

Art and Education: Cultivating Active Citizenship Through Game-Based Storytelling

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Abstract: This paper presents “The Other Half”, a collective game aiming on the one hand to encourage creative expression through the writing of dialogues, and on the other to foster students’ understanding of and critical reflection on aspects of the democratic citizenship education. The game was played within two teaching sessions of the course “Art Didactics and Creative Technologies”, which is taught by the authors as part of the “Special Program of Studies for the Pedagogical and Didactical Sufficiency Certification” (PDSP) at the Department of Audio and Visual Arts of the Ionian University. The authors employed mechanics that require players to first complete individual and collaborative creative assignments and then negotiate in the context of secret and open voting sessions to weave them into a common work, while given the ability to modify the game’s own rules and scope. E-learning affordances facilitated the coexistence of both physically present and remote players. Emphasis was placed on the role of the majority and the importance of participation in decision-making, as well as on flexibility and agreement in the process of dynamically exploring a common goal. The game was evaluated through a focus group discussion, whose thematic analysis suggests that the game was found interesting and creative, especially in terms of voting for dialogues and changing rules, and suitable for use in the classroom. However, the total freedom to shape the game’s end-goal, the complexity of rules, and the time constraints resulted in some cases in confusion and anxiety, whereas the game’s hybrid form was found to weaken participation.

Keywords: Active Citizenship, Game-based Learning, Gamification, Democracy, Art Education, Storytelling

1. Introduction

Undertaking their societal role, young people question and reflect, form opinions and advocate. In the social arena, groups with conflicting objectives are formed based on various interests and different understandings of events. Controversial issues tend to instil a “binary code” in the public, i.e. being for or against, causing most refined opinions to disappear. In the beginning of the 2024-2025 academic semester, during the teaching of the lesson “Art Didactics and Creative Technologies” as part of the “Special Program of Studies for the Pedagogical and Didactical Sufficiency Certification” (PDSP) at the Department of Audio and Visual Arts of the Ionian University, the class investigated what social influence means. The instructors and authors of this paper raised the key question whether social influence is considered a process that involves the majority. It was argued that the term majority is defined numerically and in relation to the term minority. Besides its smaller numbers, it is the determination of the latter to participate or not in the dominant social norms that plays a vital role. Many of us often adopt an attitude of obedience when we are in a collective situation and our assessments are mitigated due to the fear of differentiating ourselves from others. Trying to avoid a conflict, we expect/desire a negotiation that progresses with equal and mutual concessions.

This paper suggests a game-based educational approach seeking to prepare prospective Art educators for raising the awareness of their class about the challenges that modern reality poses to a democratic system of government. In the 21st century, liberal democracy seems to be well established and rarely questioned (at least in the West), yet faces a complex array of challenges, including the rise of populism and the impact of technology on democratic processes and public discourse. In order to something different and innovative to come, everyone has to be alert and participate actively. In the suggested game-based approach, by creating dialogues that deal with characters who are diametrically opposed and by combining the dialogues with the ones of their peers into a common narrative, players are guided to justify conformity through personality traits and place emphasis on social situations. Through negotiating and voting they are confronted with the notions of majority, social influence, unanimity, pluralism. They are prompted to be subversive, playful, imaginative. By deciding themselves their common goal they become the “agents” of a social interaction that they envision.

In these challenging times, art sharpens citizens personal responses to the contemporary theories, challenges and problems (Papadopoulou, 2019). Art can provide a sense of optimism; in Gerhard Richter’s words “art is the highest form of hope” (Phaidon Editors, 2016). Art education can foster a greater social tolerance and civic engagement. More specifically, it can highlight the problem of selective attention, which accounts for arbitrarily dismissing or emphasizing certain issues (Papadopoulou, 2013). Through active participation in a creative game environment facilitating free and safe experimentation (Huizinga, 2014), students are guided to appreciate the

importance of dialogue and solidarity within a dynamic community, which is not clinging to comforting assumptions and oversimplified solutions (Papadopoulou, 2023). The true reward of connecting different viewpoints is the broadening of perspectives and knowledge, the cultivation of inner discipline, vigilance, constant introspection. Fostering a positive stance towards synthesizing crises is expected to unite unique –and otherwise isolated- instances and pave the way for discovering the common good (Papadopoulou, 2019).

Focusing on games, they are considered complex learning environments, which require careful design for their motivational and cognitive affordances to be effectively realized. The appropriate mechanisms must be provided that allow for meaningful exchange of ideas in ways that build collective knowledge and trust to meet shared goals (Plass, Homer & Kinzer, 2015). ICT can further enhance the playful learning environment by extending its creative capabilities and facilitating remote access and communication. Heading towards a new paradigm in education, one that is deeply grounded to digital revolution (Collins & Halverson, 2018), universities are starting to adopt hybrid learning practices that blend the physical classroom with online space (UNESCO, & NETEXPLO, 2019).

Considering all the above, the collaborative game “The Other Half” was designed with a dual purpose: i) to encourage and foster, both individually and collectively, players’ creative and expressive skills in storytelling and dialogue writing; and ii) to raise awareness and cultivate players’ critical thinking regarding issues, concepts, and concerns related to Democracy. This paper presents the game’s content and rules, as well as its first evaluation through a focus group discussion.

2. Game Design

2.1 Curricular Integration

“The Other Half” served as the backbone of the “Art Didactics and Creative Technologies” course in the winter semester 2024-2025. It was structured in three stages: Preparation, Application, and Evaluation, providing a framework for focused study and reflection upon democratic concepts and practices.

- In the stage of Preparation, students were tasked with seeking and studying literature related to Democracy (Böckenförde, 2022; Riesman, 2001; Runciman, 2019; Tocqueville, 2004; Weale, 2018). Excerpts from Steiner’s work on the Ancient Agora (Steiner, 2015) were also examined. Two main pylons are used as guidance: i) Democracy and its two core principles: majority rule and the principle of popular sovereignty, and ii) serious games that address aspects of Democracy. Each student presented their research findings to the class for feedback. Each presentation lasted 7 minutes, followed by an 8-minute discussion.
- In the stage of Application, the students played the game “The Other Half” during two weekly sessions with a total duration of approx. 4 hours. The game was conducted in a hybrid format, with undergraduate students physically present in the classroom, while alumni joined online. Both groups were connected to the same online platform to enable private chat communication among team members in isolated virtual rooms.
- The stage of Evaluation involved a focus group discussion about the participants' experience. With their consent, the conversation was recorded and later transcribed. The authors fuelled the conversation with questions exploring the role of the gaming process in the construction of narratives and in the reflection on matters pertinent to the quality of Democracy.

2.2 Gameplay Mechanisms

Drawing upon their prior engagement with projects realizing playful learning approaches (Papadopoulou, 2018; Papadopoulou et al., 2023) the authors employed game mechanics that require players to compose, evaluate, negotiate, and make decisions. The aim was to examine democratic notions pertaining to active participation and the majority required for decision-making: what it means for groups to form coalitions that constitute an absolute majority, a relative majority, or situational majorities that arise depending on how people vote on a specific issue (Weale, 2018). Time constraints were utilized as a mechanism to challenge players to quickly generate and adapt ideas. A virtual meeting platform supported gameplay between undergraduate students, who were physically present in the classroom, and alumni, who joined from their homes. The option to form breakout rooms gave teams the opportunity to convene in private before joining the plenary. A virtual-dice application was used for adding randomness.

Of core importance is the mechanic to modify any one of the game rules including the initial “endgame” that all selected stories must somehow be intertwined; upon completing each game stage and reaching a successful decision, players are granted the opportunity to discuss suggestions for modifications. The aim is to formulate a constructive position that recognizes all perspectives and confronts their inherent bias (Russell, 2014; Tocqueville, 2004). The focus was placed on the problem of conflicting motives, positions, and forces, on the basis that a romanticized projection of democratic values is not sufficient. Beginning with personal choices in the creation of fictional characters, participants were invited to collaborate first in pairs and then as one group, with the dual objective of weaving dialogues and establishing a narrative context to embrace them.

2.3 Game Structure

"The Other Half" consists of four (4) stages, called "Episodes," which symbolize the journey from the individual to the collective. Each Episode presents players with its own task and set of rules. However, participants are allowed to modify any rule and/or goal they deem necessary, including the ones pertaining to the Episodes' deliverables, as long as they agree to the required degree of majority. The purpose of this process is, on the creative level, to highlight the freedom and significance of adaptive thinking, as it is manifested through each choice made during the creative process; and on the reflective level, to emphasize the necessity, responsibility, and power of social commitment of the group that co-decides with a shared vision.

2.3.1 Episode 1

In the first Episode, players are presented with pairs of opposing characteristics, from which they must silently and without disclosing their choice select the pair that most captures their interest. Through an online application a virtual dice is rolled for each player to determine the order in which they will choose their preferred pair. When a pair is selected, it is removed from the virtual board and all remaining players must make their selection from the remaining options. The use of dice symbolizes the role of chance in an individual's life and, by extension, in the society formed by individuals, as it can either facilitate or disrupt personal plans and shape social conditions. The authors have previously explored the concept of "disruption," its manifestations and implications, through the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational games (Rovithis et al., 2022).

After all players have chosen a pair of characteristics they have 12 minutes to compose a dialogue between two characters embodying the selected traits. Table 1 presents the pairs of characteristics that were available during the session discussed in this paper. The authors' rationale behind the selection of these specific dichotomies was to provide an overview of the diversity of human traits and behaviors that can possibly interact within a social collective. The sharp contrast in each pair reflects the heterogeneity that may occur within a group and account for divergence in ideas and attitudes. The deliverable for this Episode represents an understanding of this diversity through its artistic, narrative representation.

In this Episode, players work individually and are invited to explore the concept of opposition through the writing of a dialogue, embodying both extremes and developing empathy toward positions potentially unfamiliar or even opposed to their own. The only specification given by the instructors was that the dialogue should include a turning point—an instance where something changes dramatically. The interpretation of this turning point — as convergence, conflict, or otherwise— was left to the students' discretion, with only request that they be able to justify their chosen interpretation.

Table 1: 16 pairs of contrasting character traits

Gullible	Skeptical
Organized	Chaotic
Realist	Visionary
Hard-working	Lazy
Content	Dissatisfied
Assertive	Modest
Changeable	Stable
Flatterer	Honest
Boastful	Humble

Conformist	Dissenter
Flawless	Imperfect
Proud	Servile
Superstitious	Rationalist
Brave	Coward
Arrogant	Insecure
Laconic	Expressive

2.3.2 Episode 2

In the second Episode, the transition is made from the individual to the most fundamental form of relationship: the pair. Players are divided into groups of two, and each team is isolated in a virtual room. Each member of the team must first decide to keep one of the two characters from their original dialogue and discard the other, and then together with the other team member compose a dialogue between the two retained characters. The exact way and criteria for selecting/rejecting the characters and composing the dialogue is up to each team to decide. For example, one approach would be that each team member makes their selection based on personal criteria before the dialogue's narrative framework is discussed, whereas another approach would be that the team members first agree on the context of their dialogue, which will then influence their character selection. The total time available is 15 minutes, and the only specification for the deliverable dialogue is that it must contain a turning point. The team members can communicate orally, unless they disturb other teams, in which case they must switch to written communication only.

The process of selecting and rejecting characters highlights the necessity and difficulty of decision-making, both within the intrinsic value of democratic procedures and in the creative process of any artistic composition. Moreover, the collaborative writing of a dialogue, starting out with at least equal responsibility for each co-creator and evolving through mutual compromises, reflects the negotiated yet productive interaction between the parts of a bilateral relationship, from interpersonal dynamics of individuals to bilateral agreements between states.

2.3.3 Episode 3

In the third Episode, each team is asked to compose yet another dialogue, this time between the characters that each team member had previously rejected. Again, the process lasts 15 minutes, and the dialogue must contain a turning point. Here, players are challenged to deal with the unexpected, as they had not known, when they previously rejected a character, that this character would later return to the game. The authors have previously explored the notion of "reversal" and highlighted the gravity of applying educational practices that prepare students for unexpected turns of events (Rovithis et al., 2022). On a creative level, this mechanic symbolizes the potential of previously dismissed ideas to re-enter and enrich later compositional processes, whereas in terms of reflection on Democracy, it highlights the necessity for active citizens to engage with voices that they themselves may have rejected and/or marginalized voices, which nevertheless assert their own positions and bring their own dynamics into the democratic dialogue.

2.3.4 Episode 4

In the fourth and final Episode, the game focuses on the concept of community and the rules and mechanisms that govern the democratic coexistence and interaction of its members. The virtual breakout rooms are dissolved, and all teams come together in a hybrid plenary session, combining in-person and online presence. The instructors announce the initial collective goal: the community must compose a work made up of selected dialogues, with the essential condition that a connection justifying these selections must exist, like for example a shared narrative framework or a common element in discrete narrative nodes. The community must select the dialogues through the following process.

Each team performs vocally its two dialogues without revealing which dialogue was created first or second (i.e. the one involving the initially preferred characters or the one involving the rejected ones). The community then approves by secret ballot one of the two. For the decision to be valid, at least 75% agreement is required. Abstentions and blank votes are not excluded but instead counted in the percentage calculation. Throughout the procedure, the team that wrote the dialogues remains silent. If a valid decision is not reached, the process

is repeated after two volunteer speakers, who support different decisions, openly defend their positions. Each speech has a maximum duration of 3 minutes. If no decision is reached again, the debate continues with new speakers. If no decision can be made, the game reaches a dead end and all players lose.

In the case that the community manages to reach a decision, it automatically gains the right to modify any game rule at will. This may be a percentage, a procedure, the final objective, or even the decision to end the game. The process of voting for a modification is public and unless modified requires 75% agreement. Any member of the community can propose a modification and argue in favour of its adoption. The vote on whether to adopt a modification can occur once in each round. If the required level of agreement is not reached, the game continues under the existing rules. The authors' intention is for the process to reflect the responsibility of individuals participating in democratic processes to pursue a collective goal through a form of synthesis rather than discord, guided by freedom and reasoning, while at the same time to allow for democratic mechanisms such as majority rule, public speaking, and voting to be empirically explored.

3. Evaluation Results

Twelve students took part in the game, thus forming six teams in the second Episode. The fourth Episode was interrupted, because the teaching session ended, and was resumed in the next week. After the game was completed, the class discussed about their experience. The following questions had been preselected by the instructors to stimulate the discussion:

- How did you find the experience?
- Mention, if any, one or more elements that you liked and/or did not like.
- How did the game impact your creative ability?
- Do you believe it helped you understand what determines the quality of democracy?
- Did it challenge or reinforce your views related to the power of the majority, participation, and dialogue?

The discussion was recorded, transcribed and analysed according to the thematic analysis methodology as described in (Caulfield, 2019; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). The inductive approach was followed allowing the coded data to determine the themes. The analysis resulted in 4 themes, namely "Game Mechanics", "Group Dynamics", "Hybrid Format", and "Potential Application in the Classroom". The "Game Mechanics" theme was broken down into 3 sub-themes, namely "Time Constraints", "System of Rules", and "Final Goal". The themes and corresponding codes are shown in Table 2 and analyzed further below.

Table 2: Themes, sub-themes, and corresponding codes

Theme: Game Mechanics		
Sub-theme: Time Constraints	Sub-theme: System of Rules	Sub-theme: Final Goal
Codes: pressing time limit, unfinished tasks, disconnection from game flow, safety, fun experience, suspense, need for closure	Codes: game alive and evolving, creative, confusion, more guidance, too open, need for clarity, to know rules better	Codes: lack of direction, no criteria for voting, unclear, seeking coherence, uncertainty, player-dependent
Theme: Group Dynamics	Theme: Hybrid Format	Theme: Potential Application in the Classroom
Codes: game fosters socialization, constructive teamwork, observing introverts and extroverts, uncomfortable with strangers	Codes: impersonal interaction, disconnection from game processes, face-to-face better for discussion, face-to-face makes participation easier, face-to-face expression more direct	Codes: democracy education, adaptability, creative activity for younger students

3.1 Theme: Game Mechanics – Sub-theme: Time Constraints

The participants were to a great extent concerned with the issue of time, and more specifically i) the time at their disposal to complete the solo and pair tasks (Episodes 1-3), and ii) the game's structure within the course of two teaching sessions. Regarding both issues, controversial opinions emerged from the discussion.

The amount of time available for delivering the dialogues had a positive impact on some participants and a negative impact on others. Some players reported that time was too limited for such a creative process. They also complained that they could not devote all the available time to the creative process as they had to process the game rules, which made the experience more stressful. Yet others reported that the specific time constraints made the experience more fun and suspenseful and had a positive impact on the creative process by establishing a concrete deadline for the goal to be achieved, which motivated especially persons with little experience in writing dialogues.

Regarding the game's structure in time, some participants found it difficult to reconnect with the plenary after it was interrupted, and would prefer a temporary closure after the game's first three Episodes that would allow them to enter the plenary for the first time in the second session. Others suggested the opposite, since knowing already how the plenary works made them feel safe the second time.

3.2 Theme: Game Mechanics – Sub-theme: System of Rules

Many participants appreciated the fact that the game rules were revealed step-by-step, and more importantly that all rules without exception were subject to change through the plenary sessions. This made them feel that the game was "alive" and constantly evolving, capable of being something entirely new every time, and that they can create order out of the initial chaos by voting to shape their own goal. Some argued that the voting process was their favourite and most creative part of the game. Yet, other participants found this freedom too much and would prefer to have a limited number of options to choose from.

In terms of clarity and presentation some participants mentioned that the game rules were complicated and had to be re-read several times. They also felt that as the game progressed and new rules emerged, keeping everything in mind was confusing and possibly led the group to forget some choices and miss some of the game's potential. Some participants made suggestions, such as having the total game instructions written in front of them all the time, or given to them beforehand, and asked for better explanation regarding the game's key issues.

3.3 Theme: Game Mechanics – Sub-theme: Final Goal

The participants were puzzled by the game's initial directive and found it too general. Confronted with having to figure out themselves what the final goal should be, they felt confused and without purpose. Not knowing the desired outcome resulted in lack of concrete criteria for voting for/against a dialogue, which hampered the voting process. Some felt reluctant to make decisions since no rule seemed permanent and no choice was guaranteed to prove itself useful in the end. They reported struggling to find a solid suggestion for a common goal to present and justify to the plenary. Thus, some asked for specific directions, such as a list of options to choose from. Yet, others argued that the goal of the game depends on the functional value that the users have agreed to bestow in the first place. Defining the game as primarily educational or creative can critically shift players' endgame approach.

3.4 Theme: Group Dynamics

Many participants stated that the game's collaborative tasks, namely creating dialogues in pairs and voting for dialogues as a group, were constructive and interesting experiences in terms of teamwork. Focusing on the plenary tasks some claimed that they aptly simulate the way a parliament operates, with others arguing that the plenary was their favourite part of the game, because one could observe how different characters, both introvert and extrovert, behave within a group. It was suggested that the game brings together different personalities and guides them explore how to work together even if they do not know each other. One participant though claimed that if she had not teamed up with a person she was familiar with, she would feel uncomfortable.

3.5 Theme: Hybrid Format

It was widely supported by the participants that the game's hybrid form with some players online and others physically present did not benefit the game process. This was reported by both people who were participating remotely and in person. Many felt that communication was impersonal especially when their peers had their cameras turned off. The lack in direct interaction weakened participation with people hesitating to raise their hand, wait for their turn and express themselves. Issues were not discussed thoroughly or even not discussed at all, resulting in the voting process being perceived as inefficient. All participants who shared the above opinions agreed that if they all played the game in person, such problems would be avoided.

3.6 Theme: Potential Application in the Classroom

Some participants were quite positive towards the game's application in the classroom. The most salient notion in that context was adaptability, which was reported to have two aspects. The one refers to the game's suitability to foster players' skill to adapt to the unknown, to randomness, to negotiation and compromise. Guided by the game's mechanics, which require their active participation, players must seek ways to integrate themselves in the collective in a fruitful and meaningful way. The other aspect of adaptability pertains to the game's flexibility in terms of rules and structure. Independent from a rigid system and open to constant change, the game can be adjusted to the specific learning needs of different target groups, subjects and tasks. The participants thought that younger students would be more interested in the game's creative tasks, whereas older students and adults more likely to engage more with the game's democratic processes.

4. Conclusion

Given the complexities of our time, which can potentially deal heavy blows to Democracy, the inclusion of lessons where dialogue is developed, decisions are made, and each of us transcends their own limiting horizon is essential. The goal is to think critically, without allowing things or situations to be processed for us, but rather by us. With the game "The Other Half", the authors try to encourage participants to express themselves creatively, while remaining open to co-authoring and negotiating towards a common goal, whose meaning they themselves collectively explore.

The game's evaluation suggests that the mechanics involved fostered creativity and communication on a personal and interpersonal level. The participants enjoyed especially the voting part and were inspired to reflect upon democratic notions and processes. However, some participants found the time constraints stressing and the game rules confusing. The game's hybrid form was also found to weaken participation. Moreover, participants felt overwhelmed by the freedom that was given to them and asked for a more restricted, unambiguous space of possibilities.

The authors suggest that the thought-provoking remarks regarding the game's rules and goal are mainly due to the game lacking a clearly opposing position to one's own. Students tended to seek out clear-cut distinctions that would provide specific options to select from. One of the major accomplishments of the game was that it enabled dialogue and reflection on the notion that, rather than starting from spontaneous disagreement and remaining within a framework of opposition and competition, players could move forward by opening spaces for doubt; passionately upholding the right to disagree in ways that ultimately lead to critical re-examination of one's own views. Future work will build upon these preliminary findings to further explore the affordances of Art education regarding active citizenship in the digital age.

Ethics Declaration

All participants signed a consent form, which complies with the Ionian University Ethics Committee regulations pertaining to the conduct of game-based qualitative research activities with human subjects.

AI Declaration

AI was employed i) as a support tool for translation, more specifically in the case of Democracy-related concepts that needed to be accurately and formally expressed in English, ii) in the transcription and translation of the recorded semi-structured discussion, iii) the design of the word cloud.

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