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Disrupting Monopoly: Homelessness, Gamification and Learned Resourcefulness

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In 2019 a pilot project called ‘Homeless Monopoly’ evolved in Coventry to investigate how arts methodologies, dramatic scenarios and gamification could be used to raise awareness in young people regarding homelessness. This article investigates the origins and collaborative development of this project, but specifically focuses on how piloting the game in schools, colleges and universities has raised questions about the ways in which resourcefulness and resilience might be taught as adaptive and sustainable strategies through processes of rehearsing and discussing unpredictable challenges, vulnerabilities, support mechanisms and different life outcomes rooted in ‘real-world’ scenarios.

Introduction

In 2019 a project with the working title ‘Homeless Monopoly’ began in Coventry to investigate how arts methodologies, dramatic scenarios and gamification could be used to raise awareness in young people regarding homelessness. Initiated by Jackie Calderwood, who worked for Coventry University’s Disruptive Media Learning Lab, the project involved the author who was brought in as a collaborator and our project partner the Coventry Cyrenians (Cyrenians), a local branch of a national movement that supports the homeless and vulnerably housed in Coventry and Warwickshire. The project received seed funding via a Coventry City of Culture initiative to facilitate collaboration between the Universities of Coventry, Warwick and organisations in the city. This funding enabled three focus groups, the commissioning of artwork from ‘student activators’, the generation of three prototype board-game sets and a piloting phase involving game play sessions at Cardinal Newman School in Coventry, and with various groups from organisations including the University of Warwick and Coventry City Council.

This article investigates the origins and development of this project, its reliance on creative collaboration and how the game mechanics evolved to overturn the neoliberal ideological implications of the traditional Monopoly game. I examine how creating and playing ‘Homeless Monopoly’ opened up discussion, the possibility of mutual support and promoted ideas of collective resourcefulness in the face of personal and structural factors that cause and sustain homelessness. I consider how the game draws attention to the multiple
resources (material, agencies, human, societal) that can contribute to combating the risks associated with homelessness in order to encourage resilience. Alert to the numerous critiques of resilience that situate it as a neoliberal response to persistent structural inequalities, I also explore how piloting the game offered insight into how resourcefulness and resilience might be taught as adaptive and sustainable strategies through processes of collaboration, rehearsing and discussing unpredictable challenges, vulnerabilities, support mechanisms and different life outcomes rooted in ‘real-world’ scenarios.

‘Homeless Monopoly’ emerged out of the Serious Games Institute and Disruptive Media Learning Lab at Coventry University that develop and research games and gamification in the healthcare, education and environmental sectors. Understood as an innovative approach to using game mechanics in a non-gaming context, gamification is about enhancing engagement and enjoyment in ways that might lead to positive outcomes, for example, enhanced collaboration and team-building in business or heightened motivation and information retention in education (Stieglitz et al, 2017; Kim et al, 2018). Modified versions of Monopoly are frequently deployed as pedagogical tools to engage students with ideas around globalization, capitalism and the international political economy, as well as to explore various inequalities, discrimination and campaigns for social justice (see Capehart and Van Vleck, 2018; Smith, 2017; Darr and Cohen, 2016 and Waren, 2001). The original Monopoly boardgame entails players using imitation money to engage in simulated property acquisition and development that enables them to charge their fellow players rent for landing on the squares they ‘own’. The goal ‘is to maximise individual wealth by purchasing, then monopolizing physical capital’ and winning is reliant on bankrupting fellow players and leaving them without houses on the board (Darr and Cohen, 2016, p. 269). This resonant ideological landscape and the standard trajectory of the game made it an ideal vehicle to explore homelessness and to embark on what Kathleen Gallagher, discussing an applied theatre project with homeless youth in Toronto, has referred to as a form of ‘socio-artistic engagement to get inside the locality of such macro socio-economic processes and structures’ (2016, p. 229).

It might seem odd to be writing about a boardgame in the context of applied theatre and drama education but, as Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson note, applied theatre practice is
‘an ecology of practices that make pragmatic, imaginative and contingent relations, connections, attachments and belongings’ (2016, p. 5). The fields of applied theatre and drama education are constantly expanding their methodologies, spaces, contexts and convergence with practices in other fields. Anderson et al, for instance, foreground the intersections between drama, education and new technologies, which has included digital gaming (2015). Whilst ‘Homeless Monopoly’ was not engaged in theatre-making per se, it can be understood in relation to a long and diverse history of applied theatre and drama education that has employed arts-based methodologies and practices to tease out and articulate cultural anxieties, stimulate debate, heighten awareness and make the case for change. Pedagogical drama is primarily about ‘imagining other worlds’, which the game does, as well as emphasising the established conventions of play, role-play and rehearsal as a way of thinking through scenarios and action. The project also grew from an investment in arts-based methods of data-gathering, collaboration and creative imagining as it drew on the particular expertise of the project team, which included Calderwood’s experience using media arts for advocacy, education and well-being and my prior research on how theatre, rehearsal and community-based projects can contribute to enhanced understandings of identity and citizenship.

**Responding to a National Crisis and Calls for Resilience**

The creation of ‘Homeless Monopoly’ responded to a climate when the plight of homelessness has been escalating due to structural factors such as the poor provision of social housing and the expensive private rental market, as well as austerity measures that have seen harsh cuts to welfare and a freeze on housing benefit. In many towns and cities across the UK, there has been a marked increase in visible homelessness on the streets. Launching its 2019-2022 strategy, the homeless charity Shelter declared that the ‘housing crisis is now a national emergency’ citing the fact that in addition to people sleeping rough on the streets there are ‘over 90,000 households hidden away in temporary accommodation in England and Scotland, a rise of 38% in the last five years’.¹ These ‘hidden homeless’ are precariously housed in hostels, Bed and Breakfast establishments or sofa surfing with friends and family.
In Coventry, the city where I work, which is located in the West Midlands region of England, the issue of homelessness was proving particularly acute. At the end of 2018 it was reported that the city had the second highest rate of homelessness in the region and in September 2019, the Coventry Telegraph ran a news item with the heading: ‘A family is made homeless every 10 hours in Coventry’, which contained statistics released from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that found there were 555 households in temporary accommodation, a sharp rise from the 282 recorded at the same point in 2018 (Hook, 2018; Clark, 2019). Moreover, it was clear that this was set to be a long-term problem. In 2018, Coventry Council published a report on homelessness in the city that stated:

The levels of homelessness are likely to increase over the next five years, as external influences (such as welfare reform and affordability) continue to impact on people’s ability to sustain their current tenancies or home ownership, whilst also making it more difficult to access alternative accommodation if they do become homeless.²

Violent, abusive and anti-social behaviour targeted against the homeless has been on the rise too involving physical attacks, sexual assault, verbal abuse and humiliating acts such as being urinated and spat on. In January 2019 the Coventry Telegraph reported that a homeless person had his hands doused in lighter fuel and set alight whilst he slept in a park in Coventry. It was a shocking assault that highlighted the vulnerability of rough sleepers and a figuring of the homeless as somehow less than human. This was not a lone incident. In 2016 the homeless charity Crisis recorded ‘street sleepers were almost 17 times more likely than the average person to have been the victim of violence, and 15 times more likely to have suffered verbal abuse’ (Butler, 2016). In this context, the ‘Homeless Monopoly’ project team wanted to create an interventionist game that would facilitate young people teasing out some of the attitudes that lead to violent and demeaning behaviours targeted towards the homeless.

The game was also alert to the fact, as Megan Ravenhill outlines in The Culture of Homelessness, that the factors that lead to homelessness often begin early in life – absent parenting, violence in the home, child abuse, time spent in care, bullying or a parent with dependency issues. She raises the need for creative thinking and innovative approaches to
tackle homelessness in terms of prevention and specifically identifies the potential efficacy of early school-based interventions.

Roofless people felt that had they been taught about what to do or where to go for help during a housing crisis whilst at school, they would have recognized what was happening to them sooner. Had such a course been taught alongside other issues such as drugs awareness, they may not have become roofless or the duration of their rooflessness could have been significantly curtailed (Ravenhill, 2008, p. 239).

Hence, Ravenhill advocates early intervention to teach the warning signs of risk, what homelessness entails and awareness of support mechanisms as a means of encouraging resilience in those who may encounter circumstances that could lead to homelessness in later life.

In recent years the concept of resilience has risen to prominence as a way of signalling the need for coping mechanisms at times of stress or crisis that rely on a perpetual state of vigilance and preparedness, and the abilities to learn from the past, to respond to change and adapt to altered circumstances that heighten vulnerabilities. Brad Evans and Julian Reid suggest in *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, ‘[w]hile there are a number of ways to reduce vulnerabilities, including reduced exposure, transfer and sharing of risks, preparation and transformation, resilience is key to this new ethics of responsibility’ (2014, p. 5-6). The implications surrounding resilience as an ideological concept have faced significant criticism amidst concern that it has been co-opted and mobilised for a neoliberal agenda that has normalised individualism, stressed the need for self-reliance and ultimately endorsed the withdrawal of state responsibility for social problems. Discourses of resilience problematically stress how the neoliberal subject is charged with finding ways to cope in turbulent times, without addressing the causes of that turbulence. Resilience becomes about managing a persistent state of ‘normalized anxiety’ and insecurity rather than challenging the circumstances that demand resilience in the first place or initiating alternative modes of being that might lead to political transformation (Evans and Reid, 2014, p. 92). In this frame, neoliberal thinking might view the possibility of homelessness as an inevitable consequence of the contemporary condition that must be managed by encouraging resilience rather than
demanding political and social change to eradicate its existence. Several theorists (Cretney, 2014; Evans and Reid, 2014; Cutter, 2016) also highlight the structural issues of power and marked social inequalities that result in uneven access to individual and collective agency, as well as to the support mechanisms that might help at moments of crisis. With particular relevance for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, Raven Cretney draws attention to the worrying implications for ‘vulnerable subjects’ who face the presumption that it is they alone who have to overcome the challenges they face, which, in turn, ‘deflects criticism and responsibility away from the state’ and society (2014, p. 634). If, as Evans and Reid insist, becoming resilient ‘requires more than simply taking care of our individual precariousness’, how might it be possible to introduce a more communal, sustainable version of resilient thinking that is about shared knowledge about and accountability for the vulnerabilities that exist in society? (2014, p. 4).

In their retort to the rhetoric of resilience, Evans and Reid call for ‘a different concept of the political, which disavowing narratives of survivability and endangerment, proposes a forceful account of the politics of love essential to a new consciousness for human togetherness’ (2015, p. 158). They advocate for the arts, poetics and the imagination as a means to apprehend new ways of conceiving the world, its interconnectivity and to initiate new ethical relations. A game, designed to offer an innovative approach to perceiving homelessness, might be understood in relation to this impulse, but it perhaps fits more comfortably with Cretney’s call to value ‘grassroots resilience…articulated as a concept for designing community-driven approaches to environmental and social issues’ (2014, p. 634). Cretney insists that ‘resilience can be articulated and practised in a way that expresses transformative, alternative counter-neoliberal discourses of self, community and society’ and that the most important thing is ‘the values and motivation of those taking part’ (2014, p. 635-636). The creation of ‘Homeless Monopoly’ was driven by people who wanted to contribute to an enhanced understanding of homelessness. It was also rooted in an ethos of collaboration that relied on dismantling traditional hierarchies of knowledge in order to share and incorporate experience and ways of seeing that emerged from the different constituencies involved.

Creating ‘Homeless Monopoly’: A Collaborative Ethos
The process of devising the game relied on a collaborative approach to accumulating material and the positioning of participants as co-creators. At the project’s heart was its research partnership with the Cyrenians, with its mission to ‘provide individualised support to promote and enhance the life chances of people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, and empower them to live as independently as possible’. The Cyrenians know that the issues facing the homeless are far more complex than simply needing a roof over their heads and offer a client-focused holistic approach via allocated support workers and personalised plans to facilitate access to support for mental health challenges, problems with addiction and to enhance employment prospects as routes into rebuilding lives. The charity has been notably innovative in its approach for young people. Since 2012 it has run a social enterprise store and café that provides volunteering, work experience and training opportunities for young people. In 2013 the Cyrenians secured funding from Comic Relief (and later the National Lottery) to launch a new initiative, Alcohol Intervention Mediation Services (AIMS), to work with young people aged 13 to 18 years who are at risk of having to leave home and/or who have issues with alcohol or their mental health.

Cyrenian staff members Izzy Hawkins and James Forsyth appreciated the benefits that might accrue from some of their clients and volunteers (who are usually ex-service-users) sharing their unique experiences and perspectives on the topic and were hopeful that the game itself could help deconstruct normative frameworks and negative stereotypes. Recognising the potential capacity of the game as a resource for their service users, volunteers and staff, the Cyrenians promoted and hosted three focus group sessions with their clients and volunteers. The charity acted as a ‘gatekeeper agency’, with staff using their knowledge to identify potential participants. It was crucial that ‘Homeless Monopoly’ was not perceived as a distanced research project but was instead embedded in the values and support mechanisms the Cyrenian staff actioned on a daily basis. Equally, it was important that those who had experienced homelessness were prepared to offer insight into their lives and experience. In her call for a radical shift in how homelessness is perceived and tackled, Ravenhill laments the fact that the homeless are often absent from discourses around homelessness and stresses the need to avoid research processes in which homeless people are ‘relegated from expert to freak attraction’ (2008, p. 21). She insists that ‘[t]hose with the most knowledge
about rooflessness and the homeless culture are those who have lived that lifestyle’ (Ravenhill, p. 83). This rationale propelled the content of the focus groups, which, in turn, informed the content and conceptualisation of the boardgame in its early stages of development.

Insert Fig. 1

Caption: ‘Homeless Monopoly’ Focus Group Credit: Nadine Holdsworth

The focus groups took place at the Cyrenian’s administrative premises, a place familiar to those the project team were trying to reach, with staff support available for participants before, during and after the sessions. During these informal sessions, representatives from the Cyrenians, their service-users and the project team had lunch together as a means of breaking the ice and establishing a rapport. As facilitators, we selected a range of arts-based methods to open up conversations around perceptions of homelessness, their individual trajectories into homelessness and ideas regarding how their lives had been changed or had the potential to change. These modes find accord with Hughes and Nicholson’s insistence that applied theatre is reliant on ‘encounters characterised by openness and a commitment to a process of making relations rather than staking out a secure or fixed position’ (2016, p. 7, original emphasis). Through a range of exercises participants accumulated words associated with homelessness, drew pictures, wrote postcards to someone who could influence their lives, gave advice to their former selves and shared their aspirations for change and ‘top tips’ for helping young people at risk of homelessness. We also asked for information regarding the ‘homeless industry’, the network of charities, as well as local community-based and religious groups that offer services to support the homeless in the city (Ravenhill, 2008, p. 14). We were interested not just in services, but the places that were meaningful. We learnt that the library was valued for being ‘warm/relaxing/quiet’, that the bus station café supplied cheap chips, and that the Cyrenian office was somewhere to not only see a support worker, but to get a cup of tea, a biscuit and a chat. It was also important that the exercises were not solely focused on homelessness, as if this was the only thing that defined our participants. We asked what they liked doing and noted responses including ‘I like watching TV, doing crosswords and jigsaw puzzles’ and ‘riding motorcycles’. As such, the focus groups became a way of countering the perception that homelessness is necessarily a permanently negative
state of ‘being without’ as outlined by Paul Moran and Frances Atherton (2018, p. 2). Alternatively, whilst acknowledging the states of privation encountered by those with experience of homelessness, the focus groups highlighted what they did have – knowledge, expertise, skills, hobbies, hopes and compassion for others.

Addressing the ambition to create a board game, advice was sought on appropriate player pieces, the characterisation of players, scenarios for inclusion and an invitation was extended to participants to pilot the game as part of its iterative research, development and design phase. This activity was vital as a way of ensuring that the game was based on real-life scenarios and sources of support that were meaningful for the homeless community, but it transpired that being involved in the game’s evolution also had positive implications for some Cyrenian service-users. The focus groups provided a means of appreciating the knowledge and life skills they had accumulated and a collaborative platform for celebrating the fact that they had chosen to be involved in something that was beyond their immediate need, and that was about helping others to avoid some of the difficulties they had encountered in their lives. It also contributed to community-building, as James Forsyth noted, by providing a platform whereby ‘clients would freely interact with each other and share their experiences’, which helps to build enhanced solidarity and robustness.4

The evolution of the game also relied on access to young people who were the target audience for the game. AIMS co-ordinator Phil Smith ran a consultation session with students at Cardinal Newman School in Coventry as part of a community awareness programme run by the school’s history teacher Rhys Davies. In addition, the design phase of the project utilized ‘student activators’, a scheme run by Coventry University that enables students to undertake paid positions and gain work experience by being involved in research projects. In this case, the project commissioned three illustration students with complimentary skills and a shared design aesthetic to produce artwork for the game that would appeal to the target audience. Both groups of young people contributed invaluable feedback on the game mechanics and some important suggestions for content that related to their understanding of scenarios that might impact on youth homelessness. In particular, they raised issues around gender, sexual orientation and trans-gender identity that they felt might result in increased vulnerability in the home. These aspects were subsequently incorporated into the
game through the creation of additional scenario cards depicting LGBTQ+ concerns, as well as additional resource tokens for condoms and sanitary protection.

**Design and Game Mechanics: A window into the world of homelessness**

The original design of the game, a square with nine spaces on each side and four corners, made strong visual reference to the traditional Monopoly game, but combined iconic Coventry places including the modern cathedral and a statue of Lady Godiva; retail spaces including Starbucks and Primark; places signifying problems zones for the homeless such as the police station and Accident and Emergency unit of a hospital; places of support in the city including the Cyrenians and Crisis Skylight and what became known as the ‘grey zones’, the spaces where the homeless can be found - park benches, bus shelters and stairwells. In the corners ‘sofa surfing’ replaced ‘free parking’ and ‘isolation’ replaced jail. The money, houses and hotels familiar from Monopoly were replaced by coins and resource tokens. Players begin the game with a quantity of coins and a supply of resource tokens selected randomly from a collection of twenty-two including a tent, sleeping bag, a pillow, a cup of coffee, sandwich, bottle of water and toothpaste.

The game mechanics utilized fours packs of cards transcribed from the original chance and community chest cards into the headings: opportunity, choice, weather and utilities that present various scenarios and questions. These cards drive the action of the game, stimulating movement backwards and forwards around the board and the acquisition and loss of coins and resource tokens. The objective is to accumulate sufficient money and resources to acquire the key to a home. However, rather than the traditional impetus in Monopoly to win at the expense of every other player’s loss, this re-imagining promotes collaboration and an alternative winning strategy entails pooling resources and announcing the intention to co-habit with another player. As one player summarised, ‘It is good having the option to team up as it made people think if they should work together as part of a team’, which relies on communication, coordination and cooperation in order to problem-solve. It also suggests that, rather than being an individualised state, homelessness is a social problem that demands societal responsibility and agencies working together. Of course, this has a wider set of social implications around how state, local council and charitable resources
might be co-ordinated to address this pernicious problem. With this in mind, it has been instructive to see how the Covid-19 pandemic prompted an allocation of central resources in the UK, as well as a raft of policy changes and initiatives developed with and actioned by local councils and charities to support many homeless people or those at risk of homelessness via the ‘Everyone in’ hotel and emergency accommodation operation and the temporary curtailing of evictions from the private and social rented sectors.

This pilot of ‘Homeless Monopoly’ was designed to bring the diverse experience of homelessness into the players orbit as a means of countering apathy, encouraging recognition and hopefully instilling a more informed and engaged response to the topic. It tries to illuminate the complex intersection of structural factors and personal triggers that can contribute to homelessness and the different manifestations of homelessness from rough sleeping, to night shelters, hostels, temporary accommodation and sofa surfing. Myth-busting was a primary motivation. The scenarios depicted in the choice and opportunity cards were intended to combat normative and, very often, reductive perceptions of the homeless; the complex factors behind homelessness and the multifaceted trajectories and myriad issues faced by homeless people. In particular, there was an aim to shift focus away from stereotype of the lifestyle choice victim and ‘individual vulnerabilities and failings’ that Ravenhill found a commonplace trope in early studies of homelessness (2008, p. 96).

The game highlights the heterogeneity of the homeless community – those in work, refugees, ex-armed forces personnel, former cared for children, ex-prisoners, victims of domestic abuse, children kicked out of home, those facing difficulties due to their mental health, alcoholism or drug addiction and people who are no longer able to pay their rent due to family breakdowns, unemployment, benefit sanctions or unstable incomes resulting from zero-hours contracts. The ambition was to make game-players think about routes into homelessness that they may not have previously contemplated. For example, cards that evolved directly from encounters during the focus groups read: ‘You escape from modern-day slavery. You do not have a permit to work in the UK and your English is very poor. Go to Isolation, lose all your coins and 3 resource tokens’ and ‘Your landlord decides to evict you from your home of 10 years even though you have always paid the rent on time, because he wants to increase his income by renting separate rooms to students. He is threatening you
with violence if you do not leave immediately. Look online for advice from Shelter. Go to the LAW CENTRE’. Respondents made it clear that the game made them think about multiple routes into homelessness, epitomised by one player’s response to a question about what they had learnt which referred to ‘the family rejections (a woman coming out being ejected from her home, a parent locking out a child) really impacted how these issues are not just based around the stereotypes of druggies and drop-outs, but can come from places of safety and comfort’.

Insert Fig. 2

Caption: ‘Homeless Monopoly’ Choice Card Credit: Jackie Calderwood

A central plank of the game’s work around building resourcefulness in the face of adversity was to highlight the support services available to those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. As indicated above, local and national support services featured on the board, but a broader range of support mechanisms from charities to church groups featured on the cards too. In her discussion of socio-ecological resilience Cretney writes about ‘how ‘maintaining a store of resources’ helps to build ‘adaptive capacity’ (2014, p. 630). Whilst the game-players clearly do not gain insight into homelessness from lived experience, it was hoped that their shared access to information regarding available support might be stored in the memory bank as something that could be called upon if the need ever arose. Examples below of opportunity cards show how this knowledge transfer was embedded in the game.

1. You visit Jesus Army for a shower and to wash clothes, move forwards 2 spaces.
2. Go to Positive Choices for a substance misuse assessment, move on 2 spaces
3. After visiting Change, Grow, Live you are referred for counselling with Positive Choices, collect 3 coins.

More broadly, ‘All Change’ cards were introduced to reveal some of the structural mechanisms that can impact on all homeless people such as the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol that is activated to place people in temporary accommodation if extreme weather conditions hit. The game also exposes some of the social and political logics that contribute to the actual and symbolic violence faced by the city’s and nation’s homeless, for example
how negative newspaper reports on homelessness can lead to an increase in violent incidents or how defensive architecture (homeless spikes) have been introduced to prevent the homeless from dwelling in public space.

Defensive architecture is revealing on a number of levels, because it is not the product of accident or thoughtlessness, but a thought process. It is a sort of unkindness that is considered, designed, approved, funded and made real with the explicit motive to exclude and harass. It reveals how corporate hygiene has overridden human considerations, especially in retail districts. (Andreou, 2015)

Being in receipt of a card that states ‘Buildings where you shelter introduce “Homeless Spikes”’, all players who are in SHOPS, ICONIC COVENTRY or GREY ZONES go to ISOLATION’ highlights the symbolic violence indicated by a practice such as defensive architecture, identifying its demonization of the entire homeless population and provides a prompt for players to be more alert to changes in their local built environment that may have social and political motivations. It was also important to the project team that the cards represented stories local to the vicinity of Coventry such as the man who had his hands set on fire or a recent bequeathal of a 4-bedroom house to the Cyrenians.

**Piloting the Game: Rehearsing Resilience**

The project team piloted the game extensively with volunteers who responded to a call to play or attended an event where the game was being discussed. Each pilot play involved at least one member of the project team as a player or observer. These occasions were informal, but as the players familiarised themselves with the rules of the game they were told about the origins of ‘Homeless Monopoly’ and the fact that the scenarios they would encounter in the game were based on real-life testimonials. As the game unfolded the project team took on a pedagogical role through contributions and prompts for discussion and by providing contextual information. After each pilot play-through the players were invited to share their responses to the game via an anonymised online survey, which elicited thirty-five responses.
A significant component of the game’s mechanics is the way it asks players to consider their responses to a range of situations and encounters stimulated by the Choice cards that have two modalities. The first offers up a situation for general debate in the group, as illustrated by one card that states: ‘A hostel for homeless people is planned next door to your home. Your neighbour has started a petition against it. They invite you round for tea and ask you to sign. Ask your fellow players what points they would make to counter or support the petition’. The second version of the Choice card works by identifying a dilemma and inviting the player who has picked up the card to seek advice from two other players. The player with the card chooses which advice to take and thanks the person who has supplied it with an ‘appropriate’ payment of money or resource tokens.

Insert Fig. 3

Caption: ‘Homeless Monopoly’ in play Credit: Simon Peter Green

During the piloting of the game, it was clear that the Choice cards served several purposes. Practically, the cards impacted on the game dynamics, described as ‘the run-time behaviour of the mechanics acting on player input and each other’s inputs over time’ (Matallaoui, 2017, p. 10). The cards initiate shifts in rhythm and the opening up of pedagogical space, with one player noting how ‘[t]he shifts in energy, from deep conversation and reflection on personal stories and situations to a more energetic and light-hearted feel worked very well’. The moments of pause from the gameplay introduce a temporal shift whereby players are invited to give advice or verbally rehearse what they might do in a given situation, they are asked to build a case and to think about what evidence they might draw on to persuade others. During these interjections other players are invited to listen to alternative views and potential actions, to contemplate what is being said and how it might concur with their thoughts on a topic, they learn from each other and revise their views and tactics. This modality finds accord with what Gallagher as called the ‘aesthetic of talk’ that can emerge as part of drama pedagogy when conversation becomes a productive site for a dynamic co-creation of knowledge (2014, p. 173). The strategy also connects with Cutter’s discussion of how resilience might be understood as ‘a dynamic process that includes feedback, adaptive learning and change’ (2016, p. 111). This invitation to rehearse action as part of a communal
shared activity is crucial to the game-as-pedagogy and how it might lead to altered, or at least more considered, behaviour in the ‘real’ world.

During the piloting phase, feedback was overwhelmingly concerned with the ‘aesthetic of talk’, with a typical response being ‘genuinely engaging group discussions. The discussions themselves became a stronger, more gripping part of the game as it went on’. Players commented on how the discussions engaged and invited them to develop a heightened awareness of their assumptions, prejudices and the contributory factors that impacted the behaviours and their willingness to acknowledge and help homeless people they encountered. Ravenhill acknowledges that ‘[t]he sight of people sitting on the streets of England can be, for some people, a very powerful experience, invoking a variety of sometimes conflicting reactions and emotions, including anger and pity’ (2008, p. 25). This game provided a space where those ‘conflicting reactions and emotions’ could be acknowledged and tested in a supportive and ultimately playful environment. Several pilot players wrote about how the game provided a reflective space, such as one who reported thinking about ‘the interactions I have had with homeless people and how my actions vary depending on whether they are male or female’. Another player cited how the game had encouraged them to think about ‘my own misconceptions of homelessness or how I would act in certain situations compared to how I'd advise others to act’.

Whilst the game was geared towards young people, it became clear during the pilot phase that it had a wider application, especially for the Cyrenians and its clients. One staff member commented on how well the game reflected their working environment, that it was useful as a ‘team-building exercise’ and that it could potentially help their commercial supporters such as ‘Coventry Building Society understand issues around homelessness’. James Forsyth noted how the sharing of personal narratives opened up a dialogic space that had previously proved tricky. He reflected on having ‘played a couple of games where (ex)homeless individuals were playing and two or more players can relate to the cards that are being discussed. I have discussed with some players after and it makes them realise that others are going through the same experiences’. He also identified how the game had facilitated an enriched encounter with Cyrenian clients who had previously struggled with more formal mechanisms:
Some clients have not always been open to discussing their support needs via the traditional support planning process of sitting with their worker in an office environment but open up when playing the game about what they have been through in their past and what they have overcome.\(^6\)

The game also provided a vehicle to enable those who had experienced homelessness to interact with new members of the public, to insert themselves back into the fabric of society. On Saturday 5 October 2019 ‘Homeless Monopoly’ was featured as part of ‘Coventry Collaborates’, a City of Culture event that took place at Fargo Village in Coventry. The occasion was conceived as a family-friendly event with food, face-painting, games and stalls, with opportunities for people to engage with the research on display. I was joined on that day by James Forsyth and a number of their service users who gave up their time to celebrate the outcome of the collaboration and to disseminate the game’s potential to as wide an audience as possible. Whilst many people came to see what the stall was about, the most significant interactions occurred when members of the public sat down to play the game with current and ex-Cyrenians service users, who were able to comment on their experiences and how it was reflected in the game. Those who had experience of homelessness reported that they appreciated the various conversations they’d had ‘with members of the public, who thought it was very informative and true to life’. These moments of encounter, of speaking and being heard, build confidence, dismantle stigmas, reduce stereotypes and have the potential to contribute to a more resilient culture.

There are, of course, challenges in approaching a subject like homelessness through this kind of pedagogical practice. There is a danger that it could trivialise the topic or be reductive in how it condenses complex, multi-dimensional experience into convenient scenarios. There are, as Gallagher recognises, knotty ethical issues with ‘witnessing painful stories and aiming to make some greater social good of those stories’ (2016, p. 234). There is also a need to carefully mitigate against appropriating experience or heightening vulnerabilities by re-activating traumatic histories. Clearly, playing a game does nothing to alter the structural inequalities that can lead to homelessness and it is important to be attentive to Katharine Low’s caution regarding ‘a neoliberal agenda whereby arts practice is being employed as a salve or plaster for widespread and complex social ills’ (2017, 6). As this pilot project evolves,
Further research is required to develop enhanced and robust mechanisms to test whether this pedagogical tool can contribute to changing perceptions of and altered behaviours towards the homeless beyond immediate responses following the game play. Moreover, as recent scholarship in applied theatre has attested, claims about change need to be treated with caution due to the ‘non-linearity of social change’ (Hughes and Nicholson, 2016, p. 10).

Nonetheless, this pilot project has cemented a belief that a thoughtful approach to game design, game mechanics and game dynamics can not only be educative, but seed ways to test attitudes. The game can offer ‘micro-encounters that shift the landscape momentarily, make discursive interjections, and together may amount to a different analytic possibility’ (Gallagher, 2016, p. 245). This piloting phase has suggested that the game can open up the potential for new ways of apprehending the self, vulnerable others and the mechanisms that contribute to and support homelessness in society. It has indicated ways that resourcefulness and resilience might be collectively learned and shared as sustainable strategies through processes of rehearsing and thinking through unpredictable challenges, vulnerabilities, support mechanisms and different life outcomes experienced by the homeless. Moreover, it has challenged the values associated with a neoliberal market-driven individualistic culture that instils a believe that vulnerabilities are down to poor-choices that need to be self-managed via enhanced resilience and alternatively forwards ideas of collective responsibility, collaborative resourcefulness and shared problem-solving.

Notes

1 https://england.shelter.org.uk/what_we_do/our_strategy/strategy [accessed 14 May 2020].


3 See http://www.coventrycyrenians.co.uk/ [accessed 6 May 2020].

4 Email from James Forsyth to the author, 19 February 2020.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.
References


Hook, J. (2018) ‘Coventry has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the region’