Breaking (a) Character: Investigating Children’s Reactions in a Role-Playing Game on Social Identity

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ABSTRACT
Labels that people give us have an impact on our social identity. People’s perceptions of our expressed gender, for example, lead to labels that we learn to perform, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. We wish to look into creating a children’s reflection game that can raise awareness of the labels we wear and the labels we assign to other people. To achieve this, we involved 24 primary school students in a role-playing activity. We present findings and implications for design.

CCS CONCEPTS
• Human-centered computing → Interface design prototyping; Participatory design; Usability testing; • Social and professional topics → Children.

KEYWORDS
DEI, primary school children, co-design, game, empathy, reflection

1 INTRODUCTION
Early on, children learn about gender identity and how others perceive them [1], and at the same time, they start distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate behavior and preferences [1, 3]. Intergroup behavior refers to how people interact with one another based on their membership in categories or labels [7]. The label can be considered as the link between a person and a set of undesirable characteristics that form a stereotype [4]. We tend to give labels to people, which modify our behavior toward them; in response, if the person giving the label or the label itself is perceived as important, they start agreeing and behaving accordingly [5]. Thus, labels shape our social identity [7] and set up self-fulfilling prophecies [5]. A classic example of a self-fulfilling prophecy is the math performance of girls [2].

Interventions to reduce the impact of labels can either provide multifaceted awareness training to the labelling group [4] or use creative reframing techniques which target the labelled group [7]. As part of the process of developing technology that promotes Diversity and Inclusion, we concentrated on Link and Phelan’s awareness, in particular focusing on children. Although there have been attempts to use technology to assist children in reflecting on gender stereotypes (e.g., [6, 8]), the field remains largely unexplored. The purpose of this study is to gather requirements for the design of a technology that will encourage reflection by examining how children interact while playing a game that challenges them to act as someone else.

2 METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS
We carried out a role-play exercise based on Social Identity Theory [7] and labelling [4] to understand how children respond to labels in a playful context and then generate requirements for a reflection game.

We worked with a class of 24 children, 12 boys and 12 girls, ages 10 to 11. The Cinderella fairy tale was given to the children to plan a theatre play and perform it. On their foreheads, each child had a piece of paper with a label written on it. The labels were given by their teachers to prevent the characteristic from adhering to the child’s true personality. Specifically, we asked teachers to allocate 6 children to each of the following labels composed by a trait and a role: Shy and Caring, Assertive Organizer, Confident Speaker, and Creative Artist. After, we split them up into 6 groups of 4 children each so that every personality type was represented in one group.

Children were encouraged to try interacting with others based on their labels. First, they had to plan and act out the fairy tale, selecting which character to play among the Princess, the Prince, Cinderella, and the Knight. Eventually, each child was assigned a label with a trait and a role by the teachers, and each child chose a fairy tale character. Then, we proposed to them to change characters and asked them if they felt comfortable taking on a different one. Teachers monitored the activity and assisted in making them comfortable since we wanted them to experience a different role.
without making them feel uneasy. Before ending the session, we asked the children some questions about the activity, how they felt, which labels they found challenging, and which characters they preferred. Throughout the activity, three authors filled out observation grids and took notes. All the authors then met to reflect on the preliminary findings.

The children found it challenging to distinguish between the two acting levels — one associated with the label and the other with the fairy tale character. A few children were perplexed by the assignment and had no idea how to understand the labels in relation to the task of organizing a play. Some children did not like their new label, so they preferred not to act on it. Some children struggled with handling their own personality traits, so they were only able to adhere to their labels in the beginning. Some children were so engaged in playing the part of the fairy tale character that they let go of the label and played the character more stereotypically. Children who used more props, displayed emotion without restraint, and imagined themselves in real play were able to mirror their labels for longer periods. Another cause of the different degrees to which some children accepted the label was influenced by the fact that some children were more reactive than active players. Some children claimed that even with another label from the proposed ones, they would not have recognized themselves, while others claimed that if they had been given a different label, their performance might have been better. Compared to the other labels, the Assertive Organizer label was discussed more. A boy labelled as Assertive Organizer told us that he was not as bad as he had thought, and he felt relieved and more confident. On the opposite, two girls who had the same label did not like it and were too shy to try it out.

Girls generally told us that they enjoyed experimenting with the stereotypically masculine characters of the Prince and the Knight because they were more active and allowed them to explore more facets of who they were. While some boys expressed a similar sentiment regarding feminine characters, most agreed that it was both inconvenient and inappropriate to play a traditionally feminine character. Even though there were some bumps in the activity, the children enjoyed themselves.

3 IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN

Thanks to the activity, we were able to gather an initial set of requirements for the design of a game that aims at prompting reflection and awareness of diversity and stereotypes.

The setting should be familiar but not drawn from stereotypical storytelling. On the one hand, while the fairy tale was familiar, the first phase of planning the play was not. This added a layer of difficulty that was summed to the already challenging task of acting. Besides simplifying the game, a familiar setting can also help in understanding what the labels mean in that determined context. On the other hand, the fairy tale was too familiar as familiar, and imagined themselves in real play were able to mirror their labels for longer periods. Another cause of the different degrees to which some children accepted the label was influenced by the fact that some children were more reactive than active players. Some children claimed that even with another label from the proposed ones, they would not have recognized themselves, while others claimed that if they had been given a different label, their performance might have been better. Compared to the other labels, the Assertive Organizer label was discussed more. A boy labelled as Assertive Organizer told us that he was not as bad as he had thought, and he felt relieved and more confident. On the opposite, two girls who had the same label did not like it and were too shy to try it out.

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4 CONCLUSION

In this study, children were asked to play a role-playing game in which they pretended to have different personality traits. Even though it was an exploratory exercise, it helped identify some needs and challenges that would arise when designing a reflection game. A reflection game on diversity, in particular, should be driven by a narrative; however, stereotyped or overly simplistic stories should be avoided. Potential challenges include discomfort and dislike of the opposite, which should be addressed by both non-polarized content and game mechanics.

REFERENCES