

A Genuine 'Miteinander': On Becoming a Team in an International Virtual Simulation Game

Ein echtes Miteinander: Erkenntnisse aus einem internationalen virtuellen Planspiel

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Abstract (English)

Megacities is a simulation game which uses the Internet as a transnational virtual space for developing intercultural competence, thereby fostering intercultural dialogue. The experience of over a hundred people of several nationalities in this simulation game is at the core of this study, which aims to understand how individuals succeed in creating a genuine 'Miteinander' despite language barriers, the constraints of virtual communication, and expected cultural differences. 'Miteinander' is a German word which combines the concept of collaboration with that of cohesion. The introduction of this term allows us to further clarify the focus of this investigation, which aims to observe how a diverse group becomes a team in an online environment. This study is a qualitative one and its corpus is composed of reflection sheets in which participants share the feelings, thoughts and perceptions they had before, during, and after their experience in the game Megacities. The analysis of the data revealed that participants had similar fears and perceptions, despite their diversity. Out of their reflections, an interplay of factors related to individual, social, and technical-organizational dimensions emerges. Two factors which have a particularly high impact on the process of building trust and creating culture are looked at in depth in this paper: language and the virtual setting of communication.

Keywords: virtual teams, intercultural collaboration, diversity, game-based learning, lingua franca

Abstract (Deutsch)

Megacities ist ein Planspiel, das das Internet als transnationalen virtuellen Raum nutzt, um interkulturelle Kompetenz sowie interkulturellen Dialog zu fördern. Erfahrungen von über hundert Teilnehmenden unterschiedlicher Nationalitäten, die an diesem Planspiel teilgenommen haben, stehen im Mittelpunkt dieser Studie. Ziel ist es zu verstehen, wie es trotz Sprachbarrieren, Virtualität und erwarteter kultureller Unterschiede gelingt, ein echtes 'Miteinander' zu schaffen: Wie wird eine internationale Gruppe in einer Online-Umgebung zu einem Team? Bei dieser Studie handelt es sich um eine qualitative Studie, deren Korpus aus Reflexionsbögen besteht, in denen die Teilnehmenden ihre Wahrnehmungen, Gedanken und Gefühle vor, während und nach ihrer Erfahrung in Megacities mitteilten. Die Analyse der Daten ergab, dass die Teilnehmenden trotz ihrer Verschiedenheit ähnliche Gefühle und Wahrnehmungen hatten. Aus ihren Reflexionen geht ein Zusammenspiel von Faktoren hervor, die sich auf eine individuelle, eine soziale und eine technisch-organisatorische Dimension beziehen. Zwei Faktoren, die besonders großen Einfluss auf den Prozess der Vertrauensbildung und der Entstehung einer gemeinsamen Kultur haben, werden in diesem Beitrag näher beleuchtet: Sprache und Virtualität.

Schlüsselwörter: virtuelle Teams, interkulturelle Zusammenarbeit, Diversity, game-based learning, Lingua franca

1. Introduction

The German word ‘Miteinander’ [ˌmɪtɪʔaɪˈnandɐ]¹ expresses a multifaceted concept, not easily translatable into other languages. When used as an adverb it simply means ‘together’, but when used as a noun (due to the linguistic process of nominalization), it describes a state of being in which the persons that have come together establish a real connection, while pulling together in order to achieve a common goal. It thus has similar connotations to the English word ‘collaboration’, as “united labour, co-operation” (OED online 2021), though it also evokes the concepts of “commonality, community, solidarity, cohesion” (Duden 2021).² This term is therefore useful because it interweaves practices related to collaboration with the emotional dimension underlying it. In this article, we report on the experiences of international teams formed within the context of the simulation game *Megacities* (Bolten 2015a) in the course of 2021. Through the analysis of the reflections participants shared with us, we seek to understand under what conditions a real ‘Miteinander’ among people with different backgrounds and first languages can emerge online. This question allows us to reflect upon the factors which favour and hinder collaboration among people primarily socialized in different countries, considering the specific opportunities and challenges linked to the virtual dimension. This knowledge is relevant as it allows us to explore the Internet as a medium through which geographical distances are cancelled and a global community emerges, fostering connection and the pursuit of common goals. The simulation game *Megacities* was developed by Jürgen Bolten to enhance the intercultural competence of students preparing for the challenges of “New Work” (Hackl et al. 2017) in a society characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity

(Bolten / Berhault 2018:105). Thus, in addition to the competences required by team members in the establishment of a ‘Miteinander’, we examine the conditions of the collaboration setting in order to gain an understanding of what must be considered to make the emergence of a ‘Miteinander’ possible at all.

Even though the game *Megacities* represents a framework for simulated virtual international collaboration, the experience mirrors real team work to a great extent due to the strategic design of the game. The main advantage of choosing this setting for our study may be seen in the enabling of the comparison of data emerging from different groups, playing the same game.

The article is structured as follows: In section 2, we present a brief overview of studies on trust, (inter)culturality, language use, and their connection to the question of ‘cohesion’. In section 3, we outline our data and methods. Section 4 describes the most relevant findings arising from the analysis of reflection reports, written by game participants. In section 5, we discuss our findings. Section 6 presents our concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

The web represents a networked “global village” (McLuhan 1962) in which users are *equally close* to each other, as geographical boundaries are only partially noticeable or relevant. More than twenty years ago Castells (2001:138) described the Internet as a space for community building, as users retain the possibility to actively participate and interact with each other, notwithstanding their location. However, in order for community building to take place, three main challenges in the context of international teams need to be discussed: how actors build trust, create culture, and develop social cohesion through language.

2.1 Building Trust

Trust embodies a type of credit within the framework of an interpersonal relationship (Petermann 1996:120) and enables uncertainty and risk – inherent to every relationship – to be bridged. Trust is a *condition* and at the same time a *product* of interaction, as it develops via a dynamic of reciprocity (Stegbauer 2002). Trust is, at the very beginning of a relationship, a “swift-trust” (Meyerson et al. 1996:167), which may be withdrawn in the process of interaction or develop over time, out of shared experiences, by building a common basis of familiarity and the awareness that it is possible to rely on each other (Meyerson et al. 1996:167). Trust development has (a) a cognitive side, as it is based on evidence which legitimates it and (b) an emotional side, since it implies the emergence of a relationship which becomes over time itself a guarantee, in the sense that a violation of trust threatens to bring emotional pain to all those involved (Lewis / Weigert 1985:970f).

Trust has therefore a complexity-reducing effect because it enables many possible but not probable scenarios to be ignored. With the help of trust, it is possible to act “as if the future were certain”³ (Luhmann 1979:10). The degree of trust between team members influences their willingness to put themselves in a vulnerable position and therefore to engage in interdependent actions (Lin et al. 2009, Maurer 2010). A trusting relationship usually attracts a more open, fluid, unfiltered communication with “fewer dysfunctional sequences” (Graeff 1998:68), which leads to greater satisfaction on the part of the interaction partners (Schweer / Thies 2003:77). Trust therefore has a positive influence on, for example, knowledge sharing (Wiewiora et al. 2014), creativity (Barczak et al. 2010), and team performance (DeOrtentiis et al. 2013).

Trust seems to be more difficult to develop online, even if it remains

possible to achieve the perception of closeness without being physically together (Mason / Carr 2021:13f). In relation to virtual teams, Albrecht and Albrecht-Goepfert (2012) show that a basis of trust is linked to a sense of belonging and commitment and that these often do not develop in virtual teams. The main reason is the difficulty in building a personal relationship in the absence of physical proximity. Numerous authors (e.g. Ferrell / Kline 2018) show how important it is to consciously set in motion processes which help members to build personal relationships, for example by using rich media such as videocalls, especially at the beginning of virtual collaboration (Antoni / Syrek 2017:255), by planning moments during online meetings for off-topic conversations and personal exchanges (Geister / Hertel 2005; Olson / Olson 2006) or by engaging in rituals and instances of celebration together (Dhawan / Chamorro-Premuzic 2018). Teams which do not have the chance to build trust may act initially as though there were a trust-relationship, though this “swift-trust” (Meyerson et al. 1996:184ff) can be quickly withdrawn in the process.

2.2 Creating Culture

In the previous sections, we have referred to virtual *teams*. In the existent literature, teams are usually referred to when groups of people work together in some capacity. However, are all virtual work groups *teams*? The distinction that some scholars draw between a team and a group is useful here in differentiation of the degree of cohesion of a group, defined as the degree to which a team is united in attempting to achieve its goals together (Carron 1982), or in addition as the degree of togetherness and the value they give to their relationship (Cook et al. 2013), or indeed even the commitment of the team members to their common tasks and to each other (Mathieu et al. 2008). As numerous factors flow into it, cohesion is instantiated as an “overall group process” (LePine et al. 2008).

According to the definition of Miebach (2017:251f), teams are working groups which go beyond co-operation: they experience cohesive collaboration, what we would call a genuine 'Miteinander'. While working groups aim to create a *synthesis* of the individual contributions of its members, team members work 'Miteinander'⁴ i.e. together, permitting *synergy* to emerge. Thus, the fact that a group of people may be considered a team, as they must collaborate, doesn't necessarily mean that team members really succeed in creating a 'Miteinander'. Indeed, cohesion itself must first emerge through the interactions of the team members before it becomes a factor influencing them (McEwan / Beauchamp 2014).

In order for it to emerge, cohesion implies the participation of team members, as it is through such participation that collaboration can take place and synergy develop. As every team is heterogeneous, collaboration is first of all a negotiation of meanings, a space which Bolten (2015b) would say is characterized by interculturality, that is, uncertainty and unfamiliarity. However, at the moment in which multiplicity becomes familiar and the team has developed routine practices, *interculturality* is transformed into *culturality* (Bolten 2015b, Stang / Zhao 2020:34). Team members build up a common culture mostly unconsciously through their individual actions and interpersonal interactions. Considering that cultures are constantly evolving (Bolten 2015b), we can state that the transition from interculturality to culturality takes place throughout the life of a team. Thus, referring to Tuckman's classical model of group development (1965), this happens in particular during the forming, storming, and norming phases.⁵ International and transnational virtual teams face further challenges: digital constraints and the related need for digital competence as well as the challenges linked to the presence of different time-zones, first-languages,

cultural styles, etc. (Bolten / Berhault 2018). Both the *VUCA-competences*, i.e. the ability to trust, connect, open, adapt, and participate in a complex context, and *intercultural competence* (as defined by Bolten 2007), i.e. the ability to act in an adequate way despite unfamiliarity and ambiguity, are necessary for dealing with existing constraints in a constructive and proactive manner.

2.3 Creating and Challenging Cohesion through Language

Since language is closely related to identity, the matter of what language is spoken in international groups can have a great impact on how (much) prospective participants engage, and how they interact with each other over the course of a conversation. In these contexts, participants might use their first language(s), or opt for the use of a lingua franca.

Rogerson-Revell (2007:103) explains that the development of lingua francas is historically linked to international trade. Thus, the use of a lingua franca in the context of international dealings is not a new phenomenon. Nowadays, English is, more often than not, the language chosen in such scenarios. In fact, the term 'English as a lingua franca' may be used to refer to (1) the use of the English language in situations in which speakers do not share a first language and choose English as the medium of communication, and (2) the field of studies whose focus lies on the language described in (1). The area of studies of English as a lingua franca (ELF) was born out of a need to reconceptualize the English language spoken by so-called 'non-native speakers'. This reconceptualization leaned on the contestation of the traditional view of non-native English as a deviant and flawed language, even in situations in which it was employed successfully and effectively. In this vein, ELF scholars claim legitimacy for uses of English as a second and foreign language (see Seidlhofer

2001) in varied contexts, such as in academic (Mauranen 2007) and business settings (Louhiala-Salminen / Kankaanranta 2011, Mendes de Oliveira forthcoming).

Kecskes (2019) makes the case that a characteristic of lingua franca communication is the relative lack of linguistic common ground between speakers. This absence of common ground can refer to unfamiliarity with other speakers' vocabulary, accent, and communicative routines. Because of this lack of a common basis, an important characteristic of ELF communication – and, indeed, lingua franca communication in general – is the array of communication strategies (CSs) employed by its users in an attempt to build common ground with their interlocutors (Kecskes 2019). Björkman (2014) argues that CSs are resources utilized by speakers in ELF situations to deal with different types of asymmetries, such as accents, asymmetric levels of proficiency, and differing cultural frames. Björkman (2014:124) explains that

“with their strong orientation to mutual comprehensibility and preparedness for different asymmetries, speakers in ELF settings seem to do ‘pro-active work’ to ensure communicative effectiveness (Mauranen 2007) and use a variety of strategies ‘to both pre-empt and resolve’ communicative turbulence (Kaur 2010, 2011) (see also Björkman 2011). In fact, this ‘preparedness for what might go wrong’ can be regarded as one of the characteristics of ELF interactions”.

Thus, the linguistic processes connected to lingua franca communication may potentially lead to the creation of common ground in international teams. Hence, it seems appropriate to argue that, also from the broader point of view of communication, language choice contributes to – or hinders – cohesion in such teams. The very status positions of ‘native’ or ‘non-native speakers’ lead to the legitimation of the former as personal authorities in terms of language use. Citing Bernstein

(1971:154), van Leeuwen (2007:94) explains that, in cases of legitimation connected to the existence of a personal authority conceived in such a way, “judgements are a function of the status of the member” and “disputes are settled by the relative power inhering in the respective statuses”. In this connection, Stang and Zhao (2020:30) also found that “language and linguistic power imbalances” can be a source of tension and “influence the flow of information and team satisfaction”.

3. Methodology

The research design of our study centres on the experiences of 118 students of a number of different nationalities during their participation in the simulation game Megacities. We will here firstly present the specifics of the simulation game we chose, then describe the contexts of data collection, and finally explain what data are contained in our corpus and how they were analyzed.

3.1 The Simulation Game Megacities

Megacities (Bolten 2015a) is a simulation game and a learning experience that is of course ‘artificial’ and simulated but resembles reality. It allows students to develop skills through solving tasks in a setting in which they do not act out roles but are in fact themselves: they cope with the reality created through fiction. The game has the following setting: a wealthy senior citizen owns a rather large piece of land that lies between three neighbouring cities. The citizen decides to donate the so-called wasteland to the neighbouring cities provided that they succeed in creating a holistic concept for the area, via which all cities may benefit equally. At the beginning of the game the players are divided into three groups, usually on the basis of the institution they are part of. All groups receive a basic description of the three cities and must choose one. Before starting to work with each other towards the creation of a common concept, every

group must focus on their own city, making it their own and building a degree of identification with it. Various tasks related to the individual cities, as well as to the wasteland, are given to the players throughout the game: this leads them to work in different constellations towards developing a successful concept and finishing the game.

The game is organized as a set of four to five sessions. Each virtual encounter lasts two to three hours. The tasks require players to work closely together: collaborative teamwork as well as a readiness to deal constructively with unfamiliar, intercultural situations are important competences for concluding the game. The players are required to develop, reflect upon, and ‘try out’ their own approaches to dealing professionally with uncertainty, foreign/multilingual contexts, and unfamiliar patterns of thought and action.

3.2 Our Games and Our Teams

We collected data from five parallel games, which the three authors organized separately. In the following table, we present specific information about each game:

	Game 1	Game 2	Game 3	Game 4	Game 5
Moderator	Author 1	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3	Author 3
Language	English (all lingua franca speakers)	German (majority of native speakers)	English (majority of lingua franca speakers)	English (all lingua franca speakers)	German (majority of lingua franca speakers)
Number of participants	14	15	38	21	33
Online tools	Zoom, Dropbox, Whatsapp, Canvas	Zoom, Google drive, Google doc, padlet, Whatsapp	Zoom, Conceptboard, WhatsApp	Zoom, Miro, Padlet, Glocal Campus, Wonder.me, Whatsapp	Zoom, Miro, Glocal Campus, Wonder.me, Whatsapp
Time frame	May-June 2021	May-June 2021	May-June 2021	March-May 2021	March-April 2021
Focus of theoretical input in the game	Intercultural Communication	Intercultural Communication	English as a Lingua Franca	Intercultural virtual collaboration	Intercultural virtual collaboration

3.3 Data & Data Analysis

We observed interactions while the game sessions were taking place and also video-recorded the same interactions; in this study however we limit the corpus to the reflection sheets that the participants submitted at the end of their experience in Megacities. This decision was taken in order to maximize the value of the internal view of the participants, and to provide space for the aspects relevant to the research question from *their* point of view. During and after the simulation game, in debriefings, the players had the possibility to reflect individually and collectively on the team-process they were experiencing.⁶ These reflections flowed into the written reflection sheets, a form with open-ended questions either in German or English. The response rate varied in the five groups between 73% and 100%. In order to analyze our corpus, we followed the principles of inductive qualitative analysis, which lean on “detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data” (Thomas 2006:238).

The analytical steps can be described as follows: (1) the preparation of raw data files; (2) the close reading of text; (3) the creation of categories or themes; (4) the reduction of overlap and redundancy among categories; (5) and the creation of a model incorporating the most important categories (Thomas 2006:241f).

In the next chapter, we present the data, using several quotes by anonymized participants of all five games. We reproduce the quotes as written by participants and refrain from correcting grammatical or typographical mistakes, except when these are translated.

4. Findings

Analyzing the corpus, we identified four principal stages which the participants of the online simulation game underwent. In section 4.1 we describe the issues mentioned by participants in relation to these stages. The analytical categories we have identified are illustrated by selected quotes. In section 4.2, we focus on two specific factors which are shown to have had a strong impact on the process of creating a 'Miteinander', namely language and the virtual context. In that section, quotes are used to illustrate our analytical reflections and conclusions.

4.1 Creating Culture, Becoming a Team

In the reflection sheets, participants referred to their thoughts and feelings before the start of the game (*phase 1*) and compared them with the reality they experienced. Furthermore, they observed the transformation of the group dynamics (*phases 2 and 3*) and reflected upon the whole experience after the game concluded (*phase 4*).

4.1.1 Phase 1: Before the Game

This is the phase in which participants get inwardly prepared for the experiences which they are about to undergo, imagining what will be involved. The associations their minds set in motion, while going through the

information they have at their disposal, lead to expectations for themselves and others. These expectations, in turn, trigger feelings of excitement and fear. Excerpts from the corpus highlight the existence of anxiety in relation to:

- the virtual setting: *"It is of course a bit disconcerting to meet other people virtually and not in person"* (G2P1);
- the presence of people primarily socialized in other countries: *"My team [...] thought that it could be difficult to find a harmonic way of working together because of language barriers or different cultural backgrounds"* (G1P4);
- the need to engage with strangers: *"I was very sceptical about how much I would contribute, because I didn't know my team members and of course the others from the other cities. I thought I would withdraw as far as possible and not participate in the conversations"* (G2P10);
- the perception others will have of oneself: *"When a higher amount of people is involved, I feel more judged"* (G3P12);
- their own ability to cope with the upcoming challenges: *"I felt like I didn't have the right background or knowledge to handle everything"* (G3P5).

4.1.2 Phase 2: The Start as a Group

This phase starts at the moment in which the members of the group come together. They know they must relate to each other in order to solve the tasks they receive as a group. Communication, though, is an act which implies trust in others. We found that it is challenging to have this trust if the persons involved do not already know each other, as they do not know whether the others will misuse this trust, for example by judging them. Some people are more cautious than others, although the data show also that perceiving others as friendly and open makes it easier for all to place trust in the group and, therefore, to open up and become involved:

"The trust was strangely there from the beginning, we were very open to each

other and had a lot of fun getting to know each other and introducing ourselves. By giving each other space and especially leeway for any opinion, we were able to make sure that no one felt excluded or pressured. By doing this, we tried to keep the fun in the process. We think that the fun is the most important thing, because this way we could also make sure that we could build up the trust". (G2P1)

On the contrary, feeling ignored or excluded, facing unfriendly or stubborn attitudes, as well as being trapped in awkward silence decrease the feeling of reciprocal trust and demotivate people to engage: "I can also imagine that because of the one team member, some lost interest or were put off". (G1P3)

4.1.3 Phase 3: Becoming a Team

In this phase, a group becomes a team through the creation of its own culture, which is shaped through the actions of the people involved. The more time people spend with each other, the more familiar they become with one another and the entire context: "It was impressive how the dynamics changed/ developed and the communication got better, the more time we spent together". (G3P14)

The analysis of the corpus shows that trust and familiarity are reciprocal, with trust being a condition for building familiarity, and familiarity being a basis for the strengthening of trust. Indeed, the occurrence of positive interactions favours the flourishing of a pool of trust on which group members can rely to build up their collaboration:

"Through team measures, we built up trust within the group beforehand, which allowed us to have a team dynamic where everyone could speak freely without feeling ashamed. We had open conversations and supported each other in working on the tasks. Overall, we have developed from a group into a team". (G2P3)

Feeling safe fosters the willingness to engage with others who are in principle different from us and accomplish a common goal. It is, therefore, a

precondition for the creation of synergies: "I believe that the differences that we all bring to the table are the bedrock for change and development". (G3P11)

4.1.4 Phase 4: After the Game

In this phase, the participants receive the chance to reflect upon their experience and its impact on themselves. The corpus shows a tendency to compare the experienced reality with initial expectations and fears. This gap is indeed where a large degree of the learning resides. The most frequently observed discrepancies are the following:

- The expected difference between national groups, imagined beforehand as an obstacle to collaboration, was not there:

"But the interesting thing for me personally was that it was always easier to find a common ground with others than we thought. Although we all had different nationalities, we can say that we had rather similar ideas. In fact, what shaped our cultures was something beyond where we were born and our families". (G1P1)

Instead, individual differences were often emphasized and evaluated as enriching: "Generally the result was that everyone is different, which leads to different knowledges and characteristics which in turn can lead to good results when combining more of them in a team project". (G1P4)

- Negative predictions about their own performance, which were related to a setting envisioned as adverse, did not fulfil themselves. Instead, many participants realized how much their performance depends on the setting and estimated that the positive context favoured their self-confidence:

"I was the most afraid of interacting with other people. I am normally very shy and find it super hard to speak in front of people I don't know [...]. But at the end of the megacities game it got a lot easier for me, everyone was so nice and open. And the atmosphere was just really relaxed

so that I didn't feel as much pressure as I usually feel when doing this sort of thing". (G2P1)

In general, the game has been described as an experience which allowed students to:

- strengthen their dialogic attitude:
"I am generally reserved in large groups and do not like to express my opinion very much. But I have learned that it is not important whether what I say is right or wrong, but that if you participate and communicate with other people, you will learn if you are right in your opinion and if not, you will learn the right thing from other team members, but if you hold back and do not say anything, you will never know what is right [...]. I learned if you are friendly and open with other people, they will be open and friendly with you". (G1P7)

- become aware of pre-assumptions and discrimination in international settings and take action against them:
"Often people are simply attributed certain behaviors of certain nations, although you do not know the person and perhaps this person does not even identify with this nation or culture. Probably these prejudices often appear in connection with the appearance of a person. This also allowed me to feel and learn what stereotyping can trigger in a person. That people feel excluded by it and partly also offended, but also that one automatically withdraws and behaves away from the person". (G2P10)

- be empowered and understand how important it is to get involved and express their own opinion:
"I really came out of my shell. I voiced my opinion and I stood up for it. I learned to be open, to speak frankly and to express my feelings without any remorse. I have not only acquired this characteristic as a competence for teamwork, but also as a personal development". (G2P5)

- reflect upon the disempowering impact of racism on an individual. In this respect, a Person of Colour writes:
"I think that I learned that my ideas do deserve to take up space even if there is a time limit for a task and I do not want

to interrupt the discussion. I think that this experience made me realize that my form of non-evasive communication is probably based on historical and cultural conditions that have been handed on to me". (G3P11)

4.2 Dealing with the Challenges Linked to Language and the Virtual Context

Participants' statements made evident the impact of language use on the participation patterns they experienced throughout all phases of the game. The same can be said about the influence of the virtual environment on their perception of the game interactions. Both of these factors will be examined in more detail below.

4.2.1 The Impact of Language on Creating a 'Miteinander'

Several comments in the written reports show that many participants experienced the issue of language choice as impacting the dynamics of collaboration in the game. This impact is sometimes felt on an individual level, with participants expressing emotions resulting from language choices within the group. On a collective level, we found that the choice of a certain language can reinforce informal hierarchies within the group. Besides, students also reported differences in group dynamics and participation patterns relative to the language adopted in the game. In the following each of these aspects are described and illustrated using a number of examples.

4.2.1.1 Individual Feelings

With respect to the feelings experienced by participants during the game, many of them reported that the act of not speaking their first language was associated with leaving their comfort zone, due to lack of fluency, limited vocabulary, etc. More specifically, they refer to feelings of embarrassment, anger, and uncertainty, as in:

“Participating in the simulation was a challenge for me because first of all I had to leave my comfort zone in terms of speaking in German.”⁷ (G5P14); “During the meeting today, I was pretty annoyed and confused because I couldn’t understand everything that was being said”.⁸ (G2P7)

Interestingly, a student connected the feeling of embarrassment with learning: *“I think the situations where I learned / grew the most were when I was embarrassed and had to find my own solution to the language barrier”.⁹ (G2P8)*

Other participants decided to focus on the characteristics of collaborative work in a lingua-franca scenario that made up for their perceived lack of fluency: *“Even if we didn’t know some words our teammates helped us to find the right words and even if not we understood each other anyway”.* (G1P5)

4.2.1.2 The Collective Level of Collaboration and Hierarchies

In relation to comments that address the impact of language on the collective level of game collaboration, some students who used their first language recognized the privilege associated with it: *“I noticed that the participants were a bit more reserved, probably because they didn’t speak German as well as we did and because they were a minority”.* (G2P1)

The choice of a language that is a native language for some and a non-native language for others can potentially establish some hierarchies, which, at first sight, are not necessarily seen negatively by participants, as exemplified by the following excerpt: *“The opinion of the German group was very helpful here, as German is their native language, and it was easier for us to work on possible mistakes in the reception of the given sentences. The German group explained to us how they perceived the sentences and what could be improved to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. I thought it was very*

cool because I was able to learn something new, like why a word can’t be used in a certain context”.¹⁰ (G5P24)

Here, even though the participant shows positive feelings towards the German group, she positions her colleagues as ‘teachers’ holding knowledge of the language, which, as a result, positions herself and other non-native German speaking colleagues as ‘learners’. By contrast, some comments favour the use of English as a lingua franca because it puts participants on equal footing:

“When everyone are non-native speakers, this gives me a feeling that everyone is standing at the same starting point. I don’t need to feel constrained because the other people is a native speaker. When I say a sentence with grammatical mistakes or when I use the wrong words, I don’t feel too nervous, so I feel more free and willing to express my idea, instead of having to prepare all the vocabulary in advance and build a complete sentence in my head first”. (G3P22)

4.2.1.3 Group Dynamics and Participation Patterns

Finally, other comments addressed certain types of group dynamics and participation patterns due to the language used in the game. Some students, for example, reported behaving more passively:

“[...] because of the different language levels, it is worth mentioning that the native language group is often unaware of the challenges faced by the representatives of the groups learning German. Sometimes the pace of speaking and working was too fast for the learner, which made me passive”.¹¹ (G5P23)

Interestingly, in a group of Chinese and German participants who had taken several courses together before the game and had participated in university courses in the German language, the following descriptions, which highlight the fact that language can be a strong factor influencing participation patterns, were made by a German and a Chinese student, respectively:

“Within the first two semesters of our studies, I already realized in several courses that some of my fellow Chinese students have some difficulties with speaking German and sometimes do not seem to feel comfortable participating in discussions in German[...]. Although there have been some initial difficulties in this course as well, I had the feeling that only talking in English in this course has helped more Chinese students to take an active part in the conversations and to openly involve in discussions. Obviously, this may be caused by a variety of reasons, but I assume that it might be related to the fact that none or only a few of the students spoke in their mother tongue. This on the one hand creates more equality in terms of the language proficiency level which lowers the barriers of participation. On the other hand, all students have equally been more eager to paraphrase complicated terms and vocabulary due to a lack of specialized terminology and to express thoughts in an easily understandable way”. (G3P24)

“I think many other Chinese students will have similar experiences to me. We Chinese students can be more relaxed in English-based courses and are more willing to try to participate in the discussions in the course. I have observed that many of my close friends (Chinese student) do not participate in the discussion during the German-based course”. (G3P35)

4.2.2 The Impact of the Virtual Context on Creating a ‘Miteinander’

Our data show that virtual collaboration brings both benefits and challenges for creating a genuine ‘Miteinander’, which we describe below. As well as this, we were able to identify strategies that participants used to deal with those challenges.

4.2.2.1 Benefits of Virtual Collaboration

Reports on the benefits of virtual collaboration mostly referred to the impact of online tools on the communicative processes in the teams.

Participants particularly emphasized the benefit of online tools that enable written communication such as online surveys, chat, instant messaging services and collaborative platforms such as Padlet, Miro and Conceptboard. From the perspective of the study participants, these tools enabled everyone’s involvement despite language barriers and insecurities to convey their opinions and ideas in the written format. An example is the following statement: *“I think that using polls and the chat was good for a lot of people who were too shy to participate orally!”* (G4P12)

Furthermore, participants reported being impressed by how well the combination of a wide variety of tools can impact the process of communication and promote creativity: *“Working with Conceptboard was an interesting experience because I liked how one can be creative while visualizing certain aspects”* (G3P8). Consequently, the choice of online tools affects the way people work together and the involvement of team members.

4.2.2.2 The Challenges of Virtual Collaboration

Unsurprising, but nevertheless of great importance, is the finding that virtual collaboration makes it more difficult for a group to become a team and for a genuine ‘Miteinander’ to emerge. Several participants of all groups emphasized that creating a sense of community during the online collaboration was rather challenging. The main reasons for this difficulty are explained below.

Lack of possibilities for informal interaction

As mentioned in 4.1, before the first virtual meeting, some participants were both excited and anxious about meeting and working together. These emotions were reinforced by the fact that they would not meet in person but only virtually. Even if after the first meeting these anxieties subsided, the fact that all interaction took place solely on the

virtual dimension was still perceived as a hurdle by many participants, mainly due to the lack of time for informal exchange and, consequently, for building more expansive relationships. Indeed, during the work phases, there was time pressure and small talk was not possible. Moreover, during the breaks, everyone used the time to move away from the computer and/or turned off the camera.

Turned-off cameras

In the corpus there are various references to the fact that not everyone had their camera on. Having the camera off was consistently interpreted as a deliberate lack of engagement and referred to as a decision *“to hide oneself behind its screen”* (G4P10), even if there could have been other reasons for this (e.g. low internet bandwidth or the presence of other people in the room who should not be shown on screen). Having the camera off was described as having a negative effect on collaboration: *“It was hard to talk to those who turned off their cameras”*.¹² (G5P9)

Group size

According to our results, group size seems to play a major role in virtual collaboration. This was identified in the reflection of all groups and is exemplified by this statement:

“I think that perhaps more people in the group, myself included, could have spoken up more and not been so intimidated by the size of the Zoom class. It is understandable in a sense that because the game sessions were held virtually, it is a little bit more difficult than if we had had the opportunity to meet in person”. (G3P1)

The smaller a group in virtual collaboration, the easier the team members rated the collaboration. They felt more at ease, found the collaboration more effective, and felt freer to take the initiative and express their opinions.

Technical problems

The flow of collaboration was sometimes disrupted by technical problems. When team members were not informed about technical difficulties that another participant was experiencing, it made cooperation harder: *“Often people had technical difficulties, but would not share that information, which resulted in longer waiting times on occasion”*. (G3P3)

4.2.2.3 Strategies

Promotion of relationship building

Our results show that the initial hurdles in virtual collaboration are greater than in face-to-face encounters but also that, once they are overcome, productive and effective collaboration can occur. To this end, it is important to specifically promote relationship building from the very beginning. In the context of the five different games considered in this study, the facilitators of the game as well as the participants themselves initiated the process of getting to know each other and took measures to foster relationships building throughout the game.

Many teams came up with the idea of using WhatsApp as an informal communication channel to network outside the official meetings, to support each other in the case of questions or problems, and also for quick and uncomplicated arrangements. In the corpus, we found various references to this practice which was evaluated positively: the participants benefited from it personally, and as a team. In one of the games, the participants could meet after the end of every session in a room created in Wonder.me, where they could freely join circles of people. In the corpus, there are some direct references to it e.g.: *“We also talked to each other on Wonderme, so we were also able to get to know each other better. [...] I noticed the others also had contact with others and (also) talked more after a few meetings”*.¹³ (G5P11)

The corpus shows that participants who were in groups in which there was not much space for informal interaction had a harder time feeling comfortable with each other: *“I would wish that more was done, that a pleasant climate was established and that everyone felt appreciated”*.¹⁴ (G2P15)

Facilitation

In order to overcome the challenges linked to the virtual setting, adequate facilitation of the process is particularly important. In the corpus, participants refer more specifically to three main aspects related to facilitation:

- The choice of tools which support communication and collaboration (see above);
- The emotional support of the facilitators: *“The coordinators were really likeable. That helped me feel much better and less stressed. And thanks to that, it was easier for me to work together”*.¹⁵ (G5P22)
- The opening up of spaces to share perceptions and perspectives about the group communication and collaboration: *“The feedback rounds and reflections on improvements were always very exciting and a lot of the content will still ‘stick’ with me. I think the group was able to learn a lot through the various reflection stages and the brainstorming sessions”*.¹⁶ (G5P1)

Digital competences

Apart from the technical basics (availability of a computer, a microphone, a webcam, and a good internet connection), special skills need to be expanded for online collaboration: The use of Zoom, a shared whiteboard (Conceptboard/ Miro) and other online collaboration tools must first be learned so that the benefits may be seen, and the focus shifted from the technical background to content and interpersonal perspectives. The analysis shows that team members developed digital skills – *“We had the opportunity to get used to tools (like Zoom or Dropbox) which can serve as a communication instrument or to work on a project synchronous/*

asynchronous” (G1P4) – and recognized the development of their digital competence, not just in relation to their ability to use different virtual tools in general, but tools that impact the quality of the virtual collaboration: *“We were able to learn how to work in virtual teams and how to use the tools offered effectively for good cooperation”*. (G2P5) Those lessons learned from online collaboration may help participants to be better prepared in future online collaborations: *“The experiences we have gained in this seminar, as well as the skills we have acquired, will certainly be invaluable to each of us later in our work environment and it may reduce the fear and stress that we may experience in virtual encounters with people we have not met before”*. (G1P1)

5. Discussion

The methodological decision to concentrate on the perspective of those who participated in the game has allowed us to take an intimate perspective upon a delicate process: getting into a new group of people implies overcoming fears and putting oneself ‘out there’. In the reports we analyzed, we identified the following three interconnected dimensions relevant to the emergence of a ‘Miteinander’ among individuals engaging in computer-mediated international collaboration: the individual, the social, and the organizational and technical dimension.

5.1 The Individual Dimension

The collaboration experience has an impact on the identity of each individual involved. Identity is inherently dialogic; it develops in the interaction with the environment (Buber 1965, Conti 2012). Entering into a collaboration project means challenging oneself in a social context and, thus, exposing oneself to the risk of a bad experience. A key finding in our study is that insecurities – induced by the context of an unknown and diverse group, the use of a foreign

language and the virtual environment – dissipated throughout the game and were transformed into opportunities which were channelled into consistent learning gains.

Firstly, the participants' positive experience in the context of the simulation game increased their self-confidence. In some cases, we can actually speak of real empowerment, as they acquired the chance to display their individual competences, to succeed in experimenting with new roles, as well as experiencing themselves as learning agents, able to develop new competences. Secondly, they could strengthen their "system trust" (Luhmann 2000:27; 47) while improving their image of "the others", as the strangers became familiar and created a common culture. Thirdly, they could experience difference as enrichment and, therefore, develop a dialogic attitude. Fourthly, they could deconstruct essentialist perceptions of identity and culture, moving away from a focus on national culture groups perceived as homogeneous. The imaginary line representing the border between sameness and difference in relation to national borders was removed for several participants. Difference and sameness have been located on the basis of the individual, identity was recognized as multiple and hybrid (Nederveen 1995). An important clarification that needs to be emphasized is that these observations were, mostly, undertaken by students who participated in games which also contained a specific theoretical input surrounding this topic. Theoretical knowledge seems, therefore, to be a precondition for perceiving the gap between expectation and real experiences in relation to certain topics, and for the revision of one's own schemata in a conscious manner.

5.2 The Social Dimension

The data confirm that trust is a fundamental core of human interaction on a social level. Trust and familiarity are interwoven, as "swift-trust" allows

people to accommodate uncertainty and co-construct familiarity. Indeed, it has been shown that the perceived (un)friendliness of others has a relevant impact on the (de)motivation of team members.¹⁷ The research focus on the emergence of a genuine 'Miteinander' led us to search for an identifiable cohesive turn over the course of the game. We have referred to this, more concretely, as the transformation of the group into a team, drawing on Miebach's definition of team as a group of individuals creating synergies through collaboration (Miebach 2017:251f). This turn happens once familiarity is given, individuals feel comfortable enough to engage with each other and a common culture has taken form.

On the other hand, a key challenge for participation is represented by hierarchies. Even if the analyzed teams had no formal hierarchy, we found that informal hierarchy develops as not everyone dares to claim some space for themselves. A key finding in this regard is that, in a friendly and familiar context in which there is trust, it is possible to experiment with new roles, develop self-confidence and the ability to claim space for oneself. The findings provide a hint towards the negative influence that repeated discriminatory experiences may have in the development of a leadership attitude. In this context, a student realized how (internalized) racism impacted their identity and behaviour in group-work situations (see 4.1.4, point 6).

A further and central means of power distribution is the main medium of communication itself: language. Language plays a crucial role in contexts where the language chosen for the interaction is spoken as a native language by some and as a foreign language by others. In line with Stang and Zhao (2020), our findings confirm that power relations can develop implicitly in such contexts but also demonstrate, by contrast, that the use of a certain language (e.g. English as

a lingua franca) can place participants on the same footing, thereby enabling more participation and engagement.

5.3 The Organizational and Technical Dimension

As we have seen, a ‘Miteinander’ requires a high level of trust. At the same time, however, our findings confirm previous studies (Albrecht / Albrecht-Goepfert 2012, Mason / Carr 2021) and show that it is more challenging to foster trust online, as adequate space for informal communication is, usually, not provided. This is in agreement with other empirical studies (Geister / Hertel 2005, Olson / Olson 2006) which state that informal communication is fundamental for the sustainable development of a team, above all at the beginning of their joint experience. Furthermore, our analysis demonstrates that trust can be built more swiftly in small groups, and it is, therefore, easier for an individual to participate actively in such groupings. The conscious use of break-out rooms or of platforms in which users can organize themselves into small groups is, therefore, strategically expedient. Video-chat also favours the development of personal relationships and trust. However, mistrust can arise towards participants who keep their cameras off without any valid explanation. In such cases, meta-communication would restore transparency and therefore strengthen trust and tighten relationships, while acknowledging the existence of potential misunderstanding. The presence of a person supervising the group dynamics and eventually facilitating the process, taking different roles – e.g. cultural mediator, conflict mediator, supervisor, coach – (Conti 2012:266ff), can be useful.

While technical problems can hinder participation, computer-mediated collaboration can benefit from a variety of tools, including those which allow for multichannel communication. Indeed, videoconferencing tools can impact trust positively, as they allow a

wide range of information to be sent and received simultaneously. Moreover, content-management platforms allow materials to be shared in an extremely easy manner. Shared documents or whiteboards allow visible minutes to be written in real time, which is useful for ensuring understanding by all parties. In general, participants may explore their creative capabilities with online tools, which foster the development of synergies.

6. Conclusion

Examining reflections written by participants in the simulation game Megacities, we were able to show how a real ‘Miteinander’ emerges in online collaborations from the perspective of virtual collaboration participants. We found that participants often refer to stages they experience in the process: from uncertainties at the very beginning, to the creation of trust and of a common culture, beyond the imagined challenging cultural differences. We also showed that language, and specifically the language chosen as the ‘team language’, seems to have an important impact on the participation of the team members, on their relationship and on their collaboration. Finally, we saw that the online setting of collaboration influences the interactions and relationships in different ways, sometimes leading to benefits and at other times resulting in deficits (i.e. in comparison with offline settings). However, participants reported on strategies to deal successfully with hindrances of virtual collaboration. Thus, the ‘Miteinander’ in online contexts proves to have several aspects in common with the ‘Miteinander’ in offline contexts. For instance, in both settings, participants in a collaboration generally strive for trust, sometimes act in hierarchical ways, and try to find strategies to deal with difficulties and ‘build’ culturality out of interculturality. This is, of course, to a certain extent unsurprising as human beings build upon the knowledge they themselves

retain when interacting with new things and situations, but are also creative and able to expand on their existing abilities when presented with new contexts. The virtual medium can create new opportunities for collaboration and participation (e.g. new ways of participation due to the use of online tools). Moreover, the ‘Miteinander’ created by the simulation game impacted participants’ conceptualizations of culture and identity. They began to look at these concepts as hybrid and changing. This learning gain is fundamental as it allowed participants to distance themselves from discriminatory mechanisms, to create social cohesion, and to engage in real intercultural dialogue.¹⁸ Last but not least, the virtual ‘Miteinander’ created in the game proved to be empowering, as it allowed participants to consciously assess the importance of their own perspectives and abilities, to challenge the existing assumptions of normality, and to leave their comfort zone, all of which resulted in elements of growth.

The Internet is a lively crossroads: words, ideas, images and sounds flow through it and become potential stimuli for people crossing by, transforming their emotional states, their knowledge, their behavioural patterns. The freedom which partly characterizes this space offers chances and bears challenges, fostering parallel utopias and dystopias which unfold throughout our postdigital reality. The design of this study, centred on a simulation game which strategically combines freedom with constraints, puts in evidence the potentiality of the Internet towards the creation of a universal ‘Miteinander’. Indeed, through this educational activity aiming at the development of intercultural competence, young people are given the opportunity to embrace the challenge of stepping out of familiar fields of action and getting into a process of personal growth with and within an international community. Safe and mediated online spaces of this kind are fruitful contexts for nourishing

utopias on the Internet. This article has shown one of the infinite possibilities to create such a space. Further studies are needed that help unveil aspects fostering a Miteinander in other – mediated and unmediated – online spaces.

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Endnotes

1 As a noun, 'Miteinander' is capitalized, while as an adverb, it is not.

2 "Gemeinsamkeit, Gemeinschaft, Solidarität, Zusammenhalt".

3 (...) "als ob er der Zukunft sicher wäre".

4 Here without a capital letter, as it functions as an adverb rather than a noun.

5 Developed in the 1960s, Tuckman's model is still very popular as it describes the typical phases which teams generally go through. The phases we refer here are: "Forming": the group members become oriented regarding their role and position in the group, which are then negotiated in the "Storming" phase. In the "Norming" phase the focus is placed upon the work itself; routines are developed.

6 The amount of time dedicated to debriefings varied largely in the 5 games.

7 "Die Teilnahme am Planspiel war für mich eine Herausforderung, weil ich zuerst vor allem meine Komfortzone in Bezug auf das Sprechen auf Deutsch verlassen musste".

8 "Während des Meetings war ich heute ziemlich genervt und verwirrt, weil ich nicht alles verstehen konnte, was gesagt wurde".

9 "Ich denke, die Situationen, in denen ich am meisten gelernt / gewachsen bin, waren die, in denen es mir peinlich war und ich selbst eine Lösung für die Sprachbarriere finden musste".

10 "Die Meinung der deutschen Gruppe war hier sehr hilfreich, da Deutsch für sie Muttersprache ist und es war für uns einfacher, an möglichen Fehlern bei der Rezeption der vorgegebenen Sätze zu arbeiten. Die deutsche Gruppe erklärte uns, wie sie die Sätze wahrgenommen hat und was verbessert werden könnte, um unnötige Missverständnisse zu vermeiden. Ich fand es sehr cool, weil ich etwas Neues lernen konnte, z. B. warum ein Wort in einem bestimmten Kontext nicht verwendet werden kann".

11 "Ich möchte nur hinzufügen, dass es aufgrund der unterschiedlichen Sprachniveaus erwähnenswert ist, dass die Muttersprachengruppe sich der Herausforderungen, denen sich die Vertreter der Gruppen, die Deutsch lernen, gegenübersehen, oft nicht bewusst sind. Manchmal war das Sprechtempo und Arbeitstempo für den Lernenden zu schnell, was mich passiv machte".

12 "Es war schwer mit denjenigen zu sprechen, die ihre Kameras ausgeschaltet haben".

13 "Wir haben uns auch miteinander auf Wonderme unterhalten, also konnten wir uns auch besser kennenlernen (...). Ich habe bemerkt, die anderen hatten auch Kontakt mit anderen und nach ein paar Treffen auch mehr gesprochen".

14 "Ich würde mir wünschen, dass mehr gemacht wird, dass ein angenehmes Klima hergestellt wird und sich jeder abgeholt fühlt".

15 "Die Koordinatoren waren echt sympathisch. Das half mir viel besser und stressfreier zu fühlen. Und dank dessen war für mich die Zusammenarbeit leichter".

16 "Die Feedbackrunden und Reflexionen zu Verbesserungen waren immer sehr spannend und davon wird mir inhaltlich noch viel „hängen bleiben“. Ich glaube die Gruppe konnte durch die verschiedenen Reflexions-etappen und die Brainstormings auf Miro „Strategien nachhaltiger interkultureller Kommunikation“ viel lernen".

17 For factors and dynamics which influence engagement of individuals in teams, see Conti 2021.

18 For a discussion concerning the meaning of intercultural dialogue, see Conti 2012.