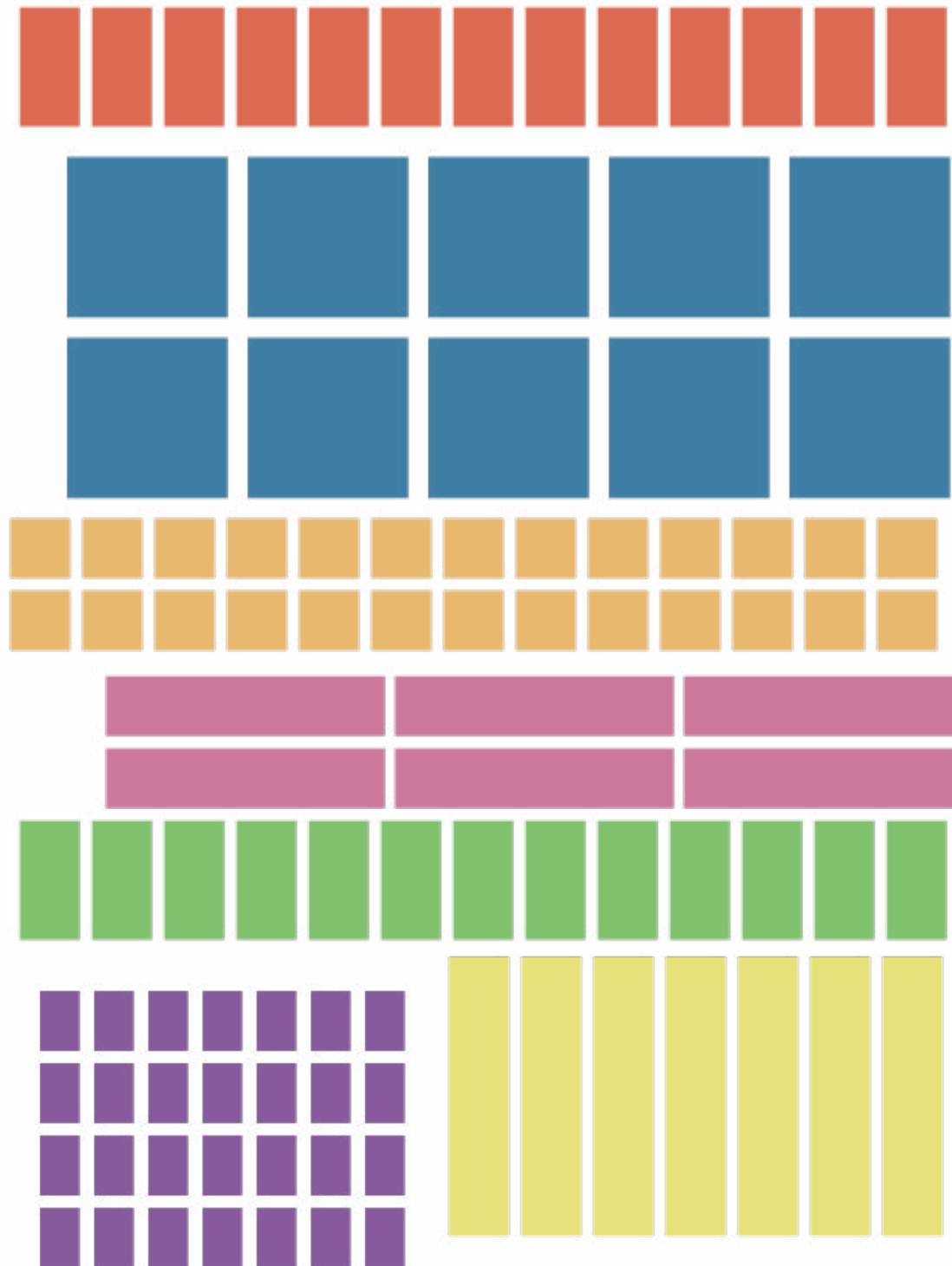


THOMAS WAS ALONE - THE CHARACTERS



Itinerary #13 We are not alone



Competences



- 2.1 Interacting through digital technologies
- 2.2 Sharing through digital technologies
- 2.4 Collaborating through digital technologies
- 2.5 Netiquette



- 3.1 Developing digital content
- 3.2 Integrating and re-elaborating digital content



- 5.3 Creatively using digital technologies

Tags

- Friendship
- Self-expression
- Hate speech in video games

Time frame

6 hours

Audience

Age 11 - 17

Overview

This itinerary begins by observing the *Thomas Was Alone* video game. It is apparently a very simple, minimal video game, but very profound and which allows you to think about a very important aspect: how we perceive our personality and that of others. Each person is complex, it is not attributable to a single characteristic or peculiarity, and this should sensitize us towards a greater understanding and empathy towards others. At the beginning, therefore, the students try to describe the complexity of their character through a self portrait. Subsequently the students are invited to reason on the themes of video games and the hate speech faced during game. A social campaign is proposed in which to spread news and data, or the use of Instagram as a vehicle for thoughts and reflections related to the theme. In the end, students are asked to create their own avatar through an online platform, which conveys a message, a thought that they consider important and that they have understood throughout the itinerary.

Context

In the first part of the itinerary students are asked to make a self-portrait. Often this activity is not experienced very willingly, but in this case it is a very "abstract" portrait, made of geometric shapes, so it should not find too much resistance. Students still have to talk about themselves, telling their personality. In the second part, the use of Instagram is proposed: a medium that students will probably appreciate and will be able to use. Even the final part, the creation of an avatar, could be a fun moment but also of restitution and understanding of the itinerary experienced together.

Objective

The activity aims:

- Raise empathy for others by understanding the complexity of personalities
- Understand how a social network can be a useful tool for conveying positive and constructive messages
- Be able to communicate clearly and effectively important content relating to video games and hate speech

Required Media



Thomas Was Alone

Thomas Was Alone is a video game in which puzzles have to be solved to overcome the various levels. To help the player, there are the unique abilities of the various characters, funny artificial intelligences with colored geometric shapes with different personalities, who work together to face the various challenges and reveal the meaning of their existence. It is a simple game visually and mechanically, but with contents that lead to empathy towards the characters, also thanks to a very brilliant narration and dubbing. The video game is paid and it is available for many platforms: Microsoft Windows, OS X, PlayStation 3, PlayStation Vita, Linux, iOS, Android, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Wii U.

Thomas Was Alone is an independent video game born from a Game Jam in 2010, developed by Mike Bithell, distributed for the major game systems starting from 2012, with subsequent publications for other platforms and consoles. It is a puzzle / platformer game with a hundred levels to overcome; the player controls characters represented by simple geometric shapes,

each characterized by a color and some peculiarities: Thomas is a red rectangle that questions the meaning of life, Chris is short and wide and manages to slip into tunnels inaccessible to others, Claire it is very large and can float on water, and so on. The player can control the various characters to overcome the different challenges facing him: high places to reach, ponds to cross, elements to push and much more. To deal with all this, you need to put your own strength on the different characteristics of the characters and make the most of them by combining them. This is the only way to reach the exit point of each level.

Although apparently it may not seem so, *Thomas Was Alone* is a game about friendship, collaboration, self-acceptance, diversity and respect. The game can be finished in a few hours, but it offers interesting and profound moments, despite the fact that everything is represented by geometric shapes and few colors: narration and dubbing humanize the characters to the point of being able to become attached to them.



Voki

Voki is an online software (www.voki.com) that permit to create custom avatars and give them voice. The use is very simple: once connected to the site, click on "try it" and you will arrive in the editor. On the left there are various useful elements to create the avatar: the background, the general appearance, the clothing and other details. You can also click on the dice to randomly generate the avatar. There are also ready-made celebrities, animals, fantastic creatures and much more. The last button on the bottom left allows you to add audio.

You can make written text read by an automatic voice, record it directly or upload an audio file. The free version allows you to record or insert tracks no longer than one minute. In this way it is therefore possible to create avatars that speak and that carry a message; at the end of the creation you can share the avatar - by clicking on "save" - via Facebook, Twitter, email or by sharing a link.

On the site you can also find tips and applications for using *Voki* in teaching.

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In this itinerary students are asked to tell their personalities, at least in the initial part. Probably, in the part of the restitution, there could be moments when someone decides to open up more. The suggestion is to listen, and invite everyone to do it, without judging, but only by guiding and mediating. For some it may be a delicate moment and therefore we must build a protected and safe environment in which we can feel at ease. In the second

and third parts, it is important to assist students in the research of the topics and themes to be treated and communicated. It is important to "slow down" their "method of working with Instagram" for a moment, and to spend a lot of time on what you are about to post, share. It is important to make them understand that a post can be something light, but also something very heavy and important, and therefore should not always be taken aback.

SEGMENT 1

Overview

In this segment we introduce the video game *Thomas Was Alone* and propose students a self-portrait activity

Time: 2 hours

Media

The video game *Thomas Was Alone*

Equipment

A platform (console or computer) to run *Thomas Was Alone* - or a computer to show videos; white sheet of paper, scissors and glue; pen and post-it

We can begin this activity with a short presentation of the students that brings us immediately to one of the themes of the workshop. In addition to the name (in case we didn't know them) we ask them to introduce themselves using only an adjective, which describes their personality. We try to stimulate choices and alternatives that go beyond the usual "nice" and that are more distinctive. At the

end of the short presentation we can ask if according to them it is possible to present oneself through a single peculiarity of one's character. Of course it will emerge how each person is made up of various traits and characteristics, which constitute its uniqueness. At this point we can tell them that we will see a video game together, and we will try to understand what it is about.

This itinerary proposes to start from the video game *Thomas Was Alone*. It is important to start right from the game because it allows to observe some reactions of the students. For example, it is interesting to observe what kind of interpretation they give to the game, to the characters and to the situations; this interpretation could correspond to ours or it could be different, and surprise us. Let them observe what is happening on the screen, with their times, trying not to impose a vision but to stimulate their observation. Secondly, we can naturally offer them our interpretation, specifying

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that in this case the author himself has constructed the narrative precisely to suggest this particular reading.

Depending on the platform we have available to play, we organize short game sessions in which students can take turns, so that more people can play. While one student is playing, the rest are asked to observe carefully. We can ask them to write on post-it notes what comes to their mind while watching the game, what feelings they feel, if what happens on the screen in their opinion has a meaning that goes beyond solving puzzles and passing levels. We let the students play enough to get the protagonist to meet some of the other characters in order to start outlining their personality.

After the session, we can read what the students wrote and comment. We can read one post-it at a time and ask for opinions and comments about it. If the theme of the different personalities does not emerge, we can try to guide the students in that direction with questions: what do you think about Thomas, the protagonist? And Claire, is she the same as him? What are their fears, their desires?

If there is not enough time available to advance a lot in the game and discover various characters, the various profiles with the main features are shown below.

 **Thomas** thinks that all the challenges he faces are one training, as if the world was testing it. And he wants to prove he is up to it. He is a confused character, it also keeps track of anything (it appears to be obsessive compulsive).

 **Claire** wants to become a superhero, she needs a suitable name and a supervillain to deal with. She always needs to show that she has superpowers and that she is honest. Initially she is sad because she feels useless: she is slower than the others and does not jump high like the others. Then she discovers that she is the only one who can float, helping others and transporting them. From that moment she takes care of her companions and feels responsible for protecting them.

 **Chris**, a small square, is cynical and proud: he believes he can do anything, without the help of squares or rectangles higher or greater than him. Initially he hates Thomas then, as history advances, he understands that without Thomas he is not complete.

 **Laura** has a low self-esteem: she believes that everyone, after knowing her, want to abandon her. Chris falls in love with her, and Laura proves to be fundamental to the group, because they can use her as "impetus" to overcome obstacles.

 **James** looks like Thomas but is "inverted" compared to him: he is green and gravity works in reverse for him. He says many other AI (artificial intelligence - the squares) make fun of him

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because of his strange color and behavior. When he knows Thomas and the others begins to understand that he is not that bad and starts to accept himself, even if he remain a bit "weird" in the eyes of others.

 **John** is a little arrogant and detached, but he cares a lot about showing his skills (especially jumping) to others and being observed. Despite this, he takes great care of his friends, becoming the most loyal and attentive companion.

 **Sarah** is the smallest of the group, even smaller than Chris. She has however a great determination and strength that allows her to jump high, most of all (even more than John). She can also go where others fail.

After presenting the characters, we ask students to work on their self-portrait. This is an individual work, which will be done on a white sheet of paper, with glue and scissors. We distribute to students the photocopies of the form with the various colored rectangles and squares, attached to this itinerary.

Now we ask students to make self-portraits using the shapes (squares and rectangles) cut out from photocopies. Of course it will be a simplified, symbolic self-portrait, since it will be done with geometric shapes, cut out and glued on the sheet. But what matters in this case is the choice, which geometric shapes the students will choose to describe themselves. In fact, we will have to ask them to use at least ten shapes to retract, but the choice of which is up to them. We tell them that they will have to choose the shapes according to which personality of those available represents them. For example, do they feel very insecure like Laura, a little misunderstood like James but also slightly eager to show their skills like John? They could use five long pink rectangles (Laura), three short green rectangles (James) and two long yellow rectangles (John). With these shapes they will be able to compose their own portrait (the rectangles can be the nose, the mouth, the eyebrows, etc ...). There may be someone eager to describe themselves with only two personalities (or maybe even one) and someone who will feel the need to use them all. The important thing is that the students take the time to read the descriptions well and think about what could best represent them.

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Once the self-portraits are finish, we involve the students in a moment of feedback. We observe the students' works and ask who wish to show their self-portrait and explain which personalities they have chosen and why. Of course not everyone will be eager to tell and someone may not feel comfortable; we respect their sensitivity and thank them anyway for the work done.

In this first part, the theme of different personalities and identities was introduced: how people can be complex, have composed characters, and how it can be interesting and engaging to discover it. This is a theme to always keep in mind when relating with others on the web: the identity of the person on the other side of the screen is not often known, who can be sensitive to various issues, and who can be easily hurt if wrong words are used. What happens in video games is like this: beyond the avatar personified at that moment, there is a person we do not know, with his weaknesses, who must be respected. The next activity will allow students to intervene precisely on this theme, the insults and hatred that can be encountered while playing and, above all, how to communicate these themes to adults and possible solutions.

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SEGMENT 2

Overview

In this part, students create content regarding the world of video games, to be shared on social networks

Time: 2 hours and half

Media

Instagram, Facebook, others social networks

Equipment

smartphones (or computers)

During the meetings held with students in Italy, as part of this project, it emerged that there is a strong idea about adults and video games. Students believe that adults know little or nothing about the world of video games, and that they do not have the adequate tools to understand the complexity of the theme. Often the only sources of information are media that deal with the topic in a superficial, scandalistic way (only when there is a news somehow "tied" to the world of video games), if not downright demonizing. The students also expressed their interest and willingness to make adults (parents and teachers) more aware of this world, which has many interesting points, creative and educational potential to offer.

If you wish, you could start this second phase by opening the debate on this topic and gathering students' opinions and thoughts. It may be useful to write their thoughts on the blackboard, for example, they could be useful later.

The class is divided into groups. Each group will have to imagine a post for social networks that tells something about the world of video games and adults. They can be directly lived experiences, stories found on the web, heard by friends, research or newspaper articles. The aim is to make adults more aware of the world of teenager and video games, with episodes regarding hate speech, but also solutions, good news regarding the communities of players and more. Groups can do their research through smartphones (or in a computer room if available) and collect news and data.

This activity can vary a lot and could even expand further, to continue beyond the duration of the itinerary. Here are some ideas and suggestions.

Students could create posts that will be published on the school's social pages. The kids will have the role of looking for facts, news, data and information on the topic and making short posts to share. They will therefore have to elaborate a synthetic text which, however, clearly explains the content, and choose whether to attach an image, a link to an article or other content. They could decide on a hashtag (for example #gamesfact or #stophatespeechinvideogames) in order to combine all the posts in a single search, and therefore create a kind of thematic articles collection. It is not necessary to publish all the posts at the same time, but they can be scheduled. If they wish, students can also relaunch the posts from their personal channels.

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Another idea could be to work exclusively on data concerning the world of video games. What would adults want to know about video games and hate speech? What data do they consider important? In this case, a specific research must be done for each question (each group may ask a different question) and data will be collected. Subsequently, these data will be communicated as clearly as possible - with diagrams, infographics, drawings.

Another possibility is to use some content created previously for another national project called #nodrugstobecool, for which the Centro Zaffiria created useful tools. Some of these tools are Instagram profiles generated specifically for the project: they are profiles of imaginary characters (inspired by protagonists of Italian literature for teenagers) created to do workshops and activities in the classroom using the popular social network as a vehicle. In particular, Tonino's profile (@tonino.the.boss on Instagram) is the one most used, because Tonino was a bit the "protagonist" of the project (and of a free App related to the project, in Italian, called *Ehi, Tonino!* created by Centro Zaffiria). Interested teachers can write to info@zaffiria.it to request the access credentials to the profile and use it.

The activity could be set up as follows: Tonino has learned that a friend of his offends a classmate while playing Fortnite, and would like to do something useful, using Instagram; how could he do it? In his posts he would like to explain the hate speech phenomenon in video games, he would like to sensitize his followers,

make adults understand something more about video games, share fun and non-violent video games, etc ... In this case, impersonating Tonino, the groups could create posts to be shared on his profile (which is public) and which they could relaunch on their personal channels.

All these activities could become recurring appointments, dedicating a couple of hours a week in carrying out research and creating new posts together. Making students creators of content, and doing it together, comparing before posting, can help them reflect on the potential of tools that they use every day, and which unfortunately often are a vehicle of hatred and intolerance.

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SEGMENT 3

Overview

In this segment, students will create avatars that will be vehicles of important messages for them

Time: 1 hour and half

Media

The online software *Voki*

Equipment

A computer to show *Voki*; white sheet of paper; smartphones or other devices to run *Voki*

The last activity could serve as a moment of recapitulation of the themes and arguments that have emerged so far. In this part we will use *Voki* webware (an online software), a tool that can be used directly online that allows you to create animated avatars. The use is free but, compared to the paid version, there is a limit of length of the audio tracks of one minute (how to insert the audio is explained later). Essentially *Voki* allows you to create an animated character that can be customized in every aspect: from the home page, by clicking on "try hit", you get directly into the editor. Here you can choose various elements of the avatar's appearance, thanks to the tools on the left: the type of character, the facial features, the clothing, the background and much more. The last button allows you to add audio, and we can do it in various ways: thanks to a text-to-speech system that allows you to write a text and make it read by a voice; through direct audio recording;

or by uploading a previously recorded audio file directly from the computer. Once the avatar is ready (after making all the changes and inserting the desired audio) press "save"; at this point it is possible to share the animation via Facebook, Twitter, send an email or simply share with a link. Those who receive the animation can press play to hear the message.

With the students we explore *Voki* together from the class computer, possibly connected to a projector so that everyone sees well. Together experiment with various solutions, characters, backgrounds, try the various voices and illustrate the procedure for saving and sharing the animation. At this point the class is divided into groups (or even couples) and everyone is assigned the task of creating an avatar and, above all, an important message that they would like to share with their friends. In the first phase it was seen how it is possible to create an avatar that talks about us but is obviously not recognizable. Students can be asked first of all what "avatar" means, how it is chosen, what it represents and if any of them want to tell one (of a video game, for example). Then it is important to stimulate them to create an important message (no longer than a minute) concerning something that has attracted them particularly during the itinerary, or that they believe is important to convey: a thought, a reflection, an invitation. The information found during the previous phase - regarding hate speech in video games, or adults and their knowledge

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of video games - could be an excellent starting point for finding important messages to be launched. According to the group, it is possible to leave more freedom or give more "tight" deliveries in case there is a need to target the students more. At this point, via smartphones or other available devices, the groups create their avatars. About the message, it is advisable to ask them to write it first on paper, so that they can calmly reason about content, and then read it easily during the recording.

At the end of the registrations, the groups send the links to the teacher, who can thus show all the creations through the projector to the whole class. In addition, students can now also share their messages with other people.

The various messages are listened to and commented on, asking the authors to explain their choices, both as regards the appearance of the avatar and the content of the message. This activity could be a great way to end the itinerary and think together about the themes that emerged throughout the whole activity.



In a nutshell

Empathy and understanding of others are a good starting point for educating in careful, kind, correct communication. Understanding a person's complexity helps one to be more careful in choosing words, and to understand that we could hurt him with little. It is also interesting to show how even a seemingly simple video game can offer interesting food for thought, and therefore understand that they can be very useful and interesting tools. Other daily tools, such as Instagram, can turn into effective communication vehicles: we see it daily. It is therefore important to show how these means can not only be a vehicle of hatred and discrimination, but also bearers of good practices and positive messages.

Sources / Links

If it is not possible to play the *Thomas Was Alone* video game, at these links you can see trailers and gameplay:

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K4zjNtQ3y8
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDaa3Cq6c7M

Also at this link you can play the first version of *Thomas Was Alone*. It is a preliminary version, however, where all the in-depth part of the characters, the narration and the dubbing are missing. However, it can be interesting for puzzle / platform mechanics, if you really didn't have the opportunity to play in the classroom: www.gameshot.org/?id=5334

At this link you can find the free demo to download: www.mikebithellgames.com/thomaswasalone/