

Playing the Game: Using VR and Gaming to inspire and engage young people in Havant



The People

New Theatre Royal Portsmouth

Active Communities Network

University of Portsmouth (Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries)

The Project

Game On! was created in response to a brief as part of The Arts and Culture Investment Programme, co-supported by Artswork and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The programme aimed to reduce antisocial behaviour and youth offending rates through sustainable high quality arts and cultural activities, with Arts Council England's Quality Principles at their heart.

A group of young people from Leigh Park (either already known to the police or recognised at risk of offending by their schools and other agencies) were invited to take part in the project, which ran from November 2016 to February 2017. All were consumers of games, but through this they were able to actually discover the processes and learn some of the techniques and skills involved in creating games for themselves.

Working with the University of Portsmouth's School of Creative Technology, the project introduced the young people to new activities, using creativity as part of a skill-building process. They were able to complete the project having achieved an Arts Award, and having their creative

The young people achieved Arts Award and had their creative work recognised and given status. It's helped to build their sense of achievement, self-esteem and has enabled them to learn new skills.

Liz Weston, New Theatre Royal



work recognised and given legitimate status. At the heart of the project were themes of character development, changing attitudes and creating lasting, positive outcomes to counter anti-social behaviour and reduce the chances of offending/re-offending.

Leigh Park in Havant was the project's target, as it is an area with limited access to arts and cultural activities. As a location, it is stigmatised by known levels of deprivation and youth crime. Young males aged 13-19 were identified in consultation with Julian Wadsworth at Active Communities Network as the demographic most at risk of involvement in criminal activity in the area. Because these were young people with multiple issues, some of them with additional learning needs, we wanted to ensure they succeeded. To aid in this, we brought in a qualified Arts Award adviser to support their work and liaise with workshop leaders and staff. Arts Award was deliberately built into the project so that the participants did not feel they were 'back at school', somewhere they associated with personal failure.

After discussions with the Creative Technology staff at University of Portsmouth, it was agreed that the project would be based around working with a mobile phone game-building app, which enabled participants to build their own simple games: <http://appinventor.mit.edu/explore/>

As well as learning how to use the app in the 'formal' sessions, the young people were able to

"We build young people's skills, improve confidence and self-esteem, broaden their horizons and raise ambitions, to ensure they can succeed in employment, education and training."

Active Communities Network



explore the possibilities and experiment with it in their own time.

Measuring the project against Arts Council England's Quality Principles

Access to Resources for a High-Quality Experience

Having the project take place at the University meant being able to provide high quality resources for the young people, whilst enabling them to experience a diverse community. It was out of their comfort zone, but the unique experience was the best way to provide hands-on support from the Creative Technology tutor and staff from Active Communities Network.

One of the sessions took place in the university's Virtual Reality Room, a world-class resource that was both exciting and inspirational for the young people.

Being Authentic

The project was rooted in actual problem-solving and creative decision-making, using real applications and with end results that the young people could share with others and pass on their skills to. The setting added to the authenticity of the work they were doing – for that period of time, they were themselves a part of the University.

Gaming and digital activity is central to the lives of most young people and this project was designed to give them access to new skills that they could learn quickly, and that would enable them to master technology.

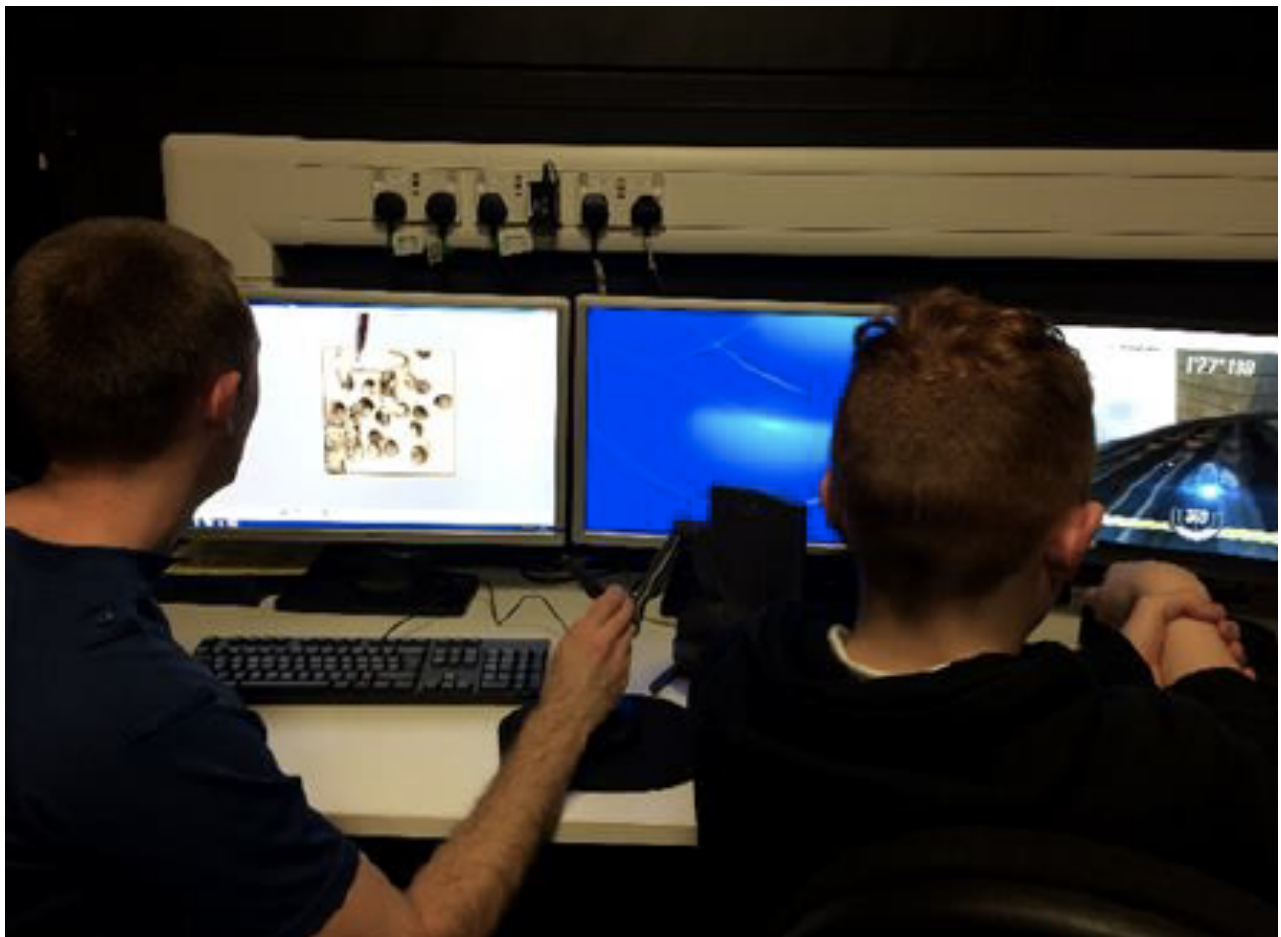
Being Exciting, Inspiring and Engaging

The subject matter of the project was in itself exciting for the young people but it was the involvement of Geoffrey 'Tiny' Turner that really provided inspiration and engagement.

Tiny tutored the project and was the key to its success. A large, tattooed Hell's Angel with a Master's degree, he established a rapport with the students, and they in turn liked and respected him. He himself has a disability and was aware of and understood the difficulties the young people experienced in their backgrounds. Because it was a small group with a high support staff/participant ratio, Tiny was able to give the young people personal attention when they needed it, encouraging them and working out the best ways for them to access the learning.

Ensuring a Positive and Inclusive Experience

Because all the young people recruited to the project had expressed an interest in digital work and gaming, the sessions concentrated on them participating directly in the learning and creating process. They worked individually but also with each other, and we were impressed at how



The session in the Virtual Reality Room was a combination of exploration, wild excitement and sheer amazement, as they explored and 'played' with the equipment.

Liz Weston, New Theatre Royal

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successful they worked as part of a team, cooperating in the processes and supporting each other throughout.

They also shared their new skills with friends and family members and came into sessions eager to show each other (and their tutor) what they had created since the previous week. Their confidence was clearly boosted and it made the whole experience very positive for them.

Actively Involving Children and Young People

This was a very hands-on project. The young people were given the tools, shown how to use them, and were able to use them creatively. They were supported and encouraged by the workshop leader, ACN staff, and the other participants themselves.

A film crew, consisting of three third-year students, were brought into record the project in action. They related well to the young people and became an integral part of it too. This was an unexpected outcome from their involvement – one of the participants was especially excited by their presence. He became directly involved in the filming during the second half of the project, using the camera and spending time with the crew. The film crew are now planning the making of a further documentary with him.

Enabling Personal Progression

The project enabled progression in a number of ways:

- When using the Virtual Reality Room, two of the young people were confident enough to engage with technical staff they had not met before, even explaining to them how to use one of the applications, much to the delight of the staff.

- At the celebration event at the end of the project, six of the participants attended with members of their families, where they watched film, received their Arts Award certificates and enjoyed pizza. It was a big deal that they felt confident enough to attend the event, and some brought along extended family as well, showing they were proud of their involvement and personal achievements.
- The project raised the young people's aspirations – all of them expressed an interest in doing more learning and some even asked how they could work towards getting into College and University. We worked with them to discuss pathways they could follow to develop their interest within Further Education.

Developing Belonging and Ownership

There is no doubt that the participants felt a strong sense of ownership of the project. They were able to learn new skills and then demonstrate these skills outside the sessions – at home, in school and with their friends. We heard from their families and schools how involved they had been in the project, and how much they had talked about it at school – to the envy of their fellow pupils.

They talked about the environment and the university – not just about what they had directly been doing. They owned the whole experience. The celebration event was always planned as a part of the project, but it was more of a success that we had anticipated. It was held in their own community, at the Leigh Park Community Centre. Proud parents told us how much their sons had

When asked to join the project as a role model for younger participants, V's first reaction was to laugh. However, when staff talked him through it, he rose to the challenge and took the responsibility seriously, modelling good behaviour and encouraging others.

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I really appreciate the opportunities you have given me. It's building my confidence and giving me things I can put on my CV. *Game On!* has been really interesting and I've learnt lots.

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‘V’, Participant

enjoyed the project and teachers told us the impact it had made within the context of the classroom too.

Recommendations for others planning similar projects

- Set up a foundation/introductory session at the beginning of the project, so you can identify early on the interests and abilities of the young people involved.
- Explore the possibility of designing one-off engagements or shorter-term interventions for those who may struggle to complete longer courses/projects.

Feedback

“Being on the project has been amazing! Tiny has blown my mind with all this technology stuff and I love filming and games myself, so this has been really good. The guys here get that I can't always concentrate and they help me keep focused and keep me going. I've started making my own YouTube channel with my scooter, so this project has given me loads of ideas for that too. I can't wait to have more time to focus on that.”
(Participant)

“It's been really interesting and I've learnt lots.”
(Participant)

“This project has been a wonderful example of the mutually beneficial opportunities that can arise from collaborative working between the University and its partners in the community. It is pleasing to see the positive impact it has had on participants and I look forward to the project being developed even further to help the wider community.” (Simon Brookes, Interim Dean of the Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of Portsmouth)

“The Game On! project has been a fantastic experience for these young people, giving them the opportunity to develop new transferable skills, which has resulted in increased confidence and raised aspirations. These young men who have never visited the University before are passionate about gaming and have really benefited from working with enthusiastic lecturers and students. They have been able to increase their knowledge of career pathways in this exciting sector, and all the young people have progressed to work independently to design and develop their own gaming app, earning an Arts Award in recognition of their hard work.” (Julian Wadsworth MBE, National Partnerships Manager, Active Communities Network)

“I didn't really know what to expect but the young people have been amazing. The way they have worked on the project has been tremendous; it has been very rewarding and enjoyable.”
(Geoffrey ‘Tiny’ Turner, Course Tutor, Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of Portsmouth)

“It was an insightful experience to liaise with professional clients in order to produce a good standard of material that can be used for years to come. My team were able to gain professional experience, build client communication skills and have the chance to work directly with one of the young people on the programme. Thank you for giving us the opportunity.” (Roger dos Santos, third year Film student, University of Portsmouth)

“He enjoyed it so much – it was all he talked about when he came home!” (Parent of participant)

‘X’ was referred by police to CAN due to concerns he was vulnerable and displaying risk-taking behaviours around drugs, anti-social behaviour and radicalisation. *Game On!* has been significant for X, giving him something positive to focus on and enabling him to pursue an existing interest.

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Legacy

- Working closely with Active Communities Network, one of the young people involved in *Game On!* is now working with the same third-year film students to make a documentary film.
- The young people are to attend a special workshop session at New Theatre Royal, where they will meet Theatre Technicians and be shown how lighting and sigh systems work. They are going to attend a suitable performance at the theatre later this year.
- We are also in the process of looking at ways we can signpost them to future opportunities.

Final Thoughts

This project was a very rewarding experience for all involved. It was simple in its central themes, but has produced what appear to be life-changing outcomes for some of the participants. *Game On!* not only involved young people, university staff and students, but has led to a strong partnership between the three partner organisations. Every organisation and individual involved in the project – including Hampshire Police – has benefited. We have been able to create a successful model for future collaborative working.

The lecturer's remarks on Y's quick grasp of app-building clearly had a positive impact on his confidence. He was seen frequently helping the young person next to him throughout the project.

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Credits

Taken from: *Game On!* Evaluation Report by Liz Weston, Education and Outreach Officer, New Theatre Royal

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