

# Game of My Life: Supporting life management skills of young people

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## ABSTRACT

There is a need to develop new methods and tools for the social and healthcare sector (Arnab et al. 2013, Rigby and Ryan 2011, Kato 2010). Gaming is one possible way of extensively reaching young people.

Kajaani University of Applied Sciences (KAMK) in Finland has developed a health game, *Game of My Life*, in cooperation with the Kainuu Joint Municipal Social and Health Care Authority and the City of Kajaani. The original request to develop a game supporting young persons' life management skills came from the Youth Psychiatric Ward of the Kainuu district hospital in the municipality of Kajaani. There was a need to find new tool that can be used in therapeutic relationship concerning life management issues.

Background work for the development process involved KAMK nursing students studying in their assignments, the most important themes concerning the life management skills of young people. A psychology student from the University of Chicago evaluated the technical implementation of the demo game, its narrative, theoretical background and functionality from the life management support perspective. KAMK researchers also tested the *Sparx* -game in Finland and used the results in development work. KAMK game graphics, design and programming students formed a game development team to produce *Game of My Life*.

The theoretical background for the game is based on a "Role map for growing up to be an independent young person" that includes 5 motivation roles, subcategories for goal-oriented roles and action roles (Ylitalo 2011).

The *Game of My Life* version 1.0 is a visual novel aimed at supporting the life management skills of young people. At the start of the game, players can choose an avatar which operates in the levels of school, home and free time. The main themes in the game are relationships, intoxicating substances, economic skills, mental health and daily life activities. During the story, the player makes decisions in different situations by

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choosing from among several options. At the end of the game, the player can find additional information related to the themes in the story.

The aim of *Game of My Life* is to evoke new thoughts and ways of thinking concerning daily-life decision making and problem-solving situations. The Visual Novel style and storytelling is at the core of the game. The basic idea is to incorporate “a serious message” into the fascinating world of the game. The player can influence game events and also faces the consequences of the choices made during the game. The game is recommended to be used in a nursing or youth work context in professional relationships between adults and young people. Using *Game of My Life* in this context is supported by practical guidelines.

This poster presentation concentrates on the player experiences of *Game of My Life*. The study was part of a nursing student’s Bachelor thesis and the aim of the study was to produce qualitative knowledge of player experiences to enable further development of the game. The research task was to investigate the thoughts that the game evoked in the players. The data collection method was a semi-structured theme interview of 9 young persons aged 18-22 years from a youth work unit and data was analyzed using the deductive content analysis method. (Haataja 2016.)

The results of this study regarding gameplay showed that young people made their decisions in *Game of My Life* based on their interest in observing the consequences of their decisions. The decisions were not those they would have made in real life. Most of the decisions were based on reasoning. The young people recognized various challenging topics and situations concerning life management and they suggested solutions to these situations. The results regarding the use of *Game of My Life* as a tool in therapeutic relationship showed that the themes of the game provoked discussions between the young people who played the game and the nursing student who conducted the study. (Haataja 2016.)

The results concerning game narrative and mechanics showed that there is a need to develop the narrative of the *Game of My Life* in terms of the consequences of the player’s choices. The options in the game that direct the narrative should not be as obvious as they seem to be at the moment. On the other hand, it has already been indicated that the game world attracts players to attempt new activities and take risks. (Haataja 2016.)

Results from this study are encouraging as regards using *Game of My Life* as a tool to stimulate conversation and thoughts about life management issues. Further study will focus on the experiences of nursing and youth work staff who use *Game of My Life* in their work with young people.

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