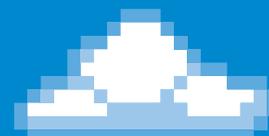# DIGITAL INTERACTIVE SPACES:

Digitally transforming education and participation

SALTO

PARTICIPATION &
INFORMATION

Disclaimer

This publication uses the title 'educators' as a collective term encompassing a diverse range of professionals engaged in the facilitation of learning experiences. While traditionally associated with formal educational roles such as school educators, vocational education and training (VET) teachers and higher education professors, we extend this term to embrace non-formal youth workers, adult education trainers and individuals contributing to education in varied settings.

Our intention is to foster inclusivity, recognising that those working in formal and non-formal educational settings share a common purpose – to empower and educate young people. This publication encourages a collaborative approach where professionals from different backgrounds and contexts can learn from one another, exchange insights and collectively enhance their effectiveness in reaching and supporting the target age group.

By using the term 'educators' in this broader sense, we aim to bridge the gap between formal and non-formal education, acknowledging the valuable contributions of all individuals committed to the holistic development and education of young people.

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Why this PUBLICATION?

In a world where digital transformation is affecting every sector, this publication marks a second step for SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre (SALTO PI) in exploring the possible uses of digital interactive approaches for participation. Following the initial edition dedicated to offer educators a useful guide in formal and non formal education contexts, this is a further exploration of utilising video games and other digital interactive spaces for fostering participation.

Our journey begins with a general question: how can we effectively use digital spaces to engage, educate and empower? And more specifically, how can we intertwine those spaces to enhance fostering participation and the diverse skills connected to it?

When we write *digital interactive spaces*, we mean first of all spaces that can be shared by participants who are there together and can possibly move around and explore: their agency is not limited to reading and commenting text and pictures; it is *interactive*, as they can relate to each other. Moreover, they can relate to the environment they are immersed in, use it, even transform it or be transformed by it, as they proceed in their experiences. The *digital* element is important, but it comes last, because it doesn't matter alone: this is why we are not talking about social media, or other digital tools, even if they could be positively used for fostering participation.

In fact, we offer here a collection of several different approaches to explore the subject of participation in democratic life within digital interactive spaces. Ranging from video games to online communities, universities to youth clubs, participatory budgeting to e-sport practices, this collection spans the spectrum. It begins by delving into the fundamental use of video games across various educational contexts and then gradually expanding to explore a broader array of educational digital interactions applied to participation. This includes utilising virtual reality (VR) appliances, engaging students in participatory processes using video games, fostering online communities to develop activities that are later implemented in person, developing new specific video games to serve distinct educational purposes and beyond.
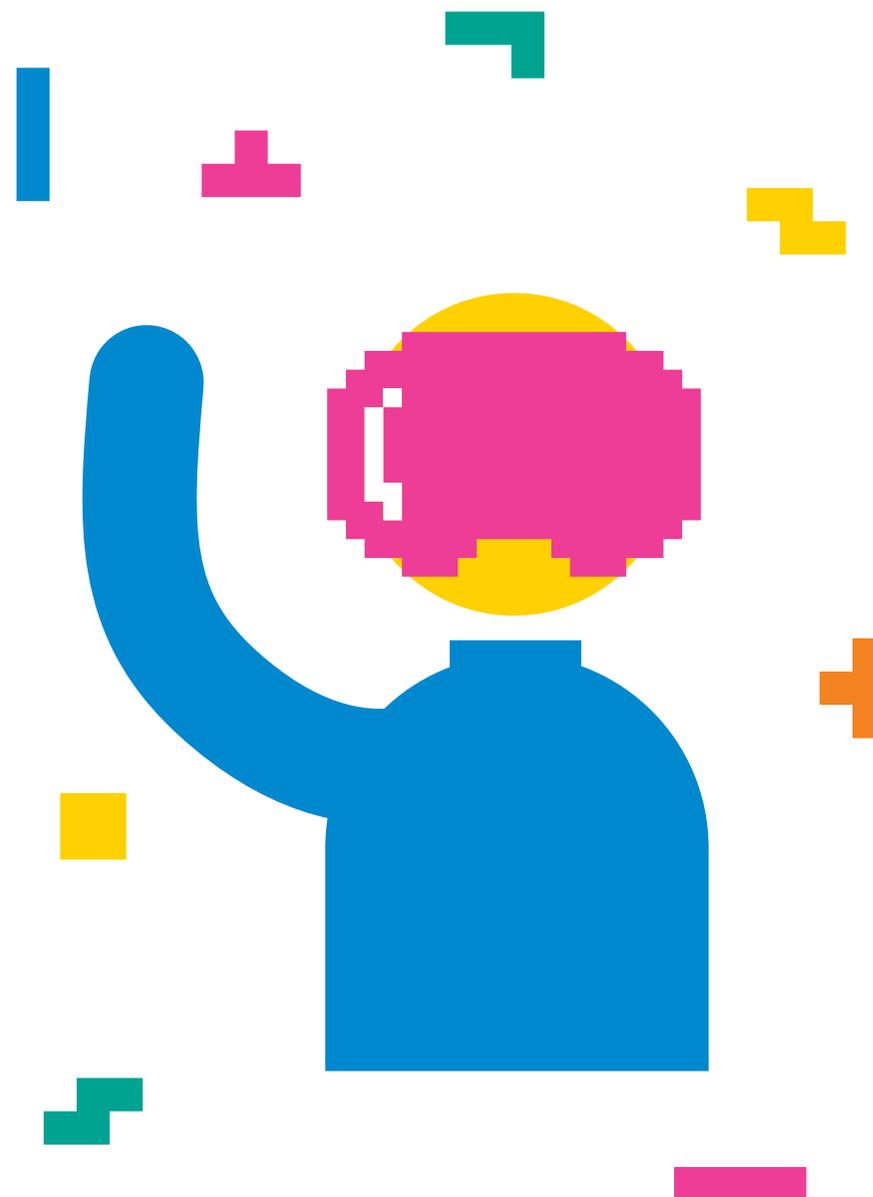
Contextualising interactive digital spaces

In explaining why we created this publication, we already stressed the aspect of *interaction* in digital spaces as the most important feature for selecting the experiences we are offering here.

The concept of interactive digital spaces underlines the dynamic relationship between users and the digital environment. Interaction is the critical aspect, as it highlights the importance of users' ability to both influence and be influenced by the environment. This interactivity is not just about simple navigation or operation within the space; instead, it encompasses a deeper engagement where users can meaningfully alter or be altered by their experiences.

This transformative interaction can happen in various forms, such as through modifying the digital spaces, creating new contents or changing the course of an event within these spaces. The design of these spaces often incorporates elements that respond to user actions, allowing a personalised and unique experience. This responsiveness to user input is essential in creating a sense of agency, where the user feels their actions have significant impact.

Moreover, interactive digital spaces often support social interactions, facilitating communication and collaboration among users sharing the same space. This social dimension adds another layer of complexity and richness, as interactions with others can profoundly shape the user's experience.

In these spaces, the experience is not static or predetermined; rather, it is fluid and evolves according to the interaction between the user and the environment. This dynamic nature of interactive digital spaces makes them particularly engaging, as they offer unique, personalised experiences that evolve and grow over time, reflecting the ongoing involvement of the user, and offer a wide range of possibilities for participation.

Finally, we already mentioned that we want to advise about the added values which digital interactive spaces could add to the participation process. We will elaborate on this later, but it is important to underline that our collection will provide you with some practical advice on how every platform we will mention can be used for different scenarios, target groups and objectives.

We will explore what we mean by digital transformation in the next paragraphs, but let's already state that participation, a cornerstone of democratic and educational processes, can find a new playground in these digital approaches.

This collection will showcase digital transformation in both formal and non-formal educational contexts, specifically exploring its application within the broader theme of participation. It highlights how this transformation may enhance or hinder the participatory process in different contexts and digital spaces:

Commercial spaces

The role of commercial platforms cannot be overlooked when exploring digital environments. Many of the experiences collected here happened in or around commercial products, such as video games or online community platforms, that have their own rules and mechanisms. Understanding these dynamics allows us to adapt and tailor these platforms to suit our needs as showcased in the stories such as Beyond Borders, Go Virtual and Kasteddu e-sport;

Special-purpose digital spaces

Public or communal digital spaces, designed with specific goals and audiences in mind, can be created to offer unique opportunities for participation. Cases collected here often utilise public or municipal servers of community platforms, like in the story of Skillimylly, which presents an interesting model for public initiatives aimed towards fostering participation;

Self-created spaces

The creation of a digital space from scratch can be a daunting yet rewarding endeavour. Our collection features experiences of video games created to support both formal and non formal learning activities, as presented in Charles Games and The Spirit of Europe - Origins.

Existing research has highlighted the positive impact of video games on general competences. These include culture and value competence, social and civic competence, self-management, learning to learn, communication, mathematics, science, technology, entrepreneurship and digital competence. However, we should also always be aware of the potential risks associated with video game overuse, such as sleep disorders, unhealthy lifestyles, social isolation, addiction and mental health issues.

Our exploration now expands to encompass a wider set of digital approaches within educational settings. Video games, online communities and VR are just a part of the many possible ways to further transform the learning process into an engaging and interactive experience based on participation.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION in
formal and non-formal education

Digital transformation can refer to the evolution in social, economic and cultural processes and structures, of processes within organisations and in practical changes in how education is delivered. It also refers to a priority in the European Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes. This multifaceted nature of the topic echoes the inherent complexity as well as the connection to previous definitions in the youth field, such as digital youth work as a tool, activity and content. While this might feel overwhelming at first glance, once we focus on certain topics the picture becomes more manageable.

Recently, we have all had to take hold of several new tools for conducting work, learning and forming and maintaining human connections because of the pandemic. This tends to reflexively narrow our contemporary view of digital transformation to be only a tool to facilitate these processes. While this is true to an extent and is certainly relevant to the topic of participation in interactive spaces as well, it is not the complete picture. While leveraging these interactive tools and platforms for participation, we need to be mindful of the context of our learners.

How does choosing to use these tools affect the competences required of our participants and – by extension – the democratic balance of our participatory process? How can we build better interaction in digital environments while upholding our existing standards of participation? Do our participatory processes need augmenting or updating when transferred to a digital context? What added value can using digital approaches bring to participation? If we merely adopt a tool without examining our processes thoroughly, we risk losing a large amount of potential impact. The same is true for anyone reading the stories within this publication.

Just as digital transformation, our interactive participatory activities are, by default, serving multiple purposes at once. While implementing the process, we are simultaneously helping participants develop the competences they need to take part in society as active citizens. While the challenge isn't new as such, it is arguably more complex and nuanced in the age of digitalised society. A common challenge for all educators, both non-formal and formal, will be to engage young people in and support participatory processes where digital transformation is also the main target, or participation, i.e. participatory projects shaping digital services in local communities, or addressing AI governance.

As the term implies, digital transformation is a process. Looking at the term this way gives us two pointers for managing its inherent complexity: first, it urges us to be constantly mindful and keep abreast of how digital transformation is progressing in our field, our societies and our communities. Second, it gives us the permission to be incomplete and alleviates the pressure of not knowing enough; as long as we are willing to always learn more, we are still a part of the process.

Creating PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCES in digital spaces

In the digital era, democratic participation has evolved beyond traditional forms, embracing digital spaces as new hubs for civic action and active citizenship. Rooted in media and information literacy, digital participation offers a chance to have an influence and say in democratic decision-making, both locally and globally, that take place in online, hybrid or blended formats.

The case studies gathered in this publication serve as inspiring examples, spotlighting innovative projects using digital interactive spaces and video games to foster democratic engagement. They provide educators and beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes with valuable insights into crafting initiatives and leveraging technology for civic empowerment.

These case studies are more than mere stories – they embody transformative practices and approaches that are likely to become increasingly more commonplace in the next decade. Showcasing how digital participation democratises decision-making, amplifies marginalised voices, enriches learning and fosters inclusive civic dialogue, they illustrate technology's potential to fuel grassroots movements and create spaces for meaningful engagement.

As we delve into democratic practices within digital spheres, these case studies can inspire us to envision a future where technology acts as a catalyst for positive change.

The recent years of work around the topic of participation have brought us to distil a list of 10 tips to enhance participation in democratic life through digital interactive spaces:

1. **Establish collaborative principles:** Co-create foundational principles with participants, fostering mutual respect and active involvement. Enable contribution through collective brainstorming sessions or dedicated platforms.
2. **Encourage open dialogue:** Cultivate a secure environment for sharing ideas and opinions, valuing each participant's input. Encourage active engagement, especially among younger voices, enabling them to express opinions and take action.
3. **Transparent decision-making:** Clearly communicate decision-making processes, involved parties and participant influence levels. Keep participants informed about the fate of their ideas and involve them effectively in the decision-making journey, including follow-up processes.
4. **Encourage inclusion and diversity in participation:** Cater to participants' unique needs, ensuring inviting spaces that welcome everyone. Actively promote the involvement of underrepresented groups, amplifying their voices in discussions and decision-making.
5. **Prioritise user-centric design:** Understand user preferences and design intuitive, interactive and accessible interfaces that address genuine needs, concerns and interests, both in project design and activities.
6. **Incorporate interactive elements:** Cater to different learning styles by integrating quizzes, polls, puzzles or simulations. Utilise clickable elements, drag-and-drop features or gesture-based interactions for decision-making or shaping the platform's future.
7. **Create engaging platforms for discussion:** Establish varied platforms like forums, live chats or moderated discussions for users to express opinions, fostering healthy debates. Where possible, decide collectively on engagement tools and spaces, fostering self-direction within the group while offering necessary support.
8. **Provide accurate and transparent information:** Ensure information accuracy, diverse perspectives and unbiased content to facilitate informed decision-making.
9. **Offer spaces for educational discussions:** Provide resources, tutorials or interactive modules that educate users about all discussed topics, as well as the democratic processes, governance structures and civic responsibilities to ensure everyone has equal access to the information. Promote more equity at the discussion table.
10. **Implement effective moderation strategies:** Collaboratively set community guidelines, employing moderation strategies to maintain a civil and inclusive environment during discussions and engagements. Designate moderation roles beforehand, ensuring participants feel supported in expressing themselves.

Remember, each project and context is unique. In the stories presented here, you may find traces of these tips being applied, or of new ones still to be discovered. For further insights into creating participatory experiences, explore the Youth Participation Toolkit.

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Designing more INCLUSIVE online spaces

As we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, if we want to create inclusive online spaces, we cannot simply transfer online what we used to do offline. However, before envisioning how to create online spaces that are inclusive, there are some fundamental principles that educators must have in mind regardless of whether it's a physical or an online space. SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre, in recognising this need, has curated a comprehensive website to offer valuable insights and support for educators navigating this field.

We advocate for an inclusion by default approach. This means taking inclusion as a guiding principle in all aspects, from the design of the content and methods to communication and outreach, choice of tools and even involving people with experience in addressing barriers in the design of the activity. This cannot be fully achieved without understanding that we are part of a diverse society, we are all diverse and there are multiple parts to our identities.

As you can see on the wheel of power and privilege, different parts of our identities can give us power over other people or put us in a position of being marginalised or excluded. Therefore, people you are trying to reach out to may be subject to barriers that keep them away from participating. When it comes to accessing online spaces, the most common barriers that prevent people from participating are connected to:

- **E-infrastructure:** limited or unreliable internet access, insufficient electronic devices per household

- **Accessibility:** visual or hearing disability, acquired disabilities, mental disorders, low digital literacy, learning difficulties or language barriers

- **Pedagogy and methodology:** methods used online to get results, awareness of what's possible to achieve with online activities and what's not, how to motivate and attract young people to go online and not to drop out, how to avoid fatigue

- **Other structural inequalities:** economic, cultural and institutional barriers, and gender norms and expectations

Moreover, being disadvantaged can have different layers and be connected to infrastructures, personal skills and socio-economic reasons, as stated above. Often, we find in our target groups a mix of all these different aspects. To understand this better, we can use the concept of intersectionality, which helps us to understand that each person belongs to different and intersecting social groups and, as a result, may face different and often overlapping discriminations.

So how best can we approach the digital environments to ensure that participants are more included and feel safer?

Addressing the needs of diverse groups of people in the design and delivery of inclusive online spaces requires intentional efforts and mindset.

On the other hand, certain online platforms and tools can be used to reach those young people who would otherwise struggle to access youth work services, including those facing geographical obstacles, with limited access to transport or disabilities that make it difficult to attend in-person sessions.

Another interesting aspect of online tools and platforms is the flexibility it provides, allowing educators to diversify their offers, including activities that can be completed at any time or place, and at the individual's own pace. This is essential for people with limited time due to their jobs or studies or because they need to take care of their families.

Also, remember that many young people lack the digital skills needed to fully participate in online youth work. Therefore, it is important to provide training and support to young people to develop their digital literacy skills.

If in your organisation or workplace you have limited access to tools or technology, consider establishing cooperation with Maker communities, as these spaces often have the means to teach young people how to code and use technology in general, showing them how to create, maintain and repair devices instead of buying new ones, and, by doing so, reducing their environmental footprint and actively participating in a different approach to digital spaces inspired by a broader 21st century responsible citizenship idea.

Navigating RISKS in interactive digital spaces

While digital spaces offer immense potential, we should always be aware they are not without risks. Data privacy issues may always be present, even more so when using platforms placed outside of the EU, which may not be fully compliant with GDPR regulations. You may want to check this compliance before choosing which tools to use in your practice.

Moreover, some games incorporate microtransactions or gambling-like mechanisms, underscoring the importance of a thorough assessment before choosing which games to incorporate. Starting with evaluations based on PEGI guidelines and GDPR compliance can inform this decision-making.

Furthermore, we hear the questions and concerns of many educators asking why we are once again focusing on digital spaces. This is an ongoing question, and it is one that is growing more since the pandemic and the consequent lockdowns of formal and non formal education services.

Many thought, or hoped, that once we could come back to the possibility of physically sharing the same spaces with other people, the digital dimension of education would disappear, but we do not think this is going to happen, nor should it. On the contrary, we hope the digital dimension in education will not disappear, since we see that it brings added value to the process and end result when used in effective ways – and this publication aims to highlight such examples.

For young people, digital spaces stand among the various realms where they navigate life, alongside schools, youth clubs, homes and more. Understanding this digital dimension as an integral part of their life experiences is crucial. As educators, our presence within these spaces is essential, offering guidance and support in this aspect of their lives.

WHERE, WHY and WITH WHOM to use interactive digital spaces

The application of digital spaces for participation is not solely tied to physical locations; it's equally about the context in which these platforms are implemented. Interactive digital spaces have the potential to be integrated into various settings:

- **Educational institutions:** for enhancing classroom engagement, facilitating remote learning and providing platforms for collaborative projects and discussions.

- **Organisations:** for team collaboration, training sessions and members' engagement activities.

- **Community/Youth Centres:** to engage community members, host virtual events and provide resources and support for local initiatives.

- **Global platforms:** connecting individuals from different geographical locations for cultural exchange, global projects and international collaborations.

Having discussed the potential of using digital interactive spaces in fostering participation, let's highlight objectives we could achieve through these, using the following main directions:

- **Enhancing participation and engagement:** digital interactive spaces can break down barriers of distance and time, making it easier for more people to participate actively, share the same experiences and interact with each other at the same time.

- **Promoting inclusivity:** they provide opportunities for those who might be excluded from traditional settings due to geographical, physical or social constraints. Moreover, digital interactive spaces can offer specific ways of interaction which are even able to overcome or cancel some specific physical constraints.

- **Facilitating innovative learning and collaboration:** digital spaces offering dynamic, interactive approaches can cater to diverse learning and working styles: the experiences in these spaces are not only visual-textual (as happens in traditional learning and also in social media, where you can only read/watch and comment), as they can also have auditive, motorial and emotional aspects.

Last but not least, the 'with whom' focuses on the target audience:

- **Youth and educators:** for learning, teaching and academic collaborations.

- **NGO teams:** for work-related projects, networking and professional development.

- **Community members**: to engage diverse groups in civic discussions, cultural activities and community development projects.

- **Global participants:** connecting people across the world for cultural exchanges, international projects and cross-border collaborations.
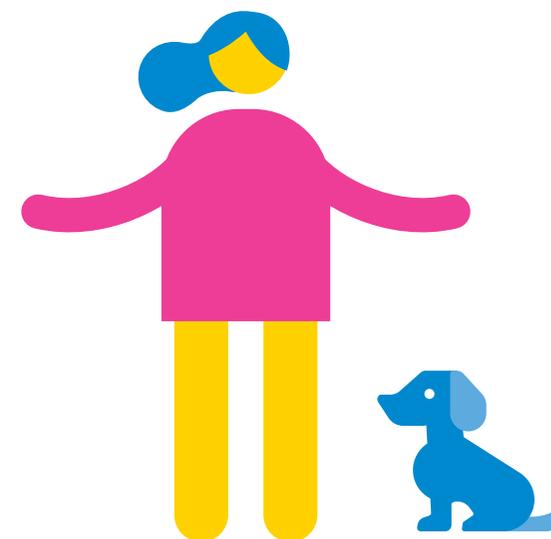
Rules for PARTICIPATION and general intervention in digital spaces

Establishing rules for participation and interventions in digital spaces is crucial for ensuring constructive and respectful interactions. We would like to offer you at least a few priorities to keep in mind, while laying down your own specific rules:

- **Clear guidelines and expectations:** establish and clearly share rules regarding behaviour, communication norms and the use of the various possibilities given by the digital space you will be in.

- **Respect and inclusivity:** encourage a culture of respect, where all participants feel valued and heard, regardless of their background or perspective.

- **Privacy and safety:** implement measures to protect participants' privacy and ensure a safe online environment, including guidelines on sharing personal information and reporting inappropriate behaviour (see the dedicated paragraph above for more).

- **Encouraging active participation:** design activities and discussions that encourage active involvement from all participants, ensuring that quieter voices are heard.

- **Constructive Feedback and Moderation:** provide a framework for giving and receiving constructive feedback. If possible, always consider having facilitators to guide activities and discussions and manage conflicts.

- **Accessibility:** ensure that digital spaces are accessible to all your group members, offering necessary accommodations like captions, but also providing devices if needed (see the dedicated paragraph above for more).

- **Regular review and adaptation:** continuously review the effectiveness of the rules and make necessary adjustments based on participant feedback and evolving digital landscapes.

By considering these factors and guidelines, interactive digital spaces can become powerful tools for fostering participation, collaboration and inclusive learning and engagement across various contexts.

STORIES

BEYOND BORDERS -
a participatory exploration of world history in games

Type of digital interactive space: Video games

Approach: blended

Official website: https://playingwithpast.wordpress.com/

Game/Software used: *Total War* series, *Civilization* series, *Crusader Kings 3, Europa Universalis 4, Victoria 3*

Equipment: computers

Licences: the games need to be purchased individually. Older versions (similar but less polished games) are available at significantly discounted prices and don't need powerful hardware to run.

Funding: self-funded

Replicability: easily replicable once teachers have some expertise on the games in question

Age recommendation: official ratings of the games 12+

Time engagement: standard lecture time, plus students had a home assignment to complete in 15-20 hours

Other possible uses: the approach can be used to teach and discuss a wide range of subjects, such as geography, economics, biology, geopolitics and sociology

Why we recommend: an alternative way to approach critical thinking and an interest in academic subjects; the online interaction between students opens opportunities for interactive and participant-led learning.

Tags: critical thinking, blended learning, interactive, history
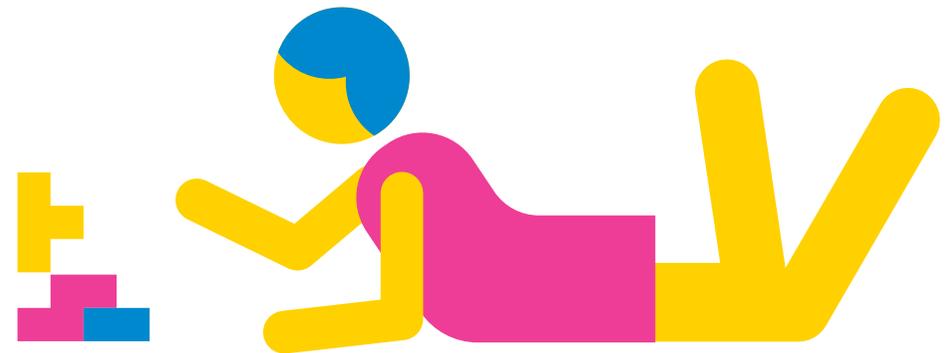
Beyond Borders -
a participatory exploration of world history in games

Two researchers with a common passion for history and video games decided to try an interesting experiment with their students: what if they based their next course curriculum entirely on history-based video games? To date, the experience has already had seven successful iterations and continues garnering interest among students. You can read the full story below.
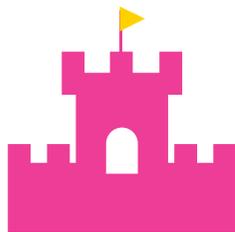
Introduction: game-based learning

James Paul Gee, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, sat watching his 6 year old son playing a video game and was struck by the boy's concentration and engagement. He then started playing games on his own and this process culminated in 2003 with the book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*: a ground-breaking study which explored video games as a medium, their potential as learning tools and the revolutionary impact they could have on education. The book is still considered one of the seminal works on game-based learning.

Twenty years later the video games industry has considerably evolved and new genres have been developed, some of which offer incredibly rich educational aspects. One of these is without a doubt the category of 'grand strategy games', which essentially are strategy games in a historical setting that provide players with an unparalleled level of depth and detail. Every game involves learning of some kind, but is there a way in which this could somehow be made part of a formal course? Some educators definitely think so.
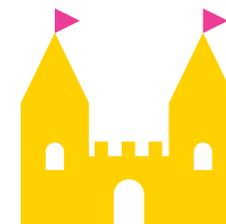
The experience

In their 2018 paper[1], Mehmet Şükrü Kuran and Ahmet Erdem Tozoğlu detailed their experience using such strategy games. They designed a history course, which they aptly named Playing with the Past, entirely around historical video games[2], and this course is still running to this date.

'The general idea was to enrich traditional history lessons by making them more interactive, thereby encouraging students to try out things for themselves. It was more of an engineering approach to teaching – and, of course, not all of our colleagues agreed,' said the developers.

'Students from every department could join, and during the COVID lockdowns we combined classes virtually from Kayseri University and Istanbul University. We had participating students from the architecture, economics, molecular biology, computer science and civil engineering departments. We set no prerequisites, and no prior knowledge of games was requested, along with no former history studies. Some had, some didn't have and some may have had biases or preconceived notions based on their past studies.'

Every year they focused on a different period and games.

The so-called 'grand strategy games' offer incredibly detailed world maps down to cities and villages, with a single game easily lasting hundreds of hours. Over the years, they have nurtured a dedicated community of players, which has created an interesting feedback loop: students with an interest in history tend to play these video games, and players of the games develop a passion for history and decide to pursue it at an academic level[3].

Image 1: Crusader Kings 3

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1   History-Themed Games in History Education: Experiences on a Blended World History Course
2   Originally offered at the Abdullah Gül University in Kayseri, it was then run online during the COVID-19 lockdown; it has since continued.

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3   This process is not without problematic aspects, which were described in 2022 in an article from The Atlantic.

Course structure

The course had a clear structure. Each module started with a lecture and discussion (L & D) session, and it continued with a game experience in which the instructor would present a game on a shared screen and introduce its main mechanics. Decisions were taken collectively with the class.

After each module, students were given specific goals and were asked to play the video game on their own (15-20 hours, even though some definitely did more). Examples for missions can include exploring the Mississippi River in North America or inventing the printing press technology. Even if the students failed their tasks, the focus was on understanding why, the in-game consequences and the outcomes.

They then had to write an essay that compared their experience with the existing historical sources of the same historical period. This was also an exercise on critical thinking.

'The course engaged students with personal questions such as 'how did they feel during the experience?', and it prompted them to evaluate their experiences critically. These included, for example, descriptions of the roles of men and women in society, examining the everyday life of the characters they controlled and details such as their diets, what kind of cheese they could find and so on. We encouraged discussions on any historical inconsistencies or particularly well-modelled periods.'

This is a particularly interesting aspect: games are the product of a design process, and as such developers make many decisions to simplify reality. This is delicate, especially in the case of actual history, and it is a controversial topic to begin with.

 emphasised that they were not engaging with time machines, but rather models, which could be biased, make assumptions and should be open to criticism. A less critical approach could potentially spread misinformation.

'On the contrary – remarked the authors – when students reported a potentially controversial aspect, we dedicated lesson time to delve deeper into it. For instance, while discussing the religious clashes in the Middle Ages, we explored how all churches would instantly switch to mosques when a region changed from a Christian to a Muslim ruler – which isn't at all reflective of reality. This generally isn't due to bad intentions or ignorance from the developers, but it is just a simplification that is necessary for game design. We asked students to identify critically and report such cases, and then we stepped in to provide more information and context.'

Image 2: CK3 council

The student experience

Some students, particularly those not overly familiar with computer or strategy games, found the experience initially challenging. Most, however, were able to overcome these hurdles and started to enjoy them. In the introductory sessions, the instructors helped the students to take their first steps in the simulated worlds. Furthermore, games have their own 'tutorials' that are designed to offer a gradual and gratifying learning curve.

Students were asked to write blog posts on a public page. The enthusiasm was palpable throughout the 14/15 week course, with articles written in very personal styles, sometimes describing in detail their adventures and the learning outcomes.

One student describes France's internal affairs during the Industrial Revolution, as follows:

'Balancing a diverse population's needs, economic reforms and social stability was crucial in my gameplay as France in *Victoria 3*. I faced decisions involving industrialisation, social reforms, education and military spending, with each impacting the nation's well-being. The game's colonial aspect offered expansion opportunities and economic growth but it also highlighted the ethical dilemmas of colonialism.

Unpredictable events like economic crises, political revolutions and wars demanded swift, strategic responses, which taught me flexibility and resilience. Overall, playing France in Victoria 3 offered me an immersive experience, and it enhanced my understanding of historical complexities and international relations. It fostered critical thinking and appreciation of the challenges faced by 19th-century leaders, and it emphasised to me decision-making and its consequences.'

Another student played as Brunei during the Age of Discovery. They wanted to create an Asian alternative to the European powers.

'I chose to play as Brunei since it was one that 'could' rival the European great powers. Most of our games were Western nations. I went into the game believing that I would play until the 1500s at most, before finally succumbing to the neighbouring powers, although this surprisingly did not happen.

I think many people come away from this game with the similar view of 'if only...'. It's like how I imagine a lot of the smaller 'third-world' nations could have been greater if they knew what was coming (usually Europe) and had managed to sort themselves out and prevent exploitation. Borneo originally kept to themselves and stayed within the Borneo and Philippines area; now we see that this could have been a prospect for world domination :(Overall, I'm impressed at how much I learnt in this game and course.'

The articles are worth reading as they move from more realistic descriptions ('Playing as Sweden, one of the happiest countries in the world' or 'Prussia, unification or colonisation?'), to humorous journals in which students share their personal failures and learning points in articles such as The Ming thing (describing the creation of a unified empire in China), Getting involved in everyone's business as the United States or just the Sleepy Belgium experience :).

Living history from a first-person perspective definitely brought it closer to their point of view, and it allowed for a deeper understanding of the topics and for the emergence of personal experiences.

'Students shared their personal stories, contributing to a rich, diverse narrative,' recalled Kuran and Tozoğlu. 'A student from Central Asia pointed out the game's [*Europa Universalis IV*] inaccurate depiction of their country due to a Western design bias. And an Indonesian student shared stories about their culture, everyday life, family and lifestyle, which really helped enrich our class.'

Evaluating the impact

In such a setting, the student experience can be hard to assess and evaluate. Based on what the students reported in their essays, in the following lessons they held group discussions. They examined the games, the main actors and the underlying historical realities. They delved into how accurately certain facts were modelled in the game. They discussed to which extent game platforms can succeed in teaching history. Despite games not being designed primarily as educational experiences, they offered a fun avenue to learn.

Moreover, students gained insights into game design, historical contexts and a critical understanding of history and its representation.

'One of our objectives was to familiarise students with other cultures and geographical areas – remarked the teachers – focusing on non-European and non-Mediterranean cultures. We explored Eastern Asian, Native American and Sub-Saharan cultures, helping students acquire a deeper understanding of different cultures, economic systems, religions and geography. They also encouraged creative thinking, such as contemplating alternate history scenarios ('*What if the Mamluks became a colonising empire?*').

This brought a global education aspect to the course, which of course expanded the range of the problematic aspects we faced.'
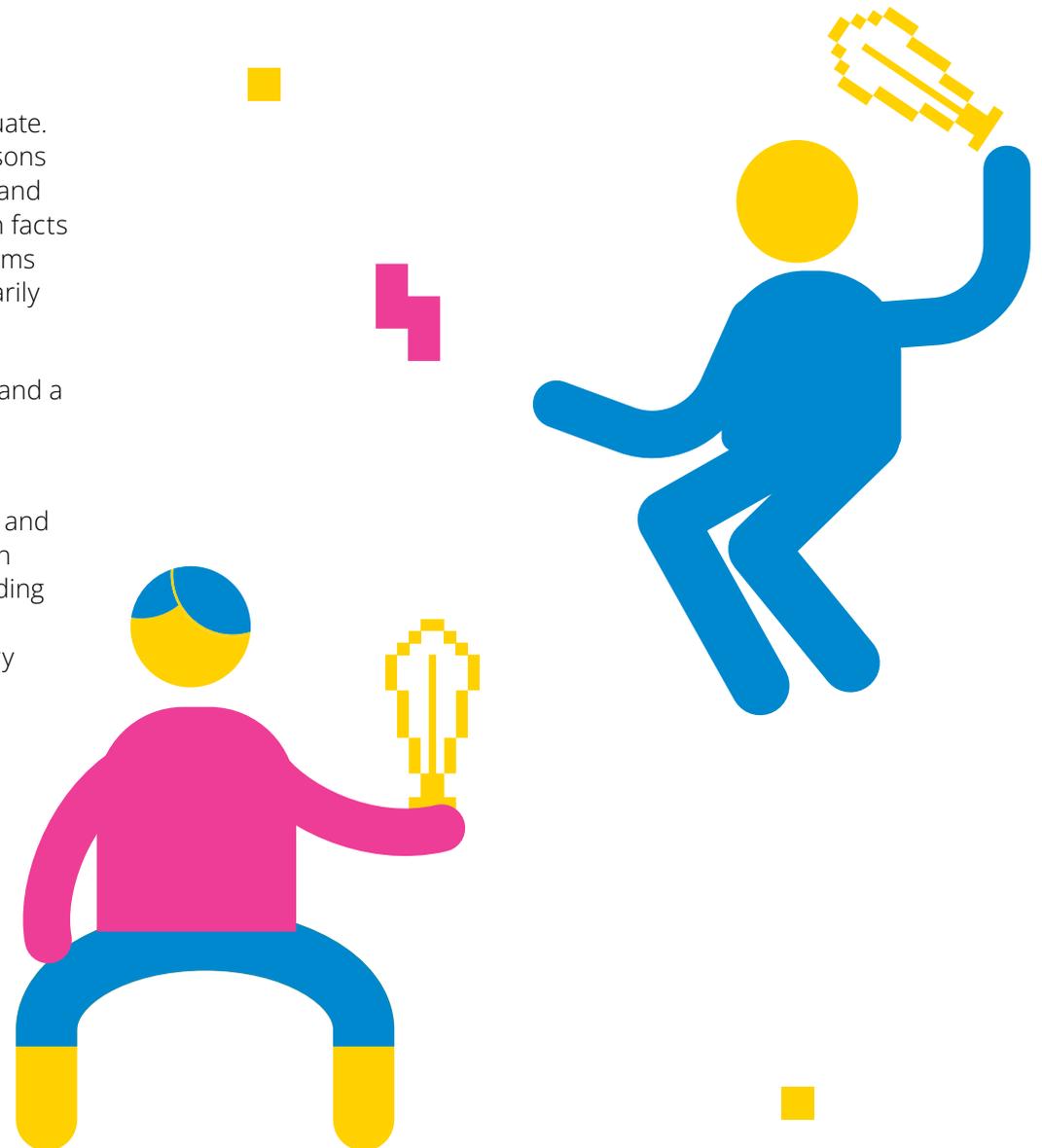
The problem with 4X games

A very popular subgenre of strategy games is the so-called 4X simulations. 4X stands for 'explore, expand, exploit and exterminate'. This is potentially problematic for those who consider using these games in an educational context and should come with an appropriate level of preparation. When strategy games simulate historical processes, such as colonialism and geographical expansion, the option of 'eliminating' all the natives from a territory sooner or later emerges and is actually encouraged. Games don't really delve deeply into the gory details – which is maybe part of the problem – as this may sanitise what is instead one of the darkest aspects of history. Even more problematic is the fact that many games create a distinction between 'civilised nations' and barbaric or primitive ones, which can be destroyed or assimilated without too many consequences. Aside from the time and money invested in the venture, this is seen as a mechanical process that is necessary to 'win' the game and accumulate resources. It is quite apparent how this is considered by many critics to be one of the most delicate aspects of this genre, and one that needs serious reflection.

For further reading, see these examples: https://imperial-globalexeter.com/2018/07/03/colonialism-is-fun-sid-meiers-civilization-and-the-gamifi-cation-of-imperialism/

https://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/ford

Controversial aspects

When students played at home, they could delve into the more thorny aspects of simulated history, such as war, conquest, colonialism and religious conflict. They shared their experiences through longer blog posts, in particular about conquest and war, and this created opportunities for us to discuss the conditions that made expansion possible, technologies and the circumstances that rendered some countries more advanced.

Nationalism and nation-states were recurring themes, emphasising how the definition of 'state' has evolved over time. In the 16th century, people wouldn't have understood the concept of 'Nation', as this was introduced later in history. This is well represented in the game *Victoria 3*, which also served as a platform to discuss industrialisation, the conflicts that came with it and the evolving conditions through pre-modern and modern times.

Traditionally, learning history meant studying an endless series of wars. This is certainly an important aspect of historical video games. So, how was this addressed by the teachers?

'We always aimed to create a safe space for discussion among students, especially those from 'hot' conflict areas around the world like Armenia/Azerbaijan, Israel/Palestine, Greece/Turkey and Ukraine/Russia. Having non-European students contributed to our process, as they offered a global perspective and helped us all to understand that the world is bigger than any single point of view.'

The teachers acknowledged that misconceptions are inevitable as games provide an incomplete description of reality. hen discussing colonisation or other controversial topics, in particular, they encouraged the students to view situations from different perspectives, which was easy since every game could present a completely different experience.

One striking example, while playing *Victoria 3* and recreating the process behind the colonisation of Africa, was how the brutality of European colonialism led to group reflections on the huge consequences of these actions and to consider whether such situations would be managed differently today.

Simulations of the Middle Ages are distant enough to be seen with a critical eye, but games that represent the modern age are trickier. This is because they don't allow much space for alternate history and they sometimes push players simply towards repeating historical atrocities, according to Kuran and Tozoğlu.

In other words, you cannot win a game of *Civilization* without repeating the steps that led to our present-day world order. Accumulation, imperialism, capitalism, industrialisation.

Encouraging personal connections

However, by inviting students to reflect critically and to share their more personal real-world stories, this could be limited. A focus on diversity and inclusion limits the emphasis on conquest and violence.

One poignant moment described by the researchers came when an Indonesian student shared his great-grandfather's experiences during the Dutch colonial period, which offered a real, emotional connection to that period. The moment was triggered when in-game Indonesia was discovered by a European power, and the student commented 'And this is how my land ceased to be a sovereign territory'. This was a deeply emotional moment for everybody and it was followed by a very personal and touching discussion.
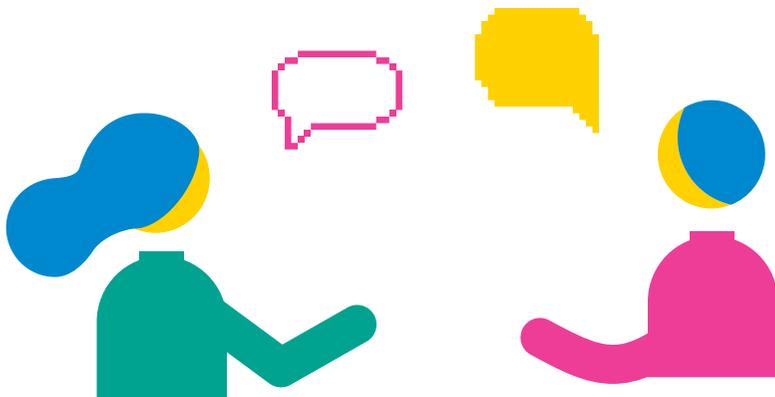
Learning points

Based on the blog posts, =discussions and post-course surveys, the students' main learning points are:

- in-depth geographical knowledge, thanks to the use of the interactive and highly detailed world maps;

- increased awareness of the interaction and interconnectedness between the various societal issues;

- insights about the modelling decisions of the games, and how representations of history and facts can vary according to differing points of view;

- contextualising of key events and major developments, developed from a historical perspective and understood as a series of cause-effect relations, rather than as given.

'We concluded that while the course method may not be for everyone, it's an excellent way to engage with history,' said the developers. 'Beyond facts and dates, students acquired a deeper understanding of historical events and their implications. And perhaps most significantly, they honed the ability to analyse history from multiple perspectives.'

It is important to keep the human aspect in focus. One anecdote: in the Ottoman period, a reform by Mehmet the Great allowed every future ruler to eliminate their brothers – and their children – so nobody could claim the throne. This is generally seen as a brutal practice, of course, but after playing *Crusader Kings 2* for a while, a student remarked ' I understand now why Mehmet did it'.

He was referring to the need to avoid a court full of scheming and plots – but the plain, matter-of-fact way he shared it was quite startling for everybody in the class, and the teachers felt the need to discuss it a little bit more. The difference between a gameplay session and its real-life applications is all in the critical thinking process, and educators have a huge role in this.

Conclusions

Blending video games in a university school course provided great benefits in terms of the engagement and participation of students. The essays were written in the form of interactive blog posts and are informative and entertaining. Teachers interested in using this approach should keep an open mind and be able to change the content of some classes, should particular topics or discussions arise from the group – but that's also why the course can be particularly enriching.

However, teachers should also be well aware of the bias and design limitations that are inevitable in game development, which can really affect the students' perception of the particular issues represented. The role of the teacher in this case becomes more of a guide who aids in the exploration of interactive material, highlighting its contradictions or inconsistencies and encourages students to acquire a complex and critical understanding of the topics at hand.

Image 3: Victoria 3
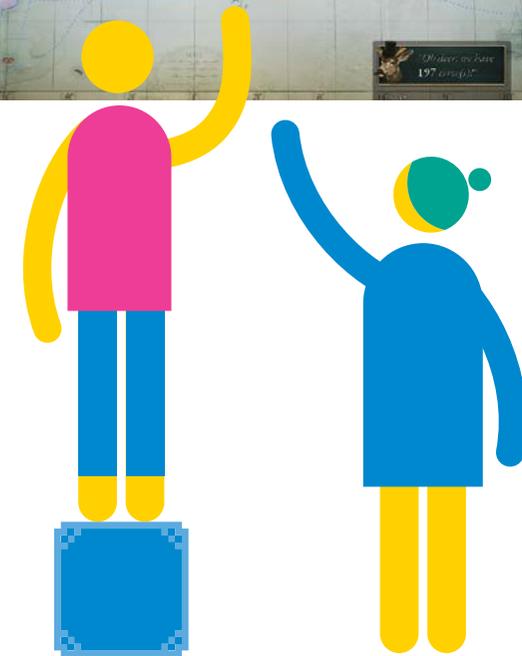
SKILLIMYLLY -
youth-driven innovation in digital spaces

Type of digital interactive space: online communities

Approach: blended

Official website: https://www.peliliike.org/skilli-projektit

Game/Software used: Discord

Equipment: computers or mobile devices

Licences: free

Funding: European Social Fund, Municipality of Oulu

Replicability: easy at a smaller scale, financially demanding at bigger scale

Age recommendation: participants 15-29 to comply with EU/European Social Fund participation rules

Other possible uses: focus on other topics or activities, such as video games speed-run for charity, etc

Why we recommend: this project introduces an innovative use of digital spaces in engaging young people and encouraging them in decision-making. It involves participatory budgeting and diverse community activities that can be adapted in various contexts.

Tags: participatory budgeting; co-creation; ownership; innovation
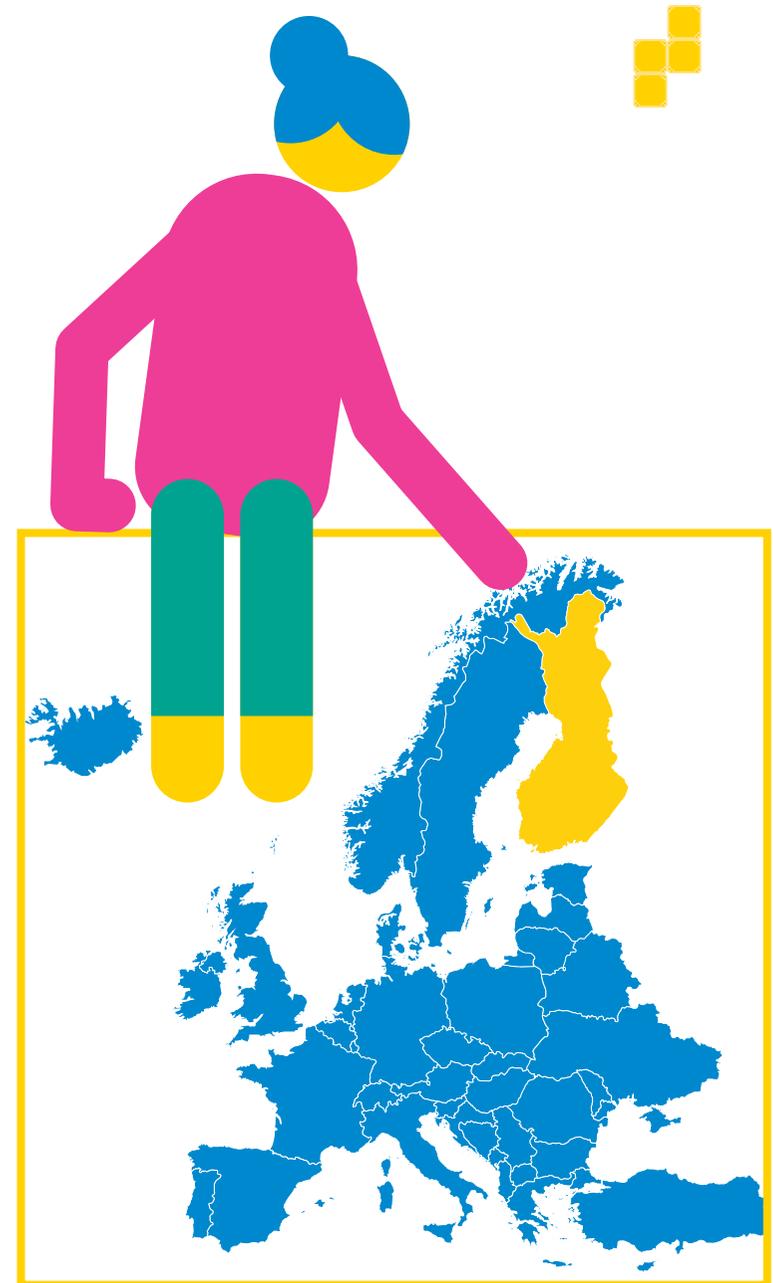
SKILLIMYLLY -
youth-driven innovation in digital spaces

A fashion workshop to build the best appearance for your Minecraft character? We got you covered! A gaming corner in your school, including all the required facilities to ensure inclusion for all players of different abilities? Sure, here it comes... and what about a workshop about using AI to improve your photographs? Skillimylly provided all of this and much more to young people of the region of Oulu, Finland.

Introduction

The youth of Oulu, Finland, curated and executed a multitude of activities mostly centred around video games and digital spaces as part of the Skillimylly project – a participatory budgeting initiative. This initiative, aptly named the 'mill of skills', became a channel for the development and cultivation of many skills and talents.

We spoke with Kati Hopiavuori, former youth worker at the City of Oulu and coordinator of the project, about the Skillimylly Innovation Competition.

Background

In 2021, the Municipality of Oulu initiated Skillimylly and called upon their youth workers, educators and organisations to involve young people and give them the possibility to produce innovative digital youth work activities for their communities. This effort aimed to demonstrate that adults can support them even during the pandemic crisis. The project delivered many activities in the field of digital youthwork, and it focused on outcomes which would use digital spaces, such as streaming programmes, online cosplay galleries and online gaming, among others. Moreover, it used digital spaces themselves, such as the Discord platform, as a place to meet, coordinate and connect young participants in Skillimylly.

Funding and platforms

The project was funded by the European Social Fund (80%) and the Municipality of Oulu (20%). The main objective was to enable youth groups to get their projects funded and their ideas put in place so that they could produce digital youth work innovative practices themselves. Skillimylly also received applications and proposals from organisations, and they involved young people in implementing the ideas. To facilitate this, preparatory training sessions were conducted for the adults and organisations, which aimed to clarify the significance of youth participation. Additionally, a recommendation sheet (in Finnish) about youth participation was produced and made available online.

The youth workers decided to use the Discord platform for Skillimylly, which is a digital space that became very popular in Finland during lockdown. This platform, known for hosting gaming communities, was repurposed to create youth work environments online during lockdown and it also continued its activity post lockdown.

Discord is a community platform that offers free services such as public and private chat channels, audio and video conferencing, content search through hashtags and many more features. These capabilities have made it a very popular tool to build online communities.

For this reason, the city of Oulu already had their own Discord server working from that period. Establishing a new Discord community for this project was seamless, and it was created within the municipality's Discord server. Various channels were used to invite young people to join, from direct contact to old-school leaflets to modern online promotion using a promotional video.

Project workflow

The project followed these steps in its workflow:

1. With a first call in the Discord space, a panel of young people aged 15-29 was established;
2. This panel, supported by two youth workers, was tasked with preparing specific calls for project proposals and evaluating the submitted ideas;
3. The project submissions were collected in five different rounds of calls, each lasting two weeks. During these rounds, authors submitted their proposals to the youth panel, which then evaluated the presented ideas.
4. After every round, the panel gathered online with youth workers to evaluate the application and grant the fundings.

At the beginning, during the pandemic, disseminating information and clarifying project objectives proved to be very difficult. However, despite these obstacles, the initiative saw the participation of 20 groups/organisations, resulting in 15 successfully executed projects out of 38 proposals collected. Finally, 22 projects were selected for funding, and a substantial grant of €5,000 was awarded to each project, which was very well received by the excited participants as it enabled them to realise and implement their projects.

For every round, a call was circulated in various channels: advertisements in local newspapers, outreach via phone calls and emails, active engagement through social media campaigns and of course promotion in the Municipality Discord server.

Youth workers supported groups of young people in creating and writing the projects when needed. They engaged in frequent in-person and Discord meetings, offering templates for their applications and supporting them in defining strategies to involve more young people in the implementation. They also helped to clarify the need behind the proposed activity.

At the end of every round the jury panel gathered. Convincing kids, schools and parents about the importance of their full-day participation on the proposal selection required explanation. To facilitate this, the youth workers provided meals, small gift cards and accommodation for skipping school. Due to the high number of proposals, two separate panel/jury groups were formed. In total, 25 young people and 14 youth workers were involved in the panel and evaluation activities.

Image 4: Sharing information about the results of Skillimylly

Challenges and adaptation

Originally, the use of Discord was prompted by the ongoing COVID restrictions, as the first round commenced in August 2021. However, by the last call in January 2023, it became evident to all involved that using Discord for meeting and coordinating the youth panel was a winning strategy. It was already familiar to most participants and acknowledged as a usable tool by the municipality, and it encompassed basic features for group interactions (including direct and group chats and video and audio calls). Moreover, its user-friendly interface made it accessible even for newcomers, boasting a low learning curve.

At that point, the challenge was primarily around addressing obligations beyond the digital spaces. For instance, youth workers had to collect signatures and paper forms for reporting to the European Social Fund to validate the presence of young people, despite being unable to meet everyone in person. Nonetheless, Skillimylly managed to register 200 young people as participants, although it engaged with many more throughout the entire process.

The age range was set at 15-29 to comply with EU/European Social Fund participation rules. Most young people were aged around 20, although there were a few individuals involved who were under 18. While the aim was to engage NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) youth, connecting with this group posed a challenge within the project's framework. In the end, however, the initiative successfully involved NEET individuals, despite the initial hurdles they faced in engaging with the process.

As Kati explained, the most challenging aspect for the youth workers wasn't navigating the setup of various rooms or channels in Discord for hosting meetings and calls with the panel participants or applicants. Instead, it revolved around what they called the 'boomer effect': situations where the youth workers found proposals compelling, but the youth panel disagreed and favoured entirely different options.

Project highlights

Most of the approved proposals were related to gaming and digital spaces, such as:

- creating an online youth centre for gamers;
- delivering workshops to create Minecraft *skins*;
- organising gaming 'speed-run' events for charity;
- establishing a folk dance AR video gallery;
- establishing an accessible gaming space at school (wheelchair friendly, hand impairment friendly etc);

and many more.

Through these activities, young participants had the opportunity to significantly contribute to their local or peer communities. They provided pathways for learning and socialisation among other young individuals, all achieved through a digital approach.

All the projects are showcased (in Finnish) on the project website and each one has a project summary to help to replicate it (sometimes also in English).
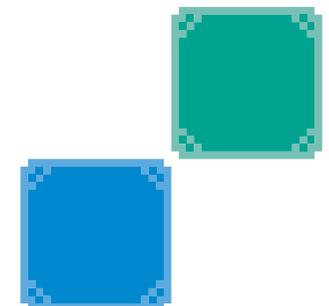
Lesson learned

Kati highlighted some interesting points for future iterations of this dynamic:

1. importance of involving informal groups in the application structure
2. balancing the involvement of youth workers to avoid feeling like idea appropriation
3. the surprise inclusion of face-to-face activities connected with gaming
4. the absence of VR ideas despite the expectation, signalling a potential for future considerations

All the projects offered their young authors the chance to tackle and further develop their digital competences. They engaged with ethics and AI, especially in creative appliances, digital literacy and critical thinking. Moreover, this participatory process facilitated a deeper understanding and application of participation principles for everyone involved. Elements like shared decision-making, negotiated agreements and democratic group dynamics emerged in the evaluation forms distributed among all participants.

Throughout this project, young participants had the opportunity to impart knowledge to youth workers and recognise their own competencies, particularly those developed through informal means, despite the occasional challenges.

For instance, there was a proposal centred on empowering photographers to utilise AI for enhancing their images. The youth workers acknowledged their limited knowledge about AI, while the youth panel exhibited a better understanding. Consequently, they collaborated to engage a consultant for support. Overall, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive: the youth workers said

they learned a lot, and were proud of what they achieved. The project's feedback system emphasised the youth's active involvement and that the grant's monetary value was substantial and unprecedented for most participants.

Kati emphasises with certainty that the most relevant learning for the youth workers was that they should use their personal abilities, even coming from outside of youth work, to connect with the passions and abilities of the young individuals. Moreover, if they encountered skill gaps they learned the importance of reaching out to passionate or professional individuals and involving them in the process.

Kati also highlighted a significant takeaway: the 'boomer effect' underscored that while youth workers play a vital role in establishing and maintaining the space, especially in a digital context like this, they shouldn't entirely dominate the decision-making process. It's crucial to grant young people the final say in choosing what resonates most with their interests.
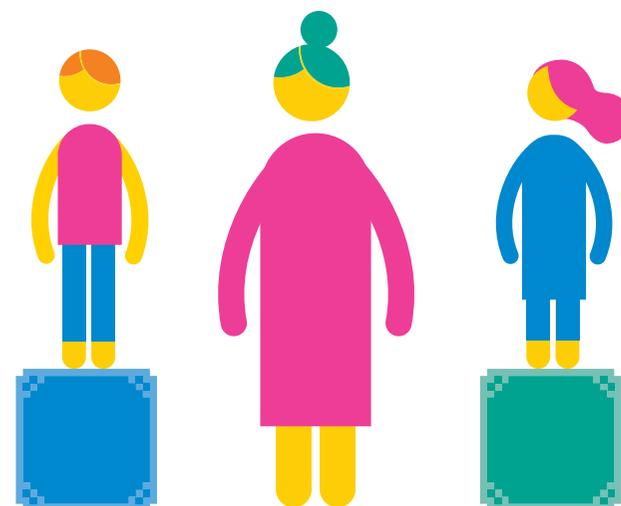
Inclusion and future considerations

Another interesting aspect linked to the use of digital platforms is the degree to which data collection of participants is required at the initial meeting, a requirement set by the municipality and the European Social Fund. Kati observed that the extensive questioning, including binary gender requests, might have seemed overwhelming to some participants.

This approach, while necessary for compliance, clashed with the informal and friendly tone that is typical of digital spaces. Digital spaces have their own atmosphere, which quite often lean more towards informality and friendliness, so asking for registrations and signatures really felt out of the place for someone. This is something that should be considered when developing similar initiatives.

When discussing potential alternative digital spaces, Kati mentioned a few points that were to be considered for the future:

1. exploring better engagement methods for panel evaluations, potentially involving direct interaction with applicants;
2. considering narrowing down the scope of digital youth work topics for more focused calls;
3. evaluating other digital spaces beyond Discord for potential inclusion.

Regarding other digital spaces, the prospect of utilising VR spaces to engage with young people was considered. However, due to the limited availability of devices to support this approach, they leaned more towards Discord, which had already gained significant traction in Finland, especially during the pandemic.

Ultimately, they contemplated a more advanced server structure for Discord, such as incorporating bots and autoresponders. Despite this, they intentionally maintained a simpler setup comprising basic rooms, chats and video meetings. Surprisingly, this straightforward configuration sufficed in delivering all the necessary functionalities for the activities. This experience underscores the lesson that sometimes a less sophisticated approach can enhance participation even further.
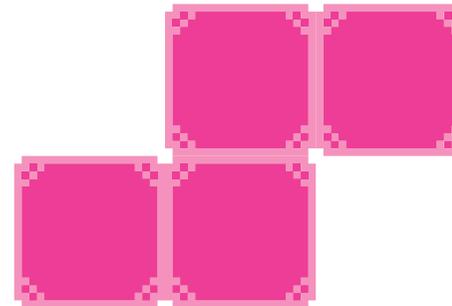
Evaluation and feedback

How could the project have been improved? Kati highlighted insights from the evaluation conducted by youth workers and participants. They suggested reconfiguring the panel/jury setup. For instance, having applicants speak directly to the panel, even through an online call, instead of solely submitting written text, might have heightened their engagement and participation levels.

Overall, Kati firmly believes that a digital-centric approach, such as the one employed here, is optimal. It ensures a higher level of inclusivity among young people in regions like Oulu municipality, where the digital divide isn't a concern. This model can be replicated in similar conditions if sufficient funding is available. However, it's also adaptable to smaller budgets for implementation on a smaller scale.

The digital youth work topic covered in the calls was broad, but Kati suggests potential refinement. It could focus solely on gaming or specific aspects within gaming. For instance, similar to the project on speed-run gaming events for charity, where players race to complete a video game's main quest line in record time to raise funds, it could explore specific aspects within the gaming realm.

Conclusion

This project not only fostered digital creativity and inclusion; it also empowered young people to be at the forefront of decision-making. From fashion workshops in Minecraft to accessible gaming spaces in schools, Skillimylly transcended the traditional boundaries of youth work to showcase the potential of digital spaces as a participation tool for amplifying youth voices, nurturing skills and bridging gaps within communities.

While participatory budgeting projects involving young people are widespread across Europe, adopting Skillimylly's digital approach on a larger or smaller scale offers the opportunity to experiment and adapt it to various contexts, thereby exploring innovative means of engaging young people in participation.
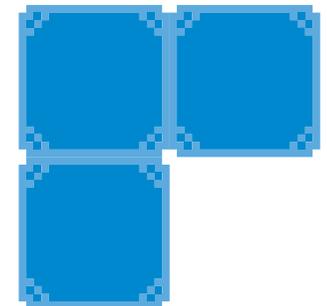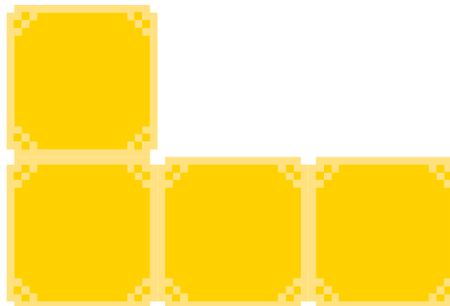
GO VIRTUAL -
pioneering youth participation in virtual realities

Type of digital interactive space: Virtual Reality

Approach: fully online

Official website: https://www.foroige.ie/our-work/go-digital-youth-work/govirtual

Game/Software used: Rec Room

Equipment: VR sets

Licences: free to play

Funding: national grants and private foundations (META)

Replicability: easy at a smaller scale, financially demanding at bigger scale

Age recommendation: The 13-18 age range seems the one with the highest chances for using this kind of experience to develop a sense of responsibility and engagement in society and turn it in a process of participation

Time engagement: 1h per week

Other possible uses: digital and virtual employability skills programs; to practise interview skills; to practise conflict resolution; cultural exchanges; space observation; music editing...

Similar methodology can be used in: environments where interaction meets the possibility to build something together (Gather Town; Minecraft or similar)

Why we recommend: very inclusive. The project aims to break down geographic, social and physical barriers that often hinder young people from participating in traditional youth work settings. The project also empowers young people by allowing them to lead discussions, create content and actively participate in shaping their experiences within the VR space

Tags: creativity; co-creation; ownership; inclusion
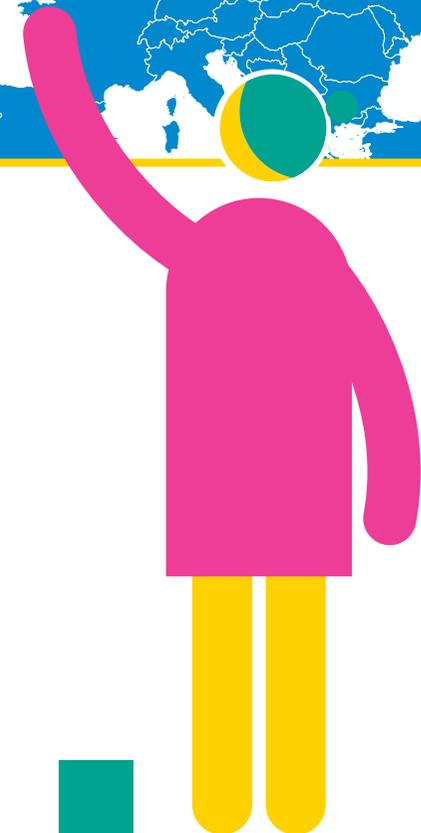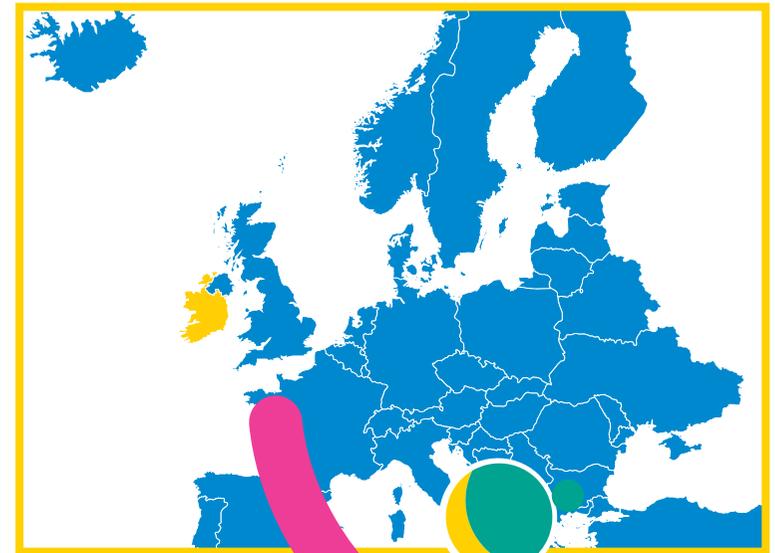
Go Virtual - pioneering youth participation in virtual realities

What do you call a project that can scale up a stunning 4,233% from its pilot phase to its first year of effective implementation? Well, we may be short on adjectives for this but it surely sounds surreal, almost 'virtual'! This is the story of an amazing success in engaging young people with few opportunities in a fully immersive digital experience. It's the story of Go Virtual.

Introduction

Adam Leech guided us through the details and results of the Go Virtual project, an innovative way to deliver youth work in a VR environment that made it possible for over 650 young people to meet every week from every corner of Ireland. Find out how the project was implemented, how many VR sets it distributed and how young people across the country were actively involved in this experimental digital youth work initiative.

Overview

Foróige is a prominent youth organisation that works with young people through more than 600 Foróige clubs in Ireland, reaching over 50,000 young people aged 10-18 each year.

True to their purpose of enabling 'young people to involve themselves consciously and actively in their development and in the development of society', at Foróige they have designed a new approach to Digital Youth Work.

We met online with Adam Leech, Senior Youth Officer in charge for the VR Development of the Go Virtual project, and we discussed with him about how their VR initiative has engaged their target group across Ireland.

Adam, a sociology graduate with a master's degree from Maynooth University, Ireland, applies his academic focus to the mutual interaction between the internet and society. His MA thesis was on Transgender Gamers and their lived experience in the physical vs virtual world. This research led him to understand that the virtual world provided a sense of agency for those that are isolated, even restricted by society in some way.

He gave us a detailed insight on why, amidst the digital transformation of youth work, Foróige's Go Virtual project stands out for its impact and as an innovative project aimed at engaging young people who are traditionally excluded from youth work due to various barriers.

The Go Virtual project, as Adam explained, is driven by two strategic objectives. The first is to overcome the geographic, social and physical barriers that prevent young people from participating in youth work. In his own words *'we're looking at how we can use virtual reality and mixed reality to engage young people who otherwise wouldn't have access to youth work in a traditional setting. […] Whether they could be physically isolated, or socially isolated.'*

The second objective addresses the reality that young people are increasingly present online. Foróige aims to meet them in this digital space, rather than expecting them to come to physical centres.

A story of amazing growth

Since 2001, Foróige's youth workers have been attuned to the interests and needs of young people, adapting their methods to engage them through various digital means, including early VR tools like Google Cardboard to later include the latest Oculus headsets.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a turning point for Go Virtual. The limitations of platforms like Zoom highlighted the need for more immersive and engaging alternatives. This led to the acquisition of VR headsets and the training of youth workers to use these tools effectively. The pilot project demonstrated the potential of VR, with significant engagement from young people, particularly those isolated during the pandemic, via platforms like AltspaceVR and Rec Room, which facilitated this virtual engagement.

The feedback from these early 15 to 20 young participants engaging weekly, their parents and staff was overwhelmingly positive. VR was not just another piece of technology; it was an exciting new platform that young people looked forward to engaging with, a welcome change from the 'Zoom fatigue' that had become all too common.

However, communicating the value of investing in technology, especially when the direct impact may seem modest in numbers, has been a hurdle. While youth workers understand the importance of reaching young people who traditionally wouldn't have access to youth work, it can be challenging to justify the investment in technology, especially when the direct impact may seem modest but is significant in terms of overcoming barriers for those individuals.

So the goal of the pilot phase was to develop a proof of concept that could be scaled across the organisation and, encouraged by this initial impact, Adam's team started to look at how they could scale up such a virtual reality experience until they managed to obtain a 3 year funding package to equip approximately 45 to 50 VR sets.

The state of the project, now in its first year and due to last until December 2025, has already provided plenty of positive impact evidence. The new VR sets have allowed the project to scale from one youth worker interacting with one young person to a team of over 120 trained youth workers interacting with 20-30 young people each on a weekly basis. In effect, this means that Foróige can now operate 80 different sites and reach over 650 young people every week.

Image 5: Dáil Showcase Rec Room

The workflow

Curious about how their system works we asked Adam to guide us through the main steps of the project, such as finding participants, onboarding and training them and their parents, and getting started!

Basically, he explained, *'we kind of operate on a referral system'*.

- **Reaching out to young participants:** Foróige can rely on referrals that come mostly from the Irish Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC), a key public structure to coordinate services for children and young people in every county in Ireland.
  'CYPSC brings together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people [...] to ensure that children, young people and their families receive improved and accessible services. Their role is to enhance interagency cooperation.'

- **Onboarding new participants:** There is also an onboarding path before new users can join the programme. There is, to start with, information provided to parents or guardians about what to expect from the project: 'what is virtual reality? What is the work that we do in virtual reality? Why are we doing this work? What is required from them?' The first practical step is a 30 minute information session on Zoom or Google Meet to guide everyone through the process involved.
  'And then at that point – Adam explained - we say, look, if you're still interested, let us know. And usually you know, they're very excited, and they're like, yes, yes, we're interested. And we then send them off some forms to fill out.'

- **Dealing with the tech settings:** Another half an hour setup session with the parents and guardians together with the young person talks them through step by step from setting the headset up and downloading the necessary apps for engaging in VR.

- **Integrating the new users:** Once the new user is set up, they will join a mailing list sent to parents, guardians and young people to keep everyone informed of the week's VR meeting topic. And that's it: they are part of the project until they no longer want to be involved or until they reach the age of 18. Every Thursday, from 7 to 8 pm, Adam and his colleague Tom Rickard host a VR youth panel on Rec Room, a youth participatory VR space where they're joined by young people and youth workers, and that's where new users are welcomed.

Image 6: Maths in Rec Room

The VR meetings

The weekly VR meetings are not just for social interaction and fun; they also foster critical thinking and creativity. Young people are active participants in the VR space, not passive consumers. They are involved in creating and evaluating their experiences and in shaping their virtual world. A usual session will start off with some light chatting and checking in with each other and on what they've been up to in the previous week. But then young people take the lead. They are asked about what they would like to do or discuss, and this can take quite some surprising directions like deciding to do some maths homework and exercises together on a virtual white board. But other typical activities can range from testing a new app or reviewing a new game together, for instance. Would they recommend it to other young people? If they could make any changes, what those changes would be?

The young people take the lead and become very creative. They, for instance, hosted a podcast on video games and how they've spent money in games. The Foróige staff may only speak for 30 seconds during half an hour, as the young people are very well able to facilitate the meetings themselves. The young people were given these kinds of skills and the authority to develop and create in Rec Room. And once you give young people that kind of information, the whole room just becomes this creative and chaotic space, which gives those people the ability to understand that they can create their own content in VR and make their own games in RecRoom from an empty space to a fully interactive world. The project is therefore not just about playing games. It's about creating developmental and learning opportunities that were previously inaccessible to many young people.

Image 7: A participant in Foroiges digital youth showcase in Leinster House using a VR-headset

In answering a specific question on the software used, Adam explained that Rec Room was ultimately chosen because it's an app that can be used on any smart device, be it a laptop, a phone or a tablet, or even a PlayStation or Xbox console, as well as through the VR set. This makes the digital space more inclusive, and given that Rec Room is also completely free, both users and the organisation are safe against situations when young people turn around and say 'we don't want this; we want to be in another space'. That could be quite a waste of resources if the software requires a financial investment.

Lessons learned

Adam also shared some key moments and lessons learned from the Go Virtual project.

- **A safe environment:** He recounted an instance during a VR session where a staff member realised that a young person, who was presenting as male, was actually quite reserved and not engaging fully. It was only through the anonymity provided by VR that this young person felt comfortable to express their true gender identity, revealing themselves through a female avatar. This moment underscored the unique safe space that VR can offer, allowing young people to explore and express their identities without fear of judgement.

- **Bridging the gaps:** Another poignant story involved a young person from a remote island who, through VR, was able to connect with others and participate in a virtual work experience programme. This experience not only provided valuable skills but also a sense of connection and normalcy during the isolating times of the pandemic.

- **Technologies comparison:** In terms of broader digital tools, Adam believes that smartphones could be the stage before VR, by offering a more accessible platform for digital engagement. However, the immersive experience of VR provides a unique advantage that other digital tools may not replicate as effectively.

- **Generational differences:** He also humorously reflected on the learning curve associated with new technology, sharing how young people often grasp these tools much faster than adults. He recalls spending hours learning to use the 'maker pen' in Rec Room, only to watch young people master it in seconds, a testament to the comfortable interaction with technology that younger generations often experience.

Image 8: Sharing an informal space in Rec Room

Impact and youth participation

The Go Virtual project proved highly effective in promoting youth participation. In recent months, Foróige has been reaching out to staff trained in VR to evaluate the work they've done. The feedback has highlighted the project's impact on young people who traditionally wouldn't engage in youth work, providing them with opportunities to be involved in their communities. In one case they were able to engage with young people who are from the travelling community in Ireland, who would have traditionally very low attendance in that specific kind of project. It's that kind of impact that helps in tackling the challenge mentioned earlier: convincing donors and society of the value and importance of a project like this, and convincing parents and schools that, for instance, 'gaming is not just playing a game; it's also problem solving, critical thinking and communication. It's all of these things'.

But the results go beyond increased inclusion, as they also foster youth participation in the decision-making process. Specific groups called Digital Youth Squads form the youth participation structure for the overall digital youth work strategy at Foróige and, meeting on a monthly basis, they are responsible for the direction of digital youth work. They provide indications in terms of what areas to focus on and what the priorities should be. And they give feedback about everything, from the names of programs to the types of activities to implement. Plus, they also keep the team up to date in terms of what's going on, what young people are doing and what young people are interested in. So, young people play a key role as they're actually deciding on the creation of content.

Sustainability

We wondered about the sustainability of a project so ambitious and Adam shared with us about how the results and impact reached so far have made the difference.

Of course, he explained, another huge challenge for a project of this kind is the financial cost of equipment, which is clearly very expensive and can become obsolete quite quickly. It could easily take up to 30% of the budget of a normal project. For small organisations this can be a huge obstacle. At Foróige, they have been extremely lucky or effective in making potential donors interested in their approach, and as a result they ended up receiving huge support from Meta, which sent them 400 VR headsets.

Adam advises starting small, with a few headsets, and then scaling up based on evaluations and research. Connecting with other organisations using VR and demonstrating its effectiveness is crucial for engaging those who traditionally wouldn't access youth work. The aim is to scale the project, backed by research that validates its success, whether through European cooperation or local and national funding. The project's success is not measured solely by the number of participants but by the depth of its impact on individuals who would otherwise be excluded from such experiences. Communicating this value to stakeholders and justifying the investment in technology remains a challenge, yet the profound effect on the lives of the few is undeniable and well worth the effort.

Another challenge has been time: there is not enough time in the day, the week or the month to focus on all the opportunities and projects that come with VR. If we were to double our Digital Youth Work Team, we would still struggle for time. Such is the demand for Digital Youth Work among our staff and volunteers.

Looking ahead

As we reached the conclusion of our exploration into the Go Virtual project, Adam shared his final thoughts and reflections on the initiative's journey and its future prospects.

Looking forward, Adam emphasised the importance of content creation by young people themselves. Go Virtual is committed to empowering young individuals by equipping them with the digital skills necessary to create their own content, from podcasting to 3D animations and VR content. This not only fosters a sense of ownership and creativity but also ensures that youth participation remains at the core of the project.

In 2024, Foróige is planning to engage external research partners to evaluate the impact of VR as a tool for youth work, so that they can stand over the work that they do and verify its effectiveness.

The Go Virtual project is more than just a shiny piece of technology: it's a platform for development, learning and growth. It's a space where young people can practise employability skills, engage in conflict resolution and explore their creativity. Every young person in Ireland should have the opportunity to engage in Digital Youth Work and to develop these key soft and hard digital skills for what's now and next. This should be by choice, and not by chance

Conclusion

In closing, Adam shared a sense of optimism and a call to action. This *'is an experience unlike any other; you feel like you're in person with someone. [...] if we were in VR together, I would feel like I was there with you, except for the temperature difference, obviously. VR just has that extra element of immersiveness...'.*

The Go Virtual project is a living example of how technology can be harnessed to make a significant difference in the lives of young people. It's a challenge to the status quo, an invitation to rethink how youth work can be delivered and a project that has proven its worth, offering a glimpse into the future of digital engagement and the possibilities it holds for empowering young people.

Image 9: VRoige Foroige 2023

CHARLES GAMES -
it all started in 1348

Type of digital interactive space: Video games

Approach: https://charlesgames.net/

Game/Software used: all games created by Charles Games

Equipment: computers

Licences: the games need to be purchased separately

Funding: internal university funds, income from selling games

Replicability: medium – some resources are necessary to develop a video game but various funding opportunities and public grants exist

Age recommendation: different games were developed for different target groups. From ages 13-16 to 20-23 and older.

Time engagement: game development can take up to 6 years (the whole process). Playing the games takes a few hours to 10+ hours

Other possible uses: the games can be used as recreational tools but they are designed with preeminent social and educational dimensions

Why we recommend: Charles Games develops its games in close cooperation with NGOs, educators and parents to deliver products as close as possible to the needs it wishes to address

Tags: critical thinking, history, visual novels, environment, research

Charles Games - it all started in 1348

From a research question to a successful studio developing innovative video games with an educational and social focus. This is the story of Charles Games, which started as a spin-off project within Charles University in Prague and is now a very interesting player in the indie video game developer scene.

Background and research

Charles Games is an award-winning indie game studio based in Prague, Czechia.

The company was born initially as a project co-funded by the Faculties of Mathematics and Physics and Arts at Charles University. It is now a limited company with 8 employees and a number of very interesting active projects.

It started with one simple idea – a research question, actually – and it developed into a video game company that is cooperating actively with NGOs and institutions. The company's mission is to use digital media to create engaging, interactive learning experiences.

We met Lukas Kolek, CEO of Charles Games, for a coffee-infused conversation in the company's office in Prague.

Kolek's background is in European Studies and Political Science. His PhD idea was to research how video games can produce changes in attitudes[1] and whether people became more critical about the events described in a game and less on the ideological extremes.

He interviewed about 150 people (age 20-23), in two groups – control and experiment. The results show that players approached the topics much more critically, were more willing to get involved in discussions and were more inclined to start conversations with their family and inner circles.

His research work hasn't stopped. An empirical study on the socio-political impact of video games was published in 2021[2], and this was followed by a paper that involved 148 young adults in 2022[3].

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1   defined as an 'approach or personal view on something'
2   Summary of results and conclusions from the first empirical study in the Players and Attitudes project. Can video games change attitudes towards history? Results from a laboratory experiment measuring short- and long-term effects, 2021.
3   Video Games and Attitude Change: A Meta-analysis, 2022.

The first game

Charles Games aims at advancing science, while pushing for a positive change in society, developing compassion and empathy, and building bridges towards mutual understanding and critical thinking.

This started with their first game, Attentat 1942. This multi award winning game was innovative in its use of multimedia and allowed players to explore a particularly critical moment in Czechoslovakian history – the partisan attack that in 1942 killed Reinhard Heydrich.

In *Attentat 1942*, the player plays the role of a young person in today's Czechia, whose grandfather was arrested by the Gestapo shortly after the Heydrich assassination. The objective of the investigative point-and-click adventure game is to establish what role your grandfather played in the events, as well as the reason for his arrest. Throughout the investigation, players interview eyewitnesses, discover the family's backstory and learn more about life during World War II[4].

Released in 2017, the game was well received by players and acclaimed by critics. In Germany, it was the first game that was permitted to use Nazi symbolism (completely forbidden across all German media), for its particular 'social adequacy'. It presents a complicated story from multiple perspectives, and it attempts to maintain a balanced and respectful outlook, while being careful about the real-life implications on people's lives.

'Given our limited resources,' said Kolek, 'the game went quite well. Between twenty and twenty-five percent of Czech high schools downloaded it. As *Attentat 1942* was initially funded by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, and co-funded by our university, the Czech and Slovak versions were released for free. The international version was sold on major platforms such as Steam.'

Current developments

The company is now firmly established and operates thanks to the revenues of its games, as well as income from other projects. Charles Games keeps its focus on social and political topics, with special attention to the educational value of all its projects.

'We get hired as developers to create games on given topics,' continued Kolek. 'As part of a Horizon project, we are working with museums from Ireland, Greece, Brussels, Bosnia, Austria and Czechia to digitalise their content in innovative ways.'

The company is developing three games, one of which (*Project Toys*, still in the early design phase) will tell the story of children who grow up in war zones. They are also creating *Playing Kafka*, on the work and life of Franz Kafka, in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut.

Historical context

Reinhard Heydrich was one of Nazi Germany's highest-ranking officials who, after the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia, became governor of the occupied territories. He carried out his duties with a special savagery, which earned him the nickname Butcher of Prague.

The Allied Command and the Czechoslovak government (from their exile in London) devised a daring commando plan to assassinate him. This became known as Operation Anthropoid. Considered by many to be the hideous mind behind the genocide of the Jewish people in Europe, Heydrich's entire activity (and the Nazi occupation of Bohemia as a whole) are undoubtedly dark pages in history, but his assassination also left a controversial legacy. It led to an incredibly brutal retaliation by the Nazi regime, with an estimated 5,000 people executed as a direct consequence, and many more thousands imprisoned and deported to concentration camps. s imprisoned and deported to concentration camps.

The ripples of this collective trauma continued to be felt long after the war was over, with the forced expulsion of many ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia to East and West Germany. Many thousands died as a direct consequence (the figure is still disputed).

4   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attentat_1942

Don't simply call them games

Charles Games developed a number of successful games in cooperation with the Czech NGO People in Need. The *Digistories* series focuses on cyberbullying and digital addiction and is relayed from the point of view of teenagers; *Ashti* was specifically developed for the elementary schools of Iraqi Kurdistan to teach water management and water scarcity.

In these cases, the NGO is in charge of the needs analysis, in cooperation with the target group, and they bring expertise on specific topics. At the same time, they are responsible for dissemination and for bringing the games to audiences. The whole process, from the initial idea to releasing the game, may take between 3 and 6 years.

'The social aspect of our projects is essential to us,' said Kolek. 'It's easier to put one hundred percent of your energy into something if you see the value in it. Working like this can be energising. We are interested in challenging, complicated issues where multiple points of view are possible. We think that games are a great medium to work on these topics. We don't want to develop educational games as such; we don't frame our projects in that way.'

From a designer's point of view, games have to be 'fun'. When games are framed as educational, it's a limitation, and sometimes the pedagogical element is put up front; players may then stop seeing them as fun. When people get bored, they stop playing. As a game designer, that constitutes a failure.

Another example of this is Beecarbonize, a strategy card game where the objective is to survive climate change.

People in Need

People in Need is a Czech-based NGO with over 30 years of experience. Founded in 1992 by a group of Czech war correspondents who sought to be actors of change, it gradually became established as a professional humanitarian organisation that was active worldwide. It is one of the main humanitarian NGOs in Central Europe and its approach is student-centred, participatory and strongly rooted in respecting and upholding human rights.

The participatory approach to game design

The DigiStories series was developed in close cooperation with teachers who indicated the essential topics that were not covered by traditional curricula. The topic of excessive time spent with technology and gaming emerged as one of the most pertinent. The team also involved psychologists and experts on digital addiction, which helped all of those involved to grasp the topic as realistically and effectively as possible.

During the game development, People in Need continuously tested the product with school teachers and pupils. For example, they checked whether the language was appropriate for the given age, whether they found the story believable and so on. The game was modified according to the feedback received. They also tested whether the game helped open up the topic of healthy online habits in the classroom and how it affected the students.

At the end of the development, the game was again tested in schools – including follow-up activities for the pupils that were prepared in cooperation with teachers. Feedback was collected using forms submitted in the classrooms. In general, pupils and teachers enjoyed the game and, according to them, it works very well for discussion and reflection on topics such as digital addiction or digital balance.
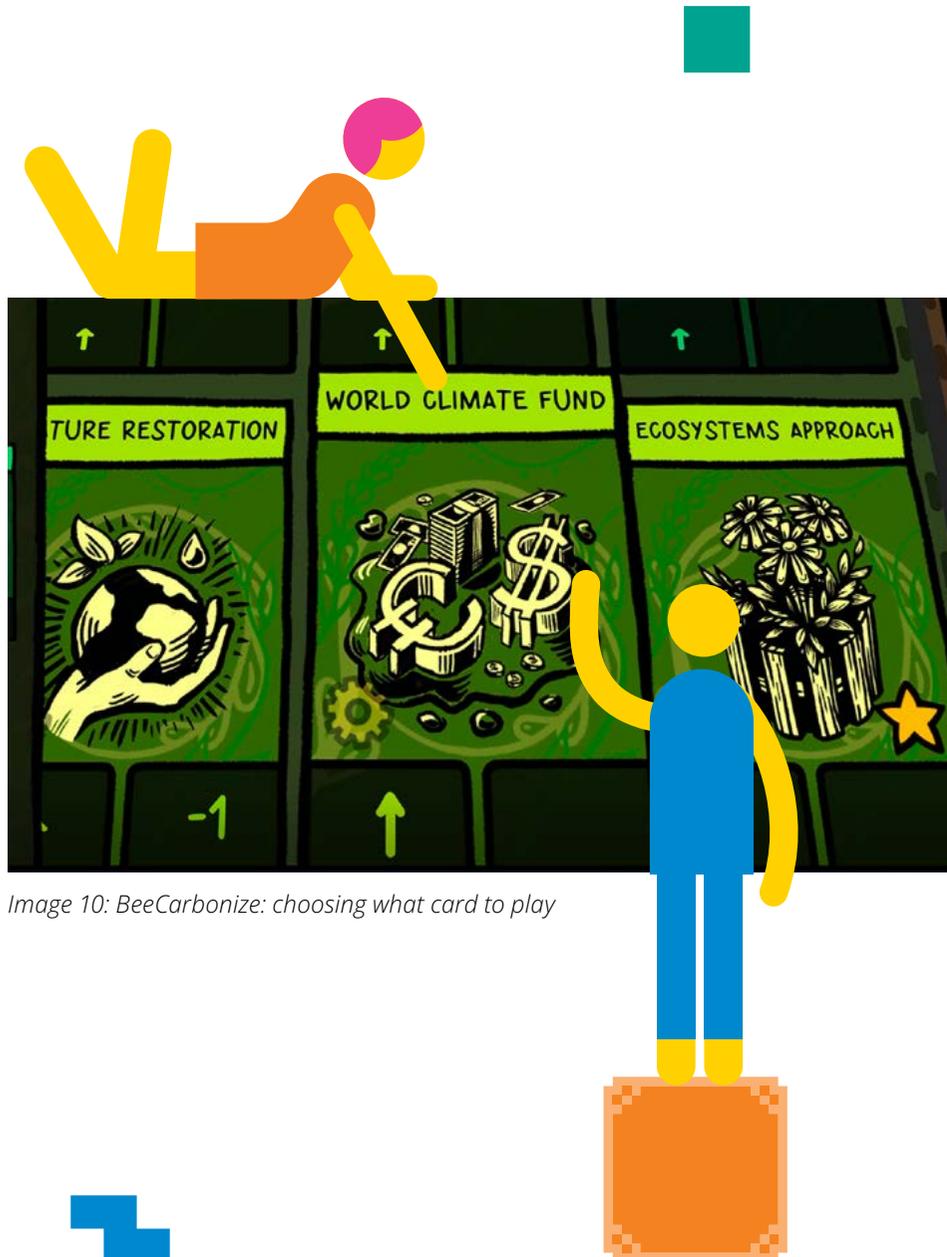
Image 10: BeeCarbonize: choosing what card to play

Very powerful learning tools

Learning is embedded in game design: a new game is by definition a learning experience. And if people like a game, they talk about it and this will spread the message even more.

Svoboda 1945: Liberation[5] was the second game produced by the company. Like *Attentat 1942*, it also combined different styles in an interactive story told from the perspective of a protagonist who is investigating their family's history. History is not shown as a black-and-white series of events.

This complicated scenario is described in a nuanced way, including voices that are not often represented in the public discourse. They represented people who were expelled, people who were actively involved in the expulsion, witnesses and people who just were there in a neutral role.

Beecarbonize, on climate change, tries to showcase possible solutions and opportunities as well as describe the problems. Many environmental games are simply apocalyptic, in that they show we are in big trouble with no way out. This can instil fear with offering the motivation to change.

And if a game is successful, people talk about it. *Beecarbonize* has 300,000 players on Steam who are active, spark conversations and share their experiences.

5   The game is about the complicated post-WWII period in Czechoslovakia. Thousands of people were expelled from the country because of their German heritage. The decision led towards more homogeneous Czech and Slovak states, but it left a massive collective trauma that is still felt today, generations later.

Possible controversies

If games can have a positive social effect, does the opposite also apply? Can they have a negative impact on a player's behaviour and attitude? The existing research at present shows that they don't[6]. 'Some research actually suggests that violent games may reduce violent behaviours,' replied Kolek. 'It's very hard to say if all games are equally effective, including educational games. That's why we measured something very specific, which is attitude change. Games have a big impact on the way we think and react to situations. That can be measured. Whether games also have wider, worldly consequences, I cannot say. *America's Army* was the most successful campaign to hire people in the American Army. In general, is it a positive thing, or a negative thing? It's very hard to say.'

The problem with representing war or violence in the media is that they necessarily represent a cleaner, sanitised version of the topics. Video games are no exception. Even if they try to create a realistic impression, it's never fully 'real'. Plus, it has to be somehow appealing to the audience (otherwise they quit). It's quite complex really.

The focus of Charles Games is more limited and, therefore, easier to control. They try to identify possible problematic aspects during playtesting.

For example, in *Beecarbonize* they designed a scenario in which the player would be able to genetically or technologically alter human beings, in order to contrast climate change. Soon they realised this didn't feel very ethical to the community of players (and to the developers), so they reduced its importance in the game. They listened to the users' feedback and this helped them to gain a better point of view.

In another case, during the making of *Attentat 1942*, they realised that telling such a delicate story from a personal point of view would have to be carefully handled, since so many lives and families have been directly affected by those events.

With this in mind, they decided to create characters that are realistic but not 100% accurate. They are fictional, and the studio filmed actors to impersonate them. It made the game much more manageable from an ethical point of view.

Designers have to make many decisions during the creative process, and having a close focus on the social and ethical dimension of the game allows them to create much more profound experiences.

America's Army is a series of video games officially funded, developed and published by the US Army between 2002 and 2022, which 'intended to inform, educate and recruit prospective soldiers'. Many people are concerned about the content of war games though it is a genre that is more popular than ever with the Call of Duty franchise, for example.

6   https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/jul/22/
    playing-video-games-doesnt-lead-to-violent-behaviour-study-shows

The impact of their games

Charles Games measured the impact of their games through questionnaires, and they decided to ask questions after 40 minutes of gameplay such as 'What do you remember after playing the game?' and 'Are you now motivated to learn more about the issues represented?'.

The research was conducted with scientific rigour, was peer-reviewed and used the first games developed at Charles Games. About 150 people, in two groups – control and experiment – were interviewed (all participants were aged 20-23).

The results are fascinating. The use of video games as a tool to bring about a change in attitude towards historical facts or societal phenomena showed positive results that were measurable in the short-term, and they seem even more impactful when looking from a long-term perspective.

One of the reasons is motivation. Players who engage critically with a subject through an interactive experience (such as a video game) develop an emotional connection, and they have an intrinsic motivation to learn more about it and understand it at a deeper level. According to Kolek, another aspect is – if the game is designed well – immersion. 'Being involved in the first person helps the player to critically evaluate the scenarios described, remember facts and situations even over a longer time span and take action accordingly.'

The team at Charles Games is also fascinated by other indie studios. In order to be positively surprised and see what video games really have to offer as a medium, they recommend exploring the less-beaten path.

Path Out is an Austrian game from 2022 that is centred around the story of a refugee from Syria. The games really breaks down stereotypes and is one in which the protagonist is actively involved – in that the real person's voice is used in-game.

Another example is *Endling - Extinction is Forever*, an indie game in which the player can act as various animals and experience the effects of climate change from different perspectives. This can prove to be quite impactful.

Of course, funny anecdotes are common in the life of a game designer.

'We were creating our first profile on Steam,' Kolek recalls, 'and the company asked us to upload the founding statute of our organisation, a completely normal thing to do. The problem is, at the time we were legally still a part of Charles University in Prague, which was founded in 1348 by Emperor Charles IV. So we scanned and registered our university statute, the original parchment document, in Latin and uploaded it. Everybody at Steam was pretty confused at first and they asked a lot of questions. But in the end, they accepted it. So it all ended well.'

Conclusion

Indie video games explore a wide variety of topics and they enjoy more creative freedom than the so-called 'AAA games' (the big budget games developed by large, corporate studios). Their immersive element has no equal and allows for a deeper, more engaging experience from the user. This has been proven to lead to effective learning experiences and may bring about changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the users.

Developing video games should definitely be considered alongside the other, more traditional forms of media education. As a field, although still experimental, it is expanding rapidly.

THE SPIRIT OF EUROPE - ORIGINS -

the quest for peace and democracy
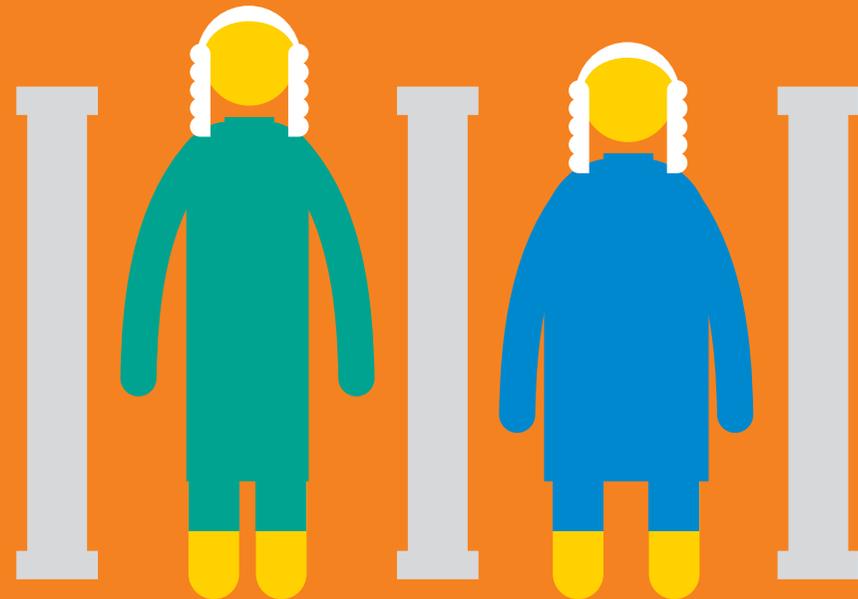
Type of digital interactive space: Video game + self assessment website

Approach: blended

Official website: https://thespiritofeurope.eu/

Game/Software used: Unreal + Moodle

Equipment: computers

Licences: free

Funding: Erasmus+ KA2, own funds

Replicability: difficult at a smaller scale, requiring a larger team on a bigger scale

Age recommendation: Participants aged 15-19 in schools and youth clubs; 20-40 in public libraries

Other possible uses: using commercial video games (like Assassin's Creed discovery tour edition) to explore the same historical periods

Why we recommend: it is a custom-made video game designed by educators and developers together to address topics such as European values, democracy and peace, and it underlines the importance of participatory processes to the evolution of Europe. Moreover, it comes with a complete package of tools and guidelines for assessing learning and preparing educational workshops around the video game.

Tags: European values; democracy; history

The Spirit of Europe - Origins - the quest for peace and democracy

The historical development of European values is yours to discover through groundbreaking video game workshops, based on a custom-made game and a learning-assessment Moodle platform. A fusion of pixels and education, unravelling Europe's core values in an immersive digital experience unlike any other!

Introduction

The idea that educators could create their own digital tools, such as video games and platforms, to be used in formal or non formal education activities, has been circulating since before the pandemic.

Predict Edumedia is a group of consultants in e-learning and digital tools, platforms and gamification based in Arad (Romania) and operating as a department of the Predict CSD Consulting organisation.

They began experimenting with video games as tools to aid in group bonding in European youth exchanges and to deal with culture shock within the European Solidarity Corps programme for volunteering abroad.

In 2018, they decided to develop a full scale video game to tackle the fundamental values that built Europe, with a particular focus on peace and democracy. The project was called The Spirit of Europe - Origins.

Project background: origin and objectives

The goal of this project was to enhance the understanding and appreciation of European values, history and culture among the targeted audience. Dealing with European values and rights, players would understand that none of these is to be taken for granted. There has been a long history of struggles and achievements needed to build them up, and ongoing attention and maintenance is due, in order to keep these rights alive and relevant in our societies today and into the future. Participation in civic society and in the democratic process is the key element that connects European values and the story of their origins, and this game was developed to make that clear and understandable.

Funding

The project was funded by Erasmus+ programme KA2 grants and co-funded by the organisation's own funds. We spoke with Victor Roman from Predict Edumedia about the development and outcomes of The Spirit of Europe - Origins.

Their team worked all year during 2018, supported by their own resources, to get ready and prepare an Erasmus+ application for the project. In 2019, they applied for an Erasmus+ KA2 grant and the project funding covered 90% of development expenses. They kept co-funding it as far as dissemination activities were involved.
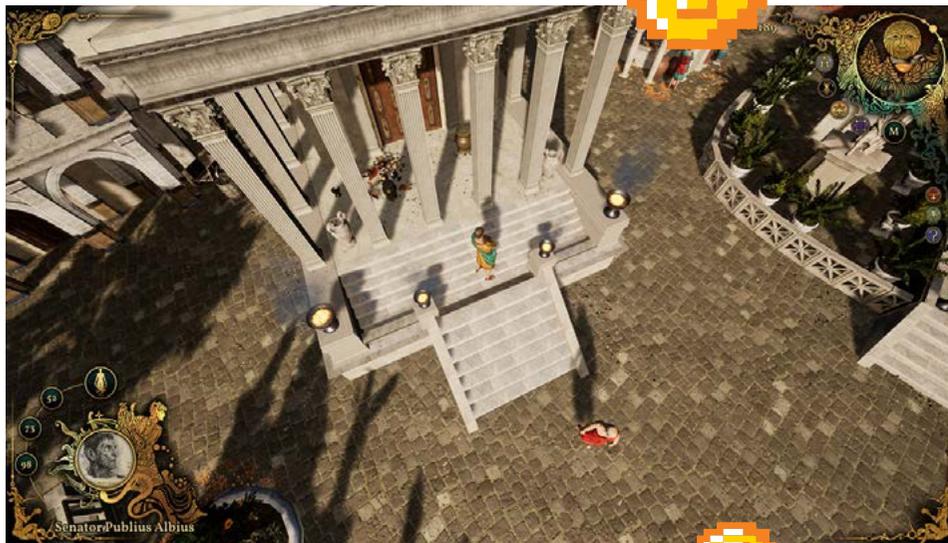

Image 11: Exploring the origins of Europe at Roman times

Project development journey

The COVID pandemic made things harder and the subsequent travel ban halted many Erasmus+ project activities. However, they were able to carry on because the project mostly relied on digital spaces which, as we have all learned, were not affected negatively by the pandemic.

A first version of the game was launched in 2021. Since then it has been continuously improved, thanks to the feedback collected in workshops and learning activities based on it. The video game is now both a game to play for fun and a tool to create educational workshops about democracy, human rights, peace and all the values that are at the core of Europe.

Romania is generally considered one of the best countries in the world when it comes to internet connectivity, which helped in the ease of establishing the game there. Other project partner countries were not in the same situation, so when the project team started experimenting with the game in rural areas of Spain, Greece and Italy after the pandemic, it became apparent that it was more complicated in those regions to achieve the same results.

At the same time, since they started bringing their own mobile routers and laptops, they were able to offer game play sessions almost anywhere.

To improve this offering, they also made a deal with the game streaming service Boosteroid.

Game streaming services allow subscribers to run games on their remote servers, which usually have higher-specs hardware, and they then use local devices only to watch and control the gameplay.

By sharing their own paid Boosteroid accounts, the team was then able to offer yet another way to overcome digital divide issues.

Game overview

The game underwent a long development and transformation phase to make it become a possible tool for youth workers and educators in contexts such as youth centres, schools and libraries.

The game was created on the Unreal engine, it was developed out of a 300-pages script, which was written by their 5 person team and checked by historians hired as consultants, in order to ensure that the history in the game checked out.

The game itself is a role playing game (RPG) that guides players through the various stages of evolution of European values. Beginning from ancient Greece and the birth of democracy in Athens, you then move on to Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and beyond.

In these periods, some historical characters in the game are possessed by the Spirit of Europe, which takes control of them against challenges such as prejudice, slavery, ignorance, etc.

You as a player will play these characters, and you will be expected to manage the conflict situations, choose how to develop resources, which side to take and so on. Your choices and actions will shape the future and hopefully lead Europe to become what it is now.

The general aim of the video game is to create and maintain peace during the historical phases that put the foundation to the creation of Europe, in many different situations and contexts: for instance, you negotiate the Magna Charta with the King of England, you develop the Hanseatic League in central Europe, you learn to establish the Pax Romana, you see the impact of Christianism on the Roman Empire when moving the capital to Constantinople and so on. This is achieved through a system of quests that are proposed to the players, which they then have to solve and fulfil.

The game is available for free on several digital distribution platforms, by following the links on the official webpage and, up to the time of writing, it has been downloaded by 4,027 players on Steam and by 431 on Itch.

Image 12: Exploring the origins of Europe in an Hanseatic League city

Game deployment and adaptation

Originally, the game was accompanied with a self-assessment companion website based on Moodle to measure the progress of the players' knowledge about history and Europe. Unexpectedly, the request for registration on Moodle triggered an incredible amount of feedback (including some quite angry messages). Players questioned the necessity of registration before playing a game that they got on another platform like Steam, where they were already registered. They were also concerned about the collection of redundant data and personal information.

While the registration process strictly adhered to GDPR guidelines, Victor smiled as he remarked on the modern trend of people skimming through information without thorough reading, despite the clear explanation provided on the website.

To address this challenge, a first major modification to the game was introduced: an option for casual, unrestricted playing, allowing players to bypass the Moodle platform and the history knowledge quiz. This introduced the possibility for the game to be played in many more possible contexts, including schools and youth clubs, and in a more casual way.

Then again, the game feedback system hinted at the developers about a possible second major update. Again Victor smiles when he comments that this update came mostly from the feedback from youth workers and educators, who could not stand such long gameplay times and required something easier and shorter. The second update introduced the possibility to play the game in the so called 'story-mode', without having to pass through the whole 30 gameplay hours, 13-maps, 240-NPCs and 2,000+ years of European history.

Implementation and outreach

Fulfilling these conditions allowed the game to become a proper educational tool, with a story mode being possibly completed in up to 8 hours.

This allowed the team to start designing their own workshops centred around the game, and they aided players in fully understanding the impact of European values and the path which led us to define them. Additionally, it served as a means to address the potential digital divide among players: for instance, making the game available to young people who do not have access to powerful (and expensive) last generation computers or reliable and fast internet connections – a story worth sharing.

Victor recalls organising game playing sessions during Romania's national non-formal education week, which were held in schools and youth centres across the Timisoara area. These sessions aimed to promote the game as an educational tool for training democracy and civic participation. Additionally, they arranged a caravan equipped with laptops to embark on a trip to rural areas, where they also organised gaming sessions.

Moreover, they struck an agreement with the cloud/streaming gaming service Boosteroid that would host the game, enabling the game to also be played on lower-spec computers, as long as a good internet connection was available.

Step-by-step workflow for workshops

Onboarding new participants:

- Young people were engaged in educational workshops based on the game, through local gaming contests. These kinds of workshops can easily be replicated locally, using local gaming hardware and a free copy of the game. Alternatively, a subscription to Boosteroid can allow game streaming on lower-spec computers, which are still commonly used in schools and youth centres.

- Participants: in each workshop, a group of 10 to 20 players was formed based on available devices, which allowed for diverse experiences tailored to different time frames and contextual needs.

- Basic structure: the initial structure consisted of more or less 2 hours of playing, allowing completion of the first 2 ages. At this point, the winner was declared, and the whole group was engaged in a debriefing discussion led by a facilitator. The discussion explored the learning they got out of the game, either in terms of historical knowledge or in respect of European values, peace and democracy.

Debriefing

A comprehensive set of debriefing questions was crafted, encompassing various aspects of gameplay and learning outcomes:

- Objective-related questions

- Reflective questions prompted contemplation about some aspects that happened in the game and the values explored while playing; decision-focused questions aimed to explore the consequences of in-game choices and the effects they would cause.

This last group of questions was the most relevant in terms of identifying learning connected to participation and the development of democracy and European values.

Some of the debriefing questions regarded the origin of specific European values across different historical ages in the game. Participants were prompted to compare these values with their manifestation in modern societies, in order to identify their evolution, changes, persistence and underlying reasons.

These thought-provoking questions ultimately led the participants to engage with topics connected to their local experiences. For instance, they could identify the connection between a local campaign, such as preserving a green area in a proposed shopping centre development, and the core values our democratic life is based upon. This observation reinforced the view to never take these values for granted but instead to actively take part in preserving and expanding them.

Some examples of the debriefing questions, related to the age of migrations and the so-called barbaric invasion, include:

- Objective-related
  Who were the key figures involved in the migration of the Gothic population into Roman territory?

- Reflection-related
  Reflect on the impact that the Sack of Rome in 410 AD by Alaric might have had on the Roman population at the time.

- Values-related
  In light of the migration period's cultural exchanges and conflicts, how does this era's legacy inform the EU's values of tolerance, non-discrimination and solidarity?

- Decision-related
  Considering the historical outcomes, what strategies can be learned from the Roman handling of migrations that might apply to modern issues of migration and integration?

The full list is available here

Participants and workshop dynamics

Typically, participants ranged from 15 to 19 years old in schools or youth centres, while those in public libraries were often between 20 and 40 years old. Younger participants proved to be more at ease with the game dynamics, while older ones were more engaged in the debriefing discussions, which often lasted much more than expected.

The game designers, as Victor says openly, understand that this kind of experience usually attracts a particular set of participants, often favouring boys over other genders. To address this imbalance, they experimented with offering parallel workshops in which one could either play the game or be involved in a face-to-face 'old school' simulation about democracy.

Subsequently, the different groups of participants would meet in the debriefing session and share their experiences. This approach aimed to balance the gender ratio among participants and ultimately offered a more diverse discussion.

Lessons learned

Looking back, there are quite some learning points that Victor can count, both in developing the game and in using it as an educational tool.

Victor underlines the importance of having a facilitator, such as a youth worker, on guiding discussions and handling some situations which sometimes could emerge during the debriefing discussion. For example, there were instances where participants extolled the virtues of the simpler solution of a single individual in charge, whether it was Mussolini, Ceausescu or others, thereby favouring simplicity over complexity.

A facilitator's presence ensures that discussion is based on game facts and experiences, and it helps to steer the discussion away from diverging viewpoints that contradict the European values that have been built up through the centuries (and their hours of gameplay).

Moreover, having a workshop with a facilitator could enable participants to choose different historical ages to explore. Facilitators can provide game-save files to initiate game play in the desired historical period, thereby bypassing the need to start from scratch and journey through the game until the preferred historical era.

Impact

The original self-assessment of historical knowledge, facilitated through a Moodle platform, consisted of a 20-question quiz drawn from a pool of 250 questions and prepared by the team and history consultants.

Participants were encouraged to retake this quiz at the end of their gaming session to assess their enhanced understanding of European history and the development of fundamental European values. However, this feature had limited success, with 1,807 players engaging in the history assessment quiz before playing the game and 751 returning to take the final quiz.

The workshops gathered almost 200 participants (Victor states, 189 to be precise!), and upon reviewing the history assessment quiz, a noticeable trend emerged. Before playing, the average value of correct answers was 6.5 points. However, after the experience, this score nearly doubled to an average of 12.9 points.

The game itself was quite successful, receiving positive reviews and feedback from numerous streamers. One amusing incident occurred when a streamer in Latin America accidentally lost their progress after failing a critical quest and then realised they hadn't saved their game. He had to restart from the beginning while streaming the game in front of a huge audience!

This highlighted the need for an auto-save feature, which was a learning point for the developers. Nonetheless, it was a flattering experience to witness their game being reviewed and streamed online from across the ocean!

Talking about history based games, Victor hints that some AAA commercial video games could be used in a similar way as The Spirit of Europe - Origins.

These kinds of games need a dedicated hardware of a certain level, often beyond what's available in locations such as schools or youth centres. Even if played on game streaming services, the cost per-licence is quite high and often impossible to bear for educational institutions. To bridge this gap, workshops were organised that offered laptops or used subscriptions to services like the Boosteroid for game streaming.

The most important takeaway of this experience is the proven possibility to build digital experiences, such as video games, and use them as learning tools. Victor suggests potential improvements for those contemplating game design:

- Shortening the game and reducing text, as they discovered that people tend to read less in-depth.

- Considering more audio elements, despite the potential cost, to offer content that better resonates with players.

- Conducting a more extensive testing and pilot phase pre-launch (their initial testing phase was disrupted by COVID), which could affirm the need for a simpler structure and mechanics – potentially sticking to the traditional RPG or turn-based styles without blending genres excessively.

Finally, coming to possible improvement in the educational use of this game, a key lesson learned is that the game requires a substantial time commitment. Therefore, effective planning and engaging participants willing to dedicate several hours are essential. Forcing people to play for just a while would not yield ideal results.

There are two remarkable milestones in the impact of this game that Victor cherishes with a big smile: winning the Good Practice award by Romanian Erasmus+ National Agency and the SALTO Award for the best digital transformation practice in 2023. An historical game indeed!
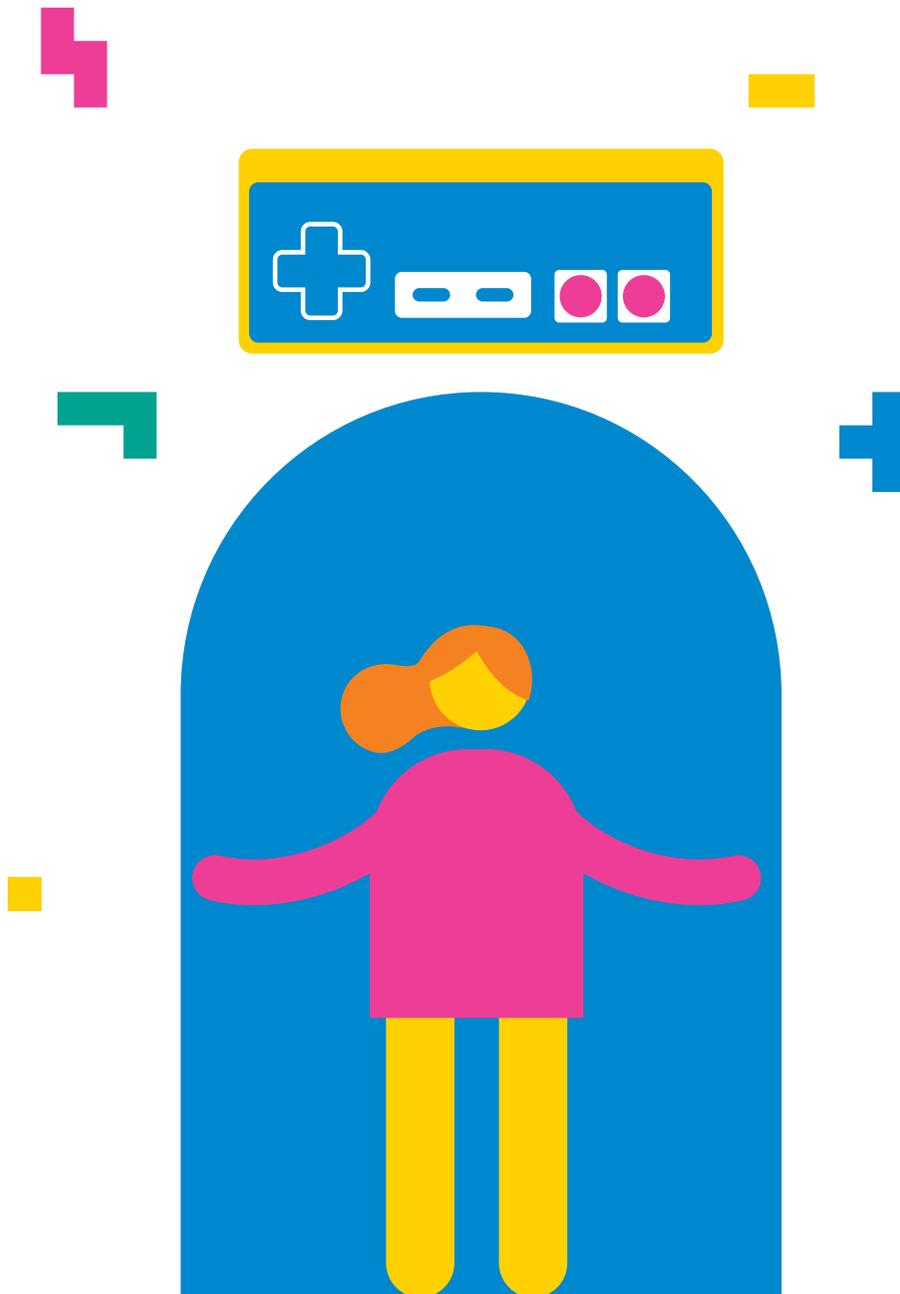
Future prospects

A lot is happening in digital spaces lately, and Victor hints at a possible new project based on VR structures as an escape-room experience rooted in history. This possible development might be even more engaging and usable by the educational and youth field.

Conclusion

The Spirit of Europe - Origins stand as both a globally enjoyed video game and the outcome of an Erasmus+ project. This is an example of an impact of digital transformation in educational projects, and it hints at the potential for similar groundbreaking experiences in the future.

This project's capacity to change and evolve – starting with the reaction to challenges like COVID-19 pandemic and spanning to inclusion issues such as the digital divide or the availability of devices – led its transformation from a 'simple' RPG to an educational resource, complete with a Moodle-based assessment platform and a workshop structure to make it more replicable.

Finally, this project is an example of how educators, game developers and cultural institutions can work together. Whether by developing new games, incorporating existing ones into educational programmes or supporting projects like The Spirit of Europe - Origins, there's immense potential to make learning more dynamic and accessible. Let's harness the power of digital innovation to educate and inspire the next generation about the rich tapestry of European shared history and values.

KASTEDDU E-SPORT -
a video game club with a focus on inclusion and team spirit
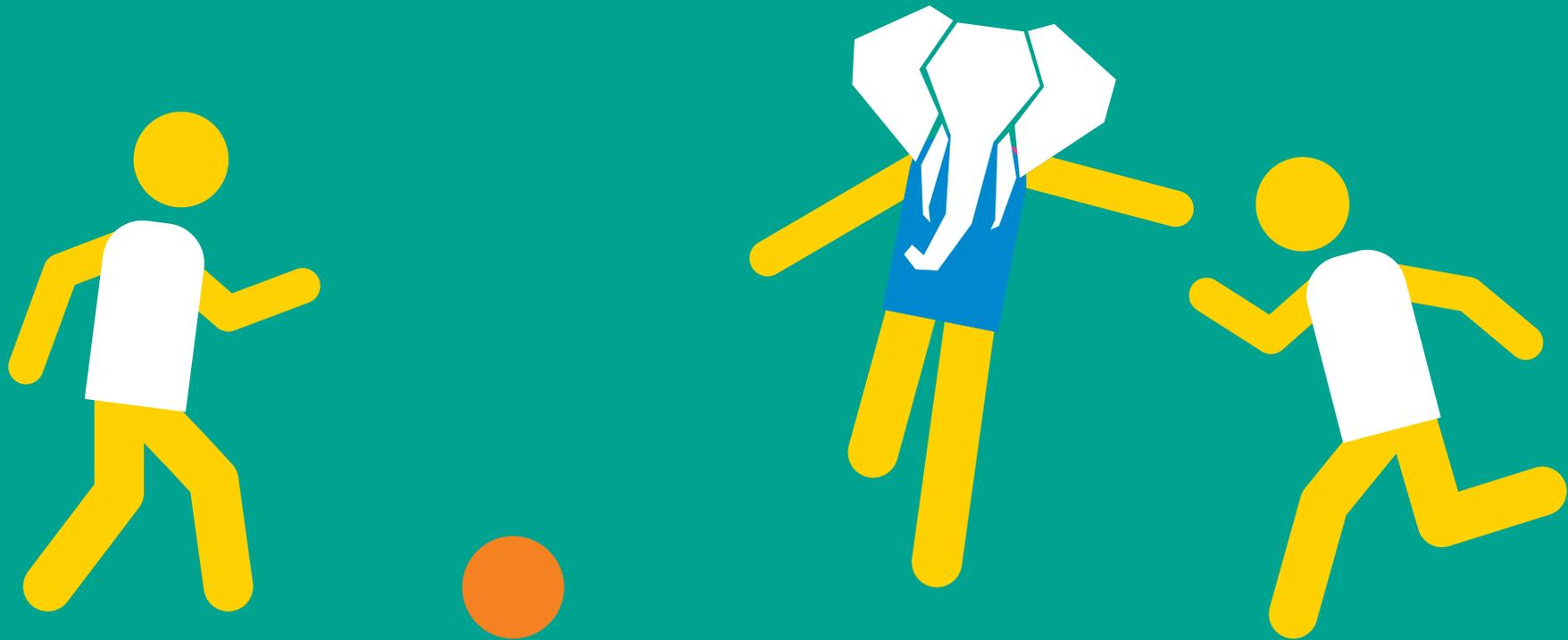
Type of digital interactive space: E-sport club

Approach: blended

Game/Software used: Rocket League, Fortnite, League of Legends, Valorant

Equipment: computers

Licences: free-to-play games were chosen; an average gaming PC naturally needs to be bought and assembled (see below for more info)

Funding: this project received €9,500 as a public grant from the City of Cagliari

Replicability: easy, once youth workers are familiar with the chosen games. Requires an initial investment in hardware

Age recommendation: 13-17 as in the story. Other options are possible, but always check the age of users against PEGI guidelines for the chosen games

Time engagement: the group once a week for 2-3 hours, for a period of 6 months

Other possible uses: focus on more specific issues or topics, or even on more formal types of learning if other games are considered

Why we recommend: e-sports offer opportunities for socialisation, personal growth, learning and to be active community members

Tags: e-sport, teambuilding, youthwork

Kasteddu e-sport -
a video game club with a focus
on inclusion and team spirit

A cultural association based in Cagliari, Sardinia, used a small local grant to start an e-sport club for youngsters completely from scratch, which focused on positive values, inclusion and education. It worked so well that the families volunteered to pool money to renew the project even after the funds ran out. The club is called Kasteddu e-sport
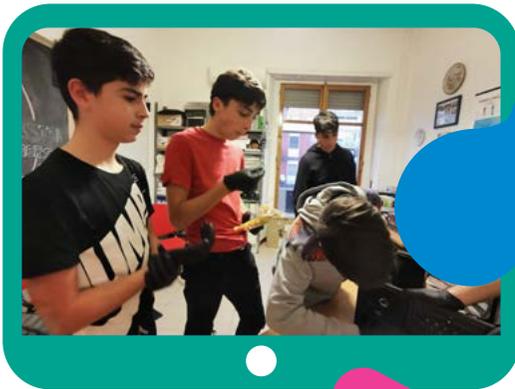
Background

This is an initiative of Associazione Interculturale NUR[1] – the name is a nod to Sardinian cultural heritage and is in reference to a 3,500 year old bronze age civilisation which developed in Sardinia.

They have been active since 1997 in intercultural learning, non-formal learning, volunteering, European mobility programmes and the integration and inclusion of migrants – since they are based in Sardinia, they have become involved in anything that helps contrast the isolation.

Image 13: Assembling the gaming PCs

Image 14: Assembling the gaming PCs

1   https://www.assonur.org/sito/

So, why video games?

Jan Lai, co-founder and board member of NUR, grew up with video games. He has always been fascinated with them and with their possibilities in terms of getting people passionate about something. This interest has lasted to this day, and he promotes it in healthy and interesting ways to younger people[2].

'We don't just invite young people to play video games,' he told us. 'This project was born after the COVID-19 lockdown when we wanted to give young people the opportunity to socialise and spend meaningful time together. The City of Cagliari was looking for innovative projects for youth aggregation. Many other projects were presented: theatre, web radio and graffiti. We simply wanted to do something different.'

'At the end of the lockdown period, young people needed reasons to leave their homes and meet with their peers. They needed something other than mandatory school attendance. Not much could compete with playing video games with their friends, each from their own home. So we tried to give them an opportunity to play together, but in the same physical space. We decided to create a sort of 'cyber-dojo' where people could come together, socialise and learn something.'

It sounds like a movie plot. Against all odds, a ragtag group of people with a vision decide to challenge the common perception and create something new. But this story is real, and it happened in Cagliari in 2022.

Resources

Because of the limited space, NUR purchased components for 4 PCs. The total grant was €9,500 – limited, but definitely enough to cover components and salaries. Since the club was hosted in the association's premises, they didn't have to pay for rent or utilities.

The operations had to wait until late 2022 because of the peak in video card prices[3]. But after the crypto market crashed in June 2022 and the situation normalised, it was again possible to buy components at affordable prices. The process took 6 months but it allowed the club to buy everything within a respectable budget.

Image 15: A practice session with Rocket League

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2   He is also one of the co-authors of this publication, and with good reason.

3   Essential to mine Bitcoin, in 2021-2022 they were in such high demand that one piece could easily cost up to three times the normal market price.

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The beginning

The first thing was for the young people to come together and assemble the computers, personalise the room (with LEDs and whiteboards), install software, design the merchandise – currently in production – and set up everything needed for the broadcasts. Doing this as a group was important for the project in order to create a sense of camaraderie and bring people together – something you just can't replicate if everyone is at home in front of their PC.

This is not something that happens normally in e-sports or in the computer labs of most schools. It is a process that may look intimidating, but with appropriate guidance it can be achieved.

Jan had what it takes. 'I have been assembling my own PCs since the 1990s,' he remembers. 'Feels like centuries ago already! Things have changed but then again not so much, after all. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, I helped my son with his computer and I realised that things are not that different from what I remember. The size of components has changed, but in many ways it's even easier today. So you don't really need an expert in games or even computers to run a club. The online tutorials can help with everything, there are apps and there is even a video game that teaches you how to assemble PCs[4].'

The day the young people arrived they found all the boxes neatly organised on the tables. Unboxing the components is a fun part of the process (just have a look at the amount of YouTube videos on the subject), and it's something they had never done before. Getting all the brand-new parts out of the boxes and assembling them together has been an integral part of the team building process.

The staff involved

Two youth workers (Jan and Fabio Costa, an expert gamer and a dungeon master) were involved in this project for twelve young people in total. The limit was essentially set due to the fact that space and time were limited. One youth worker would always be physically in the room, which ensured people would not engage in anything illegal or dodgy while online.

The staff members also observed group dynamics and led discussions. For instance, if the chat with the other teams became a little bit toxic or aggressive, they asked questions like 'do you think this helped you to win the game? Was this attitude useful or helpful in any way?'

'This was important because behaviour is often imitated,' commented Jan. 'Young people watch streams or videos on TikTok and they internalise the language and attitude of the streamers. Then they imitate it. We tried to step in and intervene.'

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4 https://www.pcbuildingsim.com

The location

The space as such didn't need much in terms of furniture: two tables and chairs, electric sockets, one router and a whiteboard. But finding a room wasn't easy.

First, NUR tried to partner with Cagliari Calcio, the city's Serie A football team. They have a strong e-sport team (they mostly play *FIFA* and *Rocket League*) and the idea was to host the workshop at their venue, right in the stadium. But they didn't show an interest.

Then they tried to cooperate with a local youth centre, which had a spare room. It was a good idea but in the end they couldn't get the required broadband connection. Apparently, cable companies don't consider the city's more difficult neighbourhoods to be an interesting market! So in the end NUR decided to host the workshop themselves and to use their training room. They upgraded its internet capability and, *voila*, the video game club was born! The name officially became Kasteddu e-sport (Casteddu is the old name for Cagliari).
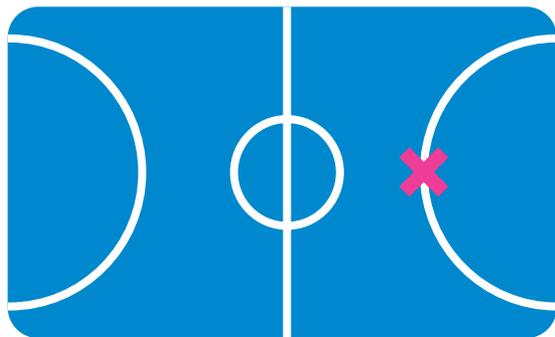
The activities

The team chose popular free games (*Rocket League*, a crazy crossover between football and car racing; the team shooters *Fortnite* and *Valorant* and the real-time strategy arena *League of Legends*).

Each user had their individual profile, so they would login with their accounts and keep track of achievements, statistics, friends, etc. The personal element is really important when building online communities.

NUR also considered hosting coding workshops as an added value, but as they admitted, 'When gaming is involved, everything else fades away'. So they decided to stick with e-sports.

The groups had meetings in the club once a week for 2-3 hours each time.

They also joined an Erasmus+ youth exchange. One of NUR's partners from Magdeburg, Germany, organised a youth exchange on the topic of e-sports and the group was obviously enthusiastic. Only four young people could take part, and the group decided together who would go. The decision was taken quite democratically and the group agreed to send the natural leaders (the most skilled and most charismatic ones). Naturally, the parents were also involved.

On a positive note, the whole team had meetings to decide how to present the local culture of Cagliari and what activities to host during the exchange; this proved to be a great process for everybody. Our team was the youngest. The project involved groups from Italy, Spain, Germany, Croatia and Greece.

Inclusion and participation

'Cagliari is not a very large place,' said Jan Lai. 'Our communication was done via social media, word of mouth, interviews, radio and the printed press. We also reached quite a large audience thanks to the involvement of a local sports club, which really helped us reach a larger audience.'

Finding participants was easy enough, but in the end the applicants were all males, aged 13-17. NUR tried to involve females: they reached out to Cagliari's female e-sports teams and spread the word on the local 'geeky' channels (gaming groups or the local Comic-Con and cosplayers), but nothing worked. They realised that maybe girls become more engaged with video games a little later in life, and that this is still considered a mostly male-dominated hobby.

They were, however, able to work on intercultural learning, in particular before and after the youth exchange. It was the first time they met peers from Spain, Germany, Croatia and Greece and the impact was huge. For example, the group learned a Croatian song that they could not understand at all, but it became their 'summer hit'. They kept playing it constantly after the exchange, to the point that even the youth workers started to like it![5]

Decisions were taken in a participatory way. Participants had initially diverse opinions, such as on which games to play. The staff worked on the decision-making processes, including establishing one simple rule: it wouldn't be allowed for people to play different games while in the club. The main aim was to bring people together.

So the group decided to take turns and they played a different game each month.

The team received two 'challenges'[6] from their partners (from Spain and Czechia), and they spent a considerable amount of time[7] deciding how to respond to them. They decided on the starting team, how to prepare for the matches, strategy and the team kit. The idea was to have consensus-based decisions but in reality more often they had majority votes.

Duration of the project

The initial funding lasted for 8 months, until December 2022. However, NUR decided to continue for another 6 months on their own budget because the young people didn't want the experience to end. The most well-liked elements are the fun activities, the new friendships and the team spirit that they couldn't find anywhere else.

Families were so happy that they decided to contribute so the project could continue – it comes to about €20-25 per month, so it's quite affordable.

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5   The song is 'Hugo' by Trile

6   A series of matches played simultaneously online on a specific game. It's like a mini tournament, but it's also an opportunity to meet and chat online.
7   Half a session, so the rest was dedicated to gameplay.

Learning results and impact

The group learned about online security, safety and privacy, and how to install and set up computers and a local network – all valuable skills that people who focus on gaming don't normally acquire.

They also learned about games as a form of cultural expression. In preparation for the youth exchange, they shared traditional games their families were playing, and one in particular brought old, wooden toys that his grandfather had made.

The team also included more traditional games to the activities. At the end of the season, they organised a final tournament for the players and one Saturday afternoon they tried something new: video games they did not know[8], and some traditional games too. Everybody had to try everything and a large board was created to keep track of all results. That was a lot of fun.

It was very interesting to see how participants exhibited new skills, social competences, problem-solving and improvisation skills – aspects that were not so well known to the rest of the team. So thi s final tournament, besides being an engaging experience for everybody, was also important for bringing people closer together.

As to measuring impact, the main indicator used was the drop-out rate: out of the twelve starting participants, two dropped out – one was a very competitive e-player who joined the club but found himself way too qualified for the rest of the group[9]. And the other young person dropped out because his parents didn't want him to continue following poor school performance.

All the remaining participants wanted to come back for another year and the families were happy to contribute financially once the public grant was over.

Challenges and experience for the organisation

The first challenge is the limited duration of the initiative. The grants were only sufficient for a period of 6 months. Once that was over, NUR started to run the project on their own funds and considered asking for a contribution from the families involved.

The organisation is also looking for other forms of sponsorship, for example from a Foundation.

'When it comes to the learning process, one thing is for sure,' concluded Jan Lai. 'Running an e-club is more like coaching a sports team. We needed to change our mindset because this was different from our traditional youth work. We needed to keep young people motivated, as the main factor for them was to feel like members of a team, to earn the place in the 'starting 4'[10], and so on.'

'Our participants had trouble with things like creating and keeping passwords up to date, and opening and verifying accounts. We often hear that 'digital natives' are naturally gifted with digital skills, but this experience showed us that in reality, they sometimes don't know how to navigate online environments, and more importantly, do so safely. There are a many possibilities for youth workers to support young people in the digital aspects of their life.'

The young members also learned to respect each other's points of view and preferences, work together as a team, solve problems and challenges, and communicate in a more constructive way.

Another positive outcome is that NUR was able to use the e-club as a springboard to find new partnerships. They joined an Erasmus+ strategic partnership and they plan to write a new youth exchange to continue working on the topic in 2024.

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8 The games played were *Fortnight, Rocket League, Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*, and *Overcooked*.
9 He said 'I cannot be in a team with people who play using a controller', referring to the well-known preference among the real pro players for a mouse and keyboard.

10 the players who can always count on a place in any given game, like in football's *starting eleven*.

Feedback received

The project received high praise from the municipality. Even though the numbers were not huge in terms of participation, the activities were viewed as being highly innovative. The team is happy they promoted the positive use of video games and e-sports for educational and social purposes.

Parents were enthusiastic and got in touch repeatedly to give positive feedback. In essence, they see NUR as a reference point on 'everything digital' – asking for advice on which devices to buy, for example, or what apps can help their kids with school work.

'All in all, this has been a fantastic experience,' concluded Jan. 'All the people involved had fun and learned a lot, and we are definitely looking for ways to make the adventure continue.'

Conclusion

For their immediate future, NUR is aiming at securing a new season until June for the team activities. In the longer term, they hope to run a new youth exchange start a network of organisations that uses e-sports as an educational and aggregation tool and develop the first European Youth Work e-sports League.

It's a big ambition, but if there is one thing that people can learn from e-sports, it is that even the wildest dreams can come true.

Image 16: A practice session with Fortnite

Lessons Learned & CONCLUSIONS
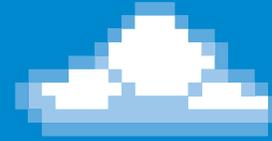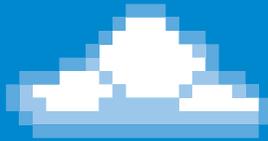
Lessons learned

The process of collecting and analysing these experiences has unearthed numerous invaluable lessons. Each story summarises these insights within a dedicated chapter, yet we aim to highlight a selection we find particularly relevant.

Moreover, beyond the lessons summarised within the stories, additional reflections stem from the active pursuit of unearthing these narratives. This process involved tracking down individuals and experiences, and striving to connect with the right people to get a glimpse into their activities. These experiences, whether successful or not in securing discussions, have provided further lessons to enrich our understanding.

First of all, in summarising the different lessons listed within each story, we could identify a few recurring elements:

- **The important role of facilitators**
- **The prevalence for a blended approach including both physical and online activities**
- **The importance of educators' competences**
- **The multi-perspective approach to complex topics**
- **Prioritising inclusion in safe digital spaces**

Where facilitators were involved in the process, they acted as mediators between the users and the digital spaces, and they also supported the debriefing of the experience with guided discussions and by taking care of possible inclusion issues and rearranging settings accordingly.

A blended approach between physical and digital activities surfaced in several practices: online or digital-only activities sometimes transformed into practices that also involved old-school and traditional games; in-person group simulations of democratic processes sided with video games tackling these topics; projects centred on Digital Youth Work approaches ended up also proposing traditional activities for youth clubs, etc.

The competences of educators organising the activities were relevant in shaping things as they were. The replicability notes connected to the stories highlight the potential ease of replicating these experiences once the educators have enough familiarity with the corresponding digital spaces or platforms. Moreover, the personal competencies of educators were often considered instrumental in enhancing the overall experience.

Many specific digital competence models are being built (for instance DigiComp), while others incorporate digital competences in a wider set (such as the European Training Strategy), so an exhaustive coverage will not fit here. The digital dimension of educators' competencies has been the focus of considerable research in recent times, underscoring its undeniable importance. Across various experiences, a recurring theme emerges: the potential of digital spaces to facilitate learning by offering diverse perspectives on complex situations. This multi-perspective approach enriches understanding and knowledge about complex matters such as the participation of individuals in shaping and understanding history.

As we mentioned in the introduction, digital spaces can pose inclusion challenges when situations of digital divide are present. Yet, several experiences demonstrate that organising activities – often with educators or facilitators – centred around the theme of inclusion can effectively address this divide. Strategies include designing activities that provide devices to participants or setting up widely used platforms for the creation of digital spaces. Moreover, the way activities are designed inside digital spaces could be a further element of inclusion. For instance, allowing participants the freedom to represent themselves with customised avatars that authentically reflect their identities rather than conforming to binary gender options fosters a more inclusive environment.

In our preparatory phase in identifying and selecting the stories and experiences to be shared with you, we also learned some crucial lessons:

1. Despite extensive discussions about digital activities in education in recent years, the actual quantity of activities within digital interactive spaces which have been delivered seems to be quite small;
2. Participation, as a topic, is often perceived as somewhat specialised, leading many innovative practices associated with it to overlook or misunderstand their own relevance.
3. Many new activities involving digital spaces such as video games or VR are only in their initial stages or have yet to commence. Our pursuit for completed experiences to share might have been slightly ahead of its time; undoubtedly, more will surface within a year.
4. In some cases, there is a modesty that keeps educators from sharing and presenting their activities and results, until you convince them that what they do is worthy.
5. Many educators do not find enough value in sharing what they do, or are too busy doing it, and do not find the time or motivation to share their achievements.

This last element is what we found to be more problematic. We identified several interesting experiences, both in formal and non formal education, and sometimes we managed to get in touch with the educators directly in charge of them, only to be left waiting for weeks or months, without being able to collect the needed information about their innovative practices.

As a result, you will not find accounts here about teachers' peer learning on how to use digital spaces for participation, or about video games being offered as an optional part of schools' national curricula regarding democracy and conflict management together with books. Similarly absent are narratives about digital games used to learn about complex decision-making processes during crisis situations. We perceive this absence to be regrettable, and we hope that this plea could lead to more amazing stories being shared in the future.

On a more positive note, as we are heading towards the conclusion of this publication, we are eager to see what will come out of the many practices that we could not describe here. These initiatives were either still evolving during our engagement or were actively in the design phase when we approached the respective teams. The utilisation of VR within various educational projects or the integration of video games in co-designing spaces and services for young people could be the focus of a future edition of this review.

CONCLUSIONS

As we conclude this introduction, we reflect on the transformative potential of digital interactive spaces in fostering participation. This publication not only highlights the diverse approaches of the experiences we selected; it also addresses the challenges and considerations essential for their successful implementation. We hope that the insights provided here inspire and equip readers to navigate the digital landscape with a renewed perspective on participation, inclusivity and engagement.

In this time of digital transformation of education, the opportunities for participation are boundless. By embracing these innovative approaches, we can create more engaging, inclusive and effective learning and community environments. Let us move forward with the knowledge and inspiration to make the most of the digital opportunities that lie ahead.