

A professional game is a participatory communication activity in which businesses use elements of play to achieve a meaningful purpose, such as teambuilding. Most often, they consist of a tabletop game or simulation in which players attempt to reach a specific state of affairs only by means permitted by a set of rules and intend to communicate best business practices. In this presentation, I assess how professional games communicate in ableist ways. These games promote the belief that the ideal skills of an ideal worker necessitate an ideal body. Consequently, people with disabilities function less effectively than this ableist ideal and, thus, are rendered unqualified to meet the challenges that accompany leadership positions. Building on what Fiona Kumari Campbell has called “the maintenance of abledness” in modified bodies and Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric, I argue that persuasion in professional games brings together game design, disability studies, and professional communication in ways that show how games might ostracize employees with disabilities. To demonstrate how, I examine a selection of professional games from Elite Training.

Ian Bogost’s term procedural rhetoric helps us understand the important ways that persuasion works in how players interact with games. Bogost (2010) describes procedural rhetoric as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (p. ix). The importance of visual, aural, and textual characteristics of games lies in the ways that they communicate the models of real-world processes and promote player interaction, and not as persuasive elements themselves. Games employing procedural rhetoric use a simulated process (for example, buying properties charging rent, and building hotels in *Monopoly* in an effort to bankrupt competitors) that makes a claim (market capitalism can be cutthroat and unethical) about how a real-world process works.

One important element of effective procedural rhetoric is *vividness*. Bogost (2010) divides vividness into two different categories: meaningful interactivity and significant expressive content (p. 35). Meaningful interactivity and significant expressive content, such as specific game mechanics and visual, tactile, and auditory imagery, mean “greater responsiveness, tighter symbolic coupling between user actions and procedural representations” (p. 42). Consequently, just as there are more and less effective methods of oral, written, and visual rhetorics, there are more and less effective methods of procedural rhetoric, partially dependent upon how sophisticated and significant their interactions and expressive content are.

Through the lens of procedural rhetoric, several issues surface with professional games *vis-à-vis* disability studies. Businesses use professional games as a form of communication to train new employees; these games mount claims about the best ways to handle customer service or to tackle a team project. However, if these professional games are not accessible, then people with disabilities may not get jobs easily or may feel disregarded. Also, vividness through interactivity and expressive content is a key component in procedural rhetoric, but the types of vividness that people with disabilities experience depends on context.

Fiona Kumari Campbell’s critique of ableism provides a valuable framework for examining how professional games—through procedural rhetoric—might marginalize people with disabilities in the workplace, starting with the internalization of compulsory ableness. Campbell (2009) argues that compulsory ableness gives two equally negative options: either to hate one’s self as culture requests or to have no sense of self at all. Culture tolerates disability or seeks to fix it in some way rather than seeing it as simply another way of experiencing the world.

The second aspect of Campbell’s critique of ableism involves what she calls the “tactics of dispersal,” or the distancing of disabled people from each other (p. 22). She argues that many

prominent approaches by disability service workers *explicitly* discourage community making among persons with disabilities and other minorities. This strategy of dispersal, predicated on the belief disabled people should not draw attention to each other via ‘mixing,’ leads to a perceived “dispersal of deviance,” which generates internalized ableism “in that mixing with other people with impairments is interpreted as a negative, inadvisable choice” (p. 23).

The third and final aspect of Campbell’s critique of ableism calls attention to “defensive Othering” (p. 24). Campbell says, “Defensive Othering occurs when the marginalized person attempts to emulate the hegemonic norm, whiteness, or ableism, and assumes the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group...” (p. 24). Such passing, she says, is about keeping the colonizer happy by not disturbing the peace and containing the matter that is potentially out of place.

Next, I will analyze two different professional games through the lenses of Bogost’s procedural rhetoric and Campbell’s critique of ableism. A twenty-year veteran of producing professional games, Elite Training has created the games I discuss: *Colourblind II* and *Minefield*.

*Colourblind II* consists of thirty-six pieces in six irregular shapes and in six different colors. Before the game begins, the facilitator removes two random pieces from the set and does not allow the players to see any of the pieces. In the game, players put on blindfolds (included with the set) and are assigned an equal number of these plastic pieces. While blindfolded, the players try working together to determine the shape and color of the two missing pieces. The players cannot exchange pieces, but the facilitator does answer the question, “What color is this?” correctly each time the players ask.

In terms of procedural rhetoric, *Colourblind II* uses a gaming process (working as a group to discover the two missing pieces) to mount a claim about how a real-world business

process works (achieving a communication goal despite challenges). Elite Training designers view *Colourblind II* as a game about overcoming communication challenges. Among others, the game puts forth the major claim that using a metaphorical challenge—as opposed to a real-world communication challenge—is the best way to help workers learn about the diverse ways that those around them can contribute to the workplace.

Unfortunately, this game replicates a major way in which people with disabilities are often represented by authors and filmmakers in their works: as “an opportunistic metaphorical device,” in the words of Mitchell and Snyder (p. 47). In the case of *Colourblind II*, blindness serves as an opportunistic metaphorical device for a negative state of being, a communication challenge that no one ever wants to experience no matter how briefly. Indeed, the whole premise of the game turns the experience into a type of “inspiration porn,” a phrase that refers to inspirational stories depicting people with disabilities supposedly overcoming obstacles when in actuality they are simply performing actions that people without disabilities do on a regular basis. *Colourblind II* presents blindness as an almost insurmountable challenge and players should be praised for completing the task successfully. The supplemental materials repeatedly mention the high difficulty level of the game. Thus, the game makes it difficult for players to develop a procedural counterargument through expression, outside of a counterargument that poses one of two ideas: if successful at the game, that blindness is not so bad, and if unsuccessful, that blindness is a diminished state of experiencing the world. This issue deflects Campbell’s idea of embracing disability as a fundamental part of beingness. This game falls short in that respect by maintaining focus on individual disabilities and using them for metaphorical purposes.

Similarly, the game integrates metaphor into vividness through interactivity and

expression. This use of metaphor parallels Campbell's (2009) discussion of compulsory ableism in language. In her framework, this game shows how the marginalization that people with disabilities experience "is further emptied, captured in common terms...that indicate their exclusion...such as suffering from, afflicted with, persistent vegetative state,...good and bad leg," among others (p. x). The use of the misnomer as a title—the game has nothing to do with colorblindness but instead uses that term as a potentially less offensive replacement for blindness—works accordingly to the same style of these common terms. The game suggests that it replicates blindness through the required interactivity among the players and depicts lack of vision as an impairment rather than as simply another way of experiencing the world. In this way, the game imitates a version of passing but in reverse. Usually, the typical danger involved in passing is the danger to the person who has tried to pass as able-bodied but has failed. In *Colourblind II*, however, passing becomes a core part of the gaming experience as all players simulate blindness. This simulation occurs without any major consequences; at the end of the game, players remove their blindfolds and regain their sight. The removal of the blindfold indicates the objectionable nature of blindness and implies that it requires a kind of cure to sweep in and restore sight. *Colourblind II* implies that "curing" players at the end of the game by removing and relieving players of simulated blindness acts at least as a positive, if not ethically purifying, experience. Unlike the stated goal of helping players realize "the unique value of those around us," the game tries to place everyone on an equal ableist playing field in a way that devalues the unique contribution of people with disabilities. *Colourblind II* mounts a weak procedural argument about the best practices of business communication by using an ableist simulated process that overcodes disability with metaphor. The game represents a missed opportunity because it could easily use a less ocular channel but still communicate the same

lesson through the use of tactile rather than visual cues; instead of using color to distinguish among the six pieces, the game could use different textures.

*The Minefield* game consists of forty-two mousepads that the facilitator lays out in a six-by-seven grid. The mousepads represent locations in a minefield upon which the players step, and twenty of these locations symbolize unexploded landmines. Teams must navigate the minefield from one side to the other in less than thirty minutes to gain a theoretical £2,000. In addition to the mines being pressure activated, they are also voice activated, so no players can talk once a player enters the minefield. Each time a player speaks, the team loses £100. The players cannot write anything down, cannot leave anything on the minefield, and cannot touch the player on the minefield. The players can enter the minefield one at a time, and only one person can be on the minefield at a time. Players may step in any direction but must move one mat at a time. The facilitator will activate a loud bomb noise, produced by an included sound maker, when the active player steps on a mine. Stepping on a mine results in a £100 penalty. When the active player steps on a mine, they must exit the minefield in the same way they entered it. If a member goes out of sequence, the team loses £100.

*The Minefield* uses the process of finding a safe path across a simulated minefield as a way to argue for the most effective methods in handling a team experience within the business world. According to the Elite Training support material that accompanies the game, the game focuses on developing teamwork through risk taking in problem solving, planning, communication, and leadership. Therefore, the game puts forth the claim that risk taking is the most important contributing factor to creating a successful teamwork experience. In addition to the imaginary monetary penalties, the supplemental guide suggests that the facilitator blindfolds the players after stepping on a bomb, telling the group that they now have players “who have lost

their sight as a result of the exploding mines. These people must wear blindfolds, and they will have to find ways of communicating to them without talking.” In this context, players can view the penalties for stepping on the mined areas as either mistakes or as valuable feedback, one of the discussion questions for the after-game debrief.

However, the use of disability through the game’s interactivity and expression positions disability as harmful and as something to be feared or pitied. In short, disability becomes a deterrent. Because the game’s interactivity relies upon the facilitator asking players to traverse a simulated minefield, players confront the idea of their own temporarily-abled bodies, or TAB. TAB is a somewhat contested term in disability studies alluding to people’s inevitable decline, through age, disease, or accident. Stepping on a mine discloses this fear of, symbolically, perceived somatic fracture and, within the rules of the game, blindness. Disability, then, is depicted in an automatically negative way. At the same time, though, the game imitates the problem that some disability studies theorists have with the term TAB as a category. This point is reinforced by the fact that ability is not always temporary; old age does not always bring disability as is often implied in discussions of TAB. Likewise, disability is not always a permanent condition. This point reflects the choice of seeing their movement as a mistake instead of helpful feedback, and the game communicates that idea through the use of blindness as a penalty along with the loss of money. Disability is a mistake that one pays for, and if you’re unlucky enough to experience disability, then you will be dependent upon others.

In considering the risk taking and mine exploding as helpful feedback, the game promotes a version of the charity model of disability. Cultural artifacts, such as novels, films, and games, often depict characters or people with disabilities as morally superior to abled characters, as well as ethically purified. Thus, they are more worthy of our help and our

admiration. The players who become blindfolded as a result of stepping on a mine then are helpful when sacrificed for the good of the group. This point happens despite the real accessibility issues with the game. People using wheelchairs or who may have other types of mobility impairments could not easily play the game according to the rules by maneuvering through the minefield one spot at a time. Additionally, the use of a sound box to contribute to the expressive vividness of the game assumes all players have adequate hearing to perceive the sound box's bomb, which has no volume control and cannot connect to an amplifier. These last two points are particularly problematic because the game is marketed as an "activity...used by people of all abilities," according to the game's supplemental materials.

Similar to *Colourblind II*, defensive Othering occurs in *The Minefield* in a way that's opposite to the problematic norm: namely, the danger to the person who has tried to pass as ablebodied but has failed. However, in *The Minefield*, the players without blindfolds may see a player simulating blindness as a kind of hero through the results of their risk taking that helps with the success of the group. Campbell (2009) writes that the shame that some people feel concerning their disability "is magnified in culture where the rhetoric of being a survivor, a non-victim, is powerful," while being a victim implies fear and docility (p. 25). Players who take the "risk" of simulating blindness and succeed at the game—in essence, "overcoming" their disability—also promote the type of mindset that Campbell criticizes. Tactics of dispersal work similarly in this game in two ways. First, the strategy encouraged in the facilitator's guide would suggest not sending two blindfolded players in the sequence at the same time. Within this strategy comes the assumption that two blind players cannot contend with the gaming situation. Relatedly, this strategy assumes that blind players may not or cannot develop other strategies of their own. The second way in which tactics of dispersal work in *The Minefield* involves if people



with various disabilities attempt to play the game. They might also be separated due to strategy, thus dividing players into two or more groups based on ability. In the end, then, *The Minefield* uses a procedural rhetoric of risk management that places people with disabilities in one of two groups: the “sacrificial lamb” who takes a risk for the good of the group and the “mistake” that costs the group capital.

These professional games participate in ableist communication practices. *Colourblind II* employs metaphors that presume disability to be a naturally undesirable somatic experience. *The Minefield* deploys metaphor in a similar but arguably more forceful way through violent imagery meant to serve as a deterrent. As a result, the procedural rhetoric of these professional games fails to effectively persuade employees of best practices in business communications involving teamwork and risk taking.