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Digital role-playing games as a means for dialogue and change for marginalized teachers¹

Jonathan Mendels² and Amit Schejter³

This study presents a theoretical model that incorporates the theories of Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal and Amartya Sen and uses their ideas to create an innovative digital role-playing game for teachers on 'To-Be-Education,' a platform originally designed for teacher-student role-playing. We then demonstrate how Sen's 'capabilities approach', Freire's 'pedagogy of hope' and Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' are adapted to tools of empowerment for Arab-Israeli teachers, who belong to a community marginalized by State policies. The teachers design their own games and base the scenarios on their own real educational and professional dilemmas. They then re-enact these situations to "rehearse reality," and debate possible outcomes.

Introduction

Concomitant with the proliferation of new media technologies, there is a noticeable rise in worldwide consumption of digital games and the part they play in contemporary digital culture (Gough,

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2019). In this study, we demonstrate how a specific type of such games, the digital role playing game (DRPG) platform developed by [‘To-Be-Education’](#)⁴ was adapted to act as an arena in which three approaches to social justice were tested: Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed,” and Amartya Sen’s “Capabilities Approach.”

The game platform was introduced to two groups of Arab-Israeli teachers, a community systematically marginalized by State policies, which research has demonstrated, find it illegitimate to express in the classroom or outside of it views that diverge from what they perceive as the ‘mainstream’s’ views (Skop, 2014). Our basic assumption was that taking part in DRPGs while implementing the principles developed in the theories of justice we were testing, will lift some of the barriers placed on these teachers and provide them with fresh means of expression.

The theoretical underpinnings of our analysis, as well as the adaptation model to the game, can serve as steps in the ladder of acquisition of knowledge, skills and comprehension by teachers as well as by other members of marginalized communities in general, and ultimately be used to provoke social change and action.

Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach (1999) served as the underlying theoretical tool for promoting physical access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) as enablers of voice; Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of hope (1970) as the theoretical driver for assuming voice and the will to acquire informed action to face one’s oppressor; and Augusto Boal’s theatre of the oppressed (TO) (1979) as the tool for implementation of such change. These three theories provide different angles of looking at providing voice to the voiceless, yet they are complementary in that their combination allows focusing the attention on providing media access, skills and voice to the powerless.

The ‘To-Be-Education’ game platform, originally designed for teacher-student role-playing, was altered for the process of writing and playing a game to fit the ideas of forum theatre, one of the main tools offered by Boal (1979, 2002). The result was a role-playing game that allowed the re-enactment of

⁴ www.to-be-education.com/

real-life situations, by Arab- Israeli teachers, on a digital stage with the goal of provoking critical dialogue.

Research group – Arab-Israeli teachers

Israeli society is highly diversified (Goldscheider, 2019). Smoocha (1993, 2002, 2010) identified in it five major 'cleavages': national (Arab-Jewish), ethnic (Ashkenazi Jews-Sephardi Jews), class-based (socioeconomic), religious (secular-orthodox) and political (right wing-left wing).

Throughout Israeli history there have been changing levels of stress regarding these divides. This study focuses on the particular tension between the majority group of Jewish-Israelis and the minority group of Arab-Israelis and examines it through the eyes of the latter (the Arab minority consists, as of 2019, 20.9% of the Israeli population). Indeed, this aspect of the conflictual Israeli society emerges from a basic disagreement regarding the nature of the Jewish people and whether they are a national or a religious group. Israeli Jews predominantly prescribe themselves as 'Zionist,' thus adhering to the belief that Jews are a nation, which entitles them to self-determination in the form of an independent state.

Arab-Israelis, mostly self-defined as "Palestinian," often identify themselves as a sub-group of the larger Arab nation living in the Middle East, many of whose sub-groups are culturally and politically conflicted with Israel. In general terms we can say that the majority of Arabs oppose the Zionist agenda's most basic tenets. Thus, Arab-Israelis are often regarded by the political right in Israel as a 'fifth column' that is not loyal to the state and seeks its destruction (Yashar, 2014). Concomitant with these ideological and spatial differences is a systematic discrimination of the Arab-Israeli minority, which suffers from lower levels of state services than their Jewish counterparts and are on average less affluent.

The study focuses on Arab-Israeli teachers for several reasons: First, teachers are highly literate, which allows them to express themselves fluently; second, in their role as educators, they often

confront ethical and social issues; and third, their position provides them with a significant educational role in the lives of their students (Clark, 2004). In addition, teachers play an important role both in sustaining oppression and in resisting it, as they are the ones responsible for the transfer of knowledge in society, and the agents of the same mechanism that enforces indoctrination. On the other hand, once they realize their role in the process of oppression, and understand the oppression inflicted upon them, teachers operate as agents of change (Shor & Freire 1987; Wexler 2007).

While the classes in the Arab-Israeli school system are conducted in Arabic, the curriculum promotes the Israeli mainstream Zionist agenda. Paraphrasing Freire, Agbaria (2013) states that '[e]ducation is always political, and teaching is never a neutral or technical process (p. 15).' The Arab-Israeli educational system is constantly monitored by the establishment that rejects the voicing of alternative narratives (Jabarin, 2013) and draws a clear distinction between issues deemed legitimate to be discussed in schools and those that are deemed unacceptable and are silenced. Teachers that wish to address political issues, or current events, must choose their words carefully or be marked as "problematic" and face possible sanctions (Skop, 2014).

The need to teach materials that are often sensitive, problematic or biased puts Arab-Israeli teachers repeatedly in conflict with their own beliefs and opinions, especially when dealing with news events and social or historical issues. For example, how should Arab-Israeli teachers explain Israeli attacks on Palestinian-controlled Gaza and maintain the rules set by the establishment without creating conflict among their students, who are constantly exposed to social media and the news? Teachers must therefore choose carefully what they say and more importantly what they choose **not** to say.

Theoretical background

To meaningfully and independently participate in a digital role-playing game (DRPG), one needs to acquire access to enabling ICTs, as well as to the know-how to utilize them and to ensure they serve their needs. Developing a framework that identifies the need for access, know-how, and personal

fulfilment requires combining empowering theories regarding these three aspects of the engagement. Access to DRPGs and the know-how to use them offer players, especially members of marginalized communities, added value.

Digital Role-playing games

The basic notion behind role playing is that looking through the eyes of another may provide different perspectives of reality. Role-playing has two meanings: Most commonly, it refers to a game in which the players assume the roles of fictional characters to complete a quest 'with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment' (Lortz 1979, p. 36). However, it also refers to a technique used in various fields, such as theatre, psychology or business and often in classrooms, to 'change values; develop empathy; to become aware of one's assumptions' (Nickerson, 2008. p. 2).

Role-playing differs from other forms of play in that 'unlike most social games that are frequently competitive in nature, most role-playing gaming is cooperative, with no clearly defined winners or losers and potentially no defined end to the game' (Ibid).

The use of role-play as a method for promoting change has been chosen for this study since role-play helps the players develop the skills needed for future success by incorporating realistic problems, (Clapper, 2010, p. 40) and is regarded a technique for engaging individuals in 'challenges of the real-world environment' (Gardner & Horan 2011).

While theatre and role-playing emerged in the non-mediated world, the emergence of digital media has provided the latter with a new life, perhaps an ability to influence players in different locations and places. Indeed, all media are new at the time they appear and old by the time a newer medium appears (Schejter & Tirosh, 2014), yet digital media have unique characteristics.

Schejter & Tirosh (2016) describe contemporary media from the perspective of their users as differing from traditional media by being **interactive**, **mobile**, offering **abundance of information** and channels on which it travels as well as storage space, and **multi-mediality** of form. They also describe

new media as bearing the potential to allow new means of expression for those so far deprived a voice in society (Schejter & Tirosh, 2014).

Digital games fit within this new mediated world, which gives them, as said, a new meaning (Groner 2015). Klimmt (2009) defines digital games as media products that include an interactive experience, offer multimodal representation, present a narrative, whether fixed or changing, and allow social play and the 'situation of playing a game' (p. 250). He later adds that such games 'might motivate players to elaborate on the content of social change' (Gabriel 2016 p. 195).

Role-playing on a digital platform can have a profound effect on members of marginalized communities due to the affordances of contemporary media (Garcia and Morrell, 2013). Thus, for one, the use of digital tools helps the players to distance themselves from reality, as the players are often anonymous and play alone (Connolly et al. 1990; Berge and Collins, 1995). With regards to members of an oppressed minority, who often find it hard to express their opinions, anonymity might enable dialogue that would otherwise be avoided.

When adding to the mix other elements of digital games, such as fantasy (Allison et al. 2006) and the magic circle (Apter 1992), the players find it easier to 'blend in' with the character and allow the creation of imaginative scenarios and characters that help in shaping the task at hand and the goal of the game. This, along with the use of personalized avatars (Whitlock 2005), assists in lifting some of the barriers of speech. Furthermore, '[t]he evolution of the digital game has been to move towards replacing the limited nature of physical play with abundance' (Groner, 2015). That is, the nature of any game is to differ from reality, and the technological affordances allow those so far deprived a voice in society to more readily express themselves online.

Several attempts have been made to connect the power of new media and digital games with Freire and Boal's ideas and methods. Frasca (2001) writes about the possibilities digital games offer when used as tools for critical thinking and education. He offers a theoretical model in which game development is the tool through which Boal's forum theatre principles will be used using "SimCity."

Cavallo (2007) suggested using video conference as the tool for implementation of theatre of the oppressed with children of low socioeconomic status. Other attempts to create interactive drama include *Puppet* (Marshall et al. 2004); *Teatrix* (Prada et al. 2000); and *Carman's bright ideas* (Marsella et al. 2000).

Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach and Voice

While Amartya Sen is essentially an economist, the significance of his theory calling for realizing individuals' capabilities to achieve the kind of lives they have reason to value goes beyond economic theory and provides a motivational tool for encouraging meaningful access to ICTs. Sen (1999) contends that addressing the wishes and needs of each person is required in order to achieve social justice. He claims that freedom and capabilities cannot be separated (Deneulin, 2006) and focuses on the needs of the individual and not on the aggregate goals of the group or society as a whole. The goal of acquiring what Sen dubs as capabilities, is to serve the individual's well-being and fulfilling their desires. Ensuring capabilities is the goal of the system of justice Sen promotes, as all members of society must be given the opportunity to accomplish their wishes, among them members of marginalized communities. Providing these opportunities to develop capabilities and the process of deciding collectively on valuable capabilities both require and serve freedom (Walker, 2005).

Another key element is agency, which Sen (2001) defines as the actions of a person that bring about change, and whose realization can be evaluated in terms of his or her own values and goals. He argues that the agency to be actively involved in shaping one's own life and having opportunities for reflection is critical for positive social change (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). In a mediated world, such as the one we live in, a person's well-being, and even more so the well-being of members of communities, depend also on the ability to access the information provided online and to voice one's needs and wishes freely. ICTs have the potential to provide access and to offer the ability to express one's ideas of well-being in an open manner.

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy and its Application to Voice

Paulo Freire, who developed the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (1970) spoke of dialogue-based pedagogy through which the weak(est) members of society can transform their lives and empower themselves. For that reason, he saw literacy as a necessary tool for change: the need to establish a language of liberation. Establishing this language starts with the breaking of the dichotomy between the teacher and the students and continues towards resisting any oppression within society through an open dialogue.

Freire claimed that there is no such thing as 'neutral' education, but rather that there are two contradicting definitions of education: one that deals with 'taming' and indoctrination and one that deals with liberation and action (Cohen, 1983). He argued that the knowledge taught in class must come from the lives and experiences of the students, that 'teaching that does not emerge from the experience of learning cannot be learned by anyone' (Freire, 1998 P. 30).

Critical dialogue, in Freire's eyes, must attempt to achieve 'Conscientization' a term he defined as the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through a cycle of reflection and action (Liu 2012) that will result in the breaking of the oppressive state. The teacher's role is to be the facilitator of the dialogue, and to create what Papert (1996) called 'conditions for invention, [and] for construction of knowledge by the learner, rather than to attempt to provide ready-made knowledge' (Cavallo 2007, P. 28). Through Conscientization both the will to change and to face the oppressor, and praxis, a Greek term that means 'an action that is informed' (Smith, 2002), will be materialized.

The development of a critical consciousness is highly important when dealing with marginalized communities, that are often lacking the ability to change their lives with the tools provided to them by the system. Modern society's power structure, which includes the educational system, often acts to develop a false understanding of power relations and to weaken one's belief that such change is possible.

Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre and the Implementation of Voice

Dramatist Augusto Boal adapted Freire's ideas to theatre in order to develop a method for the implementation of the ideas of critical education on stage. The principle remained the same: conducting a process that aims to provoke dialogue that will allow the oppressed to reach conscientization, and through these new perspectives, the ability to resist the oppressor and change the social\political\economic situation. Both Freire and Boal seek new terms for the dialogue created and wish to create a new language - a liberated one - to face reality.

Boal developed the 'theatre of the oppressed' (TO), a political-social agenda that sees theatre as a means for resisting oppression (Auslander 1992, Phelan 1993). This method aims at promoting and motivating social and political change, and supports the presentation of difficult and personal stories as a way of therapy on stage.

Boal believed theatre can change people and help them observe their reality by 'perceiving what it is, discovering what it is not and imagining what it could become' (Boal, 1995, p. 13). In that way theatre can be a prominent tool for awareness and critical thinking.

The theatrical act is a conscious intervention, a rehearsal for social action based on a collective analysis of shared problems of oppression (Boal, 1979). Boal developed different types of theatre tools which all aim at achieving social, educational and political goals. He identified two factors that promote change: (1) The Joker, a neutral figure who promotes the process; and (2) 'spect-actors', those involved in the process as spectators and actors (Ibid).

Furthermore, Boal saw his methods and ideas as open for interpretation and encouraged their adaptation into a variety of fields. 'In each country,' claimed Boal (2005), 'people have to adapt the method to their own culture (...) TO is not a Bible, nor a recipe book: it is a method to be used by people, and the people are more important than the method' (p. 120).

The game platform

The 'To-Be-Education' platform offers a synchronic web-based role-playing game. It is designed in an open game format that allows the players to encounter a variety of topics. Its original educational objective was to provide teachers with an online game platform on which the class can role-play and discuss sensitive issues, while raising social, political, educational or other topics.

At the basis of each game lies a dilemma, serving as the basis for the design of the characters. The teacher is directed to write four or five different roles, each with a distinctive agenda and standpoint regarding the dilemma discussed. Each character is assigned with an avatar and provided with several resources. The stage on which the game is played resembles a sophisticated chat room with added gamification elements (such as badges or 'likes'). It is a form of a 'multiuser virtual environment' (MUVE) that offers players a synchronized virtual stage on which they can enact situations that raise conflicts in a manner that makes the sensitive dialogue 'easier to digest' (Orvis & Lassiter 2005).

The game platform offers multimodal representation feedback mechanisms (i.e. Yan and Geivid 2013), adaptive pedagogical mechanisms, and a link to a learning management system (LMS). The teacher acts as a game master and can follow each student's actions during the game and address each group of conversing students at any given moment.

The platform has two interfaces: the student interface offers access only to a specific game scenario, while the teacher interface allows the design of the scene and the facilitation of the discussions held in each group. One of the platform's advantages, especially when working with people who are not tech savvy, is that it offers a clear and simple work process that doesn't require any programming knowledge.

Stolovitch (1983) claims that a game is built on four pillars: *contrivance*, *conflict*, *control*, and *closure* (Kaufman & Sauv e, 2010, P. 2). 'To-Be-Education's platform is no different. The players gather around a *conflict* brought up by a teacher (in the traditional model) or by one of them (in the model we developed). The conflict can be based on a real event, or on a fictitious event - composed especially for

the game. The players act under certain *rules* enforced by the game master to pursue *closure* through various endings and possibilities. They are encouraged to present a complex argument, and to debate possible options and actions.

Research Method

The model we developed adapts the ideas and methods of Sen, Freire and Boal to DRPGs. It demonstrates a process during which the teachers participate in a digital forum theatre, one of the main methods of TO, on the 'To-Be-Education' platform. As the game platform was not designed for TO but rather for a 'conventional' role-playing game, the adaptation of TO methods to this system required reframing several of the game rules and rethinking some of Boal's ideas.

Theatre is first and foremost, a physical art. It utilizes the actors' whole body as a tool for expression. Boal (1979) refers to embodiment as one of the key factors in theatre: "Knowing the Body" [is] the first stage in his process—a process that culminates in direct bodily involvement in theatrical action via Forum Theatre' (Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort 2003 P. 339). Embodiment on the digital world is very different, as it lacks the "first word of the theatrical vocabulary," as Boal defines it, the human body (1979. p. 102). DRPGs use an avatar, a projected image of the actor that has limited abilities and offers actors a mask or a digitized body with which they can express themselves (Williams et al. 2011). Therefore, the transformation to the digital stage will undoubtedly result in new means of expression. The 'To-Be-Education' creation process allows the designer of the game to pick an avatar for each character and offers several levels of customization (figure 1).



Fig. 1. Avatars

Furthermore, our model does not attempt to create theatre in the orthodox manner on a digital stage, but rather attempts to create a new mechanism that takes some principles from critical pedagogy and TO into the digital world and enables voice and the realization of one's capabilities. It is an attempt to create a new form of a role-playing game - one that is built on real life stories and offers fresh means of dialogue and expression for those who play it. Thus, utilizing one of the basic elements of Freire and Boal's critical process, empowering the weakest members of society.

The fact that dialogue on the 'To-Be-Education' stage is mostly textual, forces the players to think about what they write and therefore limits the intuitive\emotional message. This is different from the intuitive, often subconscious means of expression that serve the physical actor. On the other hand, the digitally controlled dialogue allows the players to express themselves carefully and use certain digital examples and images to enhance their message.

Several researchers (Burrill 2005, Whitlock 2005) claim that the video game player of today is a performer, who is actively engaged in an interactive state that is both physical and mental, playing a character in a space that can allow unlimited creative freedom. Nellhaus (2017) argues that DRPGs 'are' theatre in many aspects and that the outcome of role-playing games (i.e the game after it has been played) should be seen as a theatre spectacle of sorts. This strengthens the connection between the digital scenarios created and played by the teachers and TO.

Crocco (2013) developed a 'critical gaming theory,' which is what happens '[w]hen the valuable learning principles embodied by games (digital or otherwise) are used to promote critical thinking about hegemonic ideas and institutions rather than to propagate them' (p. 29). Our model draws from these ideas, as the critical discussion uses a digital game platform and wishes to benefit from both physical and virtual worlds, thus attempting to widen the scope of action, and reach larger audiences. The players conduct an open critical dialogue and co-create a game scenario they later play.

Boal's (1979) methods attempt to bring the critical discussion to the theatre stage and to use drama as the means for simulation and codification. When adapting these ideas to the DRPG stage,

several elements change, thus creating a new and innovative medium for critical dialogue. The result is not a computer game *par excellence*, but rather a digital stage on which a “game for change” with a flexible narrative can take place. The model thus wishes to focus on the scenario, or the narrative of the game, while using a platform that allows co-created content. Another difference from conventional games lays in the manner the game is played. Our model does not attempt to use the game mechanism to provoke the change, but rather to conduct a fruitful critical discussion using a gamified platform.

Facing oppression on a digital stage

The implementation of the theoretical model consists of both physical meetings and digital work. As most teachers are not avid gamers, we chose to base the process on two main pillars. The first, is the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the world of digital games and the theoretical background: the ideas and methods of Sen, Freire and Boal. The second is the critical process the players undergo as a group and as individuals, which results in the designing of their game and in playing it, both as players and later as spect-actors. As the implementation is a shared process, in which the group’s ideas and feelings play a big part, the model undergoes constant changes. This is done in correlation with Freire’s (1970) reflective cycle, which is composed of recurring action and reflection.

In *the first level* the players learn about the world of digital games and its possible advantages, they experience several types of games, play in a pre-designed DRPG scenario, and conduct a face-to-face discussion about the educational advantages it offers. In that manner, the players experience an orthodox ‘To-Be-Education’ game and learn to master its game mechanics and processes. In this part the players develop their skills and competences and learn about the different ways ICT’s and DRPG’s can act as agency provoking tools. It is the phase in which they acquire the means to voice out their

needs and desires (Sen, 1999) and the possibility of using DRPGs as a stage for a liberating and critical dialogue is discussed.

As part of the first encounter with the “To-Be-Education” platform, the players are divided by the system into groups of five, determined by the time they logged in (figure 2). When they enter the game, they are directed onto a virtual stage which allows dialogue in any desired language. The players enter the game anonymously and are identified by the other players only by a pseudonym and avatars. They are assigned roles and agendas by the game and receive background material to support their character’s claims and to debate the issues on the agenda (figures 3 and 4). The duration of the game is limited, and the players are requested to try and represent their role in the best way they see fit (figure 5). During this stage, they learn to put the characteristics of the game to their benefit (i.e. anonymity and fantasy) and understand the different forms of role-play possible.

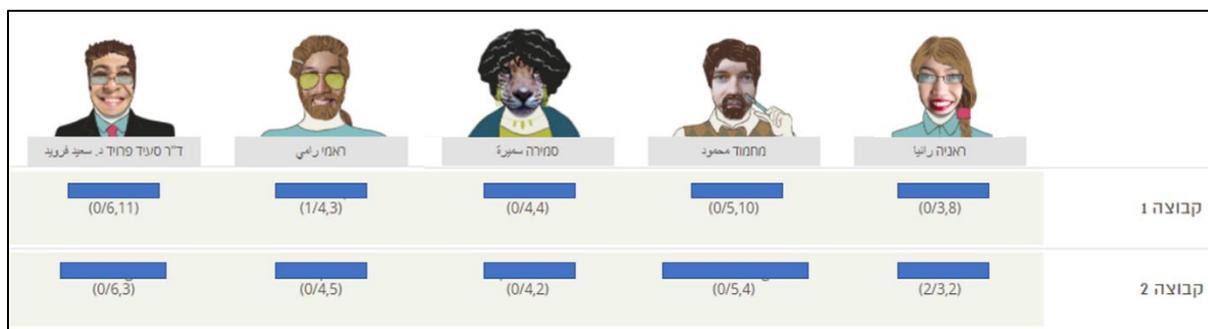


Fig. 2. Groups

Background

This story took place last year at the end of the third term at school. It was June, the events started when I had a conflict with a pupil's parent about his son's grade in English. He insisted that I add extra marks to his son, and argued that his son's grades were high in all the subjects except English. the story got complicated when he started to shout loudly. Other members of the staff interfered to solve the problem but the conflict is still relevant. what should we do if a parent demands a change?



Fig. 3. Supporting background.

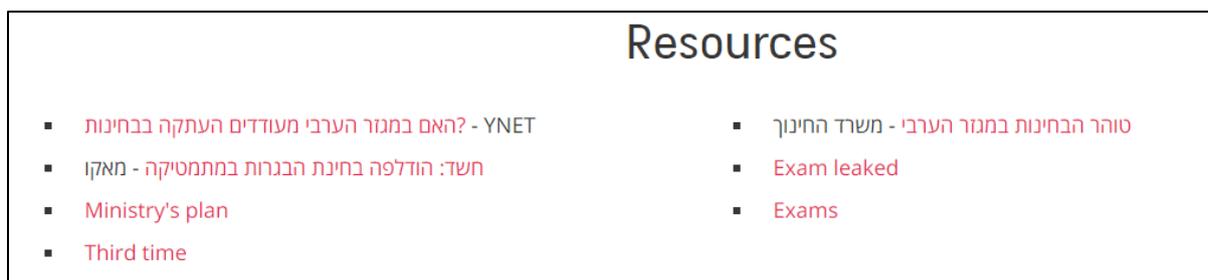


Fig. 4. Supporting materials.



Fig 5. Player representations.

In order to raise the participants' level of identification with the process, the scenarios used in the first stage of the process are based on ideas raised by them in class discussions. This level correlates with the theatre games Boal uses to “prepare the body” for TO (Boal, 2005), in an attempt to train the players in the use of digital games in general and in the use of the game platform.

Once the first stage is done, the group conducts an open reflective discussion in class, regarding the possibilities and constraints they experienced during the game. This is done as a preparation to the second part of the game - co-creating the scenario based on real life stories.

The unique features of the game offer the players tools to co-create it, and to re-enact stories and events from their own lives taking advantage of the distance provided by the digital stage. That is because role-playing 'can be framed as a way of playing instead of as a system, making it possible to role-play any game by layering additional meanings on top of the base game' (Montola 2012, p. 119).

The second stage aims to imitate the basic principles of Boal's forum theatre, which Boal (2002) describes as 'sort of fight or game' (p. 242), on a digital stage. A basic forum theatre scenario is composed of several short scenes, based on an oppressive event experienced by one of the members – the protagonist. This part is called "the anti-model": a scene that depicts oppression, which prevents the protagonist from achieving their goal, or as Boal (2002) describes it, '[t]he original play – the model – must present a mistake, a failure, so that the spect-actors will be spurred into finding solutions and inventing new ways of confronting oppression' (P. 242).

During the design of the scenes the teachers conduct a codification and de-codification process (Freire, 1970) in which they attempt to dismantle the scene down to its basic ingredients, thus exposing the roots of the event and the power relations behind it. This is done following Freire's 'culture circle,' in which the students and the coordinator together discuss generative themes that have significance within the context of the students' lives (Freire 1988, Rugut 2013). This discussion is maintained up to the point where they can reflect critically upon the scenario's various aspects before offering suitable representations on the "To-Be-Education" platform. This process is also generated by the platform's requirements, which directed them to inquire what were each character's motivation, agenda and goal.

After the unfolding of the story, the group writes down a basic game scenario, and portrays each character, offering an avatar for it and describing its place in the scene (figure 6). This is a chance for the group to find a suitable visual representation for each character and for each player to give the avatar a personal touch. The use of personalised avatars has been found to increase the players' identification with the characters (Kafai 2010). The players re-enact the story on the digital stage, with the protagonist playing itself and other players playing the antagonist and other roles. The game

platform allows the attachment of a specific player to a specific role, so that every player will play his or her designated part in the game

Select the number of characters that will participate in the game: 5 Characters

Nour נור |
 Samir סמיר |
 Miriam מרים |
 Rania ראניה |
 Raed ראעד |
 System |
 Tips & Examples

Name: Nour נור
 Profession: Sami's teacher
 Biography:

 Nour is a sensitive and compassionate teacher. She is dedicated to her work and considers herself to be an educator. She has to decide which is the best way to keep her students safe while providing Sami with the best care.

 Staging instructions for character:

 You want to keep Sami in school, but you also want to keep all the students safe. Act like you did in reality or like you would have.

 Age: 30

Enable participants select an expression
 Allow students upload their own images

Upload | Choose Avatar

Fig. 6. The avatar is placed in the scene.

The process concludes with an online forum of sorts which can be done in two ways: After completing the game, the teachers in each group play the scenario again in class and present the dialogue on the screen. The other teachers can then watch each game develop and stop it at any given point, replace the protagonist and offer solutions. The forum is therefore conducted in a blended process, both on and offline. Another possibility is that all the teachers - turned spect-actors - will work in their group to offer various possibilities and actions that will alter the result of the scene, with the help of the joker. The result of this dialogue is a new scene that offers a new look on the situation described to the group.

As the online forum is the result of a class process, the players know each other and are acquainted – to a certain extent – with the details of each game. This said, even when each player's actions are visible to the group, the DRPG platform still presents an advantage, as it creates distance

between the player and the character on screen. The first method suggested takes this into account while the latter allows the players to maintain a certain level of anonymity.

An example of a game scenario

The following story was shared by A, one of the teachers, as a possible scenario for a game. She stated that this is a story that bothered her for a long time: several years back she worked at a dental clinic that belonged to one of the biggest health organizations in Israel as a clientele manager. The branch she worked in had both Arab and Jewish managers and she was happy with her job. After a few months another Arab worker, Rania, joined the company. They worked side-by-side but after a few weeks it became clear the new employee was lazy and unfit for the job. To make things worse, she acted manipulatively and tended to badmouth A in front of the manager and to lie that A is responsible for her inability to complete her work. A, who describes herself as a sensitive person, suffered from this behaviour greatly and became depressed and unhappy. The atmosphere at her workplace became unfriendly as Rania was organizing all the other workers against A. The scene she wanted to re-enact took place at a meeting with A, Rania and the two bosses, Dr. Sami, her direct manager and Sharona, the regional manager. In this meeting they were all supposed to discuss the situation and to find a solution. The meeting resulted in A losing her job.

After A finished presenting the scenario to the class we attempted to understand what was behind it and understand the setting: what's wrong, where the oppression is, who the protagonist\antagonist were, who the other characters in the story are, what responsibility they have in the creation of the conflict, and how they affected the outcome of the story.

We then started to discuss the subtext: what were the reasons for this behaviour? who benefits from this? what could A do to fix it? Did any of the other teachers experience anything similar? The next step was to discuss the bigger picture: how does this story fit into the Israeli social framework? This led to a discussion about job opportunities in the Arab sector and the way Jewish bosses often see Arab

workers. Two teachers argued about the Jewish manager's role in the story and one said that she never had a (direct) Jewish boss and that for her "it would be strange." Another mentioned that many places of work don't want to hire an Arab worker and shared one attempt she had at a job interview, in which she felt she was rejected because she was Arab.

Discussion

The model presented in this article attempts to address the limitations placed on Arab-Israeli teachers' freedom of speech and the conflicts they often face in class as a result of the political and social reality in Israel. It harnesses the advantages of contemporary media to offer these teachers fresh means of expression, a voice and a platform on which they can discuss and re-enact sensitive, often difficult situations.

Members of marginalized communities face various difficulties that are unique to their place in society and to the oppression they suffer. These instances may be a random rendezvous with police or a failed attempt to tackle bureaucracy. These understandings affect people both externally and internally. They are reflected in the life created within the community and in the way members of these groups explain reality to themselves and to their children. On top of it all, they affect their personal security and their hope for a better future.

Arab-Israelis are no different. They are systematically discriminated against, suffer lack of funding for rights they are guaranteed by law, or find it illegitimate to express their opinions in the general Israeli public. In many ways, they are barred from the mainstream Israeli stage and they lack the opportunity to realize and sound their voice. Within this group, teachers suffer even greater limitations, as they play a double role: on the one hand, they are representatives of the establishment - the same one that oppresses them - and are expected to follow the rules set by the education ministry and its narrative. On the other, they live in the same reality as the rest of their community, exposed to the discourse on the street and to the national conflict.

These teachers are inflicted by both internal silencing, what Boal and Epstein (1990) define as “the cop in the head,” as they fear their words or actions may be used against them and therefore refrain from challenging the system, and by external silencing, as the establishment defines the borders of discourse in class and takes action against teachers who fail to fall in line.

We used a blended work model, which allowed gradual exposure to technology, an especially important factor when dealing with members of a marginalized group (Thorne, 2003). Thus, the process maintained an ongoing critical discourse that dealt with questions of inequality, freedom of speech, democracy, minority-majority relations and social rights and took place over several weeks/months of group meetings. During the sessions, it was essential to focus on the creation of trust between the moderator and the group, and among the group members, thus creating an open environment for dialogue.

In addition to the exposure to ICTs and the affordances of contemporary media, the sessions included practical experience with digital games and constant discussion regarding the possibilities they – and especially DRPGs - offer. We tried to create a setting that would allow the teachers to learn and develop, preferably in a professional development course.

Several difficulties, which may arise during such a process with Arab-Israeli teachers needed to be taken into consideration: maintaining a critical dialogue regarding sensitive topics, especially when it is led by a Jewish-Israeli moderator, can pose a threat to some of the teachers. These teachers work in a system that does not welcome the voicing of opposing opinions, and live in a society in which they are constantly discriminated against. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe it will take time to establish trust and to get them to fully commit to the process. In addition, the presence of a Jewish-Israeli moderator – being a part of the majority in Israel and therefore identified with the oppressive establishment - can also affect the freedom of discourse. As a result, because the process was facilitated by a Jewish-Israeli moderator, an Arab-Israeli partner was included in the process.

Furthermore, there is a stable digital divide between the Jewish majority group and the Arab-Israelis (Schejter et al. 2018) which results in the fact that many of the Arab teachers have limited experience with technology and little, if any, experience with digital games. Overcoming this barrier requires a thorough process of introduction and training, before attempting to harness the advantages DRPGs offer to conduct a meaningful dialogue.

The framework we presented is built on three theoretical pillars, all sharing the same goal of provoking agency among marginalized communities and achieving social justice. The combination of the three theories with ICTs and DRPGs, attempts to offer a stage for dialogue about these situations and other social difficulties Arab-Israelis face. The outcome of this process, we hope, will offer the teachers a fresh look on life in Israel and on their role in Israeli society.

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