



**Game Design for
Self-Determination**



***There has never been a better time
to make video games.***

Game-making tools are more accessible than ever.

The emergence of free tools like Twine and Unity, and publishing platforms like itch.io and Steam Greenlight enables single individuals and small teams to create games, where before game development almost exclusively happened inside large corporations and required a great deal of technical knowledge.

More people are able to make games than ever before.

With the rise of these tools, the barrier of entry to game development is much lower. Now more people are able to make games, which means there are a broader range of voices and stories than ever before. Games used to be almost exclusively made for and by young, white, straight males. Not anymore. The medium itself has changed and is more inclusive than ever.

New gameplay experiences are being created.

With more people able to express their ideas and represent themselves with games, and the tools requiring less specialized technical knowledge, a wider range experiences are being explored. We now have games about companionship and trust, mental health issues, the personal lives of drone pilots, immigration bureaucracy, the awkwardness of greetings, etc.

And...

We still have a lot of work to do.

This progress is to be celebrated and enables us to start looking at *how* we make games, now that we've made progress on the *who* and *what* fronts.

Practices still lagging behind...

The internal structure of game development practices still retains the undemocratic, strictly top-down hierarchy of large corporations that measure their success based on the wealth they create, while the well-being of their members and that of the communities in which they're located is at best an afterthought.

This kind of structure works well for large companies trying to maximize profits, but if our goal is to create a culturally diverse, equitable, and just world, we can do better.

We need to rethink how we work together so that our practices are structured in ways that are consistent with the values we hold dear.

If we say we want to live in a democracy, does it really make sense that, in our practices, where we spend about a third of our lives, a few people make most of the decisions, have absolute creative control, and accrue most of the wealth?

Education is still lagging behind...

Likewise, we structure our classrooms like boardrooms. The instructor tells the students what to do and they must listen and obey. Questioning of the curriculum is discouraged, adherence to strict rules is enforced, and students treated as passive receptacles of information with little agency of their own.

There are many reasons for this that we won't delve into here, but we believe we can do better.

Our classrooms can be spaces where learning happens as a collective, experiential process, instead of a one-way transmission of knowledge.

We know from our own field of game design that autonomous, relational learning experiences are more effective than simple one-way instruction.

We can teach the way we design.

Ok. How do we start?

There is no one solution, no magic bullet, every practice is composed of completely different people and exists in totally different contexts. But we can start by listening to our peers and identifying our values collectively.

Once we know what those are, we can ensure that our internal structure and daily praxis, including the ways we relate to one another, are consistent with those values.

For example, if we value democracy, then we can't let a few people at the top have all the decision power and have the ability to exclude others from the decision-making process.

If we value cultural diversity, we need to be sure all our voices are represented in our work and in our conversations.

And so on...

Solutions to these questions will be as diverse as we are.

Switching to a values-driven practice is hard, but worth it.

This is an unfamiliar process for most people. There is a lot of work that needs to be done to unlearn patterns of behavior that reproduce unjust power relations before we can participate in the process as equals.

This is crucial.

We all have the experience of working with others and feeling frustrated because we feel we have no say or because it's hard to get people on the same page. The usual reaction is to either abandon the process entirely, or try to control it completely, but those reactions stem from our fear that we don't have each other's best interest at heart.

This process requires trust and that takes courage, we cannot approach it with fear or timidity or we risk reverting back to the old patterns.

Appendix

How do we measure success?

Again, we have to look at our values and create metrics that are consistent. In my own classroom, we determined that collaboration, respect, and self-expression were at the top of our list of values.

So we measure success based not on the marketability or effectiveness of the games students create at the end, but on how the process enabled us to work well together, in a manner that was respectful of one another, and enhanced our sense of self-efficacy. Note that the instructor is included in this evaluation.

The amazing thing about this process is that, if the values-driven outcomes are realized, the other stuff almost takes care of itself. A practice in which members are respectful of one another, work well together, and feel empowered will produce better results, and in the process, become a prefigurative example of the world we'd like to live in.

In a classroom setting, how do you pass on your knowledge and experience without becoming their boss?

Let's look at our values. Based on the question, it sounds like we value respect. Well, then we can't treat students as lesser people because of our different roles or experience gap. In my own practice, I tell students that I am sometimes talking to them in front of the classroom because I have done a lot of the work already. My experience is their asset, not something that confers me the authority to control their behavior.

The ultimate goal is to relate to one another as equals, but before we can get there on a certain topic, there is a period in which the teacher is doing most of the talking and the students most of the listening. We're in good shape as long as this isn't a relationship of domination, but one of respect, i.e. one in which the student does not feel inferior for not having the teacher's experience, and the teacher understands they're not inherently better for having spent more time and effort on the topic.

Here insights from critical pedagogy can be really helpful, specifically the work of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Ira Shor.

Why can't you offer a clear, concise plan for this model?

Because the shape that your structure and praxis will take depends on the values of the members of the practice, and the context in which it operates. If I told you to modify your internal structure to match mine, I would be imposing my practice's values onto yours.

In my own artistic practice, because I value democracy, solidarity, equity, and cultural diversity, I work with others as equals in mutually beneficial relationships where every member does empowering work but also “takes out the trash,” while being aware of how the work impacts my local community because my well-being is predicated on theirs.

Why should I go through all this work?

We believe that there is a disconnect between the way we talk about our values and the way we organize our classrooms and workplaces. We say we want a just, equitable, democratic society but we usually work inside pyramidal hierarchies where a few people, often just one, can have total control over the practice, including the ability to coerce those with less power under the threat of exclusion and even veiled violence. The boss can unilaterally tell people what to do without any justification and if they don't comply, they can get rid of employees. Most of us don't behave in this way, but we do have the power to because of the top-down hierarchy we work in.

We can do better. We've made a lot of progress recently, so why stop now?

What about the end-products?

In my own experience, corroborated by many others working in this way, the artifacts of our collaborative, participatory, values-driven practices are often exceptional, not despite of the process, but because of it. Self-efficacy breeds excellence. Perhaps more importantly, a different way of working produces different results. Stagnation is harmful to any medium. We need a vibrant, diverse community of game makers if we are to see the medium thrive.

Can you recommend some resources specific to this model?

Here's a list of resources I've found useful for my own practice. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Pedagogy:

- *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire
- *Teaching to Transgress*, by bell hooks
- *Experience & Education*, by John Dewey
- *Anarchist Pedagogies*, edited by Robert H. Haworth
- *Helping Children Succeed*, by Paul Tough
- *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, by Pablo Helguera

Game Design & Culture:

- *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, by Anna Anthropy
- *Values at Play in Digital Games*, by Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum
- *Grow-a-Game* cards and app, by Tiltfactor
- feministfrequency.com

Autonomy, Values-Centric Approach, Self-Determination:

- *The Empowerment Manual*, by Starhawk
- *Parecon (Participatory Economics)*, by Michael Albert
- *Why We Do What We Do*, by Edward L. Deci

Game Development:

- gamesareforeveryone.com, by Zoe Quinn
- extra-credits.org