

Taboo and Game Design

**MEANINGFUL**  
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Taboo Game

- Create a permanent, nefarious place in history
- Potential to demolish careers or the publisher's brand
- May never see daylight, locked behind some no-peeking curtain as mere concept
- Are the domain of meaningful play

No Meaning  
– No Taboo

(but can you have no meaning in play?)

Taboo Heuristics

**Heuristic #1**

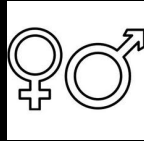
1. Taboo play is most easily created by applying your game mechanics to your politics.

The Old Taboos: General

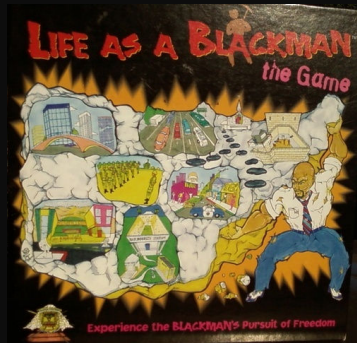
Race

Sex

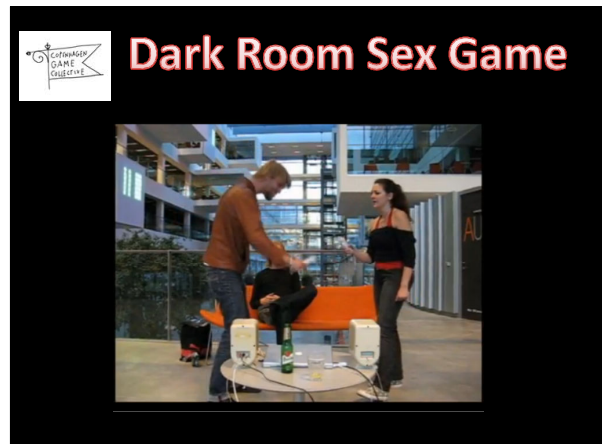
Earnings



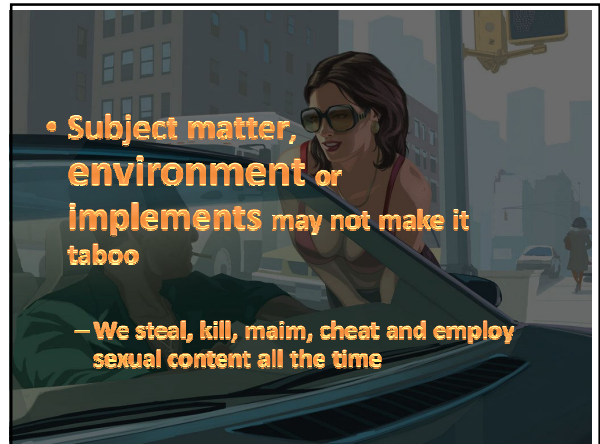
Chuck Sawyer



Which is actually the  
**Taboo Game?**



# Which is Taboo?



1. Amount of credit card debt (earnings)
  2. Your love life (sex)
  3. Your salary (earnings)
  4. Your mortgage, rent payment (earnings)
  5. Your health (sex?)\*
- (In case you want to make a new Taboo game)
- \*list compiled from CreditCard.com – not terribly scientific

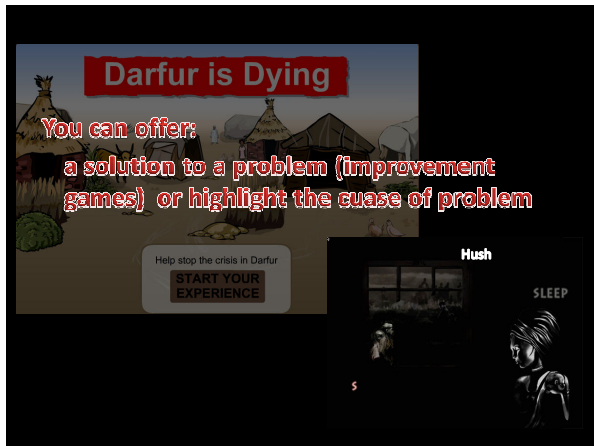
## Heuristic 2

Taboo is dismissed if you are merely applying a taboo environment in an “innocuous” way

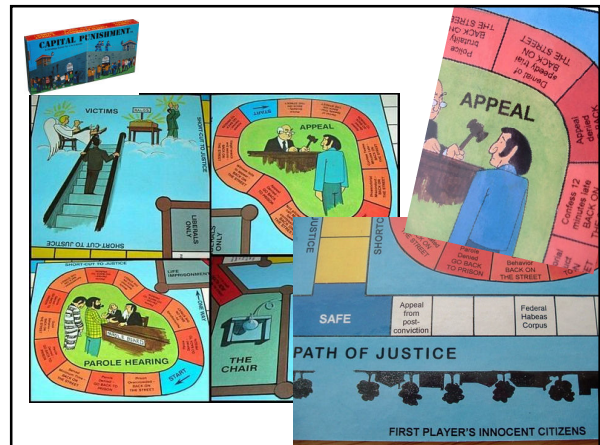
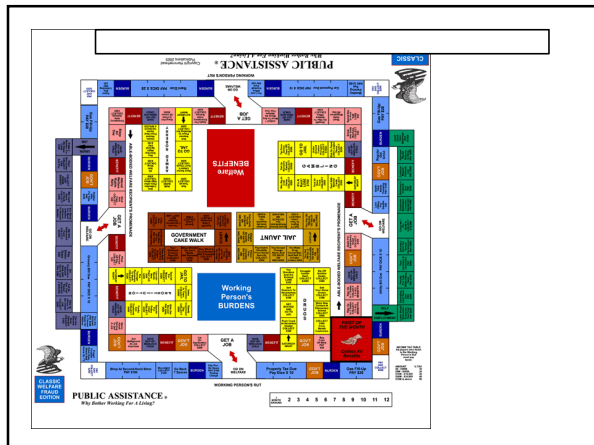
### Heuristic 2 (example)

- It is okay to have a game take place in a ghetto (environment), but it is not okay to relate the politics of ghettos to a game’s environment and rules





- You can't:
  - continue the problem through practice in game



The general public understands games to be about creating fun, and there are certain human conditions for which **we do not want to attribute fun:**

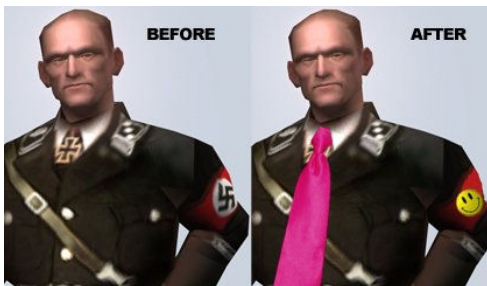
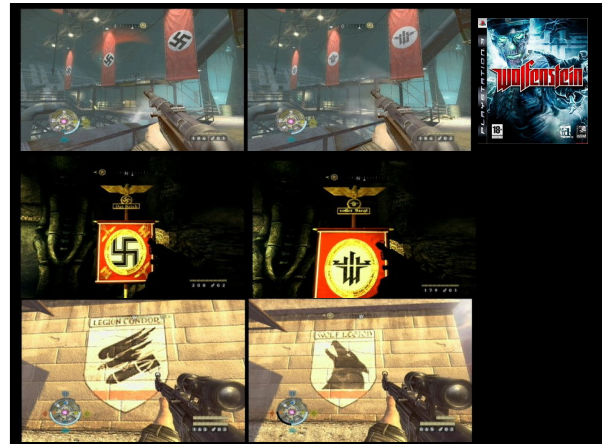
- These include:
- The **permanent destruction** of others
  - The **continuance of negative cycles**
  - Etc.



### Heuristic 3

#### The Shame and Modesty Principle

- We generally don't want to expose some attributes about ourselves that shame us?



Yet, the environment and  
representational affinity  
dictates our interpretation  
of meaning

Don't we play genocidal games all the time?

#### A few questions to consider:

- Is it easier to be taboo in **non-digital spaces**, because these spaces are assumed to be more child friendly?
- We continuously bump up against the complication of digital game simulations and meaning. Why have so many seemingly taboo game mechanics gone uncriticized in digital games (shoot, kill, etc) – is there more expectation for fiction?