

Best practices for interdisciplinary research supporting the development of digital games for personal empowerment and social inclusion

Jan Van Looy¹, with Lizzy Bleumers², Ilse Mariën², James Stewart³, Dana Schurmans², Anissa All¹

¹ iMinds-MICT-UGent, Ghent, Belgium

² iMinds-SMIT-VUB, Brussels, Belgium

³ JRC-IPTS, Seville Spain

Digital games are increasingly used in initiatives promoting personal empowerment and social inclusion (PESI) of disadvantaged groups. There is a lack of knowledge regarding best practices however. The literature on game-based learning insufficiently addresses the process and context of intervention and the diversity of contexts and intermediaries involved. This paper addresses this knowledge gap based on literature review, case studies, and expert consultation.

The seven cases studied represent various application domains of empowerment and inclusion. Case studies were conducted using documentation and interviews, covering background and business case, game format/technology, user groups, usage context, and impact assessment. They provide insight into each case's strengths and weaknesses, allowing for a meta-analysis of the important features and challenges of using digital games for PESI. This analysis was extended and validated in two expert workshops.

Results show that a substantial challenge lies in selecting or designing a digital game that strikes a balance between enjoyment, learning and usability in the given use context. The particular needs of the target group and those that help implement the digital game intervention often require a case-specific approach. Projects benefit from involvement of intermediaries and target groups contributing to the game design. Furthermore, there is a need for interdisciplinary research to facilitate the use and development of game-based practice. Integrating game use in the operation of formal and informal intermediary support organizations increases the chances at reaching, teaching and empowering those at risk of exclusion. The teachers, caregivers and counselors involved in the implementation of a game-based approach should be supported through documentation, training and structural support.