

# Socioeconomic Pong: A Social Impact Game about Inequality

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## Link to game:

<http://media.capella.edu/NonCourseMedia/mediaLab/socioEconomicPong/index.asp>

(for best results, use Firefox, Chrome, or IE9)

Imagine that life in America is a game. Some players enter the playing field with advantages that make it easier to win. Some players enter with obstacles that make victory a challenge. This doesn't mean that the player with obstacles is doomed to lose, but it does mean that this player may find the game much more difficult to play.

The issue of socioeconomic inequality in the United States has become an increasingly popular topic of discussion and debate. President Barack Obama has placed the reduction of socioeconomic inequality at the center of his second term agenda. Obama recently stated, "The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe." (White House, Office of the Press Secretary).

So how do educators engage students in dialogue about socioeconomic inequality—and encourage students to evaluate the American cultural mythos that anyone can "pull themselves up from their bootstraps?" To help educators foster this dialogue, we developed a game called Socioeconomic Pong.

Socioeconomic Pong is a social impact game, or SIG. According to Ray, Faure & Kelle (2013), social impact games "deal with delicate social issues with the primary purpose being that of creating discourse and assisting learners to propose solutions and draw conclusions about issues of concern" (p. 61). Socioeconomic Pong is modeled after the classic Atari arcade game Pong, a simple electronic ping-pong game that features two paddles and a ball.

In traditional Pong, players are each given equally-sized paddles, and therefore neither has an advantage. In Socioeconomic Pong, the size of a player's paddle is determined by socioeconomic factors.

The purpose of Socioeconomic Pong is to demonstrate visually, and through game play, that the socioeconomic advantages and obstacles faced by an individual at birth have a strong impact on the likelihood of that individual's success. Winning the game is always *possible*, regardless of obstacles, but Socioeconomic Pong demonstrates the significant impact of inequality.

Before game play begins, players are asked a series of questions from drop down menus. Players input information about their gender and race, along with their parents' education level, incomes, professions, marital status, and other similar factors. These inputs affect the size of their paddle. Players with low socioeconomic factors are given a smaller paddle, which makes the game more difficult to play, and vice versa.

Players are also asked to input information about the state of the economy. In a strong economy, the ball is larger, which makes the game easier for everyone to play. The opposite is true if the economy is weak.

Scoring in Socioeconomic Pong reflects income disparities. If a player is a White male, he is awarded one point every time he scores. However, if the player is an African American female, she is only awarded 0.7 points every time she scores — because African American women on average make only 70 cents for every dollar that a White man makes. In addition, female players have to play with a "glass ceiling." When a male player's ball approaches the glass ceiling, it travels through as if the ceiling wasn't there; when a female's ball approaches the ceiling, the ball bounces back rapidly towards her side of the game, making it more difficult for her to play.

Statistics and other information about socioeconomic inequality are easy to find. By gamifying the concept through Socioeconomic Pong, we hope to illustrate this important concept in an innovative way and provoke discussion and debate about this important topic.

## References

Ray, B., Faure, C., & Kelle, F. (2013). Using social impact games (SIGS) to support constructivist learning: Creating a foundation for effective use in the secondary social studies education. *American Secondary Education*, 41(2), 60-70

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2013, Dec. 4). Remarks by the President on economic mobility [Press Release]. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/04/remarks-president-economic-mobility>.