

Chapter 16

Power to the People: Anti-Oppressive Game Design

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ABSTRACT

This chapter defines basic principles of anti-oppression and its ethical implications. Anti-oppression is a framework used in social work and community organizing that broadly challenges power imbalances between different groups of people in society. This chapter positions these principles in the realm of game creation and argue for their use—particularly in the development of social issue games that in one way or another seek to spotlight and challenge social power imbalances. While the chapter outlines some essential theory, it ultimately takes a practice-based perspective to make a case for and support the incorporation of anti-oppressive principles in game design and development. It features the work of five organizations from around the world about their strategies for implementing equity in game/interactive design and development, and closes with broad guidelines to support integration of anti-oppression principles in game creation.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-120-1.ch016

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, a Danish advocacy group that initiates public awareness and education campaigns released an online game entitled *Hit the Bitch*. Produced by Børn og Unge i Voldsramte Familier (Children Exposed to Violence at Home), the game allows the player to enter the experience from the perspective of a man's hand, which can be swung to strike a woman's face by proxy using a mouse or webcam. A slider appears at the top of the screen. As the blows multiply, the slider creeps from one end, labeled "100% pussy," to the other, "100% gangsta." The woman in the game becomes increasingly upset, bruised, and bloodied. She eventually falls to the ground in tears, and a caption, "100% IDIOT!," concludes the playing experience. Following the end of the game play, players hear the voice of a woman issuing scolding words in Danish and on-screen statistics, presumably about the prevalence of violence against women in Danish communities.

Unsurprisingly, the release of *Hit the Bitch* evoked a flurry of commentary beyond borders, given its content and the group behind its development. In fact, traffic to the website was so heavy that access to it was limited to users from Denmark. A surface examination of online reactions reveals a common underlying question: is *Hit the Bitch*'s approach successful in denouncing, challenging or preventing violence against women? Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux writes that, despite noble intentions, "the method it uses is so offensive, misguided and disgusting that the message gets completely lost within sexualized violence and abuse" (2009). A blogger on *Feministe* says that the game "is supposed to convey to everyone that hitting women is bad. After you've played a game that rewards you for hitting a woman. Color me unconvinced" (Jill, 2009). *Hit the Bitch* "seems like the end result of some people sitting around a table trying to figure out how to make domestic violence edgy and attention-grabbing," another blogger writes, although she goes on to say, "then

again, no one in mainstream media talks about domestic violence unless it happens to a good-looking famous person ... are they on the right track by trying to be aggressively controversial?" (Ganeva, 2009).

Like other games on social issues, *Hit the Bitch* incorporates controversial messaging open to a wide range of interpretations. Just how the game fulfills presumed advocacy, awareness and/or educational goals concerning violence at home is difficult to determine. Players may struggle with those goals as much as critics have, given that the game places them in an abusing role and the game play does not delve into complexities inherent to violence against women. While a number of reviewers explore the controversy that surrounds *Hit the Bitch*, most of them do not comment on the game's use of "pussy" and "gangsta" or its use of background hip hop music. Besides a note that the music is "sad rap" and that the word "gangsta" is "an offensive stereotype of a black man," incorporation of "urban" artifacts into the game and their inescapable race and class implications seem to have gone unnoticed (Ganeva, 2009).

While satirical in its approach to violence, *Hit the Bitch*'s ambiguity does not sit comfortably in the context of anti-oppression. A game on gender-based violence designed with anti-oppressive principles in mind would open space for players to rethink the commonness of this violence—most often perpetrated by men against women they know and trust—with the goal of challenging, reducing and/or preventing it. *Hit the Bitch*'s uncritical inclusion of stereotypical "urban black" culture, whether intentioned or not, is at odds with an anti-oppressive approach. In the process of designing an anti-oppressive game, developers would be conscious of inserting any uncritiqued stereotypes into the game's look, feel, and play. They would resist associating gender-based violence with any single group of people, for example, challenging the Western tendency to blame violence against women on communities of color (Jiwani, 1997).

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