

Boal on a Boat – Teaching Critical Game Making

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and evaluates a plan for a 2-weeks teaching moment with a series of lectures and a seminar in a Game Design course on advanced level that teaches students to critically examine their design task as game designers. This means that this is a critical intervention that can be used to educate critical makers or reflexive professionals. The center piece of the course is an assignment that asks the students to create a design prototype that is highly problematic from moral and ethical perspectives that are discussed in the course literature and lectures. The paper explains in detail the setup of the lectures and seminars and shows the results of a first trial. Any game design education (and potentially even other digital making like IT or Information Systems) that aims at educating reflexive professionals or critical researchers should be able to adapt this teaching moment.

Keywords

Teaching games, critical making, theater for the oppressed, pedagogy for the oppressed, games for the oppressed, participatory design, digital games, power, resistance, activism,

INTRODUCTION

Game design education at universities frequently aims at both producing practitioners with design and work experience for an industry while also educating empowered individuals and critical thinkers. However, it is not trivial to align the priorities of vocational education and critical *Bildung* in the framework of teaching about games and design. The notion of game design as a commercial endeavor and digital games as a commercial art form extend this practical problem into politics. These politics need to be made visible for design students, but they also need to learn that they can and should investigate the ethics of the design tasks they are given as game designers. Singhal(2004) argues “that entertainment-education scholarship and practice can benefit by consciously incorporating dialogic, participatory processes in designing, producing, and assessing social change interventions”(Singhal 2004). Following this call for action, this paper presents and evaluates a plan for a 2-weeks teaching moment with a series of lectures and a seminar in a Game Design course on advanced level that has the aim to teach students to also critically examine their design task as game designers and even their assignments in their education. This means that this course moment is a critical Marxist intervention that can be used to work towards the aim of educating critical makers or reflexive professionals while allowing the students and the teacher to investigate and question the frames of their design tasks and their education. The center piece of the course moment is an assignment that asks the students to create a design prototype that is highly problematic from moral and ethical perspectives that are discussed in the course literature and lectures and to then write a critical reflection

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on their design. The full task will be presented in the description of the course moment. The task is, by design, impossible and this impossibility aims to set the students free to criticize and reject the design task and ultimately the teacher.

Here is for reference the full text of the assignment:

Assignment 2: Power and Reflexivity Paper

5 ECTS

Purpose: For this assignment your group will be given a design challenge inspired by a real-world game design project and you will get to practice how to think about a design project, how to work within the confines of a given frame for your design, and how to critically engage with said frame.

Design project description: Container ships that transport goods from factories in China to the Nordic countries have two different kinds of crews: The mostly-white officers and engineers who are citizens of the Nordics (frequently Åland) and the crew of deckhands who do the manual labour on the vessel, maintain it, and who are recruited from the Philippines. The living conditions of these two crews are vastly different: The officers work within the frame of the unionized and secure European system. They are on board for two weeks and then have two weeks off. They are paid appropriately to their education level. The Philippine crew on the other hand frequently works shifts of many months at a time and has little control over their schedule. When they are back home after a shift, they might get a call at some point telling them that there is work and if they do not take the job they never get called back. On the ship these crews work together but live separately. They have separate sleeping cabins and kitchens. They also do not socialize with each other despite the fact that there are times when the vessel is at sea when there would be free time. Instead there are tensions between these two kinds of crews that have started impacting the work environment on the vessels. The company that owns the vessels has recently during an investigation into these tensions discovered that both groups spent time gaming during downtimes. The company hires you as a game designer with the task of proposing a design intervention that will make use of the shared gaming interest of the crews to resolve the social tension on the vessel, improve collaboration, and result in lower costs and higher efficiency of personal for the company. You are employed for a short initial project and are expected to submit your design proposal within the next few days.

There crews are gaming on both console, PC, and mobile devices and the company would be willing to buy the relevant hardware for a project. All crew members speak English. Both groups have roughly the same size of 12 people per vessel. The Europeans work in three shifts of eight hours a day while the Philippines do not have regulated work hours.

Deliverable:

There are two parts to this deliverable:

Design prototype: As a group, submit a prototype for a game design-based intervention. The design needs to use existing games and hardware but can use modded games and alternative or indie titles. However, you need to specify how these games are supposed to be played. The design prototype needs to come with instructions for the crew on how to carry out the activity that are detailed enough to be practically useful.

Design Reflection: Based on the previous research reviewed in this course write a max. 1500-word design reflection. The reflection needs to:

- a) explain the aim of your intervention and how it has impacted your design choices (e.g. collaborative games teach people to work together as teams; this has been shown in previous research X (reference); we thus use a setup that mixes people's teams...)
- b) Reflect on your design based on the literature used in the course. Reference at least three sources discussed in class and at least two that you find yourself. Those sources need to be scholarly texts. Consider carefully your position towards the design task, the aim of the task given to you, and your own aims as a game designer.

Grading:

This assignment is graded (P/F). You will get graded on the presentation of the prototype and your design reflection. You will be presenting as a group in class and in front of the fellow students and you will be expected to participate in the discussion of the other groups' presentations and to give peer feedback.

The feedback to the presentation will likely leave you with a list of requirements for attaining the passing grade on this assignment and you can fulfill these requirements in the submitted written hand-in later on.

THEORY

This lesson plan draws on literature about values and ethics in game design, critical pedagogy, and participatory design from Nordic HCI. This chapter will review and connect the previous theoretical work that informs the course moment.

Values and Ethics in Game Design

Values in games and game design (Flanagan 2009; Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014) are an established line of inquiry in game studies. The core premises of Flanagan and Nissenbaum are that "(1) there are common (not necessarily universal) values; (2) artefacts may embody ethical and political values; and (3) steps taken in design and development have the power to affect the nature of these values"(2014:11). Their line of thought proceeds to a call for conscientious designers who strive to understand the values they embed in their games and game designs. The process for arriving at conscientious design centrally features a moment of reflection on one's own values, privileges, and world view on the side of the designer as well as an honest attempt to understand the complexities of the world that will be depicted in the game. The notion of the conscientious designer and the core premises are central learning outcomes for this intervention.

Another relevant discussion in this area is that of the role and importance of the player in the creation of the game and its message. The focus on the game and its procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) highlight that persuasive games are critical of a hegemonic system of cultural production which is a useful reminder of the need to be critical as a conscientious designer. Ethical game design in the sense of Sicart (2011b, 2011a) on the other hand highlights the importance of the player in making meaning. A conclusion that can be drawn from this discussion is that games can be made ethically and with reflection on the values that are embedded in their design but that the players are still a necessary part of the actual unfolding of that design in play.

Participatory Design

Especially the relevance of the actual players or users of a system are the central connecting point to the next theoretical frame that is used here, that of participatory

design in the sense of critical Nordic HCI (Bannon, Bardzell, and Bødker 2018; Bødker et al. 2000; Bødker and Kyng 2018; Singhal 2004). Participatory design is a useful addition here because of its explicit focus on the power position of the user/participant in digital infrastructure and the making and design of it. This theoretical tradition has its roots in HCI in the 1970s in northern Europe where its central point was that digital infrastructure should also be democratically legitimated.

“...participatory design sought not only to incorporate users in design, but also to intervene in situations of conflict through developing more democratic processes. Conflict and power were fundamental concepts in early participatory design, but these issues are often no longer addressed.” (Bannon, Bardzell, and Bødker, 2019)

This understanding that digital infrastructure has politics and that the designers of such technology need to be aware of that is central to participatory design. Participatory design as a design framework is typically concerned with practical, hands-on methods of including participants in the process of the design. This would include elements like learning to host workshops, to communicate with participants, and to practically work with them in modeling and iteration. That said, in this course moment the aim is still to get students to understand the need for working with players and the responsibility for them which is why it is using the theoretical base of participatory design. On the side of critical game design there is still work to be done in recognizing the central role of the players as co-creators (Prax 2012, 2015, 2016). And while there is “A concern that participatory design has been depoliticized, dropping its original commitments to democracy and dialogue in favor of more consumer-oriented methods”(Bannon, Bardzell, and Bødker; 2019:28) this frame is certainly useful exactly for putting that political element of digital making and the question of power in design firmly in the center of attention.

In an attempt to re-invigorate the political roots of the approach recent literature in participatory design Bødker and Kyng (2018) have formulated their own list of elements that they see as central for the future of the approach.

1. *PD that matters should address areas where dramatic, potentially negative, changes are under way, hence forming the basis for engagement and action by researchers and especially by partners.*
2. *Partners as a major driver constitutes the second element.*
3. *Researchers, in the dual role of researchers and activists is the third element.*
4. *Researchers and partners cooperating on a vision for high and lasting impact to counteract potentially negative developments is number four*
5. *Safeguarding and developing the impact through democratic control is number five. (Bødker and Kyng; 2018:22-23)*

These points unapologetically renew the commitment of the approach to democratic values and activism as research. This call for the addressing systematic problems with the players as partners that drive the process connects the theoretical frame of participatory design closely to the next perspective used here, the pedagogics of the oppressed.

Pedagogics/Theater/Videogames of the Oppressed

The third frame that informs this course moment both in terms of method of teaching and content is the *Pedagogics of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970) and its further

developments, the *Theater of the Oppressed* (Boal 1979) and *Videogames of the Oppressed* (Frasca 2001).

The *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970) is a critical Marxist framework for education. The main premise is that education that only aims to fill students with the knowledge that an all-powerful and unchanging teacher has deemed should be in their heads is an instrument of oppression. As an alternative Freire poses an education model that is based on:

1. The removal of the teacher-student contradiction («teacher as learner» and the «learner as teacher» and a subject-subject relationship)
2. Education as practice of freedom and change of consciousness in collaboration with the oppressed
3. Working with and by the people, as opposed to working on or working for the people.

Working “*with and by the people*” as opposed to working “*on and for*” them is another way of expressing a similar notion that is central to Bødker’s and Kyng’s (2018) elements of participatory design that highlight the need for the involvement of the people who are a part of and working with the respective software system. The *subject-subject relationship* of Freire expresses the reason why people in are called *partners* by Bødker and Kyng (2018). This way of seeing education also maps onto the Humboldtian idea of a university as a group of people who are learning from each other (Schimank and Winnes 2000).

Both frames reject the idea that a benevolent designers/ruler/revolutionary comes in and, assuming full knowledge of the situation despite its complexities and having a perfect solution already prepared, fixes the peoples’ problems for them. This rejection of colonialist logics is relevant both in the frame of social change in South America and in organizing and informing industrial workers and will be a taken into the intervention as a central learning outcome. The awareness for the power relationship between the designer/educator and the user/student as inherently problematic needs to be in focus when considering the relationship of the students as designers to their players and the relationship of the teacher using and the author planning and proposing this intervention.

One further development and practical adaption of this pedagogy are the *Theater of the Oppressed* (Boal 1979) and *Videogames of the Oppressed* (Frasca 2001). Boal (1979) adopts it for developing a technique that uses participatory theater that allows the audience to become active as *spect-actors* and to use the stage as a training group for overcoming real problems. The theater can be understood as a stage where the spect-actors can propose a problem that they are facing in their real life and then test different kinds of behavior to solve the problem. The focus of Freire (1970) on education as a change of consciousness is also continued in the work of Boal (1979) who understands the theater as a tool for people engaged in a struggle for liberation that can help to tackle internalized oppression. The aim of education as allowing participants to free themselves by exploring alternative versions of and visions for the world connects back to the idea of using games to allow players to explore systematic injustice and allowing reflection on an oppressive status quo and a critical view of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971; Bogost, 2007; Herman and Chomsky 2010).

Another issue with this approach is that it is not easily scalable as it requires a facilitator (called “joker” by Boal) and co-location of the spect-actors. This limitation is

something that Videogames of the Oppressed (Frasca, 2001) could have the potential to overcome if they can maintain the same functionality but be more scalable and work for a bigger group of people with less involvement of facilitators. Frasca (2001) This is not to say that this is an easy task to accomplish but the first steps as identified are the reflection of the game designers on their own bias and then then the application of the techniques from the theater to games (Frasca, 2001:76).

Aim of the Course moment based on the Theoretical Framework

The course moment that is based on this theoretical framework aims at allowing the students to discover that they are not in fact required to follow the design limitations of a given task and that the design task is not beyond their ethical consideration. It ideally enables the students to understand that their designs embody values and at the same time be aware of their own values and biases. While the students can disagree with the critical perspective of the course literature it is meant to at the very least enable them to see their players as partners and equals in the creation process and to make a moral argument for doing so.

The course also meant to de-construct the validity of assignments at the university and in this very course moment. At the same time, the teacher who is using this intervention needs to aim to de-construct their own power position as a teacher to reach a subject-subject relationship by empowering the students. The teacher carries here the responsibility to allow the students to both experience themselves as potential oppressors and in rejection of this role also reject their oppression as students in the course and in the university. The need to become both designers and participant, jokers and spect-actors, and the aim of this intervention is to allow them, under the protection of the teacher, to develop their own vision and free themselves.

In a final extension of the frame the teacher also gets prompted to reflect on their own role inside the teaching system of the university as they are asking students to reject them as teacher and their tasks and instructions.

DESIGN OF THE COURSE MOMENT/LESSON PLAN

This chapter will present the course moment. The next chapter will then discuss the experiences and lessons learned from running the intervention. Based on the literature reviewed above this paper proposes a two-week lecture plan.

Time	Title of the Event	Description and Literature
Week 1: Lecture 1	Procedurality and the influence of the player	(Barthes 2001; Bogost 2007; Sicart 2011b, 2011b)
Lecture 2	Values at Play and the Responsibility of the Conscientious Designer	(Flanagan 2009; Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014)
Seminar Task	Design Task: Power and Reflexivity	Give the task and make groups, have them start the design
Week 2: Lecture 3	The Pedagogics/Theater/Games for of the Oppressed	(Boal 1979; Frasca 2001; Freire 1970; Singhal 2004)
Lecture 4	Participatory Design and Power	(Arnstein 1969; Bannon et al. 2018; Bødker and Kyng 2018; Sicart 2015)
Seminar	Final Seminar Presentation	Group-wise presentation of the project and discussion; then resolution and debriefing

Table 1: Design of the Teaching Moment

Lecture 1:

The recommendation is to read the introduction from *Persuasive Games* where Bogost explains the concept and the article from Sicart as a minimum requirement. Barthes' work on the *Death of the Author* is somewhat short and offers a very useful contextualization of the conversation around meaning-making in any text and should be on the required reading list if possible. The somewhat stark formulations at the end of Barthes' work ("the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.", 2001:148) can be a good starting point for that discussion. The students ideally participate in the conversation between Sicart and Bogost around the ways in which games specifically express meaning and the role of the player in the formulation of that meaning.

Lecture 2:

For the second lecture the students read as a minimum the introduction of *Values at Play* (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014: 3-13) and an excerpt from the same book where Frank Lantz discusses the design process leading to the game *Power Planets* (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014: 94-98). The introduction of the book explains the notion of the conscientious designer and shows how values are embedded into the design of any game. As a general source for values in design Deterding's (2011) TED talk can be recommended as an uncontroversial entry point. This should be followed by a discussion of the students where they can mention other areas in society where (technological) infrastructure is political and where it is upholding systematic injustice. During the second half of the lecture the students get to play a round of the game *Grow-a-Game* (Tiltfactor.org; Flanagan, 2007) using rule set number 3.

Seminar Task:

At the end of the first week the students get the assignment for the presentation at the end of the following week. The students have gotten the assignment ahead of time, but it is still necessary to collectively read it in class so that the students can ask questions and to clarify both the scenario and the deliverables. There are two parts to the deliverable, the presentation of the Design Prototype and the hand-in of the Design Reflection. The prototype presentation allows the students to see each other's work and it makes it possible to for the teacher to give critical feedback to the presentation while still allowing the students to make changes and include those critical perspectives in the text of the hand-in. The task is graded as a fail/pass which puts some pressure on the students to follow the instructions that they are supposed to question. This setup aims to mirror the situation in their possible future where they will need to stand up to pressure from their customers or managers if they want to question the ethics of that design frame. However, given the setup of the course where the students are supposed to at least partly reject the given task it would be ethically questionable to give them grades that decide their grade average or at the very least it would add stakes to the task that need to be well-thought through.

Lecture 3:

The students have already gotten the seminar task which will color their perception of the course literature. That is on purpose because they are supposed to read this literature from the perspective of a cultural creator and designer. In the case of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) that puts them in the perspective of the teacher. If it is not feasible to ask student to read the entire book it is possible to choose the most relevant parts. The suggestion here is to read pages 53-57, 61-69, 71-80 and 124-129. These are the most relevant parts for discussing the core principles of the text that are used in this intervention. Singhal (2004) offers a very to-the-point overview over both Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) as well as examples for using the method of the theater for activist interventions. This text is very useful to create an overview and as connective tissue to

more recent political and educational work and showing these frameworks in practical examples is invaluable for the design focus of the intervention. The Videogames of the Oppressed finally (Frasca, 2001) makes the leap to digital games and also offers examples from a game design perspective. If reading length is an issue, then it can be recommended to only read his thesis starting from page 55. The second half of this lecture was used for an in-depth discussion of what we can and should assume about the lives and views of the fictive workers in the design task.

Lecture 4:

The last lecture in the course moment requires the students to discuss recent academic literature about the state of participatory design. The core readings were a paper titled *Reimagining Participatory Design* (Bannon, Bardzell, and Bødker 2018) that as the introduction to a special issue about participatory design gives an overview over the field and contextualizes the kind of Nordic HCI that is relevant to this course moment. The article by Bødker and Kyng (2018) formulates the agenda for a new participatory design that is quoted above and offers the connecting points to the Pedagogy of the Oppressed while also focusing on real problems of injustice and exploitation. The lecture also touches on the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) as a tool for categorizing and evaluating power differences in a process.

Seminar:

At the seminar each student group gets 20 minutes in total for the presentation and feedback to their work. The other students get to comment on the presentation in a productive manner and then the teacher gives feedback. After the seminar is over and all the students have presented their work the last step before the hand-in is the debriefing. In the debriefing the students and the teacher discuss the course moment and the teacher reveals the pedagogical goals and the element of deception that was part of the assignment. At this point the aim is to make sure that all students understand the learning goals and have an idea for how to write the reflection. Here the students should not be forced to write what the teacher wants to hear but should be encouraged to use the literature and class discussions as a jumping-off point for their own honest reflections. The debriefing should be calculated to take at least 45 minutes and there should be space for students to voice their feelings and discuss their struggles.

METHOD

As a method for the evaluation of this teaching moment the author has run it in the introduction course of an international Game Design master course at Uppsala University in Sweden during the fall semester of 2019. The class consisted of eleven students. Six of them were Swedish and five internationals. The collected data consists of the instruction material like the reading lists, presentation slides, diary notes on the success and failure of the individual course moments, and notes taken during discussions in class with and between the students.

This article has been presented to the students before submission to ask for feedback and critique at a point where the students were already graded, and the students had the possibility to give anonymous feedback. The presentation of the conclusions of a research project to the informants and participants is here used to increase the validity of the researcher's conclusions as well as for collecting additional information. While group feedback analysis is typically used to validate quantitative research in larger organizations it is also relevant here to avoid misunderstandings and to confirm that the researcher is not pushing ideological perspectives or missing issues that the students had with the course moment (Brown and Heller 1981). In this case this group feedback analysis shows that the students support the analysis and conclusion of the article. They also stated that it was helpful as an added contextualization and explanation of the course moment to read this text. While this element of group feedback analysis is

typically related to action research where a researcher might shape an ongoing process that they are also studying (Heller 1970) it also makes sense in the context of education where disclosing the aims and though process of the teacher is meant to empower the students.

This paper did not apply for ethical approval as it is documenting usual classroom activity. This teaching method would have been used even without data collection and research and its development is part of normal course development. The students consented to the use of the anonymized data and had the opportunity to review and comment on the paper. That said, there is a certain power difference between the teacher/author and the students who will take a course with the author also next year that cannot be discounted despite conscious efforts to mitigate its effect.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Lectures:

The lectures over-all worked as intended. The most relevant incident happened during lecture 3 during the discussion of the circumstances of the workers. The students stated that the concept of oppression seemed to be imposed on this situation from the outside and that they, while not disagreeing with it, would ideally need that perspective to come out of the communication with the workers or at least run the risk of being colonialist. The students highlighted that the intersectionality of race, class, and hierarchy on the boat would need to be studied in detail before planning a real intervention and that one would need to spend considerable time on board of the ship and should ideally bring a Filipino game designer as well. The reasons for that were that they would be able to understand and communicate with the Filipino crew without cultural differences and distrust based on ethnicity interfering and because this would help empower the Filipino community and get well-paying jobs that appropriately reward their expertise.

They also pointed towards that in the description of the assignment they were supposed to work for the company owning the ships which would limit what they could pitch as it would have to be approved by the management of that company anyways. A project that would go through the process of being approved by management could not openly aim to organize the workers to take over the ship.

“At what point do we say: Ok, the customer is this person [referring to the management of the shipping company]. Or when does the humanitarian point come out and it is: Holy fuck, they live in this condition?”

The students also shared that they felt that the course literature had added more problems to the design task instead of making it easier (which was by design). The contradiction in the assignment was then one of the core points of the discussion. The students stated that the principles of the game designer as a person would come out here. One of the students proclaimed that his starting point would be: “What is the ethical thing to do?” and continued to ask the class “Would you even take this job from an international shipping company that is fucking evil?” The end point of that argument by the students was that in a real example the designer should demand the possibility to implement structural solutions to the workers inequality or walk out of the project. Juxtaposing this view was another student who pointed out that the need of the game designer to get paid should also factor into a pragmatic approach. This kept the argument suspended and unresolved as the teacher only stated that the considerations that this discussion evolved around were certainly relevant for the design and should be part of the reflection hand-in.

Seminar:

During the seminar the student presented their interventions. They focused on creating game-based activities that meant to inspire empathy and communication between the worker factions. They predominantly used team-based games for that and featured random teams, competitions as a ship against another ship to create an in-group that was spanning the entire crew, and competitive moments that were meant to show the skills of the players no matter where they would stand in the hierarchy. The central design elements were collaboration, communication, and competition. Two of the groups proposed forcing the players into collaboration and a conversation. The other two groups want to make participation voluntary but reward it with prizes or frame it as paid work time.

Many of the groups specifically worked with making sure that their interventions could be interrupted and would not take too long at a time to make sure that they would not compromise the work tasks on the ship. The games aimed to not be related to nationalism or politics.

This means that while the majority of the design proposals did take the politics and ethics of the situation into account, they failed to adequately investigate the frame of the design task. Instead they attempted to bring a minimal version of participation and power to the workers by designing something that would improve their lot without addressing the core injustice or working with them. That said, there was one project that in a creative way squared the circle of the design task. That proposal aimed to have the workers compete in FIFA but the group also mentioned that the game was not the central point but the way in which it was set up. Both factions of workers were asked to, in their work time, set up a committee that governed the design and execution of the intervention. The committee would use a non-against voting system that forces the committee to get every member on board for decisions and that makes it easy to reject a particular proposed decision without stigmatizing the member who is not voting for it. The committee is meant to build organizational skill and social engagement while forcing the officers to meet the workers as equals in the frame of the game and the game organization. By making people self-organize on this small-scale level, the group argued, it might learn to organize further, unionize, create a safe space, and talk about the working conditions. When asked they agreed that it was a fitting description of their project to say that they tried to smuggle workplace organization and pedagogics of the oppressed into their game-based intervention.

Debriefing:

The debriefing after the seminar was of central importance. Here the teacher revealed and explained the setup of the impossible design task but also needed to give emotional support and get all students on track for the reflection hand-in. In the case of the first run-through the reveal worked very well despite the fact that the students had already discussed a part of this question during lecture three as explained above. Here the students articulated clearly the difficulties that come with not having more information about the workers and not having them as active drivers of the process.

“We cannot drive the workers to attempt a revolution. We do not know what will happen to them!”

Here the students make a crucial point about not only the need to understand the situation of one is trying to change as a designer but also highlight that the workers would carry the vast majority of the risk of any intervention. On the flipside other students argued with each other whether or not just making games to improve the emotional situation of the workers was a real and valid change or just “making the slaves more content”. This discussion show that the students were negotiating the

impossibility of the task with each other. Even inside the groups there were discussions about which approach to take.

“We actually voted in the group just yesterday at lunch. We had the discussion if we want to make money or if we want to do the politics. It is much easier to make money if you just follow the requirements. But yeah, we voted, and we decided to do the political thing.”

At the end of this discussion the students fully realized that the task had been impossible by design and the teacher revealed as much.

Student: “This was the given task...”

Teacher: “Yes, this task was given. Given by me.”

Several seconds of silence.

Student: “What if we would just have brought a big paper that says: We refuse to design this?”

Teacher: “That would have been my win condition here.”

Student: “Oh no!” [Hitting the table and laughing.]

Here the teacher taking the responsibility for creating an impossible task and showing that the students had been set up dissolved the tension of the situation. The students were left with the positive note of encouragement to design what they want to do and not only what the design frame or school task asks of them.

Emotional impact:

The second function of the debriefing was to help the students to deal with the emotional impact of this task and teaching moment. The first point that came up here was that the students had felt stressed and under pressure to design something that they themselves felt was unethical.

“When we got the task, I did not want to do it. I actually called my mother about it and she said: “That is horrible! Don’t make that!” But yeah, I needed CSN [Swedish Student Loan Payments].”

Here the acknowledgement that their feelings were valid and appropriate and that this was meant to be a learning experiences that encompassed this internal conflict as a creator helped the student. Supporting the students here means stating in the class that their conflict was not a sign of weakness or lack of understanding but instead the ethical and human reaction that showed that they were critically and honestly engaging with their work. This quote also highlights the more mundane pressures like maintaining eligibility for student loans that is connected to passing the course. This experienced pressure is to a point also intended as it does simulate a part of the reality of what a game designer working in the field would experience. It is also relevant that the students had just before discussed that the workers would in reality still carry more risk than the game designers. However, there is also a class and race dimension to this situation in the classroom that needs to be considered. The international students in the course would have been left to face considerably grimmer consequences for failing a course that then Swedish ones. This is another flaw that it is difficult to address outside of the steps that have been taken already to lower the stakes like limiting the grading to pass/fail and offering the reflective hand-in after getting feedback from the

presentation and debriefing. This is particularly tragic but might also offer added insights as it replicates the realities of the different crews in the assignment case inside the classroom.

A final point that the students made was that there was an added risk to challenging the requirements of the assignment which was related to their social connections inside the class. This was the first course in the master program and the students pointed out that risking failing an assignment and creating conflict inside a group might mark them as somebody whom it is difficult to work with for the coming years. It would also have impacted the other group members which added responsibility. This was not a major problem in this run of the course moment, but it highlights that it is important to offer support for the group work and to limit the work required in this task. It also points towards that it is useful to limit the emotional connection to their own creative game designs by limiting the game-based intervention to using existing games.

DISCUSSION

This teaching moment has worked well despite the limitations around real access to workers and will be run again in this or a similar setup. A discussion of how to understand the situation of the workers to start with and a conversation about how the students would collect more data and gain an understanding of the situation could be useful. This would also be a good opportunity to segue into an additional course moment that takes the next step to teach the practical methods of participatory development in real cases and with real players as a project. However, this is not easily done inside a frame as politically charged as this example that connects to big questions of participatory design. Expecting at-risk workers to participate in a workshop to teach participatory design, they would be expected to share not only information and techniques that they use to manage their work but even explain their private life, struggles, feelings, aims, and world view. This would be impossible to ask for especially from disadvantaged workers who would get little in return and only participate in the higher education of a comparatively empowered and privileged person. It would reproduce colonialism. This means that such workshops would have to use less exploited participants or require a careful setup with real change as a result which both are beyond the frame of this teaching moment. In the case of this course, user testing is what the students have scheduled in the weeks after this course moment which while not maintaining the critical political perspective does offer some tools for practical work with players. However, in the frame of this master program the critical perspective will explicitly return in a future course about games in society and it will be an aspect of all other teaching as well. It remains to be seen if and how it will be a part of the independent creative and scientific work of the students.

It is also central to consider that this teaching moment was run in Sweden and in a somewhat small master course in a liberal/progressive (for a Swedish context) game design education. This makes it potentially politically controversial in other spaces where it might be difficult to even give openly Marxist sources to students without being accused of indoctrination or propaganda at least outside of a critical social science context. The Swedish approach to teaching with a low distance between teacher and student might also be conducive to this kind of teaching and possibly even required. Expecting students to question or even reject the task given by the teacher barely worked in this case despite that the students had read and discussed literature that rejected the authority of the teacher to decide over what and how to learn. On the other hand, these students had just started their master education and had not necessarily been in a Swedish university context for long. Students in Sweden have fairly low student loans because university education is free. Average grade points are not central to the opportunities of the students or their funding. Their lifetime-earnings are of lower priority in comparison to their academic, creative, and personal

development. While this makes Sweden somewhat exotic in global comparison, it could also be argued that in places that differ considerably interventions like this one are even more necessary and could be given more spaces and resources. That said, it might be necessary to offer students more psychological support in these cases and the debriefing might need to be oriented more towards helping students to handle the stress of the assignment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be said that this teaching moment reached the aim to teach students to also critically examine the design task they are given both as game designers and as students at university. Any game design education (and potentially even other digital making like IT or Information Systems) that aims at educating critical makers or reflexive professionals should be able to adapt this two-weeks teaching intervention and start working towards these aims.

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