

Gamification against hate speech

Gamificação contra o discurso de ódio

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Abstract

This article framed in the European project "Play your role - Gamification against hate speech" proposes the study and analysis of the state of the art in video game panorama, focusing the tendency to the use of hate speech by the young players. The immersion of the player in the symbolic arena of the game, where everything becomes possible, raises moral questions about the relationship between video games, in the virtual world and the player's behaviour in the physical world. It is shown that the use of anonymity and the creation of communities and game groups can lead to exclusion and attacks to the minorities; chat communications can facilitate the sharing of interests and game techniques as well as insults in times of tension between players, leading to reflection on the role of gaming platform in the control of the shared content. Taking into account the possibilities of video games, this article also reflects about game literacy and how games can become powerful learning tools.

Key-words: Gamification; Game Literacy; Hate Speech; Teenagers

Resumo

Este artigo, enquadrado no projeto europeu "Play your role - Gamification against hate speech", propõe o estudo e análise do estado da arte no panorama dos videojogos, focando a tendência para o recurso ao discurso de ódio pelos jovens. A imersão do jogador na arena simbólica do jogo, onde tudo pode ser possível, levanta questões morais e éticas às quais os jovens não estão, muitas vezes, preparados para responder. O recurso ao anonimato e a criação de comunidades e grupos de jogo pode gerar exclusão e ataque a minorias. Além disso, a comunicação por chat facilita não só a partilha de interesses e táticas de jogo como também de insultos em momentos de tensão entre jogadores, levando à reflexão acerca do papel das plataformas no controlo dos conteúdos partilhados. Tendo em conta as inúmeras possibilidades oferecidas pelos videojogos, este artigo reflete ainda acerca da literacia dos jogos e de como estes se podem tornar poderosas ferramentas de aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: Gamificação; literacia dos jogos; discurso de ódio; jovens

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## Introduction

Illegal hate speech is defined by European Union law "as the public incitement to violence or hatred directed to groups or individuals on the basis of certain characteristics, including race, colour, religion, descent and national or ethnic origin"<sup>1</sup>.

This research is developed in the framework of the project "Play Your Role", whose main goal is to achieve how to prevent hate speech in video games, one of the most favourite activities of young people nowadays, involving gamers, teachers and educators, video game enterprises, video game developers and the civil society.

Playing an online game or interact in a game community is part of everyday life of most of the teenagers, and their understanding of video games world represents a great influence in their behaviour and conflict management. Surveys and studies all over the world show that in cyber gaming, we can often find prejudice and outright hatred, through outrageous and offensive comments, harassment, physical threats and stalking. Frequently, hate speech victims expose that they are frequently targeted based on their race, religion, ability, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or ethnicity. The project aims to comprehend the phenomenon of online hate speech and how to act in its prevention, helping young people in the development of critical thinking through games messages and motivating an active playing against hate speech.

Providing secure contexts of discussion, the project wants to explore, in the field, working with youngsters and game creators, the challenges and the difficulties of video games, the role of media literacy and serious games in education and learning for a life of constant change, in the 21st century.

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This paper is the result of a research into the state of the art in video games and it is divided in the following parts:

1. Video Games;
2. Hate Speech and Violence;
3. Platforms and Creators - Censorship and Liberty;
4. Video Games Literacy;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:133178>



5. Serious Games;
6. Conclusion.

## 1. Video Games

Video games enable the discovery of knowledge through a simulated reality that allows the player to fail without physical consequences (Silva, 2010). Via image production and persuasion techniques, games invade everyday life with an interesting and safe reality. In the virtual world, the ethic and moral are suspended, and the player immerses in a freer and independent environment, allowing him to be different, aggressive, beautiful, killer or king of an empire. "The game is a system that engages players in an artificial conflict" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.80) where, stimulated by curiosity, gamers look for answers and rewards. Studies have shown that if a player has to choose between a bloody game that doesn't challenge him or one that does but has no violence, he will choose the second one (Ramos, 2008). On the other hand, video games can provide the ability to learn new concepts, with constant feedback on players progress; autonomy, freedom to build their own game and relatedness, interaction with others, and also the ability to play cooperatively and competitively (Nass, Taubert & Zolotykh, 2014).

Nowadays video games represent one of the most influential media in popular culture: at European level the 97% of teenagers (12-17 years old - 40% of which are girls) plays or has played video games; counting just the European console market, the top 20 best-selling games have sold a sum that exceeds 973 million copies<sup>2</sup>. In this regard, during 2018 the video game market has reached new records in terms of size of gaming communities. Two relevant examples are "Playerunknown's Battlegrounds" (PUBG)<sup>3</sup> and "Fortnite"<sup>4</sup>.

It has been observed that online games make the interaction between gamers easier and the socialization, without access to sex, age, race or physical aspect, creates ephemeral or circumstantial relationships. Players make virtual communities with specific rules and values and with a sense of belonging, they work for a common purpose. However, while some defend an increase in social behaviour after playing (Colwell, Grady & Rhaiti, 1995), others claim the isolation of the player (Selnow, 1984).

Game's narrative is capable of involving the player like a movie, transmitting ideas and values, showing that beyond functionality, there are concerns with the emotional user experience. When immersed in the game, the user builds a virtual world based on his game decisions, especially when he is represented by an avatar. The virtual freedom may lead to unethical behaviours (Machado, 2007; Ramos, 2008). According to Kinder, "As if to strike an ironic balance between manichean morality and total nihilism, characterisation and plot

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2008/09/16/teens-video-games-and-civics/>

<sup>3</sup> PUBG is the first videogame popularizing the "battle royale" genre, a type of video game in which a large number of players (usually 100) compete on the same map at the same time and where only one survives.

<sup>4</sup> "Fortnite" is an online video game created by Epic Games. It is a shooter cooperative survival game. Gamers have to gather materials and weapons and try to kill each other off. The last player standing wins. It has more than 125 million players and has become a cultural phenomenon.



remain minimal. The only moral justification that appears essential are the rules of the games” (Kinder, 1996, p.28).

Video games present a vast world of possibilities for interaction and creation and it's the player's responsibility to choose which kind of behaviour to adopt. The fact that the majority of users are children and teenagers (Ferreira, 2003) increases their susceptibility and vulnerability to interactions in video games.

## 2. Hate Speech and Violence

The manifestation of opinion that incites hatred towards individuals or groups, giving words the power to hurt physically, characterizes hate speech. Online Hate Speech has been addressed in Europe for some time now, in the public discussion as well as at political and institutional level. With the implementation of the Code of Conduct, since May 2016 many important platforms have committed themselves to fight the spread of such content in Europe. The evaluation of the Code of Conduct on countering illegal online hate speech carried out by NGOs and public bodies<sup>5</sup> shows a fourfold increase in the notifications of hate speech online being the main grounds for reporting Xenophobia (17.8 %), which includes anti-migrant hatred, has been reported, together with anti-Muslim hatred (17.7 %), as the most recurrent ground of hate speech, followed by ethnic origin (15.8 %).

Hate speech in video games can be mainly found in three different circumstances:

1. Offline gameplay;
2. Online gameplay;
3. Online community.

The first aspect - the offline gameplay - concerns the contents and the overall player experience. In this regard, some video games can contain material related to hate speech or can encourage its development in the form of very cruel and violent language and situations. This issue is well exemplified by the identification of PEGI (Pan European Game Information is a European video game content rating system) content descriptors such as discrimination and hate speech used in (in)famous video games such as “Grand Theft Auto”<sup>6</sup> (GTA).

The online gameplay relates to the dynamics of interaction with other players during online multiplayer gaming sessions. Often unmoderated, activities such as the building of teams or clans, the sharing of strategies and the voice chat, can result in conflicts or be a vehicle of hate speech. Real time actions that can't be regarded only as virtual, as they implicit the gamer as a real person and can have implications and influences outside the game, as leading to conflicts among friends. As an example, PewDiePie<sup>7</sup> – Youtube celebrity related to the

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<sup>5</sup> [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-18-261\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-261_en.htm)

<sup>6</sup> “Grand Theft Auto”, video game series created by David Jones and Mike Daily and developed by Rockstar North. Published in 1997 by Rockstar Games. This game is censored or banned in countries like Brazil, China, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, United Arab Emirates.

<sup>7</sup> PewDiePie, comedian and video producer known for his video game vlogs and live streams on Youtube.



“let’s play” genre – has suffered fines and has seen its sponsors withdrawing contracts for having made anti-Semitic insults on his Youtube channel.

The third aspect regards the online communities, formed around specific video games (for example “PUBG”, “Fortnite”, “League of Legends” and “Overwatch”) on social media and video game platforms (such as Twitch, Steam and Reddit), where it’s easy to find comments full of verbal violence, intolerance, or even “virtual stones” to those who express conflicting opinions.

Unfortunately, in recent years these attitudes can be found in several examples, such as harassment campaigns against women of the video game industry or hate groups or white supremacist servers. More serious episodes have seen a shift from the digital world to

the real one, putting at risk the privacy of prominent personalities of these communities or even their own safety.

The murder and the crimes presented in cinema and television, where usually the public has no say or doing in what is happening in the screen, are also present in the games, where players are allowed to act like murderers or haters. Since the beginning of the millennium, the use of hate speech has become a trend, being more and more present in the games ambience. The virtual world seems to promote and allow a freer expression, giving a feeling of autonomy to the player and letting him take control, sometimes ignoring the laws of the countries they are part of. In games, like “GTA”, “Fortnite” or “Call of Duty”<sup>8</sup> players are free to act as they want and behaviors that are considered unethical, or even a crime<sup>9</sup>, outside the virtual world, like racism or sexism, seem to be accepted and encouraged in the world of “GTA”. This ability to unlock virtual violent behaviours of an individual is called the "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004, p.321) that, due to factors such as invisibility and minimization of authority, may increase the use of rude language, criticism, aggressivity and hatred (Joinson, 1998).

The verbal expression of hate speech is often tolerated as a normal reaction in moments of anger or frustration suggested by the competitiveness in video games. During the games, the interaction by chat is common and comments can go from performance compliments to ironic criticism, personal or ethnic insults, to sexual orientation, harassment or minority attack. The use of anonymity in front of a supportive public and the absence of consequences may support the use of hate speech like a power demonstration or frustration relieve. This kind of behaviour is detrimental to the physical condition and the self-esteem of the aggressors and the victims (Breuer, 2017).

According to Consalvo, Ivory, Martins and Williams (2009), the main ones affected by hate speech are women and minorities, as there is a tendency for over-representation of males, whites and adults, and an under-representation of females, Hispanics, Native Americans, children and elderly. Like television, games can have an impact on the cognitive modelling of social identity formation, influencing players impressions of social groups.

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<sup>8</sup> “Call of Duty”, first-person shooter video game franchise published by Activision in 2003, first focused on games set in World War II. In 2014, was considered by Guinness World Records, the best game series ever.

<sup>9</sup> Hate speech is actually considered a crime in some countries like the UK and Australia.



The results of Consalvo's et al. studies (2009) showed that there are no female characters in 40% of the games and that when they appear is most of the times with secondary roles. More than two-thirds are white characters (68%), followed by Latinos (15%) and black (8%), often associated with gangsters in games like GTA. These unbalance can provide the creation of stereotypes, reflecting in games the social inequalities of the physical world.

Like Simon Morris, Sega UK's marketing director, said "Violence is a problem that is part of our society and we are not to blame for that. Our games are produced as a result of consumer demand and we are just responding to what people want to buy" (Cunningham, 1995, p.196). Consequently, an environment where a type is highly represented will catch the attention of players with the same characteristic, creating virtual communities frequented by certain majorities (Consalvo et.al. 2009). According to Breuer, the fact that minorities are underrepresented leads to few minority players who are consequently more exposed to exclusion and hate speech. Despite the need to defend the minorities against hate crimes, control is often used as a tool to spread intolerance (Bernardes, Fernandes, Bonaldi & Nesteriuk, 2016). Many authors and scientific research has found a relation between violent depiction and aggressive behavior in children. According to Packard (2013, p. 318), violent video games like "GTA" or "Fortnite" may promote unhealthy relationships between boys and girls, as it encourages sexual harassment and dehumanization.

### 3. Platforms and Creators - Censorship and Liberty

The fact that players systematically choose a certain type of socially identifiable game will economically encourage game designers to match that preference. Their goal is to satisfy this audience rather than expand it by making games for other audiences. MMORPG<sup>10</sup> games like World of Warcraft<sup>11</sup> are becoming increasingly popular, giving players multiple options for choosing gender, race, age, creating more distinct identities (Consalvo et.al. 2009). As Zagalo (2019) writes, creating something worthy of being appreciated as work with ethic and moral value, but above all significant, is not within reach for industries, corporations or fabrics designed to make money.

When combating hate speech, creators have the most important and immediate role, giving the change to block content, or diversifying the available characters. This way, they will increase the number of players from the minorities (Breuer, 2017). It's certainly almost impossible for game creators to predict the player's behaviour during their interaction with the virtual environment, the control must be done by small A.I. programs, that acting as virtual police, are capable of rectifying mistakes (Machado, 2007).

In this regards, big companies like Ubisoft<sup>12</sup> have decided to implement a Code of Conduct on its community systems and in-game chats, banning players who use racist or homophobic insults. Players banning depends on how extreme the offense is and it might take two, seven

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<sup>10</sup> Massive Multiplayer Online, online role-playing video game in which a very large number of people compete and interact simultaneously.

<sup>11</sup> World of Warcraft, MMORPG online game developed and distributed by the producer Blizzard Entertainment. Launched in 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Ubisoft is a French video game company with several development studios across the world, producing popular games such as Assassin's Creed, Just Dance, Prince of Persia, Rayman.

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or fifteen days or even permanent ban (e.g., Tom Clancy's Rainbow Siege). Harder to track is everything that happens in chats and discussions.

A bigger concern and vigilance is a higher control and censorship. The EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online<sup>13</sup> must serve as a model for platforms. UNESCO also promotes media role to counter hate and extremism. The publication "Countering Online Hate Speech"<sup>14</sup> gives an overview of hate speech and some measures to counteract and mitigate it, showing good practices that have emerged at local and global levels (Grizzle & Tornero, 2016).

The game platforms and communities usually serve as a means for the propagation of this kind of speech. Discord<sup>15</sup>, which allows the creation of chats and groups to unite players, already imposed its position against hate speech by banning several users linked to nazi or white supremacy ideologies and forbidding harassment or threatening messages. On the other hand, Steam, the gaming community and store, refused to block games or content in defence of the right of decision, reaffirming itself as a game market closed to cultural disputes. Twitch<sup>16</sup> and YouTube<sup>17</sup> are other platforms allowing to watch live streams<sup>18</sup> of almost everything, including games. The content goes live without filters, so it is impossible to predict any inappropriate actions. Livestreamers can become stars, like PewDiePie, influencing players to act according to certain kind of attitudes. Banning or censoring video games can be considered as a way to oppose free speech; and it is important to protect freedom of speech because it promotes self-fulfillment, autonomy, democracy and truth (Greenawalt, 2005, p. 279). Can censorship be justified? If the exposure to a type of content can lead to imitation, limiting the access to it can increase the ability to take freer decisions. The power of words is revealed in the influence of the content in opinions and actions, showing that violent speech can generate inconsistent answers (Hurley, 2004). On the other side, banning certain video games may not be the correct approach, because it could be understood as turning violent video games into a "forbidden fruit". Maybe the literacy and games design could be the answer, encouraging discussion about the messages and contents and stimulating young people's moral reasoning (Lourenço, 1998). On the other hand, the features of the game could be improved, assigning different missions so that the player would be encouraged to do less violent acts which could reduce potential harm.

#### 4. Video Games Literacy

Video games create challenging situations at the same time that they liberate, normalize, organize and integrate, leading to the recognition of its educative potential (Moita, 2007). In a context where video games serve as a pedagogical resource, educators face a strategic

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<sup>13</sup> [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-18-262\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-262_en.htm)

<sup>14</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233231>

<sup>15</sup> Discord, application with voice and text chat designed for players. Launched in 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Twitch, streaming site focused on streaming video games. Launched in 2011.

<sup>17</sup> YouTube, video sharing platform. Founded in 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Live stream, live transmission of an event over the Internet.

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function to promote this learning tool to the new generation, searching for resources that encourage students. Using intellectual techniques as read, count, memorize or identify, games can approach society themes including violence and amoral behaviour, which prohibition may not be enough to disinterest young people. Instead, it is necessary to problematize games, alerting for an ethical behaviour in the virtual world and empathising the difference between the physics and the virtual, reinforcing games as a space for learning, fiction and fantasy (Moita, 2007; Ramos, 2008).

How can young people learn from video games? How to promote video game literacy among educators, children and teens? According to Espinosa and Scolari, "Video game literacy can be described as: having the ability to play games, having the ability to understand meanings with respect to games, and having the ability to make games" (Espinosa & Scolari, 2009, p.48-49). Informal learning should be viewed as a set of skills that are rarely worked at schools and requires critical thinking, collaboration and participation, showing the importance of the balance between the two education forms. This way of learning is very relevant for the modern man, by solving problems, simulating, evaluating and imitating, players can learn from the virtual world. Imitation is the most important ILS (informal learning strategy), while observing their favourite players on platforms like YouTube, young people can complete tasks and solve problems in video games (Espinosa & Scolari, 2009).

Which factors can encourage learning through video games? In game design it is important the existence of elements that interact with players to create user-friendly experiences able to teach. Players can choose a new identity (avatar) and discover an interactive world that allows them to take risks without real consequences to evolve their gaming skills. However, there are some barriers against this mode of learning, such as high costs, the time that it takes to learn, or the difficult access to them, but above all, the preference of some students for the traditional methods (Nass et al. 2014).

Besides the knowledge of the rules, objectives and game's interface, the user has the opportunity to communicate with others with a specific language, developing social skills. Unlike the traditional education often characterized by the individualization of work, conditioned by the classroom space, in video games players learn with the actual interaction with software and other players. Students receive the knowledge actively, being in control of the activity that challenges them to a certain goal (Delwiche, 2006).

According to Zagal (2008), "Gamer literacy", a result from an avid interest and years of gaming experience, shouldn't be equated with "games literacy" or the ability to understand games. To understand games is also necessary to perceive their role in culture because many times the language, music or other elements are valued by a specific culture or subculture. The cultural context is often important to understand games and vice versa.

Understanding games implies the ability to explain, discuss, situate, interpret and position games in the human cultural context (artifacts), other players context and platforms context. In his research, Zagal (2015), looking for a framework for games literacy, pointed out two educational lenses that contextualize the meaning of understanding games and supporting the students: the "communities of practice", where the user is part of a community, sharing beliefs and goals, and the "knowledge building" where the valid ideas to the community are encouraged and improved.

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According to Grizzle and Tronero (2016), there is no clear consensus about how to counteract the negative impacts of online hate speech, but it seems certain that education and awareness are a key element to combat hate speech online, playing a crucial role in the promotion of media and information literacy. Recent initiatives of UNESCO include the launch of a Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism through education. The Organization notes that "It is not enough to counter violent extremist --- we need to prevent it, and this calls for forms of 'soft power', to prevent a threat driven by distorted interpretations of culture, hatred, and ignorance"<sup>19</sup>. This media and information literacy must be applied to both formal and informal education and such intervention should target especially youth, giving a rich insight about their knowledge, attitude and practice online when they encounter hate and extremist content.

To perceive the video game's role as artefacts and experience transmitters it is important to place them in the context of human culture. Video games can be excellent educational tools, capable of focus and motivate young people to learn certain skills based on the development of critical thinking, cooperation and interaction.

## 5. Serious Games

The Serious games allow the player to learn a certain kind of educational material while playing, where gameplay and learning can't be separated. Usually, they don't make a first good impression, with an unappealing appearance, they aren't received with the same enthusiasm as other kind of games. In most cases, they are associated with only one skill, that once learned, leads to discarding the game. Another discouraging aspect is the need to read the instructions before the game begins, making those games not attractive, as the player must be able to start playing, naturally understanding the rules as he progresses: Game play as a lesson. The difficult access and unavailability in all platforms are other factors that compromise their success (Nass et. al., 2014).

Several authors and studies have been researching the importance of serious games in education and behaviour. *The International Journal of Videogames* or *The International Journal of Game-Based Learning*, with periodical publications, have been dedicated, for a decade, to bridging the need for scientific and engineering methods for building games as effective learning tools, promoting regular meetings and job calls in this field of work. We also highlight the work of James Paul Gee, that has dedicated his scientific career to the study of the relationship between games, learning and society. According to this author, one can be literate in the semiotic domain of video games if he or she can recognize (the equivalent of "reading") and/or produce (the equivalent of "writing") meanings in the video game domain (Gee, 2014). Gee gathered some of the principles that are good practices in the creation of serious games, guiding success as learning motors while being motivating and challenging. Also, the american Mark Prensky has been a reference for his research studies in Digital Game-Based Learning, basing his assumptions in the notion of digital natives and the need of taking the game into the classroom, while an innovative model that promotes student learning through the use of technology (Prensky, 2006).

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<sup>19</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/preventing-violent-extremism>

Some non-governmental organizations have implemented the use of video games in the field work with various communities, looking for behaviour changes, educational<sup>20</sup> and cultural development. Immersing a student in a virtual environment with physical world characteristics, that allows him to test possibilities is one of the most effective means of learning (Giasolli, V., Giasolli, M., Giasolli, R. & Giasolli, A., 2006). In many ways, video games can encourage learning, through historical games or by representing a known character, who teaches about the period in which he lived. As an example, "My Child Lebensborn"<sup>21</sup>, where the player takes care of a child from a nazi program in Norwegian society after the war, where the emotional drawing is the key. Or the game "Florence"<sup>22</sup>, which through a simple game allows the player to formulate questions about the new society (Zagalo, 2018).

The success of these games depends on the player's emotional response while interacting, the aesthetic and the design, where the most important factors seems to be: awareness, the player must be sensitized by a narrative that encourages him to a goal; immersion, the game must be able to shut down the player from the real world, focusing on the game (Shell, 2013); the feeling of progress that encourages the performance (Werbach & Hunter, 2012); the feeling of danger, when simulated with precaution can focus the player (Chou, 2015) and finally, the feeling of conquest, able to motivate the player to continue (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

The perspective of game-based learning seems an important path for teaching and modeling behaviors in the era of the digital natives, we can understand serious games as a tool to sensitize the player through emotional drawing, which motivates natural and fluid learning, avoiding boredom.

## 6. Conclusion

Media, such as video games and game-related practices, are complex and intertwined worlds that play an important role in the everyday life of youngsters and adult citizens and have therefore a significant influence when it comes to building concepts of the other, behavior patterns and conflict management. The attention to this influence has been addressed mostly through the negative connection with violent behavior, violent radicalization, or lesser worrying but problematic leisure activities of students. Disregarded is the positive potential of the video game in providing for safe zones of behavior and confrontation, reinforcing and

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<sup>20</sup> We highlight the work of gamesforchange.com, created in 2004 with the following mission: "empowers game creators and social innovators to drive real-world change using games and technology that help people to learn, improve their communities, and contribute to make the world a better place. We convene stakeholders through our annual G4C FESTIVAL and foster the exchange of ideas and resources through workshops and consulting projects. We inspire youth to explore civic issues and learn 21st-century and STEM skills through our STUDENT CHALLENGE and train educators to run game design classes on impact games. We incubate projects through our game design challenges and executive production expertise in coalition building. We act as an amplifier by curating games for change to the public through our games arcades and awards" (<http://www.gamesforchange.org>).

<sup>21</sup> My Child Lebensborn, is a nurture, survival game, based on true events. Developed by Sarepta Studio AS and released in 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Florence, interactive story video game developed and published by Mountains Studio in 2018.



rewarding positive behavior, the ludic approach to serious topics and debates with a language that speaks directly to youngsters. Media Literacy plays here a crucial role in providing the tools for critical thinking, but also to reinforce more sensitive approaches around creativity. According to the European Council conclusions on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training, Media literacy is "all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with both traditional and new forms of media (...). It is closely related to active engagement in democratic life, to citizenship and the ability to exercise judgment critically and independently as well as to reflect on one's own actions, and can thereby enhance young people's resilience in the face of extremist messages and disinformation"<sup>23</sup>.

The different paths gamers can experiment in video games have given rise to many debates and reflections. Digital games have long been associated with negative effects on the physical and mental health of the players. Currently, they seem to be a virtual space where hate speech manifestations are growing without mediation. However, more recent studies show that although digital games could, for various reasons (hate speech, addiction, violence, isolation), affect human health negatively, especially when talking about children, if there are good playing habits (such as limited time, appropriate environment, game literacy, moderation of games), they can be considered safe and with a positive impact on behaviour and learning (Felicia, 2009). The emergence of the notion of Serious Games, to use new gaming technologies for educational purposes, has reinforced the positive impact that video games can have. According to a study published in 2009, written in the framework of European Schoolnet's Games in Schools project, this movement emerged "to meet the needs of a new generation of learners, often referred to as the digital natives, whose distinctive characteristics should be acknowledged in order to ensure successful learning outcomes and motivation on their part" (Felicia, 2009, p.6), being a possible way to combat violence and hate speech in certain gaming communities.

In the revision of the studies that have been developed in this field, we gathered some authors, like Breuer (2017), Bernardes et al. (2016), Packard (2013) and Ferreira (2003), who concretely analysed the violent and aggressive behaviours triggered by video games. There are also numerous articles launched by blogs or websites, like Kotaku or Vice, that warn to the controversial content that can be found on online gaming platforms and communities. Analysing the sources, it is notable an insistence on the subject over the years, without finding a consensus, because, on the other hand, there are those who argue that games do not influence violent behaviour (Ulanoff, 2019), seeing them as a way for behavioural, cultural and social change. As Zagalo (2014) points out, what is discussed is the production of culture, because however violent the game can be, it forces the player to be aware of himself and of the environment he's inserted, each video game is a human expression with an idea, and who plays may or may not agree with it.

It is notable the constant evolution of video game universe, new games are constantly being launched, with new themes and perspectives, that will be received by the audience in many different ways. According to Machado (2007), the consequences that each game could bring are impossible to be predicted by game creators. Actually, it can be argued that games can be

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<sup>23</sup> adopted on 30 May 2016, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9641-2016-INIT/en/pdf>



less violent, and individuals may still be able to express themselves freely and violently in them. Finally, it is essential to mention the importance of dividing games in categories, using, for example, PEGI labels, and insisting in a game literacy perspective with educators.

The project “Play your role” aims to understand illegal hate speech online in the context of video games, in the field, with young people, looking forward to the prevention as an important path to explore the games literacy and the use of serious games as significant learning tools to reinforce positive and empathic behaviours. The expected results are the empowerment of civil society organization and schools in countering hate speech online with new pedagogical itineraries for teachers based on video games culture, strengthening the cooperation between schools, youth institutions and video game industry and the increase of awareness in youngsters and the general public on online hate speech, boosting public perception of the issue.

The contribution of this project and the innovative aspect is in enhancing gamification in the role of creating safe zones for dialogue, debate and awareness of hate speech online starting from one of the most loved everyday life practices of the youngsters. And to foster its pedagogical potential through the creation of new educational materials that teachers and youth workers can use in their daily work. The project proposes to learn how to fight hate speech online starting exploiting video games in favor of the cause, by transforming a group of strangers into a community: discovering the other, activating empathy, trusting to be able to connect with others, having a common interest and the means to interact, by creating something. For this reason, the project proposes “creatively tinkering with technology” involving young game designers, promoting the dissemination of European content produced by the most innovative video game industry (often startups), laying the foundations for a greater involvement of the videogame industry in contrast to the phenomenon. The ludic approach of the project itself, for example in the form of the urban games, is also a powerful and innovative tool for creating awareness raising strategies in the dissemination of the project results, which include citizenship as a whole.

This paper was the first of four interrelated activities to implement a counter-action to online hate speech, the research on video games communities to identify the challenges and potential solutions, the creation of new pedagogical itineraries for teachers which will contain resources to promote gaming as a powerful ludic tool and change the perception of video games in educational context, the organization of a European-level hackathon, where game designers and educators will work together in short video games and the implementation of an online platform to provide new tools and organize dissemination events.

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