

# Real Recognizes Real

**Toward Eliminating Barriers to Children's Generative Ideas in Co-Design**

**Presenter: Jonaya Kemper  
Lead Game Designer- P3G Project  
Carnegie Mellon University**



**Carnegie Mellon  
Robotics Academy**



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# Introductions



- ▶ **Nebula Award Winning Game Designer**
- ▶ **Lead game Designer for the P3G Project**
- ▶ **Works Across the Game Design Spectrum in Analog, Digital, and Immersive Environments**
- ▶ **Experience in working hands on with children and teens in classrooms and in OST spaces**
- ▶ **Game Design Academic specializing in transformational games for marginalized populations**

# Player Programmed Partnered Games Project

- ▶ NSF Funded Project to create co-designed cobot games with low resource students in out of school time spaces.
- ▶ Students are full co-design partners who participate in ideation, iteration, and critique of games that are created with their community in mind.
- ▶ Over 3 years the project has created six games with varied ages, genders, and ethnicities.
- ▶ The games vary in tone, themes and genres.
- ▶ Five of the games are small scale digital games, and one is a fully printed analog board game.



# Overview

- ▶ What is a real game? Who is a real game designer?
- ▶ What is a *generative barrier* in the co-design of games?
- ▶ Identifying Generative Barriers to Game Design
- ▶ Suggestions and Outcomes for Overcoming Generative Barriers



Map Still From Acceleration  
City Co-Design Game 2

# Real Recognizes Real - Etymology

- ▶ A phrase used in AAVE to mean an authentic person or someone who is authentic, or who recognizes your own authenticity about a subject or experience
- ▶ Realness is the experience or state of being authentic to something including oneself and being. To be real, is to be a person of authenticity.

# What Is a Real Game? Who is a Real Game Designer?

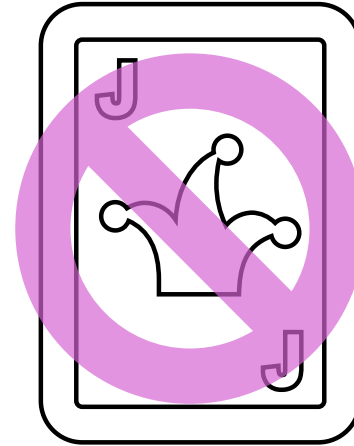
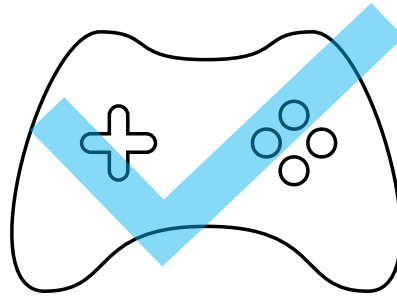
- ▶ What makes a game *authentic*?
- ▶ What makes a game designer, an authentic *game designer*?



Level Design by a Co-Design Participant

# “Real” Game Designers

- ▶ Make digital games
- ▶ Make AAA games
- ▶ Make high budget games
- ▶ Make well known games



**Spoiler!** Anyone who has made a game is a game designer. You are most likely a game designer.

You may not be a **Professional** or an **Expert**, but you have most likely designed a game at least once in your life.



Fortnite



ROBLOX



Grand Theft Auto

## “Real” Games- Authenticity Based on Normative Ideals

- ▶ Digital
- ▶ High Quality 3-D graphics
- ▶ Made by well known studios or are AAA
- ▶ Can mostly be played on consoles or computers
- ▶ Tend to be overtly transgressive
- ▶ Include high customization (skins, items, etc.)



# Games That May Not Be Perceived As Authentic Games



## Analog Games

Card games, board games, tabletop roleplaying games



## Sports

Football, Basketball, soccer, baseball



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## Folk Games

Ring around the rosy, Mother May I, hand games, imaginary play activities

# Definitions of Expertise

## Co-Design Students

- ▶ Co-design students are already game designers whether they may identify as such.
- ▶ They are Experts at the games they play and have knowledge of their community's playstyles.

## Facilitating Designers

- ▶ Facilitating Designers are adult experts with in-depth game design knowledge who facilitate ideation, exploration, and iteration. They are responsible for interpreting and scaffolding the design experience.
- ▶ They may be experts in specific fields of game design.

# Transformational Game Design: Barriers

Within the transformational game design framework, Culyba states that barriers are “...what stands in the way of your players’ transformation and the achievement of your High-Level Purpose.”

When co-design students do not believe in their own authenticity, they may disengage, or fail to advocate for their own novel ideas.

**Generative Barriers** are those that stop designers from ideation in not only novel ways but also **believing in their own ideas and designer identity.**

# Generative Barriers

When co-design participants expressed design ideation it was constrained by what they believed was an authentic game. This Authenticity marker led them to discount their own expertise and knowledge in some areas, while prioritizing their play experiences in others.

In several instances we saw generative barriers to their creation of games, which constrained their ideation or led to frustration with game development.

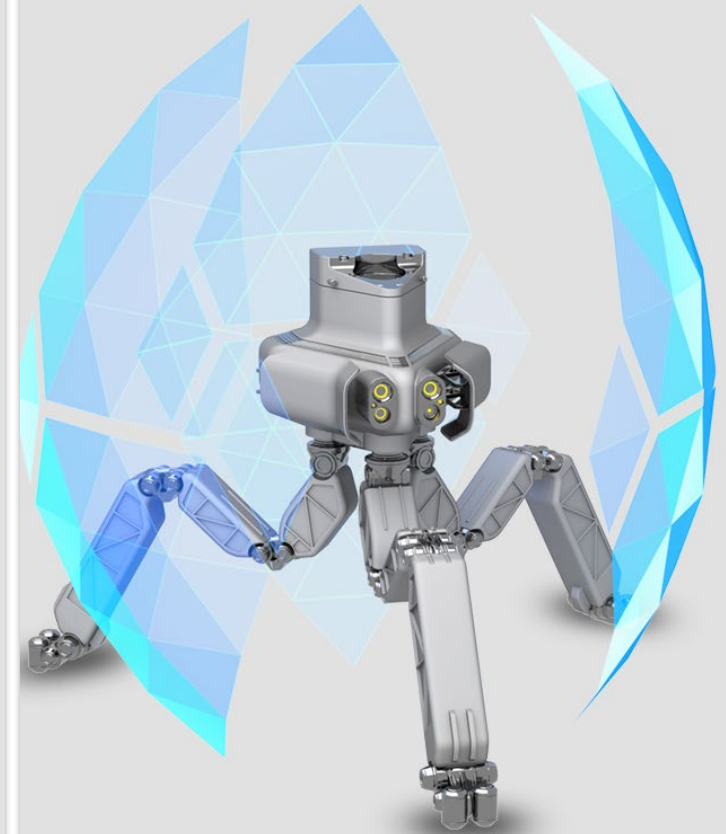
In short, if the only games that are **real** games are Roblox, GTA, and Fortnite then they will design games in the image of those games regardless of their expertise in other genres or wants. The belief that these games are somehow more authentic than others, creates a **generative barrier**.

# Examples of Generative Barriers

- ▶ Rejecting game art that is not 3-D even if it is based on their suggestions or wants.
- ▶ Wanting to purely emulate genres that are considered authentic, even if the student does not play them, or have the ability to play them. Making sure to express that monetization mechanics were unwelcome even though facilitating designers made no mention of them.
- ▶ Game mechanics and narrative preferences hinges on their experience with a small subset of digital games
- ▶ Not mentioning or including game preferences outside of their cultural norm
- ▶ Struggling to connect narrative and mechanics to an overall vision
- ▶ Not seeing themselves as full design partners as their game play does not fit the normative definition of "gamer"



Seen as less than  
due to pixel art



Seen as satisfactory  
due to 3-D art



How Do We Begin Eliminating the  
Barriers?

# All Games are Real: Validate “Non-Traditional” Game Design Experience

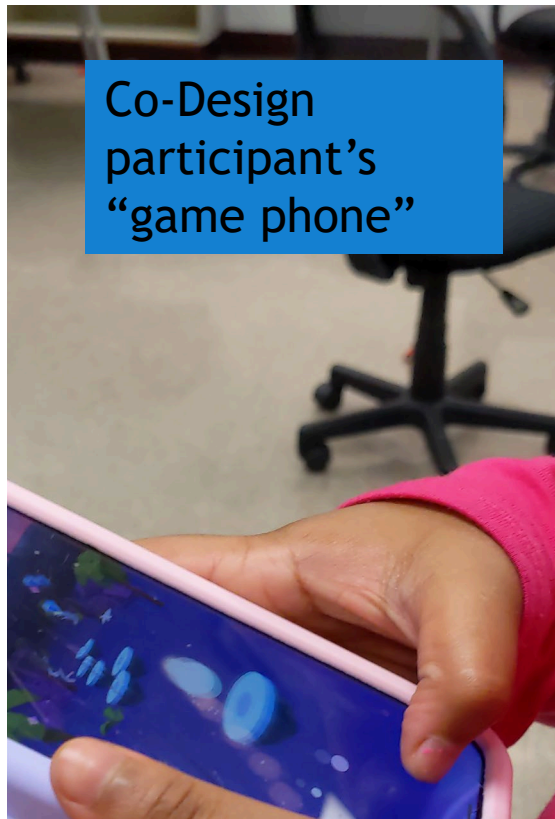
## The Issue

- ▶ Students may not realize that they have already designed games themselves.
- ▶ Folk games, sports, analog games and imaginary play are not always included in game design expertise of adults let alone children.
- ▶ Co-Design participants may not identify as a “gamer” as they do not fit the normative idea of a gamer, or perceive their style of play as outside of the label.
- ▶ They may view the “gamer” identity as undesirable

## The Proposal

- ▶ By placing varied game experience on the same or similar level as digital game designers, students may gain confidence in their own expertise and begin to think beyond a digital confine.
- ▶ Elevating varied expertise also encourages co-designers to draw on their own gameplay experience and bring this novel design into their co-designed games

# Examples: Zillah Beat City



Co-Design participant's "game phone"



A scene from Zillah Beat

- ▶ After creating a third person shooter type co-bot game and getting mixed reviews we noticed that students often played rhythm games together or solo on phones.
- ▶ Students who previously did not identify themselves as a gamer, had \*many\* games on their mobile devices. These games were unlike the general stated preference games.
- ▶ When we created a beat matching game that integrated these preferences, we saw a wider satisfaction through the student co-design population



# Their Expertise is Real: Respect Child Expertise While Exchanging Game Design Knowledge

## The Issue

- ▶ While face saving may occur when discussing game knowledge, leading students to admit to playing only popular or socially acceptable games, it does not necessarily mean **they do not enjoy those games.**
- ▶ Even if they do enjoy these games, they may omit other gameplay experience that is just as or more relevant a design inspiration.

## The Proposal

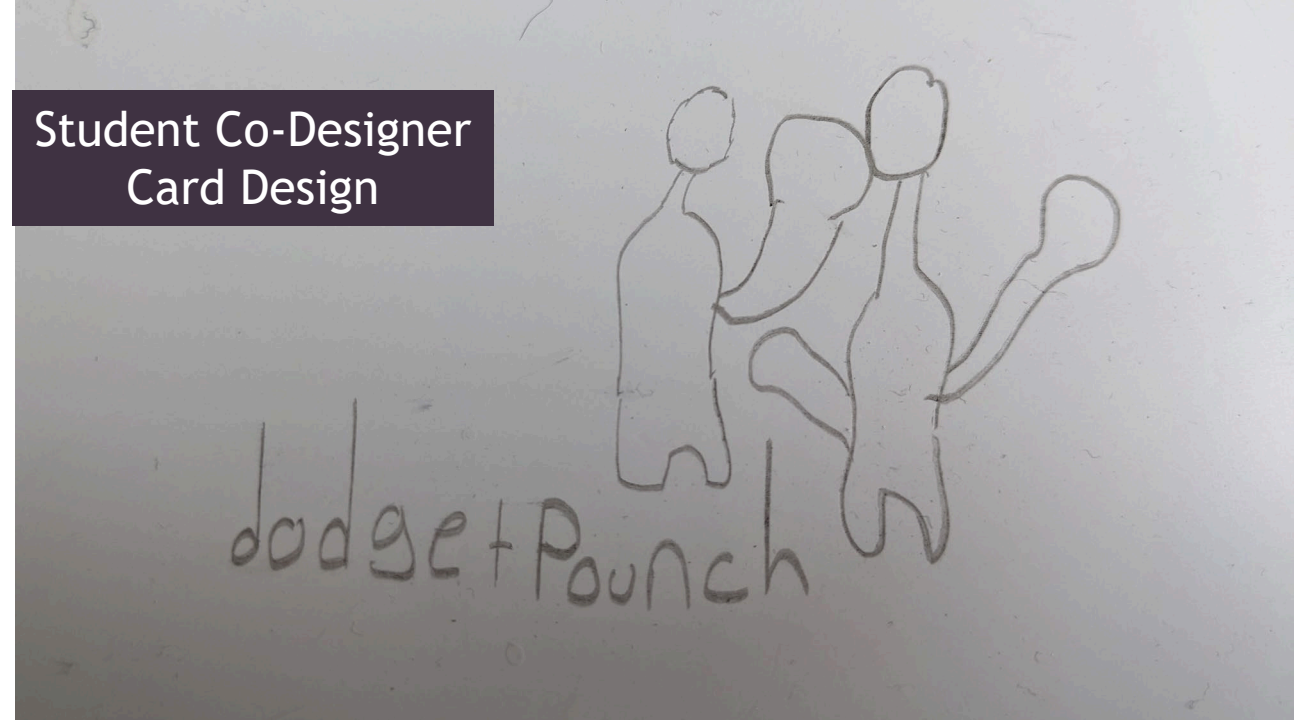
- ▶ Design facilitators should share a variety of games they themselves enjoy and introduce them to their fellow co-designers
- ▶ Design facilitators can elevate less authentically seen games to highlight that many different games are valued and are themselves authentic. This allows co-design students to expand their own definitions.

# Example: Battle of the Hill

- ▶ A cohort consisting of boys aged 10 and older were tasked with designing a cobot game that was an analog game.
- ▶ These children mostly identified sports as a favorite pastime as well as first person shooters.
- ▶ Facilitators noticed their affinity for the card games, especially Uno.
- ▶ Over subsequent weeks, the cohort (including the facilitators) explored different types of analog games by playing together and discussing the properties of the games: board games, card games, physical games, and tabletop roleplaying games.
- ▶ When it came time to ideate on the game we would design together, instead of *leaning away* from their preferred expertise (sports and card games) to the cohorts *leaned in*.
- ▶ The Expert designers worked with their co-designers who designed cards, mechanics, themes, and art direction.
- ▶ The result was a co-bot board game whose mechanics were heavily inspired by card games and sports.



Design Executed to High Fidelity



Student Co-Designer Card Design

# The Real Deal: Illuminating the Game Design Industry to Support Co-Design Expectations

## The Issue

- ▶ The Game Design Industry is an opaque and mostly inaccessible industry whose consumers may not understand its inner workings.
- ▶ Co-Design students who game frequently or identify as gamers may not know the basics of digital game design or production and have unrealistic expectations of what can be done in any span of time.

## The Proposal

- ▶ Design Facilitators should be explicit in what can and cannot be achieved by the design team, so that co-designers can better hone what they may want out of the game itself.
- ▶ Design facilitators should introduce basic tenets of game design in a digestible manner that can be applied to games they believe are “authentic” games.
- ▶ Designers should be open to including critique of co-designed games and “authentic” games in order to encourage a healthy understanding of the medium and increase design expertise.
- ▶ Heavily involving co-designers in not just ideation but iteration of design and the design process allows co-design cohorts access to specialized knowledge that may not be available to them, but that they can use outside of co-design experiences.

When designing a video game, we must make hard choices to balance the features we want with the time and money available. You have 20 points available to buy features for our Acceleration City game. What features will you spend your points on?

<b>HOW TO MOVE AROUND THE GAME (PICK ONE)</b>		
	Drive around in a car AND walk/run around the area	15
	<b>Only drive</b> around in a car	0
<b>MULTIPLAYER</b>		
	Play with multiple friends in the same area	10
	Single player	0
<b>VEHICLES IN THE GAME</b>		
	Default car	0
	Dirt bike	8
	Rollerblades	8
	ATV/Four-wheeler	4
	Tractor	4
	Ambulance	4
	School bus	4
	Police car	4
	Sports car	4
Luxury car	4	
<b>CUSTOMIZE CARS</b>		
	Change parts and customize parts/performance	10
	Change the look of cars e.g. paint and decals	4
	Car has one special ability e.g. drift, boost etc	4

The \$20 task from our second co-design game.

## Examples: \$20 Dollar Task

- ▶ The \$20 task asked children to prioritize their wants in needs, while illuminating the difficulty that go into game creation. This task also included non-normative wants like roleplaying, which placed its authenticity on the same level as wants pulled from games deemed “authentic”.
- ▶ Consequently, roleplaying and character creation became frequent touchbacks were elevated to the same levels as new weapons, cars, or clothing choices.

# Your Feelings are Real...but-: Recognize and Acknowledge Expert Designer Bias and Limitations

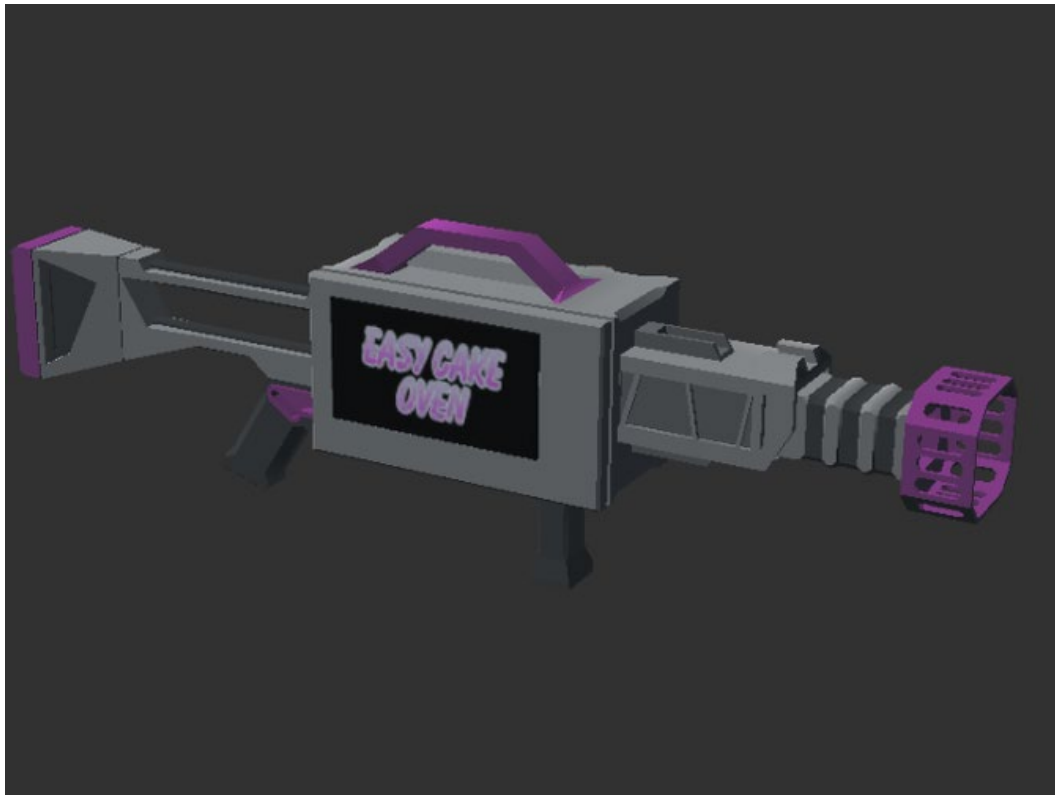
## The Issue

- ▶ As design experts we may carry our own internalized biases against genres, mechanics, or narratives in games.
- ▶ These bias can constraint the generative expression of co-design participants by placing your expertise over theirs or subtly signaling that **their designs are not authentic.**

## The Proposal

- ▶ Co-Design facilitators should lay out clear limits to what they will and will not design upfront and give a solid reasoning that student co-designers can understand.
- ▶ Co-Design Facilitators should pose ways in which compromises can be made that may fit both students and facilitators.
- ▶ If the Designer's bias is simply personal preference, they should cede power and encourage their co-designer's expertise. Only they are experts in what \*they\* like to play.

# Examples: Dealing with Transgression



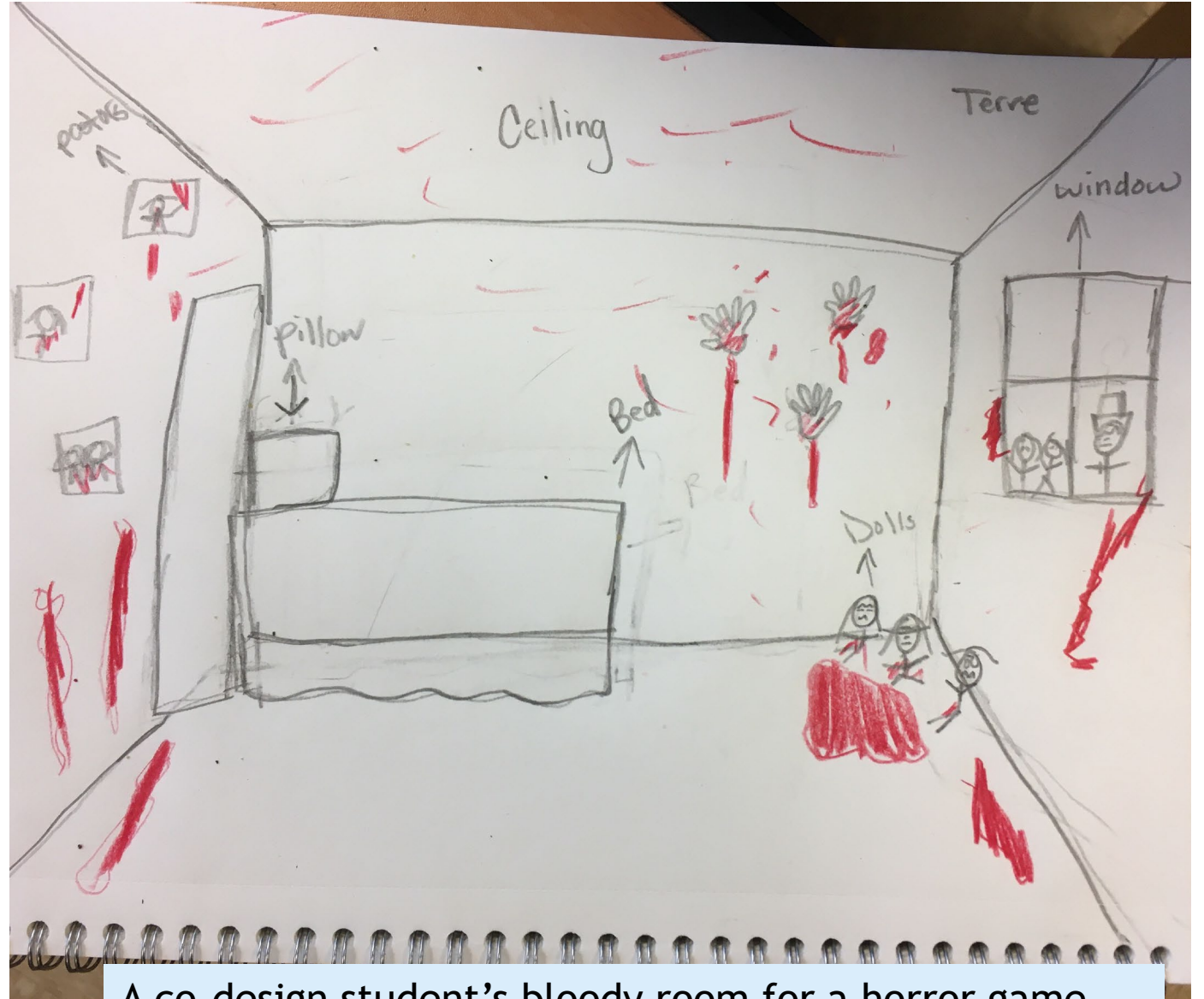
The Cupcake Gun- A Gun that shoots cupcakes, designed by a student and executed by the team's designers.

Students expressed transgressive behaviors that could not be fulfilled as they were not deemed appropriate. This included shooting guns with bullets, knives, and the killing of animals.

Instead of dismissing their needs for transgression out of hand, Facilitators explained constraints upfront, while encouraging students to think of other ways to engage in transgressive behaviors.



The compromise: An altered photograph made by designers for a jump scare.



A co-design student's bloody room for a horror game for teens.



A Co-Design Prompt designed to learn about play habits and signal authenticity across gaming habits.

## Conclusion

Children's generative design can be impacted by their beliefs and ideas about what makes a game an "authentic" game, who are "authentic" designers, and who are "authentic" gamers.

By acknowledging non-normative expertise in game design and game design identity, facilitating designers can encourage generative ideas outside of games perceived as "authentic".



Q and A

Thank You!

Jonaya Kemper

[Jkemper@Andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:Jkemper@Andrew.cmu.edu)