Check your privilege: The digital privilege game

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Introduction

This paper discusses the background, goals, design, and plans for the future development of Check your privilege (CYP), a Digital Privilege Game (DPG) developed by the authors since 2018 (Bordalejo et al. 2019). CYP seeks to create awareness among Digital Humanities (DH) practitioners about implicit bias and privilege in an interactive fashion (see below for a discussion of these concepts). Given the changes imposed on this year’s conference by the COVID-19 crisis, we have built this paper around the game itself, which is available online at https://privilege.huc.knaw.nl/?join=FACD56FE-A364-11EA-8DC7-0050569283A2. For our presentation, we will ask audience participants to sign up for a group game.

Background

The ADHO Diversity Workshops

Diversity and bias — and in particular strategies for improving the former while reducing the latter — have been a matter of intense focus within DH over the last several years. They have been the subject of significant research efforts (e.g. Losh and Wernimont 2018, Bordalejo and Risam 2019); major organisational initiatives (Global Outlook::Digital Humanities n.d.); and
sometimes fraught administrative and political discussions (Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations 2015; Global Outlook::Digital Humanities n.d.; discussion of these issues in relation to DH2016 can be found in O'Donnell 2019; O'Donnell and Brantford 2016).

In 2016, the ADHO steering committee asked Barbara Bordalejo to develop special workshops on diversity and collaboration for the annual DH conference. These workshops, which have been offered by Bordalejo and Daniel Paul O'Donnell annually since 2017, demonstrate the pervasive and unavoidable nature of implicit biases, highlight the importance of diversity, and provide inclusion strategies for DH researchers and students. A fourth pre-conference workshop had been planned for DH2020 before its cancellation due to the COVID-19 crisis. The workshops include lectures and in-person exercises and discussions designed to uncover and demonstrate privilege and bias (Bordalejo and O'Donnell 2018). While the format of the workshops has evolved over the years, the core elements — lectures, demonstration, exercises, and discussion — has remained largely the same.

The (analogue) Privilege Game

One of the critical activities in the workshop is “The Privilege Game,” a multi-player board game developed by Bordalejo and O'Donnell and based initially on *Snakes and Ladders*. The goal of the game is to illustrate the diverse areas impacted by (often unrecognised) bias and, particularly, privilege. The critical components of the game are a game board containing a road or path along which players can move; game pieces to represent each player; and a list of questions describing situations in which privilege or bias may manifest itself. The precise format of the game board and pieces is not essential: provided there is a graded path the
players can move along and game pieces that can represent the players as they move along, any format will do. We have used different game boards and pieces over the years, and there is no reason why an existing game that involves moving pieces along a path could not be repurposed for this activity.

**Gameplay**

The gameplay involves having a moderator read questions from the list out loud to the participants. Players respond to each question with one of three moves:

- Forward, indicating that a participant has benefitted from privilege in the context of the question;
- Backwards, indicating that a participant has been held back by a lack of privilege in the context; or
- Staying in place, indicating that a participant either
  a. has not experienced the situation described;
  b. was unaffected by privilege in such a situation positively or negatively; or
  c. prefers not to answer.

It is worth noting that we have overloaded this last option with several meanings quite deliberately. Since movement in this game implies the presence or absence of privilege and since privilege often manifests itself in relation to sex, gender, racialisation, family status, initially, the questions were phrased in such a way that a positive answer always resulted in a move forward and a negative response in a move backward, and no answer would make the piece remain in place. We intended to make the game easier to understand. However, we soon found that our phrasing, particularly in as much as it often required the use of double negatives, was confusing to many non-native speakers of English. We decided that the discussion generated by the questions was more important than streamlining the game mechanics. So we moved towards a more complex approach that allowed for questions to be interpreted from multiple perspectives.
sexual orientation, mental or physical health, disability, and other aspects of human relations, behaviour, and well-being that people may find uncomfortable discussing in a professional setting, all players are given the option of ignoring questions they do not wish to answer and are repeatedly reminded that this option exists during gameplay. In addition, because the game highlights privilege, the questions we use are liable to generate discomfort as they challenge individual preconceived notions of self. This is the same effect that articles like “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (McIntosh n.d.) or books such as White Fragility (DiAngelo 2018) have on readers. As individuals, we want to think that everything we have achieved is a direct result of our merit and hard work. When confronted with the reality that there are others who are as hard working or talented or intelligent, but who have been held back because of their class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, race, origin, religion and countless other factors, we feel threatened by and, often, at least initially, resistant to the idea. Growth, however, arises precisely from places of discomfort. In this case, the discomfort comes from being confronted with the many circumstances, for which we are not responsible, that have played a role in our success.

Play begins in the middle of the path. As the game progresses and players move their pieces forwards and backwards, they are able to compare their relative privilege — and in many cases identify previously unidentified privilege from which they have benefitted — from their position on the board. Players with considerable inherent social privilege (a white, anglophone, heterosexual male with a tenured North American Professorship who attended an Ivy League university for graduate school, for example), tend to advance rapidly in the game no matter what set of questions are asked. Those with less social privilege (women, non-CIS gendered,
non-anglophone, under-employed, and so on) tend to advance less quickly and, in some cases even move backwards.

*Goal: To promote discussion and learning*

The goal of this game is not so much to “win,” of course, but to illustrate the cumulative, intersectional nature of privilege (for discussions of the concept see Crenshaw 2018; Essed and Goldberg 2002; Ahmed 2017) and to encourage players to both recognise the degree to which privilege affects individual lives and careers and discuss the different ways it manifests itself in an international academic context (while privilege affects all aspects of human social experience, the specific game developed by Bordalejo and O’Donnell is focussed on the academic context within the DH domain).

In practice, this discussion tends to dominate play. Although we have developed several hundred questions over the years, our experience has been that we have never been able to read out more than a couple of dozen in the course of our two or three hour workshop. From the first question, discussion among the participants and the moderators usually begins: about the validity or likelihood of the situation, the definition of terms, the range of possible factors at play, the degree to which a given answer does or does not reflect differential privilege, regional differences in the interpretation of questions or the significance of specific answers, and much more.

While the purpose of this paper is not to go into great detail about our analogue original, this discussion is so important to the success of the analogue exercise that it is worth pointing out
some examples of the kind of conversations we have had in various iterations of the workshop to establish both some of the context for our work on the digital game and some of the problems we faced in adapting the game to a digital context.

1. One point that comes up nearly every time we lead participants in a version of the game is the degree to which male participants differ from nearly all others in their experience of sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and the role sexualised and gendered expectations play in day-to-day professional life and development. Where few male participants ever report having been the victim of gendered or sexualised harassment, discrimination, or expectations on their daily lives, for example, nearly all women and non-CIS-gendered participants do.²

2. Another set of common issues revolve around uncertainty as to where the privilege lies in response to individual questions, or whether a given response represents the operation of privilege or its opposite. In many cases, this involves regional or cultural differences. Questions such as “I was not educated in my native language,” or “I do not use my native language at work,” for example, frequently fall into this category. On the one hand, an inability to work or be educated in one’s native language can be

² We realise that male-targeted sexual violence does occur and (like its female and other-targeted equivalents) is underreported. It remains the case, however, that participants almost always observe the near universal distinction in movement at some point after we ask a question about gendered or sexualised violence, harassment, or expectations.

We should also point out that throughout this paper we are relying on anecdotal observations rather than systematically collected data. This is for several reasons. The first is that we do not collect systematic data about participants in our in-person workshops. The second is that by (deliberately) assigning several meanings to a lack of movement in the game (“not applicable,” “had a neutral experience,” “do not wish to answer”) and informing people that they are free to answer truthfully or not as the game progresses, we cannot assume that any given response by any individual is accurate. As in the case of gendered and sexualised privilege, however, participants in our workshops frequently comment on the type of distinctions we are discussing here, self-identifying into different intersectional groups (“Women,” “Adjunct Faculty,” “From the Global North,” “African,” “Person of Colour,” “CIS-gendered Male,” etc.) during discussion.
understood as evidence of lack of privilege — as evidence that some other language is being used hegemonically and that members of the player's linguistic group face an additional burden over those who are native speakers of that language in their work and education. On the other hand, however, this same question can also indicate the presence of privilege, even for those who do not use their native language in such contexts: it can be evidence, for example, that their families had sufficient resources to ensure they were educated in a hegemonic language (and hence evincing privilege over their peers).

Problems and limitations

While the analogue game works well in the context of our diversity workshops, this does not mean that it is without problems, that it is suited for every context or audience, or that we have learned nothing by offering it through four iterations. In fact, even from the beginning, we were aware of several important issues with our use of this exercise:

1. The small size of the actual game board we used meant that each group of players was limited to a maximum of six players or so. While we generally present the game to much larger audiences, these audiences must usually break up into separate groups. While the different groups interact with each other during game play, a lot of discussion also takes place among the players within a single group; this limitation reduces the number of players involved in these secondary, often more intimate, discussions.

2. Once you divide a large group into a number of smaller ones, there is a tendency for like to sit with like — that is to say for friends to sit with friends, or, which is often the same
thing, people sharing a variety of common characteristics to sit with each other (e.g. groups of male participants, groups of female participants, people of colour, people from a given country, people sharing similar disciplinary interests). When coupled with the fact that the groups themselves are relatively small (i.e. our first problem), this further reduces the degree to which different experiences and their impact on privilege are exemplified and explored by individual players.

3. Many of the questions we ask involve subjects people are uncomfortable discussing in public. This means both that users may be more focussed on their potential discomfort than considering and discussing the role of privilege in a given situation and that players may either answer incorrectly, or not wish to answer or discuss their answers to specific questions in a larger group.

4. Many of the questions involve culturally specific issues. “College” for example, and especially issues involving access to elite institutions, manifests itself quite differently as a form of privilege in the United States than even in Canada and Mexico, its two nearest neighbours. Likewise, access to or use of public transportation means different things in a city versus a rural environment, in countries with a long tradition of investing in public infrastructure versus those without such a tradition.

5. Many of the questions involved concepts that were quite difficult to express adequately in simple International English — many of our participants, and indeed one of the moderators of the analogue game and all but one of the designers of the digital game, are not native speakers of English. We often found it difficult to find a way of describing
situations that did not use complex circumlocutions, double negatives, highly technical terms of art, or other linguistically difficult constructions.

6. Because the game prompts a lot of discussion, we have never been able to get through more than a couple of dozen questions, and usually far fewer. While these conversations are the point of the game, the slow pace does mean that potential prompts for reflection carried in other questions are not presented to the game players — and this in turn means that other important aspects of privilege of necessity go unexplored.

** Developing *Check your Privilege*, the Digital Privilege Game **

For this section, we encourage readers to experiment with the game itself at [https://privilege.huc.knaw.nl](https://privilege.huc.knaw.nl).

It is in the context of these strengths and limitations of the analogue diversity game that our DPG *Check your privilege* (CYG) was developed. The instigation for its development came largely from Karina van Dalen-Oskam (Huygens Institute) and Folgert Karsdorp (Meertens Institute), as a way of allowing the game to be used in a wider variety of contexts — at an individual university department or institute, for example. With funding from the KNAW Humanities Cluster (of which both Huygens Institute and Meertens Institute are part), Basten Stokhuyzen, principal of the code development firm BSTN ([http://bstn.nl/](http://bstn.nl/)), was engaged to develop a digital version of our analogue game.
Like its analogue counterpart, CYP allows players to recognize the way privilege manifests itself in their daily lives and the role it has played in helping them achieve their successes. It also allows them to compare themselves to others as they observe the consequences of diverging situations. As with the analogue game, this comparative aspect reveals underlying privileges hitherto hidden from those who benefit from them and has, in practice, the same effect as highlighting bias: it is, in itself, a catalyst for change (Pope, Price, and Wolfers 2013).

As initially proposed, CYP was intended as an alternative to the analogue game, which could be used both in the context of the workshop and outside of it. An early design decision was to allow for play in a solo (individual) and group (multi-player) mode. In solo mode, participants can play without sharing their answers with others in non-aggregate form. This option, which was not possible with the original analogue game as we used it in our workshops, provides a private experience and can contribute to the safety of vulnerable individuals. For workshop use, the group mode creates an experience in which individual experience is visualized in reference to the totality of the group. These models, together with the possibility of easy customization of the questions, enable a range of potential uses and interactions which could not easily be achieved with the simple implementation of the analogue game.

**Game Questions**

An important early problem was adapting the game questions. This involved two issues in particular.
The first had to do with the ambiguity of the questions. Since discussion was a major point of the exercise in the case of the analogue game, a number of the questions we used during our workshops were either ambiguous or had more than one possible answer in terms of how they might indicate the presence of privilege. During analogue game play, participants were encouraged to discuss what they thought a question might mean before deciding how they intended to move their piece. This meant both that we could refine our questions through various iterations of the game since participants would help us uncover ambiguous wording and that we could ask questions that had different possible interpretations, either because the situation involved was inherently ambiguous or because it played out differently in different contexts, regions, or disciplines, since these could be discussed and clarified in person.

The second issue had to do with the freedom we gave analogue participants in the analogue game to decide how they would move their pieces as a result of their answer: i.e. having discussed what a question meant, analogue participants were free to decide whether their answer meant that they were to move forward, backwards, or stand still. Even if the entire room argued that a particular answer was indicative of privilege (and hence involve a step forward on the game board), for example, in the analogue game there was nothing stopping an individual player from going against this consensus and moving their game piece backwards or standing still.

We debated creating a digital analogue of this second feature in the early stages of our digital game design. While it would not be impossible to build a game in which participants could decide which way their piece could move completely independently of their answer to a given
question, there are a couple of reasons for not doing this: first of all, such an approach would make it difficult to compare players against each other in group mode or through anonymised data; but more importantly, in the absence of the corrective and normalising effect of the group discussion, complete freedom to determine whether a given answer indicated privilege or not could vitiate the entire point of the game. Because privilege involves an at times uncomfortable recognition that success is not entirely due to our own actions or merit, it can be difficult to see. An individual who was completely free to decide in isolation whether their answer to a question indicated the presence of privilege would almost certainly miss many examples of its intervention. In the analogue game, we overcame this problem partially through the fact that the moves took place in a communal setting: while individual groups of players tended to be relatively homogenous, there was enough diversity in the room in most cases to ensure that group discussion would identify even relatively hidden examples of privilege. In the case of the digital game, we removing the freedom to decide whether an answer indicated privilege or not, tying specific answers to specific movements in the game and, in effect, establishing a baseline and common understanding of privilege that forced users to confront personal instances of it.

But this then brought the first instance into play. If there was no freedom to decide whether an answer resulted in a forward, neutral, or backwards move, then the questions themselves had to be far less ambiguous and open to regional or other variation in interpretation. This meant that we had to be both much more careful in the specific wording of our questions and remove a large number of examples where it was impossible to tie the degree or nature of privilege to a single specific answer (e.g. as in the question about schooling above).
But in addition to presenting problems, moving the game to a digital environment also offered an opportunity: in particular, allowing us to more easily adapt the game for use in different environments or by different communities. As mentioned above, the questions developed by Bordalejo and O’Donnell for the analogue game and adapted for use in the first iteration of the digital game specifically target DH practitioners working or studying at universities, research institutes, museums and similar. But by separating the questions from the interface itself, it is possible to develop new questions or modify our existing ones for use with different audiences or institutional contexts. By modifying the publicly available question dataset, interested parties are able to customize them for specific groups, as the questions can be translated, updated, or redesigned for a different target group beyond the digital humanities or academia.

### Game design/Back end

CYP is implemented as a Node.js application with a MySQL database for storing results, and Nginx as the HTTP load balancer and router. The front-end was implemented using Webpack, LESS and Vue JS. Using these components allowed us to create a modern and powerful, yet extremely lightweight application. Being lightweight was crucial to our goals, as it makes the game accessible to users with slower internet connections and older hardware.


4 One interesting thing we have discovered over the last four years is the speed at which issues in Equity and Diversity change and adapt to changing circumstances. Each year we played the game, we discovered questions that contained assumption or language that, though uncontroversial in previous years now struck participants as being inappropriate or too broad (for example: we have steadily broadened and worked to eliminate the use of binary assumptions about gender since the first iterations of the game).
Interface design

Our goal was to create an interface that was visually as neutral as possible. Limiting the use of color to a minimum enables participants and their differences in privilege to be accentuated and better expressed. After a series of welcome screens explaining what the game is about (cf. the upper left panel of Figure 1), the user is presented with two game modes (upper right panel of Figure 1). The first is a single-player mode, in which the user has to answer a series of randomly chosen questions. The lower left panel of Figure 1 illustrates this single-player mode. After each question, the dot with the player's initials moves either up or down, depending on whether the given answer increased or decreased the user's privilege position. After all questions have been answered, users can compare their answers with the anonymised results of previous users. This gives users insight into how their privilege relates to that of others.

In addition to supporting group play, CYG also allows individuals to test their understanding of personal privilege on their own, comparing their case asynchronously to others who have played the game previously. As we discuss here, this both improved on our paper game in some aspects while it highlighted the value and importance of the analogue experience in others.
Many decisions in your life brought you where you are today and will influence where you will be in the future.

Figure 1: Four screenshots of the Online Privilege Game.

The second mode is a group-mode. In this mode, users can create a 'room' in which they can play the game together with a group of invited users. The group mode can be played synchronously and asynchronously: Synchronously, in which all users are present at the same time, and asynchronously, in which users enter the game at different times. The lower right panel of Figure 1 displays the design of the group mode. Two players are displayed with varying positions of privilege. By showing the relative distances between users' privileges, we aim to spark conversations between users about different aspects of privilege.
Conclusion: Games as arguments

CYP fulfills Stuart Moulthrop’s intervention criteria (Moulthrop 2005): it belongs to the cybertext domain; it was produced with standard tools; it is informed by a critical stance; and it is both pedagogical and provocative. But it is also an intervention in the sense that it generates new states among players (most generally, discomfort, as explained above).

Our approach while developing the game is an instance of a game “as argument,” as suggested by Kyle Dase in his thesis, The Tenth Art (Dase 2016). Dase demonstrates how, through history, many games were created for specific purposes. Moksha Patamu, a traditional Indian game where vices and virtues are assigned to tiles or spaces in the board in order to show how the virtuous path is more efficient than the one including vices was eventually adapted into Snakes and Ladders (Dase 5).

Dase’s most compelling example is his account of Elisabeth Magie’s Prosperity. Magie designed her game to demonstrate the merits of a single-tax system known as Georgism. The rules of Prosperity ensured that, as one player progressed in the game, the other players would benefit from her success. Magie also crafted a counterargument to her game. This was done by creating an alternative set of rules in which the object of the game was for individual players to acquire as many properties as possible while attempting to bankrupt others. This game was eventually developed into what is now known as Monopoly, despite the fact that Magie likely never intended the game as anything else besides being a criticism of the capitalist system (Dase 7 and ff.). As Dase points out, if games can present arguments, counterarguments and serve as vehicles for a didactic experience, they can be used not only for pedagogical
purposes, but also as a form of scholarship. It is the idea of games as arguments with the objective of making players think that partly served as inspiration for the development of the analogue privilege game.

The combination of Moulthrop’s notion of intervention in combination with the idea of games as a form of argumentation sit behind the concepts surrounding the Privilege Game in any of its forms.

The CYP app opens the possibility of designing other similar games which might function as an illustration or challenge of other aspects of diversity and inclusion. We are convinced that such artifacts have scholarly value, not just as educational tools, but also as provocative interventions and generative agents of change. By challenging preconceived notions of who we are and how we relate to others, we can potentially fine tune our self awareness in ways that could have a positive effect on our interactions with those who are different from ourselves.

CYP’s pedagogical and provocative aspects (i.e. Moulthrop’s intervention) force the users to confront their privilege. Because of its nature, it generates a type of productive discomfort which results in self-evaluation and might trigger behavioral changes (Pope, Price, and Wolfers 2013). Although the DPG generates privilege awareness, it does not offer solutions on how to balance and better distribute privilege. The inclusion solutions will be part of a new set of workshop tools currently under development but which are the direct result of the successful implementation of the DPG.
References


