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## Doing Social Inclusion: Aiming to Conquer Crisis Through Game-Based Dialogues and Games

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**Abstract:** This paper explores game-based dialogues and games for enabling participation and furthering social inclusion in diverse educational settings and carves out aspects impacting this process. The data-base - documentation and initial interpretation of observations of reflective workshops - stems from the eCrisis-project (funded through means of the Erasmus+ program; in collaboration among Universities of Vienna, Malta and Athens). The project aims at tackling crisis across Europe arising from global uncertainties, financial crisis, the disruptions of social security and the partial inability of communities to cope with diversity (e.g. arrival of refugees and political provisions implied). The workshops entailed gaming sessions using two digital (Iconoscope and Village Voices, developed in earlier projects) and a couple of board games such as UNO and LUDO. These play-sessions were followed by a reflective debate. Diverse participants in different settings (such as classrooms and special events held at University) were invited to 'simply' play games. Participants were free to choose whether they preferred to play by themselves or with others, the type and kind of game and the duration of playing individually. These sessions with a focus on interaction patterns were observed by the project team and thereafter discussed among the participants. The number of participants spanned between 4 and 20, their ages from around 10 to 40. The participants were made up of pupils, students, refugees, persons with and without disabilities, teachers, etc. Initial findings show the violence of discursive practices such as belittlement in negotiating who plays with whom and according to which rules. These navigating processes will be described and analyzed. Initial ideas for the implementation of games in the context social inclusion will be introduced, along with plans to evaluate the outcome of this process on the students' level of understanding and their ability to handle and resolve conflict.

**Keywords:** social inclusion, game-based dialogues, participation, games, crisis, affective games

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### 1. Introduction

With this article we attend to key problems emerging across Europe in school communities and societies, such as refugee exclusion; European debates—relating to economic crises—that imply cuts to spending on education, and bullying. These challenges are tackled by fostering 21<sup>st</sup> century skills of conflict resolution, and with an eye to creative and reflective thinking. Specifically, we envision game-based dialogues as well as digital games such as Iconoscope and Village Voices to provide one such solution in primary and secondary school education. This article provides an educational framework through which teachers, students, refugees, and people with learning difficulties and disabilities can address recent societal challenges, and are able to reflect on these challenges in a creative fashion that enables social inclusion.

The educational framework was developed and studied in close relation to school communities in Greece, Malta and Austria. Accompanying the development of this framework, a total number of 20 gaming sessions, reflective workshops and interviews have been held with potential stakeholders for social inclusion across these three countries. Above all, inclusion of the groups mentioned is also fundamental to the research process itself. Koenig (2011, 214) describes inclusive research as research *with* marginalized people instead of *on* or *about* them, and this approach was adopted and applied in the methodological framework of this study. We have used the American model of community-based participatory research, as well as others utilized in the field of social sciences (von Unger 2014, 2). Israel et al. (1998) address how “community-based research offers a means to reduce the gap between theory, research and practice that has been problematic [...]” (Israel et al. 1998, 194), according to the exclusive situation of marginalized people in (school-) communities. Von Unger (2014, 4f.) additionally lists some advantages of participatory research:

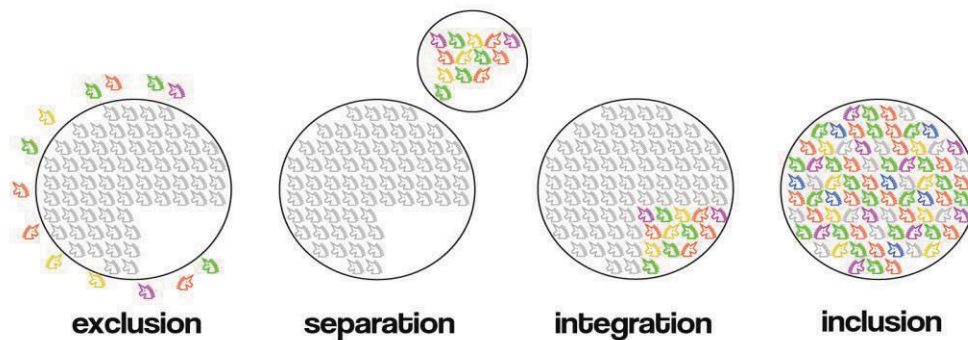
- the research questions are designed to relate to the real problems of the marginalized community
- The reliability, validity and the cultural sensitivity of the research process are improved by the participating people

- A higher level of trust between researchers and the involved community members can be achieved
- The interpretation of results can be more effective and sensitive

Conclusively, we report selected initial findings of the reflective workshops and elaborate on the potential of facilitated game-based dialogues and games for social inclusion. First up the intersection of inclusion and games that is at the heart of the project will be presented.

## 2. Social inclusion, participation and games

The definition of social inclusion is strongly connected to its antonyms exclusion and integration. This complex issue will be introduced by illustrating a model of different societal- and school systems. These systems are all present in most European countries in various degrees and combinations, although the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD; UN 2006) now makes inclusion a legally binding goal in many countries where it has been ratified. It is important to note that these models can be interpreted from both inside(r) and outside(r) perspectives.



**Figure 1:** Inclusion - exclusion model

The model on the left—exclusion—denies access to specific groups not considered to be part of society. The second model—separation—points towards the practice of exclusion of selected groups. The next concept—integration—illustrates efforts to include certain groups of people not originally identified as part of the community. Integration typically still entails certain levels of exclusion, be it through spatial segregation or exclusion from specific activities. Finally, inclusion aims to realize the principle of full participation, and points towards equal access at all levels for everyone. Details related to the impact games can have on this process will be elaborated in the course of the paper.

The European Commission Department of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion defines “active inclusion” as follows: “active inclusion means enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society, including having a job” (European Commission 2016). In addition to tackling social exclusion, a focus on work environments serves to avoid poverty; motivation-loss at work; long-term unemployment; gender inequality, and labour market segmentations (European Commission 2016). In summary, the European Commission defines inclusion mainly through employment-related opportunities of participation while promoting an active and practical model of inclusion that aims to prevent social exclusion (Stewart et al. 2013, 16). Following the definitions of the same authors, social exclusion is defined as a process that pushes people to the fringes of society, denying right to participate, mainly due to poverty and/or unemployment. This can result in a lifelong lack of exposure to learning opportunities and a lack of basic competencies. For this group of people, employment, educational opportunities, and social participation edge increasingly out of reach. Discrimination and public policies that result in economic poverty are contributing factors to social exclusion. (Stewart et al., 2013, p. 15).

In general, the Protection Policy (EU Council 2010) encompasses factors such as labour, health, housing, and lifelong learning. These policies, aimed at increased social inclusion, focus on empowering individuals to overcome social exclusion with governmental support (Stewart et al. 2013, 16). Since social inclusion and empowerment are complex and multifactorial processes, the success of any particular process depends on the individual and his/her specific needs. The core aim is for individuals to gain “control of their lives through

development of capabilities and capacities, including skills, social capital, wellness, self-confidence and self-advocacy, which in turn are built up through civic participation (...)." (Stewart et al. 2013, 169)

In addition to the definitions described above, the authors of this framework utilize a broader approach to social inclusion, which covers more aspects than participation and employability in the labour market, and the associated restrictions to social life. John O'Brien's (2014) expanded definition is as follows:

*Inclusion is an emergent property of a particular situation in which everybody takes responsibility for claiming the right to be part of a diverse community of equals. It is a social creation for which everyone engaged in a common project holds responsibility. Inclusion benefits and challenges everyone involved.*

*(O'Brien 2014, 9)*

Following this approach, social inclusion addresses everyone in the community: everyone has the responsibility to foster communal life. Participation should not be dependent on ability, as this mechanism leads to exclusion in its close association to disability (defined here as the restriction of participation due to a broad societal focus on the ability to be especially economically self-sufficient and independent). However, social inclusion delivers the necessary opportunities and resources to enable individuals to fully participate in society (Bleumers et al. 2012, 14).

Against the backdrop of these considerations, realization of social inclusion is approached by using game-based dialogues and games to address a number of challenges (such as refugee discrimination, and economic or individual everyday crises), currently facing the European Union and its individual member states. All of them are related to social inclusion and lack of participation. Therefore, we envision the inclusion of marginalized groups in school communities via games.

Of course, games do not amount to a direct intervention for the avoidance of poverty or loss of employment. Nevertheless, they do facilitate learning and empowerment processes such as social participation and communication (Stewart et al. 2013, 16). Thus, gaming, and especially its reflection, opinions, and behaviour, can be reconsidered and new strategies can be found. Accordingly, both our policy and research are oriented towards achieving social inclusion through the use of digital technologies.

There are several reasons that games support learning in and beyond formalized educational contexts. First and foremost: people love to play games (Berne 1970). Games allow us to experiment in a safe simulated environment, and the possibility to restart a game at any point allows the practice of trial and error. Games also have a positive effect on the motivation of participants. Furthermore, a cooperative gaming mode gives players the opportunity for guidance in social interaction (De Schutter & Vanden Abeele 2008). Therefore, playing can increase learning in protected settings. To get further into a digital environment, we will use the term "serious games" to refer to "...a mental contest, played with a computer in accordance with specific rules, that uses entertainment to further government or corporate training, education, health, public policy, and strategic communication objectives." (Zyda 2005, 26).

In EU Policies, one target group out of three should be addressed by games: "...disengaged and disadvantaged learners, enhancing their employability and integration into society. This includes helping people with *learning disabilities* and young people to be more employable, and to reinsert them into education. This is the area with the greatest activity, focused primarily on *young people*" (Stewart et al., 2013, p. 16). This implies a focus on people facing exclusion from employment, educational barriers and are at risk of low chances to 'employability' (Stewart et al. 2013, 31).

Through games we can guide people to think about, explore, experience, and reflect on complex topics (e.g. multiple crises) and let them act in a safe and reduced way to accomplish new skills. Digital games are also suited to help empower people to connect with others—a major skill for social inclusion:

*Empowerment comes from making meaningful decisions within a real civic context: we learn the skills of citizenship by becoming political actors and gradually coming to understand the choices we make in political terms. Today's children learn through play the skills they will apply to more serious tasks later. The challenge is how to connect decisions in the context of our everyday lives with the decisions made at local, state, or national levels. The step from watching television news*

*and acting politically seems greater than the transition from being a political actor in a game world to acting politically in the 'real world'.*

*(Jenkins et al. 2006, 10)*

Decision-making seems a lot easier when it is part of a game. By making meaningful decisions in a safe environment, and reflecting on this afterwards, we might transfer game acting into the real world, and empower people to participate in society. The empowerment and inclusion impact of games depends on the accessibility to target groups (Bleumers et al. 2012). Therefore, we have to keep technical barriers like unnatural usability, steep learning curves, etc., low, and include target group representatives to participate in the development process.

The following passage will introduce the educational context and layout of our workshops in detail.

### **3. Educational scenario: Using games and game-based dialogue for social inclusion**

In the project eCrisis, mainly two games are used, assessed, and developed further: Village Voices and Iconoscope (see the project's website for details: [ecrisis.eu](http://ecrisis.eu)). In order to learn about the limitations and usability of these two games developed in earlier projects, game sessions and accompanying reflective workshops were and are being held in the three participating countries.

Here, we present the educational scenario and its core element that has been used in the gaming session and reflective workshops: A minimum of two units (1h30), but ideally open-ended. Some tables are put together in the classroom or respective educational setting.

- Introduction (5 min):

Participants get an overview of the room, the unregulated and open setting, and the timeframe. The teacher introduces the setting and lets participants know that they can freely explore and play the games provided for approximately 1 hour.

- Gameplay session (55 min):

Participants can enjoy playing games together and can encounter each other without any teacher input and evaluative performance pressures. Participants take part in a non-regulated session, they are able to play board- or card games (chess, Mikado, Uno, Memory, Ludo) or digital games (Village Voices, Iconoscope) provided on tablets or laptops. All games are set up on a table that is accessible to everybody, so that participants can freely choose what, when, and with who they want to play.

- Game-Based Dialogue (30 min):

Participants can talk about their experiences in the gameplay session and voice what they have learnt and felt. There are different forms of game-based dialogues as Socratic Dialogues, Narrative Socratic Dialogue, Picture-based dialogue and so forth.

### **4. Gameplay sessions with Village Voices**

*Village Voices (Yannakakis et al. 2010) is a multiplayer game that takes place in an imaginary village. It is designed to be played in a classroom under teacher supervision. On the surface, the game is about survival and prosperity in the village. On closer inspection, however, the game is about friendship and reputation management in the village, and mastery of conflict resolution. When the game begins, each player is randomly assigned a particular character to play (alchemist, blacksmith, farmer, carpenter). Players stay as this character for the duration of their involvement in Village Voices; this has no impact on the quests assigned to them, merely on the digital resources they have to harvest (e.g. the blacksmith gathers stone, while the alchemist gathers mushrooms). As part of daily life in the village, players will be required to undertake quests related to maintenance of their characters' livelihoods, progress in the game, and social responsibilities within the village. As all the characters are interdependent, situations often arise that lead to conflicts or conflicts that already exist in the classroom are brought in the game, and the players are responsible for managing them. For example, the alchemist may wish to obtain a straw from the innkeeper to complete a quest involving a health potion, but a longstanding history of conflict between the two may mean that the innkeeper is reluctant to engage in trade with the alchemist.*

*Importantly, the characters will have on-going relationships with other player characters, and the gameplay revolves around management of these relationships.*

In keeping with conflict resolution concepts like mutual gain and collaboration (Bodine et al. 1998), the shared objectives of the game are to keep the village healthy and flourishing, in terms of both development and growth, and to minimize negative aspects associated with village life. Each player also has individual survival and prosperity objectives, measured in terms of livelihood, social reputation, health, and wellbeing. But the central objective of Village Voices, related to learning about conflict resolution, is for players to collect achievement badges towards “guru” status. This is attained once a player has experienced and resolved a subset of potential possible conflicts; demonstrated a nuanced understanding of different conflict perspectives; demonstrated the ability to creatively come up with suitable conflict resolution strategies in a range of different contexts within the village, and participated in counselling other players in terms of how to resolve conflicts in a constructive and positive manner.

Game-based learning is fostered when learning is tailored to the needs, beliefs and skills of each player (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2007). As such, Village Voices adopts high-end game adaptation technologies for the personalization of game experience. In particular, the game relies on an interwoven player model and adaptation component, yielding personalized conflict scenarios for each player. The player model (PM) component is synthesized from two static and three dynamic modules. The player profile module includes static information such as player demographics and conflict strategy approaches from players’ self-reports. The cultural profile contains static information about the cultural background of each player, which impacts on how conflict is dealt with. The three dynamic PM modules include affective/cognitive (Yannakakis et al., 2011), behavioural, and group modules. The former incorporates predictors of affective states relevant to conflict, such as frustration and satisfaction, as well as predicted cognitive states, such as attention. These are inferred from the player’s facial expressions and head pose (Cowie, 2008). The second concerns identification of typical patterns of playing behaviour. Finally, the group model infers player groups existent in the game based on like or dislike annotations provided by players during the game. The output of the model is the predicted level of conflict for each player in each game quest. The player model is derived from a data-driven, model-free modelling approach in which data from students is crowdsourced in classrooms and conflict intensity is annotated via in-game questionnaires (Berger et al. 2012).

##### **5. Gameplay session with Iconoscope<sup>1</sup>**

*In Iconoscope, the educator picks a set of three from a predefined set of concepts as the input to the learners’ tablets. Predefined terms include anything from abstract concepts such as “love” or “freedom” to more specific properties such as “house” or “storm”. Each member of the group chooses, in secret, which part of the concept input to use in order to produce a new diagram out of the initial one (or its subcomponents), which expresses (communicates) the concept input, albeit with the above evaluation constraints in mind. Each player (or group of collaborating players) can choose from a predefined palette of shapes and icons existent in the game. They can drag and drop, rotate, resize, and colour existing shapes as well as add new shapes to the shapes suggested by the teacher (see Figure 2). After a period of time has passed, the game is over and the players show their icon to the group, which will then vote. Passing the tablets around, other players (opponents) take turns to observe the icon and choose which of the three initial concepts it represents. Once each player has voted for each other player’s icon (and thus each tablet reached the icon’s creator), the voting phase is complete, each player’s icon receives a score based on the number of opponents and the votes cast. The scoring system rewards ambiguous icons specific enough to be correctly guessed by at least one opponent. If all opponents guess the concept correctly, or if no opponent guesses the concept then the player loses and receives no points.*

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://iconoscope.institutedigitalgames.com/>

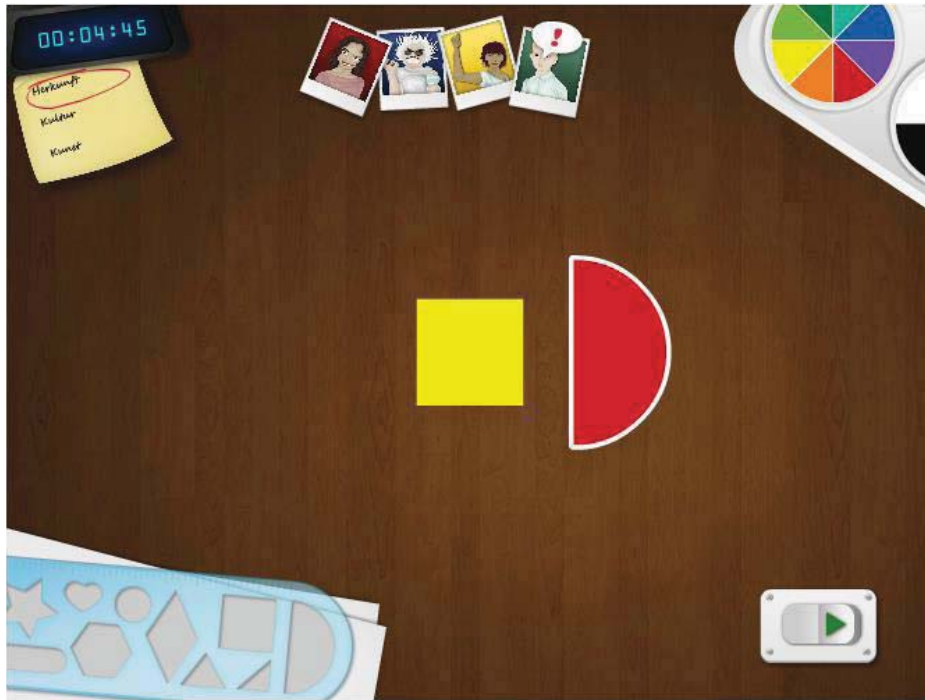


Figure 2: Iconoscope

Iconoscope is not just closely related to lateral thinking, but it also often constitutes a type of diagrammatic lateral thinking: creative thinking occurs through diagrammatic representations (e.g. in level design) offering visual (diagrammatic) alternative paths that satisfy a number of conditions. These define non-linear lateral paths within the creative (possibility) space as they promote deep exploration of the space of possibilities, which is, in turn, a core characteristic of lateral thinking. The game expands the very notion of diagrammatic lateral thinking, dichotomizing it into two main creativity dimensions: one that is based on *analogical* thinking—with diagrams and images—and one that works purely on the *visual* level, through imagistic lateral thinking pathways (Scaltsas et al. 2013). Iconoscope thus encapsulates both analogical and visual diagrammatic lateral thinking: the first by constraining the possibility space to high-quality artefacts of value to the given problem (as defined by the teacher of the context under investigation), which allows learners to draw analogies to context-specific qualities via diagrams; the latter by targeting visual diversity in the suggestions it provides the learner with.

## 6. Game-based reflective dialogue

Additional to the use of games, game-based dialogues have been facilitated after the game session to enable reflective thinking and debate. Game-based dialogues (Schmoelz, 2016) are post-game discussions with and between students that allow for reflection, critique, and renegotiation of prior gameplay experiences. Incorporating game-based dialogues means that teachers need to make professional judgments about the ends for which a specific game is embedded in classroom activities (Stenning et al. 2016). Teachers can facilitate both popular games and educational games, because the dialogues that are based on previous gameplay experience are a core part of the students' learning. There are various forms of game-based dialogues:

Narrative-Socratic dialogue (Schmoelz, 2017):

- Generative phase: deals with the gameplay. Questions should motivate students to freely talk about the play session. What happened during the gameplay: Describe from the beginning until the end. What did you experience? How did you play the game? Who was playing with whom? When did a new interaction or a change of playing partners occur?
- Immanent phase: The teacher reiterates aspects from the generative phase that has already dealt with societal issues (if any): what kind of social issues appeared and why? How was this connected to the gameplay? Why do the participants drop the discussion about the social issue? If the teacher notices a high-tension issue, it is worth asking further questions about it in plenum.
- Exmanent phase: The teacher can bring in additional societal challenges that are interesting to him/her.

A picture-based reflective dialogue (Kremsner, Proyer & Schmoelz, 2017)

- The discussion uses a sample of pictures and photos pre-selected by the facilitator to incorporate societal challenges such as pity and belittlement as well as assumptions towards socially marginalized people. These intentionally used pictures can be taken from a simple online image search for e.g. “disability”, “intellectual disability”, “pity”, “refugees”, “prejudice”, or “inclusion”.
- Participants are asked to choose one or two of these images based on their gameplay experiences and express their thoughts and feelings about them.

## **7. Initial data analysis and conclusive remarks**

Besides affective expressivity (Shaker et al., 2011), player behaviour data sets from the game play sessions are currently being analyzed under the perspective of social inclusion. Each session was documented using audio-taping via tablets, tape- and/or video recordings, and written documentation of the game play sessions and post-discursive elements of our approach. The project team is looking into the video and audio material guided by the question whether the games played can have an impact on the level or practicability of participation and inclusion. The following results stem from an overall open content analysis that was discussed and documented among the national research teams.

Interestingly, the observation data of the gameplay and reflective sessions showed the significance of the choice of games and the negotiation of rules or modes of playing. The choice made by individuals or groups to decide for a game were key. We were able to observe the breaking down of certain barriers normally imposed in social interaction. Factors such as accessibility, background of the players etc. became an issue only later during the stage of technical implementation of the games or - when available - the practicality of playing board games e.g. in the case of a wheelchair user. Arising needs, e.g. by those with visual disabilities or those in need of support in reading complex texts, were easily managed and no source of discriminatory or demeaning behaviour. Hitting the target by solving the complexity of a game or the aim of winning were at the foreground. People enjoy playing and tend to get together while playing. However, the facilitation of games in education has thereby shown its potential for social inclusion, it has also been recognized that existing practices of belittlement (Kremsner, Schmoelz & Proyer, 2017). So, a self-critical attitude of the facilitator is another core parameter.

During evaluation we recognized a duality of technology. On the one hand technology opens new ways for communication, especially if that hasn't been possible, e.g. children speaking different languages or varied modes of communication. The buzzword facilitated communication has to be mentioned at this stage (Grove & Bunning 1999). Technology can also enhance other ways to express emotions and feelings or share knowledge and thoughts. And getting in touch with others through technology has shown to be a highly social process. This adds to the potential of media and technology for participation (Schmoelz, 2015) and illustrates the social and emotional dimension in enabling media spaces (Schmoelz & Koenig 2016). Moreover, results showed that sometimes ideas could be more thought through, as while typing and after typing contents can be corrected and rethought, edited or added. On the other hand not everybody can afford the devices. Also some applications are not optimized and usable for everybody, e.g. blind people. The immanent barriers in some technological solutions hinder its potential for social inclusion. Further research will be needed to solve these challenges. Another aspect regarding the technical implementation was the experienced that tolerance of bugs and learning to handle games was rather low.

Another factor that proved interesting comparing board games and digital games, was the choice of game settings. Interestingly, playing with tablets in some phases proved highly interactive and social. At first thought this seems to be unexpected but digging we found people helping each other with the game and exploring the environment of the game settings. Again it was about assessing the complexity of a game or the play-mode and not the challenges of interaction between players.

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