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Activist Board Games in Adult Education: Educational Philosophies, Learning Theories and Game Mechanics

Kamil M. Gerónimo-López

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Kamil M. Gerónimo-López[1]

[1]Lifelong Learning and Adult Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

Abstract

The use and design of activist board games in popular education is an unexplored phenomenon. This study explores the board game Rise-Up (TESA Collective, 2017). To gather data, game aesthetics were observed and analyzed. Two issues are worth examining from an adult education lens, the operationalization of critical thinking and the relationship between educational goals and game mechanics.

Keywords: Activism, popular education, board games, radical aesthetics, critical thinking

Board games are artifacts (Schell, 2020) that require a tabletop for play (Woods, 2012). The gameplay experience, perhaps more than the aesthetics, makes a board game a meaning-making catalyst that game scholars consider a "carefully crafted learning experience" (Squire, 2011, p. 13). The type of problems articulated, the mechanics available to foster solutions, and the playfulness admitted are venues of informal learning.

Theoretical framework

The fields of education and rhetoric intersect in various ways when it comes to board games. My approach to education is influenced by thinkers who viewed education as a catalyst for transformation that promotes freedom, justice, and collectivism, while rejecting individualism, colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and white supremacist patriarchy (Carrión, 2014; Freire, 2002; Hooks, 2014; Horton & Moyers, 1981; Torres, 2013, 2020). In a broader sense, I perceive rhetoric as "the means by which people create meaning and influence the world they inhabit" (Palczewski, 2012, p. 5). Designing, playing, and reviewing board games are all symbolic actions employed to share ideas, values, and perspectives on the world. Games simulate social relationships and ideologies, and they "debate which behaviors in the world are desirable or undesirable" (Bogost, 2021, p. 30). When engaging in board games, individuals partake in literacy practices that challenge the quality of their thought processes, their interpretation of the world, and their rhetorical agency both during and outside gameplay.

Rationale for Subject Selection

"Rise Up" is a strategic board game created by The Toolbox for Education and Social Action (TESA) Collective. This cooperative game is designed for 2 to 5 players aged 10 and above, with an estimated playtime of one and a half hours. TESA Collective has been involved in the development of educational programs, curricula, and tabletop games for over a decade. They are well-known among U.S.-based non-profits and the social justice movement for their ability to address a wide range of important issues through board game design. Unlike other developers, TESA has explicit educational goals for their games. They combine grassroots organizing, education, and playfulness to inspire people about the potential for social change and to teach practical skills for achieving it (TESA Collective, 2017). I chose this game because TESA claims that "board games help players improve real-world skills and focus their collaborative efforts in

their everyday lives" (TESA, 2022). This perspective highlights an interesting connection between learning and game mechanics that is worth exploring.

Literature Gap

I am not actively engaging in robust ongoing scholarly conversations within my chosen focus and artifact. The existing scholarly conversations surrounding my focus are limited, suggesting that this focus is groundbreaking (Booth, 2018). There is a research gap in the study of board games for social change. Apart from anecdotal references, book chapters (Wonica, 2017), and a few books (Flanagan, 2009; Flanagan & Jakobsson, 2023; McGonigal, 2011), there is a lack of scholarly work within popular education that explores the use and design of board games. I have reviewed scholarly conversations on the educational potential of games, but most of them concentrate on video games, formal education, K-12 instruction, and gamification. Board games, especially within non-formal education settings involving adult play or activism, are largely overlooked as research artifacts.

Research Design

In this research project, my aim was to explore the design elements of Rise Up. I wanted to understand the values at play in the game and its approach to critical thinking. Additionally, I sought to investigate the embedded relationship between learning theories and game mechanics within the game. Furthermore, I wanted to assess the game's potential for rhetorical pedagogy. To conduct this exploration, I adopted a qualitative approach methodology. My primary sources for data collection were my own observations of the board game and the rulebook. I documented these observations in a game journal that I created specifically for this purpose. The data analysis process consisted of four steps.

First, I utilized the Values at Play model developed by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2007) to describe the design of Rise Up. This model helped me identify and articulate the underlying values manifested in the game. Second, I compared my observation notes with existing literature on radical aesthetics and critical thinking, drawing from sources such as Atta and Holst (2023), Brookfield (2000), Brookfield and Holst (2011), Flanagan (2009), and Royster (2000). This comparative analysis allowed me to deepen my understanding of how the game promotes critical thinking and engages with radical aesthetics. Third, I applied the Learning Mechanics-Game Mechanics (LM-GM) model to Rise Up, referring to the work of Arnab et al. (2014), Patino et al. (2016), and Ribeiro (2019). This framework helped me analyze how the game's learning mechanics intersect with its game mechanics, shedding light on the learning processes facilitated by the game. Finally, I explored Rise Up's potential for rhetorical pedagogy, drawing insights from scholars such as Bogost (2021), Kriz (2010), Monzón (2014), Pritchard (2017), and Royster (2000). This investigation focused on how the game can be leveraged as a pedagogical tool to enhance rhetorical skills and discourse.

Findings

Rise Up's design elements align with explicit themes of people and power, incorporating values of oppression, diversity, justice, and environmentalism. The game's playfulness fosters critical thinking, drawing on various theoretical traditions. The accessible language and relatable scenarios make the game approachable, while the inclusion of psychoanalytic elements promotes self-reflection and social awareness. Rise Up also provides a pragmatic constructivist space for players to engage in critical thinking and actively shape their understanding and experiences.

Values at play

The Values at Play (VAP) approach, as outlined by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2007),

involves three interconnected activities: discovery, translation, and verification. While there is no direct evidence suggesting that the designers of Rise Up engaged in the VAP approach during the game's development, there are inherent values embedded within its design that can be explored using this framework. In this research, I focused on the activities of discovery and translation.

Through discovery, various human themes such as diversity, oppression, justice, and environmentalism were identified, along with implicit values of creativity, organizing, expression, cooperation, collectivism, community, sharing, freedom of agency, trust, and optimism. In translation, the embodiment of these values in the game's design system was explored, with diversity represented through illustrations and problems, justice conveyed through denouncing oppressive movements, and environmentalism considered through eco-friendly production. Other values such as creativity, expression, cooperation, sharing, and trust were operationalized through mechanics and prompts. The implementation of these mechanics aligned with the game's objectives and pedagogical intentions.

The design of Rise Up contributes to understanding and realizing democratic processes through various elements. It encourages players to use their interests and imagination for storytelling, emphasizes collective use of individual turns, takes a pragmatic approach, promotes collective winning and losing, allows players to have a say, and recognizes silence as a form of democratic expression. The game provides a comprehensive perspective on causality and system operations, promoting balance. However, conflicting values arise within the game, as players confront "the system" individually in each movement space, which contradicts the collective spirit of organizing outside of the game.

Approach to critical thinking

The game Rise Up offers a critical examination of society by addressing social issues and the dynamics between grassroots organizing activists and oppressive power systems. It aims to inspire players to envision a world where they can collectively fight against injustices for the betterment of society. The game's political stance leans towards liberal and progressive agendas, potentially encompassing social democracy and egalitarianism.

The game design allows for the challenging of oppressive systems, with two versions catering to both experienced and non-experienced players and activists. The game serves as a means of communication that introduces relevant vocabulary for grassroots organizing. Moreover, the design itself functions as an organizing platform, facilitating and empowering learning experiences.

The game offers practical opportunities for challenging systems of oppression through problem-solving, collaboration, and group tasks. However, as an Afro-Caribbean popular educator, there is concern about the game perpetuating issues within grassroots organizing. The game's paratextuality (Booth, 2021) runs the risk of narrowing the rhetoric around certain modes of organizing and disregarding others, potentially deeming them less valuable. The cultural tailoring to US-based grassroots organizing may make other modes of organizing and their associated social causes invisible to non-experienced activists. It emphasizes the importance of examining the game's impact on players and their unique contexts.

Is it an endogenous or an exogenous game?

The classification of Rise Up as an exogenous or endogenous game is nuanced, but it tends to lean towards being an endogenous game with elements of speed. In exogenous games, the context is external to the gameplay, which affects how the learner, learning instruction, pre-knowledge, social models, player identity, and context are portrayed. While Rise Up does treat some aspects of context as extrinsic to the play, such as presenting discrete factual knowledge

determined by the game designer, it also recognizes the intrinsic connection between the player's context and gameplay.

Rise Up views the learner as an active social organism engaged in sense-making. The player's knowledge is seen as a toolset to solve problems, and learning occurs through hands-on experiences and discovering information and stories for action in the world. Role-playing allows players to assume different identities and encourages them to confront existing beliefs and reflect on their understandings. Instruction is treated as a collaborative activity involving meaning-making, discovery, and negotiation.

The game's social model is group-oriented, emphasizing collective play. It is designed with complexity to accommodate affinity groups and grassroots organizing communities, whether they are experienced in the gameplay or new to it. Pre-knowledge is viewed as social awareness that influences storytelling and the player's engagement with ideas and strategies to succeed in the game. Additionally, the game fosters personal growth, aiming to improve each player's identity over time.

Considering the contrasting characteristics between exogenous and endogenous games, Rise Up aligns more closely with the traits of an endogenous game in various categories. This categorization suggests that Rise Up is primarily designed to integrate gameplay and the player's context, making it an endogenous game.

Game mechanics and educational goals

The relationship between educational goals and mechanics in Rise Up unfolds, although not always from a critical pedagogic lens. Some of the educational goals, such as gaining skills and experiencing rewards and penalties, align with behaviorism. On the other hand, the game also aims to depart from learners' experiences and interests, foster empowerment feelings, and develop pragmatic knowledge, which aligns with a progressive education agenda.

The table summarizing game mechanics, learning mechanics, and Bloom's taxonomy indicates that certain mechanics can respond to multiple learning theories, and these theories may have different socio-political implications. However, understanding these mechanics within the game context helps establish a coherent rationale between the educational goals and their philosophical functions. For example, strategy and planning are part of the game mechanics and can be associated with cognitive development in cognitivism and experiential and problem-based learning in constructivism. However, the nature of strategy and planning in the game is not about answering questions (as in cognitive development) or exploring/experimenting (as in humanistic experiential learning).

Playing the game confirms that strategy and planning are specifically related to solving the problem of balancing movement and system power. Therefore, although these concepts align with different learning theories, considering the game context helps discard theories that are not coherent with the educational goals.

Upon closer examination of various game mechanics such as resource management, communal discovery, goods and information, cooperation, and movement, it becomes evident that Rise Up is better situated within constructivism. According to Kriz (2010), constructivism suggests that people create their sense of reality and are open to alternative opinions and unconventional perspectives. Board games serve as representations of reality and channels for enacting patterns of communication, making them appealing tools for educators. This aligns with TESA's goal of providing an enjoyable way to explore social movements, community organizing, and becoming better activists personally and collectively. In this sense, the educational goals, and mechanics in Rise Up unfold coherently.

Rhetorical Pedagogy

Rise Up incorporates a rhetorical pedagogy through its prompts and storytelling features.

The game goes beyond the designers' conception of argumentation and embraces players' multiple rationalities and modes of making sense of reality. The rhetoric in the game is not limited to a linear approach but rather allows for players' experiences and imagination to shape the gameplay. By doing so, Rise Up's rhetorical pedagogy challenges universalism and logic and instead opens space for dialectics within the board game platform.

Conclusion

The paragraph provides a historical perspective on the relationship between board games and social change, citing relevant sources. It highlights that while the concept of board games for social change is not new, the combination of controlled experience and storytelling in game design represents a state-of-the-art advancement within the context of activism. Furthermore, it emphasizes the scarcity of board games explicitly designed for organizers and activists, making them valuable as grassroots organizing tools. The paragraph also acknowledges the limited literature on board games from an adult education perspective and positions the research design as a significant step towards developing a methodology that contributes to exploring the educational potential of radical board games for social justice.

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