# Design in Partnership and Projects with High Social Impact an experience with games as catalysts for a university extension project

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***Abstract.*** *The design in Partnership method has many intersections with Youth Participatory Action research (YPAR) methodologies. This document will explore their application to propose conducting projects with high social impact, potentiating youths to take on leading roles in their communities, using as a reference a project based on Tabletop Games to promote the integration of underprivileged youths in academic spaces. These methods are also very in line with more modern approaches to university extension projects, which focus on the relationship between universities and the communities surrounding them, with the intent of promoting social change through education and liberation.*

***Keywords—*** *design in partnership, YPAR, tabletop games, university extension*

## 1. Initial Context

This short paper is about a project called "Narrative-based Board Games as Tools for Meaning-making, Communication and Inclusion"conducted by the Laboratory of Language, Interaction, and Meaning-Making/Design (LINC-Design) from PUC-Rio, in partnership with the "Nucleus of Study and Action Youth's World" (NEAM, free translation), the PUC-Rio's Pastoral Church, and financed by Game in Lab. The project is mostly based on the "Design and Partnership" methodology, which focuses on developing projects in partnership with the people who would benefit from them, and the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) guidelines, which focus on empowering youths to take leading roles in conducting research, especially about themselves, and in underprivileged contexts. Furthermore, this project is part of PUC-Rio's humanitarian mission through its Extension Projects initiative, which favors projects that focus on having a positive social impact in the surrounding communities, such as Rocinha. This paper's main objectives are to shed light into the planning that went behind the project, and how it furthers PUC-Rio's Extension Projects initiative by applying active and participatory research methodologies with underprivileged groups.

## 2. The Project's Objectives

Based on our laboratory's previous experiences partnering with NEAM, which is a part of PUC-Rio that provides learning opportunities and apprenticeship programs for underprivileged teenagers and young adults inside of PUC-Rio, it was relayed to us that many of the young apprentices, even after starting their apprenticeships, still did not feel truly welcomed in the University's facilities. This sentiment is echoed by the self entitled "Bastards of PUC" [Bastardos da PUC-Rio, n.d.]: a play on words on how PUC-Rio's students are generally called "Children of PUC". PUC-Rio's Bastards is a collective of students that attend PUC by means of low-income scholarships and express the feeling that, by not being part of the middle-class, they don't truly belong there, or, at least, are treated as if they didn't belong [Franco, 2018].

This type of feeling is a very common side effect of PUC-Rio's humanitarian mission and promotion of integration between people from different backgrounds. By virtue of being a Communitary University – a type of private institution with a considerable share of scholarships, that promotes social liberation through affirmative action and extension projects –, there's a perceptible social inequality between students from upper-class and lower-class backgrounds. However unintentional, this inequality leads to this perceived social stratification, which is dealt with through the institution's extension programs. As explained by Oliveira (2022), Communitary Universities have the mission of promoting social cohesion and citizenship, considering that they are tied to society by "a conductive thread of social commitment" (p.19).

To address this issue, we proposed an extension project that focused on using tabletop games as catalysts to engage those youths from underprivileged backgrounds in PUC-Rio's community, considering that, even though the institution has lots of initiatives in place to integrate students from diverse backgrounds, there still are some bridges to gap. Our main hypothesis was that, by sharing enjoyable experiences through games, the young apprentices would feel more at ease, and people who shared those experiences with them would form more meaningful bonds, encouraging them to actively foster a more welcoming environment outside of the game sessions. Based on documents that explain educational and social benefits of playing tabletop games [Devir Escolas, 2016, 2018; Galápagos Jogos, 2022], we selected ten games that develop "linguistic", "intrapersonal" and "interpersonal" skills, from Galapagos Jogos' "Catalog of Educational Games" (Free Translation), considering that they would further encourage the interactions between players to be meaningful, shared experiences.

## 3. Project Conduction and Results

Considering that we were dealing with youths from underprivileged backgrounds, we applied our resources to provide transportation and meals, while also not making any demands in return, so they were free to stop attending the project without fear of repercussions. Through those actions, we tried to foster a welcoming environment that would be significant to those who managed to attend the project during its entirety. We also employed the Design in Partnership methodology, which, as explained by Araujo, Cortês and Farbiarz (2020), "intends not only to generate products, but also, and mainly, to generate trains of thoughts based on the relationships with other, whose focus is on

what it means to value one another, in what it means to exist on our planet, in what it means to be part of a social group. It intends to foster solidarity and cooperative attitudes, in a way that makes it so we can experience respectful, reciprocal, and humane relationships, in consonance with the thoughts of Humberto Maturana." (Free translation). Ultimately, its goal is to provide more meaningful products, processes, services and experiences to everyone involved in them.

Moreover, by partnering with NEAM and applying Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) principles [Cammarota, J.; Fine, M.; 2008; Mirra, N.; Garcia, A.; Morrell, E., 2006], we assembled a team of former NEAM young-apprentices and PUC-Rio students that were already engaged in social projects, which will be referred to as "Young Researchers" (YR). The main purposes of this team were to foster a more welcoming environment to the Project Participants (PP), since they come from similar backgrounds; act as medium between the Research Team (RT) and PP; provide an opportunity for the YR to engage in an international research project and be trained to become game monitors; and provide them with financial aids that could help them in their learning journeys. This process was summarized by Sousa (2023, in press) in his Doctoral Thesis, in which he reports about the potential for the collective development of projects in partnership with young people from different socioeconomic Backgrounds, based on the projects he was part of during this doctoral research. The first of these projects, which is called the "Welcoming Group", is part of the "Youths of the Present Anticipating Desirable Futures" initiative, from PUC-Rio's Vice-Rectory of University Extension Pedagogical Strategy, and provided the founding basis for the Game in Lab project: periodical meetings, accompanied by collective meals and snacks, during which young people could participate in light-hearted activities, but also engage in projects and courses provided by PUC-Rio. To illustrate how this process was specifically conducted during the Game in Lab project, Sousa provided a figure that focuses on the YR contributions for the project, which was translated into Fig 1.
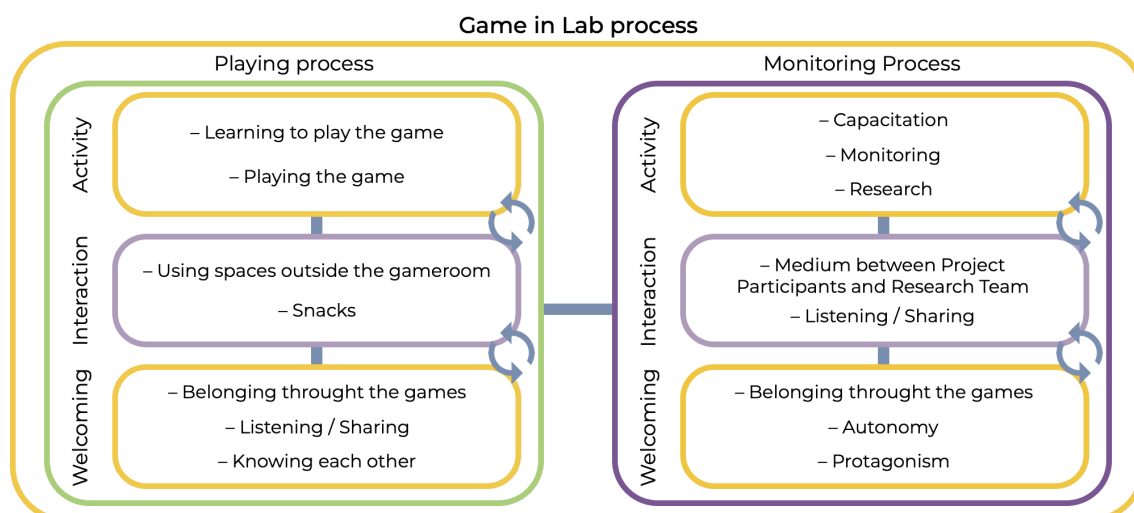


**Figure 1. Free translation of the Image produced by Sousa (2023, in press).**

The Game in Lab project was also the first part of Léste's field research for his ongoing doctoral research – with the intention of offering a non-formal formation to youths from underprivileged backgrounds to be able to form a team of young

researchers that will be responsible for adapting existing games and design new ones, both with inclusive and liberating approaches. As a first step towards this goal, The YR received training sessions in how to properly teach other people how to play games – based on the RT's previous experience with the subject – so that they could be the main group to interact with the PP. They also went through two training sessions about how to propose research hypotheses and parameters (Fig. 2), as well as how to evaluate empiric data to validate their own. This was of particular importance so that they would be truly active agents in the research, instead of only following the cues provided to them. Naturally, some of them were initially more adept at those tasks, but they eventually started sharing tips and helping one another.
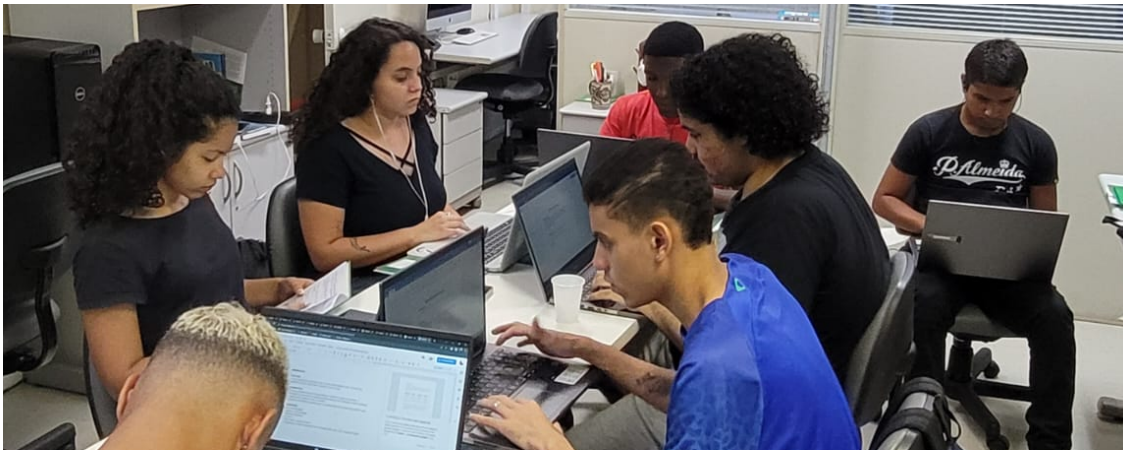


**Figure 2. Young Researchers developing their hypotheses for the project.**

The project started with 21 PP and finished with 9. This decreased happen due to some factors: some of the PP got apprenticeship jobs through their participation in the project (which is NEAM's main goal); the biweekly meetings – since the physical space was also used for other activities – which decreased engagement; the second half of the project coinciding with the exam period for the schooling year; and a conflict between some PP outside of the project, that already knew each other. On the other hand, during its conduction, the lines between the YR and PP became somewhat muddy, since they often ended up playing all together. Even though that was not the initial intention for the project, this was considered an interesting development – which was aligned with the project's objective: by actively playing the games, instead of just observing and taking notes, the YR were more meaningfully bonding with the PP. They routinely started bending rules in favor of more enjoyable playing experiences. While not overtly encouraged, this was interpreted as part of the Design in Partnership methodology, in which every participant has an active role in shaping the processes that are happening.

By the end of the project, there was a truly noticeable difference in the demeanor of all the YR – especially two of them, who had struggled the most during the beginning. They were much more outgoing, confident – as evidenced by them making jokes, being more present, and inviting some of the other YR to do activities outside of project hors. Moreover, at the beginning of the project, they were still struggling with finishing high school, and had signaled that they were unfit for school when we first met them and held our initial training sessions; however, after doing their final presentation

about their hypotheses, they even started considering taking on University Admission Exams – which they previously considered to not be a true option for themselves.

We were also able to allocate part of the remaining budget to provide the YR with new laptops for them to further their studies, drastically changing their access to the digital infrastructure currently required by High Education Courses. Even if they do not follow this particular life path, we consider it part of our mission to enable them, to the best of our abilities, to have the security to consider this option, if that is what they want. Moreover, we managed to donate one game to each of the remaining participants, and four sets of games to partner institutions that promote social change – PUC-Rio's Pastoral Church, PUC-Rio's Vice-Rectory of University Extension Projects, NEAM, and the Maria Dolores Toy Library. With those donations, we were able to allow more underprivileged youth to have access to the social and educational benefits of playing games, which might not be readily available to them otherwise.

## 4. Conclusion and Takeaways

When dealing with social inequality issues, we must consider a series of factors: monetary barriers that might need to be overcome to even begin with; self-esteem issues, of societal roots, that might convince people they are not worth opportunities; how welcoming new environments are; among others. In that regard, Extension Projects offer some of the best opportunities for research to be put to practice in meaningful, and impactful ways. By conducting projects that focus on participation, collaboration and the protagonism of underprivileged groups through the Design in Partnership methodology, we are able to provide the tools for people to be self-determinant and to become multipliers of this knowledge in their own contexts and communities.

When we factor games in this context, this process can be even more potent. Much of what is considered "learning" is tied to the schooling system, since formal education is often perceived as a "better" educational model; however, non-formal education, which happens outside of the classroom, in less structured ways, is a highly effective method in promoting socialization and liberation for learners (Gohn, 2003). In a country where the public education system is overcrowded and underfunded, it is no surprise that many students feel unfit. So, for some of the PP and YR, incorporating games in an educational scenario allowed them to perceive "learning" as a more positive and enjoyable experience that can happen outside of classroom settings. Moreover, by employing active research methodologies, such as YPAR, we allowed the next generation of researchers to experiment in a controlled setting, with the full support of a veteran team and the funds from a privately funded international project. Without even realizing, we fostered the scenario in which the YR filled the space of an aspirational group for the PP, that we hypothesized would be filled by teachers, students and staff.

This result brings to light the importance of employing active and participatory methodologies in university extension projects, as the RT was unable to accurately predict what would count as aspirational for the PP. On the other hand, the YR were uniquely qualified to identify and promote aspirational experiences, by virtue of being from a similar background than the PP. Finally, our main takeaway from the project is that the social inequality that our underprivileged students face is not a matter of lacking capacity, but of not being offered the same kinds of opportunities as others are.

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