of western Sudan and the initial development resulted from a call by mtvU to mobilize university communities to raise awareness about genocide through digital games. Stephen Friedman, general manager of MTV, explains that they wanted to extend awareness of the crisis beyond a relatively closed circle of experts, activists, and non-governmental organizations. Says Friedman,

It was an attempt to expand a campaign that already existed and to create a game that would spark a conversation and raise awareness beyond what our other programming was doing. We went in not knowing what we would get and with the goal to create something that would linger and would have more of an impact than a PSA or TV show. (2010)

Responding to the request, Ruiz and York sought to use "uncomplicated, immediate mechanisms" in *Darfur is Dying*'s gameplay. They wanted to inspire players to effect real world change by taking part in letter-writing campaigns and learning how to initiate divestment strategies in their college campuses. More than 700,000 people played it in the first month after the game's release on April 30th, 2006—the day of the Save Darfur Rally in Washington, D.C. That number grew to more than two million. Tens of thousands of players utilized "activist tools" that TAG wove into the game's reward structure. This includes the ability to write letters to the President and petition Congress to enact legislation to support the people of Darfur. Says Ruiz,

We were guided by a three-step design methodology. First, we wanted to construct an experience in which the player could become emotionally invested via personal narratives and testimonials. Secondly, we wanted to pull back and be able to offer her a broader context of the extremely complicated issue. Thirdly, we wanted to ensure that she had an immediate and simple means to make a difference in the real world in some small way, especially given the government and media's stark silence on the genocide in Darfur at the

Figure 1. Darfur is Dying game screenshot of the internally displaced persons camp. (© 2006, MTV, Take Action Games. Used with permission)

time. In this case, playing through a portrayal of genocide would be entirely disheartening were it not for a chance to spread awareness about the crisis, learn about divestment, sign a petition, or write a letter with the goal of evoking decision-makers to respond. (2010)

Ruiz presented the game to members of Congress and Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2006), who has worked extensively in the region, says it is "one of the best presentations of life in Darfur" (p. 12). In contrast, immediately after mtvU posted an early prototype of *Darfur is Dying,* Julian Dibbell wrote an article for the *Village Voice* entitled, "Game From Hell." Dibbell writes,

*Folks, I've seen some sick and twisted video games in my day, but I hereby award the cake to a dark little perversion of the human imagination entitled Fetching Water, a finalist in the MTV/Reebok Darfur Digital Activist contest… Currently playable in demo form at MTV's new college-targeted broadband site, mtvU, Fetching Water casts the player as a cute Darfuri child dodging heavily armed militia gangs through the five kilometers of desert between home and the nearest well. Fail to outrun the militiamen and the game ends, with "kidnap, rape, and murder" listed as your likeliest fates; make it to the well and back, and maybe your family survives another day of drought. Is there even a rating for something this f***ed-up. (2006)*

Ruiz and York were mindful of their position in addressing issues in Darfur and anticipated the potential for negative reactions. They noted that Dibbell's response was to a work-in-progress version of the game that was put online with little context. "We were leading a group of privileged college students from a private university to develop a game about something so far from our own daily realities. It's understandable that people would react viscerally to that," says Ruiz (2010).

The team consulted with various individuals and groups, including those with expertise on the genocide and those who spent time in the region. Paul Freedman, a Peabody Award Winning docu-

mentary filmmaker who was directing *Sand and Sorrow*, a film on Darfur at the time, provided invaluable consultation about the logistics of the camps inside Darfur, as well as imagery for the game's aesthetic modeling. Ruiz and York also consulted with activists and scholars such as Donald Miller, Executive Director of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture; and Brian Steidle, a former U.S. Marine, unarmed military observer and U.S. representative to the African Union. Additionally, the International Crisis Group and International Rescue Committee provided the team with information, perspective and imagery that proved critical to an understanding of the situation. Ruiz says,

These were incredibly helpful to game development but we didn't get the opportunity to speak with Sudanese experts who may have witnessed what was happening. It was an element that didn't quite match up with our understandings of equity in game design. More people from outside of the situation were contributing to content than those internal to it. There's no doubt that the game would have benefited greatly from the perspective of Sudanese experts who were much closer to the politics and history of the region. (2010)

Following the production of *Darfur is Dying,* TAG co-produced *RePlay: Finding Zoe/ReJouer: Où est Zoé?* along with the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), a Canadian non-profit organization that prevents violence against diverse women, youth, and children. METRAC approached TAG to develop an online game on healthy relationships amongst children and youth aged eight to fourteen with the goal of challenging gender stereotypes and gender-based violence. Ruiz says that the partnership with METRAC was TAG's first opportunity to work so closely with those engaged in community development work on the issues. Ruiz says that METRAC brought invaluable knowledge about the topic and the target audience that the design team would not have had on its own as game developers (2010). *RePlay/ReJourer* tells the story of two friends searching for their friend, Zoe. After hearing sexist and stereotyping rumors about her, they conclude she is caught in an abusive relationship. During their search for Zoe, her friends navigate through their neighborhood and are challenged by situations that encourage them to work together and be respectful, confident communicators. Success in these situations equips them to find Zoe and cheer for her. The game includes information on the warning signs of violence and community services relevant to Ontario youth.

Funded by the Government of Ontario, METRAC assembled an Interdisciplinary Advisory Committee for the project that included educators and school board members, experts in technology and communications, violence prevention organizations, and people who work with youth. The committee provided guidance for all stages of the project. METRAC also completed a literature review on best practices for video game design and conducted focus groups with more than 250 diverse young people in the province of Ontario. Youth were asked about their game playing behaviors, ideas and preferences, information directly utilized in the game's design. Wendy Komiotis, METRAC's Executive Director, comments on the importance of focus groups:

As an organization that operates from an anti-oppressive framework and values equity so much, we knew we needed to find out what youth wanted in this game. Instead of settling on the advice of literature and adult experts, we thought it was important to listen to youth themselves. Not just the ones who could afford their own game consoles at homes. We made sure to ask what they liked in a game, digital or not, whether played at home or a friend's house, whether played every day or not. (2010)

Figure 2. RePlay: Finding Zoe/ReJouer: Où est Zoé? game screenshot of title page. (© 2007, METRAC, Take Action Games. Used with permission.)

Komiotis explains that METRAC discovered new things about the way young people play games:

They told us that it was action, not violence so much, that they looked for in a good game. This was interesting because we were totally new to the world of social issue games and had heard all the hype about how games promote and teach violence. The youth also shared that they wanted a lot of control, even in the process of playing a simple online Flash game like RePlay/ReJourer. They wanted to control the look of their characters. They wanted to play with characters that looked like them and looked nothing like them. Choice is important. In contrast to all the research on media violence we had read, these youth were not playing like mindless sponges. They applied a lot of their own agency in the process. (2010)

The ideas and preferences of the youth who participated in focus groups directly informed *RePlay/ReJourer*'s design. For example, a feature was included where players choose their character, and conscious effort was dedicated to representing characters in non-normative ways. Ruiz says that METRAC and TAG worked hard to reflect the youth they had met in their focus groups, their "many skin and hair colors and types, their different physical abilities and body shapes, their dress and styles… The game does not place gendered limitations on characters, which was important in creating a game that challenges mainstream gender roles and stereotypes." (2010) In addition, a feature was included where players answer questions about issues of abuse and gender before and after they play the game and through an abstract graphic representation, they can view how other players answered as well. Komiotis explains the significance of this feature:

It helps us collect data about players' opinions. But, perhaps more importantly, it helps players contextualize themselves with other players. They get the opportunity to see that, for example, most players answer the question of whether or not girls can do anything boys can do in the affirmative. They understand that most people do have some positive ideas about gender and ending abuse. Even if it doesn't always translate to peoples' actions in relationships, seeing that most of us don't believe abuse is okay is a start to support

positive attitudes in youth and help them form healthier behaviors in their relationships. (2010)

Since its release in 2007, more than 10,000 people have played *RePlay/ReJourer*. It won three awards for its design, two from Ashoka Changemakers and one from Adobe. Of the 353 players who chose to answer the post-game survey, 45 percent identified learning "something new." Additionally, *RePlay/ReJourer* was translated into French and updated for Francophone cultural competency in 2008 through a partnership with Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions (COPA), given the bilingual nature of Ontario. Komiotis explains,

It was important for us not to do a word-for-word French translation, because it would not be culturally competent. We partnered with COPA, who used their peer networks across the province to connect with Francophone youth and make sure the game's language reflected how they communicate. (2010)

Komiotis says that the incorporation of youth voices in the game's content and its diverse imagery are two of its greatest strengths. "If youth were the ones who developed the game" Komiotis notes, "if they had learned the skills to make the games and actually did it, equity in the design process would have been even stronger" (2010).

TAG's current work, *In The Balance*, consists of a documentary film and a game. *In The Balance* explores the story of six Kentucky teenagers who were incarcerated for murder more than a decade ago. The game began as an experiment in computational documentary and evolved into an investigation of broader dynamics and personal stories embedded in America's criminal justice system and prison industrial complex. Some of the questions *In The Balance* provokes relate to the issue of ethics and documentary filmmaking and to one of the form's longstanding ethical concerns – the burden of responsibility documentarians have as they seek to represent, model and simulate real lives and situations.

In The Balance's core team engaged in five years of research. They visited prisons in Tennessee and immersed themselves in research on issues such as capital punishment, life sentencing of juveniles and the over-incarceration of America's poorest citizens. York, a trained journalist, notes that "objectivity is always a constant struggle" in the process of developing the documentary and

Figure 3. In The Balance game screenshot of a prison modeled after the Tennessee Prison for Women in Nashville. (© 2008, Take Action Games. Used with permission.)

game and "the range of opinions on it is something we were cognizant of and were always negotiating" (2010). In referencing Brian Winston's essay, "The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription," York notes documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's assertion:

[Films] have a point of view that allows you—or, hopefully, asks you—to think, to figure out what you think about what's happening. I don't know how to make an objective film. I think my films are a fair reflection of the experience making them. My subjective view is that they are fair films. (as cited in Winston, 1993, p. 49)

In contrast, documentary scholar Bill Nichols' believes that a subjective approach can help an audience examine their preconceived notions and assumptions. "Subjectivity itself compels belief: instead of an aura of detached truthfulness we have the honest admission of a partial but highly significant, situated and impassioned view." (2001, p. 51)

Adopting Nichols' "documentary modes," York says,

Our discomfort with calling In The Balance 'objective' will be reflected in the game's rules and the game's design. It mirrors the idea that there is no one 'true' perspective and the fabrication inherent to a documentary is purposefully and self-conscientiously exposed. One of the most challenging and problematic aspects of the project is discerning what the goals for the player should be. James P. Gee's [2007] concept of projective identity requires that we think clearly through the structure of identification for the player. This is challenging because ultimately, we don't feel we're making a project about either one "truth" or about what other outcomes may have been possible. Rather, it's about how multiple voices tell their versions of the story—from individuals directly involved and affected, to scholars that speak of broader systemic elements. (2010)

Values at Play

Values at Play (VAP) is a National Science Foundation research project whose principle investigator Mary Flanagan believes that technology has the power to transform human behavior, shift culture, and shape institutions. Flanagan directs the Tiltfactor game research lab at Hunter College, which harnesses video games in the service of humanistic principles, with the recognition that games hold great potential to educate and inspire. VAP investigates how designers can be more intentional about integrating human values into game systems. VAP seeks to assist designers to create games that further the understanding and appreciation of equality and diversity.

In the 1990s, VAP's principle investigator Mary Flanagan focused on gender equity, creating software for female players and initiating after-school programs to build the technology skills of girls. She says that equity and inclusion have been essential to her work as a woman designer. The work of her game laboratory, Tiltfactor, emphasizes how white, male, and heterosexual participants dominate the world of software development and game design. Flanagan explains:

As a consequence, those who are not white/ male/ heterosexual often feel like they have to conform to the mores of the dominant culture. A core principle in the laboratory is to create a space that celebrates and legitimates difference and diversity, rather than conformity. A corollary of this approach is that our games tend to fall outside of the mainstream (which is where we like them to be!)—they spotlight voices and perspectives that are usually found only at the margins. (2010)

VAP develops games as well as game creation tools. For example, the *Grow-A-Game* Cards is a simple and engaging tool that broadens access to game design by helping people brainstorm game ideas on social issues and societal values. Non-designers can also use the cards to create

Figure 4. Screenshot of Tiltfactor's Grow-A-Game Cards web page. (© 2010, Tiltfactor. Used with permission.)

powerful, expressive ideas. More importantly, Flanagan notes, *Grow-A-Game* Cards help non-developers view game design as an interesting, accessible and fun medium for personal, political, and artistic expression. She believes that increasing contributions of non-programmers and other non-experts will ultimately contribute to a more inclusive game development community. Says Flanagan,

It is relatively easy to see the benefits to a given design when enhanced by new ways of thinking due to the diverse voices of the design team and the player group. These arguments for innovation are often stronger to those in the industry than arguing for diversity's sake, just to be inclusive. In the end, the principle is served, and hopefully, new ideas, perspectives, technologies, rewards, points of view, and the like are actively developed. (2010)

Molleindustria

Molleindustria, founded by Paolo Pedercini, aims to "reappropriate" video games as a popular form of mass communication. It investigates the persuasive potentials of the medium by subverting mainstream video gaming cliché. Mollindustria produced a number of online games that explore issues such as abuse perpetrated by clergy, corporate food production and sexual and gender fluidity. With respect to incorporating equity in games, Pedercini says there is a risk in viewing it as a mere implementation issue, which can lead developers to creating little more than a series of guidelines for "politically-correct design practice" (2010).

For instance, he notes that *The Sims* allows players to design characters from every conceivable race and allows characters to form same-sex relationships with each other. However, gender, skin color, and sexual orientation are cosmetic options as the "family" portrayed in the game always conforms to the same parameters and is always contextualized into a North American suburban environment. He says that the game reinforces the "narrative of the American Dream" by depicting equal career and opportunities despite race and gender differences in characters. In this way,

Pedercini questions if *The Sims* actually reflects progressive design or just cultural mystification:

Certainly I prefer the highly politically incorrect world of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas to the utopian suburbia of The Sims ... at least it provides a complex representation of the urban environment. The city of San Andreas, modeled after Los Angeles, is a space characterized by inequalities. Social and racial tensions inform the overarching plot, the player is continuously confronted with moral dilemmas that arise from being disempowered as citizen. (2010)

Pedercini refers to the "posturing of equity" in games when power and access to resources is so skewed (2010). Pedercini cites the recent alternate reality game, *EVOKE*, and how many of the problems the game purports to solve are directly or indirectly created by two decades of Washington consensus. Says Pedercini,

At first sight it appears a great initiative, the comic that introduces the online game is full of empowered men and women from developing countries and the promoters are actively trying to recruit a diverse player population. Except you notice that the game is sponsored by the World Bank, the infamous super-national institution controlled by the richest countries. The same institution that, together with the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund, imposed free-market policies to a number of developing countries with catastrophic consequences. (2010)

While the developers of *EVOKE* may be well-intentioned and there may be positive outcomes to the game, Pedercini warns about the "photoshopped diversity" found in the marketing of universities and corporations (2010). He notes that, when there is a large disconnection between the object of inquiry and the subject producing the text, misrepresentations and mystifications are difficult to avoid.

Pedercini explains that Molleindustria's *Oiligarchy* game exemplifies radical game design by allowing players to be the "protagonist of the petroleum era," where they fuel the world's oil addiction with the goal of successfully exploring, drilling, bribing and halting green energies as they run their oil company with limited resources. As an "oiligarch," the player manages the extraction business in the homeland and overseas and lobbies the government to keep the carbon-fossil based economy as profitable as possible. *Oiligarchy* illustrates what Pedercini believes to be the main potential of game systems. Pedercini says,

Their main potential lays in their ability to easily represent complex systems such as the economic and the political ones. Observing and interacting with a system "from above" allows the player to abstract from her everyday experience and think about the invisible threads that connect our globalized economy. In order to create an "ethical" game you just have to set up a system of rewards and punishments that force the player to be "good." I wish it was that easy! I believe players are smarter than lab rats in a Skinner box. If we dismiss the simplistic relation violent games = violent behavior, we also have to acknowledge that we need more than good scout simulations to foster critical thinking. (2010)

Global Kids

Global Kids in New York City reaches out to marginalized youth, primarily young people of color, in low-income neighborhoods. Barry Joseph, director of the organization's Online Leadership Program, stresses that Global Kids identifies the potential of young people to learn and view themselves as global citizens and community leaders. The Online Leadership Program builds on youths' existing strengths and assets, at the same time that it does not underestimate the impact of internalized oppressions they may

Figure 5. Oiligarchy game screenshot. (Public Domain)

face. "We look to the youth whenever we can to shape the content of the games—they pick the issues, they work out the core mechanics … but we never leave them to do so on their own and provide more guidance with some groups than others" (2010).

Educators and professional game designers partner with youth throughout the game design process. While Global Kids cannot expect youth to have design skills that take experts years to develop, Joseph notes that youth bring unique and valuable assets and insights. For instance, a team of first and second-generation youth Caribbean immigrants developed *Ayiti: The Cost of Life*. The partnering gaming company, GameLab, wanted to locate the game in China, but the youth team wanted the game to reflect issues with which they were more familiar. Joseph explains that the youth were not shy in contributing their ideas, opinions and knowledge at key points in *Ayiti*'s development. For example, during the first play test, the youth team noticed how game characters that fell into debt immediately died. They pointed out that positive elements should be worked into *Ayiti* to more accurately reflect real life in Haiti, that it was not as stark as the game suggested. The team advocated for changes to game play, including an opportunity for players to build things in their communities. When the question arose about including cheat codes in the game to get out of debt, a team member aptly noted: "In Haiti, they don't have a cheat code" (2010).

Joseph speaks to challenges Global Kids faces as they seek to incorporate equity in collaborative digital media and game projects. He notes that time is often a limiting factor, which hinders the depth of game design skills they are able to develop. "This pressure means at times we need to move forward on the project and get youth buy-in after the fact," he says, a less-than-ideal process for equitable game development (2010). Time constraints can also limit learning opportunities for the young people as well. He offers an example from the design process of another Global Kids' game, *Hurricane Katrina: Tempest in Crescent City,* noting that the majority of youth on the design team originally shied away from giving the game's main character a name that they felt would be "too black" (2010). Joseph felt that the team did not get to explore or dissect this issue fully due to scheduling concerns in the development process.

GUIDELINES FOR ANTI-OPPRESSION IN GAME DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

An overview of anti-oppression principles, as well as insights provided by collectives and partners on equity issues and games, informed the guidelines we suggest in this section. These guidelines serve as a starting point to understand practicalities in building anti-oppressive games.

Figure 6. Ayiti: The Cost of Life game screenshot of title page. (© 2006 Global Kids. Used with permission.)

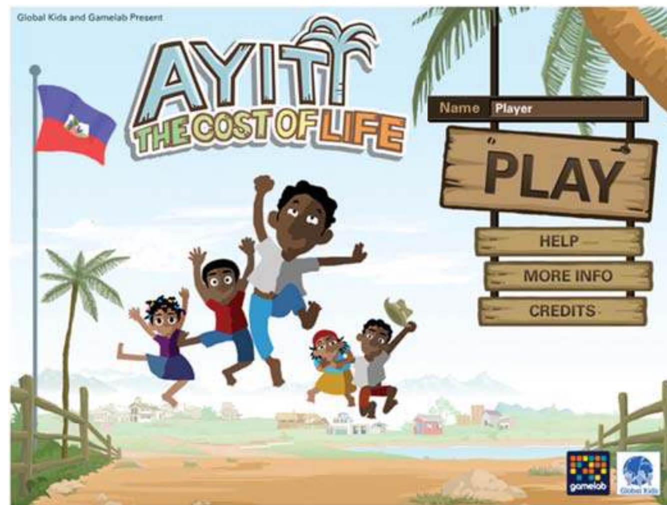

Figure 7. Hurricane Katrina: Tempest in Crescent City screenshot of gameplay (left) and main character (right). (© 2008, Global Kids. Used with permission.)

1. Disrupt Stereotypes

On a preliminary level, anti-oppression in game development and design entails making conscious efforts to disrupt the reproduction of oppressive assumptions in the look, feel, and play of a game. Makers must avoid uncritical stereotypes and "othering" depictions, especially of groups that are most marginalized in media and society. Richard Dyer (1996) draws connections between stereotypes and unequal power relationships between groups. He writes that "stereotypes express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations, which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society" (p. 248). In questioning "who proposes the stereotype" and "who has the power to enforce it," Dyer demonstrates how stereotypes tend to reinforce the worldviews and position of dominant groups (p. 248). While stereotypes of dominant individuals and groups certainly exist, the full harm of stereotypes play out against those who have less power to define

reality, to deem who and what is "normal" and "abnormal."

For example, in creating *RePlay: Finding Zoe/ ReJouer: Où est Zoé*, mainstream understandings about gender—how girls and boys are "supposed" to look—the designers provide players with a wide range of options in choosing the look of their character. Given the invisibility and vilification of dark skin in media and negative connotations having dark skin carries in mainstream society, the game makers made a conscious decision to provide players with the option to choose a dark brown skin color for characters. However, as alluded to by Pedercini above, diversity that appears "photoshopped" can be problematic where it is tokenizing or exists on a purely surface level. When consciously representing groups of people typically underrepresented, game creators should not simply use a window dressing approach.

Game makers must adopt intentionality and conscientiousness when broadening diversity and challenging mainstream stereotypes in games. The *Diner Dash* franchise provides an interesting example. Many incarnations of the game have a young female character as the diner's server, Flo. While some may consider this a stereotyping depiction, deeper complexity is embodied in the character and her role. Flo is a former stockbroker who quit her job to run the diner. She is an entrepreneur who must utilize a variety of strategies and skills to successfully manage and expand her business. In many ways, Flo's portrayal moves beyond a one-dimensional understanding of women's role and qualities even if she engages in service and nurturing work in the game. Dyer (1996) distinguishes "social types" from stereotypes in media. "Although constructed iconographically similarly to the way stereotypes are constructed," he writes, "social types can be used in a much more open and flexible way" (p. 248-249). They can "figure in almost any kind of plot and can have a wide range of roles" while stereotypes "always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative" (p. 248-249). Inclusion of social type characters like *Diner Dash*'s Flo is a helpful way to disrupt stereotypes in game representations.

2. Consider Players and Communicate with Them

Careful consideration of a game's target players and their unique experiences—power they may hold and oppressions they face—is critical to anti-oppression in game creation. It entails moving away from the assumption that only one type of player exists or that all players use games the same way. Game designers and developers must think reflectively about assumptions they make about target players' ideas, preferences, and needs. Before creating *Darfur is Dying*, for example, Take Action Games sought out information about mtvU's audience and network, as well as the evidence that pointed to their lack of knowledge about the situation in Darfur. Only then did the team feel equipped to start designing a game to expose these complex issues to American college-aged youth, with the intent of provoking and inspiring those players to take real-world action.

Communication with target players must have real implications for the shape a game takes; it cannot consist merely of testing pre-formed ideas. For the development of *RePlay/ReJourer*, focus groups with diverse Anglophone and Francophone young people were essential to conceptualizing a game targeted to youth aged 8 to 14. METRAC dedicated a segment of the development budget to travel across the province of Ontario and meet with children in schools and community settings. METRAC incorporated principles of community-based participatory research when it directed focus groups (Israel et al., 2005). Among other features, community-based participatory research "facilitates a collaborative, equitable partnership … [It involves] an empowering and power-sharing process that attends to social inequities" (p. 7). Community-based participatory research computes with anti-oppression and proves useful in the design process for anti-oppressive games.

3. Attend to Multiple and Hidden Perspectives

An essential element to anti-oppressive practice involves multiplicity, and game makers should open space for marginalized communities to share their ideas, opinions, and perspectives. Developers cannot assume that their own perspective is definitive and need time in the development process to proactively search out and reflect upon other perspectives, particularly those hidden in mainstream discussions. Through an anti-oppressive lens, it is clear that academics and professionals are not the sole experts on a subject. In the case of *Darfur is Dying*, they do not only consist of Westerners with particular perspectives on the crisis.

Game makers should converse with a diverse body of experts and witnesses. Chris Swain (2010) advises game developers to conduct needs analyses with the support of experts, to yield a list of pertinent concepts. These concepts contribute to the learning objectives of value-based or ethical games.

Game makers face a challenging and time-consuming task of identifying and opening space for hidden and marginal perspectives, which can require significant resources. *In the Balance*'s developer, Take Action Games, experienced a long and costly research phase because of the difficultly the creators faced in accessing criminalized people, especially those implicated in serious and highly newsworthy crimes. Beyond that, the process of building trust and comfort between criminalized youth and the game's developers presented its own difficulties and implications for project timelines.

Interestingly, hidden perspectives do not only lie with marginalized groups and can be found among those who have a great deal of socio-political power, whose perspectives, understandings and actions may be clouded by anything from propaganda and mainstream mythology to the sheer complexity of what they do. Molleindustria's *Oiligarchy* highlights oppressive practices of the oil industry by exploring a dominant perspective not often addressed in media, government, or policy development. Some may accuse the game of exaggerating the predatory intentions of the industry, but *Oiligarchy*'s depiction of the oppression and degradation that arise from oil addiction provokes players to reflect on a complicated and mystifying system, one with far-reaching but often hidden impacts on most peoples' daily lives.

4. Marginalized Groups Guide Design and Development

Applied to games, anti-oppression entails looking to marginalized groups to guide the process of design and development. Mary Flanagan speaks to how the Tiltfactor Laboratory has created opportunities for marginalized students, designers, and collaborators to participate in game design and build games that better reflect their ideas and play preferences. Since anti-oppression is a power-sharing perspective, one that seeks to decrease the divide between those considered experts and those viewed as non-experts, it is essential that game makers provide opportunities for laypeople to contribute to a game's development. The *Grow-a-Game* Cards make the specialized process of game development accessible and meaningful to people without game expertise. Global Kids' community-based initiatives exemplify how game makers can engage marginalized people to lead the game design process. Some Global Kids initiatives transfer programming skills to young people who may not otherwise have access to them, allowing them to plan and build their own digital games and interactive experiences.

Of course, sharing programming skills cannot be undertaken lightly or quickly. It may require significant resources and time, and unexpected issues that directly relate to oppressions marginalized people face may arise. A telling example comes from Joseph, who says they did not have adequate time to support a young development team who wanted to find a less "black" name for a game character. The harms, pains, and internal-

ized concerns that oppression creates in the lives of marginalized people reveal themselves in many ways. For people who do not experience the same oppressions, it can prove difficult to anticipate these concerns in the planning process. As a result, allowing for flexibility in time and resources to process these concerns proves essential to anti-oppressive game design.

Game makers can establish balanced partnerships with non-governmental organizations and groups who work to support and learn from diverse communities as a means to get guidance from marginalized people. The partnership between Take Action Games and METRAC was not only instrumental in accessing funding for *RePlay/ReJourer*, it also supported information-sharing between game developers, Ontario youth and violence prevention advocates.

CONCLUSION

Anti-oppressive principles are amenable to games with social issue content as well as commercial games. Henry Jenkins suggests:

The issues are complex because oppressive assumptions may be more deeply encoded into the genre norms of commercial games, while serious games may start from a pro-social agenda. But all the more reason why you want commercial designers to start reflecting on these concerns. (2010)

Beyond challenging "taken-for-granted" ideals and ideas about groups with lesser and more access to power, anti-oppression explores the structure of the world and how it functions to maintain social power imbalances between people. Root causes of society's contemporary dynamics are sought out and exposed through, among other things, the very mechanisms explained above—disruption of stereotypes, connecting with target communities, listening to multiple and hidden perspectives, and opening space for the guidance and direction of marginalized groups.

For all of its heady theoretical underpinnings, anti-oppression is designed for practical application in building societal equity and flattening hierarchies. It requires reflectivity and holds strong ethical implications for those who practice it. It also holds a sense of urgency that changes must happen and that people on the margins as well as people with higher access to power and resources must be involved. A core goal of anti-oppressive games, then, is to inspire players to contribute to equitable social change.

Game collective members and partners interviewed for this chapter provided key starting points to support equitable principles in game and interactive design and development. These guidelines only scratch the surface of the potential anti-oppression principles hold to transform game design and development, especially games that seek to expose unequal power dynamics in society. Anti-oppression can support the process of giving players space to re-envision a more equitable world, where, as Flanagan says, working and fighting for equity, justice, and inclusion is learned and practiced, where players are agents of change who can create and share tools for social change.

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