

Critical reflections: Merits of using youth-centric technology in keeping young people safe across Europe

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Introduction

This chapter draws on the lessons and experiences from an EU-funded project carried out by an interdisciplinary research team, youth work practitioners and international body of young people. The chapter illustrates how participatory research done well can lead to the co-production of digital tools for safeguarding young people in the ‘real world’, while also empowering vulnerable groups of young people in becoming active and engaged citizens. This project was designed primarily in response to the inconsistency and gaps in youth-led resources currently available to support the safeguarding of children and young people throughout the European Union and online. The project built on primary research to co-develop a cross-culturally transferable e-learning tool to promote early routes to help for young people on the move across Europe. The focus of this chapter is on the complexities and benefits – theoretically, and in practice – in co-producing digital tools with young people who experienced shared histories of state care, forced migration, detention and displacement.

The project achieved its aim in raising the profile of a group of young people who experience adversity as European citizens capable of knowing, understanding and responding to their own risks. We also achieved our aim in the co-development of a game-infused e-learning tool to empower young people from across Europe to learn more about the different child protection systems in existence, and provide youth work professionals with a novel tool for tackling a challenging societal issue.

Context and background

The contemporary world is experiencing an unprecedented movement of people, across countries and continents, and we are learning to deal with all the challenges and

complexities this migration brings, particularly in the case of unaccompanied migrant children (Hopkins and Hill, 2010). The recent flows of refugees from the Middle East to Europe have accentuated the need to attend to these movements with the necessary sensitivity and urgency, especially in relation to those populations who appear to be more vulnerable, such as unaccompanied, smuggled or trafficked children (Feijen, 2008).

Although not the only social group that requires special attention, young people who are on the move are clearly in need of safeguarding. As discussed by Klepp (2010), there is no uniform child protection system in place within the EU to keep children and young people safe from harm. This shortcoming gains significance when considered in light of existing evidence that favours early help. On the one hand, there is longstanding and widespread international agreement that readily available early help for children and families can stop problems from escalating and prevent maltreatment before it occurs (MacMillan, 2010; Laming, 2003, 2009). There is significant evidence that harm from maltreatment is common, but often hidden, and that most children and young people in need cannot easily access services (Harker *et al.*, 2013; Walsh and Brandon, 2012).

We draw on the lessons and experiences from a collaborative project carried out by a diverse group of academics, researchers, practitioners and young people. It illustrates how participatory projects, based on the active engagement of young people, can facilitate a creative and productive process for developing tools for safeguarding young people, while also empowering them to tackle their safeguarding needs both online and offline as active and engaged citizens. Although the primary goal of the project was the development of a Gamified e-learning tool to promote health and early access to safeguarding services for young people on the move in Europe, the focus of this chapter is on the participatory process of co-developing a youth-centric digital tool.

Although the outcome or product of the project (the production of a Gamified e-learning tool) remained a clearly defined goal for all participants from the very beginning of the project, it was also clear that the process through which this would result was equally important. Treating participation as a process, rather than merely an outcome, recentres attention on the actual relations, negotiations and practices that unfold during the participatory process, which ultimately matter as much for young people's development as the quality of the outcome of the participatory process. The project faced the challenge of ensuring a productive and fulfilling collaborative experience for young people coming from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups working across national contexts, an issue that we explore in much more detail in the chapter. The overall framework of the project enabled groups of young people to provide insight into their own concerns and cultural contexts, through a supportive mechanism that sought

to achieve voice, impact and improvement within social policy and social work environments.

From this blended intergenerational and multicultural context, this chapter first provides a brief introduction to the project, and its objectives are outlined. This is followed by a discussion of the participatory process of youth engagement in researching, analysing, conceptualising and developing the e-learning tool. There is a focus on both the strengths and challenges of working collaboratively with diverse groups of young people across national contexts to achieve a common goal, and an examination of the various needs that stem from the participatory process through a culturally sensitive lens. This is followed by a discussion of young people's reactions to the game, and how their feedback, combined with the 'bottom-up' approach adopted by the team, helped make adjustments to the game, and how this offers a dynamic model for game development through participatory engagement. The chapter concludes with reflections on the significance of this kind of research-informed, participatory youth-engagement process for addressing the safeguarding needs of young people on the move.

Keep Me Safe in Europe: A participatory youth project

This participatory project, titled Keep Me Safe in Europe, offered here as a case study of youth engagement in applied research, was funded by Erasmus + and ran for a period of 24 months (2014–2016). The project built on the learning and experiences of the partner organisations gained through previous relevant funded national and transnational youth projects that centred on young people's experiences of violence and abuse in Europe. As part of the project, groups of young people from three different countries (the UK, Greece and Cyprus) worked together in a collaborative manner in order to develop, with the help of a number of experts (including academics and researchers from the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology and social work, practitioners involved with youth support services, and game design and development experts) a Gamified e-learning tool.

In this project, an EU citizenship model was adopted, based on the participation of young people that recognises the importance of youth voice and non-formal learning. The emergence of childhood and youth studies since the late 1980s, together with the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, has brought about an unprecedented interest in child and youth participation in research. While participation may come in a variety of forms, from the mere soliciting of young people's views on a research topic to youth-led research projects where young people play a leading role in all stages of the research process, it is well-established that participation offers clear advantages to young people, the production of new knowledge, and society at large (Fraser *et al.*, 2004; Kirby, 1999). Yet still, the youth-

participation movement cannot stand still and should strive to reflect the times in which we live. For instance, research and policy addressing the needs of digitalised youth falls behind general youth participatory practices. Led by the previous Children's Commissioner for England, there is now growing momentum internationally to bring the UNCRC up to date by recognising and addressing children's digital rights (see Livingstone *et al.*, 2017).

In this project, not only are young people's rights as citizens acknowledged, respected and safeguarded through their participation in research, but their perspectives are made visible and integrated into the research knowledge produced as part of a democratic process (see especially Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). Likewise, young people's participation often leads to more valid research findings that are attuned to the realities of young people's lives, while youth-led research is often more likely to address power inequalities in research, given that it is young people themselves who are carrying out the research (Schafer and Yarwood, 2008). The young people who participated in the project explored their own solutions to neglect and abuse risks inherent within their daily lives, in their local communities, on the internet, and in their social media environments.

Methodological aspects of the project

The project was sponsored and approved by the European Commission, ethical approval was gained from the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education Research Ethics Panel at Anglia Ruskin University, European University Cyprus and SEERC Research Ethics Panels, and also Walsall County Safeguarding Board. We registered Anglia Ruskin's research ethics approval with our respective ethics bodies. Both the research and practice were iterative processes where we learnt as we went along. In practice, we produced young-people-friendly paperwork and co-designed learning sessions based on the principles of learning by doing. We also learnt how to reflect together and find solutions in monthly telecom meetings involving primarily the adult researchers. We discussed, debated and discovered new ways to involve the young co-creators in the co-design process in safe and meaningful ways.

The project fostered the service-learning approach, which is a method of teaching, learning and reflecting frequently used in youth work. As a teaching method, it falls under the philosophy of experiential education. More specifically, it integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, encourage lifelong civic engagement and strengthen communities for the common good. It also promotes active learning, which is a process whereby the young people co-create the learning environment. The co-

inquirers in our project engaged in activities such as role playing, reality playing, small groups and other introspective challenging activities that promote critical thinking. The cooperative learning experience was entertaining, with high returns in terms of recall for young people. Below, we describe the four stages we followed in our participatory approach.

Phase One prioritised the recruitment, training and support of the young co-inquirers. All the sites ran at least one learning session per month with a group of young co-inquirers (aged 15–24). The co-inquirers from the three countries were brought together at the project's first transnational meeting in Greece, where the young co-inquirers gained exposure to a range of participatory methods from experienced youth coaches. The meeting offered opportunities for the young co-inquirers to refine and practise the participatory methods they would later use to gather local knowledge. The young co-inquirers left the meeting with an increased understanding of the European context of abuse and neglect experienced by young people, and enhanced skills in the planning, running and recording of activity-based workshops aimed at children and young people. The young co-inquirers also had the opportunity to test out their initial thoughts and ideas on this substantive topic area, and received immediate feedback in a supportive environment from peers and adult practitioners/academics. In parallel, adult members of the team had the opportunity to network and share among themselves the latest safeguarding information/resources they had uncovered in their desk-top research, and cross-referenced the key issues to be included in the e-tool. They also agreed milestones for sharing work with the goal of harmonising the fieldwork in the development of the e-learning tool and guide. All of the groups had started to gather and share information on neglect and abuse by the end of Phase One. The young researchers then returned home in small groups, and led local workshops with groups of vulnerable young people to develop storylines and scenarios, based upon real situations and perceptions of accessing early routes to find support for neglect and abuse, with which to populate the game. The storylines were brought together into the game to allow users from across Europe to learn more about the different safeguarding systems in existence across the EU, and culturally specific issues in recognising, telling, and seeking help with neglect and abuse.

One of the main challenges of Phase One was to help young people from different cultural backgrounds, who speak different languages, to sit together in groups and cooperate to produce the first storylines. The use of two languages – Greek and English – was a considerable barrier for the young co-inquirers. The stories shared presented some difficulties in terms of understanding the issues and recognising unexpected behaviours. This was particularly prevalent when the UK group presented stories on child sexual exploitation, bullying, domestic abuse and neglect to the Greek group, who

had young people that had been displaced due to turmoil from countries from which they had arrived. This presented some anomalies in terms of responses from the groups, with the UK group wanting to be proactive and identify solutions, versus the Greek group not feeling the same – in essence, dealing with bullying and neglect. What was evident during the development of this work was that young people in the UK had greater exposure to the topic areas within schools, colleges and wider participation groups, from a theoretical base, while the young people from Greece had little understanding of the subject area due to the lack of exposure and varied background of the participants present. Also, there was a question of what was deemed as acceptable in terms of behaviours from the Greek and UK young people, particularly around cultural sensitivities, in relation to use of language. This challenge was overcome by pairing fluent bilingual youths with monolingual members of the same team, thus promoting a culture of collaboration, and monitoring and supervising the working teams through their respective leaders. The cultural differences challenged co-inquirers but in turn enriched the co-production process, creating greater opportunity to identify risk and protective factors to build into the scenarios modelled in the game. Boyle and Harris (2009) highlight the challenges to co-production, but argue that the key to reforming public services is to encourage users to design and deliver services in equal partnership with professionals.

Mutual respect and acceptance is not a given state of mind among people of different cultural backgrounds. The young co-inquirers were to some extent constrained by their local biographies, but were supported in developing cultural competence to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with other young people and adults across the multicultural team. Respect and acceptance were promoted by sharing personal experiences and providing fun bonding activities for the young co-inquirers. Five mixed working groups were formed, and each group had representatives of the three countries. The above two actions facilitated the necessary transnational cohesiveness for the game. It should be taken into consideration that many of the young researchers have themselves experienced abuse and neglect, and they have used their own personal experiences to inform the stories that were produced by each group. This was a liberating experience for many of them, but still a lot of effort was made to ensure that they did not reveal more than they felt comfortable with, and that they could withdraw from the group at any time. This concern was also built into the Gamified game, where the player has the option to press a 'panic button' and leave the scene of the game should they feel overwhelmed by the story content.

The ethical complexities of a participatory project where a number of the young participants might themselves have had direct experiences of violence or neglect should not be underestimated. The adult facilitators in the project had to ensure that the young

participants would be protected throughout the process from unintentional disclosures or the possibility of emotional trauma resulting from the recall of painful experiences. For example, we gave guidance on not reading project material late at night, provided local safe spaces to discuss ideas before sharing them with the larger group, and worked hard collaboratively with their carers, parents and organisations to ensure that a wrap-around support system was there for each young person. The benefits of drawing on participants' personal experiences had to be constantly checked against the possible negative consequences of doing so for their emotional well-being. This was in relation to young people sharing their own stories and the impact it had on them emotionally during group discussions, and allowing for young people to feel safe enough to share them with the wider group, with support from staff present as and when required. At the formation stage of the UK group, young people were asked to develop and agree a set of rules that would cover the sharing a sensitive information with others. The rules were something the group adhered to and recognised as an important feature in relation to the development of this work.

It is also worth mentioning that the young people came from diverse cultural settings, which had different understandings and practices about safeguarding. Thus, a substantial amount of time was spent during the first session to ensure that all young co-inquirers reached a consensus on basic concepts and terms used throughout the project. The cultural differences could merely be acknowledged and be considered as a factor in the design of the game. For instance, terms such as 'participation' or 'co-production' carried different cultural and linguistic meanings across the group, and had to be negotiated early on to allow for a fruitful and commonly shared trajectory for the project. Also, the graphic description of the characters and places young people would naturally go to seek help varied across the participating countries, and therefore commonsense comprises needed to be made. For instance, characters shared different ethnicities, gender and evolving storylines. The places young people can go to seek help was simplified to home, school and friends, a terrain which all the collaborators and users inhabit. We recognised, however, that the quest for cultural competence is a dimension of the game that needs further study in order to achieve a fully localised game for each respective country of the transnational team. An example of localisation in games is that a game that is set in the Second World War would have all swastika flags removed for the German version, as Nazi symbolism is banned in Germany. The subject of safeguarding also presented some difficulties in relation to young people's understanding, with the cultural backgrounds of the group also having an impact on exploring the subjects, that is, for some young people survival (being safe) was ultimately the key principle, with other issues being secondary.

The importance of respecting and accepting diversity in all its forms was also discussed. The past experience of the senior researchers was vital in designing activities that promoted interpersonal relationships in a friendly and accepting environment. Leisure activities were also built into the programme to help young researchers socialise outside the more official project environment. Given their diverse backgrounds, establishing common ground among the young participants was an ongoing process that required not only the encouragement of respect for difference, but also finding common or shared experiences and interests that allowed for cross-national collaboration.

Phase Two consisted of an interactive, fun and playful transnational meeting in Cyprus. The 'Make, Play and Do' meeting brought together the users, developers, designers and partners to play, wireframe and storyboard in order to visualise what they needed and wanted from the e-learning tool. The co-production of the game began at the meeting and continued on their return home. Feedback was continually shared to drive the game design. In order for the young researchers to effectively steer the direction and development of the game through the local workshops, teams acquired the need for structure, which reflects the game development process. All the teams consulted and tested features of the game with a mix of social workers, custody officers, general practitioners and other professional groups, as well as youth participation groups to ensure that storylines had validity, and also accurately reflected statutory policies and procedures.

The development of the game was not without its challenges, primarily due to the detail of the content. It was necessary to reduce the content in order to get the main points across, without losing the essence of the story. Young people had different ideas on solutions, which generated some debate among the groups. The UK being diverse and young people coming from different abilities and backgrounds, there was constant pressure on staff to take stock of the outcomes of the groups, ensuring that the group had a common understanding and that their views influenced the development of the work stream. The challenges of co-producing knowledge should not be underestimated. A careful balance needed to be struck in listening, synthesising and ejecting information, and keeping everyone on board with how ideas and solutions were adapted and perhaps reworded to fit the needs of a European audience. The emerging ideas for the e-learning tool were brought to the attention of relevant child-safeguarding boards and/or the ministries responsible for children and young people's welfare in each country to gain professional input and endorsement. Between the two phases, an alpha of the game was developed.ⁱ In game development, a project goes through this process:

- Alpha: first playable version, story outlined, core featured implemented
- Beta: functionally complete, most features implemented, ready for the main bulk of testing

- Gold Master/Release: feature complete, all issues and development complete, ready for release

An abstract story model was built by researching the patterns presented in the set of stories created in the first phase, and the first stories to be 'played' were implemented in the game. The player had to choose the main character from several options with different life background stories, all with some episodes connected with neglect and abuse. The gameplay consists of exploring a town space and interacting with characters (family, friends, social workers) and institutions (social services, schools) in the context of a running story that makes the player react to problematic situations.

In Phase Three, a beta version of the game was created and rolled out to be trialled and tested with the inclusion of a 'how-to' guide. Each team encouraged groups of children and young people in their locality to trial the game and feedback their recommendations for improvement. Walsall Council led on the adaptation of the assessment guide originally developed in a separate project to accurately capture children's and young people's views of the game. In Phase Four, a showcase event was organised in London and Greece to launch the e-learning tool and guide. Key stakeholders were invited, and learnt about the background and development of the game, and were given plenty of time to test it out and provide feedback. Young researchers were also presented with the Open College Network qualifications they had earned through their active participation in this project.

To summarise, research conducted with young people questions traditional methodological premises by challenging the relationship between the young person and the researcher. This impacts on power relationships, as the target of research (the young person) becomes a collaborator in the research process. Collaborating with young people challenges the researcher's status as the expert in charge of administering the research process. The researcher's task is to share their expertise with young people and professionals. In joint production of knowledge, both young people and adults contribute to the collection and analysis of research data (Törrönen and Vornanen, 2014). This type of research undermines the construction of a 'monopoly of knowledge' on the traditionally exclusive basis of adult- and researcher-centred approaches. The collection and analysis of research data are the result of collaborative action, rather than the accomplishments of a single researcher or research team. Young people's participation also supports and reinforces the research methodology by ensuring that the target of the study is actively involved in empirical research (Faulkner, 2010).

Unpacking the complexity of digital research and creation of digital context for young people

The young researchers provided the stories for the Gamified e-tool, and this was very useful in conceptualising potentially dangerous circumstances that cannot be easily identified by senior researchers who have different experiences and understandings of safeguarding. For example, there is extensive reference in the game to social media and online dangers that are more pertinent to the specific age group. Such age-relevant stories might not have been included in the game had young people not been involved in all the stages of the project. The young researchers helped to develop the language and expressions used in the game that are most appropriate to their age and culture, making the tool more realistic and culturally sensitive. They provided extensive feedback on the characters (age, gender, appearance, role in the game), the plots and the different options that are presented to them (for example, at the points that players have to make a choice, there may be a separate option asking them if there is something else that they would choose that is not offered as a built-in option by the game), and the layout for the whole game. Pleasingly, there was also a large amount of positive, detailed feedback provided even for cosmetic things, such as the background music, the font of the letters or the time that elapses between stories. This is demonstrative of the genuine interest in the development of the game shown by the young people, and is greatly attributable to the ownership given to them.

One of the main concerns of all the people who were involved in designing the specific tool was to ensure that the 'how-to' guide does not serve simply as a manual with instructions for the game. Therefore, a section has been included that refers to the support that should be offered to users at different stages and what we should take into consideration. The support provided to young people who play the game should be the following:

- When they start to play the game, they will be informed that they may view something that disturbs and upsets them, or makes them feel uncomfortable. This is not self-evident since most games are designed to help young people relax and not to inform them about something as important as safeguarding.
- It should also be taken into consideration that some young people may not recognise that they are exposed to abuse and neglect in their everyday lives. Therefore, it was important to build into the game features that allow them to refrain from the game and take them directly to appropriate resources to deal with abuse and neglect. It is one of the main reasons why it is advisable to use this game with bigger groups as an educational tool, or with the presence of a social worker or another mental health professional.
- Playing the game will show the young people some ways to talk about their own experiences of abuse or neglect, or the experiences of people they know (for example, parents, siblings, friends, classmates). It is important to understand that they should help others voice similar experiences or report such cases for them,

in order to become active ambassadors against abuse and neglect. This is essential in order to combat forms of violence (such as bullying) that are very common, have taken enormous dimensions, and are often taking place in front of others who do not know what to do. If we achieve this, it will make a difference in the lives of many young people.

- Through the game, the players will learn how to ask for help, and the game will include various resources that they can access no matter which part of the country they live in. Lay people tend to believe that this information is readily available to everyone in today's societies, but this is often not the case for children and young people who are exposed to, or experience, abuse and neglect. For this reason, the e-online tool can be accessed from any device and also played offline. This e-online tool can be extremely useful for young people who migrate to Europe. Although at the time we put together the proposal and got the funding, we did not have in mind the flow of refugees and immigrants to Europe, this online tool can cater for the safeguarding needs of these young people who were violently removed from their houses and found themselves in a very different cultural context.

It is important to consider that parents or carers can use this e-tool as a way to talk to their children/young people through the game about scenarios of abuse and neglect to which they are exposed. They can resort to the manual and the guidelines for some relevant information, and there may also be links to other relevant sources of information. If parents avoid talking to their children about safeguarding because they are not sure how to approach the topic and what kind of information to provide, this e-tool provides a service to help with this. Parents/carers are advised to play the game themselves in order to know better how to guide their children, and to be aware of the situations to which young people will be exposed.

However, since many families/carers may not be aware of the abuse or neglect that their children/young people have experienced, they may also experience shock. They will have to process the overwhelming news fairly quickly, and offer appropriate support to the young ones (which is something this online tool can help them with). This situation is even more demanding in cases where a relative or family friend/acquaintance is involved in the abuse or neglect. In any case, they may also need to access information on where they could ask for help for themselves, as well as for their children.

Last but not least, we should refer to social workers, teachers, therapists or other mental health professionals who are working with young people. They need to play the game first, so that they can understand its rationale and how it can be used to introduce young people to the concepts of abuse and neglect, to empower them to talk about their

own or others' experiences of abuse and neglect and where to look for help. Then, according to their own training, the context and the group of young people that they work with, they can choose how and when to introduce it. They can ask young people to play it as a group talking about the choices that they would make and where they believe these choices could lead them, and use the game as an interactive training platform.

In other cases, they may opt for an individualistic approach that will enable them to 'protect' young people and give them the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences. Given that the game is built mainly around three types of abuse, and that there is no direct reference to neglect, they may want to discuss with young people examples of neglect and how they could lead to abuse. The whole philosophy of the game and the 'how-to' guide is to provide a framework of contact support to all interested parties in the form of training them to recognise and talk about abuse and neglect, learning how to avoid it and where to ask for help.

Finally, it should be stressed that young people should not be led to believe that things are always as simple and straightforward as presented in the game format. Abuse and neglect may take on different forms that are occasionally supported by cultural or religious practices. Moreover, some young people may try to access the appropriate services and still fail to receive the support that they need. This is a delicate issue that we need to deal with, since we can never devise a game that can take into account all the different endings that a case of abuse or neglect may have in real life. Therefore, we should alert young people to the fact that this e-tool is meant to provide them with guidance on which are the most appropriate actions to take, and to help them understand that they always have a choice (even if it is the lesser of two evils).

Conclusion

Keep Me Safe in Europe is unique in its merging a video gameplay experience and feel with learning about neglect and abuse. The game was built from the start with a general multidimensional story model, so that it was possible to 'plug in' new stories that impacted the main characters' lives along different dimensions in positive or negative ways. The game was expanded twice during the project, but its story model remains open for further expansions. This results in a mediated and curated experience that can reach a wide audience, all in the context of a carefully safeguarded digital environment. Keep Me Safe in Europe is also widely accessible from browsers and devices, and has specific features to facilitate its usage in classes and for facilitating interactive discussions of the themes presented. Without collaborating with a range of young people, acting as co-inquirers throughout the duration of the project, comprised of

vulnerable groups to trainee social workers, the project could not have achieved the depth and quality that it has. Exposure to the project fostered cross-cultural dialogue and built resilience in young people's understanding of neglect and abuse from multifaceted positions. Providing good research skills training not only provided the young researchers with knowledge on how to stay safe, but also accountability in their decision-making and actions. Learners were awarded OCN Level 2 in Safeguarding, OCN Level 2 in Mentoring and the opportunity to achieve the Youth Pass. Good research-skills training allows young researchers to express themselves naturally, honestly and empirically. How young researchers then translate these skills and attributes into an ethical code of conduct depends upon how they are supported and steered. This project raises the profile of vulnerable young people as European citizens capable of knowing, understanding and responding to their own risks. The project framework enabled groups of vulnerable young people to provide insights about their own concerns and cultural context through a supportive mechanism that seeks to achieve voice, impact and improvement within social policy and social work environments. In that sense, we feel that the project and the participatory approach we followed provides a much-needed, sensitively informed tool for addressing young people's safeguarding needs while on the move in the rapidly changing social scene of Europe.

The web site for the game is here:

<http://kmse.open-lab.com/>

The game can be played and downloaded from here:

<http://kmse.open-lab.com/play-the-game/>

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ⁱ Unity is a games engine that allows for multi-platform (Android, iOS, Playstation, Xbox, PC, Mac) development without additional services or applications. It is easy to use across all disciplines due to its use of standard GUI techniques and naming conventions, without sacrificing versatility, and even allows for easy expansion/augmentation by the development team. Unity uses C#, a common programming language across app and game development, allowing for new coders (whether new to the company or new to the project) to easily understand the code base and immediately integrate into the team and work processes