Europe's quiet revolution by way of digital games?

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Can digital games save Europe from crisis? Against a backdrop of racial division and economic and social inequality, it is tempting to dismiss the notion as fantasy.

But a new Europe-wide project being unveiled at the University of Malta today is set to address the question in earnest: by using games to instil creative thinking and conflict-resolution skills in the classroom and, possibly, raise a new generation of problem solvers.

"The only way to make a change in society, positive or negative, is through children," Georgios Yannakakis, an associate professor at the Institute of Digital Games, said. "We're not claiming that we're changing the world, but we believe we can enable a quiet revolution.

"With minor changes on a daily basis in critical thinking, active debate about real societal problems, minimising racism and maximising openness to diversity, our children can be better than us."

The European-Commission-funded project – Europe in Crisis – uses principles of game-based learning with two games developed in earlier initiatives.

In one, Village Voices, children take on the role of villagers who can compete or collaborate as they seek to overcome a number of communal quests and challenges, while in Iconoscope, players use simple shapes to come up with depictions of complex ideas – 'freedom' or 'refugees' – and then debate their designs together.

While the games have a strong learning component, they are far removed from the rudimentary 'educational games' that many remember playing in their own school days. For one thing, as Prof. Yannakakis explained, they are actually fun.

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"If you were designing a game to tackle bullying 20 years ago, you would have created a school where bullying was taking place. But that's a bad strategy, because children are actually experiencing a bad reality all over again," he said.

"What you want is some sort of abstract or fantasy world where they can experience bullying scenarios which they can then bring back to real life through what is called experiential learning. Games have the capacity to bring whatever is experienced in the fantasy world to real life."

Although the two games being used have already been developed, they will be redesigned in close collaboration with teachers – initially at St Ignatius College – to address the aims of the new project and the unique needs of individual schools.

"Our classrooms are facing continuous challenges," Vanessa Attard, a lecturer in the ICT faculty and another of the minds behind the project, said.

"They are multicultural and mixed ability, with learners from many different

The role-playing game Village Voices

Associate professor Georgios Yannakakis from the University of Malta's Institute of Digital Games. *Photos: Chris Sant Fournier*

Vanessa Attard, lecturer in the ICT faculty

backgrounds, with different experiences, each with their own way of dealing with conflict in the classroom or expressing their creativity.

"We want to work closely with teachers to empower them to make meaning out of these playful activities we're presenting. We believe these games have strong potential to develop soft skills like creativity and critical thinking, resolving conflict and communicating."

The project will have a heavy focus on briefing sessions to put experiences gleaned from the games into context, as well as training to ensure teachers have the necessary skillset to take the approach further in their daily work.

Such training is part of a broader drive towards using games – which across the world are rapidly evolving into serious subjects for art and research – as tools in educational settings. Other local projects are already using similar approaches to tackle issues like early school leavers and the integration of students with autism, attracting serious attention from the educational authorities.

"We truly believe that this possibility can help improve people's quality of life, both as teachers and as learners," Dr Camilleri said. "People think of games as trivial, just a way to waste time, but every game can achieve depth.

"If we approach it and target in the right way, you can achieve a lot, even with commercial games. Learning can be channelled through anything, depending on who supports it."

Prof. Yannakakis, similarly, believes games can quickly enter the educational mainstream, despite the traditional resistance to new technology that he sees at all levels of society. "There have been innovators everywhere," he said.

"The European Commission has invested millions in improving education, and game-based learning is one way of doing that.

"I'm not saying every single project has been successful, but we're learning how to make better games that are more usable, and helping teachers deliver them to their students. It's a learning process for us all. We become better, and they become more engaged with the technology."

"As long as they are part of a continuous process, these projects can have a real impact," Dr Camilleri added.

"We are hoping that these games will eventually be rolled out to a much wider audience. The more learners we have with these kinds of skills, the bigger the chance of making a difference."