



**We Belong ...
Together**

An educational role-playing game to build empathy
and communicate across differences
by Alexandra Schreiber

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We Belong ... Together was developed during the certificate track “Transformative Game Design” 2022/23 at the Transformative Play Initiative at Uppsala University/Sweden. It is inspired by a museum Virtual Exchange program for students at Goettingen University in Germany and St. John’s University in the U.S., and its title refers to a song by singer songwriter Rickie Lee Jones. I would like to thank all players during the playtesting and early stages of this game for their valuable feedback, which got incorporated into this version.

Introduction

Museums are a special site to interact with history and culture and to provide visitors with the space and artifacts to connect with own stories and interpretations of what curators aim to tell. Museums can provide a vibrant space where culture comes to life through displayed artifacts, which were created by humans across time and geographical regions. This makes them a great space to explore culture and communication across time and space. *We Belong ... Together* is a nano-game for 4 – 5 players that takes place in a virtual museum. It can be played online or in person, as stand-alone and as a way to explore cultural connections in educational settings across disciplines.

This game needs a facilitator, who starts and ends playtime and leads through workshopping, gameplay and debriefing. They need to be familiar with the “Yes, And...” technique prior to start, explained in a 4-minute video on YouTube, linked to the section “Technical Equipment” in this GDD and [also here](#). The facilitator ends gameplay when the group decides they have a compelling story or when time is up. They can include music, e.g. the song mentioned above.

Players in this game will take on characters as artifacts from museums and together create a common story about love and connection across visible differences. They can choose from a set of ten images of artifacts from museums across the U.S. and Germany, all of which are within the public domain. The goal of this game is to build empathy and communicate across differences within the group of players. This is connected, but not limited, to creating a mutual story in the group. Playtime is ca. 45 min and comprises workshopping, gameplay and debriefing. This game can be played at a table or as freeform, with players using the room and moving around freely.

Safety

Safety mechanics in this game:

- Cut: The facilitator and any player can call “cut” and signal a “T” (similar as in a sports game) with both hands. Gameplay stops until facilitator and players have clarified.
- X-card: Players tap on a piece of paper with “X” (online: crossing arms in front of your face), indicating they don’t want to discuss or work on the topic at hand. In this case, the topic will be dropped without questioning, and gameplay continues without interruption.

The facilitator should check in with players and ask, if they wish to include any other safety mechanics to this game, to be added as needed.

Workshop

Duration: ca. 15 min.

During workshop, players get to know the artifacts to build their characters from, create characters and practice communication within their group. 1 – 3 players will start and end a round of “Yes, and...” and players are free to stay at the table or move using the room.

Note to facilitator: Read this out loud.

- Step 1: Players choose an artifact that draws their attention and pick one of the cards presented (online: move your artifact to the middle on Padlet). Then, they choose one *character card* and one *message from the past* card. If played online, these will be assigned randomly and sent to each player in the private chat. In addition to the information on each card, players can use these for character building, either open or as a secret to other players.
- Step 2: Going clockwise, players introduce their character to the group. They can add names, if they like. Make this a swift round of introduction.
- Step 3: The facilitator explains the “Yes, and ... “ technique, that it requires all voices to be heard and that there is no right or wrong when doing this activity. This is played in character with one player who will start and end when they feel the story has come to an end. The facilitator gives them with one of these prompts:
 - “It was a dark and cold night at the museum, ...”
 - “The moon’s pale light was shining through the open window ...”
 - “During nightshift the janitor didn’t notice the open door...”
 - “The light in the hallway had been flickering for a while ...”

Do 1 - 2 rounds of “Yes, and ...”, until the group is familiar and comfortable with it.

Set Up

Note to facilitator: Read this out loud.

It is the evening before the start of the new exhibition “We belong ... together” opens up in the “Museum of Love and Connection”. You and your group of artifacts are left outside the door that separates you from the bright exhibition space. All because the curators decided that you are so apparently different that there is no meaningful connection or story to tell to the visitors. But you will prove them wrong, and before sunrise you will tell a meaningful story of connection, that lets you be part of the exhibition lights. We do not know who will start the story or who will end it, but we do know that you must listen to each other and that all of your voices must be heard. We don’t know, if you will succeed to find a story to secure your space in the exhibition, but we know that you will engage with your differences to see beyond what is visible. All empty boxes around you will be packed and moved down to the museum storage, carrying what is not used for this exhibition, until the curation of a new one. When time is up, you will decide together, if you have a compelling story for the exhibition space to tell.

Gameplay

Duration: ca. 12 min.

Note to facilitator: Read this out loud, set a timer, adjust timeframe if necessary.. If music is included, start now, fade out at end of paragraph. Play again when time is up or when players decide they have found their story.

You are the ones left alone. No one thought you'd have anything in common, with the fact that you come from so many places in the world and that you are all so seemingly different. But now is the time to tell the world the story that binds you together. It's the one that connects all of you in a special way, not visible on the outside. This will be the story that activates your power within, to connect and move to the exhibition to tell this story to the visitors, to let them continue and make it their own.

Debriefing

Duration ca. 10 - 15 min.

Take a deep breath a moment to distance yourself from the play and your character. Come back together as group. Brush off your character, do this physically by shaking your arms and legs and by brushing your arms and shoulders. Say your name and the character you played.

The facilitator reads out loud the questions for emotional and intellectual debriefing. They invite players to share and explain the option to say "pass", when they don't want to answer.

Emotional debriefing:

- What are some of the feelings you experienced during game play?
- At what point did you feel most involved?
- When did you feel least involved?
- What were your personal highs and lows?
- How do you feel different now, compared to before the game?

Intellectual debriefing:

- I wonder if/how/why ...
- I would like to understand ...
- What I want to take with me from the game is ...
- What I want to leave behind is ...
- Something that I want to mention is ...

When all players have vented emotions and processed the experience and have no more questions or input, the facilitator thanks the players and ends the role-playing game.

Technical equipment

When played online, this game is best being played on a computer with a stable internet connection. Players are encouraged to use headphones and to open their microphones during gameplay at all times. If played online and music is included, the facilitator sets audio settings in Zoom to "original sound for musicians". In Zoom, the facilitator shares their screen with the [Padlet page](#), so all players can see the images and follow the actions on the screen. To play this game in person, use the printout version from [Google Drive](#).

- [Link to the Padlet.](#)
- [Link to the Google Drive.](#)
- [Link to “Yes, And ...” technique.](#) James Taylor. Last access November 26, 2024.
- [Link to *We Belong Together*](#) by Rickie Lee Jones

Prompts for character building (online version)

Note to facilitator: When played online, choose randomly and copy/paste to players in private chat. When played in person, have players randomly choose from the printout version.

Character cards (10)

- I am afraid of the dark.
- I have a fear of heights.
- I am fragile, to crack under pressure.
- I like to stop and smell the flowers.
- I can't be exposed to light without getting hurt.
- I am persistent, you can take me anywhere.
- I like to make music with my friends.
- I am the happy chump.
- I am the chosen one.
- I can read between the lines.

Messages from the past (10)

- I was traded for a horse.
- My ancestors were noble men.
- There was a terrible fight.
- I was a wedding gift.
- Someone died for me.
- I was used for household chores.
- I was a bribe in a crime.
- I had special relations with the Royal Family.
- I was witnessing a secret love affair.
- I was hidden and kept away.

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