# Stakeholders consider the future of serious games

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Credit: Bradley Hook from Pexels

Serious games have become a social phenomenon that resonates way beyond the gaming world. But the truth is that many of these games, primarily funded by public authorities, lost their fun factor in the

process. Work under the Gaming Horizons project opens the door to new approaches.

Senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Dr. Carlo Perrotta focused his career on digital education. One of the topics he's most fond of is the use of video games in education, and he has had a ringside seat to negative trends affecting the sector. The first one is the growing disconnect between gamification and the cultural and artistic dimensions of game development; and the second lies in a 'gamification discourse' moving further and further away from the notions of gameplay and playfulness.

"The notion that video game design can be treated as a toolbox from which it is possible to borrow freely is flawed. It is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how games are created and played, and for their role in culture, education, and other domains," Dr. Perrotta explains. "Besides, concerns over gameplay have been replaced by a focus on behavioural control and engineering, whereby psychological and computational techniques are deployed as part of 'gamified interventions' to mould individual and collective actions."

Dr. Perrotta claims that this approach – which advocates 'seriousness by design' – is hurting the industry, all the more when 'non-serious' games increasingly include serious applications and dimensions. This poses an existential threat to an industry that has struggled for years to make inroads in the consumer market, and essentially relies on public sources of funding for its survival.

The question is, how can the serious game industry be put back on the right track? "For us, the way forward starts with 'taking the pulse' of gaming and gamification in Europe, in order to highlight implicit biases in the current research and development agenda supported by the EC and point to alternatives more in line with criteria of responsible research

and innovation," Dr. Perrotta explains.

To do that, the Gaming Horizons team carried out interviews and workshops with stakeholders from various communities including game developers, educators, young people and their families, policy makers and researchers. They considered institutional support for video games in Europe and produced a range of recommendations that plead for more mature and culturally-relevant connections between stakeholders.

Rather than provide easy fixes and solutions, GAMING HORIZONS aimed to expand the horizon of what's possible. "For instance, we looked critically at the existing funding frameworks in Europe (i.e. H2020), and this led us to engage with the world of mainstream and independent game development –the sort of developers who make and self-publish games on Steam or the App store. These, often small, studios with remarkable skills and creativity in terms of [game](link) design expressed significant reservations about the current level of support for serious and applied games in Europe.

"While they are very interested in the potential of games to tackle socially and culturally relevant themes, they find themselves pressed between what the market wants and what's required to obtain European funding, which is often viewed as constraining and rife with creativity-stifling requirements," says Dr. Perrotta.

All in all, Gaming Horizons' produced an extensive, evidence-based range of outputs targeted at relevant stakeholders. "Our recommendations and scenarios represent a rigorous, systematic attempt to influence policies and practices, based on a dialogic redefinition of what video games are and what they can achieve in various contexts, including of course education and learning," says Dr. Perrotta.