Games of the Oppressed Handbook

Edited by Leland Masek &
Daniel Fernández Galeote



How can games help us understand oppression in our lives? Games of the Oppressed brings the work of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) and Augusto Boal (*Theatre of the Oppressed*) into the realm of game making. This text introduces a novel approach for making games about systems that undermine our ability to live life fully and enables players to co-design alternatives for a better future.

This book furthermore presents five example games and a workshop script that has been shown at several larp and scenario festivals. These games represent and inspire discussion on critical topics including healthcare, gender norms, and parenting.

An easy to understand text that is both useful and horribly relevant.

Professor J. Tuomas Harviainen, former editor of the *International Journal of Role-playing* and writer of the award-winning larp *The Tribunal*

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To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.

- Paulo Freire

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Introduction

How do oppressive systems of power work? This is a critical question for our world, our health, our safety, and our ability to thrive as people. We face power frequently in our lives. When we go to a doctor, they have the power to prescribe medicine or send us to further testing. When we negotiate for a raise in our workplace, our boss has the ability to increase our living standard or lower it. Even in our domestic homes, sometimes we negotiate with the people we live with about who will take out the trash, who cleans up more, who should be doing the dishes.

Often these interactions are reasonably fair. We often feel our ability to thrive as people is supported by our environment and we are able to balance our needs and desires, as well as interact positively with other people. Other times, these interactions with power create conflict,

undermine our happiness, or seem to be at odds with what we really want as humans.

We can feel that difference emotionally. Most of us have had moments where we told someone else what we needed: for them to help clean some dishes, for example, and it has gone well. Other times, we know these conversations have broken down. We have a feeling that somehow the outcomes of who is doing the dishes is unjust. We notice that someone (often a woman) is always doing more domestic work than others. Sometimes it is complicated to fully understand how these unfair situations emerge, or even more so, how to change them. It's not just the dishes, it's also about being tired after work, it's about internalized guilt, it's about childhood expectations. It's about the many goals and systems we interact with, even during a "simple" situation like cleaning. Oppression is one word to help understand the ways power can limit our ability to live a full authentic life.

Games can help express the nuance and complexity of these moments. Some experiences in life are well told as stories: they have beginning, middles, ends, characters, rising conflict, etc. but a mundane type of inequity, of who does the dishes for example, may in fact be better told through the medium of games.

Games offer a unique insight when communicating about our interactions. Games are, by their nature, systems of power. They often have goals, mechanics, strategies, negotiation, and consequences for our actions. In this way, they offer a valuable language for moments of our lives that

have those same features. We have a goal of a clean house, we have a mundane mechanic (sweeping, wiping, pouring that one cleaning-fluid that we know works well but is dangerous), we have strategies of when and how to do it, and we negotiate with our fellow living mates how to do it.

In this way, games are a valuable expressive medium to communicate with each other about the systems of our lives that undermine us. Games can model certain aspects of these systems, direct our attention to certain parts, and give us a shared focus in our discussions on how they could be changed.

Games of the Oppressed is a game making and playing framework for guiding conversation on dynamics of power in life and how we could change them. It is indebted to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) and the performance work of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2000) and takes those values into the context of game making and playing.

This framework was developed by Leland Masek and Daniel Fernández Galeote and was first implemented in a series of workshops in Tampere University in Finland in 2025. This first workshop produced the example games you will read in this book. While this was an academic project, this book is not targeted exclusively to academics. It is targeted to professionals, teachers, therapists, community workers and anyone else who would like to guide participants in making their own Games of the Oppressed.

This book approaches this goal by explaining some of the background of this style of pedagogy. It explains the design framework for making a Game of the Oppressed. It

explains how to run the gameplay workshop and facilitate participants active engagement with the topics and games. Finally, it presents five example games made by the participants from our first workshop to give you a clearer sense of what these kinds of games may look or feel like.

If you are not interested in understanding the ideological background first, we'd recommend skipping to chapter 4 *Games of the Oppressed.* You could also jump ahead to read some of the example games first to get a more practical idea of what they look like. This book is meant to be a sharing of ideas for you, as a reader, to actively engage in, interrogate, and use as you want!

At the heart of this approach is a rejection of what Paulo Freire calls the banking model of education, where a teacher deposits truth into the minds of a student. We aim to continue in this tradition and thusly, this book does not see itself as a neutral arbiter or authority of knowledge. We warmly invite you to keep a critical eye, and to integrate these insights or approaches actively into your own understanding of the world and your context as you see fit. We would love to hear from you if you have any reactions/ responses to any of these games or the larger ideas. Please feel welcome to be in touch via email at: Info@gamesasartcenter.com

We hope you gain value and a deeper understanding about these complicated topics of life. We know we have through the process of making (and playing!) these games.

Leland & Dani

Leland Masek is the director of the *Games As Art Center* in Tampere, Finland, which hosts public events on aesthetic and important play in games. He is a doctoral researcher at Tampere University studying the well-being effects of playfulness. He is a game designer with 15 years experience in games for education, interactive theater, and experimental game design.

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