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Toward a Political Economic Framework for Analyzing Digital Development Games: A Case Study of Three Games for Africa

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This study analyzes 3 digital games for development in Africa, examining them as individual texts that operate as part of a broader international development discourse, and as political economic products with implications for international development and gaming industries. A conceptual framework is proposed as part of this process. By looking at individual games alongside the organizations and funding structures behind them, I argue that digital games, as a new technological platform, do not in-and-of themselves present a revolutionary approach to development across Africa; rather, they both reinforce and subvert dominant approaches already at play.

Keywords: Digital Development Games, Games, Gamification, Development, Neoliberalism.

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In the 10 years since the release of the UN World Food Programme's downloadable PC game *Food Force*—billed as the first-ever humanitarian aid video game—the production of digital games for use within the international development industry has expanded substantially. While the earliest Digital Development Games (DDGs) focused on raising awareness about development and humanitarian aid issues by targeting students in the Global North, more recent versions have been designed to carry out on-the-ground development work in countries such as Kenya and Tanzania. Celebrated as the "next frontier" for advocacy and aid groups, international organizations are looking to DDGs as a radical new approach to development. But, despite enthusiasm for the potential of games as educational and behavior change tools, little attention has been paid to the development ideologies embedded within them. Thus,

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an important question remains: While digital games certainly present a new technological channel for carrying out development projects, do they present a radically new approach to conceptualizing and enacting the development process?

In this study, I argue that the gamification of the development industry must be understood as a process of productive purpose in which games, embedded with particular development ideologies, are used in an attempt to generate development-oriented results in nongame contexts (Rughinis, 2013). Whether they are effective in achieving them or not, understanding the intended results of games through an analysis of their narratives, procedural rhetoric, and political economic foundations is imperative in order to expose the development ideologies and agendas embedded in DDGs designed for use across Africa, where they come from, and what they mean for the industry at large. Further, DDGs must be understood as political economic products, which, imbricated in both a global gaming and global development industry, inculcate or challenge the established knowledge/power hierarchies of a global development system. While DDGs do present a new technological platform for carrying out development projects, they do not in-and-of themselves present a revolutionary approach to conceptualizing or enacting development across the African continent; rather, they both reinforce and subvert the dominant approaches already at play.

How games will save Africa! (even if radio, satellite, and the Internet could not…)

Although the *potential* for digital games to be used as effective educational and behavior change tools has been well documented (Gee, 2005; Shaffer, 2004), a decade's worth of DDGs suggests it is not, as predicted by social-cause game developer Jane McGonigal (2010), "as easy to save the world in real life as it is in games." Indeed, analysis of the use of digital games for education and international development shows decidedly mixed results in terms of project outcomes. While the current field is relatively small (approximately 30 games), the funds provided for, and media attention around, recent DDG projects indicate future growth. The use of such games to disseminate educational messages, expose people to new ideas, and facilitate behavior change at the individual level is, understandably, of interest to the international development industry, which has long looked to mass communication technologies to accomplish such tasks (Lerner, 1958; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Rao, 1963; Rogers, 1973, 1976; Schramm, 1964; Shaffer, 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). However, research that focuses only on the effectiveness of DDGs would be shortsighted; rather, critical attention must be paid to the ideological frames and development narratives embedded within DDGs, as well as the political economic implications of the production behind them, to make clear how DDGs are used to further specific development agendas and whose interests they serve (Bogost, 2006; Escobar, 1984; Wilkins, 1999; Wilkins & Enghel, 2013). Two levels of analysis are necessary to accomplish this. The first considers games as texts.

Game studies scholars argue that a critical textual analysis of games is not only possible, it is necessary (Bogost, 2006; Fernandez-Vara, 2015; Flanagan, 2009; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). The meaning created both within games, "meaningful play," and around them, "cultural significance," lends itself to textual interpretation (Fernandez-Vara, 2015, p. 6), and the ethical and political values embedded in games by designers (whether intentional or not) necessitate a critical approach to these texts (Bogost, 2006; Flanagan, 2009; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). Unveiling the pattern of beliefs that have been worked into a text, along with whose interests are represented by it, is achieved through a close analysis of the text itself along with a description of the relationships that exist between the artifact and its context (Foss, 2009).

Thus, a critical textual analysis of DDGs must be grounded in the broader development industry discourse, beginning with the term "development" itself, which has long defied any singular definition. Generally assumed to be an intentional process meant to improve quality of life and create beneficial social change, consensus on what *beneficial change* looks like, who is in the best position to enact it, how it should be done, and for whom is lacking (Escobar, 1984; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Parpart, Rai, & Staudt, 2002; Wilkins & Mody, 2001). The debate over the term development, then, is really "a struggle over the shape of futures" (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009, p. xviii), with processes such as globalization and the spread of neoliberalism playing a role in how this debate is framed, legitimizing certain futures over others. Although often challenged, the dominant "future" in the development field has been based on modernization, which prioritizes capitalist economic development, promotes rationality and objectivity in individuals, and emphasizes technology acquisition and industrialization (Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

Alternative perspectives have critiqued the ethnocentrism of the dominant modernization paradigm, calling for more holistic and contextual approaches that take into account the roles of gender, the environment, religion, and indigenous knowledge in creating sustainable development solutions. Whether feminist, environmental, theological, and/or grassroots in nature, these critical approaches work to disrupt the top-down hierarchical structure of a Western-development model and move beyond economic definitions of development. Nonetheless, approaches based on theories of modernization and neoliberal economics remain dominant within the world's largest development institutions, such as the World Bank (WB).

Trends and changes in the global development landscape impact how issues and solutions are framed within the discourse (Wilkins, 2000, 2008). For instance, the rise of celebrity advocacy, "causumerism," and "clicktivism"—seen perhaps most easily in U2 frontman Bono's global (RED) campaign—has led to an emphasis on "compassionate consumption" and capitalist solutions to development problems. Although it has gained mainstream popularity, development scholars argue such an approach works to not only erase, but to in fact re-create and reproduce the productive forces behind global inequality (Cameron & Haanstra, 2008; Kapoor, 2013; Wilkins &

Enghel, 2013). Similarly, enthusiastic discourse about the "magical potential" of the Internet to act as a democratizing force in closing information gaps accelerated "the scale of development projects based on information and communication technologies" and the promise of a "painless transition to modernity" through technology (Chakravartty, 2009, p. 37). But such a discourse has simultaneously erased the effects of growing inequalities in access to technology (Leye, 2009; Ogan et al., 2009; Wilkins & Enghel, 2013). The discourse around and within DDGs, the newest development trend, must be given similar critical attention.

DDGs must likewise be understood as material products produced within a specific sociohistorical and economic context (Fernandez-Vara, 2015). As the multibillion-dollar global digital games industry continues to grow at a rate unparalleled by the rest of the entertainment industry, it is necessary to consider the political economic implications of the production of DDGs, especially as smaller game developers and development organizations create products alongside large international bodies and private game corporations. Without attention to the asymmetrical structures of power at play in their design and production, DDGs risk replicating issues seen in earlier Information Communication Technology (ICT) projects, including the continuation of problematic top-down, one-way information structures; the incorporation of gender biases that further entrench existing social issues; the sustainment of "knowledge monopolies" that privilege Western ways of knowing; and the erasure of important local contexts and needs (Kwami, Wolf-Monteiro, & Steeves, 2011). The uneven flows of images and capital produced by the complex processes of a globalized media industry, of which digital games are a large part, are important to analyze as they create "new configurations of power" and "produce new subject positions, new forms of oppression (and resistance), and new instruments of power/knowledge … that cut across political, national and racial boundaries in unexpected ways" (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 176).

Considered "*the* media of Empire" in the 21st century, digital gameplay often works in favor of global hypercapitalism as it "trains flexible personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun" (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009, pp. xxix–xxx); but it also offers the possibility for alternatives *to*, or ways *out* of, the system. Digital games are worthy of our attention as they have the potential to "shape work, learning, health care and more," including the field of international development (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 3).

The DDGs analyzed in this article were created to facilitate development across Africa, which, historically, has been a major target of projects spanning the spectrum of media innovations: From radio, to satellite television, to ICT projects, each new innovation has been latched onto as *the key* to developing the continent (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Enthusiasm for the transformative potential of DDGs has been no less, but, like technologies before them, it remains unclear whether games present a radically new approach to development, or simply a new technological platform for replicating traditional projects. Although DDGs have been produced by a variety of organizations to tackle a range of development issues, an overview of the field

indicates broad similarities in terms of purpose and intent. Thus, understanding how DDGs operate individually and in relation to one another is a necessary step in analyzing the use and implications of Digital Games for Development (DG4D).

Toward a political economic framework for game analysis

The gamification of the development industry must be understood as more than a simple system of applied game mechanics and game elements (i.e., point systems and progress bars) to nongame development activities; rather, it is a process of productive purpose in which games are used to produce specific development-oriented results in nongame contexts (Rughinis, 2013). If gamification is understood "as designing technology-with-intent," then, "intent matters" (Rughinis, 2013, p. 4). Thus, as DDGs are integrated into the system as a way to conduct or *do* development, replacing traditional projects that would previously have been carried out in a nongame context, it is necessary to understand them as technology-with-intent, and to critically analyze what that intent is. The productive purpose of DDGs can be broken down into three main areas: games meant to teach an audience how to *do* development; to actually *develop* an audience; or to highlight issues of inequality and engage an audience in critique. To that end, this study proposes a political economic framework comprised of three categories to be used as a tool for understanding and analyzing DDGs across the African continent and beyond.

The first category, *Developing Developers* (DD), encompasses games that present an audience located primarily in the Global North with development issues situated in the Global South. While the specific projects vary, the purpose of DD games is to construct for players an understanding of development — what it should look like, how it should be done and who should be in control of it — as well as to call on players as actors in the development process within the game and beyond. The second, *Digital Interventions* (DI), is made up of games intended for use as on-the-ground development interventions. The purpose of DI games is to "develop" individuals living in the Global South, using digital formats as a new avenue for carrying out health, education, and skills-based projects. The final category, *Critical Play* (CP), is made up of games that address structural inequality as the root cause of underdevelopment and ask players to engage in critique and conceptualize solutions outside of the current system. The purpose of CP games is to challenge local and global power structures through gameplay and educate players about systemic issues that exacerbate development issues.

I argue that DDGs must be understood as political economic products that carry an embedded development narrative to a target audience and, in this way, further a particular development agenda. Analyzing games according to their position in the framework proposed here is an important step in this process as it highlights the game's productive purpose. By asking whether a game is attempting to *Develop Developers* act as a *Development Intervention*, or engage an audience in *Critical Play*, an

important motive is identified. Thus, this study analyzes one game, and the organization responsible for its production, to illustrate each of the three categories. The analysis presented here is only a first step — more studies applying the framework could help refine it while further illuminating how political economic issues of production influence the types of games created.

Digital interventions: The World Bank Institute and *Urgent EVOKE*

The World Bank (WB), referred to as "the foremost international development agency" (Payer, 1982, p. 15), has historically worked in tandem with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to lend money to the Global South. This control of resources and influence over borrowing nations has allowed the WB to wield great authority in directing the path of international development and global policy discourse on a host of issues within a neoliberal framework (Adhikary, 2014; Holman, 1984; Klees, 2012; Spring, 2009). Critics of the WB argue its emphasis on the marketization of services such as healthcare and education promotes "competition, excellence, efficiency, expenditure, and economic rate of return" while undercutting the sociopolitical role and disruptive potential of social goods (Adhikary, 2014, p. 4). The World Bank Institute (WBI) operates as an implementation arm for the WB and, rather than focusing on relationships with local governments, emphasizes new forms of development collaboration that include public–private partnerships for things like heath and education (World Bank Institute, n.d.). Within this marketized framework, education becomes an asset that allows individuals to secure competitive advantage in a global capitalist system; the role of such an asymmetrical economic system in *exacerbating* global inequalities in education, however, is elided (Adhikary, 2014; Tarabini, 2010). This marketized, neoliberal approach to development can be seen at play in the WBI's 2010 game *Urgent EVOKE* (EVOKE).

Designed by award-winning game designer Jane McGonigal, EVOKE was created "to help empower people all over the world to come up with creative solutions to our most urgent social problems" (*Urgent EVOKE*, 2010). Online and free to play, EVOKE offered a new approach for including youth across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), its target demographic, in the development process by inviting them to voice their own ideas about, and solutions to, specific development issues. Certainly, the potential for EVOKE to generate a new space for participation by stakeholders in the development process was exciting, but in reality the constraints on such participation were significant and the game all but failed in reaching its target demographic. Further, the WBI's narrow definition of game success framed development issues and solutions within a neoliberal framework that greatly constrained the context in which players were able to participate.

The 19,386 people from across the world who registered to play EVOKE were tasked with 10 missions, covering topics such as social innovation, food security, the future of money, empowering women, and preserving indigenous knowledge (Gaible & Dabla, 2010). Players completed missions in three phases by contributing blog posts or uploading pictures and videos as evidence of what they had learned about the

week's issue, how they were taking action in their communities to address it, and how they would act locally/and or globally in the future. Although nearly 20,000 players registered, only 1,529 were from SSA: 1,010 of these players were from South Africa, while the other 519 were from the rest of the SSA countries combined (Gaible & Dabla, 2010). Compared to the 9,577 players in the United States, or the 1,672 in Canada, the number of players from the target demographic seems scarce. A strategic communication campaign, used to advertise the game and secure relationships with high-schools and universities, was responsible for the higher number of players in South Africa, but the barriers to play for those not in these classrooms were many. Beyond reliable access to the Internet, issues of gender, language skills, and social class affected who got to play: EVOKE was programmed in English only; it required access to additional technological resources and equipment skills in order to create and post "evidence"; and it necessitated Web 2.0 skills, which require a high level of Internet literacy. Users with these skills and access are more likely to be university students and "on this account and on others, are likely to be members of privileged, if not elite, groups within their countries" (Gaible & Dabla, 2010, p. 32). EVOKE was designed to empower the youth of SSA by facilitating access to knowledge and social networks, however, the material and immaterial resources necessary for access were beyond the reach of the majority of SSA youth, ultimately precluding the WBI's target demographic from participating and further entrenching existing information/power structures.

The development ideology embedded in the game acts as its own constraint to participation as it narrowly defines success within the game world and beyond. According to the game's executive producer Robert Hawkins, EVOKE's success was measured by player development of a set of specific "21st-century skills in relation to social innovation" (Gaible & Dabla, 2010, p. 11). These skills, which are laid out as a list of "powers" on the game's website, evoke a neoliberal sensibility that emphasizes market skills and individual resourcefulness as key to solving broad social problems. For instance, "entrepreneurship" is defined as the power to "Achieve goals with sound business strategy. Focus on innovation and large-scale transformation. Make your idea financially sustainable. Create something that will thrive for a long time"; the power of "local insight" challenges players to "Know your market. Meet local needs and build on local assets. Create solutions that fit the community"; and to gain the power of "resourcefulness" players must "Make something out of nothing. Rise to the occasion no matter what" (*Urgent EVOKE*, 2010). In this context, development is achieved through widespread expansion and support of the market, and development is the responsibility of individuals who must gain the necessary skills for market participation and then "make something out of nothing." The 21st-century "higher-order thinking skills" that the EVOKE "powers" are based on include: information literacy; problem solving; the discovery, use, and citing of facts and information, and; communication and collaboration skills (especially those provided by "Web 2.0" tools), as well as soft skills important to leadership, such as *empathy* [italics added for emphasis] (Gaible & Dabla, 2010, p. 11).

A primary goal of modernization has always been to bring specific technological skills to populations in order to promote national economic growth and individual behavior change. Indeed, the need for traditional populations to acquire *empathy* was one of Daniel Lerner's (1958) — the original pioneer of modernization — key prerequisites for transition to the modern world.

EVOKE's powers are based on a framework from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a U.S. organization that advocates for educational policy change at "the local, federal, and state level to shift the conversation for kids and ensure they're ready to lead and take on the challenges of the 21st century" (Partnership, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d.). The partnership's board, which has included AOL, Apple, Dell, Cable in the Classroom, Cisco, Ford Motor Company, Intel, Microsoft, and The Walt Disney Company, has a vested interest in creating citizens with Web 2.0 skills who value technological innovation, who appreciate and engage with a global economy, and who rely on media and technology systems to do so. Thus, furthering the expansion of these skills in developing regions via an online game serves the interests of both the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the WBI well. A postgame evaluation recommends that EVOKE be framed as a "transitional intervention, one that channels university students, recent graduates, and other young, socially minded individuals into development-focused activities and careers" (Gaible & Dabla, 2010, p. 40), a move that would certainly shift the focus from "empowering people all over the world to come up with solutions to world problems" to creating an NGO social class of educated individuals from particular privileged backgrounds. If the WBI follows the postgame evaluation's recommendations to engage further with students, coordinate with university calendars, develop orientation guides for teachers to use, and model future projects on the success of the partnerships with classrooms in South Africa, it certainly has the potential to become more involved in developing global educational curriculum and policy, especially in the Global South.

Although EVOKE theoretically created a new space for stakeholder participation in the development process, such participation was inhibited by material and immaterial constraints. While it is important to consider how and why the WBI missed its target demographic almost entirely, it is even more important to consider how EVOKE, as a DI game, reflects and reinforces the neoliberal development agenda of the WBI. By defining game success according to a skill set that emphasizes entrepreneurship, market participation, and reliance on technology above all else, the game acts as an on-the-ground development intervention that reinforces a problematic development approach in which all elements of social life, including education, are taken up in the market.

DD: *The Half the Sky Movement*: *The Game*

Based on the best-selling book *Half the Sky*: *Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, published in 2009 by journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, the U.S.-based Half the Sky Movement (HTSM) has developed into a multidonor, multimedia initiative that seeks to "ignite the change needed to put

an end to the oppression of women and girls worldwide" (Half the Sky Movement, n.d.a). Like the book, the HTSM focuses on challenges faced by women around the world and outlines specific solutions in the fight to end female oppression, which it refers to as the "central moral challenge of our time" (Half the Sky Movement, n.d.b). The purpose of the HTSM is to galvanize audiences around a set of issues Kristof and WuDunn have identified as causes of, or ways out of, the systemic oppression of women and girls, including forced prostitution, sex trafficking, gender-based violence, maternal mortality, economic empowerment, and education. The HTSM's focus on women and economic empowerment as a key to solving a host of development issues is reflective of a mainstream Women in Development (WID) approach in which arguments based on efficiency are used to highlight women's potential as economic producers and the benefits women bring to development when they are included in economic processes. But critics of the WID approach have argued this focus on women and productivity has in fact created greater inequality for women (Kabeer, 1994; Moser, 1989; Razavi & Miller, 1995).

Although it received ample praise from the mainstream, the *Half the Sky* book was called out by critics for a variety of issues including the oversimplification of complex problems, problematic issues of power and consent that accompany the voyeuristic expose techniques used to tell the stories of young rape victims, and an overall "white savior" mentality that provides solutions while failing to explore the transnational contexts and global power structures that exacerbate development issues. The more recent HTSM and its accompanying multimedia products perpetuate many of the problematic approaches and assumptions of the 2009 text. Pertinent to this study is the *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* (HTSMG), which was developed for Facebook and programmed in English and French for play on desktop and laptop computers. Four months after its 2013 launch, the HTSMG had reached 1 million players, and mainstream media outlets were hailing video games as the new frontier for activism and social change (Sydell, 2013). The HTSMG was created as an awareness and fundraising tool to support the HTSM in its mission to "empower women and girls around the world," (Half the Sky Movement: The Game, 2012) and, according to the developers, it is the first game to introduce direct virtual-to-real-life translation (Frima, n.d.). Developed by Frima (the largest Canadian-owned game studio), the HTSMG is meant to target a mainstream, social-media-savvy audience in an attempt to educate players about the challenges faced by women and girls around the globe. The game presents players with "real-world challenges," and invites them to "become part of the solution" through issue-specific actions that support the HTSM's nonprofit partners (Half the Sky Movement: The Game, 2012).

In the HTSMG, players join Radhika, an Indian woman, on a "journey from oppression to opportunity" as she completes a series of quests in her hometown and then travels to help other women in Kenya, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, ending her journey in the United States. The game begins with Radhika telling the player she is unable to afford medicine for her sick child; the player then navigates through a series of quests to earn the money necessary to purchase it. Gameplay happens in two ways:

In the first, players are able to choose one of two options presented at the end of a brief interactive scene between Radhika and another game character; in the second, players complete basic puzzle games in which similar items must be linked together using the computer's mouse. From selling mangoes in the market, to applying for a microcredit loan, to buying a goat and starting a small business by selling the milk it produces, the "journey from oppression to opportunity" that the player joins Radhika on is one firmly rooted in economic self-help and entrepreneurship. Once players have helped Radhika secure a loan to build an addition to her house, they join her as she travels to her next destination: Kenya. When Radhika gets to Kenya she goes directly to a rural clinic where she meets a nurse who informs her of the high rates of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the country. She then meets the nurse's daughter who admits she has tested positive for HIV. Radhika next learns about the high rates of malaria in Kenya and is asked to help the nurses decide if they will sell the clinic's supply of mosquito nets, or give them away for free to local women and children and risk them being sold on the black market. Next, Radhika helps the nurses at the clinic organize a community discussion about family planning and the use of birth control, but she and her supporters are chased away by a group of angry community members before their meeting is able to begin. Radhika eventually moves through the other countries and ultimately ends up at the UN Headquarters in the United States. But just getting from India to Kenya takes a substantial amount of time and real money from the player: The game "times-out" after minimal gameplay, forcing players to wait or pay to continue play.

The emphasis on women entering the market via microloans and small businesses woven throughout Radhika's story reflects a broader WID-based, neoliberal development agenda that identifies poor women in the Global South as an "untapped resource" and frames them as individual entrepreneurs responsible not only for their own development but also for the development of society at large, regardless of the various constraints (e.g., lack of material resources, skills, education, childcare) they may face (Brown, 2003; Karim, 2011; Moser, 1989; Razavi & Miller, 1995). Rather than questioning what negative effects a global capitalist system has on women's lives (Aguilar & Lacsamana, 2004), the HTSMG encourages individual players to act as "model neoliberal citizens" and find development solutions among the various social, political, and economic options made available through it (Brown, 2003, p. 15). It does not, however, ask them to join "with others to alter or organize these options" (Brown, 2003, p. 15). Throughout the game, players are asked to participate in what game developer Frima refers to as virtual-to-real-life translation by purchasing a good or service identical to the one that has just been used in the game through one of its seven nonprofit partners. For instance, after Radhika prospers from buying a goat and selling its milk, the player is asked if she wants to help a woman in real-life by purchasing a goat through Heifer International. By connecting these financial donations to the concept of women's empowerment, the game participates in what Dingo (2012) refers to as the megarhetoric of empowerment: a mainstreamed, naturalized discourse, in which it is assumed that women's empowerment is equal to women's

individual financial security. By unlocking material support through gameplay and engaging with in-game donations and purchases, players are able to assume they have empowered a poor woman in the Global South, and the player gains a sense of action and of personal empowerment along the way. This positioning of the game player supports a hierarchy of expertise, power, and agency, which rests with the women who have the access, resources, and skills to play the game, and which constructs them as most capable of directing and impacting the lives of women throughout the Global South (Kwami et al., 2011).

If the solution to women's empowerment is indeed individual financial support, there is little reason to consider broader political action once this support has been given. Dingo (2012) argues that approaches to empowerment that focus on financial exchange between individuals in the Global North and Global South reinforce "the notion of personal agency and monetary exchange over a broader feminist understanding of the transnational contexts that make donations, charity work, and development programs necessary in the first place" (p. 177). While the game provides players with information on key issues as identified by the HTSM (such as the number of women living in poverty and the number of people infected with HIV), there is little given in the way of context: The women facing these issues are in India, Kenya, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and the United States, but there is no explanation of regional differences regarding these issues, or of why certain women are in poverty while others are not, or how historical and current political and economic processes have impacted such issues. The player might gain a better sense of scale regarding the issues identified by the HTSM, but what she is unlikely to come away with is a nuanced understanding of either the potentially negative impacts processes like capitalism and globalization have on women in the developing world or the ways in which asymmetrical North/South power structures contribute to the oppressive reality of women in the developing world and exacerbate issues of inequality. Moreover, the HTSMG fails to provide any meaningful discussion on the ways in which microlending practices oppress women in new ways while simultaneously benefiting the middle class at the expense of the poorest (Karim, 2011). Rather, because the player has given money (either by directly donating funds herself or by unlocking material goods and services through gameplay), she "can simply forget about the broader context of poverty and feel assuaged by her or his action" (Dingo, 2012, p. 177). Women's oppression and inequality are thus presented to the player not as a challenge to a system that is inherently asymmetrical, but instead as a depoliticized tool that promotes new market subjects (Karim, 2011).

DD games present development issues situated in the Global South to a primarily Northern audience while constructing for them a particular understanding of what development should look like, how it should be done, and what their role is in it. In the case of the HTSMG, development is achieved by individual women in the Global South entering the global marketplace via microcredit loans and small businesses; the role of the game player, situated in the Global North, is to facilitate that productivity

through material donations. This emphasis on private aid and individual empowerment aligns nicely with a broader neoliberal development agenda that "reduces social change to entrepreneurship in a market-based system, and civic involvement and voice to clicktivism" (Wilkins & Enghel, 2013, p. 169). When the concept of individual empowerment is emphasized above all else, the constraints that social inequalities place on achieving individual success are erased, creating a depoliticized approach that supports a "neoliberal project, in which market-based exchanges are assumed to be beneficial without serious critique" (Wilkins & Enghel, 2013, p. 170).

CP: Afroes and *Haki 2: Chaguo Ni Lako*

Afroes, a Southern Africa mobile gaming company, was founded by Anne Githuku-Shongwe to create uniquely African mobile content that is contextually relevant and easily accessible for youth audiences across the continent (Afroes, n.d.). In a TEDx talk, Githuku-Shongwe (2012) argues that a lack of broad results in Africa after some 50 years of international development projects is not due to a lack of resources, rather it is because Africans "are still limited by our own beliefs." For change to occur, people must be able to "reimagine" Africa and, according to the Afroes founder, this process can be accomplished through games (Githuku-Shongwe, 2012). With support from mLab, a mobile technology incubator for startups in Southern Africa, Afroes developed a variety of mobile games designed to instill messages of "hope and possibility in young people" through content that celebrates "Africa's rich heritage" (Afroes, n.d.; mLab, n.d.).

Unlike the previous games, which were created by large international organizations for broad and often dispersed audiences, Afroes' games are designed to be contextually relevant and easily accessible to a Southern African youth audience. But, to ensure that its content is accessible regardless of the class, economic status, or education level of its audience, it has been necessary for the local gaming company to engage with a global capitalist system and partner with some of the largest communication corporations in the world. The high growth rate of mobile phones in Africa gives games designed for a mobile platform the potential to reach a wide swath of youth audiences in Afroes' target markets of South Africa and Kenya; but the high costs charged by mobile network operators to host games makes them prohibitively expensive, thus limiting accessibility (Pitman, 2011). Thus, Afroes has partnered with global corporations such as Microsoft, Vodacom, Samsung, and Nokia, as well as large development organizations, and has engaged a variety of other funding and distribution strategies (e.g., using school systems to distribute games and licensing mobile content to Ministries of Education and NGOs throughout Africa and other developing regions) in order address these cost issues.

Although Afroes participates in an unabashedly neoliberal project in order to fund its content (see, for instance, Afroes' recent partnership with the Digital Jobs Africa initiative, a $100 million dollar Rockefeller Foundation project meant to facilitate the growth of the tech sector across the continent), the discourse offered up by the organization on how to affect social change and the game content it produces

move far beyond a neoliberal framework. Indeed, Afroes' conceptualization of social change is one based on civic participation, institutional change, and a critique of current global processes. Rather than focusing on "fixing a problem," the organization emphasizes "shaping new mindsets amongst youth" and "[empowering] them as citizens to address their countries' challenges" (Rom, n.d.). Entrepreneurship and leadership are addressed as part of the solution, but the 400 million African youth who are "disempowered, jobless, and considered a threat to the stability of countries or a burden to states" (Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, n.d.) can be best helped, according to Githuku-Shongwe, by creating "mindsets that are not limited by current circumstances, but can re-imagine and re-create new possibilities" (Rom, n.d.). In other words, mindsets that look for solutions both within and *outside of* the current system.

The CP games created by Afroes are reflective of this discourse and cover a much broader range of issues and solutions than those previously examined in this article. They include issues of gender violence and legal rights; corporate exploitation; democracy, voting, and civic voice; government and corporate corruption; child safety and abuse; environmental rights; and peace through social justice. Although unemployment and local poverty is one of the main issues the organization hopes to address, Afroes does not look to entrepreneurship alone as the solution; rather, the organization is focused on empowering youth as citizens who must address their countries' challenges at a range of social, political, and economic levels. In *Haki 1: Shield and Defend*, the first game in a series, players are given the opportunity to "mend the wrongs that tear at the social fabric and in the process defend [their] rights" by going on a mission to stop illegal logging in a protected forest in Kenya (Afroes, n.d.). The game opens with a call to action: "Oh the beautiful green forest is being destroyed. Defend our Haki (Rights). Join the Underground!" (*Haki 1*, 2012). Players get points for defeating the evil agents who are destroying the forest and are told that, "Haki (Justice) gives you wings" (*Haki 1*, 2012). In the recently released *Haki 2: Chaguo Ni Lako*, players join the Underground, "a group of heroes who strive for peace and tranquility" as they attempt to stop Mboss, an evil mastermind trying to "destabilize the country by causing discontent, disunity, disharmony and civil unrest" (Afroes, n.d.). In this game, players are asked to be a "champion of peace" by solving puzzles and quizzes that hold clues to how they can stop Mboss from reaching his destructive goals (Afroes, n.d.). The emphasis in the *Haki* games is on social justice and protecting the rights of people and communities; in this context, Kenya does not need to be saved *by outsiders*, rather it needs to be saved *by* locals *from* outside forces such as the "Entity," whose corporate practices are responsible for destroying the forest.

The *Haki* series was designed in partnership with the TUVUKE Peace Initiative, a "countrywide collective platform" launched after the violence that erupted during 2007–2008 to promote peaceful, free, and fair elections in Kenya (Haki Facebook, n.d.). The *Haki* games are meant to bolster community involvement in political processes by inspiring a commitment to peace and tolerance in Kenyan youth. In a promotional YouTube video for *Haki 2,* a young man tells potential players to "Get

inspired. Think about your actions. Find out where you stand. Play for peace" (Haki 2 Video, 2013). Games like *Haki 2* are meant to further TUVUKE's goals of sustainable peace and inclusive public participation, improve the relationships between land and natural resource dependent communities, engage youth in civil governance processes and support safer, peaceful, diversified communities (Tuvuke Initiative, n.d.). In another game, *Moraba,* Afroes addresses issues of gender inequality through a focus on human and legal rights. The questions in this chess/quiz based game focus on interpersonal power dynamics within individual relationships, the legal structures of personal rights, and on individual and communal reporting of abuse. While *Moraba* fails to bring up gendered power dynamics and biases within the legal system itself, it does emphasize the rights of men and women equally, rather than focusing on women only. Unlike the emphasis on market participation seen in the HTSMG, which also presents issues of gender inequality and gender violence, *Moraba* takes up a rights based argument that highlights the social construction of gender and gender roles and pushes back against them.

The games produced by Afroes operate as CP games in that they are specifically designed as catalysts for Southern African youth to "reimagine" and reshape the world around them as they point to structural inequalities as a root cause of development issues. The discourse of the organization and the content of the games themselves take an approach to social change that moves beyond a neoliberal project of market participation as the solution to development issues, instead focusing on civic participation, institutional change, a critique of current global processes, personal and communal rights, and peace and social justice. That being said, calling on Kenyans to fight against issues like illegal logging, or to "play for peace," is a more abstract development approach than presenting specific solutions individuals can take in their daily lives. CP games play an important role in critiquing asymmetrical power structures and institutional inequality that affect development issues and solutions, but CP games that propose specific alternatives alongside such a critique may have more viability in development practice. However, it is Afroes' mission of "reimagining" that has, thus far, set it apart. A small, local organization, it has produced contextually relevant content that goes beyond mainstream modernization narratives of narrow economic development and even points to the inequalities exacerbated by such a system. It will be important to pay attention to whether Afroes is able to maintain the critical approach it has taken within game content as the political economic relationships necessary for it to sustain game production continue to develop. And, more critically, it is worth asking whether these relationships force Afroes to be complicit in the continuation of the very transglobal power structures that feed the global inequalities responsible for the issues they are trying to address in the first place.

Conclusion

Regardless of the type of game developed (DD, DI, or CP), each of the organizations analyzed here discusses the potential of its game to "empower" players: For the WBI,

empowerment is equivalent to the development of 21st-century skills, specifically for young people living in Africa; for the HTSM, women's empowerment is related to financial independence, which game players situated in the Global North can facilitate through in-game giving; and for Afroes, empowerment necessitates civic participation, the securing of individual rights, and the ability to imagine and shape new futures. DDGs, it is clear, are not a revolutionary tool that will *necessarily* promote a radically new approach to conceptualizing and enacting development; rather they reflect the ideology of the organization behind them. In the case of EVOKE and the HTSMG, that means reinforcing a dominant approach to development that emphasizes capitalist solutions and the broad marketization of all areas of life. Although the first iteration of EVOKE (for which the WBI spent $622,000 USD to develop and market) broadly missed its target audience, a second version is in the works and the many resources available to the WBI will, no doubt, allow the organization to continue to develop and distribute DDGs to enhance 21st-century skills and affect educational policy across the developing world. The Half the Sky Movement Media and Technology Engagement Initiative, a recent alliance among USAID, the Ford Foundation, Show of Force, and Games for Change, and a $1.4 million USAID investment in the HTSM's mobile games makes wider dissemination of their games an almost certainty. Such support will allow the HTSM to further distribute its WID-based, neoliberal agenda that prioritizes microcredit loans, individual entrepreneurship, and economic participation by women in a global marketplace.

Games such as these take an uncritical stance in assuming that the processes of globalization and neoliberalism are not only beneficial for poor, marginalized people across the developing world but also are necessary for development to occur. By design, DDGs like EVOKE and the HTSMG promote a global capitalist system as a change agent for eradicating global poverty, while ignoring the role such a system plays in exacerbating inequality. But their contribution is not only discursive. In cases like the HTSMG, developed by the largest Canadian-owned game studio, the production of DDGs is directly tied to the growth of the global digital games sector, a highly concentrated media system in which the Western loci of production, technology, and skills reinforces established North/South knowledge/power divides.

All that being said, DDGs still hold the potential to be radical players in the development process. The case of Afroes highlights how local organizations can work to produce relevant content for local audiences and offer up alternatives to established development narratives. Reflective of their mission to help others "reimagine" Africa, Afroes' games consider not only solutions to development issues but also their causes as well. Digital games have shown great possibility for use as educational tools and their dynamic nature could, theoretically, be used to incorporate a host of participatory feedback loops and user directed narratives that would disrupt current top-down development constraints. Further, open-world gaming platforms create the potential for audiences to take control of the game space, presenting opportunities for bringing players into the construction of development projects in games and beyond (see, for

example, the UN Habitat's Block by Block project). And, of course, the rate of dissemination of mobile phones presents an undeniably broad channel for reaching people, allowing a level of accessibility unheard of with other ICT-based projects. But, as seen in the case of Afroes, trying to keep games accessible to a Southern African audience has meant engaging in a range of partnerships and business strategies that are, or could become, counterintuitive to what they hope to achieve with their games. While smaller organizations and independent developers might have the necessary tools to create DDGs, the cost to distribute them and ensure they reach their target audience is often prohibitive and might impact their sustainability in the industry.

As the field continues to grow, the great potential of DDGs will necessitate more studies that ask how games are actually being used, by whom, and to what end. Further use of the framework presented here, including identifying overlapping categories, will help generate important micro and macrolevel analysis on the production and use of DDGs. By situating the analysis of a game's productive purpose and political economic foundations within the framework, broader trends in the DDG field will be highlighted. As with any technological innovation in the development field, *potential* must be understood within the context of actual use. In the case of DDGs, which operate both as texts that espouse a particular organization's ideology and as political economic products with implications for local and global development and gaming industries, actual use is varied and must be analyzed. It is likely, for instance, that some players of DD and DI games read them critically, while some players of CP games do not understand messages as intended. Hence, studies to tap how players and others understand and use DDGs are encouraged.

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