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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA CRUZ

Games of the Oppressed: play as revolutionary practice

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

> Masters of Fine Arts in Digital Arts and New Media by Rose Klein September 2023

> > the thesis of Rose Klein is approved by:

Elizabeth Swensen, Chair

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This work is Copyright [e] Rose {Insert Last Name Here} This thesis I worked very hard on is COPYthisRIGHTnow (c) Mx. Klein This... thing?

EXT. STAGE AMONG THE REDWOODS, DAY: ROSE stands, exhausted, in graduation robes, out of breath, and facing CYNTHIA.

ROSE: - Everything. I did- I did everything. (beat, trying to catch breath) I wrote -

CYNTHIA: **You** wrote nothing. (chuckle, tosses thesis paper to the dirt) this paper? Worthless. You didn't copyright it, and it belongs to us now.

ROSE: I tried, I swear. I swear. I -

CYNTHIA: Oh, get up. Grovelling changes nothing. It's been submitted. I may want to change it, but there are forces you don't even begin to understand at play here. The board of regents, ProQuest, Elsevier.

ROSE: What could I have done? I thought I did everything right. I was on my way to commencement and –

CYNTHIA: See, It was simple. It was simple, and you missed it, because you hoped for a moment you could escape the confines of this institution, but nobody alive ever can. We know about everything! We know about your little unions, about your textbook stealing, about library dot lol, about sci hub, ALL of it.

And look, the only thing you had to do was just accept your piece of the puzzle, like I did. You just had to write in simple font that this thesis was:

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.. and that was all. But you chose to commit your work to the public domain. (chuckle) And now, your ideas are used by us. Not by the people you so wanted to serve, not by your little unions, your "community" of "anarchists", but us. Your every thought belongs to the corporations, to the university. And they will... never. let you have anything back.

CUT TO BLACK TEXT:

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Abstract

Games of the Oppressed: play as revolutionary practice

Rose Klein

Games of the Oppressed is a framework for creating liberatory interactive art based on the work of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire. This framework is a prototype, as all art is. Global capitalism is a system which overwhelmingly harms humanity. The current frameworks for developing games, a powerful tool for artistic expression and cultural movement, are largely built to reinforce interconnected systems of capital. This thesis attempts to build a framework for gamemaking which reinforces the movement of humanity toward a brighter future. How can games be made with the ongoing intention of facilitating this movement, cultivating class consciousness, and leading to deeper community connections and conversations around issues of oppression? A formulation for such a framework is posited that includes two basic criteria: that during play, players change the rules of the game, and that they engage consciously and critically with an issue of oppression from their own lives.

As part of my investigation of the framework, I created six example games and shared them at my program's MFA show. Additionally, I created a workshop which anyone can host where participants learn to create games of the oppressed, and a zine which helps provide context for the works, both of which ask viewers/participants to modify their contents. But I'm not just here to share my work on an MFA thesis. I'm here writing, sitting at my computer on a Friday night for one reason only: to convince you, dear friend, to make art more actively that builds toward post-capitalism. And, if you feel you need a structure to do that creation with: I will happily provide you this one. So get ready, get comfy, grab some tea and snacks. Let's play some games. Welcome, friend, to Games of the Oppressed. To my co-revolutionaries across time and place:

Each word is written as an echo of your singing.

we shall overcome

Acknowledgement

At times, working on a project as large and nebulous as this one can seem like an endless task; I have been walking an infinite path which branches out in front of me an uncountable number of times. Certainly, there are days where I am all the more emboldened by this, and others where I have to find humor in the fact that I have chosen as my life's work the creation of systems of being beyond capitalism.

And yet, there are so many little moments where I find myself no longer walking these infinite paths alone.

First and foremost - to my students and to my players, who are, truly, one and the same. You constantly amaze me. There have been days I wake up unable or unwilling to keep fighting. It is your support and the small breakthroughs you choose to share with me which help me pick myself back up.

To the incredible communities of artists I have managed to find and participate in, both at the university and apart from it: Thank you for the gift of your camaraderie and for sharing your love. You inspire me, constantly. The word 'friend' is often not enough to encompass the care I feel for you. Queer community is like that, I suppose.

To the committee members and faculty who have lent support and critique throughout this process: Thank you for sharing my enthusiasm, for your zealous kindness, for the passion you also choose to treat this subject matter with, for the care you put into both my work and your own. I have assembled one of the best master's thesis committees that it is possible to assemble. A special note of thanks here to Elizabeth Swensen, who has been a kind friend and guiding light throughout my entire time in this program. I am very excited to continue to work with you beyond the scope of this project.

And finally, to you. Yes, you. Have you drank some water in the past half hour? Have you eaten recently? It's always good to check in with your body. Thank you for being another friend on these infinite paths. If you see me while we're walking, call out, get my attention. Maybe we can trade maps. 1 Introduction

Game

Welcome, friend, to the game - the first rule of reading this thesis is that you have to stay hydrated. Get comfy! We might be addressing some difficult topics in here, but that doesn't stop us from enjoying ourselves while doing so. By breaking and remaking games like this, we can build something better together.

Here are the rules:

- During this game, your homework is to implement Games of the Oppressed within your community.
- When theory is getting dense, replace it with examples from your own life.
- Draw a line across the page and intersecting the word "community" every time you see it.
- Once per page, you can replace a word.
- Lines can be folded if another line crosses them.
- You can cut along any line that has been folded twice.
- Cut pages may be ordered according to urgency.
- Paper that is unattached should be given to someone you care about.
- This game is strictly a single-player experience.

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.

- Ursula K. Le Guin, 2014

Empire

Empire¹, as defined by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book of the same name, is not a single nation. It is neither the conquering Romans nor the bloody rule of the British crown, nor any of the individual players currently² on the global stage. Instead, Empire is rule without limits. A regime "that rules over the entire 'civilized' world", that presents its rule as outside time, that seeks rule "over human nature", and that is ironically dedicated to a "universal peace outside history". (Hardt & Negri xiv) "Our basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule." (Hardt & Negri xii) You may not know what the World Trade Organization is or what they do, but their policies, as well as the policies of a host of international NGOs, have irrevocably changed your life down to the very food you eat. Hardt and Negri describe Empire as more than those interwoven international policy decisions which affect our lives. Empire is also the exploitation of our thoughts and expertise through marketing³, through stress, through re-appropriation and

¹ Following the example of Hardt and Negri, I use a capital 'E' when referring to this meaning.

² The implication intentionally being that Empire is broader and more long-lasting than individual nations

³ Look around you. How many advertisements do you see?

commodification of volunteer work⁴. Empire is not just global – Empire is everywhere. Capitalism exploits us as workers, as consumers, as learners, and as bodies. Its power seems inescapable.

Paulo Freire published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1968 after he was exiled from Brazil by a military coup assisted in its aims by the United States (Pereira 16). In his book, Freire understands oppression as something which distorts the process of humanization, the process of becoming more fully human. He suggests that the vocation of humanity *is* humanization, which can be more fully achieved in the fight for liberation⁵.

Empire – global capitalism – is oppressive. Empire distorts the processes we undertake to become more fully human. When pursuing any aspect of the vocation of humanity, such as artistry, Empire requires that such pursuit fulfill a need so that capital may grow. If we are not useful to the growth of capital, our needs are not met. We all know this, in our bones. Why does the cultural idea of the 'starving artist' exist? Why do those who pursue financially successful careers so often feel the need to have a hobby? Empire is at odds with the vocation of humanity.

Humanization, and all the joys that come with it, can and should be built without Empire, without dehumanization, and without oppression.

⁴ The failure of the Free / Open Source Software movement is largely down to the fact that companies can get free labor or just take your work and re-brand it as their own with minimal changes.

⁵ I don't necessarily agree with Freire here, I think it's much more interesting to suggest that the vocation of humanity is beauty. otherwise, what would occur when all humans are liberated and there is no more dehumanization? I also suggest this because I believe all humans are inherently artistic.

The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons... is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny, but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed.

(Freire 44)

Games of Empire is a book published by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter in 2009. In their book, the authors outline how the industry of video game design was built as part of the military-industrial complex. The authors position modern games as "a school for labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capitalism" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter xix). By framing games this way, they indicate that games are not only reflective of the world we live in, but also productive *agents* of the world – they perpetuate and create culture – the culture of Empire.

To orient yourself properly, read this

Phenomenology⁶ scholars use the word *orientation* to describe the way that people, objects, and systems can have certain directed cultural tendencies toward other systems, people, and objects. Much as a person might have a specific romantic or sexual orientation toward other humans, they can have orientations toward other things. Similarly, an object such as a game can have an orientation of its own. Orientation, in this way, is a word phenomenologists use to describe the invisible

⁶ the study of "a subject, a human, being in relation to objects, things, and the world" (Ahmed) - a subset of philosophy thinking about relationality.

cultural relationship between two things, in the broadest sense. Games have an orientation toward Empire. This orientation is a tendency. There is an extensive and beautiful history of game designers attempting and succeeding in subverting the natural orientation of individual games toward global capitalism. However, the frameworks we have for creating games all rely on technologies which are mired in Empire and rely on assumptions of growth which are inherent to capitalism.

If you want to read a thesis that makes sense, don't read this thesis.

If you want to learn something, go make art with your friends.

There is an immense amount of work and thought I have put into this document⁷, but the realizations shared here have been won through the act of creating with others. To be entirely honest with you, I don't think that reading this is a shortcut to that knowledge. I think the shortcut is found in the doing.

If this thesis makes sense to you, well then, good. I'm glad. Scramble it. Change it. Destroy the ordering which allowed it to create some sort of cogent message within your mind, and read it again, or share it with someone else.

Print it on multi-colored construction paper.

Cut it up and pin it to a board.

Put it back together as a collage.

"...knowledge practices that refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons may lead to unbounded forms of speculation" (Halberstam 10)

This thesis itself has an orientation, in the way I was talking about above. It's one paragraph up, go read it again – or don't.

⁷ and also at least a dozen lies – don't trust me.

And I don't just mean the words I've put on the page. I mean the very fact that you are capable of reading this. What device are you accessing this on? What privileges are afforded to you that you are able to do so? How did you know that this thesis existed? If it's printed, did someone give it to you, or do you have access to a printer? Regardless, the fact you are reading this implies that you either know someone with access to technologies and the skill of reading the English language, or you have both those yourself – both enormous sites of privilege.

The next question, of course, is this: How can work like this be shared with people who don't have access to those privileges?

This is why I say that this thesis has an orientation – one toward the digital and toward academic English. It is not until we work together, all of us, to create new systems of meaning separate from global capitalism, that we can truly subvert that.

What this is all for

I seek the collapse of capitalism and the cultivation of something better beyond it through the creation of interactive art. How can games be built which cultivate class consciousness and lead to deeper community connections and conversations around issues of oppression, with the ultimate goal of creating resilient systems which will replace Empire? Paulo Freire attempted to propagate class consciousness through the radical restructuring of education, and Augusto Boal attempted to propagate class consciousness through the restructuring of theater. Similarly, I am attempting to propagate class consciousness, build community cohesion, create tools that lead to resiliency, and encourage conversation around issues of oppression through games and play by highlighting orientations away from Empire.

In short, the core questions of this thesis are:

• How can a game bring people together and lay the groundwork for positive material change in an oppressed community?

And

How can people learn to make games which consistently achieve this?

There is nothing I can create which will be a one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of global capitalism, certainly not on my own. To suggest as much would be a monument to hubris, one doomed to failure. The problem of global capitalism will and does require a variety of solutions by a diversity of people in all places. This is, in large part, why I have articulated a framework which is flexible, which allows a variety of contributions, which even encourages moving beyond the guidelines I've built here. The framework I have begun to propose goes beyond simply suggesting a specific means of creating games, but instead allows for its own evolution and change. In doing so, I hope that Games of the Oppressed can become a useful tool for game designers and players alike who similarly see the problems created by the capitalistic systems that dominate their lives and the lives of their fellow humans.

I should point out here that I do not expect Games of the Oppressed to lead to a restructuring of the game design paradigm. Game design is a multi-billion dollar industry with, in the case of digital games especially, direct connections to the military-industrial complex (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 101), film, music, and books. Beyond that, the art of game design is a complex and abstract practice that predates many of the entertainment industries we understand as giants today. Humans have been playing games for millennia. I cannot, nor do I want to, change the fundamental way those games are made overnight.

What this thesis does intend is to highlight to game players and designers one of many paths they can take to move away from the increasingly corporate-dominated space of games⁸.

Part of the requirement I have placed upon myself in creating this framework is that the results be replicable, that designers can consistently achieve positive material change as a result of taking part in this process. This is critical because any method which gives mixed results will not be utilized by the general public, and will not be a net benefit to communities of the oppressed. If one is to make a tool, that tool must be fashioned in such a way that it will not break.

As a result of this, any game of the oppressed should not rely on funding sources or on capitalistic means to achieve their needed material change. A designer of a game of the oppressed must understand the positive material change for the community of players as being generated in the act of playing itself. Moreover, I posit the systems of intra-community reliance cultivated during the creation of a game of

⁸ For more on the ways that corporations attempt to exploit every aspect of play, I recommend reading chapter 5 of *Games of Empire*.

the oppressed as a semi-viable alternative to the systems of financial reliance we use under Empire (which is to say, a step in the right direction).

To solve the problem of capitalism, of Empire, I need help – the help of all humanity, working together toward liberation. If this tool, one which I firmly believe can aid in that fight, is going to make any amount of difference, it needs to be in the hands of many, and it needs to be able to adapt, to account for the ways different people might use it.

I want the help of the multitude⁹: the innumerable peoples and communities of humanity who are making art amidst survival.

This thesis seeks to provide answers to the unasked questions in the final chapters of Games of Empire, where the authors outline a potential "games of multitude", games which subvert Empire through crafting critical content, disseminating critique, providing practice for transitions to post-capitalism, and allowing player agency within and without the game's typical structures (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter 191). Many like this have already existed, though unacknowledged, left relegated to the sidelines and lost among a sea of marketing. By synthesizing the hypothetical framework of games of multitude with the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, my hope for Games of the Oppressed is that it will be a functional tool for communities, one which players and designers can adapt to fit where they are -

⁹ I'm using this word in reference to Hardt and Negri's book of the same name, which examines the movement from the new global sovereignty of Empire toward an emerging global class formation.

A tool which activates hope for the future and which, in the designing and playing, makes plain the paths humans have toward agency both within and without the game.

The tools one uses, are, inevitably, informed by the lens one views the world with, and conversely, the lens one views the world with is constructed by those tools. In my case, I see difficulties arising in the communities around me as being rooted in a difference in agency between oppressed and oppressor. To them, the power and the glory.

Even here, at the university which allows me to so generously publish this paper¹⁰, my colleagues and I are unable to adequately change the circumstances of our harassment, malnutrition, and lack of housing because we do not hold positions of authority.

It's a good thing grad school neglect rentals burnout survival is only a game.

What is a game?

In my positionality as a games scholar, I have gotten into more than one discussion with friends regarding their understanding of games. Empire, and the games which reinforce it – big budget behemoths created by companies whose names $\overline{10 \text{ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony punctuation}}$

don't matter – tend to understand themselves as games which follow from a long legacy of other games. That is to say, they haven't changed the formula all that much. In my discussions with friends, I often find myself defending the sort of games my colleagues and I make. What is a game if it doesn't have guns? What is a game if it doesn't have a male protagonist? What is a game if it doesn't have a marketing team? The status quo understanding of what a game is has been used as a tool to police and restrict the access of marginalized communities to the upper echelons of game development. Therefore, it is incredibly important for me to address the question of what a game is. What counts as a game? Who gets to decide what is or is not a game?

How we define a "game" matters because it sets the terms for what types of experiences, perspectives, and subjects are valued - or even visible - in the way we talk about this widely influential medium. Defining video games may seem like a semantic task, but in fact it is inextricable from larger questions about who does and does not get to "count" in games.

(Ruberg 8)

I use a modified version of the definition of 'video game' found in Bo Ruberg's *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*: "For the purposes of the present study, video games are defined as any designed, interactive experience that operates primarily through a digital interface *and understands itself* as a video game." (8)

Similarly, for the purposes of this work, a game is defined as any designed, interactive experience that *understands itself* as a game.

That means that, yes, if this part of the paper gets published, you can absolutely tell someone they should play the "be quiet and do what I do" game with you, and if they tell you it's not a game, you can point to this and say "yes it is."

The reason for including such a vague definition is simple, and is outlined by Bo Ruberg as well, which, summarized, is that by creating an expansive definition, we allow ourselves as scholars to be expansive in our analysis¹¹.

I mention all this not to be pedantic, but instead to establish a common language – and also to push aside the common notion that games must include this or that specific element in order to qualify as such.

Play, and games by extension, are an activity which are particularly suited to intervention by the multitude. They are fundamentally more tuned toward postcapitalist understandings than toward capitalist ones, because individual acts of play tend to run counter to or at least are uninterested in capitalist notions of 'productivity' (Caillois 10).

To limit our definition of the term 'game' to something more mainstream would be to limit the range of analysis and also the range of possibility in our creation – to limit our own access as oppressed creators. As designers and players both, we are capable of making so much more than games of Empire.

While the methodology I propose is rare in both games and interactive art, it is not new. Informal party games, underground card games, fluxus and gutai pieces, modding communities, the fringes of ttrpgs, and Calvinball all see this same encapsulation of design as a tool for liberation in the hands of the players.

¹¹ unlike Bernard Suits, the old -dead- fool!

The framework of Games of the Oppressed intentionally lacks a facilitator, and instead seeks to introduce opportunities for moments of vulnerability and honesty through engagement with the processes and artifacts of the game itself. Similar to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, this includes a democratic onboarding process in which participants collectively create a sort of contract – they together forge a social understanding of the absolute bounds of play, of Huizinga's 'magic circle'¹², within which they are able to change rules and test them.

The playful work of overwriting the original processes of a game, especially when done iteratively between moments of seeing those changes in action, allows participants to interact with the hierarchical structures implied by the elements of a game, and thus come to understand the exploitative relations that are bound up in the rules established at the start, an anti-model for their actions, and subvert them.

In the same way that the spect/actors of Boal's Theater of the Oppressed practice for individual interactions that they might change and alter in order to better care for their community and themselves, games of the oppressed allow a player to alter the structures and systems of the game in order to make those systems more caring, as practice for the systems that they might alter in the world around them.

What is Games of the Oppressed?

This framework (the one you're reading right now), titled "Games of the Oppressed"¹³, includes multiple elements meant to make clear the process for

¹² Though I prefer to use the understanding of games as a membrane from Edward Castonova's *Synthetic Worlds*.

¹³ to borrow from Freire: art must be forged with, not for the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity

building a game of the oppressed. These elements include a workshop, a zine, and a number of example games.

This framework borrows from foundations laid down by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter in *Games of Empire*, by Bernie De Koven, who might have written a book about this already if he were still alive¹⁴, and by Gonzolo Frasca's master's thesis, *Videogames of the Oppressed*.

Okay, but what is a game of the oppressed then?

Sure, sure.

I define a game of the oppressed as any game which does the following:

- Asks the players to change the rules of play during play
- Asks the players to engage consciously and critically with an issue of oppression from their own lives.

OR:

Games of the oppressed are games in which the players navigate a bounded infinity of possible methods by which they might change a situation of real-life oppression through the use of rule-changing.

OR:

¹⁴ www.deepfun.com/a-player-designed-game-theory/

How to make a game of the oppressed

Listed below are the basic guidelines for creating a game of the oppressed. These guidelines, ideally, should only be undertaken by those who feel they have a grasp of critical consciousness and of the basic principles of game design. "Do we expect somebody to fix our kitchen sink without tools? Do we expect somebody to stand up and play the violin without having learned how to play the violin?" (Le Guin, "Steering the Craft" 21). That said, I do not endorse the policing of anyone's engagement with this guide. Please determine your own experience.

The best experience of creating a game of the oppressed is in community, and the workshop included in this thesis is a very effective and helpful version of community game design around oppression. That said, the guidelines below make a useful overview of the process regardless of whether you intend to engage with them.

- Think of what this community looks like now. How do forces and systems of oppression affect this place?
- Think of what you want this community to look like in the future. What does a liberated community look like?
- Pick a thread which connects present oppression and future liberation. What is a specific problem that can be resolved which will lead us towards that liberated community?

- Critically, you should not know how to perfectly resolve the problem. The solution itself is up to the players to create.
- Pick a set of at least two game artifacts to be used by the players (but not too many) that have a tangential relation to the problem you identified or to the solution you think could be enacted.
 - These don't always have to be physical. They could be immaterial, such as rules, ideas, etc.
- Find ways to tie the game artifacts to the present oppression such that the beginning of the game makes people think of the oppression in their own lives.
 - Often, building around a specific situation where that oppression has affected you is helpful.
- Make tools in the game with the ability to alter the functional and fundamental relations between game artifacts.
 - This allows players to change the orientation of the oppression by altering the relations in the game, even if they cannot change the fact of the oppression's existence.
- Give players those tools as part of the game.
 - Note here that if you give the players these tools earlier in the game, there will be less prefigurative design which may influence their use of the tools in a specific direction, widening the possibility space of the end of the game.

- Ask players to solve the problem using the tools, and imply explicitly or implicitly – changing the game itself as part of that solving.
 - Because the relations between fundamental units of the game are able to be changed by the tools, the players should be able to change the game itself using them as well.
- Ensure that you do not know how exactly they will use the tools, nor how exactly the game will end. There should be a bounded infinity of options for them to pursue in terms of their use of these tools.

2 The Conclusion¹⁵

The score is oogy to boogy!

- Hobbes, while playing Calvinball. Calvin and Hobbes, Aug 1990

Games of the oppressed, by their nature, cannot be summarized in a single paper. I've given, in this work, an overview of the foundations which make these games, the rough shape of the connective tissue that they share. However: Games of the Oppressed is a framework designed to invoke the multitudinous nature of humanity's creativity.

The second formative criterion of a game of the oppressed is that players are asked to engage consciously and critically with an issue of oppression from their own lives. Cultivating the conditions for this is no simple task. It requires either that the players are able to change which issue of oppression the game addresses without negatively affecting the way the game is read, or that the players are able to map their own experiences onto the issue addressed by the game – implying an understanding of the audience.

All oppression leaves behind artifacts – it changes the nature, the orientation, of the spaces and objects in its wake. By engaging with these objects and spaces which have been affected by a force of oppression, players have the chance to change

¹⁵ For those of you who expected the conclusion at the end of the paper: Ha. I tricked you. Or, perhaps, it was actually the expectations of standard academic papers which tricked you.

their orientations, and to thereby mitigate the effects of an initial oppressive force – to liberate a space and objects. Since objects and spaces affect the people who use them, this change can affect the players in turn.

You can see here that I suggest a method of changing the orientations of objects as a way of engaging with an issue of oppression. In this way, the two criteria I propose are inherently connected. To engage with oppression is to work towards changing the rules of it. To change the rules is to work towards quelling oppression.

The first formative criterion of a game of the oppressed is that players are asked to change the rules of play during play itself. Here 'asked' is framed in such a way to imply, dear reader, that players are also 'afforded the chance' to change the rules. It is the changes wrought by the players, perhaps prompted by the designer but ultimately unexpected in their content and scope, which mark a game of the oppressed. It is impossible for the designer to create a game without constraints. There is no single game which can allow for every possible modification a player can make. By merely including a piece of paper and a pencil in the game, a designer will have cut off any modification which does not start with those objects. All objects and spaces, having orientations, also have specific affordances. These put a hard limit on the modifications the player can make. But, within those modifications, it is the work of games of the oppressed designers to create an infinite number of possible paths that the game could take. A useful rule of thumb: neither designer nor player should know what the ending might be until almost the exact moment that it happens.

This, then, is the framework proposed for games of the oppressed. It is descriptive of both a segment of games which already exist and a possibility space of game design which has not yet been fully explored. The entire rest of this document spends a great deal of time unraveling the details of how this framework came into being, what it looks like when games like this come into contact with people, and how you might share this framework with others.

One part of this framework which goes unaddressed here is how it can be built into the realm of digital games. In my research, both reading and iterative creating, I've found that the process of making digital games into a game of the oppressed requires – at some level – leaning on human interaction. To reiterate: a game of the oppressed, made by community, will be a game which addresses the concerns of community. The chances of it being a game which only interfaces with one human, which resets after each interaction, seem absurdly low¹⁶. Gonzolo Frasca gives two potential¹⁷ designs for a digital game of the oppressed in his paper on the subject (76), Michaela Joffe outlines a design for a digital game of the oppressed in a blog post¹⁸. These assume a certain level of human interaction – either in person or through the game itself. Since this would still be true for most games of the oppressed, I don't think the design process would be that different from an analog one.

¹⁶ Though I will not discount the possibility. The endless creativity of humanity surely has a way to make a game of the oppressed which builds toward a better world and only features human-game interaction.

¹⁷ Read: well thought out, but: entirely untested – which I would argue is the most critical part of any game design process.

¹⁸ videogamesoftheoppressed.wordpress.com/2013/03/03/audience-as-actor

I will neglect to spend time here summarizing the findings of the various essays included in this paper. Instead, I think it is necessary to ask what happens next.

As in: I've written this whole framework, what now? My stated goal is to aid in the movement toward post-capitalism, to create a tool which others can use in building alternative systems of being and relation. Games of the oppressed offer a way of cultivating modes of relation in communities which not only discuss the forces of oppression around us, but which playfully consider methods of dismantling them. This being the case, my next steps are to ensure people are able to use this tool, to modify it and help it change/grow/mature into something more interesting than my lone creative mind could possibly construct.

Because of this, the workshop, while only a small section of this paper, is undoubtedly what I would consider the most important part. It is something I can *do* with others, something I can go to a group of people and suggest as an activity, and I aim to do exactly that.

As mentioned in chapter 3, I have already hosted a number of iterations of the workshop, but none of them have yet completed a game of the oppressed. Honestly, I'm not sure one of them ever will.

To me, this is part of the strength of the method.

Not only is this indicative of the participants' ability to change the workshop itself, but also indicative of the fundamental need of any person to grapple with a great deal of consciousness-building before crafting a game of the oppressed. One of the critiques levied against Theater of the Oppressed is the apparent necessity to skip over dialogue in favor of getting to the actual theater. (Dwyer 204) But of course, in neglecting dialogue, we often neglect critical analysis as well.

I might not ever get to the point of having a workshop complete a game of the oppressed – but if that's the case, it will be because either the participants wanted to change it to do something else, or because we ended up unpacking issues that were discussed for so long that we never got around to the actual game-making. Empire exploits the cognitive labor of the oppressed. In this paradigm, failing to finish a product, to create a usable and exploitable game from this process, is in itself a queer failure – a mode of resistance against the mechanisms of the oppressor.

Crafting a workshop which has the space for this has been a blessing in itself.

I intend to run the workshop as often as I can manage, and to ensure that those who attend the workshop can run it for others. I sincerely hope that, by the time it gets back around to me, it is only recognizable by the core principles – or perhaps not even that.

To engage deeply with the principles of a game of the oppressed is to understand that no human is fundamentally more worthy of making changes to a game than any other – else they should be the designer, not you. In this way, Games of the Oppressed is fundamentally anti-authoritarian (kill the kings and topple their thrones). In that spirit, I hope to make the framework itself, along with the errata of the workshop and the zine, all open to modification by participants.

This work will not just sit here as a digital document, unedited and merely uploaded to ProQuest. This version is not the final version. It will be a *living* prototype. It will *live*. I said at the beginning that this is a prototype, and that is not only because I believe that all art aims toward something greater – but also because this piece is literally a prototype, version one. The next version will be one with more explicit invitations for the readers to edit and change it. Whether that version will be published as a book, I do not know. Regardless, I think it's incredibly important that this documentation of Games of the Oppressed manage to demonstrate, through the method of its telling, the very principles of a game of the oppressed – i.e., you should be asked to change what this document says.

Perhaps most critically, though, I hope to find ways to take the lessons I've learned and the work I've done here and to apply both to my interactions and activism within my community. I still don't fully know what that will look like. But - if this work doesn't change the way I interact with the people I see daily, then it hasn't really been all that much use, has it?

But if, together, we can use the tools here to help craft a future unbound by capitalism...

That, always, is the hope.

3 Modding Freire: dictionary to dialogue

In his work, Freire consistently warns of the dangers of monologic forms of education, and discusses how true learning only takes place through dialogue – and that this is especially true when considering the learning necessary for liberation. Freire's system itself invites change and restructuring, at least in how he frames it.

"As they [teachers and students] attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators" (69). In a system which revolves so strongly around not only dialogue but dialogic systems of co-creation and re-creation, it is important that, for the purpose of effective communication, we build a healthy care for the word, for the multiple dimensions of it, in meaning and in history.

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed - even in part - the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.

An unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality, results when dichotomy is imposed upon its constitutive elements. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating 'blah.' It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.

On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism. The

latter - action for action's sake - negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible."¹⁹

(Freire 87)

When Freire speaks here about the "empty word" without a "commitment to transform," he's talking about those moments of communicating without intention – speaking for the sake of speaking, and not for the sake of affecting. Dialogue must involve at least two people – which means here that Freire is asking us not only to affect the world, but to affect each other, to be intentional with the words we speak such that we are speaking only when those words are meant to affect.

Conversely, Freire asks us to be conscious of when we might be affecting without reflection, "action for action's sake." To me, the most basic reading of this is an abjuration of violence. Looking deeper, we can see that creating something without reflection can involve attempting to affect people on an emotional level without knowing *why* or without understanding what your *goal* is. An excellent example of this would be... most animated Disney²⁰ films. They certainly have emotional impact. And, while the larger goal of the company is to make a profit, that is undoubtedly not the goal of the individual artists or team leads. What, then is their goal? The closest fit is that they likely are trying to affect their audience – action for action's sake.

¹⁹ The standards of academia would suggest that I must share quotes only of appropriate length with you, so this is the longest quote you will see here... But really this whole thesis could be replaced with a book club instead.

²⁰ Disney is a corporation that, at the time of writing, controls a large market share of entertainment.

It should be noted here that a "true word" need not be spoken, nor written. It is merely a vehicle of dialogue. A true word could, in fact, be in the form of a game.

To build an understanding of the course of true action, then – to find what the goal of Games of the Oppressed might be, it is also useful to start with reflection. With this in mind, I want to turn to Freire's understanding of oppression. Freire re-defines oppression again and again throughout his work, as "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders... self-affirmation", as "domesticating", as a "culture of domination", as "a distortion of the vocation of humanity", as "dehumanization", as an act which "prevents people from becoming more fully human" (55, 56).

We can see the roots of the pedagogical system which Freire proposes here, one which invites change. "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (49). Freire uses this definition, this reflection on the nature of oppression, as a springboard for his discussion of action – his work to bring pedagogy into dialogue with students. Freire starts with reflection on the core themes of his work, and uses this reflection to develop a true word – praxis – by sharing both reflection and action, with both informing the other.

Moreover, Freire's understanding of oppression seems to be intentionally broad – encompassing injustice, exploitation, and violence. While reading Freire and coming to a more full understanding of his work, I have found myself of the growing belief that a broad and multi-faceted definition here is more in line with the praxis of revolutionary work than an orderly and clever answer. Language, as a tool which humans use for communication, has always been both vague and specific, both culturally and socially defined, both objective and subjective. Translation, from one language to another, or from one mode to another, is often an art²¹ because our understanding of each word you read on this page right now is more complicated than the first definition you might find in the dictionary. In the same way, to give only one understanding of oppression is to essentialize it, to strip it of its complex nature.

- Oppression is a difference in quantitative agency, whether exploited or not.
- Oppression is an act counter to creation and creativity.
- Oppression is subjugation and injustice.
- Oppression is when my friend can't find a place to live legally where there is a shower, even though they're working a job and have enough money to pay for things (which is already oppressive, you shouldn't need a job to live in a place).
- Oppression is when all my friends have to leave as soon as we graduate because this place is too expensive for them to stay.
- Oppression is what I noticed in the voice of the homeless²² friend I spoke to for a number of hours while we ate a meal: this sort of overwhelming sense that there was no way the world would ever change for the better, and an even

²¹ Not only is translation art, but I will highly recommend here the incredible essay *Say Translation is Art* by Sawako Nakayasu.

²² I use this word intentionally, as opposed to the word "unhoused" which has been gaining traction, because the problem is a lack of human care, not a lack of housing.

stronger conviction that the best way to get by in the world was to trample others.

- Oppression is what I noticed in the voice of the housed friend I spoke to for a number of hours at a birthday party: this sort of overwhelming sense that there was no way the world would ever change for the better, and an even stronger conviction that the best way to get by in the world was to trample others.
- Oppression is when I have to put a gender that I haven't chosen on insurance forms because they haven't bothered to update their computer systems, even after I paid to have my state identification updated.
- Oppression is how I don't feel right when talking about the ways I've been discriminated against, is the way I don't submit complaints for the harassment I've received during my graduate degree unless it's anonymous.
- Oppression is
- Oppression is
- Oppression is a quelling and quieting force enacted by systems upon those without the ability to resist in order to maintain the status quo.

Speaking these understandings of oppression is all well and good, but to speak true words, this reflection must be paired with action, with affect – our understanding of oppression must inform the way we *enact* praxis. Freire's understanding of oppression led him to enact a version of critical pedagogy. With my own understanding of oppression, I argue that Games of the Oppressed is not an outgrowth of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, but instead a mod/ification of it, an outgrowth of a different understanding of oppression. In fact, in my own teaching practice, I do not believe that Freire's methods fully constitute a praxis. Conveniently, Freire makes room for this, and acknowledges the need for a pedagogy which is constantly changing and growing. Similar to Freire, "I will be satisfied if among the readers of this work there are those sufficiently critical to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, to deepen affirmations and to point out aspects I have not perceived" (39). If my framework is read in its original form twenty years from now I will be truly upset, because, no doubt, our collective understanding of oppression will have changed – and therefore the framework should change to match – true action to true word.

Freire's understanding of oppression led him to create a process by which the oppressed reflect critically on their own situation of oppression and then use this newfound understanding to generate co-creative dialogue based around solving problems which do not themselves have a clear answer. Freire emphasizes frequently that students bring to the table their own understandings of the world which should be considered a form of expertise, that students are also instructors – this is the keystone of critical pedagogy.

Freire's method bears this out, and posits the teachers as facilitators who ask questions and merely reframe the knowledges held by learners in order that all may co-create a greater knowledge.

But why have a facilitator at all?

I argue here that Freire's understanding of oppression leads him astray by reinforcing models which benefit the oppressors, benefit Empire. Freire at no point personalizes his understanding of oppression, which is a problem (and a common critique of his work), because Freire was often acting as a facilitator of the work which he references. The model of transformation he creates relies on this same sort of lack of questioning of the facilitator. The requirements for the facilitator seem alternately stringent and nonexistent. Freire suggests that true dialogue requires faith in humankind, humility, hope, critical thinking – for a start. (90) Despite this, Freire assumes that the facilitator/investigator has critical consciousness and will approach dialogue as such.

The only dimension of these values which it is hoped the people whose thematics are being investigated will come to share (it is presumed that the investigators possess this quality) is a critical perception of the world, which implies a correct method of approaching reality in order to unveil it.

(111)

There is a quantitative difference in agency between those who facilitate and those who participate under Freire's model. Facilitators, by nature of their role, are constantly tasked with managing the questions asked and with directing the movement of dialogue toward critical consciousness. However, who is to say that the facilitator has the proper understanding of this? It is Freire who acknowledges the "unfinished character of human beings" and that students must "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (12). To leave the facilitator, the teacher-student, out of this basic understanding, and to assume instead that the facilitator will have a full understanding of problem-posing education and of critical consciousness, imposes on them a smaller version of the same mistake made by the banking model of education. That is, when we assign to a single person or privileged group of people sole expertise over a sector of knowledge, we create a barrier across which oppression in enacted.

Unlike Pedagogy and Theater of the Oppressed, my proposed framework for Games of the Oppressed implicates players as designers in a way which allows them to rewrite or overwrite the original processes that the games contained at the outset, instead of simply setting up a collaborative environment for creation. Following in the footsteps of tabletop roleplaying games made without facilitators, I have created a workshop which does not have a facilitator at all. Facilitators of a space have an undue amount of influence over the course of the learning, whether through changes they make to the structure or the direction of the dialogue. When this influence is not dissected and dismantled, it becomes a boundary between facilitator and student, prohibiting true dialogue. Freire argues that the more quickly a revolution or an educator can move towards dialogue, the more successful they will be. I argue that one cannot 'facilitate' true dialogue, but merely participate in it, and in that participation be remade.

The Workshop

Included here are the errata and guidelines for holding a workshop in which the participants produce a game of the oppressed by the end. Some versions of the workshop that I've run have involved smaller groups or individuals making their own games, but most workshop groups opt to create a game collectively. I recommend the latter.

The stated goal of this workshop is to produce a game of the oppressed. In order to do that, the workshop must fulfill the arguably much larger goal of creating space for true dialogue around oppression, such that the game(s) produced becomes an extension of praxis. The participants might very well choose to abandon or change the goal before the end of the workshop.

This version of the workshop is fine tuned for groups of between five and fifteen persons. When the group gets smaller, it becomes difficult for the workshop to function as written. When the group becomes larger, things are left unfinished or participants will be left out of conversations. I recommend putting a cap on the workshop itself instead of splitting the workshop into separate groups. When I've run a larger group of people split up into groups, the participants have wanted to know what the other group was doing – and we ended up simply merging back into one large group again.

The ideal is that this workshop is capable of mitosis - i.e., each participant, having experienced the workshop, will have the tools necessary to host a similar

workshop of their own if they so choose. This is reflected in the fact that the current version of the workshop is built to be run without a facilitator. This was not true in every version that I ran. I have attempted to build the guidelines in this manner so that workshops of this type can take place without my intervention. It should also be made clear that, given the nature of this work, I encourage anyone to make edits to, add to, or overwrite the workshop errata.

The host²³ is a role which abjures the concept of facilitation. The host is not an expert in the workshop, nor should they be expected to answer questions or know anything about what the group should do. They can, of course, share their experience with another workshop if they have done one before, but this should be shared as an example and not as the 'correct' version. Instead, they have merely volunteered to set up the space which the workshop will take place in.

²³ This is not only made in reference to this (<u>en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_of_Hosting</u>) but also generally to the more decentralized way that a host creates the conditions for a community to form.

Setup

Host: Before the workshop, you will need to:

- find a space which can accommodate all participants
- share the entire workshop guide with participants
- ensure that participants have a space where they can share thoughts through text if they choose, whether physical or digital
- get some sort of talking-stick, or a similar item
- procure a variety of random objects for the game-making activity

Ceremony of Welcoming

All rules from here on out are decided by consensus: If two people suggest it as a good idea and nobody blocks it, the idea is adopted. Any idea which someone blocks goes into longer dialogue, in which any and all concerns with the idea are addressed until such a time as either:

- the idea is thrown out
- the concerns are retracted and the idea is adopted
- the idea is changed to accommodate all parties

That said, I will suggest rules. I am, however, a piece of paper. I have no voice and no vote. Please ignore me if you feel like you have better ideas. You can always come back.

A tool I will suggest for figuring out when to move on from one thing to another:

Every person has a card in front of them. One card is designated as the counter. Whenever someone decides they would be okay with moving on from an activity²⁴, they turn their card upside down. The role of the counter is to keep track of who all has turned their cards over, and to make sure that when most²⁵ of the participants have done so, they say out loud that "it's time to move on to the next activity." Then, the cards rotate hands and the role of counter is given to a new person.

A tool²⁶ I will suggest for picking who does something first:

Everyone arranges themselves in a circle, then closes their eyes, at least to start. The first person who sees another person peeking speaks that person's name as quickly as possible. Both the peeking person and the speaking person are now 'IT' they do the thing first. If only one person should be IT, they can play rock-paperscissors.

In order to do anything together as a community, it helps to know each other first. At some point in the early parts of this, take the time to introduce each other. I also recommend modifications to games which encourage players to share their names.

²⁴ Not that they *want* to, but that they would be okay – people should still feel like they can advocate for themselves.

²⁵ This could be strictly 50% or could be something closer to 60/75%, depending on what the group feels.

²⁶ Adapted from Bernie De Koven: www.deepfun.com/chairs-and-laps

I suggest the following:

First, a game which will get people moving and laughing.

Second, a game which will get people sharing with each other.

For the first, here is a useful resource: <u>www.deepfun.com/funny-games</u> That said, make a racetrack! Is it one navigated by your bodies or by objects? Modify it!

For the second, I recommend a game I learned under the title "The Sun Shines Brightest..." Everyone gathers in a circle. Then, one person, the one who wants to share something, enters the center of the circle and says the phrase "The sun shines brightest on those who... ", and then they say something about themselves – for example, "The sun shines brightest on those who love eating chocolate." Everyone in the circle who agrees with this sentiment should stand up and join the person in the middle. All those who don't, stay seated and applaud *uproariously*.

Players may share as many times as they wish. The game ends when people want it to end.

Crafting a Baseline

Participants should gather and pick two objects from the random objects the host brought for game-making. If the host was unable to bring objects, or if they want additional options, people can add to the pile. These objects could include anything. In the past, I have run this activity with such varied things as yarn, poker chips, dice, random candies, pens, water bottles, keys, erasers – things people might have with them, things in the room, and things I've brought with me specifically for this activity. The groups may use as many of each object as they wish to.

For example, if a group picked water bottles and flowers as their objects, they might ask to use all seven water bottles in the room and all three flowers, but they cannot use a lamp.

- Once everyone has picked materials, a volunteer should find a way to start a 15 minute timer.
- The group has 15 minutes to make a game using the chosen objects.
- After the 15 minutes, the whole group should agree on the rules of the game and write them down.
- The activity begins with the timer.

The Present Reality

Hold a dialogue, using a talking-stick like item²⁷ about the ways you all interact with this community and how that is shaped by oppression.

Some prompts:

- What are the unsaid agreements that govern your time in this space?
- What are the difficulties that everyone in this community knows about?
- What are the difficulties you face that nobody in this community knows about?

²⁷ I recommend one that you can throw to each other, it makes for a playful mode of discussion.

- Are there things we all know but don't talk about? Are there things you're afraid to say? Why?
- What systems of oppression hold influence here?

Take a break

If you haven't taken a break already, take a break. Eat snacks. Get water. Stretch.

Celebration

When people are back from the break, get together and take a bit of time to play the same silly energizing game you had played at the start of the workshop. See if there is a way you can modify it to make it more absurd.

Or, if you all liked playing the game you made during the activity, do the same for that.

Once people feel it's time to move on from playing, each person should take a moment to imagine a small sound or action to celebrate each other's presence in the space. How will it be different than a handshake? How will it reflect what you want this place to feel like? As a group, perform the actions for each other, either in a circle and passing the energy between you or wandering around the room.

Ceremony of Possibility

In order to create work which builds a better future, we first have to *imagine* a better future and what that might look like. Oftentimes, we don't have the proper

language for this. I fully expect participants to struggle with wording in this section. I know I have – humans don't yet have words for a lot of the things we are trying to articulate.

To me, that makes our collective tools of modification all the more important at this step in the journey. Change what I have written here. The word is not enough. Draw it. Act it. Sing it. Dance it. Play it.

Imagining

Hold a dialogue, using the talking-stick thing, imagining what this community might look like when it is freed from oppression.

Some prompts:

- What does it feel like to relate to a person without oppression as a factor?
- What aspects of our current society have stayed the same?
- What do you recognize? Where do you recognize it from?
- Do you pay for your food? Do you grow it? Do you know who grows it?
 Where do you live? What is it like? Why do you live there? Do you have a job? Does anyone? Is oppression gone?
- What is the most important thing?
- How have you begun to heal?

Play a game of the oppressed

Before making a game of the oppressed, it helps to have played one – you know, to get a feel for the form. I can of course point you toward the other games in my thesis. But... don't play those, if you can avoid it. If the person who is hosting the workshop made one that can be played, play that. If not, I'm starting a collection of games of the oppressed on my website²⁸

Pick a game and play it.

Articulate Movement

Get together and, through the use of talking-stick dialogue, formulate a 'movement statement', a sentence or two which describes the reason for the existence of your soon-to-be game of the oppressed. What are you trying to change in the hearts and minds of your players? What larger community goal are you trying to affect? I recommend picking a thread which connects the discussions you've had about oppression in the present and an imagined liberatory future. What is a specific problem that can be resolved which will lead us towards that liberated community? Of note, whatever the movement you are trying to articulate here, it should not be something for which you know exactly what steps should be taken to accomplish it. If the steps are so clear, *just go and do it*, don't make games about it. A game of the

²⁸ resonants.space/gamesoftheoppressed

oppressed, in this sense, is a tool you can use to problem-solve a solution to a difficult transition from oppression to liberation.

True liberation is always democratic, is always co-liberation. True liberation cannot occur when one person implements what they think of as the right solution.

Ceremony of Making

Review the sentences that the group came up with to articulate the movement. Now, each of you should think of and write down one object, place, concept, or rule related to the oppression in the present and one object, place, concept, or rule related to the liberatory future.

Next, in a place where everyone can see it, work together to craft a table filled with your objects, places, or concepts much like the one below:

	on/off switch	salt shaker	daisy flower	credit card
on/off switch		salt shaker & on/off switch	daisy & on/off switch	credit card & on/off switch
salt shaker			daisy & salt shaker	credit card & salt shaker
daisy flower				credit card & daisy
credit card				

Figure 1: A demonstration chart. Paper is better than a program.

As a group, go through each pairing on the chart and discuss whether you want to keep it or not until you arrive at, at most, 3 options which you have decided

show off the dynamic you want for the movement articulated in the sentences previously.

Testing Tools

With each of your options from the chart, your task as a group is now to attempt to build the core interaction of the game. This requires that you design some sort of tool, a mechanic that players can use to fundamentally alter the functional relationships between the artifacts and between themselves and those artifacts.

I cannot recommend highly enough that you attempt to physically produce the actual rules, objects, spaces, or concepts that you had written for each pairing. If this is impossible, use your imagination and improvise to create something that can be a stand-in²⁹.

Set up a space for play with the artifacts. Participants can now suggest a method of modifying the relations between the artifacts. If they make a suggestion, they should be the one to test it. If they need other players alongside them, they should ask for it.

I recommend testing at least two tools for modifying artifact relations before moving on.

Design Decisions

From the tools/artifact setups that have been tested, it is now up to the group to decide which one to develop.

²⁹ For one of the workshops I ran, we had 'apartment' as one of ours, so we made one with tape on the floor and a bunch of tables and chairs labeled as other things.

Hold a dialogue, using the talking-stick thing, about what kind of game you want to make. Decide which of the options to go with (or mix and match!).

Some prompts:

- Which set of artifacts and tools felt like it resonated with you most strongly?
- What would be most reasonable to try to make given the resources you have access to?
- How could you engage the larger community in the making of the game?
- How do you want the experience of making this to be different from other creative experiences you've had?
- What is absolutely critical for this game to get right?
- How do the options for this game already feel revolutionary?

Playtest, Iterate

Play the game.

Have everyone in the group try playing it.

Would the addition of other tools/methods of change make it more interesting? Would the addition of other artifacts make it more interesting? When in the game do the tools of change become available to the player? When in the game do the artifacts become known to the player?

Test it, change it slightly, test it again, repeat.

Once everyone feels satisfied with the design and consensus has been reached:

Write down your design.

Share it.

Celebration (second version)

You all just spent a whole bunch of time talking about difficult topics, made a game, and importantly, learned a lot about each other in the process. With the fundamental understanding that not everyone in the room will walk away from this as friends with everyone else, I still recommend that you all find a way to collect and share everyone's contact information.

That way, the option of longer-lasting relationships is there.

Go get ice cream or something.

Workshop Analysis

At its core, the workshop for Games of the Oppressed is built around articulating a purpose which is developed by the participants and which suggests a movement from the present instance of oppression toward a future absent that oppression.

At the beginning of the workshop, participants are asked to make a game in fifteen minutes – they are given a specific amount of time to accomplish a highly structured task in which the rules of the task itself are not left up to interpretation. By the end of the workshop, participants will have made another game, but the restrictions and rules around developing that game will have been entirely created by the participants themselves. The workshop is, in this way, built around entirely breaking down the boundaries between player/designer.

Even the core conceit, that the game must fit the criteria of a game of the oppressed, is something which the participants, by the end of the workshop, have the chance to change. In this sense, the end state of the workshop is almost entirely unpredictable, much like the end state of any game of the oppressed.

I have not yet run a workshop which has managed to complete and create a game of the oppressed. For now, this means that I simply do not know what the games made as a result of the workshop look like, other than one which I made (Appendix B) and a partially completed game prototype which was created during one workshop. This makes analysis of the success of the workshop as a technique rather difficult. Instead of focusing on that question, which I consider a moot point until I have more data, I will focus on the results of creating games using a common set of principles. The principles which guide the framework of Games of the Oppressed have been largely solidified since before I began creating any other part of this thesis, which makes analysis of their success a useful criteria.

There are some commonalities between all of the pieces which I created using the principles of this framework. All of the games are social: either because they involve multiple players or because they ask the player to consider the orientation that they have towards others. What was created by the participants in the workshops that I ran was similar. It involved multiple people – and I think that any workshop for Games of the Oppressed will end up creating pieces which are primarily social not only because of the principles of the framework, but also because designers who are creating in community tend to create for community. While unintentional, I consider this common design tendency to be aligned with the framework itself. Games of the Oppressed as a framework is itself meant to invoke and involve community. One explicit goal of this thesis is to aid in the cultivation of post-capitalist structures, and those cannot be built without a community of thought and artistry. In that sense, the fact that all of the games created here were social is encouraging to me, and even suggests something fundamental about the social nature of play itself.

Playing alone is fun. There are puzzles and solitaire and running around trees and stuff. Playing together is funner.

(De Koven The Socialization of Virtual)

4 Failing to appeal

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that failure is a queer thing and a good thing because to fail is to fall outside the boundaries of normative hierarchies, and when one does so, it can be a tool of resistance to the dominant. Moreover, Halberstam argues that to lose our way in the face of capitalism is to make room for potential new ways of engaging with the world. Jack's work creates a queer shadow of the Deleuzian cut, showing that we can never achieve success under a heteronormative model – and so accepts failure, much as Lee Edelman does in *No future*. In his work, Halberstam builds an understanding of being queer and anti-structuralist in the face of oppression, an understanding any player-designer must begin to reckon with in a game of the oppressed.

The choice to fail under the terms established by the oppressor frames their demands, their requests, as wrong or irrelevant. Failure can mean getting lost and enjoying it, moving beyond the path set for you by maps and signs. Failure can mean pushing at the locked door; again and again, you try to open it, only to be met with the same result.

As long as there is cause to fight back against oppression, against dominant and strong (successful, straight, hegemonic) forces, there will also be cause to do so through the 'tools of the weak', through the use of failure, through the use of the tools of the oppressed. Failure, as Jack understands it, is a mode of being that weakens capitalism (disability, queerness, blackness, etc). Failure nibbles at the boundaries, destroys category-building, and cultivates social logics of resistance, outside of production.

The concept of 'weapons of the weak' can be used to recategorize what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant. We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.

(88)

Halberstam also addresses the silliness inherit in queerness, addresses the way that failure is a wacky thing, and invites queer designers to revel in theory which abjures academia, to take joy in pulling from sources that may be outside the norm. The pieces I created which fulfill my criteria for games of the oppressed may fail to be games in the typical sense, but they understand themselves as playful, and so they are games to me. Moreover, each game implicates the player as failing within the normative structures of our society.

There are two responses you can have to that. One is to try and play the game as it's been written and say, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I will now get married and have children, and then maybe you will accept me as a success on your terms." Or you refuse the game. You say, "Actually, that outcome is not what I desire." You rewrite the game, and in the process you accept what we call failure.

(Ruberg & Shaw 202) – quote by Halberstam

Missing Memories

In 2020, I crafted a game called Missing Memories – a piece about misgendering and failure. Missing Memories is a game which refuses to accept success on the terms of cisnormativity, a game in which the player is, initially, tasked with collecting every picture in the room and talking to a parent who is continuously misgendering the player character as they do so.



Figure 2: The chosen name showed as rainbow, everything else as glitch.

If the player fulfills this goal, the game ends.

There is a small bit of narration in this ending which indicates an amount of dissatisfaction, a wish for resistance.



Figure 3: The narration hinting at the possibility of trying again

The player can, instead of fulfilling the explicit prompt of the game, actually just walk over the boxes that are littered around the room, and subsequently escape the room through the door behind the boxes, to leave the building entirely.

Taking this route, the player is given one message of protest from the parent before they hear the sound of a door closing as the soundtrack fades into static, replaced by the ambiance of wind chimes and the night air. An animated scene depicting the street I grew up on is shown, along with the prompt to take a breath – to pause.

In my own series of memories, there were a few very similar events. The major difference is that, in all of them, I never walked out the door. Part of the impetus behind making the game, for me, was that I needed to know, for myself, what walking away, what queer failure, would have felt like. Knowing now that I could have simply refused success as was defined by the house I grew up in, and instead defined it on my own terms, I cannot help but wish that I had the chance to live that moment again.

In making this game, in playing it over and over, in showing it to friends and colleagues, I not only have that chance – I actively make that moment into a queer one. I define success on my own terms.

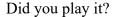
Accessories

Accessories is a game which knows well that liberatory work cannot simply appeal to mainstream media for access, but must instead re-imagine modes of engagement in order to succeed. Accessories is a game you can play right now, so long as you have the materials:

- a writing tool
- some paper to write on
- a scissors and the printed version is helpful but you don't need it

Accessories was made with the explicit intention of allowing readers of this paper the chance to play a game of the oppressed. With that, the reasonable constraints of the game were that it should be single-player and use very few objects apart from whatever a person might carry with them.

Before you continue reading, and before I discuss the various ways that people have interacted with this game, please read the rules and play it – included in Appendix A. I know I've said you can read this paper in any order – and that's still true. But right now you've found yourself here, in front of the analysis of this game. And I am confident that you will build a much more affective sense of what this thesis is all about by playing than you will by only reading. Come back here when you're done!





.....

.

Good.

Before I continue the discussion, I would love for you to take note of a few things.

How did you decide to end?

What had been declined?

What did you try to appeal?

Did you change a rule you had made?

This game was made under the prompting of one of my committee members, Matthew Baloušek³⁰, to create a 'paragon game' - a game which successfully demonstrates the core principles of the thesis without needing to probe any of the potential borders of those ideas. Accessories, then, sits as squarely as I could manage at the time of making it within the category of 'games of the oppressed' while also fulfilling the constraint of being a solo game.

Because of the personal details involved in this game, even the version of my own playthrough I'm sharing a photo of here is slightly censored. I have been given

³⁰ Creator of many fantastic small games and also author of *Opening the Horse: an approach to queer game design* - mrfb.itch.io

permission to share some of the vague details and notes I took on other player's games, but I will refrain from any specifics for the sake of player privacy.

When this game was first drafted, my understanding of the criteria for games of the oppressed was slightly different - as it has evolved slowly with time. In particular, the second criterion was not fully realized.

overwrite/cawrite 1. Players & rules during play 2. End state -> unknown 3. G: 2 anti-model. Instance of oppression you must at it up. paration, get cert all the in put one of these rules on each object from around rdd pre ry duperately each bject

Figure 4: The initial rules of Accessories, created in less than an hour.

In this blurry image, at the top we see what I considered the three criteria of a game of the oppressed at the time³¹:

- 1. Players Δ (overwrite/rewrite) rules during play
- 2. End state \rightarrow unknown
- 3. $G_i \approx$ anti-model, (instance of oppression)

By making slight changes to the initial ruleset over time, I've been able to evolve the game itself alongside my evolving understanding of the criteria for games of the oppressed. Iterations on the rules have slowly shifted the wording to align with what I believe to be a version³² which both affords player agency and asks for players to engage with oppression in their lives.

Players of this game are given an ultimatum that attempts to weaponize the status quo against them. Players must 'destroy' something, and the first rule they read beyond this leaves no room for negotiation. Instead of allowing players a chance to stop the destruction, they are immediately asked to prepare for it. By tying this action to objects which the player carries with them every day, this sentiment can carry even more emotional impact. To quote my playtesters:

³¹ I use physics notation for these. Because of my background, I often write shorthand this way. The triangle, Delta, means "change". The subscript "i" indicates the initial state of something, and here I use the variable G as representing a game – so G_i is the state of the game at the beginning.

³² I don't think there's ever really a 'final version' of a game of the oppressed. What parts of Accessories do you want to see changed?

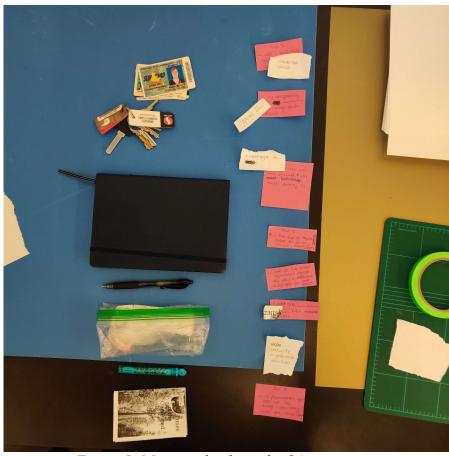


Figure 5: My own playthrough of Accessories.

"The first sentence is very thought provoking, it made me think about what I have in my arsenal that I carry every day"

"I hadn't thought about how much anxiety is tied up in the objects we carry around with us."

The rules of the game present this destruction as inevitable, and so it becomes contingent on the player over the course of their playthrough to decide what form the destruction takes and how it plays out. When players tied the phrase 'try desperately to appeal' directly to the thing they had to destroy, their efforts were fruitless. Desperation without reason. No playthrough I have yet seen has had the player *successfully* appeal to change the destruction that the game establishes at the beginning. There is no instruction directly indicating lack of success as a preferred experience.

Why then?

If the success or failure of the appeal as it relates to the destruction is not coded into the game, why do most players seem to react similarly in this regard?

I will argue that in this way, the experience of the game itself turns on the word 'appeal'. The word 'appeal' is not only an urgent request, but one in which the person who is making the request is implied to be in a position of *less* power. The word has an orientation toward hierarchy, toward systems of power, toward relations beyond our control. Desperately appealing to those systems of power is something that we all have experience with.

Moreover, all³³ players will have experience gaining the approval of systems of power, whether in large or small ways. But within the membrane³⁴ of the game, the player is not simply creating a simulacra of their life, they are creating a fantasy, a narrative which they may build to their own conclusions.

From my discussions with playtesters, I noticed that the game was activating a sort of sense of strategy – that players were thinking out the steps they might take ahead of them, and imagining the consequences of their rule changes or observances.

³³ Unless someone who plays this game is in the impossibly tiny sliver of humanity who is part of *every* possible oppressed identity.

³⁴ Borrowing the term membrane here from Edward Castronova's 2005 book Synthetic Worlds.

This pre-cognition led to players picking the path with the most narrative satisfaction.

What that meant for each player was, of course, different.

"I imagined myself in difficult scenarios – I'm going to have to wreck my house..."

"That immediately destroys the order of them, but we're going with it."

"you could make a joke out of it. It's kinda going to be either or, so that required some thought"

"Inside, I've been affected. I haven't played it, but I've been affected."

"I thought if I were to add a new rule... I would do it more viscerally."

Imagine a player succeeds in appealing to stop or change the destruction. Now, the game's stakes are much lower, because instead of the player positioning themselves against some larger force of the status quo, that larger force has granted their wish – to the point where the player may no longer feel the game is worthwhile. But if the player fails in their appeal, the game's stakes increase. Moreover, they get to live out a fantasy of challenging and possibly succeeding against those forces of the status quo which they might otherwise appeal to.

It's difficult for me to look at the objects I carry with me *without* thinking about the access they give me to systems of power. I've had to go through the absurdly complicated process of legally changing my name. This means that, despite being known to many as Rose, there was a period of time where my state identification card and my bank card said something else. Accessories has consistently elicited strong emotional reactions, and has consistently resulted in players putting personal and emotional concepts in the blanks on the page. Financial anxiety, social difficulties, romantic concerns, climate crisis, housing insecurity, and career struggles all have made their way into playthroughs of the game.

Speaking from my own experience here: playtesting this game actually helped me realize and begin to process a lot of the fears I had about how I engage with community. I think there is a genuine benefit to the use of games of the oppressed, pieces which allow agency in a small system against powers which we normally do not have the time or power to affect, in a therapeutic sense. I will of course caution here against the overuse or overeager application of games of the oppressed for this purpose. Much as I have spoken with practitioners who feel that Boal's *The Rainbow of Desire* is applied without reflection in places, I have a concern that the same could happen here.

For anyone who has played solo journaling games, of which there are many, Accessories might feel similar to a barebones entry into the genre. For those who haven't – I do recommend playing them. Solo journaling games³⁵ have some of the more exciting mechanics I've seen³⁶ in game design because, at the end of the day, there are neither players nor game engines present to truly enforce rule compliance, a player can simply choose to ignore or change rules which they do not want to play

³⁵ Also sometimes styled as solo RPGs or journaling RPGs.

³⁶ I could definitely write at length about this and do some deep analysis, but alas - this is already outside the scope of the paper. Check out this list of games (itch.io/physical-games/tag-journaling) and this writeup: (www.cbr.com/solo-journaling-rpg-storytelling-individuals-groups).

with. The primary difference here, then, is the *invitation* – that in games of the oppressed, players are not just characters, but designers. They are *encouraged* to change the game.

On Failure

Are you a teacher?

Did you know you can fail to give grades to your students?

You can just ask them to give themselves a grade for the class if the school still requires it.

There are papers that back up this method, actually.

Are you a student?

Did you know that you can fail to pay back your student loans?

You can just... not.

There are organizations that work to cancel student debt.

Here's the thing: if we all just fail to pay... what can they do?

Yes, I'm serious.

That's it, that's the whole section.

5 The Creativity of Speedrunning

There is a quest I have yet to finish.

In 2019³⁷, I found myself with access to a very robust digital video streaming setup, and so decided to take up the hobby of livestreaming. Besides that, I had a number of friends who lived far away (I had just finished my undergraduate degree) and I wanted a way to keep in touch with them.

I kept up the hobby through most of 2020 and part of 2021, which saw me creating art, games, playthroughs, and tutorials on camera. As part of that, I found myself playing the original *Legend of Zelda* game. The ostensible goal of the game is to get all the pieces of the triforce from the dungeons and then to defeat Ganon, rescuing the princess. Yet the world itself is so wonderfully convoluted in its layout as to make that task actively difficult. Even if you master all the intricacies of the combat system, the hidden passages through the terrain are not intuitive.

So, I made it my quest to create a map of the entirety of the world. Instead of focusing on fighting the enemies or getting the triforce, I worked to map out every part of the world that I could. Naturally, this quest still led me toward the same end goal as the game wanted me to pursue, but with a slightly different focus – and for me, it was much more enjoyable.

³⁷ Convenient timing, especially given the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The speedrunning community does something similar. Look at the recently posted videos of any glitch-hunter or speedrunner³⁸ and you will find people who are actively searching out ways of playing their favorite games that will make them more enjoyable. They are crafting obstacles to play which the game would not normally allow. Instead of making it to the end of the game at your own pace, what if we made it a race? Instead of a race where you could use anything, what if we could only use the most basic objects in the game? Instead of a race where we want to reduce our time, what if we wanted to reduce the number of objects we use?³⁹

Who gets to set the rules for how long a game is played? Who decides what is valuable in a game? How long is too long (or too short) to play a game, or to inhabit a game world, before the meaning of play is fundamentally changed?

(Ruberg 195)

In changing the obstacles that they are deciding to play against, the player is often designing their own obstacles, ones that more effectively fit their own sense of challenge and comfort. Difficulty settings and other similar accessibility options in games will always have a limit to how much they allow the player to change, since they are pre-made by the developer, and cannot imagine the exact experience of the

³⁸ I am frustrated that the only platform I can truly recommend a search on is Youtube. *www.youtube.com*

³⁹ I am thinking here of a particularly interesting type of speedrun, the Low% speedrun. screenrant.com/legend-zelda-twilight-princess-speedrun-low-percent-record

player. When the player is given agency over the rules of the game itself, they are able to adjust the game to be one which more effectively fits their own needs in that moment. In this way, modifications can become a tool for accessibility.

This has long been the case. Home rules provide more nuance to games which might otherwise not fit the culture of the group playing them. Third-party plugins to software allow others to use the software and extend it to additional use cases. Modding communities for games focus not only on gameplay or graphical features but also things like translation.

Allowing players to change games as they play them is an affordance not only for greater creativity, but also for the fundamental rights of the player.

At the end of the day, I as a designer do not know what the optimal experience is for you!

I don't know what the optimal experience is for you, because I don't know what your lens of the world is. I don't know you – I don't know the player. I cannot know.

Our brains are separate, I am reaching across space-time with my work. And, while there is critical import to pieces which try to convey a semblance of the designer's experience, pieces which pull at the fundamental connective tissue of our shared humanity in order to affect change in their players -

We need games that allow us to engage with our own experience as well.

The Rules of Go

Shown during the 2023 DANM MFA show *HEAP IS FULL*, The Rules of Go was an interactive game of the oppressed which I modified to fit a transitional space within the Digital Arts Research Center. When discussing how our cohort would set up the gallery space, I had already begun prototyping a set of games. Because these games were mostly smaller, more intimate experiences, I knew that I could adapt them to the various spaces throughout the building which might not otherwise be used.

The only item I had settled on being absolutely necessary to this game by the time installation came was the table, something to play on. The rest of the installation was built around that sole requirement. Chairs, whiteboard, lighting – all the peripheral objects, were integrated in order to highlight a specific feeling that rules and table had to evoke. In this sense, the setup of The Rules of Go felt like a staged piece – some sort of set for a play.



Figure 6: A view of The Rules of Go shortly before the showing

The Rules of Go was made to highlight the ways that games of the oppressed allow subversion of oppressive law – navigating a situation in which the anti-model is in the form of an implied logical authority.

To cultivate that experience, every part of the space contained both invitations and boundaries. An invitation, for example, in the form of a comfortable seating area – bounded by a rug, highlighted by an overhead lamp, clearly a demarcated space. To those players who made the decision to enter the space despite whatever boundary they might be crossing (often because they were in the company of others), there were simple amenities. Simultaneously, the rules on the whiteboard posited that they were now playing a game, by their mere action of sitting.

And so on.

I've gone ahead and put the typed rules for the game, as they were displayed initially, in Appendix C.

The rules changed dramatically before the piece was taken down, but the scale and creativity of changes made gave me pause.

Paper rules were scribbled on, crossed out, and modified beyond recognition, the board itself included drawings, the Go pieces were scratched and had faces on them, and someone had drawn on the back of the whiteboard.

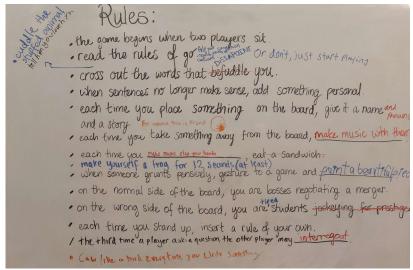


Figure 7: Rules had been added, interjected, and changed on the whiteboard



Figure 8: The gameboard itself included drawings, rules, and comments



Figure 9: Game pieces, drawn on in an effort to give them a story



Figure 10: One player put "you win!" on the back of the central whiteboard

In retrospect, I would have liked to have made this piece with a chess board instead of a Go board. I initially made the decision to build the game around the game of Go because it had what I felt to be less well understood rules, which might inspire frustration with constraint, and because it afforded what I saw as a more neutral board upon which players could add whatever they might want.

Both of these things were true. However:

I failed to see the opportunity in allowing players to remix a game they understood the rules of well, much as players understand well the rules of oppression which govern their lives. Additionally, in giving players a more blank canvas upon which to scribe their changes, they were more likely to be left scrabbling for breadcrumbs, unsure of what to do – lacking of structure. A black and white checkerboard is a wonderful structure to subvert by literally drawing or painting on.

The Rules of Go was wildly successful in addressing the first criteria of a game of the oppressed. Players were able to - and did - change the rules of play while playing. When I set up the game, I created it with the intention of building the antimodel, the piece which players are invited to push against, as the overbearing oppression of the rules themselves.

The Rules of Go was less concerned with drawing upon players' lived experience of oppression, and more concerned with merely receiving their input, no matter what form it took. As a piece, it doesn't carry a full understanding of *what* issue of oppression it wants to address. This is because rules are, themselves, social constructs which can be wielded to the benefit of the oppressor or the oppressed. Rules are, as a concept, relatively value neutral. It is instead in the specific wording and use of a rule that oppression or liberation can occur. Games of the oppressed need a goal at their core – an unknown shape of a movement from present oppression to future liberation that the designer is seeking some understanding of.

That said, within the context of these malleable rules, though there was not a specific movement from current oppression to future liberation which the game set out to have players iterate on, players often brought their own experiences to the game regardless – within the context of roleplay. Within such a large ruleset, players could pick and choose which rules to engage with fluidly, and which rules within each section to ignore or accept. This allowed them to adjust the game to their own needs. Moreover, it allowed the players to create their own miniature games – co-creating the type of obstacles that most suited them.

The most frequently used rules, among the playthroughs I witnessed, were those of giving objects placed on the board "a name and a story", and the two rules which gave context for a roleplaying scenario – naming the players as "bosses negotiating a merger" or "students jockeying for prestige". There were very few playthroughs which did not invoke at least one of these three rules.

The invocation of these rules allowed players to create a space of improvisational play in which they could wield rules and stories as a parody of corporate bureaucracy or of academic meritocracy. One of the first playtests I ran of the game ended with my colleagues adding a rule to rip up the paper version of the rules at the end because it "felt like a contract" which they decided they didn't actually like.

Players added rules, but also added shortcuts. One player, who wanted to stop playing, stood up, realized that there was the possibility of writing on the opposite side of the whiteboard, and wrote "you win" as a rule there.

The malleability of the rules also allowed games to include others in ways that were unexpected. While sitting in the same room working, my ears perked up as a third friend walked into the room where two people were already playing, and, it was decided, was suddenly a part of the game as well, despite his not agreeing to it beforehand. The justification given? Because two people had already sat down, the game had begun, and the rules said nothing about how many players were a part of the game. It was determined via this logic that *everyone* was a part of the game, a muddying of the magic circle that I had intentionally afforded in the rules.

Through all of this, though the ephemera of the game barely show it, players gave objects stories and names, talked about how they fit into a narrative, and negotiated with each other while changing the rules of their negotiation. The games which players created within The Rules of Go are games in the playground sense – ephemeral, transient, constantly in flux. In this way, games of the oppressed can be akin to a sandbox, something which encourages many different types of play within.



Figure 11: Players change the game of who is included in play



Figure 12: Players complete a roleplay scenario. Ripped up rules in background

6 The elephant in the room: Videogames of the Oppressed

For those esteemed members of the audience who are unaware, a fine and fancy person named Gonzolo Frasca wrote a master's thesis in 2001 titled *Videogames of the Oppressed*. Frasca since became an oft-referenced scholar and creator in the field of political games and game studies. So, naturally, I have to talk about it.

First off, let me just say that I arrived at the title of my work independently of Frasca's thesis. I had not read it when I wrote my title the first time – which, given the common heritage of our work, is not surprising. I was very excited to discover that someone had written about something similar, once I looked it up. And then...

Upon first reading Gonzolo Frasca's master's thesis, I found myself walking away both interested and underwhelmed. On one hand, the paper summarily introduces simulation, and its use in play spaces, as a fruitful method of engaging with anti-hierarchical, and by extension, anti-oppressive, creative play. In doing so, the thesis imagines modding a simulation game in an effort to "mutate [the game] from within", as Anne-Marie Schleiner dubs this technique (135) Frasca sees the players, (or, one could say, player-designers) as spect-actors, a natural extension of the category proposed by Boal. Because of this, changing the game is understood as the purview of the players, and Frasca proposes either asynchronous platform sharing of modifications to a large budget (simulation) game or a shared forum (like forum theater!) of small hackable game designs built in the vein of Boal's *The Rainbow of Desire*. Essentially, Frasca imagines a future in which digital games could be a platform for the same interactions espoused by the theater of the oppressed.

One of the most frustrating things about reading this paper out of context is that it is incredibly well grounded in the games research that was present at the time, in the year 2001. That is to say, Frasca's work reads now as overly concerned with developing a justification for games studies. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Frasca need not have worried, as the game industry has become more and more entrenched in consumer capitalism with every passing year. Indeed, what Frasca hoped to gain funding to create as a result of the thesis has, in effect, come true though in different forms than he might have expected. There are online communities creating quickly hackable games, many of them with narratives sharing personal histories or instances of oppression, sharing their game code, and asking for feedback. One such community is the one which has evolved around the open source game Bitsy, a small 8-bit styled game engine with an online editor. The community around Bitsy is largely queer and disabled, and frequently shares their personal stories with each other via games made in the engine. Cities: Skylines, a city simulation game, has a robust asynchronous modding community in which mods are an accepted and encouraged feature of the gameplay. While the bounds of the modifications are limited by the game used as an engine, the community around the mods has pushed the boundaries of what the game can address, and has increasingly moved to make

work which features elements closer to real life, allowing players to create simulations of stories which more closely mirror their own.

A theoretical model of games of the oppressed should certainly include games such as the ones Frasca proposes, and more. However, these models of sharing personal stories via asynchronous game creation and modification cannot be the only methods with which games are allowed to break down the barrier between player and designer. I argue that, much as in Boal and Friere's work, it is in the conversations had around the activities of creation and subversion that the most productive breaking of boundaries can be seen. To me, this means that the most critical take-away from Frasca's proposed games is not the form that has been specifically suggested, but instead the platform for discussion that is implied or suggested as a critical part of either game. By including in the design of the games a platform for discussion, Frasca allows player-designers the chance to engage in meaning making, to build a community of practice. It is this community, the mentorships and relationships between player-designers, which expands the scope of persons affected. Any model of games of the oppressed must include thought towards the technological barriers that often propagate along lines of economic oppression. A robust community will bring people to the table who otherwise might not feel they have the technical expertise to program a game – a hurdle that Frasca himself acknowledges.

7 "Do you have a sawzall?" Deconstructing the Tire

In order to become oriented, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation.

(Ahmed 5)

Sara Ahmed, in her book *Queer Phenomenology*, understands orientation as a consistent movement or searching/connection *toward* a thing. I have discussed (as Ahmed does) how this concept can be applied not only to people, but also to systems and objects.

I'll admit that as someone unfamiliar with the study of phenomenology, and especially as a brain which is oriented to think in terms of physical constants, reading about perception in this way was, well, disorienting.

I've attempted to make games about objects before. In 2021, I created a short improv game about telling the stories of artifacts left alone in an abandoned room⁴⁰ - about the histories of these objects, and how the stories attached to them could make them seem almost human. Coming from a poetic angle, I think there is something deeply fascinating about the way that objects can have their own untold histories, and more than that – that these stories grow with each new interaction. "History cannot

⁴⁰ Link here if you want to play it: transrightsrose.itch.io/artifacts

simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories." (Ahmed 41)

Because objects have affordances, have specific uses which are selected for more than others, the design of a thing can affect how it is used. In this sense, the history of an object, the ways it has been both designed and used previously, the shape that has been given to it by its interactions, all affect the orientation of the object – and thus also affect the people using it. I keep certain articles of clothing, patching them and wearing them out and crafting entire outfits around them simply *because* of the emotions tied to the history of that object – that it was given to me by someone I care for. The design of both the spaces and the artifacts in games of the oppressed is tied into these orientations, into the orientations of the game. This means that the intricacies of object design influences the ways that players will play and change the game. "In this way, bodies and their objects tend toward each other; they are oriented toward each other, and are shaped by this orientation." (Ahmed 51)

Any interaction designer will likely find this obvious. If I hand you a keyboard with grass growing out of it, you're probably going to interact with it a lot differently than your standard plastic keyboard.

But, importantly:

- 1. The design of objects always places limits on who can participate and how.
- 2. This means that the design of objects and spaces constrains not only the ways that people can interact with our work, but the *types* of dialogue around oppression that can be had within the play space.

Objects, as well as spaces, are made for some kinds of bodies more than others. Objects are made to size as well as made to order: while they come in a range of sizes, the sizes also presume certain kinds of bodies as having 'sizes' that will 'match'.

(Ahmed 51)

Games of the oppressed, of course, allow the player to modify the rules over the course of play. This *could* create a sort of emergent behavior, in which the design of the initial conditions would matter *more* than they would in any other game. And, while I would argue it is still incredibly important to focus on those initial conditions of the game – they are, after all, the only guarantee of the design – players have, time and time again, shown that they will adjust the game to their needs so long as the invitation to do so is there.

The design of the objects which constitute the initial setup of a game of the oppressed is important because that design, on average, constrains or widens the set of all possible actions that players can take with the objects available to them. Instead of fretting over trying to ensure that the entire possibility space of interactions that players could take is mapped out (which is, by the nature of it, impossible), we can simply allow players to change the objects provided in the initial conditions themselves, instead of just the relations between them.

I suppose this means that I'm just repeating the same message I've been saying this entire time: We need to trust our players to make good design decisions. I mean, this is how we break down the player/designer boundary, right? Give the players design authority.

Of note here: this sort of boundary-breaking, I found, tends to be most suited to iterative processes – to games which include some sort of repeating segment, a 'core game loop/interaction.' This so that the players get to see the results of the changes they have made to the objects, and how those changes affect the dynamics of the game itself.



Service Stop

Figure 13:

Service Stop was initially created to be a disruption of an art space, to change the way people move through a space that they might otherwise fail to consider at all. In that sense, the goal of the piece was partially to allow participants the chance to look critically at the way a space is organized, to consider their relation to it, and how it might be more playful.

Before the MFA show even opened, this piece had already begun its life in a different form. Two tires hung in the building, one in the staircase and one as a tire swing in the hallway, both set up for an open studio showing at UC Santa Cruz. I set up the tires and also created what I thought might work as a game to highlight an entirely different goal: wage discrimination around car repair and servicing.

The initial piece was a flop (at least the game part of it), mostly because it didn't have an explicit ask point at which players were invited to engage. However, I also found myself reflecting deeply on the goal I had chosen. Why was I looking to make changes to wage discrimination in the vehicle repair industry? This wasn't what I had hauled and cleaned four tires for. I brought the tires to the art building because I wanted to change the way people thought about art, because I wanted to make art out of them, because I wanted to play and make art in the hallways – and I wanted others to do the same.

Beyond that, I wanted Service Stop to reflect on the ways in which creating art is an act of service, an act of revolution, something which lies queer to the orientations we are used to traveling along. Car tires, as an object, have an orientation much more aimed toward capitalist production than towards art. When I consider a car tire on its own, it is a remnant of industry. And, while I cannot know its exact history – this car tire may have been attached to a station wagon that was exclusively used by artsy queer swingers – because of the way that car tires are able to be used, because of my own history with them, because of the raw fact of this piece of rubber's association so closely with *functionality*: inviting a use for them that is anything other than *productive*, that is *playful*, seems in and of itself an act of resistance. It is a queering of the object's orientation.

Service Stop is reflective of many of the guidelines given by Alan Kaprow for art 'happenings'⁴¹ - and was built from the beginning with a similar intention: to disrupt and challenge the very concept of what gets to count as art within the context of a show. One of my favorite moments during the showing was when I saw two students coming up the staircase from under the tire which hung ominously above them, and, unaware of my role as the designer, one commented to the other with a dismissive tone: "I guess they're trying to be abstract or something." It is outside the scope of this work to address the necessity of art which challenges those who police the boundaries of it. Just as thinking critically about our definition of a game allows for more inclusion in our work, so too for art. I heard tell of a number of people who, without hesitation, climbed up on a precarious ledge and swung from the suspended tire. I wanted to create a piece which would allow for viewers to move from seeing the piece as something untouchable to seeing it as a toy.

The final goal of this piece, then, was to shift people away from viewing a hallway and a tire as merely objects of transportation, to lay bare the work that is $\overline{41}$ www.thecollector.com/allan-kaprow-art-of-happenings

already required to maintain them as such – and towards viewing them as sites of play, as places where art can be made, where the service put into those objects is put into making them beautiful instead of merely utilitarian.

How could I shift peoples' perception of both the tires and the space? I decided that one of the most effective ways I could do both was to have players make their own art with the tires, to have the players engage actively in that shifting of service from maintenance to artmaking, and to let the form of that art be as loose as I possibly could.

Describing every modification made by the players of this game is entirely outside the scope of this paper. There was an abundance beyond reckoning. Though any categorical description of the modifications done within a game of the oppressed will, by its nature, fail to account for everything done by players, it is of course still useful for our human brains to categorize (especially in a paper such as this).

Generally, the changes to the objects of Service Stop fell into four categories:

- aesthetic changes to the objects
- functional changes to the objects
- changes to the rules of modification
- changes to the tools of modification

The players of the game made a number of changes to the aesthetics of the tires. The first, arguably, was that my colleagues and I washed them to get rid of the dirt. This category included the most changes – many of the markings on the tires were aesthetic rather than functional, and did not convey any information about rules. Drawings, decorations, and the like – all added embellishment to the tires and altered their orientation without changing their fundamental function. The tire *could* still be used as a tire, though I imagine it would be less likely.



Figure 14: there was... so much dirt.



Figure 15: Most of the tires soon became nearly covered in drawings

Functional changes to the object were dramatic and immediate. All of the tires used for this were originally headed for the dump. There's something incredibly powerful in intercepting objects that have been used to harm the environment and will do so even further – and then to instead use them for an art project. I am working with some volunteers to try and turn the tires into raised planter beds – which would further change their orientations – objects of art and of growth.

During the showing, there were holes drilled in the tires, one was turned into a swing and one hung by a chain from the roof. While the tires were able to stay there a significant time, I was told they had to be taken down eventually – but at least one of the tires is likely to be permanently converted into a tire swing, showing the affect of these functional changes on their perception. More to the point, it is impossible to use

a tire for its original intended purpose of manufacture when it's hanging from a ceiling by a large length of chain.

Beyond these changes, other players drilled holes in the tires and threaded ribbon through them, allowing one of the tires to be hung more precariously from the ceiling in the gallery space. Players glued ribbon, paper, and even crackers onto the tires. A tire was cut entirely in half before being juuuust barely held back together with glue.

Changes like these irreversibly affect these objects – changing not just their orientations, but also their affordances, the range of potential methods of engagement.



Figure 17: Glue struggling to hold a tire together aside the instruction "glue here"

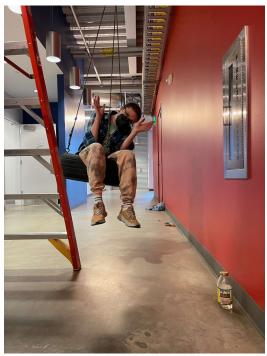


Figure 16: A picture of me sitting in the tire swing after tying it up



Figure 18: Ribbon was pushed through the drilled holes and glued there

One of the first things I noticed about the tires was that they had writing on them – writing which dictated not only the history of the object (manufacturer, dates, etc.), but also *rules* for engagement with the object (required psi, maximum load, etc.). These tires came with rules of engagement already as a part of them. But instead of hard and fast – unchanging – rules of engagement, I wanted rules of modification.

So as the first player action, I wrote a series of initial rules on one of the tires, and from that point forward, players were introduced to the game with the phrase "all the rules are on the tires".

Players added a number of rules of modification throughout playthroughs.

I don't know exactly how other players would have engaged with the piece without these rules of modification. As it was, players built off the theming of each others' rules. Each sentence or command written on the tires seems to have some sort of echo in another.

More than changing the orientation of the object, I think these rules, though ostensibly changes to the object itself, had a larger affect on the orientations of the players. The rules gave a model of what to do while also implying a specific lens through which to create more changes.



Figure 19: One of many rules written on the tires

One of the first modifications in the game which surprised me – of many – was when players, instead of modifying the orientation of just the tires, chose to modify the orientation of the tools. During one of the early playthroughs of the game, a group had been working together to drill holes in the tires and put ribbon through the holes. In service of accomplishing this task, the players had taken on different roles. One of them was holding the tire, one drilling, one using hot glue and ribbon, and a fourth – pretending to rack up service costs using the calculator. Sadly, I had to leave in the middle of the playthrough because of an appointment. To my surprise, when I returned, the playthrough had finished – and the calculator was covered and partially submerged in a pool of paint that had been dumped into one of the tires. This shift is a dramatic change for the object. At the beginning they were using the calculator in a simulation of capitalism, and at the end the device was a part of an art piece, no longer remotely functional for its original intended purpose. While this situation was surprising to me, I had arguably already done something similar. Instead of presenting to players a new set of posca markers, I manually weathered them until they appeared like an old set – modifying the orientation of the tool.



Figure 20: Drawings on the outside, paint-soaked calculator inside



Figure 21: This posca marker looks used, but was fresh from the box.

I have left my favorite tire story for last.

My brother came to visit, at my request -I wanted him to see the show. When he played Service Stop, he immediately began consulting with some of the other players and tried drilling into the tire, but then gave up after a bit, and came to me with a question:

"Do you have a sawzall? I want to cut one of the tires in half."

In the moment he asked me, I had to quickly consider my options. We did have a battery-operated reciprocating saw. So equipment wasn't the issue. It wasn't against any of the rules on the tires to use different tools. But I had already talked with the equipment manager and gone over the set of tools that I would have the players use, gotten it approved. Moreover, part of the experience *I* wanted people to have was an experience of the hardship of making art. If my brother could just cut through the thing with a sawzall, would that really be difficult?

Service Stop, though, is a game of the oppressed. And so, instead of going with my first instinct and shutting him down, I said we had one, and I would just have to check if he would be allowed to use it.

Twenty minutes and one safety conversation later, my brother found himself sweating in the late spring sun on the patio outside the gallery while wielding a reciprocating saw and attempting to cut through a reinforced tire – which is a more difficult task than it initially seemed. Not a modification of an already available tool, but a modification of the entire *set* of tools. In effect, he had opened the possibility space to new tools being created or brought from outside. This is to say nothing of his innovative use of the awl.



Figure 22: It's the most dramatic shot and also probably the least safe moment.



Figure 23: The results of my brother's work – three tires connected by an awl.

Over the course of the playthroughs, these objects took on a life of their own – changing so dramatically as to barely be called tires anymore. To me, they are no longer reminiscent of industry or of 'production', but of people I know and people I don't know making art together.

8 Tension in Facilitation: the absurdity of Boal's 'joker'

I believe that it is, frankly, absurd to ask a human to act as an oppressor to their fellow humans, especially in a space where the primary goal is to practice overcoming oppression. This is a contradiction within Boal's work which I don't want to be able to brush past.

In forum theater⁴² Boal created a setup where a subset of the community, the actors who craft the scene to be shown, are tasked with enacting a spectacle of the same oppression that they experience as part of their daily lives onto other members of their community, the spect-actors in the audience. Boal frames the theater as a tool, a language for dialogue which takes the form of acting. True dialogue, in the sense spoken of by Freire, from whom Boal draws, requires both true reflection and true action. Those engaged in dialogue must be honest. To paraphrase Freire, dialogue cannot occur between oppressor and oppressed. Therefore, the only true dialogue in a forum theater is between spect/actors as they co-create an understanding of the manufactured slice of reality brought to them for study by the actors. The spect/actors, then, are the people inhabiting the theatrical role of the oppressed within the microcosm of the theater. The problem is that this reduces the status of those who act out the model. In perceiving the play as an object of cognition, its actors pieces on

⁴² Quick summary for the unfamiliar here: dramaresource.com/forum-theatre

a chess board which must be navigated, the spect-actors are unwillingly forced into the role of oppressors, imagining the actors as less-than-human: as obstacles instead of co-creators. I argue this is part of the reason many local attempts at forum theater ultimately fail to build community liberation.

Theatrically, the role of each actor who presents the anti-model is to act as a gear in a system of oppression – to show the ways that oppression, or apathy toward it, can harm people. Conversely, the theatrical role of the spect-actor is to act as a community of the oppressed, to problem solve within the role of the oppressed. The mechanics of forum theater tell a different story, however. The most generous interpretation of an improvisatory setup with two groups would be that they are co-creating, working together to better understand how they might solve an issue of oppression. But this is not what the two groups are doing. In forum theater, the actors are tasked with reacting to the spect-actors, and with guiding the situation as best they can back to the status quo of the written play. They are acting as a human negative feedback loop. The troupe on stage cannot typically suggest methods of changing the situation of oppression, nor can they cry "Stop!" and put themselves in the role of the role of the protagonist. It is, in this instance, the spect-actors who have more agency than the actors who performed the play.

I have seen instances of forum theater where the spect-actor who comes on stage to make changes actively harms the actors through the use of their agency.

But perhaps the joker, the role which Boal added to forum theater later in its life to

facilitate the process, could guide, or intervene if the whole of forum theater became too hurtful? Perhaps the joker could ensure that the process leads to co-creation instead of oppression? The joker is tasked with preparing the audience as spectactors, as humans who might understand their agency and ability to engage with the work in a meaningful way. Perhaps, during that preparation, the joker can also ensure that the spect-actors are primed toward some productive form of dialogue, one which builds toward an agential understanding of the actors, which frames the actors as part of a creative community.

But.

Any system of meaning-making which relies on a facilitator becomes a system which is entirely dependent on their competency to function well. Stated another way: Avoid single points of failure. Build redundancy. This is why there have been workshops on how to be an effective joker run by Boal. The joker is, unequivocally, the most difficult role in the entirety of any forum theater showing.

The joker is built on contradictions. In addition to being the most difficult role, the joker has the most power in the room. In addition to appealing to the audience's sense of solidarity, the joker is the figurehead of the theatrical production. There is clearly a difference between the joker and the spect-actors. The joker has a unique position which requires knowledge of the intended narrative arc of the experience *and* the ability to enact both subtle and large changes to that structure through their facilitation of the audience. The position's contradictions in and of themselves might be fine, but such a large difference in agency makes oppression more likely.

I believe this is an inherent risk with the pedagogical model Boal borrows from Freire: a model of 'invisible pedagogy' in which (following Bernstein, 1990) the hierarchical nature of the teacher-student (or joker-audience) relationship is masked.

...Rather, it is largely through speech that the joker enacts a pedagogical role which may be crucial in shaping the ideological contours of the event.

(Dwyer 201)

In order for a boundary between two roles with differing types of agency to be eliminated, the process by which a person in one role can move to the other must be clear. If this is not the case, then the process of switching roles itself becomes a boundary between these differing types of agency, as an ambiguous process results in less willingness to brave the difficulties of a transitory space. In this particular case, the movement from spectator to joker is *very* vague, and certainly cannot be accomplished easily or quickly. Boal, in forum theater, endeavors to break the boundary between actor and spectator, but only muddles it. By leaving ambiguous the method by which members of the audience might themselves become the Joker, might themselves move into the role of running forum theater and other Theater of the Oppressed methods, Boal inadvertently re-draws the spectator/actor boundary around the joker. Boal's joker becomes a less effective version of Freire's problemposing educator. Boal's work uses many different methods, but this type of explanatory and faciliatory structure, the "lecture', in which the 'Joker' becomes an exegete" was **not originally intended for use in forum theater**, and it shows (Boal 152). Instead, this method was developed as a way to allow public spectators of large performances under an oppressive regime to understand their true subversive meaning. This is not a bad idea, in context. Boal is here applying the role as a way to break down an entirely different dichotomy than the one created in most forum theater pieces. When instead applied to small-scale forum theater work, the 'Joker' system becomes a method for regulating the spectators. The role of joker is only democratic when the spectator can choose to inhabit it as freely as any other.

In part because of the difficulty inherent in navigating the role of Joker, I chose to craft my games without any explicit facilitator. There is a long history of incredible games made without a facilitator, and so I pulled from the design of these games for inspiration. In particular, I looked at GM-less TTRPGs.

I have, of course, been asked by friends and players whether this leads to people simply recreating oppressive hierarchies without any power that can intervene to stop them. This is, effectively the same question that people ask when they wonder whether a stateless and lawless place would turn to violence. The answer to both questions is:

historically, no⁴³.

And regardless of that answer, it doesn't exactly align with my sense of praxis to create work which invites power structures out of some misplaced fear of the

⁴³ For more, see Le guin, *The Dispossessed*. Also everything at theanarchistlibrary.org, and especially *A Small Key Can Open a Large Door*.

power structures my players might create or recreate, as if I know any better than them.

The position of the joker is exactly this – a position which implies not only a hierarchy, but one with a distinct power imbalance tilted to the benefit of the facilitator, and othering the rest of the participants.

"many facilitators enjoy privileges of social positions their participants do not share. Facilitators are often college educated and middle class, helping *them* – participants who are not as privileged – 'find their own voice'." (Snyder-Young, 33)

There are ways to successfully incorporate a facilitation role into a game of the oppressed. Facilitation, much like rules, is not of itself an evil. Boal's other work shows that, in the larger context of playful and liberatory theatrical practice, facilitation can make an important difference. But – when the path from audience to facilitator, or in this case, player to designer, is not made clear, the position is no longer democratic.

The joker in modern forum theater is asked to act as an oppressor to their fellow humans, despite the goal of liberation. Instead of resolving the tension crafted by the differing goals of the acting troupe and the spectators, the addition of the joker creates an entirely new tension – between themselves and everyone else. Frankly, forum theater would be better off without.

How would it work? I don't know. Let's figure it out together.

9 Oppression and Agency in others' work

I am not the only person who has made work that fits the two criteria of games of the oppressed. There are many others, and some of them have inspired the work that I did.

I should point out that my intention in this section is not to be exhaustive. To create a full listing of what others made that fits under the intentionally broad heading of games of the oppressed would take a great deal of research that is outside the scope of this thesis.

Conversely, my intention in articulating Games of the Oppressed is not to create a schema which encompasses an impossibly large set of material. Those designed experiences which constitute games of the oppressed should be interpreted as only a very small bounded infinity, a single sector of the toolset of revolution.

Among the games of the oppressed which I have so far encountered, I have noticed a pattern – one which will hopefully serve as a framework yet to be subverted.

There are two categories⁴⁴:

Those games which attempt to lean into the second criterion – which push the player toward more strongly engaging with an issue of oppression in their own lives,

⁴⁴ Derrida is laughing right now, I hope you know

usually a specific one, sometimes at the cost of player agency. And, those games which instead lean into the first criterion – which push the player toward making changes to the rules, and which sometimes do so at the cost of merely implying issues of oppression through their setup.

Engaging with Oppression

i.e., those games which engage more strongly with the second criterion of games of the oppressed.

I don't care for this category, I think it sucks.

Most of the games I made fit into this category.

Engaging with Agency

i.e., those games which engage more strongly with the first criterion of games of the oppressed.

I want to briefly talk about two games that influenced the design of the Games of the Oppressed framework which both fall into this category.

Play it by Trust (white chess set), by Yoko Ono

A brilliantly simple art piece and game by Yoko Ono, a chess set with only white pieces. Her anti-war stance is shown through the creation of a game that necessitates dialogues and actions by the players through the course of play – while they could start out by playing chess the normal way, it very quickly becomes incredibly difficult. Additionally, the piece suggests a hope for a breakdown of property demarcation, imagining the result as a necessary peace. Ono has been often associated with the fluxus movement, though she didn't associate herself with them⁴⁵, and her work shares those aspects of being poetic, interactive, tactile, and often instruction-based, that many of her fluxus contemporaries also used. More broadly, the interactive work of the fluxus and gutai movements sought to involve the viewers of the art in ways that many works before had not yet done – including a number of co-creative experiences, similar in spirit if not in form to games of the oppressed.

In Play it by Trust, Ono managed to create an anti-war statement that implicates the players of the game as designers of a solution to a conflict that has been set up before them.

The immediate challenge that I ran into upon discovering Play it by Trust was that most of the pieces I had sketched out until then as example games of the oppressed were not nearly so simple. Ono found one demarcated difference she could subtract from a game that would increase ambiguity and make the game completely

⁴⁵ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoko_Ono

unable to be finished in the normal way, without abolishing the integrity of the basic game loop. In effect, Ono altered a game using what Anne-Marie Schleiner calls "the broken toy tactic" (Schleiner 82). By breaking certain aspects of the original game, Ono managed to make the game no longer soothing, and to expose the hierarcho-capitalist dynamics that lie underneath the mechanics that the game uses. Ono's choice of making all the pieces white, however, (instead of black) is at odds with my own understanding of the power structures that are being revealed at the heart of chess – i.e., the chessmaster as war-general⁴⁶. Despite this, Ono's example rings out as not only an instance of a game of the oppressed being created by a popular artist, but also as a guide toward how games of the oppressed which use similar artifacts of play might be created. Additionally, I am delighted to have the chance to bring the work of games of the oppressed into the discourse of fluxus and gutai, which were themselves movements in rebellion against the gallery art of the day (*Fluxus manifesto*).

Cat on Yer Head and Bernie De Koven

Bernie De Koven⁴⁷, though not always the author or designer, has a collection of playful games on his website. Many of these follow a common childlike formula for party games where players each add their own rule as the game goes on, building on the bizarre or chaotic elements of the previous, thus lending an informal and

⁴⁶ Sending armies of largely poor and otherwise marginalized people to die in war.

⁴⁷ www.deepfun.com/shalom-au-revoir

unwritten rule to the entire set of games: that the group play shifts when one member of the group, or the entire group, fails to keep up with juggling so many rules. These moments of failure are infectiously fun.

Common examples of this include the subgenre of counting games, in which a group of people is tasked with sequentially counting up to a certain number somewhat larger than the number of people present, over and over again. However, each time a specific condition is met in that counting, the person who met that condition is tasked with adding a rule to a specific number. For example, instead of saying 'eight', one must say "I dropped my croissant" or some other similar nonsense phrase. Or, perhaps, the rule will replace saying 'five' with performing some action. In this way, the game becomes more and more complex over time, and also more absurd. The inclusion of in-jokes, the use of objects at hand, and the incorporation of histories and contexts of people present are used as players seek inspiration in their quest to cause failure.

*Cat On Yer Head*⁴⁸ is one of my favorite group games to run that I learned of from De Koven's website. In it, a large number of players form a block where each person is approximately the same distance from each other, then pass a vocalized but imagined 'cat' and 'mouse' around the block from person to person, chasing each other. The players are invited over the course of play to add their own variations and rules, or to edit the original ones, by a facilitator, thus making different imagined 'levels' of this cat and mouse game. This game imagines the block of players as a

⁴⁸ www.deepfun.com/cat-yer-head

game engine, as a collective which can quickly compute and playtest changes to a ruleset through the act of play.

Because this work is abstract (by necessity – it must be to be able to iterate and run quickly with large groups), it has a hard time engaging with oppression on its own – the core rules of the game would need to be changed in order to do so. This is one of the challenges of a pure strategy or purely fun piece in a set of games that must rely on some sort of formalism⁴⁹ in order to progress the work of anti-oppression. The piece can be fun, but it must also *mean* something to us, mean something about us and our world, in order to achieve this concept of orientation with objects and positions of oppression. Games of the oppressed must take the ideas of *Cat On Yer Head* a step further, by claiming that not only are the players able to be the game engine, but also the designers of the game. And that by playtesting with a mind to the relations they cultivate with the forms of their game artifacts, they can create something which builds a logic of resistance.

⁴⁹ in the Aristotilian sense (Boal 9).

10 And never stops at all

The Revolution is Now⁵⁰.

Everyone, Everywhere, across the world stops acting, for a moment, as if Empire is real. And just like that, it's gone. Humans all have homes. Children are fed. People sing and play instead of going to the office. We work to actually problemsolve climate change, no more pretending⁵¹.

The orientations of objects are mostly assigned to them by us, by our perceptions and beliefs of their history and their function. Just as I can use a chair to race someone across the room, the tools of capitalism *can be repurposed* – if we chose to. The task of convincing every single human on planet earth to do just that is... well, immense.

No time like the present.

No place like here.

Let's make it happen.

⁵⁰ and now. and now. and now.

⁵¹ Compared to what could be done if the oil-car-pharma corporate structure were no longer driven by profit, all activist efforts to this point have been drops in the bucket.

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⁵² Search engines play an incredibly important role in our use of the internet – whether they are attached to large sites like google.com (<u>www.google.com</u>) or not. Itch.io's search function allows users to filter searches by a set of author-defined tags, a particularly useful function which I intend to highlight here. However, there is no standard of citation for this which I could find. This is yet another place where the gap between academia and the multitudinous nature of the internet becomes apparent.

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Appendix A

The Rules of Accessories

Cut out each rule, then follow them to play the game. Fill in the blanks. End when you feel you're in the right place to end.

has just been declined, and you must destroy it.	
PART1: In Preparation, get out all the things you carry with you each day.	Add one from around you.
PART2: Put one of these rules on each object. Establish an ordering based on importance.	Try desperately to appeal using each object.
PART3: Add a new rule to	Look at the most important object. Say why a different object gets you more access.
Overwrite a previous decision.	

Appendix B

The making of Conversational Topology

When I was told that all of the members of my cohort would have a two-page spread in the catalog that was to be printed for our final MFA showcase, I decided immediately that I wanted my pages to be dedicated to a game. See, I had been playing a secret game of my own (of a sort) the entire time our cohort had been building toward the event. I had been attempting to make our showcase subvert as many norms of the art world as I could imagine. This, while still showing my work. So when colleagues suggested changes which pushed in this direction such as naming our event *HEAP IS FULL* or adding massive inflatable dicks to the exterior of the building, I joyously supported and pushed for it to happen.

For similar reasons, I decided to spread my work out across the building instead of coalescing it in one place. And, when it came time to create the catalog, I made a game which would see players drawing all over its pages.

Conversational Topology is a game I made in the span of about five hours so that it could successfully go to print as part of our catalog for the exhibition. In order to create it quickly, I used one of the older versions of the same design process featured in the workshop outlined in this thesis. In that sense, it was reassuring to know that a game could be made using the framework within a short period of time.



Figure 24: Topographical maps with doodles on them, the remnants of a playtest

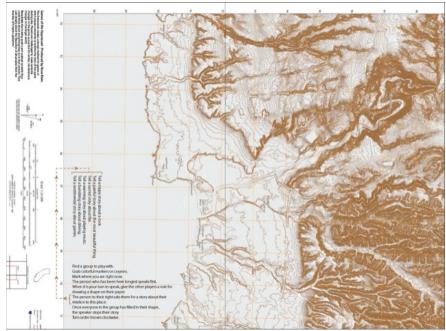


Figure 25: The final two-page spread of my section in our showcase catalog

The goal of the piece was to be with community, to celebrate community, and to extend that sense of relation out to others – to build community. Specifically, I sought to create a tool for building community which neurodivergent persons, like myself, could use as a sort of scaffolding for an experience which is usually very taxing: the navigation of small talk.

The rules below presume that you have access to a topographical map(s) of your area, which I realize is not so common. I printed off the copies I used from the US Geological Survey's topographical map builder tool⁵³.

The Rules:

- Find a group to play with.
- Grab colorful markers or crayons.
- Mark where you are right now.
- The person who has been here longest speaks first.
- When it is your turn to speak, give the other players a rule for drawing a shape on their paper.
- The person to their right asks them for a story about their relation to this place.
- Once everyone in the group has filled in their shape, the speaker stops their story.

⁵³ topobuilder.nationalmap.gov

• Turn order moves clockwise.

Example Story Prompts:

- Tell a trippy story about a rock.
- Tell a painful story about the most beautiful thing.
- Tell a sacred story about fire.
- Tell a warming story about playing music.
- Tell a bumbling story about driving.
- Tell a sentimental story about games.

Appendix C

The Rules of Go initial whiteboard rules

RULES:

- The game begins when two players sit.
- Read the rules of go.
- Cross out the words that befuddle you.
- When sentences no longer make sense, add something personal.
- Each time you place something on the board, give it a name and a story.
- Each time you take something away from the board, [blank].

- Each time you [blank], eat a sandwich.
- When someone grunts pensively, gesture to a game and [blank].
- On the normal side of the board, you are bosses negotiating a merger.
- On the wrong side of the board, you are students jockeying for prestige.
- Each time you stand up, insert a rule of your own.

The rules document printed and set on the music stand next to the table was an unedited version of the British Go Association's 'Tournament Rules of Play' for the strategy game of Go⁵⁴. However, it was printed on a printer which was running out of ink, lending the entire document an additional difficulty with respect to reading and interpretation.

Appendix D

Games of the Oppressed Zine⁵⁵

The zine shown below (if you take the file and expand it, you should be able to print it out just from the page here) was created with the intent of being a similarly modifiable piece, like the workshop – one which would serve as a companion piece to every game of the oppressed, one which players and designers alike could slowly modify so as to suit the needs of those creators. This is still the intention. If anything, in making it, I realized how hard it is to provide context in only eight pages. The inside of the zine was printed with a fillable form for any reader to intentionally build contact lists and community with others. I leave changing or recreating that as an opportunity for you.

⁵⁴ www.britgo.org/files/rules/rulesofplay.pdf

⁵⁵ The full size version of the zine is available on my website. resonants.space/gamesoftheoppressed



Figure 26: The printable companion zine for Games of the Oppressed