Assemblages of Awareness: Addressing Older Adult Mistreatment through Collaborative Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Game studies as a field has increasingly turned its attention to the use of serious games for social change, exploring their potential to engage players in critical reflection and action. La valise de Lise (Lise's Luggage) is a portable game that meshes analog and digital elements and that is played in workshop settings with audiences ranging from 3 to 40 participants. Our game comprises a series of objects in a locked suitcase and leverages the immersive and participatory elements of escape-room mechanics to address the sensitive and under-discussed issue of older adult mistreatment (also referred to as elder abuse). As players solve puzzles in small teams, they come to understand the life of a fictional character grappling with mistreatment within the context of family dynamics. Players engage in collaborative play and storytelling as they navigate scenarios drawn from real-world situations of mistreatment. The gameplay serves as a catalyst for expertly-facilitated discussions where the game's narrative, clues and characters are fleshed out and explored.

As of 2025, the game is being widely deployed across the province of Quebec, Canada, as part of a government multi-year strategy to counter mistreatment. In this context, La valise de Lise serves as a sensitizing tool for health and social services staff to broach conversations about mistreatment among key audiences, including teenagers and young adults as well as frontline workers poised to detect mistreatment, such as medical staff, police officers, and bank employees. La valise de Lise has also been adapted in collaboration with Indigenous communities in Quebec, namely the James Bay Cree and the Nunavik Inuit. These cultural adaptations highlight the significance

of iterative, informant-driven co-design processes in creating culturally resonant serious games. The adaptations require integrating culturally specific communication approaches, materials, and narratives into the game's mechanics, reflecting the importance of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and relational accountability. The games are calibrated to balance challenge with accessibility, ensuring that players of diverse skill levels can engage meaningfully with the content.

This paper examines La valise de Lise and its adaptations by situating the games within conversations about procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), research-creation and participatory design (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012), as well as assemblage theory (Latour, 2005; Akrich, 1992). By tracing its development, adaptation, implementation, and broaching initial findings related to its reception, we ask two main research questions: how can serious games navigate the demands of promoting learning, sensitization and action while allowing for cultural specificity? How does understanding La valise de Lise as an assemblage of digital, analog, cultural, and material elements help us understand its role in addressing social issues like older adult mistreatment?

We argue that both the game and its collaborative creation processes highlight the interconnected and relational nature of their components—digital and analog, material and cultural, human and non-human. La valise de Lise embodies a complex, emergent system where meaning is continually co-constructed by players, facilitators, co-designers, and the socio-cultural and policy contexts within which the game is played. This assemblage brings together physical props, cultural narratives, digital fragments, and collaborative storytelling into a dynamic ecosystem where meaning emerges through interaction. The interplay between structured mechanics, material artifacts, and human engagement reflects the relational complexity of addressing older adult mistreatment, emphasizing that solutions to such thorny issues require collaboration and attentiveness to context. The game encourages players to resist hasty judgments, allowing them to piece together the clues as fragments.

Understanding the game in this way anchors it as a model of response-ability (Haraway, 2016), understood as the ethical practice of being accountable and enacting care within complex networks of mutual engagement. La valise de Lise invites players, designers, and facilitators to engage deeply with the issue of mistreatment, requiring attentiveness to the cultural and social dimensions of the contexts in which the game is deployed. By modeling collective problem-solving and reflection, it fosters not only awareness but an ongoing sense of shared responsibility for addressing mistreatment, bridging the gap between playful engagement and meaningful social action. We contend that understanding La valise de Lise from this vantage helps foster a reflection on how serious games can function as tools for cultivating ethical and relational practices, transforming abstract social issues into opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

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