Challenging Systems of Play

Towards game design ethics for transgender allyship

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ABSTRACT

Game design processes, just like games themselves, are infused with unconscious values which need to be made transparent to ensure a successful outcome. Building on previous studies in educational and queer game design, this paper critically reflects on the values of our game design process with *Allied Forces*, a game which aims to teach trans allyship to cisgender players. Using a personal account routed in reflective design and standpoint methodology, we describe our involvement as queer subject matter experts assisting in the development of a game focusing on cis education. Our discussion reflects on two dimensions of critical game design which we believe are suited to generate a better understanding of unconscious interpersonal dynamics in politically engaged, social justice-oriented game design. These are (1) external assumptions related to our expertise as queer designers, and (2) the internal labor and hidden costs of working as marginalized creators with and for cis players. Our observations regarding these emergent themes allow us to interrogate and make visible the hidden power dimensions which tend to drive social change-oriented educational game design more generally. Our contribution thus seeks to help marginalized creators identify and calculate the costs and benefits of participating in politically engaged game design, and to develop their own feasible strategies and voices as trans and nonbinary creators in collaborative game design spaces.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → Law, social and behavioral sciences; Sociology; Education; Collaborative learning; • **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design.

KEYWORDS

Queer Theory, Trans Studies, Game Design, Critical Praxis

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in how games intersect with LGBTQ issues, including queer representation in games [9, 30, 32, 37, 44–46], and the expressive opportunities queer people have when working with games [1, 28, 48, 50, 51]. One of the ongoing concerns in this area has been a foundational mythology in games, that its target demographic is straight white boys [31, 43]. This mythology affects what kind of experiences and bodies are normalized in game culture and which ones are presented as deviant [15]. While there is a wide consensus that gender variety can and does occur in games designed for the mainstream market, potentials for trans representations are often a consequence of technical accidents rather than progressive design decisions [31].

Notwithstanding these constraints, queer audiences have always found ways to include themselves through what has variously been called 'queergaming' [6] and 'playing queer' [36]; practices which allow players to see queerness in seemingly non-queer contents. For trans players, this offers the opportunity to find expressions which accommodate lived realities rather than centering cisgender norms.

The opportunity to 'queer' game design itself has become available as game development technology has become more accessible for everyone [1, 28, 38]. Personal experience games by trans and gender-nonconforming creators have however been commonly mislabeled as 'empathy games' in their supposed message and intent [33, 38]. The notion often forwarded is that due to their affordances as embodied, participatory media, games are especially suited to teach empathy to players [3]. Under a 'hegemony of play' where the straight cis gaze is defined as the norm [13], the 'empathy machines' of games have framed queer games as an opportunity for cis players to 'walk a mile' in the shoes of trans people. This dynamic has been widely criticized from scholarly and artistic angles, including merritt k's narrative game *Empathy Machine* [20], as well as Anna Anthropy's and Mattie Brice's installations *Empathy Game* [2] and *empathy machine* [4] which problematize this notion of empathy as short-lived participation in a 'touristic' game experience detached from queer lives [33, 36]. In their critiques of empathy as a discourse which allows this kind of detachment, scholars have embraced alternative models which stress the importance of affective connection and implication [7, 33]. Ruberg [37] argues that:

> "[a]s an alternative to empathy, a more productive affective model for togetherness can be found in Donna Haraway's notion of "becoming with", wherein two subjects can stand together, see each other, and value one another without attempting to possess one another or become one." (181; citing Haraway [19].)

We welcome Ruberg's proposal to adopt Haraway's 'becoming with' as an approach to queer play, suggesting that it might be

expanded to the dimension of queer design. In particular, we see 'becoming with' as a potential ethical framework for educational game design with cis players in mind, where a core challenge is to instruct on oppressive realities which affect us without turning ourselves into the 'touristic' object of cis edutainment.

A preliminary link to existing literature on this challenge can be found in Steve Wilcox's discussion of "praxis games," which are designed for players to enact real world knowledges while respecting standpoint aspects of players and designers [52: 160]. Wilcox discusses the example of Zoë Quinn's *Depression Quest* [34], a narrative game designed from a personal view on the way non-depressed individuals tend to position those with depression, thereby misconstruing the experience. The game presents players with oversimplified choices, such as 'staying positive' or 'reading a book,' but disables these choices mechanically. Wilcox argues that "such facile options are not only unavailable, they are properly seen for what they are: condescending and demeaning suggestions that have no practical role to play in the lives of those who experience depression" [52: 159]. Instead of trying to find empathy through immersion and attempting to 'become one', the design explores the tension and dissonance between different lived experiences as an opportunity for game-based reflection [21].

Game-based learning and serious games are often discussed in their capacity to effect social change through intervention and education [11, 12, 39]. Analog game studies have been particularly rich in discussing the potential of games and their design processes as informal learning tools [22, 53] and critical intervention [25, 27, 35]. Such studies highlight the capacity of critical game design processes as reflective of their own materiality, their relationship to its players and designers, as they are situated in wider society.

Recognizing standpoints in game design is useful when aligning such efforts with trans studies, a nascent discipline which distinguishes itself significantly from perspectives that have negated trans experience, pathologized trans people, or defined them solely in terms of a medicalized model [14, 42, 49]. Instead, trans studies, attempts to account for why trans subjectivity has come to be understood the way that it has been, the characteristics and effects of socio-cultural transphobia and cis-normativity, and a fuller account of trans subjectivities [17, 24, 47]. This reflects a shift away from seeing the trans person as the problem in society, and rather focuses on the problematic society that does not accept them, akin to (and intersecting with) the ways in which disability rights theory has proposed a move away from a medical model to a social model of disability [23].

Centering the question of trans allyship and the responsibilities cis people hold, is one such shift to critically engage with the socio-cultural context of trans subjectivities. Patrick Grzanka [16] has examined wider LGBTQ allyship in this way and posits that the scholarly work that is done on the subject tends to focus on how people come to define themselves as allies to the exclusion of examining what allies then do and what impact that has [16: 5]. This finding is mirrored in Kendrick T. Brown and Joan M. Ostrove's [5] three studies on the perception of allies by people of color. Across these studies they found a difference between the affirmation allies might offer and the action they might actually take; with the latter often being seen to fall short of the former.

Robert A. Marx, Leah Marion Roberts and Carol T. Nixon [29], in their study of school personnel training to be trans allies, note that current models of allyship, though they can lead to increased awareness and support, can also be situated in problematic understandings of othering rather than fuller acceptance. Included in these more traditional conceptions of allyship is a structural reproduction of the power dynamics they purport to dismantle. They propose a more complex conception and enacting of allyship is required.

The design reflections we present in this paper examine what implications this might have for game designers, especially those working on the margins to create educational games. We present these reflections through the lens of our experience as designers working on *Allied Forces*, a work-in-progress game prototype which tries to address the challenge of allyship education through play. The ruptures and insights we experienced in this process present us with an opportunity to critically unpack some of the internalized assumptions and power structures queer game designers need to resolve when working towards positively influencing the lives of trans people.

2 METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we reflect on a game design process to identify emergent methodological concerns arising for queer creators working towards social change. Our analysis focuses both on the gameplay themes when developing the game *Allied Forces*, as well as the ethical issues we encountered when doing so. By looking at these aspects in conjunction, we expect to gain a better understanding of the hidden assumptions underlying participatory game-based learning projects.

In investigating our process, we consider feminist standpoint theory as a way to understand our shared positionality in this project as white European game scholars and artists on the trans spectrum in terms of a first-person research view [10, 26]. This identifies our scholarly angle and objectives for knowledge construction as committed to queer futures, rather than as being purportedly apolitical. We contend that our standpoints come with various limitations, due to our intersecting race and class privileges. However, we embrace standpoint feminism as a framework which understands our situated knowledge as derived from shared experience [7]. This allows us to operate from what Haraway calls a "privilege of partial perspective" [18], which seeks to make transparent what we see and do not see from our shared angle. As such, we do not claim to speak on behalf of other collaborators whose standpoints might differ and therefore elicit different reflections. We welcome such differences as complementary rather than competitive views.

Such an approach is inspired by previous queer game design research which locates academic rigor in its capacity to elicit personal reflection rather than objective outcomes [28, 48, 50]. More broadly, our method is affiliated with the discourses of reflective game design in HCI which has highlighted the role of interaction design as a resource for reflection [21, 40, 41]. Sengers et al. [41] define 'reflection' as a process of "bringing unconscious aspects of experience to conscious awareness, thereby making them available for conscious choice" [41: np]. They further argue that in order to

understand the technologies we build, we should prioritize reflection itself as a core outcome of technology design [41]. We apply this tenet in our discussion of a game prototype whose design process 'reflects' something back at us, in that it brings unconscious assumptions about power, labor, and gender-related activism to our conscious awareness.

The reflection performed in this paper is thus driven by two intentions. First, it is to make transparent some of the invisible aspects of a specific design case which features the interaction between us as queer game designers and the 'subject matter' of cis-focused educational games. This addresses the specific case study of *Allied Forces*, naming and discussing those design features which made themselves seen and heard through ruptures in the process. A second intention is to interrogate these features in their potential applicability to design processes more broadly. The hope is that this can inspire marginalized creators to develop critical collaboration strategies while performing game design interventions. This includes ourselves as designers, whose work on *Allied Forces* is still in progress. At the time of writing, *Allied Forces* is in a precarious development state with an uncertain outcome. As an object of analysis, however, it allows us to reflect on how and why politically engaged design work like ours might falter, and under what conditions it should be conducted. Since our work on the game is not fully concluded, these considerations are intended to produce insights for possible future directions, with the potential to validate and inspire other trans and nonbinary game developers working on education games.

3 *ALLIED FORCES*: DESIGNING A GAME FOR POSITIVE ALLYSHIP

We were asked to join the *Allied Forces* project initiated at the University of Uppsala Department of Game Design's Games & Society Lab some months after work had already started by our other team members. Originally envisaged as an in-person role-playing experience for (young) trans people to enact support for themselves and each other, the project had undergone significant shifts prior to our recruitment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic restricting opportunities of the game's form and function. Upon consideration, it was determined that a game experience that could be played online/at-distance was necessary and could potentially address the social environment of trans people. The consideration was that a way to support trans people in a potentially hostile social environment could be to assist trans allies to be more capable in their support. Following this restructure, we (Josephine Baird at first and shortly thereafter Sabine Harrer) joined the project as additional game designers with lived experience, to assist the completion of a game prototype which could be tested with the intended target audience, a cohort of cis family members of trans people recruited via the Uppsala University Hospital. The social impact goal of *Allied Forces* was to train allyship skills to this audience and by implication improve the safety of trans people in their lives.

We joined the project when *Allied Forces* already existed as a loose collection of ideas for a collaborative multiplayer game intended to be played by cis players. In the game, the players were supposed to succeed in the roles of allies responding to the needs and feelings of a trans individual modelled by the game system. The game featured a strategy mechanic to model the struggles of a trans person in society. Building on the previously discussed concerns in trans studies [cf. 16], our intention was to model the difference between superficial versus supportive versions of 'allyship' through gameplay in order to demonstrate rather than merely explain it to cis players. This initial focus set the tone and direction for the remaining design process. Our focus was on challenging players to learn about harmful and constructive attempts at allyship, and through the game develop effective strategies towards becoming accomplices.

We started ideation by collecting examples for unproductive allyship performances based on negative interactions we had had with well-meaning cis people in the past. We took note of the differences and similarities in our accounts and developed ideas on how such dynamics might transform and evolve towards more supportive interactions. While the framing of this process was in terms of a creative ideation phase, we observed the emotional toll it took on us, personally. First, it required us to revisit harmful memories and learn about traumatizing incidents shared by our queer team members. Secondly, it required us to consider these events in an analytical fashion which would allow us to turn them into a functional game system. Thirdly, while reflecting on good allyship brought up positive memories of support and care, we were also confronted by the paradox and emotional impact of doing so in order to create solutions for a societal problem we did not help cause but were considered experts in because we were negatively affected by its consequences.

Based on our initial collection of memories, we developed a game scenario in which three players collaborate to win against the game. These players are put into the shoes of a fictional cis character who wishes to support a trans character, named H. Each player represents an inner voice of the cis character. The game starts by players being presented with a scenario which sets the scene and introduces a conflict: The collective player character and their friend H. have arrived at a party and it turns out that a well-known transphobe has arrived too. The players must collectively make a decision on what their character should do to be a good ally and support H.

At first, their choices are limited to three options, one offered to each voice. Each voice initially represents a different 'archetype' of negative allyship gravitating towards inappropriate options. In order to win the game all voices must learn and grow, partially by helping each other through conversation, partially by gathering information from H. If the players manage to find a way to grow their voices in meaningful ways, they can win against the game by helping H. through the party. Alternatively, if their attempts fail, the comfort levels of both characters will drop and eventually end the game prematurely.

These mechanics follow a cooperative rock-paper-scissors principle using resource management to model the urgency of cooperation among different types of cis people to inspire mutual learning. In the game, these types are modeled as archetypical 'inner voices' of the main character and are intentionally kept on a metaphorical level. Their allyship features are designed in line with the common fantasy trope of *warrior*, *mage*, and *healer*. The players' available actions and future progression paths are characterized in relation to these archetypes. For example, a player choosing the *warrior*

character will initially be able to instigate fights and interventions which are intended to support but end up harming the trans character. During the game, this weakness can be turned into a consensual intervention skill. The *mage*, conversely, starts out with an impulse to overintellectualize trans experience and feels entitled to trans people's time and education. Over time, this impulse can be transformed into a useful capacity to educate themself and other cis people. Finally, the *healer* suffers from the need to spread toxic positivity, demanding trans people consider the goodness in all people and decenter existent pain. If played effectively, this can be turned into a resource for care and gentleness which benefits themself and other cis and trans people. The fantasy roles, while informed by our real experiences, create a layer of fictionality which is designed to help cis players reflect on (problematic) allyship at their own pace without being put on the spot.

Whilst over time, the players will unlock better options for their characters, the starting scenario simulates a precarious situation of 'bad allyship' which will affect H.'s wellbeing negatively. However, by enforcing the choice of one out of the three damaging options at first, the game aims at engaging players in actions they might recognize from real life. Secondly, by presenting these as exaggerated, highly constrained versions of failing ally types, we aim to encourage disruptive play and protest against normalized behaviors. Similar to the paradoxical intervention method in psychotherapy where a client is asked to consciously enact problematic behavior in order to change it [8], *Allied Forces* invites players to consciously enact problematic 'allyship' to imagine better alternatives. Thirdly, the transformation towards successful accompliceship happens via collaborative, playful action. Through collective enactment, playful failure and the possibility of resolution, *Allied Forces* is supposed to be a "praxis game" [52] which fosters an understanding for our standpoints as trans and nonbinary people.

The current iteration of *Allied Forces* is at a detailed conceptualization stage with limited playability. This is the reason it has not been tested with the target group, and its potential, impact and viability as a learning game are unknown. However, the design process evoked questions and concerns which, beyond affecting us on a personal level, speak to the ethics of learning game design in social justice contexts more generally. In the following section we will unpack these concerns along two dimensions; the external assumptions related to our queer expertise, and the internal labor related to our identities as marginalized designers.

4 EXTERNAL ASSUMPTIONS: THE TRICKLE-DOWN EMPATHY MODEL OF GAME DESIGN

The first set of observations is related to hidden assumptions about the design task, as well as our ability to tackle it as queer designers. A central assumption inherent in the project goal was that cis-oriented game design can, in fact, improve the lives of trans people. Although there is no doubt that allyship training is an essential part of trans liberation struggles, the equation of trans safety and cis education cannot help but evoke the dubious 'empathy game' model [cf. 33]. The idea is that by training cis players to become better allies, their empathy would 'trickle down' into the lives of trans people where it would produce change. However, as Pozo [33] asks,

> "If cisgender consumers of games by transgender designers learn "empathy" by playing these games, where does this empathy go as designers struggle to make a living from their work, or as their physical safety and privacy are threatened by cycles of harassment for their visibility?" [33: np].

While we have no data on the potential 'afterlife' of *Allied Forces* and how working on it might impact our lives in the future, we share Pozo's concerns of sustainability and visibility along with many marginalized creators. This passage also highlights the problem with assuming a smooth learning transfer from games context to real world context. Assuming trans safety as an outcome of cis player learning runs the risk of centering cis experience and treating trans safety as an afterthought.

Another assumption inherent in our roles on the project was that a successful 'trickle-down effect' of empathy was most likely achievable via our 'authentic' experience as trans and nonbinary creators. We were recruited in part because of our 'lived experience' as trans people. This centers trans people and their experience in determining the direction of interventions which have as their goal the improvement of trans people's lives. The players would be cis people doing the work to become better allies. This fits in with the assertion that cis people are the ones that are able to, and should, deploy their own resources to deconstruct cis-normativity and thus ultimately, support trans people. However, we found that there is a paradox inherent in educating on our experience while that experience is decentered for the benefit of the cis player. In this sense, we are asked to put our 'authentic' experience into the game whilst also being expected to do so in such a way that would make the game fun for players who might refuse engagement with our experience outside a gaming context.

This takes us to another expectation inscribed in the project; the question of trans empathy with cis players. Since *Allied Forces* is expected to provide an educational outcome for cis players, this asks us to put ourselves 'in their shoes' and implement an experience catering to their standpoints. Doing so has required us to be 'careful' and 'mindful' of how we might come across in our request to deconstruct the very cis-normativity we were having to invoke to get players to consider doing so. This has had a number of repercussions on our mental wellbeing as trans and nonbinary game designers. Through strategic optimism, we remain hopeful that making some of these affective struggles visible through reflection can help critically inform future design decisions of marginalized creators applying their experience to game design.

5 INTERNAL LABOR: THE HIDDEN COST OF DESIGNING FOR PRIVILEGED PLAYERS

A realization we had whilst working on *Allied Forces* is that living marginalized lives does not automatically equip us to make sense of them in coherent ways, least through a game. Especially revisiting traumatic experiences might actively impede our ability to speak. In addition to revisiting personal examples of past experiences which had left a negative imprint on us in every sphere of our personal and professional lives, then, there are fears related to what might

happen to the game once it was completed. We understand that our experience would make up the basis of something that might be shared with strangers potentially hostile towards it. This means that by sharing subject matter expertise, we had made ourselves vulnerable, both during the design process and through the game product we would eventually share. This feeling of vulnerability stands in stark contrast to a rhetoric of empowerment invoked in discourses on empathy game design [3].

Secondly, there are emotional ramifications to turning 'lived experience' into a format that can fit and accommodate someone else's experience and perspectives. It puts an onus on us to transform our trauma into a 'usable' shape where it will empower others to learn from it. This entails making our experiences 'acceptable' or 'comprehensible' to a standard that would mean the player does not reject it out of hand. This requires some measure of self-censorship, the most notable of which is the exclusion of elements of our experience which may be too disturbing or challenging, which could lead to rejection or avoidance in the player and thus impede the game-based-learning we hope for.

The request to put ourselves in the shoes of our cis players is equivalent with creating an 'unsafe' space for us in which our trauma must be dimmed to a level suited to cater to the needs and comfort of the cis player. In privileging the potential ally over the trans person's traumatic experience - our experience - we practice a kind of self-denial which we are all too familiar with from daily interactions in cis-normative society. This has made us wonder to what extent the design context of *Allied Forces* had itself been expressive of the oppressive forces we were seeking to address, namely a socio-cultural context so hostile that we must remain strategically invisible so as to allow for the comfort and acceptance of those with privileges associated with being cisgender. A consequence of this dynamic is the risk of 'othering' ourselves by perpetuating problematic tropes in our game design which frame queer experience in a way that, while reaching the cis players, might be alienating to ourselves and other queer players. As such, 'optimizing' queer experience for playability by compartmentalizing it may have been just as traumatic, or more so, than simply sharing our experience in its complicated entirety.

6 CONCLUSIVE THOUGHTS

Ultimately, our creative and affective involvement as trans and nonbinary creators working on *Allied Forces*, a game on cis allyship, has left us with a number of open questions. Most of all, what are the ethics of conducting such a design process? A central ethical problem we have identified is the question of 'authenticity' and its (im)possibility in the context of game design catering to cis players' perspective on trans experience. What parts of our 'authentic' experience are we able to share, when, with whom, and to what end?

While our paper intends to highlight some of the tensions arising from such difficult questions, we are confident that reflecting on them can be useful to define actionable, realistic, and respectful game design goals moving forward. For instance, rather than expecting the utilization of subject matter expertise in the design process to be 'empowering' for trans people, acknowledging the labor of strategic self-erasure required from us creates a more validating, respectful framing. This shift in perspective is required for two reasons. First, only by seeing the paradoxes and pain involved in putting marginalized experience into playful edutainment can activist efforts be appropriately seen and compensated. Secondly, understanding subject matter expertise in terms of labor rather than empowerment can help design goals stay realistic.

An empowering aspect in our *Allied Forces* process has been our collective capacity to name and question invisible framing errors through our shared standpoints [50]. That said, a reality which cis stakeholders must face when inviting trans people to turn experience into games for cis audiences is that this is potentially going to be work experienced as challenging, emotionally taxing and possibly paradoxical. Nevertheless, the undisputed need for cis ally education and the hope for social impact that it could lead to, will drive some of us to do this work regardless. In this case, it is an ethical prerogative for subject matter experts to lead the design.

Moving forward, what we hope to achieve with our future work on *Allied Forces* is to arrive at a game suited to inspire cis accomplice-ship through implication rather than affirmation. Having identified practical hurdles in the way of such an endeavor, and given the research that suggests what we are attempting may have an impact [11, 12, 39], we remain strategically optimistic. Nevertheless, it will be difficult to calculate the impact of *Allied Forces* on the design team and the player base. We have explored some of the elements that would go into that calculation, and believe that by reflecting on these and considering the ways in which they impact our labor, we might be able to apply them in our current and future projects.

We also hope for this reflection to encourage other marginalized creators to not just cope with or accept commonplace practices, like the requirement to revisit their trauma, commodify their experience, or feel the pressure to feel 'empowered' when they are not, but to recognize invisible power dimensions in their design processes, and arrive at practices which allow for care during times of emotionally challenging game design labor.

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