



[Jessica Hammer, PhD](#) is the Thomas and Lydia Moran Assistant Professor of Learning Science at Carnegie Mellon University. She holds positions in the [Human Computer Interaction Institute](#) and the [Entertainment Technology Center](#) where she researches game design and develops transformational games that are intended to change how players think, feel and behave. A favorite presenter at our 3rd and 4th Integrative Conferences on Technology, Social Media, and Behavioral Health, Dr. Hammer spoke with the [Center's](#) Julia Holber about her newest game [Rosenstrasse](#) and offered advice for creating a successful crowdfunding campaign.

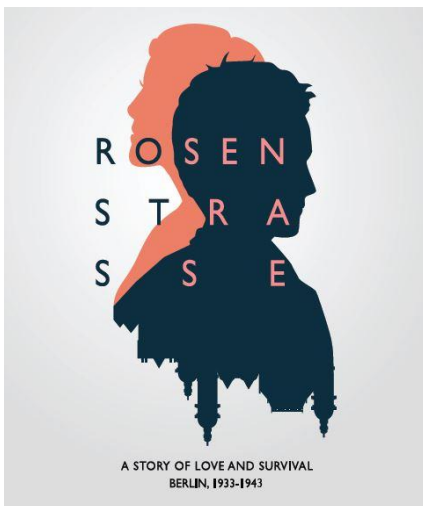


Julia: How did you become interested in designing games?

Jessica: When I was eight years old, I decided the key to becoming popular was creating games for kids' birthday parties. I went to the library and got a book called "101 Party Games Your Kids Will Love," and I started remixing those games and creating new ones. It worked really well for about a year! Obviously at the time I had no idea this could be my career. That took about another 20 years.

Julia: Tell us a bit about your newest game, Rosenstrasse.

Jessica: Well, I am part of a group called the War Birds, which is a women's game design collective. We make games that challenge dominant ideas about history, specifically by centering women's stories. There's a whole series of these games, and *Rosenstrasse* is one I've created together with Moyra Turkington, the leader of the collective. The game is an analog role playing game, so you actually get together with friends and take on the role of characters living in Berlin in 1933. The game explores the relationships between Jewish men and non-Jewish women in Berlin between 1933 and 1943. As you might guess, it's a very serious game - it's about the loss of civil liberties, the threat of death and persecution, and living under oppression. We're trying to grapple as honestly as we can with this quite difficult content.



Julia: Why did you choose this specific story for the game?

Jessica: The reason we especially want to tell this story is because the men in these marriages were protected until 1943 by the fact that they had a non-Jewish spouse. They were still living in Berlin ten years after Hitler came to power. On February 27, 1943, they were rounded up and were going to be processed, as a prelude to mass murder. Then something happened that had not happened before in Germany. There was a protest against the Reich specifically to protect Jews. These men's wives, and other women in their lives, spontaneously conducted a non-violent protest in front of the Rosenstrasse facility where the men were being held. They came back, day after day, after being told repeatedly to disperse and being fired on. The amazing thing is that these women, powerless, unarmed, looked the Reich in the eyes, and the Nazis blinked. They released the men. Almost all the men who were saved by the Rosenstrasse protest went on to survive the war.

Julia: Who is the intended audience for the game?

Jessica: This game is not for kids. It's not a beer and pretzels game. It's very serious. That being said, you don't have to be a historian to play this game. If you have loved another human being as a family member, friend, or a romantic partner, that's all the expertise that you need to bring to the table. And if you come to the table willing to use what you know about being a human being who loves and hopes and fears and dreams, then you will have a transformational experience playing this game.

Julia: What do you hope players take away from this game experience?

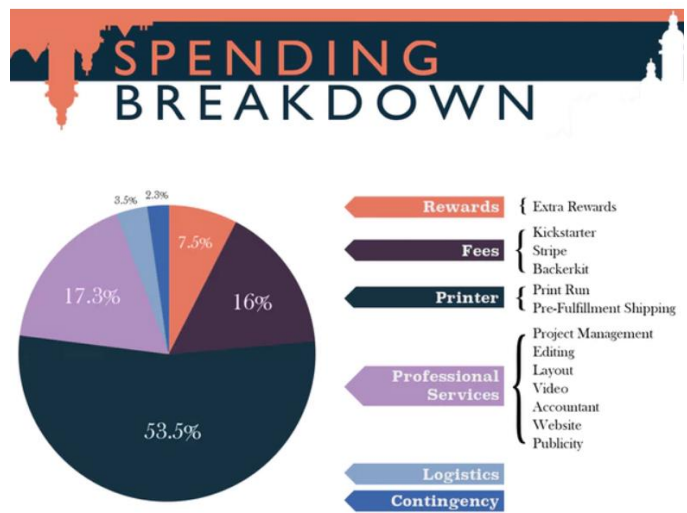
Jessica: We have both explicit educational and activist goals for the game. Rosenstrasse is an incredible story of honoring the courage of women and showing what’s possible when people stand up to oppression. At the same time, it illuminates the dangers of waiting until it’s your family before you stand up. These women stood up - when it was their husbands. We want people to understand this historical period, learn about this lesser known story, and incorporate that into the complexity of their thinking about the Holocaust. We also want people to walk away from it feeling more connected to the idea of resisting oppression, and feeling inspired to do that in their own lives before it comes to their door, personally.

Julia: What feedback have you received from players?

Jessica: We’ve run playtests now with about 150 players, and we’ve also done a qualitative research study here at CMU to understand how the game was transforming players. In nearly two decades of making games, I’ve never seen a game affect players the way Rosenstasse affects players. The thing that blows my mind is that we’ve had more than 10% of players reach out to us, without us asking, to tell us how the game has changed their lives in very pragmatic ways. For example, people have told us, “I’ve had conversations with my family about the Holocaust that I’d never have had otherwise. I went to a protest today because I remembered what my character in the game did. I went to Berlin to the [Rosenstrasse memorial](#) because I played your game and here’s a picture of me at the memorial because it was so meaningful to me.” That is humbling because 10% is just the percentage of people actively reaching out. That’s the tip of the iceberg. We’re now seeing people share the Kickstarter link with quotes like “This is the most moving game I’ve ever played” or “I still think about my experience playing this game.” It’s a big responsibility, and we’ve done our best through research and iterative design to make sure that we’re dealing with the material responsibly.

Julia: You’re now using [Kickstarter to fund the production of Rosenstrasse](#). What has been your experience using this platform?

Jessica: Kickstarter is a crowdfunding platform where you can feature projects and ask for contributions from people who want to see your project come to life. To date we have been funding Rosenstrasse mostly out of our own pockets. Producing a copy of Rosenstrasse is quite expensive if you’re not doing it in bulk. So, we want to produce 1,000 copies of the game. Backers who have donated a certain amount will get a copy, and the rest will be available for sale after the Kickstarter ends. To do this we need to raise \$20,000, and we’re almost 75% there, which is really exciting. This is a way to get the investment that we need, both in the emotional sense- building a community- as well as getting the upfront finances to get this printed and shipped.



Julia: What advice do you have for people who want to create a successful crowdfunding campaign?

Jessica: Number 1: Think about what it is you can offer beyond the base goal. We set our goal relatively modestly- basically let’s just make the game as it stands. We have big dreams, but we don’t want to risk the ability to print the game itself because we have big dreams. We need the community to react to us and want to support our work. On the other hand, we have some really cool stuff in the pipeline – a companion book of essays, a two-player version, and more. Number 2: we did an enormous amount of work revising the game before we went to Kickstarter. We’re not saying we *will* do playtesting and iterate the game before the release. We’ve done all that, there’s a little more to be done, but it’s polishing rather than creating. Having a mostly finished product is important for building trust with your community that you’re going to deliver and being able to share pieces of the project. People like to see what you’re doing as you’re doing it, and that’s been really important to us in terms of building a supportive community.

Learn more about Rosenstrasse and donate to the Kickstarter campaign [here!](#)

