

# Exploring Critical Utopian Gaming Pedagogy in a Youth Club in Barcelona

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## INTRODUCTION

In the face of the climate crisis, rising inequalities, fascism, and war, the imagination of the future seems to collapse in a vision of a scheduled apocalypse (Garcés 2022). To dispute such imaginaries, critical utopian pedagogy has emerged to recover agency by demanding that critique be paired with the design of concrete projects of a better future, challenging the widespread belief that there is no alternative (Webb 2013). Within this framework, video games intrinsically explore alternative worlds, serving as cultural media for critically engaging with ideas of utopia (Kłosiński 2018; Farca 2019; among others). Although their transformative potential has been theorized in multiple directions, pedagogical practices that use entertainment games from critical and future-oriented perspectives remain emergent (Coopilton 2023).

This study examines how video games as cultural media can be integrated into critical utopian pedagogy to support youth in imagining alternative futures. It adopts a participatory action research design to explore the pedagogical practice developed in [Play Utopia](#), a weekly conversation club in Barcelona where young people aged 12–18

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play and dialogue about the future through video games. The club began as part of a PhD research project and has since consolidated into a team of four educator-researchers over its two years of development, including one staff member from the community center *Casal de Barri Besòs*, where the club is based.

## **Research Questions**

The study explores a critical utopian pedagogy practice developed across several sessions around three Research Questions (RQ) rooted in critical utopian action research (Egmoose et al. 2020):

1. RQ1: How did the pedagogical practice cultivate critique?
2. RQ2: How did it support the co-creation of desirable and alternative future imaginaries?
3. RQ3: How did it encourage agency and transformative action?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design and Setting**

The project seeks to move beyond instrumental uses of games toward a sociocultural approach that values them as cultural artifacts capable of sparking meaningful discussions about out-of-game issues (Gee 2007), explicitly connecting game-based learning with game literacies. Game selection follows multiple criteria: the critical evaluation template for digital games in educational contexts (Pötzsch et al. 2023); concerns raised by participants and the educator-researcher; a progression from classical/critical dystopias to critical/classical utopias (Farca 2019) and the activation of Levitas's (2013) three modes of Utopia as Method—archaeological, ontological, and architectural—as adapted to games (Kłosiński 2018).

Sessions followed a two-hour structure, beginning with collective dialogue around a conceptual map, followed by a brief discussion of the selected game. This was followed by approximately one hour of gameplay, by pairs or in group, during which participants captured screenshots and produced short written reflections and conflicts framed as questions, drawing on reflective photography data generation technique (Hall et al 2020). Each session concluded with a guided group dialogue, and a final moment dedicated to trace the dialogue on the conceptual map.

### **Data Generation and Analysis**

Data generation combined multiple qualitative techniques. Reflective photography captured participants' in-game experiences to out-of-game issues (Hall et al. 2020). A collaborative conceptual map traced the learning process (Jové 2024), while semi-structured focus groups and a field diary documented reflections and pedagogical decisions. All sessions were audio- and video-recorded to capture dialogue and gameplay. Data are being analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis to identify participants' contributions to the RQs alongside the pedagogical and contextual factors shaping them. Initial codes will be synthesized into initial themes, collaboratively refined, and interpreted in relation to literature on critical consciousness processes (Pillen et al. 2020).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preliminary findings suggest that the pedagogical practice activated different phases of critical consciousness and the exploration of alternative futures. Dystopian games aligned with the archaeological mode, such as *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *Inside* (Playdead 2016), primarily supported the problematization of socio-political issues, yet were less effective in fostering the envisioning of desirable alternatives. In contrast, games aligned with the architectural mode of utopia, such as *Townscaper* (Stålberg 2021) and *The Sims 4* (The Sims Studio 2014), more effectively encouraged participants to articulate concrete and desirable futures grounded in biographical experiences. However, titles aligned with the ontological utopian mode, including *Every Day the Same Dream* (Pederdini 2009) and *Everything* (O'Reilly 2017), were perceived as especially transformative, generating moments of disequilibrium and introspection that prompted shifts in participants' frames of reference and, in some cases, reported changes in their everyday lives.

The findings further emphasize that critical reflection depended less on the content of a given title and more on intentional pedagogical design. Key elements included the educator's role as problem-poser and meaning-maker (Kincheloe et al. 2018) and facilitated debriefings (Budke 2023), alongside inquiry-oriented strategies such as participants linking screenshots to critical questions to initiate dialogue. Tools like the conceptual map supported the co-construction of knowledge, legitimized participants' voices, and connected in-game experiences with out-of-game personal and local concerns (Jové 2024).

Shared gameplay also played a central role, fostering ongoing reflection through emerging dialogue. Informal conversations during gameplay—sometimes facilitated by the educator—enabled collective interpretation of experiences and questioning. These conversations, preceding the whole-group dialogue, were key in enabling moments of introspection and shifts in participants' frames of reference.

Finally, findings indicate that agency and transformative action emerged primarily at an individual rather than collective level. However, the club has become a well-established project in the neighborhood, consolidating a stable educational team and ongoing participation. The cultivation of affective bonds between educators and youth participants was crucial in this process, fostering trust, engagement, and open dialogue (Fitzpatrick 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

Building on these findings, the project proposes the notion of Critical Utopian Gaming Pedagogy (CUGP) as an emergent framework that foregrounds the dialectic between critiquing oppressive conditions and envisioning concrete utopian alternatives (Webb 2013). This emerging approach builds on Critical Gaming Pedagogy, which emphasizes players' capacity to interpret, negotiate, and subvert game meanings (Crocco 2011), by incorporating a Utopian dimension. In the same vein, CUGP positions critical and utopian potential not as an inherent property of games, but as a situated pedagogical practice emerging through the power of play.

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