

Gianvincenzo Nicodemo¹

Università telematica Pegaso

gianvincenzo.nicodemo@studenti.unipegaso.it



Generosa Manzo²

Università telematica Pegaso

Genny.manzo@unipegaso.it



Moreno Castagna³

Associazione pedagogisti ed educatori italiani

Moreno.castagna@unipegaso.it



Patrizia Consalvo⁴

Università telematica Pegaso

Patrizia.consalvo@unipegaso.it



Double Blind Peer Review

Citazione

Nicodemo, G., Manzo, G., Castagna, M., & Consalvo, P. (2024). Team game online: virtual union, educational process. *Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics*, 8(2), Edizioni Universitarie Romane.

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v8i3.1150>

Copyright notice:

© 2023 this is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Open Journal System and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

gsdjournal.it

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN 978-88-7730-494-0

ABSTRACT

Online team games extend beyond mere digital entertainment. They serve as platforms for learning and social connection, where players from diverse backgrounds and social contexts collaborate to tackle challenges, solve puzzles, and achieve shared objectives. Within these virtual adventures, affective computing emerges through collaborative efforts, the elation of shared victories, and solidarity during moments of setback. These environments seamlessly blend individuality with collective experiences, forging unforgettable bonds that transcend digital boundaries. The educational-social approach of online team games fosters essential skills like communication, leadership, and effective group work, contributing to the development of conscious and collaborative citizens. The intervention unveils the outcomes of a focus group conducted among Italian youth workers in northern Italy exploring the use of online entertainment gaming to enhance street education initiatives.

I giochi di squadra online vanno oltre il semplice intrattenimento digitale. Servono come piattaforme per l'apprendimento e la connessione sociale, dove giocatori provenienti da contesti sociali e background diversi collaborano per affrontare sfide, risolvere enigmi e raggiungere obiettivi condivisi. All'interno di queste avventure virtuali, il calcolo affettivo emerge attraverso gli sforzi di collaborazione, l'euforia delle vittorie condivise e la solidarietà nei momenti di difficoltà. Questi ambienti fondono perfettamente l'individualità con le esperienze collettive, creando legami indimenticabili che superano i confini digitali. L'approccio educativo-sociale dei giochi di squadra online favorisce competenze essenziali come la comunicazione, la leadership e il lavoro di gruppo efficace, contribuendo allo sviluppo di cittadini consapevoli e collaborativi. L'intervento presenta i risultati di un focus group condotto tra gli operatori giovanili italiani del Nord Italia che ha esplorato l'uso dei giochi di intrattenimento online per migliorare le iniziative di educazione di strada.

KEYWORDS

Education, digitalization, online team games, focus group, youth work, social educators

Educazione, digitalizzazione, giochi di squadra online, focus group, lavoro con i giovani, educatori sociali

Received 30/04/2024

Accepted 15/06/2024

Published 24/06/2024

¹ Author of paragraphs 2 and 3

² Author of Introduction and Conclusion

³ Author of paragraph 4

⁴ Author of paragraph 1

Introduction

Street education is a pedagogical approach that takes place in unconventional environments such as streets, parks, squares, courtyards, and other places frequented by spontaneous groups of preadolescents, adolescents, and young people. It is characterized as a direct and proactive intervention aimed at identifying the needs of young people and activating their personal and social resources.

It represents an element of proximity, as it is carried out in the everyday life contexts of adolescents and young people. Methodologically, it is based on active listening without prejudice. The purpose of street education is to stimulate the participation of the adolescents and young people involved to promote their empowerment and social inclusion.

Street education is based on a relationship of trust and mutual respect between educators and users and adapts to the changing needs and dynamics of urban contexts.

The world of online gaming is vast and varied. It consists of modes, mediated by a digital environment, in which participants have the opportunity to assume the identities of imaginary characters interacting with other participants within various digital scenarios for different purposes.

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a “massively multiplayer online role-playing game” (MMORPG) released in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment. The game allows players to create an avatar and explore an open world in third or first person, fighting monsters, completing missions, and interacting with non-player characters (NPCs) or other players. WoW encourages collaboration to complete missions, enter dungeons, and participate in player-versus-player (PvP) combat, but it can also be played solo.

The essay presented here describes an experience of using WoW in the context of a street education activity in the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region in northeastern Italy.

1. The context

The street education project implemented in the Borgo San Sergio district of Trieste represents a significant example of social intervention in an area marked by marginality. The street education initiative financed by the social services of the municipality and delegated to the cooperation was started in 2004 and continued until 2018 and included the nomadic camp, considered the largest in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region.

The approach focused on direct and continuous contact with the inhabitants, particularly with the young people of the neighbourhood, aiming to create a bond of trust and to offer concrete support to face and overcome daily difficulties. This methodology is based on the idea that a human and proximal intervention can effectively contribute to the resolution of deep-seated problems of exclusion and social discomfort (Bertolino et al., 2007). The challenges faced in such a complex context are numerous and require constant dedication and adaptive strategies that take cultural specificities and local dynamics into account.

The experience in Borgo San Sergio shows how interventions of this kind can be fundamental in bringing hope and change to areas otherwise forgotten or shunned by institutions. We are now going to illustrate just one of the many project interventions, often carried out simultaneously, that took place there.

The first active action in street education is engagement. In this phase, the educator approaches the informal group of young people chosen as the target group for the first time and tries to identify an interest that most of the group has in common. It is fundamental that all activities proposed in informal contexts start from the bottom: however rich or performing an activity may be, if it is proposed from outside the group (i.e., if it "comes down from above"), it is destined to fail.

The hooking-up phase is the most delicate because if it is not carried out properly, it can compromise street education to the point of necessitating the replacement of the educator. The chances of success of the educators who intervene afterwards tend to decrease dramatically with each new attempt.

Once the main interest in the informal group has been identified, an activity proposal must be constructed and formulated on the basis of this.

In this specific case, online games intrigued or appealed to the group across the board, involving both males and females.

2. World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a multi-layered game with the possibility of creating a guild, which is a group of players who advance with the common goal of increasing their rank (value) within the world in which they play (server) through actions of mutual aid, creating and planning groups for quests, and using professional skills (of which up to four are chosen from a large pool, with the possibility of achieving various levels of specialisation) to build useful items for its members. These items are normally sold within the game by both players and NPCs (non-player characters), so being able to access them for free is a considerable advantage for the player.

Before involving the target group in the game, the educator must create a setting within it, in this case becoming the guild master of a group of about 300 players belonging to the same country and scattered all over the country (the servers, or the “worlds,” are divided by language, which facilitates the operation).

Creating a guild as a setting is essential to creating sharing and confrontation in an extended peer group from different backgrounds. It should be pointed out that the group of young people involved never confronted people from outside their own reality and rarely went outside their own neighborhood, and on those occasions acted as a closed and completely self-referential group.

This should be done while starting to talk about the game with the group in real life, so that it is ready and active at the first online experience at the same time that it is for all players in the guild an early experience. This will facilitate spontaneous networking and common recognition for everyone.

At the beginning of the game, the children will have to choose an avatar (among elves, gnomes, and other fantastic creatures), each with specific peculiarities. Then they will have to choose their class (warriors, wizards, healers, etc.). The chosen race will be given the possibility or not of accessing some classes and will give additional advantages to some.

It is crucial that the choice of classes is as diverse as possible because the participation of several character types is essential for carrying out missions. The guild will also serve to compensate for any gaps in this respect.

The game can also be played in individual mode or in small groups of two or three people that do not give access to the most important quests but still allow players to advance in the game. Of course, the group is free to do so, but a maximum level to be reached is agreed upon because with a difference of more than three levels, the group experience becomes incompatible. Since it is an open world, the players can continue exploring or engaging in activities, such as increasing professional skills, without increasing the level of their character.

3. Evaluations useful for educational planning

Educational processes often involve the use of digital tools, and this is often very useful (Smit, 2022; Garcia & Lee, 2023). The decision to propose the mmporg World of Warcraft (WoW) for online cooperative gaming sessions was based on the fact that in order to play it, a monthly subscription of about €15 per person had to be paid, which made this game inaccessible to this specific target group, given that street education is generally carried out in neighborhoods with strong social and

economic deprivation. This made it easier for the educator to access a game that would otherwise be impossible to use.

First, you have to create a fair amount of hype in the group (VUE, 2021), which is done by looking at reviews together, videos of streamers (Twitch), viewing the game's world map (WoW is an open world made up of real continents, and a player can spend months just exploring them without ever doing any other type of activity). This phase must have precise timing. If it is too short, the peak of interest is not reached, and if it is too long, the hype risks decreasing irretrievably.

It must be assessed which of the interested parties has the necessary hardware to access the game. WoW is not compatible with consoles, only with PCs and Macs. In this specific case, I had an aggregation center with two computers at my disposal. The game is designed in such a way that even medium- and low-power processors are sufficient to access it. The difference will only be at the graphic level (for example, there will be no shadows or reflections, but the gaming experience will be fully guaranteed for all players). The aggregation center was already present in the area, but with very low frequency on the part of young people due to both mistrust and lack of interest. It was mostly used for sporadic activities aimed at the elderly, so offering the possibility for the youngsters to use the two computers was also the way to encourage spontaneous access by the group. In addition to the directly involved players, their curious friends came to watch the game sessions. Volunteers were present in the center to check that the behavior of the children present was appropriate. The children were informed that in the event of any problematic behavior there, the facility would be closed immediately and the gaming experience would permanently end, not only for them, but for the entire group. This modality favored self-regulated behavior, not out of respect for the educator (which had yet to be built up over time), but so as not to have to deal with the discontent of the peer group who would miss out on an activity they were interested in at the time and for which there would be no other means of access. Instead, the educator was in another location, so the online gaming experience would be total.

Creating a common background with the group is fundamental to start building actions/activities within it because it creates a common belonging in which one knows and recognizes oneself. This is the fundamental basis for a subsequent creative and constructive harmony.

Once the participants have been identified, it is not necessary to involve the entire informal group, but two factors are also indispensable: the participation of the majority of the group and the recognized leader within the group.

In this specific case, the activity involved nine boys and girls out of a group of 15, including the leader.

WoW is designed in such a way that one can choose between various character classes, each with special characteristics. These characters are divided into equal numbers across two factions: the horde and the alliance. Each of these classes wants to eliminate the other: the horde to bring the world into chaos and the alliance to establish balance and harmony.

Participants are given the non-negotiable condition of choosing their avatar in the alliance faction. This choice on the part of the educator is made because the protagonists of the experience often live in a social context where illegal conduct is widespread on many levels, so much so that certain deviant behaviors are considered a logical *modus operandi* and do not raise any doubts as to the ethical and lawful aspect of these actions among the people living in that reality.

Another condition for creating the game setting is not to choose the pvp (player versus player) mode, where the main objective is to hunt down and attack players of the opposing faction, but the rpg (role-playing) mode, where the aim of the game is to carry out individual or group quests following real in-game plots. In rpg mode, the greatest and most attractive rewards can only be obtained from quests (missions) involving teams of anywhere between 4 and 50 players.

The game session is scheduled in person, which helps the educator's insertion in the informal context. This is not done at the community center but in a spontaneous meeting location within the children's neighborhood. In this way, the educator becomes a familiar figure within the context, even for those who are part of the group but do not participate in the game.

Being recognized and accepted by most of their peers and by the leader, even if for utilitarian purposes, fosters communication with the entire group. At this stage, it is essential to calm any intervention by the educator. Since we are still in the hook-up phase and the foundations of the relationship have yet to be consolidated, interventions perceived by the group as managerial or simply not understood due to mistrust of an extraneous, and in some ways, institutionalized figure (the educator generally works on behalf of the social services of the relevant municipality, or less frequently, for the health authority, but this is not the case) may cause the educator to be 'expelled' from the group.

It is essential, in this regard, to make it known to the group that the educator's presence has been decided by the social services, and while making them aware of this, it must be made explicit that in any case, the educator's intention is to create/do something together that is of interest to them. Transparency and consistency are essential to create a relationship of trust. One must bear in mind

that very often, the adults of reference are not consistent on this level due to their own problems (drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling, criminal behavior, strong social unease, etc.). The educator must be seen neither as a friend nor as a parental figure, but as a person who is willing to help with concrete actions wherever possible.

During the game session, in addition to seeing the other players in the group on the screen, one communicates with them using a voice chat within the game itself, which was originally created with the intention of facilitating and coordinating actions but actually becomes a means of chatting and confronting other players who do not know each other in real life.

4. Conducting educational activities

Group quests can only be carried out with cooperation and many times are not completed on the first attempt. This also makes it possible to work on the sense of frustration and the consequent correct reaction, (i.e., trying again together to achieve the result). Once they have completed a quest, players can redo it by accompanying groups of players who have not yet completed it. In this way, they become facilitators and are gratified by the recognition of their skills by peers in a socially appropriate, albeit virtual, context.

After each gaming session, the group of young people meets in person. The joint experience of online play, followed by in-person meetings, acts as a catalyst for building interpersonal relationships between the street educator and the youngsters involved. This methodology exploits the 'pedagogy of the third space' (Bhabha, 1994), in which play creates a hybrid space between the formal educational environment and the children's everyday lives. The familiarity and enthusiasm generated by the shared experience of play facilitate openness and trust, making encounters more effective and meaningful. Having a common experience to talk about, even if it is virtual, facilitates relationship building and creates and consolidates the social recognition of the street educator in that context, it also allows one to get to know the entire group. It will be up to the educator to be engaging and get involved in the group dynamics and discussions, trying to bring his/her own contribution, but not in a directive way. During post-game meetings, the educator assumes a crucial role: He or she must be open to dialogue and careful to maintain an attitude that balances authority with empathy. This behavior is described in Max Weber's 'functional authority' model, where authority derives from competence and respect rather than coercive power. The educator must therefore stimulate discussions that reflect on the issues raised

during play, encouraging critical and constructive reflection without imposing rigid directives. It is essential to remember that the street educator must be non-judgmental, but at the same time, non-accomplice. The consistency we mentioned earlier is one of the fundamental pillars for building respect on the part of the group. This approach is aligned with Carl Rogers' theory of "authentic presence," which advocates the importance of unconditional acceptance and empathy. By maintaining a non-judgmental mode, the educator avoids alienating the children, thus facilitating open and honest dialogue. However, it is crucial that the educator also maintains a clear distinction between being supportive and becoming complicit in negative behavior, thus ensuring the maintenance of ethical consistency and respect. The integrity of the educator contributes to the building of respect and moral authority within the group.

With the passage of time, the accumulation of online gaming experiences and face-to-face meetings, and confrontations in informal meeting places, the figure of the educator acquired such a familiarity in the informal group that it was possible to start trying to build a concrete activity in the real world. Of course, this was built from the bottom up (this time involving all members), thanks to the support of the participants in the online game and the experiential background that was created in three months for a total of about 110 hours of online game play in addition to an equivalent number of hours spent in presence. This amount of hours may seem high at first glance, but when analyzed in all aspects, this is not the case at all. Let us focus on each of its parts.

During the game, the group did not just relate to the street educator but to hundreds of players inside and outside the guild, thus creating both occasional and habitual opportunities for confrontation on several levels, in some cases almost becoming virtual friendships.

As a result, young people who, as already mentioned, never used to interact with people outside their social reality started to interact with people from all over the country belonging to different realities and social classes. This was also possible because they were 'stripped' of their negative social status. Generally, when they left their neighborhood, they were marked by prejudices, and this consequently created a Pygmalion effect in them, whereas when they confronted and interacted with other players, the set and setting were neutral, which allowed the construction of completely new types of relationships for this group. The concept of set and setting, extended to the context of online games, refers to the virtual environment as a socially neutral space. Here, the norms and dynamics of the real physical context are temporarily suspended or replaced by those of the game, which often promote equality and collaboration between players. This environment can

facilitate the emergence of new social dynamics, where relationships are no longer conditioned by geographical or socioeconomic barriers (Williams, 2006).

At the same time, the already mentioned and indispensable common background was built up, as in this case, the use of online games as a tool in street education offers a unique opportunity for children from different backgrounds to develop a sense of community and belonging.

Interaction in these virtual environments allows participants to build a common background based on shared interests rather than predefined socio-economic identities. This process can be viewed through the social capital lens of Putnam (2000), who distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital. In online games, bridging social capital can be particularly strengthened, as people from different social backgrounds can come together and form extended networks based on reciprocity and intercultural cooperation, which is facilitated by situational anonymity. Situational anonymity in online games allows individuals to disassociate themselves from their socio-economic status and pre-existing social expectations. This phenomenon can be analysed through the concept of “online disinhibition,” proposed by Suler (2004), which describes how anonymity and the absence of immediate visual feedback allow individuals to express themselves in unconventional ways. In online games, identity is mediated through avatars and pseudonyms, which function as liberating social masks, allowing users to explore and interact without the weight of racial, gender, or class prejudices (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Furthermore, participants have the opportunity to express themselves in ways that may differ from their usual behavior, offering a form of freedom and protection that distinguishes the online gaming environment from their everyday reality.

It must be emphasized that the constant presence of an online educator also serves to prevent or deal with any incidents of cyberbullying that may potentially occur.

Considering this, the online program turns out to be a worthwhile and productive investment. Afterward, the young people asked to perform a concert in their neighborhood as a concrete activity, open to the whole city. We refer to a neighborhood in which the rest of the city never went, both because of its location on the extreme periphery (it was in fact the last neighborhood in the municipality) and because of the objective danger involved in going there without previously knowing someone who lived there.

The event was held involving bands of up-and-coming young people, some of whom had never played in public, and a well-known local band with particular social awareness who volunteered to participate in the event free of charge. External participation was significant, and the title chosen for the event was “Street Party.”

The most significant fact is that this event became an annual appointment for the neighborhood and the city, with different declinations (writers, hip hop, rock, etc.). It was repeated for no fewer than 14 editions, and the online experience was replicated in other neighborhoods of the city, in the Triveneto, and in other regions such as Emilia Romagna and Tuscany.

Thanks to a massive investment in street education (one full-time educator and one part-time educator) and urban regeneration, both school drop-out and crime rates have been significantly reduced, which can be demonstrated by cross-referencing data from schools and the prefecture.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the online gaming experience described offers numerous relational benefits, which emerge from its unique structure and the way participants interact. In this context, the game acts as a neutral virtual environment that breaks down socio-economic and geographical barriers, allowing young people from different social classes to interact on an equal footing. This dynamic is particularly significant in neighborhoods characterized by strong social deprivation, where opportunities for external interaction are limited and often conditioned by prejudice and stereotypes. By providing a common experience and a basis of shared interest, play facilitates the formation of bridging social capital, as described above, which enables the formation of social ties and networks beyond the confines of one's immediate environment. Furthermore, situational anonymity allows players to express aspects of their personality and skills that may not emerge in face-to-face interactions, promoting a sense of authenticity and freedom of expression. This phenomenon, known as online disinhibition, can lead to greater openness and empathy between participants, reducing the risk of hasty judgements based on visible or known aspects of their identity.

Finally, the educator, operating both online and during in-person meetings, acts as a facilitator of this process, fostering a culture of respect, collaboration, and mutual support, which are essential elements in building a resilient and cohesive community. These relational benefits not only enhance the immediate interactions between the players, but as we have seen, can also have long-term effects on their social development, their ability to work in groups, and their tolerance of diversity from their own contexts.

References

- Bargh, J. A., McKenna, K. Y. A., & Fitzsimons, G. M. (2002). Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expression of the "True Self" on the Internet. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(1), 33–48.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Bertolino, S., Gocci, G., Ranieri, F. (2007). *Lavoro di strada. Aspetti psicosociali del lavoro di strada*. Roma: Franco Angeli
- Chen, L., & Wang, H. (2024). Exploring the Impact of Online Team Games on Collaborative Learning in Virtual Classrooms. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 32(1), 78–94.
- Garcia, M., & Lee, S. (2023). Digital Learning Environments: A Comparative Study of Virtual Teams in Educational Settings. *International Journal of Educational Technology*, 68, 45–62.
- Johnson, R., & Brown, K. (2023). Leveraging Team-Based Online Games for Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 56(2), 87–104.
- Smith, J. (2022). Gamification in Education: Strategies for Enhancing Learning Through Games. *Journal of Educational Technology*, 45(3), 112–128.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Smith, J. (2022). Gamification in Education: Strategies for Enhancing Learning Through Games. *Journal of Educational Technology*, 45(3), 112–128.
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326.
- Virtual Union for Education (VUE). (2021). Best Practices Guide: Integrating Online Gaming into Educational Programs. Retrieved from <https://vue.org/best-practices-guide>
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press.
- Williams, D. (2006). On and Off the 'Net: Scales for Social Capital in an Online Era. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), article 11.