

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GAME DESIGN ON THE PROMOTION OF INCLUSION

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1. Introduction: from Game Design to Social Inclusion

Game design has emerged as a powerful tool for social change and inclusion. The unique ability of games to engage players makes them effective in fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging social interaction. This research, emerging from the European Erasmus+ KA3 "Game on: Inclusion through Educational Game Design" project, examines how game design can create a more inclusive society by developing skills and competencies related to improving inclusion. The study starts focusing on three related main concepts: games for learning, co-design and constructionism in game design and inclusion.

1.1 Learning with Games, Serious Games, and Gamification

Games and gamification have been linked to learning, showing positive educational benefits, especially when integrated with pedagogical practices. Games are structured plays with rules and goals, where gameplay involves learning, adapting, and improving skills. Research has shown that games contribute to cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social effects, enhancing skills like problem-solving and persistence. Serious games, designed for education and training, have mixed efficacy results, with some studies showing negligible effects compared to other educational interventions. Gamification, enhancing services with motivational affordances, has shown positive outcomes in motivation and engagement, but also has negative aspects like increased competition and design complexities.

1.2 Co-design and Constructionism in Game Design

Game design exemplifies co-design and constructivist activity. Co-design involves all stakeholders in the design process, ensuring the result is engaging and effective. It's linked to constructionism, a theory suggesting that people learn best through making or constructing something. This approach is rooted in Piaget's theory of constructivism. Collaborative activities in game design focus on shared purposes, creation of tangible products, and open networking. Tools used include probes, toolkits, and prototypes.

1.3 Inclusion and Competencies for Inclusion

The concept of social exclusion, and its counterpart, social inclusion, is complex. Social exclusion is defined as a process where individuals cannot access a normal life, due to poverty, lack of competencies, or discrimination. Social inclusion ensures full participation in societal life, involving policies and actions across political, economic, and welfare domains. On the other hand, personal or group actions to improve inclusion are essential, focusing on developing critical skills and competencies. These include participation, being non-judgmental, empathetic, flexible, and creative. However, focusing solely on participation can shift attention from fundamental issues of inequality and wealth redistribution.

1.4 How Game Design Helps to Improve Social Inclusion

Game design aids social inclusion by identifying exclusion methods, developing values and competencies for a more inclusive society, and offering low-stakes environments for role exploration. Games can promote teamwork, communication skills, and empathy, challenging stereotypes and promoting understanding of different cultures. Game design also incorporates accessibility features, allowing broader participation. Examples include designing games for empathy in conflict resolution and creating scenarios for better understanding through role-play.

Game design fosters learning engagement and motivation, as seen in examples like board games for dementia patients or as tools in mental health service design. Participating in game design can be more motivating and stimulate deeper learning than mere gameplay. Co-designing games leads to a co-constructed understanding of contexts and experiences. The facilitator's role is crucial in influencing the validity and outcomes of these scenarios.

2. Objectives

The research aims to explore the use of game design to improve inclusive skills and competencies.

3. Methodology

The research methodology included interviews with trained facilitators, partners from five organizations involved in material and training development, questionnaires, and evaluation materials from the project. The analysis of the adequacy of game design is based on the concepts highlighted in the literature review, focusing on support material development, engagement, robustness, adaptability, clarity, process values, perceived results, and scalability.

4. Results

Game design proves to be an effective method to improve group-level inclusion skills, and seems especially useful among youth workers and educators. It provides creative problem-solving opportunities with high participation and engagement. Challenges include diverse perspectives on inclusion and scalability issues for broader user bases and large groups. Game design emerges as a promising new methodology in the toolkit for professional intervention to enhance social inclusion.