

## Dr Anna Powell, University of Huddersfield

### Biography

Dr Anna Powell is a Senior Lecturer in Art and Design Theory in the School of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Huddersfield. Her background spans history of art and museum studies, with a research focus on the art of ‘the encounter’ which addresses the often-complex relationships between art and its (intentional or unintentional) audiences. Anna is also part of the University’s None in Three Research Centre for the Prevention of Gender Based Violence. Prior to working at the University of Huddersfield, Anna taught across history of art/museum studies modules at the University of Leeds where she received her PhD, and has supported collaborative research projects for a range of organisations and events. Recent publications include: *The Image is a Moment, The art of the Visual Encounter* Powell, A. & Hibbert, S. (2018), *Transimage 2018*, ‘User Experience of Markerless Augmented Reality Applications in Cultural Heritage Museums: “MuseumEye” as a Case Study’, Hammady, R., Ma, M. E. & Powell, A. (2018), *Virtual Reality and Computer Graphics*, ‘Measuring the Immeasurable: Articulating the Value of Culture’, Swindells, S. & Powell, A. (2016), *The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts*, ‘Treasure-Hunting, Conversation and Chance: Game-Playing through Artistic Encounters’, Powell, A. (2015) *Play of Individuals and Societies, “What Is to Be Done?”: Cultural Leadership and Public Engagement in Art and Design Education*, Swindells, S. (ed.) & Powell, A. (ed.) (2014), *Contemporary art in Heritage Spaces*, Cass, N. (ed.) Parks, G. (ed.) Powell, A. (ed.) Routledge, (In press, due 2020).

**Abstract** *(NB slightly updated from previous submitted version).*

Since its conception in 2017, the Global None in Three (Ni3) Research Centre for the Prevention of Gender Based Violence (so-called because its aim is to reduce to none in three the statistic that one in three women across the globe will, in their lifetime, experience some form of violence) has been working with victims and perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV) to collect real stories about their personal experiences of GBV. Led by a team of experts from across the globe including psychologists, quantitative and qualitative researchers, games developers, media technologists, policy makers, and educational leaders (see <http://www.noneinthree.org/meet-the-centre-team/>), these real-life experiences have been used to inform the development of a series of serious, pro-social computer games whose narratives are based around this empirical data.

The games function as educational tools for use by school-age individuals, with the purpose of changing attitudes and behaviours relating to gender-based violence. The games use a choice-based system in which players are able to make decisions within its different situations which, in turn, direct the games' characters to take certain actions, and ultimately determine the outcome of the games.

As a multi-faceted piece of academic research, the games sit alongside and pervade the pages of numerous books chapters, journal articles and reports, and are underpinned by a substantial amount of published material. The game and its literary counterparts are co-dependent, and yet they function very differently from each other. Perhaps more significant, and the focus of this chapter's discussions, is the fact that the games and their narratives, as well as the in-game dialogue and characters, are based on true stories – on the real-life experiences of people who have experienced gender-based violence. This chapter discusses their translation into game's digital narratives, and explores how this re-telling of these stories is fundamental to the success of the games as educational tools for increasing empathy in their users. In doing so it explores the coexistence and fluctuating relationship between digital narratives and the spoken word – whose significance might be seen to book-end the None in Three project as a whole; in its development of the game and in the dissemination of its ultimate message about preventing gender-based violence.

## **True Stories: Storytelling and empathy in None in Three's digital game narratives.**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter considers 'the book' not so much from the perspective of book-as-object, but by considering those broader literary elements which might be considered within the genre of 'the book' – including storytelling, fiction and text. As such, it takes a critical approach to any conclusive definition of 'literature', assuming Terry Eagleton's view that literature cannot easily be conceived within a Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance' model, that is, that there is no one template for determining what a work of literature is or can be. Eagleton notes that, when describing something as 'literary', people generally assume the work in question fits one of a number of 'empirical categories, not theoretical ones' which, he says, 'derive from everyday judgements, not from an investigation of the logic of the concept [of 'literature'] itself'. (Eagleton, 2012: 25). The chapter considers storytelling, fiction and text in relation to a specific case study; the development of a series of prosocial, serious computer games by the None in Three (Ni3) Research Centre ([www.noneinthree.org](http://www.noneinthree.org)) for the Prevention of Gender Based Violence (GBV). The term 'prosocial', as antithetical to 'anti-social', refers to games which aim to foster positive attitudes and behaviours in their users, that is, games which aim to 'benefit others or society' (Batson, 1998, 209).

The games discussed within this chapter are those currently being designed and developed by Ni3 for its four participating countries: India, Jamaica, Uganda and the UK, and their pilot game, entitled JESSE which was developed for use in Barbados, Grenada and St. Lucia. Funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund and the University of Huddersfield, Ni3 came to existence in 2017 as a hub for conducting research into the causes and consequences of GBV, and into the development of strategies to prevent it. Based within the University of Huddersfield, Ni3 takes its name from the statistic that one in three women and girls will experience some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime, and it believes this statistic should be none in three. The games are educational tools which aim to help tackle gender-based violence (GBV) on a global scale, an issue which UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan describes as 'perhaps the most shameful human rights violation', and 'perhaps the most pervasive', knowing 'no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth' (1999).

Members of the Ni3 team explain the game's anti-violence concept, stating:

Although much of the [recent] research on video gaming has focused on the negative impact of violent video games, in recent years researchers and educators have become increasingly aware of the potential benefits of prosocial/serious video games (Gentile et al., 2009; Harrington & O'Connell, 2016; Whyte et al., 2015). In such games, participants assume the roles of characters and try out new prosocial behaviours in a fictional setting (Boduszek *et al*, 2019: 260).

This chapter explores some of the challenges that have faced the games design team in their efforts to develop realistic, relatable and empathy-inducing dialogues, characters and scenarios for the games, which are based around what is a very serious and emotionally gruelling set of issues. Specifically, it examines the importance of the real stories told by survivors and perpetrators about their experiences of GBV, gathered through psycho-social research (participant interviews), that underpinned each of the four games. Considering these dialogues as fundamental to the games' narratives, and exploring their significance in the games' approach to storytelling, it asks a number of practical and theoretical questions about what it means to translate real stories into a fictional game. It further asks how we might understand 'fiction' in this context. Drawing on interview material with the wider Ni3 team, it explores the processes through which the games' responsive, user-led dialogues came into being; their important role within game-play; their capacity for affecting a player's empathetic faculty and, in turn, for affecting and changing the attitudes and actions of players – which is the ultimate aim of the games.

### ***The Ni3 context***

Gender-Based Violence is defined by Health Poverty Action (2019) as:

[...] any act done to someone against their will as a result of gender-norms, and unequal power relationships. The perpetrators of GBV are predominantly men, and the victims are most frequently women. Older people, younger girls, those with disabilities, or those from ethnic minorities or the LGBTI community are often more vulnerable to being targeted and may experience higher rates of violence. Forms of abuse can range from physical, emotional and sexual to the outright denial of freedom, resources and services.

Each of the four games takes a particular focus relevant to the most prevalent GBV issues identified within each of the participating countries. These are, respectively for India, Jamaica, Uganda and the UK: gender bias as an enabler of gender violence; child marriage; child sexual abuse; and intimate partner violence (IPV) amongst teenagers.

The research which underpins the Ni3 concept is a 6-country study, based in the Caribbean, led by Professor Adele Jones (University of Huddersfield), and commissioned by UNICEF, exploring perceptions of, and attitudes towards child sexual abuse (Jones, A & Trotman-Jemmott, E., 2009). This study identified the importance of understanding socio-cultural contextual factors for GBV, the links between child sexual abuse and violence against women, the need for a focus on strategies for early prevention, and the importance of engaging men and young people in these dialogues. The report, as explained by Jones, ‘called for a “whole of society” systems approach to tackle the problem on multiple fronts simultaneously and also to engage the public.’ (Jones, 2019). This research led to the first – and to-date the only – literature on the topic in the region, including:

- Jones, A. (Ed). *Understanding Child Sexual Abuse: Perspectives from the Caribbean*, Palgrave Macmillan (London, 2013)
- Jones, A. D., Jemmott, E. T., Maharaj, P. E., & Da Breo, H. *An Integrated Systems Model for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Perspectives from the Caribbean*, Palgrave Macmillan (London, 2014)
- Jones, A., Trotman Jemmott, E., Da Breo, H. and Maharaj, P. *Treating Child Sexual Abuse in Family, Group and Clinical Settings – Culturally Intelligent Practice for Caribbean and International Contexts*, Palgrave Macmillan (London, 2016).

The second of these books describes in detail the theoretical approach adopted by Ni3, and while the detail of this report is beyond the scope of this chapter, in brief, it sets out an integrated systems model which utilises a public health approach to preventing and responding to child sexual abuse, providing guidance for those engaged in policy, practice and planning concerning gender based violence and child abuse, towards more systemic methods for tackling these problems. It sets the foundations for adopting the educational approach which was manifested through the development of prosocial computer games.

### *The games as (and with) 'texts'*

JESSE, and the other games currently being developed, are story-driven and 'explore the reality of gender-based violence, with an emphasis on choices, enabling the player to connect to the characters in the game they are playing and to understand an environment of gender-based violence' ([www.noneinthree.org](http://www.noneinthree.org)). Aimed at 10-18 year olds, the player takes the role of a main character in the game, with a third-person perspective, and is able to roam freely within the game's parameters to conduct a series of verbal interactions with other characters and choose subsequent actions, each of which cumulatively lead to alternate end points for the game. Through these interactions, players make decisions which affect the outcome of the story. JESSE's premise is described below:

Jesse and his mother Diana are living with Diana's abusive boyfriend, Rondell. Rondell is quick to anger after drinking, and has been physically abusive towards her.

Follow Jesse and the people around him as they navigate an incident of violence. Explore the situation from the perspectives of a child, a nurse, a teacher, and a friend.

Explore the 3d environments and talk to every character to get the full picture of how everyone is dealing with the situation in different ways. Jesse is becoming withdrawn and violent at school. Diana is worried about her unborn baby. Rondell is dismissive of the impact of his actions.

By the end of the game you must make a choice – what will you do about the situation?

([www.noneinthree.org](http://www.noneinthree.org)).

The role of narrative and dialogue in the games is one of the reasons that they might easily and rationally be considered in relation to books – not only those publications that have informed them, or which have stemmed from them, but as types of 'text' in their own right; as part-true, part-fiction immersive stories. Catherine Beavis, in 'Games as Text, Games as Action', describes video games as examples of 'emergent cultural forms', and explores, 'the ways they work as texts'. She notes that the often 'complex [...] and multilayered' texts of popular culture, such as animated television programmes and video-games, are increasingly becoming – and being used in the classroom as – 'the texts of students' worlds' (Beavis, 2014: 434). Concurrent with the idea of games-as-text is the notion of player-as-reader. Particularly interesting for the Ni3 games is the fact that the narratives they present, bolstered by the dialogues they encompass, are presented not as stories to be 'read' passively, but to be entered into by active participants who become, in some respects, their authors, by

determining the games' ultimate outcomes. Akin to Edward Packard's 'Choose Your Own Adventure' style book popularised in the 1980s and '90s for young people (Bantam Books), the gameplay of these types of sandbox games incorporates multiple possible endings for the very purpose of immersing the player/reader as fully as possible in the narratives they present, so that players' interactions with the characters and their decision-making within the scenarios presented to them impacts upon the ultimate outcomes for those characters, in terms of their wellbeing and the health of their in-game relationships. The full description of Ni3's game development for JESSE is provided in Smith et al. (2017), which elucidates on the mechanics of the game and the ways in which, through third person narratives, it allows the player to role-play as a variety of characters in various scenarios. The themes and characters of the game stemmed from the above-mentioned interviews. This qualitative research, based on the subject of domestic violence was which was carried out with 109 adults. 'Prominent themes from the qualitative research [which were] integrated into game design', Jones explains, included:

gender inequality, female economic dependency, intergenerational violence, the impact on primary and secondary victims, the physical and emotional impact of domestic violence and escalatory patterns, help-seeking behaviour and empowerment-based interventions, the role of alcohol as a contributory factor, impact on children's behaviour, the role of professionals, positive male role models as agents of change, and perpetrator accountability. (Jones *et al.* 2017).

JESSE and the four subsequent games currently under development are examples of computer games whose existence relies principally on the spoken-word, true stories behind them, that is, they are games for which the underpinning dialogues have come first. The dialogues were the catalyst; the starting point for the narratives, character design and the mechanics of the game, the logic behind this being that in order to function in a way which engages and immerses players, the dialogues and accompanying narratives need to be both realistic and relatable for their target audiences – namely fourteen to eighteen year olds in the different countries for which the games are being developed. John Pearson *et al* discuss how 'attachment, immersion and enjoyment of players [has] been found to directly link to the extent that they can [...] relate to [a] character in the narrative' of a game, effective dialogue being one of the key ways in which this is achieved (Pearson *et al*, due for publication 2020). Referencing Little and Froggett (2010), Jennifer Penton further notes the extent to which

‘stories and narratives and, in particular, personal stories and narratives, are critical to an individual’s organisation of their world’, they are, ‘central to how people construct and understand their experiences’ (Penton, 2011:75).

The narratives and dialogues differ for each game to reflect each participating country’s most prevalent GBV-related issue as accurately and realistically as possible, however the games emphasise the fact that often these categories are not wholly mutually exclusive, and some grey areas purposely exist across each character’s assumed behavioural role. In the India game, the story follows a young girl named Anju who lives with her bother, Siddhant, her parents, Surekha and Anil, and her grandmother (‘Dadi’). The game addresses different types of gender bias and explore the ways in which gender-bias attitudes can affect people, for example through the treatment that both Anju and her best friend Aisha experience both at home and in school. It introduces players to the many ways in which gender bias determines the experiences of the characters, and also how it impacts on their attitudes and expectations of other characters. Through the game, players are able to explore different possibilities for challenging these biases and fixed gender roles (see [www.noneinthree.org/india/game/](http://www.noneinthree.org/india/game/)).

The Jamaica game follows Gabrielle, a fourteen year old girl who lives with her mother Grace, a waitress at a hotel, and her mother’s boyfriend, Johnny, who recently moved into their family home. Gabrielle’s parents are separated. Gabrielle begins to notice that Johnny is overly generous with gifts and has begun saying things to her which make her feel uneasy, especially after he has been drinking. She starts to feel uncomfortable around him. The player follows Gabrielle through her experiences and interactions with Johnny, and their knock-on effects for other characters in the story, aiming to help Gabrielle to navigate what is a difficult time for her (see [www.noneinthree.org/jamaica/game/](http://www.noneinthree.org/jamaica/game/)).

In the Uganda game, the main character is Peace, a fifteen year old girl who lives with her father, stepmother, brother and two step-siblings. Her older sister has been missing for over a year. Peace’s biological mother died during childbirth when her brother was born and she does not get along with her stepmother, who feels education is wasted on girls and causes Peace to be absent from school a lot. The family struggle financially and Peace is pressured to marry to help support the family financially. The player must learn about the challenges facing Peace, and help Peace to make the right choices for herself and her family (see [www.noneinthree.org/uganda/game/](http://www.noneinthree.org/uganda/game/)).



The UK game centres around Danielle and her friends. Danielle is a first year student at college and is enjoying her new-found freedom. She meets a boy called James and begins dating him. All goes well until James' behaviour becomes more and more controlling and jealous. Her friends have mixed opinions of his motives. The player assumes the role of Danielle as she struggles with self-esteem, peer pressure and strained friendships, helping her to make the right choices. (see [www.noneinthree.org/uk/game/](http://www.noneinthree.org/uk/game/)).

### ***Storytelling and empathy***

The games have all been informed by a significant body of empirical, culturally-sensitive, mixed-methods research conducted internationally, and which has revealed, for the first time, the extent to which 'interventions in preventing GBV require preventative strategies, namely those which enhance empathy and disrupt the formation of negative gendered attitudes' (Jones, 2019). This research further showed a correlation between decreased empathy and violence normalisation. It also brought to the forefront the importance of addressing 'control and domination as signifiers of masculinity, and evidenced the extent to which these attitudes extend beyond victims and perpetrators, to the society as a whole, and are responsible for perpetuating intergenerational cycles of violence' (Jones, 2019).

Game evaluation of JESSE tested the short and long-term impact of the game on participants' empathy towards victims of GBV. Randomised control trials with JESSE (2017) were conducted with 2,450 young people who played the game, the first in its field to focus on victim empathy, and they demonstrated the effectiveness of the game manifested as sustained developments in its users' empathetic responses. The trials monitored attitudes and perceptions pre and post-exposure to the game, through two independent experimental groups and a control group. Students in experimental group one played the JESSE game, students in experimental group two played JESSE and participated in a focus group facilitated by teachers and research fellows. Students in the control group participated in an unrelated activity. The same survey was administered to experimental and control groups in order to observe any change in attitudes/behaviours after being exposed to the gaming intervention. The outcomes of the trials were analysed using propensity score matching, which aims to reduce any bias resulting from confounding variables when outcomes are compared across an active and a control group. The results evidenced the effectiveness of the games as a preventative intervention among young people for increasing empathy towards victims of

violence, leading to global expansion of the work: Boduszek, Co-Principle Investigator for Ni3 summarises:

Girls and boys in the experimental condition, but not their counterparts in the control condition, revealed heightened affective responsiveness towards victims of IPV at the end of intervention. There was no significant change in affective responsiveness between two post-intervention time points in participants from the experimental condition, providing the first experimental evidence that the change in this psychological construct as a function of prosocial gaming can be sustained over a longer period of time. [...] our study was [...] the first in the field to assess victim specific empathy, i.e., a cognitive and emotional understanding of the experience of victims, as opposed to global empathy, i.e., general reactions to the experience of others (Mann & Barnett, 2013). (Boduszek, D. *et al*, 2019: 260-266).

Professor Adele Jones (2019), Principle Investigator for Ni3 notes:

These successes [of JESSE] resulted in the game's implementation in schools across Barbados, Grenada and St. Lucia, and its uptake by policymakers including the National Union of Public workers (Barbados) who used it to strengthen Union Policy and practice on GBV, and by the ministry of education, UNICEF, and the CPA. Some of the research findings have also been translated into policy briefings and training to enhance technical and civil society capacity in addressing the problem of GBV.

### ***Gaming as storytelling***

The Ni3 games design team note how 'unlike other forms of media, such as movies or magazines, video games give the opportunity provide a unique opportunity for immersion in a narrative' and, as such, the chance to 'experience the successes and consequences of a character at the same time as them, thus providing an opportunity for the player to explore their behavioural and emotional responses to these situations.' (Pearson *et al*, due for publication 2020). This is an idea addressed by Belman and Flanagan who note in their 2010 paper, 'Games [...] allow players to inhabit the roles of other people in a uniquely immersive way' and, notably in relation to the Ni3 games' aspirations, because of this, 'Games are particularly well-suited to supporting educational or activist programs in which the fostering of empathy is a key method or goal' (Belman and Flanagan, 2010: 9). A 2014 meta-analytic

study by Greitemeyer & Mügge – the first in its field to provide a meta-analysis of prosocial video game effects – also underlines the relationship between association between playing a prosocial video game and positive social outcomes. Greitemeyer & Mügge’s report underlines the link between violent vs prosocial video game content and its influence in relation to cognition, affect, and arousal and, in turn, on social behaviour.

Boduszek (1999: 260), underlines the extent to which games are unique in their capacity for telling stories in ways which not only engage but immerse the player, and have the ability, ultimately, to change behaviours. He states,

Unlike other media which rely predominantly on the mere presentation of facts, video games scaffold children's experience using narrative and audio-visual content [...]. [...] Indeed, a growing body of empirical evidence indicates the effectiveness of experiential learning in enhancing students' meta-cognitive abilities, and their capacity to apply newly acquired skills and knowledge to real-life situations (Catalano, Luccini, & Mortara, 2014).

As educational tools, the Ni3 games utilise a player’s ‘self-motivation to enable [them] to follow through a story and make decisions about what steps to take’, and in doing so each game ‘draws on emotional intelligence theory and encourages children to identify [with] the emotions of the characters.’ (JESSE User Manual, 2018). Drawing on an extensive body of research including Harrington & O’Connell, Gentile *et al.*, Greitemeyer, Lebowitz Klug, Leiberg, Kilmecki & Singer and others,<sup>1</sup> Pearson *et al.* (2020) further explain how research on exposure to prosocial games whose aim is to increase empathy has identified its positive impacts on social behaviour and related cognitive and affective variables, including ‘increased helping behaviour, an increase of prosocial thoughts, lower levels of aggression and increased empathy and compassion’. Correspondingly, Belman and Flanagan note that, ‘A consistent finding in the research literature is that empathy improves people’s attitudes and behaviours towards other individuals or groups, while a lack of empathy is associated with more negative attitudes and behaviours’ (2010). Pearson *et al.* (2020) add that, ‘repeated exposure to the content of a game can translate into long-term effects by changing the beliefs, attitudes and emotional responses of the player towards certain situations’ and that, as a

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<sup>1</sup> For full details see bibliography.

consequence, these games are ‘potentially altering or developing new cognitive processes, such as perceptual schema or behavioural scripts’.

Kocurek discusses the ways in which some kinds of computer games, namely those which seek to ‘produce deep emotional responses’, depend on highly effective storytelling being at their core. She states:

These games [...] aspire to convey or form shared experiences and [...] they move by providing familiarity with the stories and experiences of others. In this, they resonate with Walter Benjamin’s longing for storytelling as a means of conveying what he calls counsel or wisdom. [...] they are distinctly invested in the acquisition and circulation of experiential knowledge, a type of knowledge that seems particularly difficult to quantify or to convey through designed experiences (Kocurek, 2018:2).

This idea is resonant with the challenges of translating real stories into a digital format recognised by Ni3, where the communicability of experience into a realistic and yet anonymous way was a fundamental concern for the research teams involved, however, unlike Benjamin’s interpretation of storytelling as containing the fanciful and not always being factual, storytelling for the Ni3 games is synonymous with fact-gathering. Kocurek’s ideas might be seen to underline the significance of the Ni3 games in providing effective but sensitively shared experiences, through the manifestation of interview material as game dialogue.

### ***Ni3 games - fiction or non-fiction?***

The combination of true stories with fictional elements in the Ni3 games (the latter being informed, however, by commonalities and themes recognised through primary and secondary research rather than incorporating any made-up or fantasy elements) situates them interestingly between the fiction and non-fiction genres, and seems significant to consider in relation to their educational role.

Belman and Flanagan explore the way in which game mechanics can encourage desired behaviours through behaviour modelling in its characters, noting the importance of accurate and realistic behavioural modelling, and the fact when the values, beliefs and actions of players need to be recognised within games, certain empathetic responses are more likely to

be fostered (2010: 10-11). They address the idea that when specific similarities between the player and characters within in the game are made apparent to the player, this may encourage players to ‘perceive others as more similar to themselves’ which, ‘in turn could produce positive attitude changes’ (*ibid.*). For the Ni3 games, the development of a culturally-specific, dialogue-based narrative founded on non-fictional stories is fundamental to their success, in terms of them accurately reflecting culturally specific elements and, in turn, their ability to engage users, their playability, and their capacity for increasing understanding and empathy about the causes and consequences of GBV (Pearson *et al*, due for publication 2020). In *Reality Play: Documentary Computer Games Beyond Fact and Fiction*, Joost Raessens examines whether the combining of fact and fiction in computer games can ‘create a harmonious “space of communication” in which feelings of mutual understanding occur between designers and players’ (2006: 213). His article explores the relatability of games which combine elements of fact and fiction (the latter which, he underlines, is necessarily as component of all computer games, however much they are based around real situations, dialogues and characters. When discussing this in relation to historically-based games, he notes, ‘We have to conclude that when [...] games succeed in being more or less historically accurate, they always occupy a comparable tense position between fact and fiction’ (218). He further explores the idea that, through interactivity in games which incorporate fact within their fictional setting, ‘players are in the position to [...] construct their own meanings of the game. (219). Herein might lie one of the significant factors contributing to the Ni3 games’ capacity for fostering empathy in its players, as demonstrate through the JESSE trials – the characters, dialogues and narratives which, because based on true stories, allow players to recognise familiar scenarios and through these form their own connections to, and understandings of, the messages within the games. Jones explains in relation to JESSE:

An important element of the game’s development has been the socio-cultural sensitisation to the Caribbean context, through consultation with groups of young people in Barbados, input from Caribbean experts and the inclusion of real world information, local dialects, voices and characterisations.

For all of the Ni3 games, cultural appropriateness is a crucial factor in their design – characters and scenarios have to seem real, recognisable and relatable for players to fully engage. By using real stories, Ni3 has been able to create ‘characters which resonate directly with young people in that particular place’ (Ni3 Director Roslyn Cumming, interview, 2020).

Jones notes how Ni3's research has demonstrated the importance of authenticity and relatability in terms of characterisation, language, environment and narrative in games development, adding that:

This not only contributes to empathy, but by making everything believable we have been able to reach out to children whose personal circumstances mirror aspects of the stories. In order for them to seek help and question the violence they recognise in the game, they need to be able to identify with the character(s) (Jones, 2020).

While testing whether the same outcomes occur if using wholly fictional dialogues and characters, as opposed to the reality-based ones used in the games exceeds the parameters of Ni3's work at its current stage, literature in the field suggests that increased empathy is more likely when taking the approach adopted by Ni3. Jones states, 'we may only get one shot at changing people's attitudes to violence. Realism, relatability and authenticity seem key to improving our chances.' Pearson *et al.* similarly note:

To incite empathy for a character the writing of the game needs to allow the player to recognise the character as one that deserves empathy and allow the player to align themselves to the thoughts and feelings of the [character] as the story unfolds. Moreover, the player must believe that the goals of the character, and ultimately the game, are relevant to what they reasonably expect from that character so they can fully engage with what they are trying to accomplish. Failure to align player and character goals would cause an 'identity gap', where unexpected actions made by the character would cause a reduction of empathy and player engagement.

Jones adds:

Robust research, together with engagement with local realities and cultures as the basis of the plot lines is the best way of preventing such an identity gap. One could easily develop story lines based on literature reviews, however there is a danger of straying too far away from people's realities – understanding the nuanced ways in which GBV manifests seems crucial. (Jones, interview, 2020).

For each of the games, the country-specific transcribed interview material – which, crucially, was anonymised – was analysed and coded to identify common themes, language tendencies and to indicate typical scenarios. This information was translated into game dialogue, characters and situations, and while some of the dialogue included in the game – including elements of the characters’ inner monologues as well as their conversational dialogues – is taken verbatim from the interviews (in a manner which would not identify participants), other elements of dialogue and narrative are based on recognised patterns, consistencies or commonalities across the information provided by interviewees. In the UK game, for example, the main character, Danielle, is based around dialogue gathered through interviews with people who have experienced intimate partner violence. In one scene, Danielle is pressured by James into sending him compromising images of herself on a messaging application. When playing as James, the player has the option of sharing these images with their friends or keeping them secret. As Danielle, the player receives responses on her appearance from James, and however the player chooses to dress their character (appearance choices can be made at the start of play), James complains and makes Danielle feel insecure. Below is a section of dialogue from the scene described above:

Danielle: Hey James! How are you doing?

James: Yeah, I'm alright. I didn't think I'd see you here. You getting lunch?

Danielle: Yeah, I thought I might find Hannah or Emily here too.

James: Huh, looking for those two again? Typical.

Danielle: Well I didn't know you'd be fee!

James: Well you could have asked!

James: What are you wearing?

Danielle: What's wrong with it?

James: How are you so clueless, I thought girls were supposed to be good at this stuff? ...

It's not just the clothing though; your makeup. I guarantee every guy is thinking about what They can do to you right now. It's like you're flaunting yourself for them.

Danielle: I like wearing makeup, it makes me feel more confident.

James: I'm just looking out for you babe. You know, you should ask Emily for help. She knows what she's doing, and always looks stunning. (Ni3 game narrative sample, provided by Royston, 2019).

Hayley Royston, one of the games designers for Ni3, explains about the above dialogue, ‘This is very consistent with some of the interviews that were conducted where GBV survivors talked about having to change their appearance for a partner, and how it was a part of the abuse they experienced’ (Royston, 2019). The games were required to include serious and sensitive content and to balance this with their entertainment factor in order to keep players interested. Royston explains the challenge of ‘Knitting it together into a cohesive story’, and discusses how the interview material helped to keep the game content ‘contemporary and relevant to audiences’. She added, ‘No creative licence happened – everything in the game has actually happened to a person in real life, we’ve just adapted it to make suitable for game play’ (Royston, 2019). One of the challenges for the games design team, as well as for the experts responsible for the interviews, was balancing important ethical considerations when interviewing survivors and perpetrators, and when translating this information into game dialogue. This is something addressed by Jennifer Penton in her work on ‘Ethics, agenda and personal storytelling in women’s FGM health Project’ (2011), when she notes,

When working with vulnerable people and personal testimonies, the [researcher] is entering into a complex negotiation between their own practice, the expectations of the project and the needs of the participants. This trilateral position creates an ethical site that must be carefully navigated and critically examined (Penton, 2011:75).

The primary way in which this was approached was through the development of the game’s dialogue as a collaborative and iterative process between Ni3 researchers/games designers, and interviewees, young people researchers in each of the participating countries. All stakeholders were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the dialogue – its accuracy and effectiveness for game-play – as it was developed, to ensure its cultural and age appropriateness. All participants were volunteers who wanted to help others through the re-telling of their experiences. The utmost confidentiality and anonymity was ensured when translating elements of the stories into game dialogue, and participants were able to withdraw from the research at any point. All participants were offered comprehensive support resources at all stages of this process, and care was taken to avoid revictimization.

Another challenge highlighted by Royston was managing to fit all of the narrative material, emerging from the interviews with survivors and perpetrators, into the game’s narrative and



dialogues. There are, she notes, ‘so many facets and sub-sets of GBV that we wanted to cover, and all perspectives across a range of different experiences needed to be included. There needed to be a sufficient level of detail in order for it to be effective, relatable and realistic’. She adds, ‘we had to ask, how do we create a narrative without pushing an agenda or patronising, or demonising people? We wanted the games to demonstrate that there is also a way back for perpetrators of GBV. These aren’t traditional “good guy, bad guy” relationships that are being addressed’. She notes, further to this, that, ‘characters and player goals have to be aligned. If these are out of sync, then players just disengage’ (Royston, 2019).

Rather than combining fiction and non-fiction, these dialogues and narratives might be seen to occupy an interstitial place between the two. Marshall McLuhan noted that, ‘anyone who tries to make a distinction between education and entertainment doesn’t know the first thing about either’ (Stavroula, 2014: xiii). These ‘texts’ within the games function on the principle of education through entertainment. As such, they do not fit neatly into either a fiction or non-fiction category, but seem to exist more as a fusion of both factual and fictional elements. It is further interesting to consider their dual function in relation to how we might conceive of fiction and non-fiction in the specific context of these games which, ultimately, exist to be played. In her article ‘Walter Benjamin on the Video Screen: Storytelling and Game Narratives, Carly Kocurek notes that ‘play occupies an uneasy space between the real and the fictional and is deeply enmeshed with narrative strategies’ (Kocurek, 2018:2) She continues, ‘Play is not only an action, but an approach to the world, a means of interacting’ (Kocurek, 2018:2). Where the aim of Ni3’s games is considered; their role as tools through which players enact fictional behaviours that will, it is hoped, be translated into read-world inter-personal actions, Kocurek’s comments seem particularly pertinent.

### ***Computer games as teaching tools***

By structuring learning around a narrative, and using rules and objectives to regulate players’ behaviour, computer games build skills and knowledge at each stage or level of completion of the game (see Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2009, 2010, 2011; Buckley & Anderson, 2006; Gentile et al., 2009; Koo & Seider, 2010). ‘Appropriately designed prosocial video games’, explains Boduszek (2019), ‘can therefore be used as teaching tools, to enhance moral reasoning, prosocial cognitions, helpful behaviour, positive affect, as well as to foster empathy’. They influence players’ internal states at cognitive, affective and arousal levels,

affecting their thinking, understanding and actions. These, in turn, can result in behaviour changes (JESSE user manual, 2018) <http://www.noneinthree.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/JESSE-None-in-Three-Game-Manual-updated-Oct18.pdf>

Stewart, in her 2017 paper, ‘Classrooms as “safe houses”? The ethical and emotional implications of digital storytelling in a university writing classroom’, discusses the concept of ‘pedagogies of discomfort’ through which certain types of learning – namely those which support empathetic capacity – can be fostered. She notes:

Given that an important implication of a pedagogy of discomfort is the acceptance of the contingency of students and educators’ beliefs about themselves and the world, the disavowal of mastery and coherence constitutes an important dimension of the struggle for an ethics of nonviolence (Stewart, 2017:13).

With underpinning ethics of nonviolence, the Ni3 games might be considered within Stewart’s framework of ‘pedagogic discomfort’. She goes on to explain that, ‘One of the basic tenets of a pedagogy of discomfort is that it promotes “active” rather than “passive” empathy’ (Stewart, 2017:13), an idea which seems particularly fitting in relation to Ni3’s aims, whereby active engagement is fundamental for its players if the game-play process is to affect perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, Boler, in her critique of the role of empathy in education, discusses the responsibility she feels as an educator and states, ‘I understand my role to be not merely to teach critical thinking, but to teach a critical thinking that seeks to transform consciousness’ (Boler, 1999: 182). She describes the extent to which certain methods of literary teaching, and the implementation of specific teaching tools, can solicit empathetic responses which do more than simply help the reader/‘reader’. Interestingly when considered in relation to the Ni3 games, her arguments address the ways in which different approaches to teaching and ‘reading’ historically, politically or socially important stories might affect more, or less successful empathetic impacts. She explains, ‘I hope to complicate the concept of empathy as a “basic social emotion” [...] [and] invoke a “semiotics of empathy,” which emphasizes the power and social hierarchies which complicate the relationship between reader/listener and text/speaker.’ She advocates for what she terms ‘testimonial reading’; a process in which the reader’s sense of responsibility is invoked alongside their empathetic response; that is, they provoke an empathetic response which motivates action, what she calls a ‘historicized ethics’ that, she suggests, can across different

genres, and which 'radically shifts our self-reflective understanding of power relations' (Boler, 1999:183).

We might further consider the Ni3 games within Boler's conceptualisation of texts as teaching and learning tools, to consider them as educational interventions which not only help to affect empathy in their players, but, because of their requirement for players to consider their roles and responsibilities within game-play, to be 'testimonial' texts, that is, games which, because of their capacity to immerse the player within the stories they present, to result in empathetic responses which, ultimately will change behaviours.

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