EXPLORING Participation with VIDEOGAMES

SALTO
PARTICIPATION &
INFORMATION

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SALTO PARTICIPATION & INFORMATION

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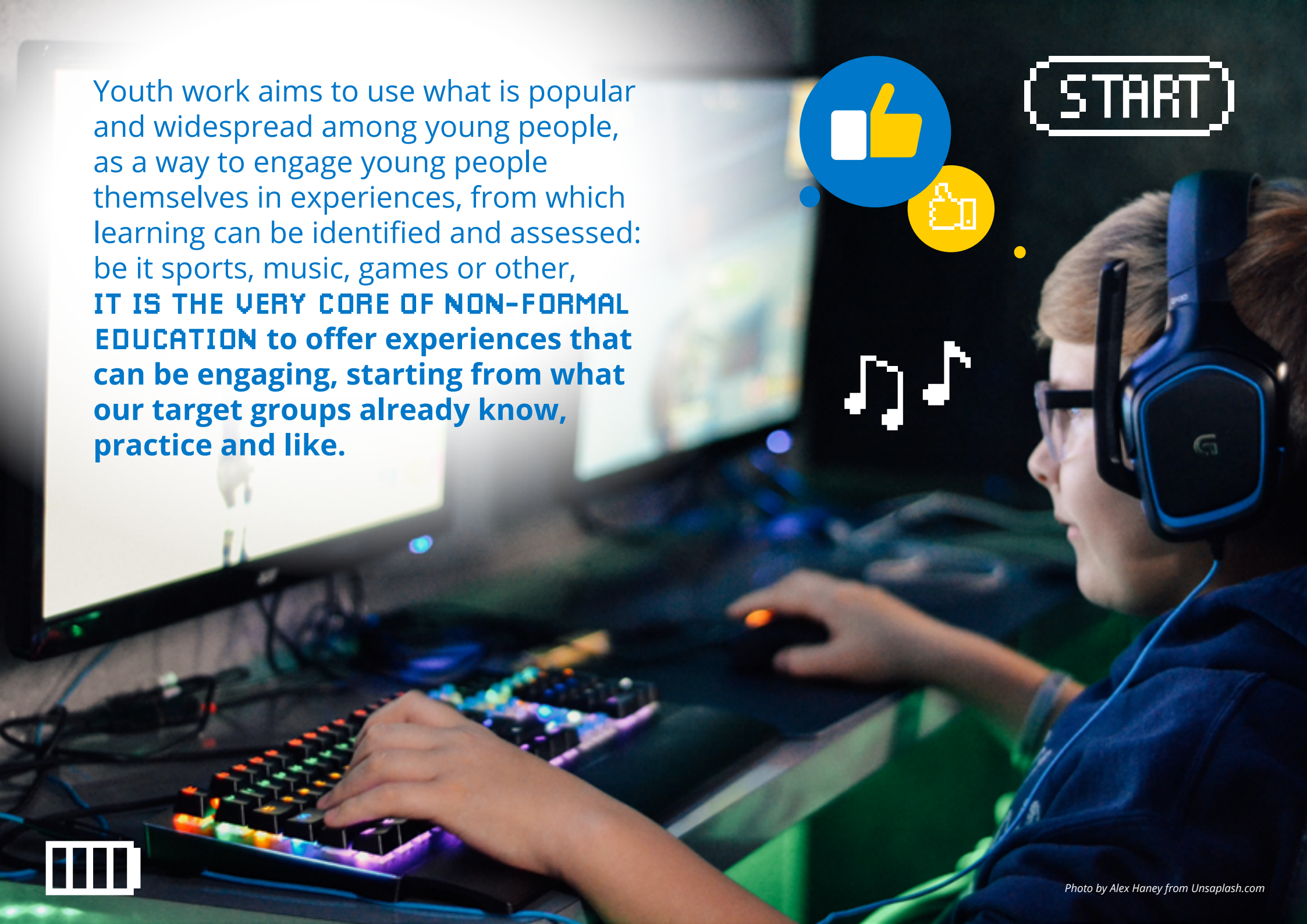


Youth work aims to use what is popular and widespread among young people, as a way to engage young people themselves in experiences, from which learning can be identified and assessed: be it sports, music, games or other, **IT IS THE VERY CORE OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION to offer experiences that can be engaging, starting from what our target groups already know, practice and like.**

Photo by Alex Haney from Unsaplash.com

WHY THIS publication?

There is no doubt that videogames have grown to be very popular and well spread among young people over many years - so in this publication **SALTO Participation & Information Resource Centre (SALTO PI) decided to share examples and guidance on how videogames have been used in the context of non-formal education to explore youth participation in civic society.** With this activity, we put extra emphasis on the **methodology of how anyone can introduce this learning tool into their work.**

SALTO PI believes and knows that **no decision about young people should be made without their involvement.** Youth participation is and should be an integral part of democratic governance on all levels. SALTO PI encourages outreach work to involve a wider and more diverse range of young people in youth participation in democratic life. SALTO PI promotes meaningful youth participation in all levels of society, which includes education, policy making, work places, the community, etc. and for all young people including those with disabilities, from refugee and migrant backgrounds, LGBTIQ communities, NEET, etc. Furthermore, we create space and capacity for meaningful, inclusive and innovative participation practices in democratic society. For the past 2 years, we have put more focus on digital tools, resources and spaces where participation can occur. This publication explores the space of videogames as one where democracy can take place to approach the discussion in a gamified way. To see more methods on how to make your project more participatory, please have a look at the Youth Participation Toolkit[1]. If you'd like to learn more about tools that can be used for participation, please take a look at the **Participation Resource Pool**[2].

Negative effects of videogames on young people have been studied thoroughly[3], but research about positive outcomes has only started to appear recently. According to Adachi and Willoughby 2017[4]:

> Although many studies have examined the impact on youth of playing videogames on negative outcomes, such as aggression and addiction, few studies have investigated potential positive outcomes. This imbalance is being addressed. [...]

> Overall, research on the benefits of playing videogames suggests that games may be a tool for interventions that promote problem solving, intergroup relations, physical activity, and well-being. Of course, attention to potential negative outcomes of playing videogames is also important, but a balanced approach to studying videogame play will enhance our ability to understand and promote positive youth development.

Thus we decided to investigate practices of using videogames for positive youth development in a rather unexplored field, the one of participation, active citizenship and democracy, encompassing it within a larger framework including processes of decision-making, collaborative design of public spaces, informed choices and other elements, which are indeed the basic building blocks in building a democratic and participative society.

1. See https://participationpool.eu/toolkit/
2. See https://participationpool.eu/resource/
3. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and generally identified as the main tool for psychiatric diagnoses, in its fifth edition in 2013 (DSM-5) finally after a long debate, defined a "gaming disorder" able to affect the mental health of gamers.
4. P.J.C. Adachi and T. Willoughby, *"The Link Between Playing Video Games and Positive Youth Outcomes"*, in Child Development Perspectives, 2017.

WHAT DO WE MEAN by youth participation?

When we talk about participation, we should remember that we are talking about something which, according to the definitions of Participation in the Youth Participation Strategy, has the following characteristics:

We believe that videogames as a virtual space could be an ideal setting to train and foster young people's participation skills, because they can offer all these experiences in a long-lasting process.

In this process, players are requested to take a stance on many different and diverse situations, and where the aspect of decision-making is immediately able to change the context and make the impact as visible as possible.

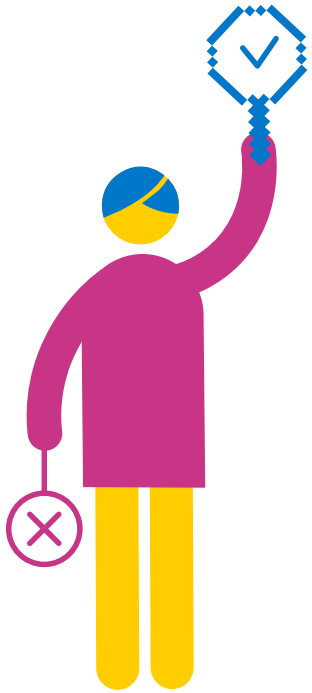
Even when *simply* used as a tool to promote participation not only between players, but to the more general political process, videogames have proven their value: In October 2020 the very popular US Congress member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez played *Among Us* live[6] on her Twitch[7] channel, collecting an incredible audience of 439,000 viewers (when Trump and Biden streamed their online events, they peaked at 6,000 and 17,000 viewers respectively). This marked a major success in outreach and participation, reportedly because "everybody was just acting normal". The Congress member didn't miss an opportunity to capitalise on her political messages, for example declaring "I am voting early" during one in-game emergency meeting, and thus promoting early registration and voting in the upcoming US elections.

Videogames often reproduce some very interesting decision-making processes, and in that sense, they offer powerful learning experiences. Solo gaming can be seen as quite a solitary experience, detrimental to a young person's social and communication skills, but as cooperative online environments keep growing in number and popularity, the picture becomes quite different. It has actually been observed[8] that cooperative gaming produces "higher friendship quality and more prosocial behavior", and even more so when players are already friends.

This is especially the case with adolescents, where videogames are seen primarily as an excuse to hang out with friends, and people who do not know each other would rarely play an offline game together. In this context we collected experiments of educational activities with and inside videogames as a first attempt in using these media with an educational aim.

5. Definition of youth participation taken from the SALTO PI *Youth Participation Strategy*, Tallinn 2020: https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/participation/ypstrategy
6. See *"AOC played Among Us and achieved what most politicians fail at: acting normal"*, in "The Guardian", 22 Oct. 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/oct/22/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ilhan-omar-among-us-twitch-stream-aoc This could be a starting point for an interesting discussion about how videogames are also being used more and more as a propaganda tool to build political consensus; see for instance also this article regarding Minecraft being used by the Macron electoral campaign in France: https://www.euronews.com/next/2022/03/31/france-election-emmanuel-macron-s-minecraft-server-is-a-glimpse-at-politics-in-the-metaver
7. A streaming service, now owned by Amazon, which is very popular among gamers to stream videogame matches and comment on the game with the audience, while playing.
8. See Geert P. Verheijen et al.,*The influence of competitive and cooperative video games on behavior during play and friendship quality in adolescence,* Science Direct, Feb 2019: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563218305132

PARTICIPATION in decisions, or having an impact



It is especially interesting to observe how decisions are taken in a group situation, and some videogames are made just for this. They can lead to powerful learning moments and have many applications in training and educational settings. It is well known that decision-making abilities and cognitive functions are particularly developed among videogame players[9], but the question for educators and youth work practitioners is often **"how can we channel this impressive amount of learning out of the videogame sphere, and put it to good use?"**.

This publication aims to be a first guide in this direction, exploring practices in a very detailed and concrete way, and offering an analysis of a few recent pioneering experiences coming from the youth field, so that you can get inspiration from them, and create your own videogame-based learning experiences to foster participation, decision-making, etc. in your target groups.

What VIDEOGAMES are we talking about?

We purposely decided to strictly focus on mainstream videogames; the ones being played by young people (and not only) in millions, and being successful products in the gaming industry: these are the games that young people would play anyway, the games they already play at home, alone or with friends, either in person on connected online[10]. There are of course thousands of "indie" videogames as well, sometimes even more directly connected to educational topics, and there is even a category of "serious" games[11], that we deliberately decided to ignore for now: a game should be played for fun first of all, and labelling it as "serious" does not really hint in that direction. Imagine for a second proposing to a group of young people to "play a serious game" or a world-famous videogame instead: what would their choice be? **We believe that using mainstream videogames could be the best strategy to apply educational purposes to the games themselves, as they will be played for fun in the first place, and the learning coming from them would then be identified with the help of youth workers' skills and intervention after the experience.**

Observing some of these games, one gets to understand that sometimes they are borrowing the same structures and dynamics of games which are often being used in contexts like youth exchanges (as for "Among Us"). Other games are indeed sandbox[12] systems, just like Lego bricks have been for so many years, and in the same way they can be used to engage with a group in many different ways (as for "Minecraft").

Identifying what could be used in those mainstream videogames to connect them to a non-formal education activity is something that these experiences can help us to define, and it is generally the result of a trial & error process. Asking young people which are their favourite games, and opening a conversation with them about what happens in those games, what the engaging elements are, and what they can learn while playing, are possible strategies to help us choose the games we want to try out.

9. See T. Jordan, *Video game players have improved decision-making abilities and enhanced brain activities*, Science Direct, Sept 2022.
10. Check out the webinar about *"Reaching young people online"* in the Participation Pool website to learn more about this concept: https://participationpool.eu/resource/webinar-reaching-young-people-online/
11. Game designers define *serious games* as games that have a primary purpose that is different to pure entertainment: for instance teaching a school subject, or promoting healthy behaviours etc. Even if these games are sometimes interesting products, they often fail to attract young people directly and need to be mediated by the intervention of an adult - teacher etc., while our idea is to use games that young people would use anyway, and employ them to tackle participation.
12. See the Wikipedia entry about sandbox games: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandbox_game

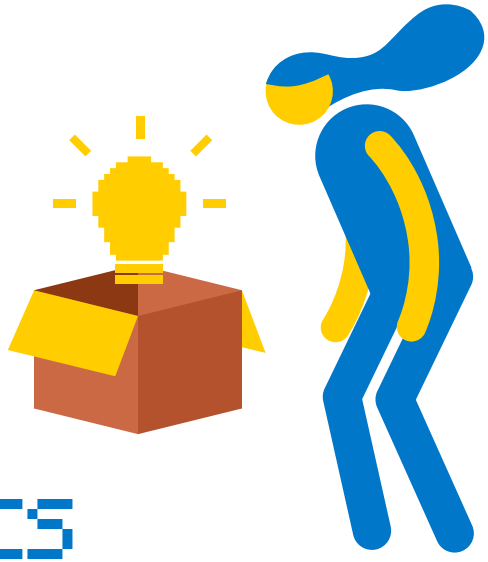
VIDEOGAMES and learning

Educational use of mainstream videogames has been studied for years already, and some milestone findings are for instance to be found in the works of Prof. James Paul Gee[13], who dedicated much effort to showing how the formal education system could really benefit from a closer relationship with games and videogames. Surprisingly enough, the non-formal education sector, which always had a clear and long-lasting connection with games as a way to learn, have generally not embraced the possibility to use videogames in the same way so far. We have had books[14] explaining how to set up a gaming zone in a public library since 2007, but the first publication about videogames in non-formal education[15] (which is also the only one so far that we were able to find) was only published in 2015.

Another milestone in videogame studies is the famous book[16] by game designer Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, where she showed for the first time in 2011 to the general public a possible link between playing videogames and addressing real-life issues and problems: McGonigal focused on the various skills that videogames could help us to foster, thus indirectly helping to improve humankind's capacity to solve real challenges.

After reading this book we can't help noticing, for instance, that **a generation growing up playing videogames aimed at managing scarce resources in order to develop and improve your in-game communities (from "Age of Empires", to "Minecraft" itself) is the one finally identifying climate change and environmental issues as crucial problems to solve,** and we would love to find more data and research about this possible connection.

For those of you interested in the carbon footprint of videogames, some research[17] has recently finally started to appear. We should always remember that digital tools and media have an environmental impact as well, and this aspect is often not considered; then again, videogames can also be an effective way of tackling the topic of environmental impact and carbon footprint with young people.



Decision-making in VIDEOGAMES

Now let's use the lens of participation and try to observe all the situations in which decision-making is implied, in which elements and components of a democratic process are simulated or enacted by young people while playing, and so on. **When observing videogames with participation in mind, the real turning point has surely been the growing popularity of multiplayer online games, where a group of people can play together while being connected online.** This brought the topic of participation directly inside the game, putting players towards challenges such as having to quickly agree on a common strategy, and then seeing the result of their choices changing the following steps of the game. The added value of having this shared experience in a videogame is for instance that if you make the wrong decision, you can always play again and go in a different direction, or apply the knowledge you got from previous mistakes to the next choices. Learning from mistakes should be a common way to improve our practice; non-formal educational approaches already have the lead in this perspective, and videogames could take it even further.

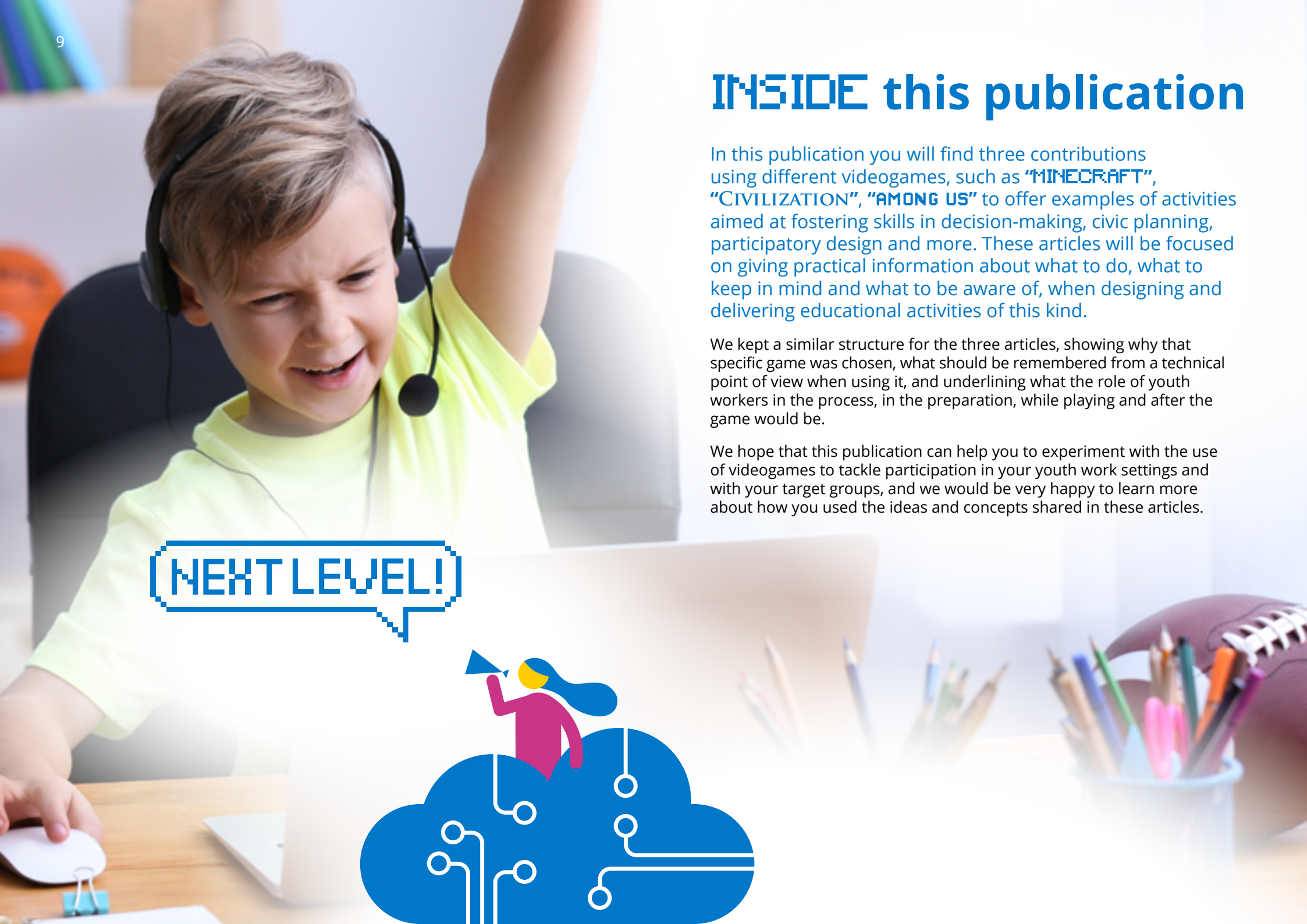
13. See at least: J.P. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy,* 2003. This YouTube playlist has all the videos from the 2013 MOOC *"Videogames and Learning"* by the University of Wisconsin - Madison (USA) featuring Prof. J.P. Gee in many of them: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLgb1EzYS06t-nOe1a0-xzQYmptWM4Db3O
14. E. Neiburger, *Gamers... in the library?!*, 2007. The American Library Association (ALA) launched an International Games Week in public libraries worldwide just after this publication, and the project still stands, promoting the curated adoption of games and videogames in libraries and coordinating gaming events and conferences during that week. More information: https://ilovelibraries.org/games-in-libraries/
15. J. Harviainen, M. Meriläinen, T. Tossavainen (edited by), *The game educator's handbook,* 2015. This publication had a first edition in the Finnish language in 2014. The handbook is available online here: https://pelikasvatus.fi/gameeducatorshandbook.pdf
16. J. McGonigal, *Reality is broken,* 2011. A famous TED Talk by McGonigal summarises the concepts from the book: https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world
17. See for instance: B.J. Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change,* 2022, which explains the environmental impact of videogame production and use, and gives interesting examples about how videogames themselves could be used to discuss climate change and environmental issues with young people.

INSIDE this publication

In this publication you will find three contributions using different videogames, such as **"MINECRAFT"**, **"CIVILIZATION"**, **"AMONG US"** to offer examples of activities aimed at fostering skills in decision-making, civic planning, participatory design and more. These articles will be focused on giving practical information about what to do, what to keep in mind and what to be aware of, when designing and delivering educational activities of this kind.

We kept a similar structure for the three articles, showing why that specific game was chosen, what should be remembered from a technical point of view when using it, and underlining what the role of youth workers in the process, in the preparation, while playing and after the game would be.

We hope that this publication can help you to experiment with the use of videogames to tackle participation in your youth work settings and with your target groups, and we would be very happy to learn more about how you used the ideas and concepts shared in these articles.



MINECRAFT as a City Planning Tool

BACKGROUND

The city of Jyväskylä in Finland established a digital youth work advisory board, to act as a multi-professional development group made of youth workers, from those doing open youth work to workers in the city's youth centres. Every year the advisory board decides the guidelines on what specific youth work topic should be addressed and how, inside the city's youth services, using digital youth work practices. In 2021 the board decided that the theme for the year would be digital inclusion and participation. After that, as youth workers in the city our task was to develop new activities within this framework, combining digital tools and platforms with standard youth work methods. We chose Minecraft as a platform and discussions with young people as a method to experiment with videogame-based digital youth work.

Our idea was to contact City Planning officers and, together with them, **ask youngsters how they would build** public parks, what kind of new buildings they would make on the old marketplace to be renovated, and what kinds of services should be in the new cultural centre. The plans would then be presented to the Urban Planning committee when finished.

We had to develop new ways to hear youth opinions, in order to keep up with their culture, which is largely reliant on videogames and digital media platforms. **Our methods should adopt new technologies and platforms to keep young people's participation as easy as possible.** There had been a significant drop in youth participation in elections in Finland[1] and a rise in radicalisation and youth gangs[2]. This was considered alarming, and we must take action to prevent this development as a part of our tasks.

In discussions with young people, they noticed that democracy and participation should be so accessible and available by now with all the technology and apps available. Still, our participation methods are primarily ways of representative parliamentary democracy, which is time-consuming and inefficient in their opinion.

So as youth workers, we decided to bring participation to young people directly on their turf. As mentioned, we decided to use Minecraft.

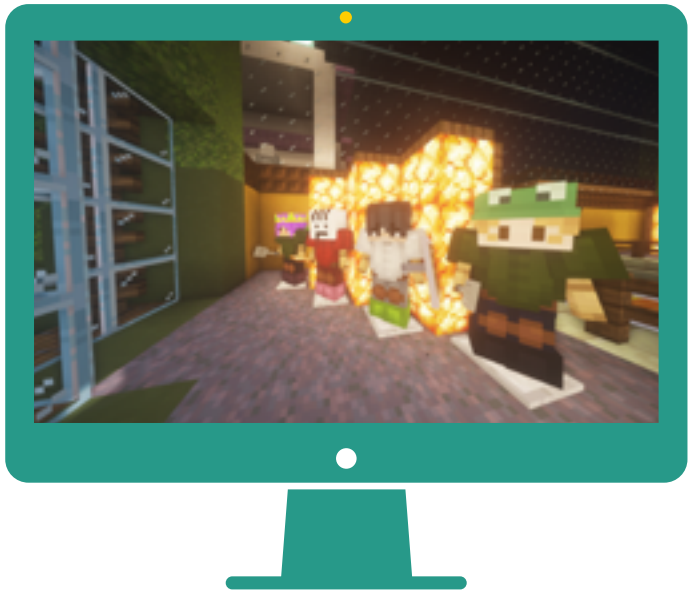
Credits: in-game picture taken by Panu Räsänen - Minecraft © Mojang

1. Some data and information about this can be found here: https://www.stat.fi/en/publication/ckvam7f8w20su0b57nwdjaxsz
2. More information about this (in Finnish only) can be found here: https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/JulkaisuMetatieto/Documents/EDK-2021-AK-399719.pdf

CITY PLANNING and participatory design

Setting up a Minecraft camp was a group effort. Our participation and equality coordinator in the youth centre assisted youth workers in lobbying for this idea with the City planning office. She had already worked with them and knew who to contact. It is crucial to find the right officers, who are adventurous enough to try something completely new and that nobody has ever done before.

Our most valuable asset to share with them was that we could contact such a target group that they have not ever dreamt of reaching: the local young people population. The other positive point was that we had the possibility to make sort of 3D models from young people's ideas in Minecraft, and turn them into videos to show the City Council. Luckily they also saw the vast PR-potential for their work. We finally made their work seem cool for the youngsters.



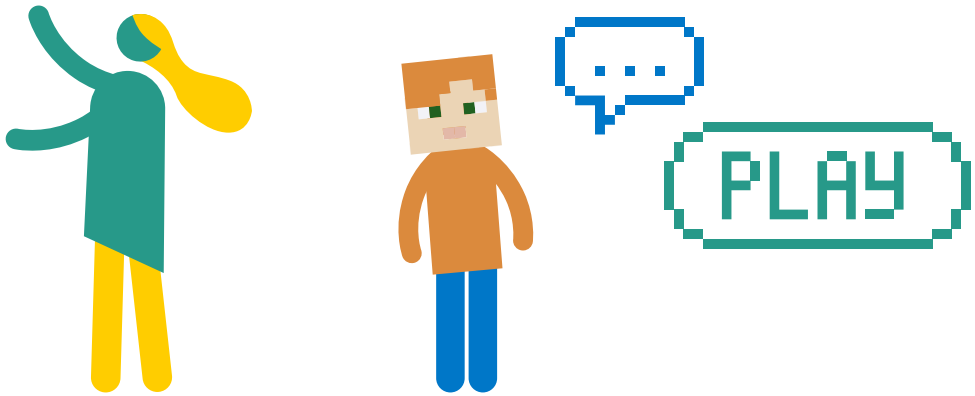
Minecraft players sporting their different "skins" on their characters
Credits: in-game picture taken by Panu Räsänen - Minecraft © Mojang

MINECRAFT[3] characteristics: why this game?

We will now provide an explanation of the distinct characteristics that made us choose Minecraft as a platform for our activity.

Minecraft is the most-sold videogame in the world. With 238 million copies sold, it has been a huge cultural phenomenon since it was published in 2011. It has been franchised from the original game to multiple different versions and is available for all platforms - from phones to consoles. **One could claim that modern-day children know the world of Minecraft better than the geography of Europe.** As it is, at least in some way, familiar to most youngsters, it is the perfect platform to work with. When the user interface and used media are commonly known, we do not need to spend time getting familiar with the tools at hand, and we can concentrate more on creativity.

Using games for hearing young people's opinions could also benefit youngsters with dyslexia, autism or other special needs: when using less written material or social interaction, we lower the bar for more accessibility. One last obvious good side with Minecraft is that it is a PEGI-7[4] rated game, so you don't have to bear the age limits in mind while using it with youngsters.



3. https://www.minecraft.net
4. The Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) system is a European videogame rating system that advises on the suitability of a game for a certain age range, based on the game's content. In this case, PEGI-7 means that Minecraft is suitable for players aged 7+ years old. For more info see https://pegi.info

What is MINECRAFT?

Minecraft is an open-world survival game. In this game, we would like to underline the term *open-world.* The Minecraft world is virtually infinite. The basic version of the game lets you play in a "world" over 4 billion square kilometres wide, which is roughly eight times the size of planet Earth. In the game, there are two fundamental modes: survival and creative. In survival mode, you are a player spawn without any tools and materials; you must gather materials to stay alive in harsh conditions, facing threats such as zombies, skeletons and creepers coming at night to harm you. Creative mode is the complete opposite. You have all the tools and materials at hand, you are immortal, and... you can fly.

Minecraft has over 1000 different items and materials to mine, build and use, making the game one of the most versatile experiences ever. Further on, more details on this videogame will be described.

Minecraft has several different versions. The two most important ones are Java Edition and Bedrock edition. The benefits of the Bedrock edition are that it is a cross-platform (aka crossplay) version. It means you can play the game with your friends no matter what platform you use. Bedrock supports all the common devices from Android to iOS ones, and all the major consoles, plus Windows PCs. Bedrock edition also works natively in VR (see further on: How to set up VR).

On the other hand, the Java edition works on every platform with Java support. The benefits of the Java edition are that it is highly moddable and already has thousands of free "mods"[5], maps and plugins. It can be slightly more complicated for beginners, but the youngsters are the best teachers here. Involve them in this process early on and let them guide you through, and you will be getting great results in no time.

5. Modifications, or "mods" for short, are user-made extensions to Minecraft. Users have even made tools to create mods (https://mcreator.net/) more easily. These mods may vary from an entirely new storyline, to taking the whole thing into the Star Wars universe and so on. For instance Pokemon fans of the game made a new Pokemon version of Minecraft called Pixelmon. The smallest mods are just new assets and items to be used in the game, such as new swords or goblets, or surveillance cameras and monitors. Using mods gives you more possibilities to build realistic and modern models and meanwhile, it gives you some grey hairs due to compatibility problems. The users need to have installed the same mods locally on their devices as the server to get access. For beginners, we would recommend the standard, plain "vanilla" version of the game, the one coming out of the box, without any mod. An example of a community website collecting any sort of mod: https://www.9minecraft.net

How to play MINECRAFT

Minecraft can be played alone but is at its best played online with friends. **You can play Minecraft with your friends in three ways.**

The first is to open the "world" you are playing on your device to your friends, who can join your game by connecting directly over the same WiFi. They can play as long as your device is connected to the internet and the game is running.

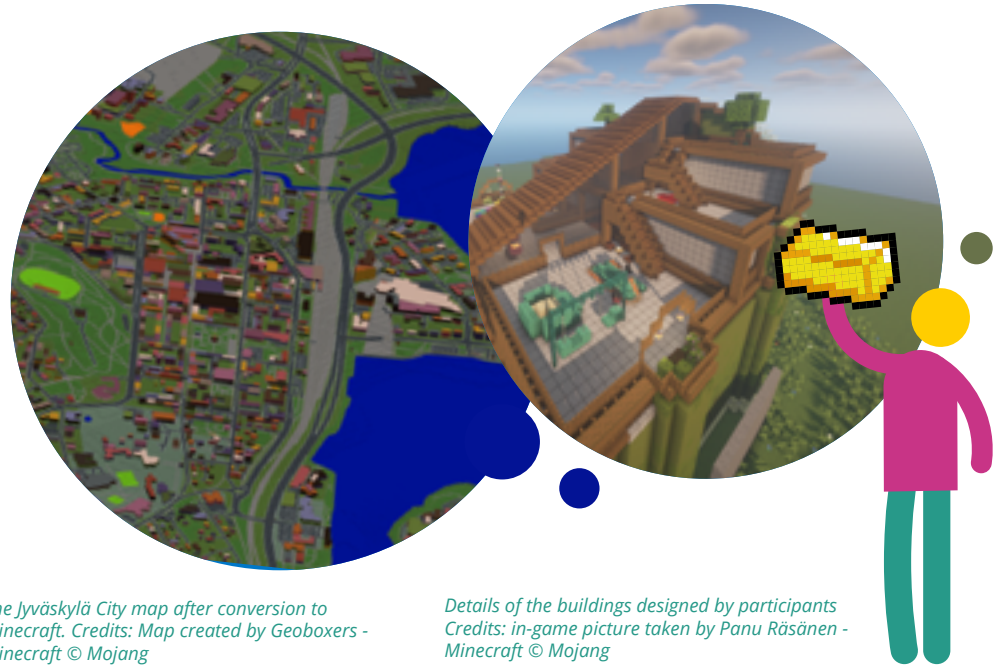
The second way is to join a ready-made external server. You can search the internet address for open-to-public servers through search engines. Most of these servers have modifications ("mods") adding "mini-games" that you can play with your friends. On these servers, the game is not about mining, scavenging and building anymore. It is more like a subgenre of Minecraft gaming, entirely dedicated to succeeding in these games. Using an external server, your friends can continue playing when you quit playing, the game is not running on your computer, and the game is saved to the server.

Unfortunately, public servers with collaborative building capabilities are not popular because of a behaviour called "griefing": griefing is when someone goes to your world to blow up your buildings with TNT. Why? Just because.

The third way to play Minecraft with your friends is also the solution against griefers: start running your own private external server. This takes about 5 minutes, and you are set. You head up to https://www.minecraft.net, download your copy of the Minecraft server software for free and install it on your own computer, and your friends can play until you shut down your computer. Or you can use some dedicated server hosting services, with easy-to-install mods[6].

And how to build the exact map[7] of the city, where young people would then go and rebuild the spaces? For our activity, we used a ready-made map, exactly reproducing our city centre of Jyväskylä. The map was generated starting from Open Street Maps data, with the help of a specialised company[8], which offers this paid service. Our map considered 3 square kilometres of the city centre of Jyväskylä.

Virtual Reality (VR) experience[9] can be an excellent ending for the group experience, when they can see all they have built from their first-person view. It truly gives the last nudge to the immersive experience, so we would recommend it as a final touch to the activity.



The Jyväskylä City map after conversion to Minecraft. Credits: Map created by Geoboxers - Minecraft © Mojang

Details of the buildings designed by participants Credits: in-game picture taken by Panu Räsänen - Minecraft © Mojang

6. A recommendation for beginners would be https://wwww.aternos.org/ for its simplicity and ease of use of different mods. The server stays on as long as some players are online. It is easy to turn it back on and start playing again. When considering the environment, this kind of service might be the best one.
7. Minecraft maps for the worlds you play in are normally generated from numeric codes called "seeds" when starting the game. These "seeds" are codes for a graphic generation system called Perlin noise. From that "graphical noise", the game creates the world map, where darker areas are higher areas and mountains, brighter ones are lower grounds such as valleys, and so on. When you find an excellent seed, you can save that seed and use it to start a new game from that same sweet spot all over again. An example of a community website collecting many maps to use in the game: https://www.minecraftmaps.com/
8. Geoboxers (https://geoboxers.com) created a 3 square kilometre map of the city centre for us, charging € 300 - there are also free tools available on software developers' platforms like GitHub, to create your own maps using Open Street Maps data if you want to try it out yourself - but it might be complicated and quite time consuming, so we decided to outsource this part of the process. More info about how to create your maps out of Open Street Maps data: https://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/Minecraft
9. Bedrock edition has native support for VR. Consider using this if you want to be sure your world works in VR. Java Edition needs a VR launcher called ViveCraft: https://www.vivecraft.org. ViveCraft is optimised for the SteamVR interface which can be used with multiple different headsets (https://www.steamvr.com); using stand-alone headsets, like Meta Quest 2, can be trickier. They might require their own software installation. Java Edition has more VR mods and plugins than Bedrock. For variety, the Java version is one to check out.
   If you are using mods and/or other additions ("plugins") on your server, be sure that your chosen VR launcher can use all the same mods and/or plugins. If your mods/plugins are incompatible with your VR-launcher, the map will not work. The safe bet is to use the plain, standard "vanilla" version of the game if VR is a mandatory element of your Minecraft experience.

HOW TO organise the workshop

Our groups were made of 10 participants each, as we have **10 computers** in our centre (plus one server, and one PC connected with the VR headset). First of all, we went to see the actual places we wanted to renovate. We took digital cameras with us and took pictures from real building sites. We had some initial planning made, and the youngsters started to pitch some ideas to each other.

Our experience is that when we were pitching ideas to each other, groups formed automatically. People with similar ideas started to fulfil each other's proposals and wanted to work together on the later building phase.

Our days were scheduled, and everyone knew there were mandatory breaks from just sitting at a computer. We had short breaks from time to time, with different physical activities. We also had a VR setup to play Beat Saber or other similar games that make you move your body while playing.

Youngsters were divided into a few groups and used Discord[10] to communicate with each other while being connected online together for planning and building the new city spaces on the common server. Some groups did their build slightly faster than others and concentrated on playing Minecraft server games with each other. And that is just fine: they were still making new friends and having a blast. Other groups took their time with the builds and even stayed after hours, when the computer room was in public use, to finalise their creation.

On the last day, we packaged the result into videos showing their builds. Videos from the game were captured with OBS video broadcasting software[11], webcams and green-screens[12]. In the video, the youngsters narrated a tour of the buildings that they made. These videos could be considered as pitching ideas to City Council members.

On the second time, we also made conceptual images from the builds, as if the Minecraft models were real architectural designs. We even located pictures of the participants in each image they made.

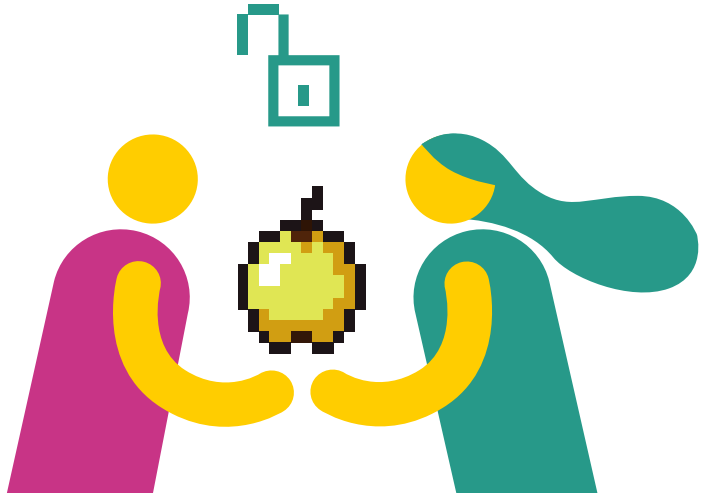
Full view of one of the buildings designed by participants
Credits: in-game picture taken by Panu Räsänen - Minecraft © Mojang

10. See https://discord.com/
11. OBS (Open Broadcaster Software) is free software, widely used for streaming videogames on YouTube and Twitch while playing; see https://obsproject.com/
12. Green screens are used in movie industries (and now also in homemade/streaming videos) as an easy way to provide custom-made backgrounds to the footage. Most video editing software is able to automatically recognise a green background and replace it with any image of choice on the spot.

LESSONS learnt

We have had this experience a couple of times now.
Here are a few heads up we have gathered so far:

- **Know your group!** Contact the parents and ask if there are some essential details to know about their children. The key is making everyone feel safe, and first impressions are crucial. What pronoun do they want to use? Are they better at flying solo, or are they better in a group? How often do they need a break? Do they get cranky or tired when hungry?
- **Make time for the group to know each other.** If the group has youngsters with challenging social skills or other special needs, it might not be best to do basic get-to-know-each-other games. Talking about favourite games and/or superheroes that have been played lately has more input for the group, given the main topic of this whole activity.
- **Youngsters must feel that their opinions matter,** are heard and will be placed into the hands of city officers. On our first venture, a PR specialist from the City planning office visited us on the first day. On the second time, we had a representative from the Business Jyväskylä consortium. Their mission was to brief our participants on our week's mission and give them guidelines on how to do it, but meanwhile to make them feel that their work was being considered and taken into account by the adult community.



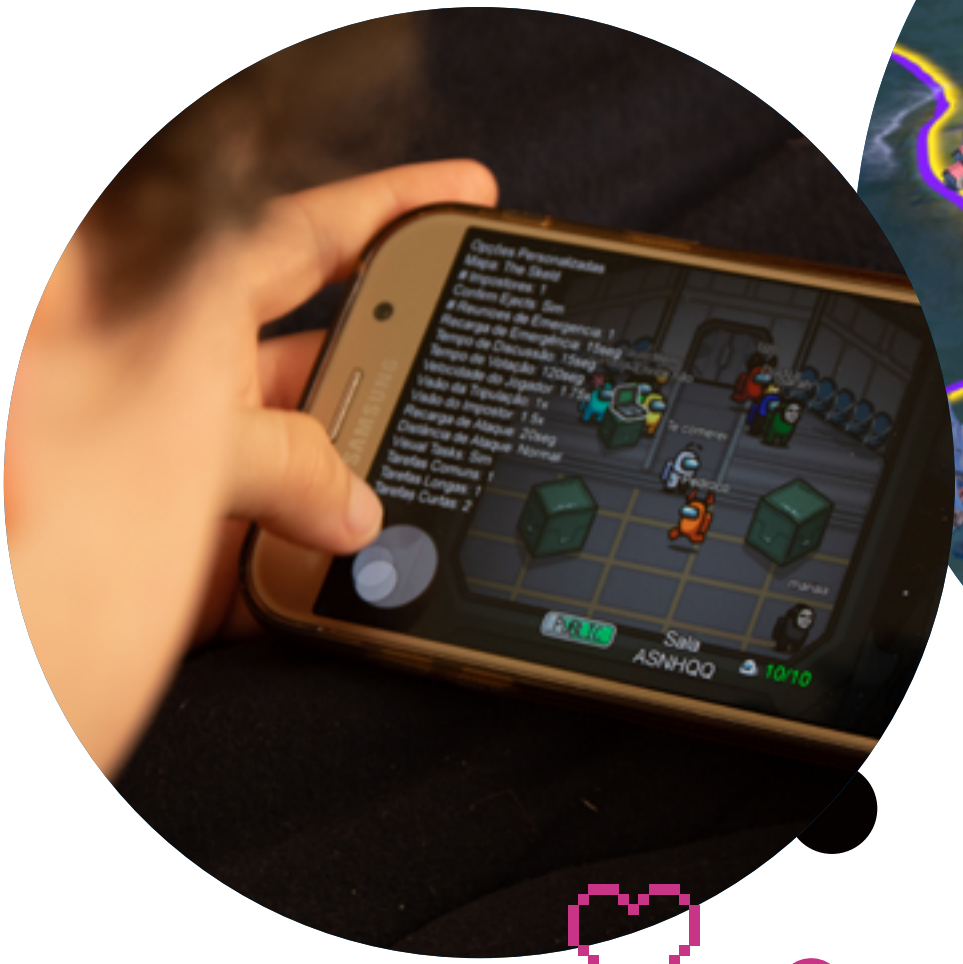
The whole activity gave participants the chance to improve their skills in a number of fields that we are listing here:

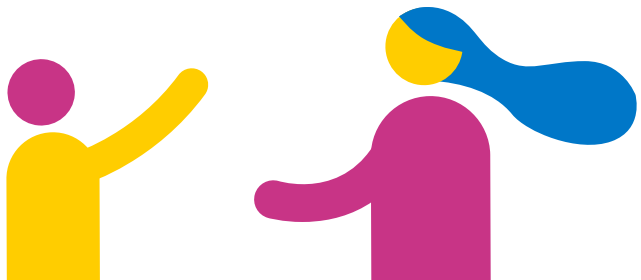
- Participation,
- Basics of city planning,
- Technology skills,
- Social skills,
- Healthy game culture,
- Approval from adults to their hobby,
- Learning by doing,
- Photographing, streaming & green screen,
- Photo retouching & video editing,
- Setting up a Minecraft server,
- Minecraft mods & text commands,
- Using Discord,
- Making new friends.

...and they got to play Minecraft for four days without any adults complaining at all! :)

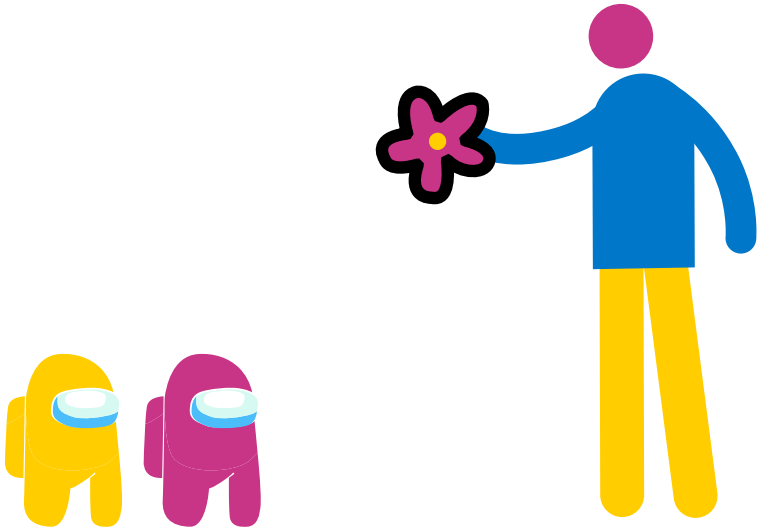
AMONG US and CIVILISATION to train decision makings skills

We will be talking about **"AMONG US"** and **"CIVILIZATION 6"**, in particular its latest expansion "GATHERING STORM", as spaces to train and address some specific aspects of participation, such as decision-making and taking informed decisions, being aware of the systemic complexity of our reality, where every decision and action has an impact on the whole system.





Credits: Shutterstock / Civilisation © Firaxis



About the game: AMONG US

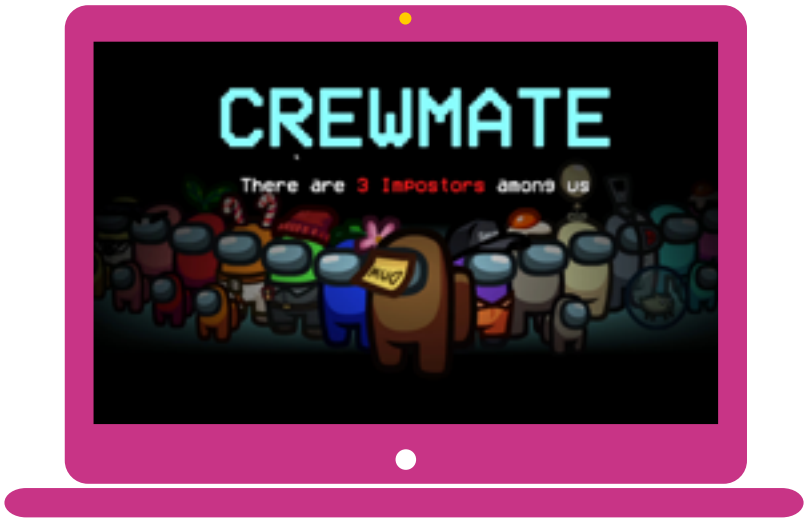
Described as a "party game of teamwork and betrayal", *Among Us*[1] was initially only released for Android and Apple iOS mobile devices, then on Steam for Windows PCs. It arrived on consoles (PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo Switch) in 2020-21. It is free to play on mobile devices (with ads), while the Steam version for consoles and PCs currently costs EUR 3.99 (8.19 for the VR version).

The concept was inspired by the super popular social deduction game "Mafia" (aka "Werewolves"), played in colleges and youth clubs worldwide, and by John Carpenter's movie "The Thing" (1981) for its sci-fi setting.

The game became hugely popular in 2020, initially thanks to streamers from South Korea and Brazil. It is believed that the COVID-19 global emergency contributed to its peak, as people were looking for ways to socialise despite the forced social distancing.

How to play AMONG US

The players take on the role of crew members who have to perform tasks on a spaceship. One of them, however, is **"The Impostor"**. The Impostor's job is to sabotage the ship and kill as many crewmates as possible in the process.



Definition of players' roles: a standard "crewmate" is informed that there are 3 impostors in the group
Credits: Among Us © Innersloth

Whenever one dead crew member is discovered, the survivors can hold an emergency meeting to discuss suspicious behavior and try to identify the culprit. At the end of a - very quick - meeting, votes are cast and if there is a clear majority, one crew member is eliminated (ejected from the ship, or "spaced", the sci-fi equivalent of "walking the plank" in pirate movies and tales. Space justice can be brutal).

But what if the players make a mistake and nominate an innocent? In space, no one can hear you scream, "what a pity". The game goes on until the crew completes a set number of tasks, all the Impostors are found, or the Impostor manages to sabotage the mission.

1. See https://www.innersloth.com/games/among-us/ https://civilization.com/

HOW TO organise the workshop

It's a fast game, with a single match lasting 5-10 minutes divided into different rounds, and **involving 4-15 players**. It offers tonnes of customisation (the number of impostors, the skins of crews and ships, and many accessories and cosmetic options), a catchy and ca toonish visual style, and the very valuable possibility of crossplay between PCs and mobile devices.

An immediate debriefing session, insisting on exploring with players how their choices were made and why, can lead to very interesting reflection about the group decision-making process, which is one of the key elements of participation.

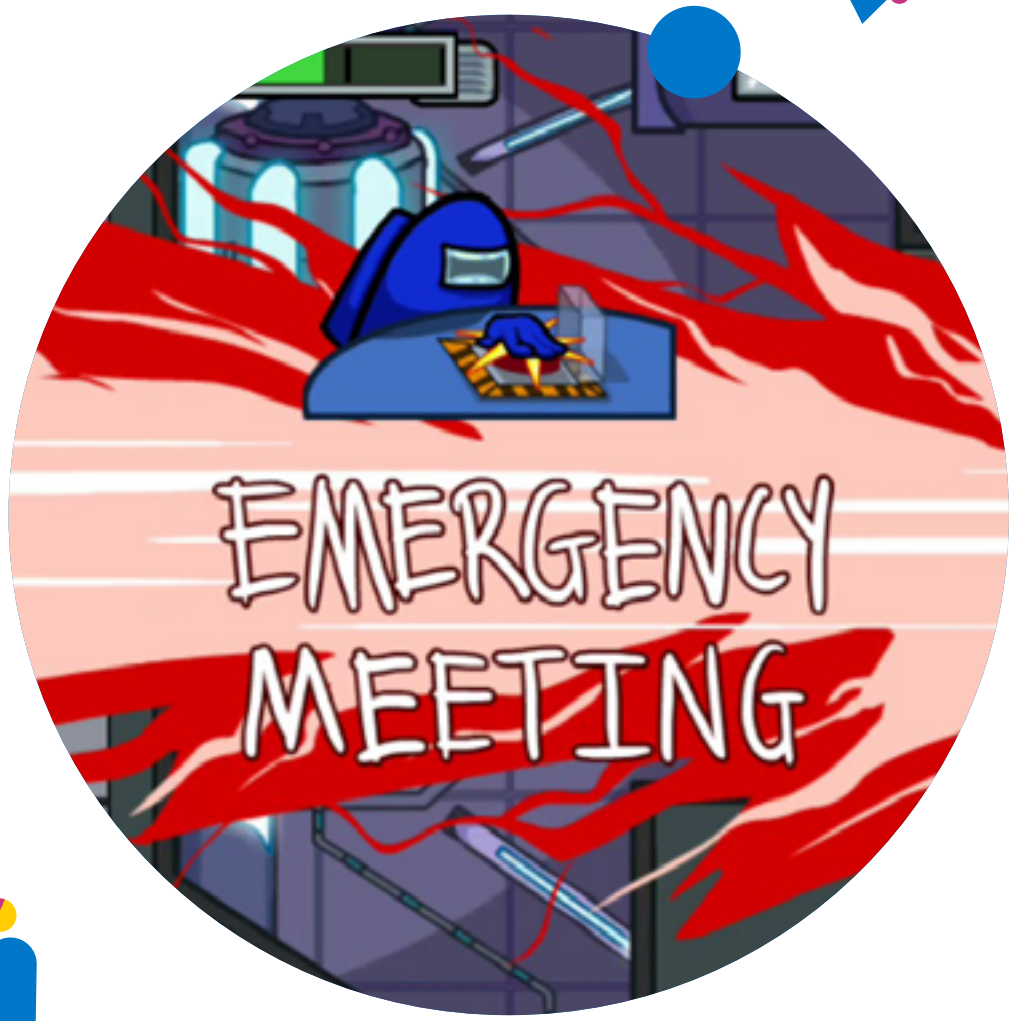
A ten-player game about to start a new round: on the left, some game stats of the previous steps. Credits: Among Us © Innersloth

LESSONS learnt

"Among Us" offers interesting opportunities for communication, conflict resolution, social deduction and decision-making, all in a very fast and engaging package. It is participatory by design, because it makes participation fun. In a group of young people, players can lie, bluff, probe each other's minds looking for alibis, and in the end they have to make hard and fast decisions. The group of players can only succeed if they work as a team and learn to trust one another, in situations of limited information and rationality. The decision-making skills of players are put under stress, and these real-life skills are exercised.

In a youth work setting, a facilitator could also lead a debriefing discussion after the game, to help players recognise and assess the skills which were at play when they had their meetings and made their decision (resulting in death sentences), evaluating mistakes, bluffing, and so on.

During the evening sessions of the online European Youth Work Convention, in December 2020, sessionsof **AMONG US** were facilitated to showcase the possible use of videogames to improve participation skills.



An emergency meeting is called by one participant to find the impostor. Credits: Among Us © Innersloth

About the game: Civilization 6: Gathering Storm[2]

This game is the last entry of a franchise that literally made history in videogames (the first "Civilization" release, developed by the legendary Sid Meier, was published in 1991).

It is a simulation of the entire development of human civilisation, starting from the Stone Age and reaching out to the future. It is based on actual history, but it also allows the players to make their own decisions and take different paths.

Wisely managing resources, developing science, knowledge, exploration (but also religion, philosophy, politics...), choosing peace or war, keeping a wide set of statistics on the overall condition of your citizens under control (and in the latest installments, also on the environment) you get to decide how humankind will develop, sometimes with very unpredictable outcomes, when you for instance avoid the colonisation of America, or avoid World War II etc.

In its over 30 years of existence, it has been the subject of an impressive number of studies - it's used in a variety of academic courses to learn Diplomacy, International Economy and Law[3] as well as by companies[4] and public administration[5] across the world to hire better managers.

What is it about?

It's the essential strategy game, in which players control human "Civilizations" from their humble beginnings as a band of settlers, to building sprawling cities and later expanding into world-spanning empires. **Players make decisions which will have a profound impact on the game-world history.** A single match can last less than an hour (at the fastest speed), or more than one day in the most epic, time-demanding settings; and during the course of a campaign, players will take all sorts of decisions regarding their civilisations: city and infrastructure development, scientific and technological progress, domestic economy and international trade, arts and culture, industry, religion, diplomacy and military affairs are all included in the game. The players' decisions completely define how that specific civilisation life-span will unfold.

"Civ" (as it is affectionately known to its fans), especially with the latest entries in the franchise, manages to keep all this complexity approachable by giving it a distinct "gamey" feeling. Graphics are vibrant, the game world feels alive and is fascinating to explore. The game never really shows the most horrific aspects of the history it simulates, like war, pollution or colonialism (all of which can be and is a criticism of the game - but this is beyond the scope of this article).

In short, it is a huge videogame classic, and for good reasons.

A typical game-play situation: mount Vesuvius and the city of Pompeii developed in the future
Credits: in-game picture created by Carmine Rodi Falanga; Civilisation © Firaxis

2. K. Weir, *"How Civilization Became a Course"*, E-International Relations, June 2012.
3. https://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/18/how-civilization-became-a-course/
4. Alexander Simons et al., *"Good gamers, good managers? A proof-of-concept study with Sid Meier's Civilization"*, Review of Managerial Science, Feb 2020. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11846-020-00378-0
5. András Nemeslaki, *"Sid Meyer´s Civilization and Simulating Technology-Society Policy Making: A Case Study of Using Computer Game in Public Administration Education"*, Budapest University of Technology and Economics

Relevant elements in THE GAME experience

The CO2 emissions of the player's civilisation and the impact on the total amount of emissions
Credits: in-game picture created by Carmine Rodi Falanga; Civilisation © Firaxis

Players without a doubt learn and experience the micro and macro aspects of taking decisions while managing a complex entity, even though clearly a simplified one. The backdrop is historical (a heavily simplified one, and full of "what if" alternate scenarios) and this - together with other successful game franchises - is inspiring thousands of young people to approach the study of history as a subject from a more systematic point of view[6], and maybe more interestingly, to participate in the (simulated) co-development of a society by taking (real) informed decisions, about the economy, education, environment and so on. **Youth work can capitalise on this, creating activities in which game sessions could be debriefed to describe which decisions were taken** (and how: Does Might Make Right? or did players follow a more inclusive approach?), and then maybe try again with a different approach to see what happens.

The sixth version of the game is the most modern, is very successful, and raised the bar of contemporary game design. It attracted history and strategy fans, as well as people interested in a more casual experience. However, what really elevated it to a higher level was its latest expansion, "Gathering Storm", released in 2019.

It introduced a few new aspects into the game, notably extreme weather and natural disasters, but most importantly translated the much-needed reality of Climate Change into the game mechanics. It is important to remember that ecology as a theme has already been present in the original Sid Meier games (as far back as in the 1990s), but this time the message hits home as clearly as possible.

Players will affect the world and its ecosystem with their decisions, and their choices about industrialisation, land use, power production and consumption have a big impact on every game. Cut down too many forests and pump too much CO2 into the air through industry and lifestyle, and the atmosphere will start to change, with severe consequences on the global climate and on everybody's life.

While still simplified (nuclear weapons in particular are not nearly as destructive as they should be), this representation of the climate crisis is stark: mess things up, and there will be consequences. Bad ones. That millennia-old city built on the coastline? Will probably disappear under the rising sea, together with all its wonders, and there is nothing you can do about it.

The farmlands that feed millions? Watch as they are made useless by desertification, hurricanes, or pollution. The message is clear, and since we are living in strange times, this aspect has proven to be divisive; again this is a great way to bring up this kind of discussion in a youth work setting: how do we approach knowledge, and can we let opinions get in the way of facts?

A specific part of the gaming community doesn't like to be reminded that they live in a world where political decisions matter and decisions have consequences, so educating young people to face the consequences of their choices, as this game does, already seems provocative to some: "keep politics out of games" is a slogan heard often in this context. The developers had to issue a statement to address this: "No, I don't think that it's about making a political statement," said lead producer, Dennis Shirk. "We just like to have our gameplay reflect current science."[7]

6. *"Kids are learning history from videogames now"*, The Atlantic, March 2022.
7. *"Civilization 6: Gathering Storm's climate change not a political statement, Firaxis says"*, Eurogamer, Nov 2018 https://www.eurogamer.net/civilization-6-gathering-storm-isnt-interested-in-debating-climate-change-says-firaxis

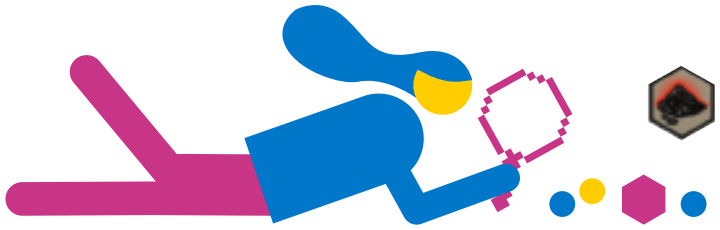
How to **organise the workshop**

This is definitely another reason why this game can be a perfect educational tool if used in expert hands. There is a chilling and very specific feeling coming from realising that, in order to support a few nations' thirst for industrialisation, the world is going to suffer badly - and this is backed by facts, verified data and science.

The game comes in many different languages, and this could help your target groups to get involved. Multiplayer games, even locally (with up to 6 players sharing the same device) can directly engage a small group, or you can decide to stress the decision-making process even more, asking couples of trios to play together as one the various civilisations competing in the game.

Playing the game in a youth work setting, maybe breaking it down into shorter sessions over more days, since the length of a "match" can be counted in tens of hours at least, could be a great way to open discussions about the impact of political choices and how informed decisions should be made.

What is even more interesting, a "Climate Panel" can be summoned at any time, and it will show very detailed information about the current in-game situation, the consequences of climate change on life and business, and the CO2 emissions of each in-game country, offering an abundance of data and highlighting cause-effect relations.



Here is the part of the game where the topic of participation can be better identified: decisions to reduce pollution can only be effective if taken collectively by most players - something that could actually be done in-game, thanks to the "World Congress" feature (something like a more effective version of the United Nations) - but many times, you will discover that players will find short-term strategies and goals much more affordable and tempting. After all, the most important thing is to win the game, right? Even if with some games, "the only winning move is not to play"?

Again, **playing these scenarios in a youth work setting and then discussing the consequences of going for short-term, immediate satisfaction instead of more complex long-term solutions, offers a chance to discuss many current political issues, stemming from the outcome of a videogame session.**

Climate change: current and to-come impacts of your development choices towards global climate
Credits: in-game picture created by Carmine Rodi Falanga; Civilisation © Firaxis

LESSONS **learnt**

A single match encompasses thousands of years of human activity, and so it allows a bird's-view experience, where complex cause-effect relations can be identified and explored in depth.

A group can experience an incredibly rich and transformative journey by playing a long-term multiplayer game of Civ 6, divided into a few days and facilitated with frequent debriefing sessions and analysis. Players may get to record their most important decisions, compare choices, and consider what they have achieved over a multi-session game: and not only on their civilisations but also on other players, and the game world itself.

Used in this context, Civilization 6 can really become a tool that allows some of the most engaging, complex and emerging participation experiences. **A really profound experience that without a doubt includes a rich and layered learning process, and where the role of youth workers is important in revealing and unfolding all the different layers in this experience**[8].

Another, even deeper, question can be about history and society. Like many others of this kind, the game suggests that there is one successful model for "development": build cities, specialize knowledge, create armies, expand, exploit natural resources, industrialize.

Is this really the best - or the only - way people can create "a civilization that stands the test of time"? Can we imagine alternatives?

Credits: Civilisation © Firaxis

8. For more games based on nail-biting decisions that have dramatic storytelling consequences, check the example: "23 Games where your choices have actual consequences", https://www.thegamer.com/video-games-choices-matter/

MINECRAFT

to foster the online participation of younger kids

About the game: MINECRAFT

The case study on **"Minecraft for City Planning"** already extensively explained how Minecraft is one of the most played games in the world, if not the most. This is an asset in itself, because it lowers the access threshold of participants willing to use the game: many youngsters have already mastered how to play, so every activity can get straight to the point, without needing to take time explaining how to do everything.

Credits: in-game picture created by Michele Di Paola - Minecraft © Mojang

During the mid 2010s, after successfully experimenting with many ways of engaging younger kids with technology[1], a mixed group of makers and youth workers (including the author) started organising summer and winter weeks based on Minecraft, which had incredible success in terms of participation and interest, with huge numbers of subscribers every time doing Minecraft activities together in the morning, and playing together outdoors in the afternoon.

This experience became an example for many other similar offers all over Italy, and when the COVID pandemic started, we had a proposal from ImpactHub Bari[2] to host online summer weeks based on Minecraft, open to children from all over Italy[3].

Minecraft is popular among young boys and girls, and this is another very useful asset: in every group, we had at least a couple of female participants despite the offer (a week playing videogames online) being perceived by many as a boy-specific proposal. An ad campaign was created by the course provider, to invite female participation in the activities.

1. see for instance the one presented at the European Tool Fair IX in Cluj, Romania in 2014: https://educationaltoolsportal.eu/educationaltoolsportal/en/tools/group-coding-videogames-and-animations
2. https://bari.impacthub.net/
3. A detailed report of the 2020 summer camp, in peak COVID times in Italy, giving children forced to stay at home the chance to meet peers and learn together, can be found here: https://www.dipaola.me/en/summer-camps-sure-inside-minecraft/

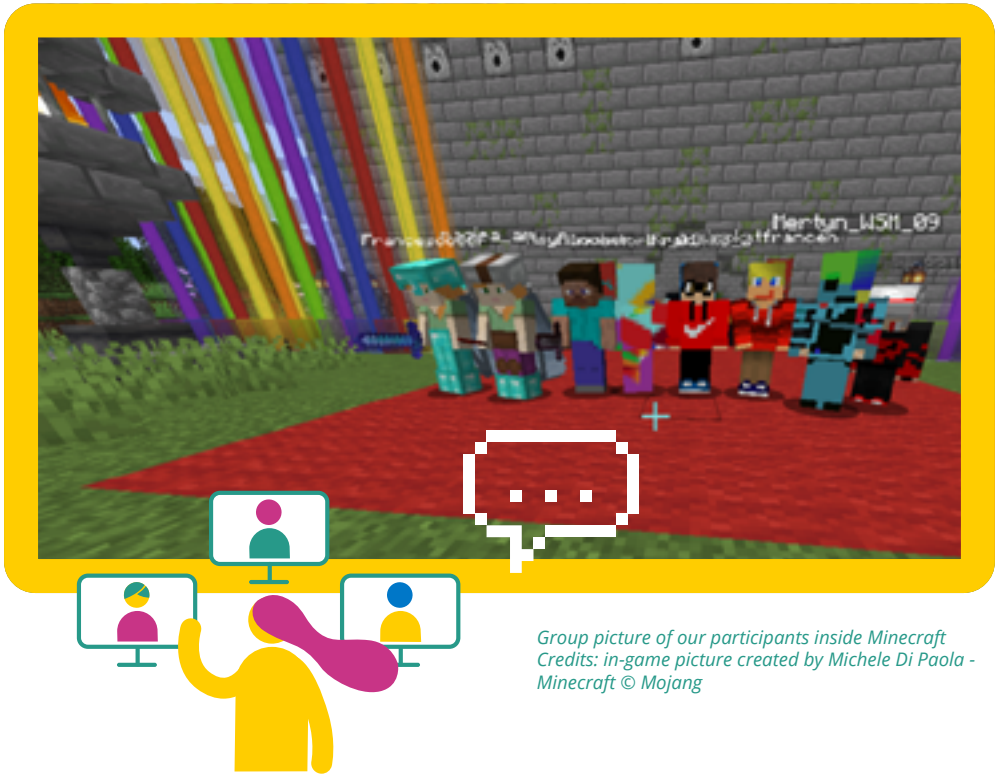
HOW TO organise the workshop

Two groups of 10 younger boys and girls each, aged 7 to 11 years old, joined two different online week sessions from many different regions of Italy: from Lombardy to Apulia, young people over a span of 1000 km were brought together in a Zoom call, and then invited to complete some tasks in a shared private Minecraft server[4]. We considered using Discord, as many gamers do, as a backup platform to meet, talk and solve game-related technical issues. We decided to go for Zoom to offer an experience which could be more familiar for our participants, being closer to the one all the kids just had until a few weeks before, with online school lessons delivered on every kind of platform. At that time, Zoom was the only platform offering breakout room capability, so the choice was quite easy.

The challenge was first of all to establish common rules for the online spaces: a group of excited kids meeting online to play their favourite game can be quite hard to handle, and surely more difficult than within an in-presence activity, so we started by establishing rules that everybody agreed upon.

This proved to be the very first activity we had, connected to participation: even after one year of online meetings for school, nobody had taught these youngsters to behave in a way that would be respectful of others in digital spaces, so we needed to help them learn how to participate in an online environment... while setting up our participation rules.

We started with only one very clear rule: no *griever*[5] players in our spaces. Nobody was allowed to destroy other players' buildings, creations etc. inside the Minecraft world that we shared on a private server we'd set up for this purpose. Being a griever is very common behaviour for younger kids in online games, and we finally managed to get an explanation as to why directly from them: not being able sometimes to keep up with the expertise and knowledge of other players, someone would start destroying those players' wonderful creations as an act of rage or revenge. So we sat together in a Minecraft forest, and promised each other that in our group this would never happen. If any damage were to happen unintentionally, the group agreed it should be announced to the group, and the destroyers would need to apologise and immediately help fix whatever they'd contributed to ruining.

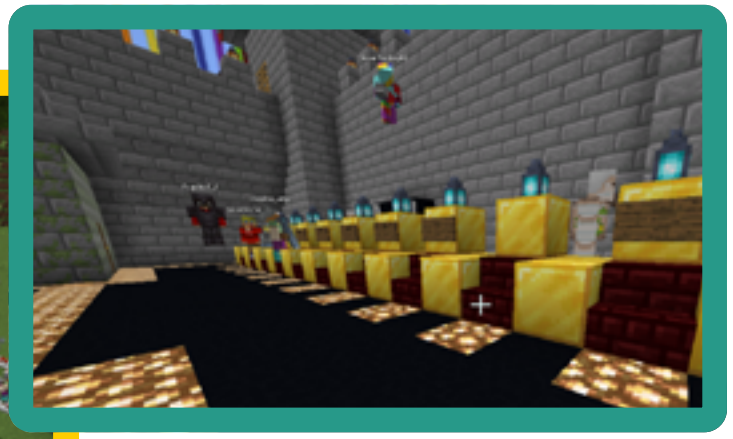


Group picture of our participants inside Minecraft
Credits: in-game picture created by Michele Di Paola - Minecraft © Mojang

This led to a more trusting group atmosphere and environment, and allowed us to experiment with more complex forms of participation, based on taking decisions together, supporting and helping each other's projects and even creating complex projects from scratch: in five days, meeting online every day for 6 hours (3 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon), both groups managed to design and create their own houses, connect them into a small village, establish a transport system via underground trains ("let's keep them underground, so the natural landscape will stay beautiful") and finally experimenting with electric circuits and coding of little turtle-robots, using specific community-created modifications of the game ("Mods").

1. See for instance the one presented at the European Tool Fair IX in Cluj, Romania in 2014: https://educationaltoolsportal.eu/educationaltoolsportal/en/tools/group-coding-videogames-and-animations
2. https://bari.impacthub.net/
3. A detailed report of the 2020 summer camp, in peak COVID times in Italy, giving children forced to stay at home the chance to meet peers and learn together, can be found here: https://www.dipaola.me/en/summer-camps-sure-inside-minecraft/
4. For all details concerning technical aspects of Minecraft, see article 1.
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griefer

Experiments with electric circuits: let's build a fireworks machine with "redstone" blocks. Credits: in-game picture created by Michele Di Paola - Minecraft © Mojang



Participants were asked to decorate a castle, and they put a shared-throne-room with 10 thrones inside. Credits: in-game picture created by Michele Di Paola - Minecraft © Mojang

It was quite impressive to notice that different children, according to their different approaches and learning styles, would either first start thinking how and what to build, or observe the surroundings to decide where to build what, or simply start building and then give form to their creations on the go.

From our side, we proposed that the group build their private houses first of all, in a defined area (around a lake), and then connect them to a street, bridges etc. to be able to easily walk from one to another. Finally, we asked them to create a transport system, based on a rail-road powered by blocks of redstone[6]. Then, we inserted a big castle in the world they were using[7], and they spent the last days decorating the castle together and making it their base camp.

Quite some effort was spent on setting up participatory spaces in building activities, explaining to the children that all different approaches had reasons to be valid, and inviting them to recognise and match other participants with the same approach, and test themselves from time to time, by working with participants known to have a different approach to building and creating.

Smaller group discussions and the overall small number of participants in the online activity were the key to being able to effectively debrief every proposed task with the whole group and have time to establish rules and ways to play together. These debriefing moments were what made a difference for all participants, and again we had to define shared rules for such a discussion in online spaces, explaining how to digitally raise hands, wait for turns, respect opinions and ideas as much as creations and buildings of other participants.

After a couple of attempts, discussions after each task became a habit, and soon the groups were able to acknowledge many kinds of learning taking place in the different activities, all connected to a participative approach to designing, creating, building, and fixing things together.

The mother of one participant, hearing the discussion from her son's computer, was very impressed by the level of analysis of such young children. Being a professor at the University of Bologna, she invited us to a lecture that she gave her students about learning styles and approaches, to share this experience of Minecraft with them.

In order to play together, we recommended using a laptop and Java edition, which is cross platform and affordable[8]. In this way, the Zoom call and the game would run on the same computer, and in the case of any technical issues, screens could be shared to help identify the problem. We also recommended participants' families to have TeamViewer[9] free software installed on the same laptop, so that if it were too complicated to give instructions in the case of issues, the facilitator could use TeamViewer to connect to the participant's computer and try to solve issues directly.

Dealing with younger kids, the involvement of families was very important. We had a preparatory meeting with parents to explain all the technical needs and share the week's programme. We had the contact number of an adult person for any emergency situations that arose during activities, because in many cases, at least for some part of the day, kids were home alone. Fortunately, we never had to use them.

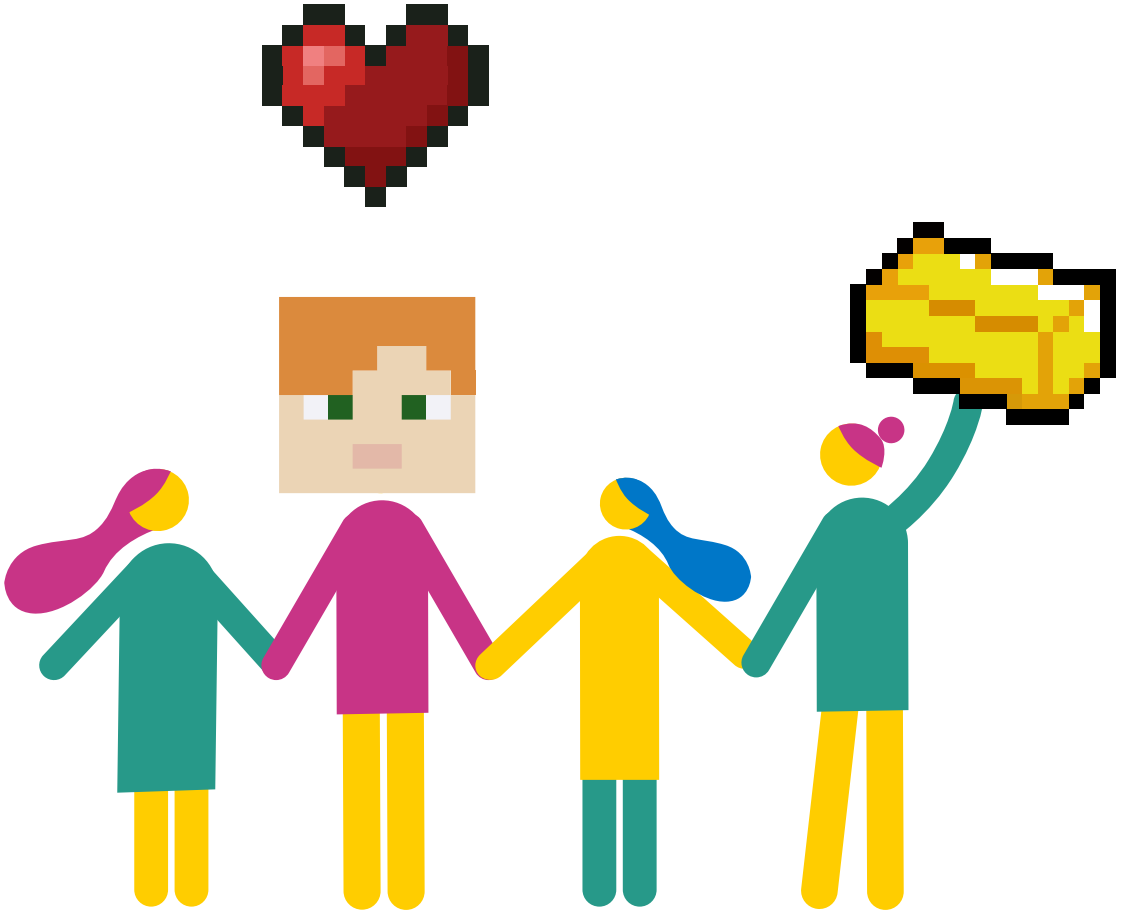
During the activities we established frequent breaks with small mandatory tasks to do at home, like walking to the kitchen to drink a glass of water and then taking at least 100 steps around the house, before coming back to the laptop.

6. Redstone is a material available in-game, which is able to create and conduct energy; something similar to an electric battery, with its own specific features in terms of power output, connections, circuits etc., which are covered by many specific articles and even paper publications - see for instance https://minecraft.fandom.com/wiki/Redstone_circuits
7. Architectural elements can be designed by CAD applications such as TinkerCAD (https://www.tinkercad.com/) and exported into "Schematics" files. Then using the free tool MCedit (https://www.mcedit.net/) they can be incorporated in a world map and used by players. Here is an online collection of ready-made architectural "schematics" files to import in your Minecraft world maps: https://www.minecraft-schematics.com/
8. Minecraft Java edition software exists for Windows, Macs and Linux computers and it costs a one-time-only payment of € 24 to play unlimited on every platform.
9. TeamViewer is "remote access" connection software allowing one computer to take (authorised) control of another one, exactly as if the user were sitting in front of it using their keyboard and mouse. See https://www.teamviewer.com/

LESSONS learnt

In the end, the experience proved to be a valid way to exercise and foster the participation skills of children in processes such as decision-making and common designing and building of in-game artifacts and structures, from very simple to fairly complex ones. **The need for common ground with shared rules appeared as soon as the activity started to imply collaboration,** and as youth workers, we were able to build on this need to introduce the wider topic of participation, often making comparisons to civic and political dimensions.

The young age of participants meant that everything had to follow a very simple plan, but even so, both groups managed to develop their skills during the five days, arriving at being able to work almost all the time alone, self-managing the group dynamics and decision-making moments.



Conclusions

We collected and reviewed a few experiences, regarding experiments on youth participation based on videogames such as MINECRAFT (with one and another example), AMONG US and CIVILISATION 6.

These examples are only the first recognition of what is happening with videogames and learning, and can be spread in the youth work circuit. More examples are out there, also in formal education environments, about the use of videogames to provide spaces for learning in a new and engaging way. The faculty of History of Charles University in Prague even created their own software house[1], to produce videogames aimed at teaching contemporary history with content validated and verified by University professors.

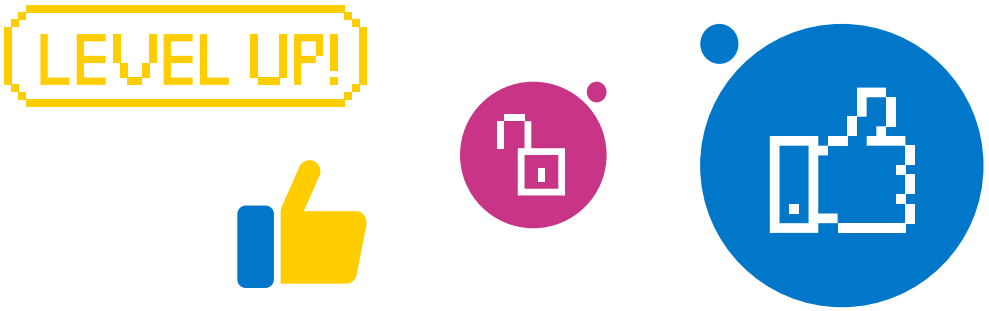
The formal education sector including videogames in the student-based learning experience is an interesting factor that we should consider, when trying to figure out where future developments and the digital transformation of non-formal education could be headed.

Using VIDEOGAMES in non-formal education

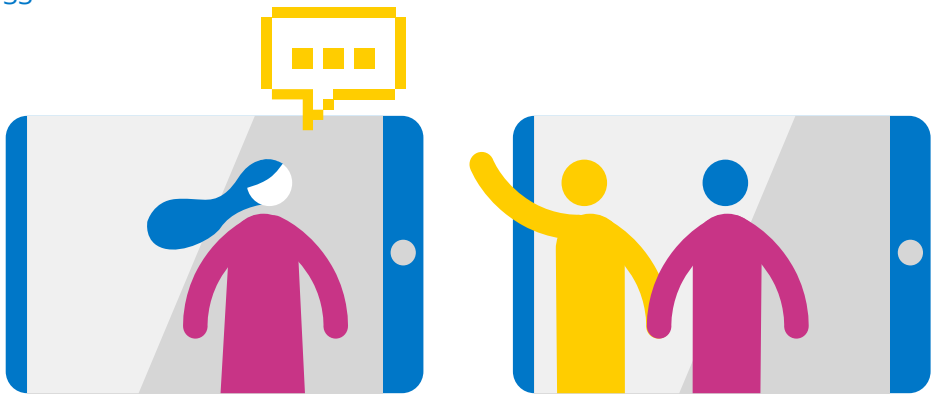
From the experiences we collected, we believe that at least a few points of interest can be identified through generally using videogames in non-formal education settings.

Videogames and devices to play them, now have costs which may be affordable in many youth work contexts; youth clubs and youth centres could provide gaming PCs or consoles to their target groups in the same way as they offer other kinds of games or materials in their venues; it is not science fiction we are talking about, but something which is already part of the everyday habits of a lot of young people, and could be used as a (new) space for learning.

Using videogames as a space for learning could provide gaming experiences that are happening under the eyes of youth workers, who could then be sure of the safety of these experiences (respecting PEGI advices while choosing games, avoiding toxic behaviour in group gaming, etc.) and taking advantage of the experience, opening up discussions and activities to analyse what happened while gaming, and identifying participants' learning.



1. Charles Games (https://charlesgames.net/) created different videogames to offer experiences connected to crucial passages of the Czech Republic's history, such as the Nazi occupation and the resistance against the regime, or the transition to Communism, but also games tackling topics such as cyberbullying.



VIDEOGAMES and participation

Focusing more specifically on participation, from these experiences we can say that a group-gaming activity, either sharing the controls of a single device or even better, playing together from different devices as in the examples we provided, could provide many possibilities to explore and discuss participation or important steps of participation processes, such as collective decision-making, taking informed decisions, analysing the impact of decisions, etc.

Still focusing on participation and videogames, the role of youth workers in this process is crucial: **the most important aspect of every experience we collected here is when a debriefing discussion about the experience starts, guided by a youth worker.**

In the Introduction to this collection we also underlined that, so far, the experiences listed here are the results of trial and error by a few youth workers, and one aim of these articles is also to show how it could all possibly be replicated by more youth workers willing to try out developing other possible practices themselves.

The important point thus is not being a gamer or a videogame expert, but being able to recognise which aspects of the game that your youth target group are using, could also be employed to tackle participation or aspects connected with participation.

Important IN-GAME elements

We identified the decision-making moments within a group game as the easiest space to analyse dynamics and learn from them, and we see that two game elements so far seem to be ensuring a richer participation experience:

- the in-game possibility to manage resources in an interconnected way, meaning that the effects of the choices of one player will affect all the rest; this happens in our examples based on Civilisation and Minecraft;
- the in-game possibility of deciding together where to further take the game action; this happens in Civilisation and Among Us, and can easily be incorporated in a youth-worker supervised Minecraft game. In fact, this could be incorporated in every multiplayer videogame.

To discuss participation in a youth group using videogames, a youth worker could stress these features of the game experience and debrief with the players, then introducing the idea of informed decision-making to underline the need for knowledge (of materials needed and crafting recipes in Minecraft, of the impact on the climate of your industrial development in Civilisation, etc.), which could open a wide possibility of connecting participation and information, too.

The so-called *sandbox*[2] games, where there isn't a clearly identified aim (as when playing Minecraft in Creative Mode), are probably the best choice for deciding together how to develop the games' actions, as described in the second article about Minecraft.

We should always remember that in any case, everything in a game only exists after a choice has been made by the developers to include it, so even *sandbox* or *open-world* games are subject to rules, boundaries and limitations, even if they may sometimes be harder to identify .

This brings us to the last and very relevant aspect of everything happening in digital form: this form has been shaped, designed, defined by someone in advance, it is possibly owned by this *someone*, and quite often the internal rules of such a space are defined by the same *someone.*

Every time we bring up participation in digital spaces, including videogames, we should make sure that all participants are fully aware of this condition, and maybe plan some warm-up exercises to help them understand and remember these boundaries.

2. *Sandbox games* are a category of games where there is no strict goal or rule to follow, and you are basically free to play the way you prefer, for instance exploring, building, destroying and rebuilding structures and landscapes in your game etc., just as you would do in a sand-box.

Find more resources on digital participation on **www.participationpool.eu**

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