

## Serious Play

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In the last decade the role of game as a catalyst became foregrounded in various fields particularly in education and healthcare. In this presentation we would offer an alternate educational strategy and experiential design tool: the Serious Play game project.

The aim of the project is to use humour and imagination to explore at people's differing abilities, acquired or genetic 'disabilities' as they are traditionally referred to, or conversely, abilities that we view as extraordinary, such as a photographic memory. These varying abilities potentially confer both advantages and/or disadvantages in certain circumstances. The project investigates knowledge creation through play and humor in order to introduce discussions of difference into learning environments such as classrooms, community programs and cultural institutions that schedule educational events. The optimal aim is to discover gameplay and interactions that transcend age, class, gender, ability and ethnicity. The game is played with cards and debate. It is intended to be amusing, leading to laughter as players try to make up winning arguments for why a particular 'differing ability' would be a disaster or a real advantage in the given circumstance. The primary aim is to create awareness and to expand teaching practice to include more gameplay. Thus the game becomes an unpretentious yet extremely useful tool for alternative knowledge development. The card design allows for additional information to be written in by the players, permitting a continuous collaborative pedagogical practice rather than a static game.

The initial Dobble Debate -as it was formally called- game cards designed by students Martin Shook and Anna Lew took inspiration from playing cards Shook and Lew had experienced playing, such as Yu-Gi-Oh, Magic the Gathering and Pokémon cards. In their words: We used a similar layout of title, an image followed by a short description. Quotes were added to the base of the layout, that are meant to create humor, an example of a quote used in the Pirate Ship card is "You can swab the poop deck, but ye can't poop on the swab deck." The illustrations for the cards posed a difficult design problem, how to avoid ablest depictions. A series of humanoid characters were designed to indicate difference. For example an anonymous blog post, explaining that living with epilepsy was like having your brain dancing, inspired the epilepsy card. We asked ourselves, do some relevant games offer a deferential yet whimsical approach to contemporary concerns? For example, one of the inspirations for the game was the popular Cards Against Humanity project. Though, unlike Cards Against Humanity, the game discourages negativity. However, Cards Against Humanity has spirited, anti-status quo and playful, qualities that we would like to emulate. To quote influential game developer, Mary Flanagan, "Create a player experience that's fun first. If you remove the fun, [players] will feel like they're being preached to and it's not a game any more, there's no agency."

The game was first tested in the late summer of 2015 by groups of interdisciplinary students at OCADU in Toronto. At first the participants felt the discomfort of trying to remain politically correct while playing the game. They struggled with an awkward first experience of creating humour about differences. However, as the game progressed, the game became more relaxed and debate more fluid. The game was work shopped at Transitio\_MX 06, in Mexico City, fall 2015. Since then the project has been work shopped in Toronto, in collaboration with Dr. Tirtha Mukhopadhyay, from the University of Guanajuato, Mexico and at ISEA 2017 in Manizales, Colombia.

Humour in the game arose from an understanding of how differences function biologically and from personal experience. Debates on zombies not wanting to eat the brains of an individual with epilepsy due to differing electrical brain currents opened up a conversation on how epilepsy

works. In another example, ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, was discussed as an evolutionary advantage because it allows the individual to focus and work on multiple activities at once. A discussion ensued about contemporary educational norms that try to eliminate difference rather than work with it. Personal experiences with differences were brought into the debate as guests to the exhibition discussed their experience with personal anxiety and mental health. As the game progressed it became a social experience guiding dialogue on differences, sharing experiences and knowledge.

During the facilitation and gameplay, reoccurring questions about the education on disabilities in Canada were asked. In the words of Martin Shook and Anna Lew: The CENART students, of Mexico City, wanted to know how we received our training on disabilities and how we learned to create inclusive spaces and attitudes. This simple question was shocking, we had no formal education taught in public school on disabilities and inclusion, all knowledge we had was based on exposure rather in real life or through popular culture. The participants discussed the cultural differences in Mexico regarding disabilities, and differences; including a lack of tact for differences in their country but also that the need for respect for Human Rights was a necessary first step. Another point that arose was the addition of differences that expand past genetic abnormality. The potential for a deck showing multiple differences was proposed. At a participatory workshop at the Leonardo LASER Art Science Salon in Toronto we were encouraged to include what we might label as extraordinary abilities, such as synesthesia, to the mix of 'Differences'. A rule was also suggested whereas a player could 'buy time or expertise' so that they can search for information on the Internet or ask for help from others. In later iterations of the game we requested contributions from the participants re changing the game. This method proves to be an excellent tool for re-evaluation and further game development. Recently we developed a methodology for collecting information re the perspectives of the participants for comparative data analysis.

In conclusion it is of note how many contemporary games relate to susceptibilities, disabilities and advanced age, thus contributing to processes of social innovation and change. Within this framework, definitions of so-called disabilities changed dramatically and further questions were raised. Who is considered disabled today? To which extent do assisted technologies and digital tools alter our recognition of disability? Do we now view disabilities - or better, different abilities - in alternate ways? And lastly, how are these issues leveraged in games from the vantage points of politics, science, arts, technology, design and education. Today many of these questions remain unanswered.