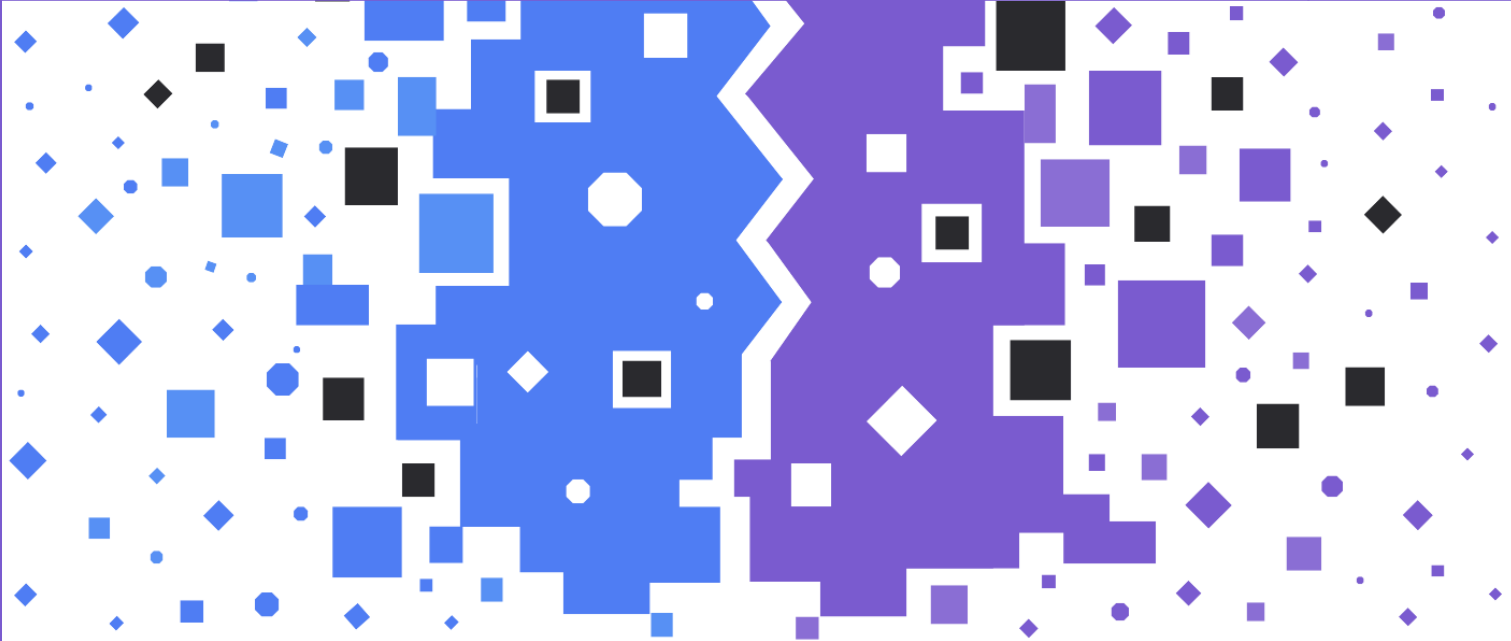




dystolarp

Booklet on dystopia as civic education

LIVEFORM



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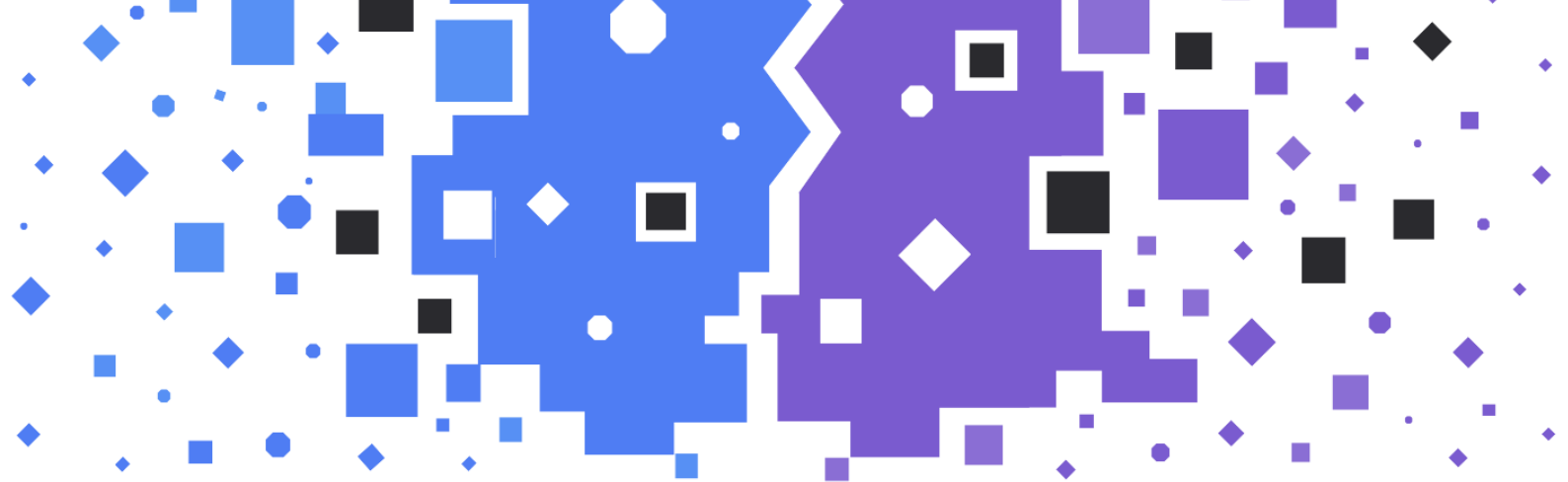


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About this booklet and its companion resources

Written by Katerina Stoyanova (CVS-Bulgaria)

This booklet provides the conceptual foundation for the Dystolarp project's educational approach. It is written **for educators, youth workers, and facilitators** who want to understand the **theoretical basis for using dystopian fiction and games in civic education** before implementing activities with young people.

The booklet is organised into two parts.

About Part I: Dystopia in education

This part establishes the educational case for using dystopian fiction with young people.

- ◆ **Chapter 1** introduces dystopia as a general concept.
- ◆ **Chapter 2** focuses on non-formal civic education, examining how dystopian fiction and games are used in youth work, community programs, and experiential learning contexts, including the ways in which young people themselves engage with dystopian content as a form of sense-making.
- ◆ **Chapter 3** focuses on formal education settings – schools, colleges, and universities – analysing how dystopian texts appear in curricula, what learning outcomes they support, and how they relate to established civic competence frameworks.



About Part II: Educational dystopian games

This part explores the specific contribution of games and role-play to civic learning.

- ◆ **Chapter 4** provides a theoretical and practical framework for understanding games and gamification in civic education, with particular attention to why dystopian framing is especially well suited to game-based learning.
- ◆ **Chapter 5** analyses a series of case studies – video games, board games, and tabletop role-playing games – that have been used in educational contexts, examining what each makes possible and what evidence exists for their effectiveness.
- ◆ **Chapter 6** focuses specifically on live-action role-playing (larp) as the most immersive form of dystopian civic education, offering an introduction to key concepts in transformative larp design and their application to Dystolarp scenarios.

How to use this booklet

Each chapter is written by a different project partner and can be read as a standalone introduction to its topic. Together, they build a layered argument: that **dystopian fiction offers a uniquely powerful set of tools for civic education**; that games and role-play extend those tools into embodied, immersive experience; and that carefully designed and facilitated larp is one of the most effective ways currently available for **helping young people develop the competences they need to participate meaningfully in democratic and civic life**.

The companion resource is the **Dystolarp curriculum**, a practical implementation guide designed for facilitators who are ready to design and run dystopian larp sessions. Where this booklet explains why the approach works, the curriculum explains how to put it into practice – including scenario design, safety structures, accessibility adaptations, facilitation techniques, and assessment frameworks. Readers who move from this booklet to the curriculum should find the theoretical grounding provided here makes the practical guidance easier to apply with intention.



Part I: Dystopia in education

Chapter 1: Introduction to dystopia

Written by Katerina Stoyanova (CVS-Bulgaria)

1.1 What is dystopia?

The word “dystopia” is, in its most literal sense, the **opposite of utopia** – a bad place rather than a good one.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “a **very bad or unfair society** in which there is a lot of suffering, especially an **imaginary society in the future, after something terrible has happened**”.

Wikipedia describes dystopia as “an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, de-humanised, fearful lives” – often a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.

Merriam-Webster offers a comparable formulation: “an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, de-humanised, fearful lives.

In the academic literature, Tom Moylan describes dystopian fiction as work that “explores societies in which social and political systems have gone wrong” (Moylan 2000, 2), while Gregory Claeys situates dystopia as a tradition concerned above all with “modern despotism” and its mechanisms of control (Claeys 2016).

Yet dystopia is never merely about darkness for its own sake. The dystopian imagination is fundamentally a critical and political one – a form of storytelling that uses exaggerated or collapsed representations of current realities to **expose the mechanisms of power, injustice, and social failure**.



Dystopia is also, in an important sense, inseparable from utopia: both genres orbit the dream of a better future, and dystopia is best understood as what happens when that dream is twisted, distorted, or placed permanently out of reach (Cole 2025).

What unites these definitions is the essentially critical and political character of dystopian fiction: it is not merely about darkness or suffering, but about the **failure of human institutions and the corruption of the dream of a better future**.

Across the Dystolarp project's materials, dystopia is defined consistently as:

A **fictional society** in which social, political, or environmental systems have failed or become oppressive – one that **exaggerates present-day dynamics** to make their underlying logic visible, contestable, and ultimately changeable.

This definition places dystopia firmly in the realm of fiction – an imagined, constructed world – while insisting that the world it constructs is always already in conversation with the real one. That double movement is precisely what makes the genre such a powerful resource for education.

1.2 A brief history of the genre

The dystopian genre as we recognise it today emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shaped by the **crisis of industrial capitalism and the rise of totalitarian politics**. Early landmarks include Yevgeny Zamyatin's "**We**" (1921), Aldous Huxley's "**Brave New World**" (1932), and George Orwell's "**Nineteen Eighty-Four**" (1949).

Each took a different feature of modernity – bureaucratic rationalism, consumerism, and totalitarian surveillance, respectively – and extended it to its logical extreme. Gregory Claeys (2017), in his comprehensive study of the genre, traces this tradition back further still, to Swift's "**Gulliver's Travels**" (1726) and the long lineage of satirical imagined societies that preceded it.



The post-war decades produced further canonical works, each responding to the specific anxieties of its historical moment:

- ◆ Ray Bradbury's "**Fahrenheit 451**" (1953) – exploring censorship and the erosion of intellectual life under media saturation;
- ◆ Margaret Atwood's "**The Handmaid's Tale**" (1985) – examining patriarchal control and the systematic removal of bodily autonomy;
- ◆ Octavia Butler's "**Parable of the Sower**" (1993) – addressing racial inequality, climate collapse, and community survival in a fracturing state;
- ◆ Suzanne Collins' "**The Hunger Games**" (2008) – depicting spectacle, extreme economic inequality, and organised youth resistance.

Since the turn of the millennium, the genre has **migrated beyond the page into film, television, video games, and live-action role-play** – the last of which is central to this booklet and to the Dystolarp project. Dystopian storytelling has also **expanded beyond its Western origins**: rich traditions now exist across Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa, each inflected by its own specific political histories and fears (Baccolini and Moylan 2003).

Tom Moylan (2000), whose foundational work on the critical utopia has shaped the field, argues that **the best dystopian texts are never simply pessimistic**. They contain within them what he calls a "utopian impulse" – a residual hope, a fragment of resistance, a community that refuses to submit entirely.

This **tension between darkness and the possibility of change** is precisely what makes dystopia educationally productive rather than merely demoralising. A well-designed dystopian experience should leave participants not frightened of the future, but more critically aware and more motivated to shape it.

1.3 Common themes

Across the broad spectrum of dystopian fiction, a set of recurring themes can be identified:

- ◆ **Strict social control:** The governing power extends its reach into every aspect of daily life, leaving little room for individual autonomy or dissent.

- ◆ **Erasure of individuality:** The system demands sameness; deviation from prescribed norms is treated as a threat to be corrected or eliminated.
- ◆ **Propaganda:** The regime replaces truth with constructed narratives designed to maintain loyalty and suppress doubt.
- ◆ **Censorship:** Dissenting viewpoints are removed from public life, making critical thought difficult and dangerous.
- ◆ **Technology:** Technological advances become instruments of control and exploitation rather than tools for human flourishing.
- ◆ **Social stratification:** Society is organised into fixed hierarchies – defined by birth, profession, or loyalty – designed to be impossible to escape.
- ◆ **Environmental destruction:** The natural world is exploited or collapsed, often by the same systems that oppress the population.

1.4 Common tropes

Alongside these themes, dystopian fiction relies on a set of recognisable narrative tropes:

- ◆ **The protagonist rebels:** A central character who cannot accept the world as given drives the narrative through acts of resistance, however small.
- ◆ **History is erased and hidden:** Control over the present depends on eliminating evidence of the past; without history, a population cannot imagine alternatives.
- ◆ **Memory:** Against this erasure, the preservation and transmission of memory becomes a quiet but radical act.
- ◆ **The power of language:** Language is a political instrument: limit the vocabulary available to people and you limit the thoughts they can think.
- ◆ **The Big Brother surveillance state:** Pervasive monitoring – by the state, by technology, or by neighbours pressured into complicity – ensures no space remains private or safe.
- ◆ **Dehumanisation:** The system reduces people to a function or a file number, stripping away the complexity and dignity that make them fully human.

1.5 Common narratives

Dystopian stories follow recognisable narrative structures, each carrying distinct implications for learners:

- ◆ **The dystopia is prevented through a pre-emptive victory.** The protagonist recognises what is about to happen and prevents it – a narrative of vigilance and timely action.
- ◆ **The dystopian system is challenged and defeated.** Resistance builds, organises, and ultimately prevails, foregrounding the power of collective action.
- ◆ **The dystopia is challenged and defeated, but the victory is pyrrhic.** The system falls at catastrophic cost, raising questions about what resistance demands and what it destroys.
- ◆ **The dystopian system is challenged but is not defeated.** Resistance is possible but insufficient, making space for individual defiance without systemic change.
- ◆ **The dystopian system completely crushes any resistance.** All opposition is extinguished, prompting learners to ask what conditions make systems so entrenched that change becomes impossible.

Not all narrative structures are equally suited to every educational context. In Dystolarp scenarios, we specifically favour narratives of pre-emptive victory and collective defeat of the system, as these are most likely to inspire participants to engage with real-life civic challenges and take action after the game has ended. Narratives in which resistance is crushed or goes unresolved can be valuable for building empathy and critical reflection but require particularly careful facilitation.

1.6 Categories of dystopia

Classical literary theory identifies four canonical categories (Cleays 2016): **Orwellian** ("1984"), **Kafkaesque** ("The Trial", "The Castle"), **Huxleyan** ("Brave New World"), and **Phildickian** ("Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?").

Contemporary stories in newer media do not always fit neatly into these frameworks, and a broader categorisation is more useful for educators:

- ◆ **Futuristic dystopias** imagine societies shaped by technological advance, corporate power, or social engineering – from cyberpunk and AI takeover scenarios to space feudalism and segregated cities.
- ◆ **Post-apocalyptic dystopias** depict societies surviving collapse caused by environmental catastrophes, war, or systemic failure. Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower" (1993) is a widely used example in civic education contexts.
- ◆ **Historical and contemporary political dystopias** are grounded in recognisable realities: authoritarian rule, occupation, religious extremism, colonialism, and systemic racism. Atwood, Alderman, and Collins are prominent examples.
- ◆ **Other categories** include mega-corporate dystopias, techno-feudalism, and works combining several threads simultaneously – which are often the richest for educational use.

It is important to note that a single scenario can fit into several categories at once. The most effective educational uses of dystopia often draw on multiple threads simultaneously, combining political critique with environmental stakes and questions of identity, memory, and resistance.

1.7 Dystopia and civic education

One of dystopia's most important educational properties is the **protective distance** it offers. Because injustice and suffering belong to characters in a fictional world, learners can **examine difficult civic questions with a degree of emotional safety** that direct engagement with current events does not always permit.

Within a dystopian scenario, questions about where power lies, whether institutions are just, how to resist manipulation, and what compliance or dissent costs become approachable and urgent. Learners can inhabit those questions rather than merely observe them.

This approach is particularly well suited to the current moment. Research suggests that many young people already carry significant anxiety about the political and



environmental world they are inheriting, along with deep frustration toward institutions that have failed to protect their future.

Dystopian fiction can meet young people in that emotional reality – validating their concerns while opening space for imagination, agency, and change. Used with careful facilitation, dystopian scenarios build critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and the political imagination that makes civic engagement feel personally urgent rather than abstract.

Chapter 2: Dystopian fiction in non-formal civic education

Written by Metka Bahlen Okoli (Zavod Bob)

2.1 The role of dystopia in civic education

Following the definitions, narratives and categories, we learnt that dystopia can represent current living realities in an exaggerated or collapsed manner. In this way it serves as a **tool to critically comment our society** – its structures, power dynamics, and ethical boundaries. It allows educators and researchers to present complex topics in ways that can offer an authentic experience to the learners. By placing them within imagined worlds, dystopia can **bring abstract issues closer to one's reality**, making them feel relatable and urgent.

When we talk about live-action role-playing, we can draw some parallels to playing computer games. Referring to the research on game studies in the Studies of Digital Media Culture, done by Gerald Farca (2018), we may conclude that players 'play through' their anxiety. According to the research, here are the traits that the dystopian games have to offer:

- ◆ Players live **inside the dystopian story** of the game and they **experience the nightmarish world** firsthand
- ◆ The virtual world is in fact a **depiction of the real anxiety** about environmental disaster and political failure
- ◆ The games **offer something that real life does not** – a chance to make choices and take action

- 
- ◆ In games, young players can **fight against the systems that oppress them**, making decisions that can change the course of the story, which gives them a sense of power that they often lack in reality.

By being a part of interactive narratives in the games, young people are not escaping reality, as may often be presented in the public discourse. What is really happening is that they are **rehearsing how to respond to real-life threats**. They are testing resistance and survival in a safe space where they can have full control. Succeeding in the game, even in a dark world, gives them a feeling of **capability and hope**. Through interactive stories, they are trying to make sense of a world that feels broken and to imagine how they might fix it, which can be a sign of deep care and a demand for justice.

2.2 For what purposes could dystopia be used?

Discoveries in the abovementioned research reveal what is going on within the players. However, the research doesn't talk about planned and reflected processes. This is an important feature within non-formal educational activities. The primary goals of using dystopia as a tool in civic education include:

- ◆ Stimulating **critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement**
- ◆ **Questioning conformity** and forcing confrontation with uncomfortable truths
- ◆ Deepening **empathy** and **analytical skills**
- ◆ Sparking demand for **change** and **activation**.

2.3 Do young people care about anything at all?

As presented in the large survey published in The Lancet Planetary Health in 2021 (Hickman et al. 2021), a vast majority of young people aged 16 to 25 feel very worried about climate change. Traditional civic education often relies on rational arguments and principles of democracy. This approach can feel distant from the urgent emotional reality young people face today. Dystopian fiction brings a specific dimension where students can emotionally **experience the consequences of injustice and uneven and unjust power distribution**. This genre allows learners to experience



the perspective of those living under oppressive regimes, bringing a sense of empathy that factual analysis couldn't achieve.

By engaging with these stories, young people **learn about civic responsibilities** and besides that feel the weight of choices in a safe yet immersive environment. This rehearsal for life **transforms their anxiety into an understanding of what the real risks are**. The call to action becomes personal rather than a theoretical obligation. Despite the many traits of the genre, dystopia can cause discomfort or anxiety if not presented thoughtfully. It requires careful facilitation to ensure safety parallel to the intellectual and emotional challenge.

2.4 Examples and practices of dystopian fiction in non-formal civic education

The following examples demonstrate that dystopian fiction is used for various different purposes – as **a tool for digital resistance, political protest, and empathy building**, directly addressing the feelings of anxiety and betrayal identified in research among young people.

While specific data on non-formal workshops is often internal to NGOs and non-formal education outcomes are rarely quantified in publicly indexed reports, the information and verification of the examples is retrieved from the verifiable sources such as news coverage (documenting the specific use of the fiction), 17 organisational blogs and websites from the organisations involved (documenting the method), academic case studies on (documenting the outcomes and pedagogy).

Example 1: Dystopiality

“Dystopiality” was a youth exchange project implemented in 2022 and 2023, with its core activity being a one-week physical exchange held in Kłodzko, Poland. The exchange brought together young participants from seven countries, including Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Armenia, Georgia, and Kosovo.



Objectives

The aims, as mentioned by the creators of the project were:

- ◆ To raise awareness of issues of social importance (alienation, climate change or classification systems).
- ◆ To foster empathy and compassion towards people and current problems in the world.
- ◆ To increase knowledge of social issues.
- ◆ To strengthen the participants' ability to speak in public.
- ◆ To increase their capacity for teamwork and their personal sense of initiative and creativity.

Methods and tools

The project utilised non-formal education methods centred around dystopian fiction and media.

- ◆ **Multimedia analysis and guided discussion:** Participants screened specific dystopian works: the film “1984” (based on Orwell's novel), the “Black Mirror” episode “Nosedive” (dealing with social credit scores), and the documentary “The Age of Stupid” (climate change). These screenings were followed by facilitated discussions to connect fictional scenarios to real-world issues like state control, social rating systems, and the climate crisis.
- ◆ **Theatrical role-play (Forum Theatre (Boal 2000) elements):** Participants selected quotes from George Orwell's “1984” and were required to act them out in front of the group to develop creativity and internalise the themes of oppression and control through performance.
- ◆ **Collaborative storytelling:** Groups created original stories from scratch based on dystopian themes from scratch based on dystopian themes expressed in formats they felt most comfortable with (e.g. oral, visual, dramatic) to encourage creative expression and teamwork.
- ◆ **Intercultural presentation:** Each national group prepared a presentation on 'dystopia-related elements currently occurring in their own countries to ground fictional themes in local realities and share diverse cultural perspectives on alienation and social issues.



Outcomes

Based on the summary provided in the Erasmus+ project card the project initiated a set of outcomes, recognised by the participants:

- ◆ **Increased capability of critical thinking:** Participants developed the ability to analyse current societies through the lens of dystopia, specifically recognising real-world parallels in state control and social classification systems.
- ◆ **Raised awareness on global issues:** The project highlighted allegedly 'impossible' current realities, specifically focusing on alienation, climate change, and social classification/radicalisation.
- ◆ **Skill development:** Improved skills of public speaking, teamwork, personal initiative, and creativity, gained knowledge of other cultures, increased sensibility and reduced intercultural divides.
- ◆ **Emotional growth:** The project fostered empathy and compassion towards people facing social problems globally, moving participants from passive observation to emotional engagement with these issues.

Example 2: EUtopia: youth-powered change from ideas to actions

EUtopia was an Erasmus+ initiative active from 2021 to 2023 involving a consortium of organisations from Poland, Hungary, Belgium, Italy, and France, specifically targeting young people aged 16 to 25, local youth workers, and decision-makers to foster active citizenship through the pedagogical concepts of utopia and dystopia.

Objectives

The primary objectives were:

- ◆ To awaken the desire to imagine and design a better world in young people.
- ◆ To shift their perspective from passive receivers of external circumstances to active agents of change.
- ◆ To equip them with critical thinking skills for analysing societal weaknesses and opportunities.
- ◆ To stimulate their ability to express opinions and project into the future.
- ◆ To teach them practical planning and organisational skills to transform utopian ideas into concrete civic actions.



Methods

The methodology focused on non-formal education techniques that used utopian and dystopian frameworks as **safe, fictional spaces to critically analyse reality** without the immediate pressure of real-world consequences. Facilitators guided participants through a **structured process of 'militant optimism,'** starting with theoretical exploration via a dedicated handbook that defined these concepts in a modern civic context.

Practical implementation involved a toolkit of various interactive methods: participants engaged in **creative workshops** like '**mind mapping**' their hometowns to visualise gaps between current reality and ideal futures, and '**brainwriting**' sessions to anonymously generate and build upon innovative solutions to local problems.

The project utilised **digital collaboration tools** such as **Mural** and **Padlet** for remote brainstorming and project planning, involving debate techniques like the 'disagreement pyramid' to teach constructive online dialogue and critical media literacy.

The key component was a residential training course held in spring 2024 for twenty young participants, where they applied these tools to **develop concrete project proposals**, practised 'cold emailing' and public speaking to engage local decision-makers, and used role-playing scenarios to simulate civic negotiations, ensuring a hands-on transition from abstract dreaming to actionable planning.

Outcomes

The outcomes included the creation of four key intellectual results:

- ◆ A **theoretical handbook** linking utopian thought to civic education.
- ◆ A **practical toolkit** of activities and action plans for youth workers.
- ◆ A **collaborative online platform** for sharing utopian actions and best practices.
- ◆ A **user guide** featuring models of successful youth-led projects.

The results were aimed collectively at empowering young people to overcome political apathy, develop a sense of agency and militant optimism, and acquire the skills necessary to design and implement initiatives that address societal challenges such as environmental sustainability and social inclusion.



Example 3: Letters from dystopian and utopian futures of arts education

The project titled Letters from dystopian and utopian futures of arts education was a speculative research initiative published in December 2020 by Florian Cramer and Michelle Teran from the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, Netherlands. Set as a **fictional correspondence from the year 2030**, it involved no physical participants but rather engaged the academic and artistic community through a narrative exploration of two possible futures for arts education following the crises of the 2020s.

Objectives

The primary objective was to **critique current trends in arts education**, such as the shift toward creative industries, the gig economy, and systemic exclusion, while at the same time envisioning a transformative model based on solidarity, decolonisation, and collective care. The authors wanted to provoke critical reflection on present-day decisions about curriculum, funding, and inclusivity.

Methods

The methodology relied completely on imaginary fiction, paying homage to William Morris's "News from Nowhere". The authors compiled two types of letters:

- ◆ The first imagined a dystopian 2030 where arts education became exclusive, market-driven, and irrelevant due to platform capitalism and cultural conservatism;
- ◆ The second described a utopian 2030 where the academy adopted collective horizontal leadership, inclusive groups for the marginalised, embodied research methods, and a language policy to reflect diverse identities.

This approach was a way for the authors to avoid traditional academic constraints, **using storytelling to express policy critiques and suggest pedagogical innovations**, such as mutual aid networks, inclusive exchange programs, and the use of the pronouns to signify interdependence. By introducing these concepts within a time-travel narrative, the project created a safe, imaginative space to explore fundamental structural changes without immediate political resistance.



Outcomes

The outcomes included a publication that served as a critical tool for arts educators and policymakers, offering a warning against market-driven and exclusive understanding of arts. Besides, it offered a **concrete guideline for inclusive and community-led structural change**. It successfully emphasised decolonising curricula, the ethics of care in education, and the potential for arts institutions to act as melting pots for social justice and collectivity rather than grounds for commercial growth.



Chapter 3: Dystopian fiction in formal civic education

Written by Benedicta Sannino (Euphoria Net)

In the previous subchapter, we explored why dystopian narratives are powerful tools in non-formal civic education, supporting critical reflection on power, justice, and active citizenship.

This section focuses on **formal civic education**, meaning structured learning within schools, colleges, and universities, where teaching follows defined curricula, learning objectives, and assessment methods. Unlike informal settings, formal education operates within institutional frameworks that shape what students are expected to learn and demonstrate.

Within these contexts, dystopian fiction has become an increasingly relevant pedagogical resource. Works such as “1984” or “The Hunger Games” are now commonly included in reading lists and interdisciplinary programmes linking literature with history, ethics, and civic education. At the same time, newer forms of media, including **games and interactive simulations**, are beginning to complement traditional texts, expanding how dystopian themes are explored in classrooms.

This subchapter examines how and why dystopian narratives are used in formal civic education, and what they can offer to learners.

3.1 Dystopian fiction in civic education curricula

Dystopian content is used across multiple subjects:

- ◆ **Literature and language classes**, where texts such as “1984”, “Fahrenheit 451”, or “The Handmaid’s Tale” are analysed for both literary and political meaning.
- ◆ **History and social sciences**, where fictional scenarios are connected to real historical events (e.g. totalitarian regimes or environmental crises).
- ◆ **Civics and citizenship education**, where dystopian narratives provide a framework for discussing democratic systems and civic responsibility.

In addition to books, some formal education contexts are beginning to integrate **digital and game-based dystopian narratives**. For example, narrative-driven video games or classroom simulations exploring surveillance, governance, or resource scarcity can complement traditional texts by offering interactive perspectives on similar themes.

Games such as “The Last of Us” can be used to explore ethical dilemmas related to survival, trust, and moral responsibility in post-collapse societies. Similarly, “This War of Mine” explores survival and ethical dilemmas in conflict situations. Another example is “Frostpunk”, which places players in charge of a society facing environmental collapse, requiring difficult decisions that balance survival, ethics, and social order.

These interactive experiences enable learners not only to analyse dystopian systems but to actively engage with them, reinforcing civic understanding through decision-making and reflection.

3.2 What dystopian fiction does in the classroom

Dystopian texts are not just interesting to read; they make students think in specific ways that are directly relevant to civic life. Here are the main things they help develop:

Critical thinking

Dystopian worlds are built from distorted or exaggerated versions of real social dynamics. When students read them carefully, they start to **question assumptions**, not just in the story, but in the real world around them. Hill (2023) found in her research that reading dystopian fiction can genuinely change how students think about institutions, authority, and social norms.

Ethical reasoning

Characters in dystopian stories are almost always forced to **make hard choices**: to obey or resist, to protect themselves or act for others, to stay silent or speak out. These dilemmas are not abstract philosophy, they feel real and urgent within the story. This makes them excellent starting points for classroom discussions about real ethical questions. Sypnowich (2019) argues that when used well, dystopian fiction does not just critique what is wrong with society; it also invites students to imagine what could be better.

Systems thinking

Dystopian narratives often **show how institutions, laws, and power structures shape people's lives** in ways they may not even notice. Stefanopoulou, Kechagias, and Malafantis (2021) explored this through the Divergent series, showing how fictional educational systems can prompt students to reflect on real ones. This kind of structural thinking – understanding how systems work, not just how individuals behave – is an important civic skill.

How this compares to traditional civic education

Traditional approaches to civic education often focus on facts and principles: how elections work, what rights citizens have, how laws are made. This knowledge is important, but it can feel abstract.

Dystopian fiction does something different:

- Instead of explaining what democracy is, it shows what life feels like without it.
- Instead of listing rights, it dramatises their absence.
- Instead of describing civic responsibility, it puts characters and readers in situations where that responsibility is tested.

This does not mean dystopian fiction should replace more structured civic education. But it can **powerfully complement** it, making abstract principles feel concrete and personally relevant.

Classroom activities

In practice, teachers use a range of activities to bring dystopian texts to life in civic education contexts:

- ◆ **Guided reading and discussion:** Structured conversations about key scenes and what they reveal about power, justice, or democratic values.
- ◆ **Scenario analysis:** Examining how specific decisions in the story lead to dystopian outcomes, and what could have been done differently.
- ◆ **Perspective exercises:** Students consider the story from different characters' points of view, developing empathy and analytical skill.
- ◆ **Debates and mock councils:** Students argue positions inspired by the text, practising the skills of civic deliberation.

In all of these, the teacher's role is crucial. Without good facilitation, students may read dystopia as pure entertainment or, at the other extreme, feel overwhelmed by its darker themes. Scaffolding and guided reflection are essential (Hill 2023).

3.3 What students learn: Civic awareness, ethics, and democratic competences

When dystopian fiction is taught well, it can produce real and meaningful learning across several areas.

Understanding how democracies can break down

Dystopian stories often show **democratic erosion as a gradual process** – not a sudden coup, but a slow narrowing of freedoms, a growing distrust of information, a creeping normalisation of surveillance or injustice. Recognising these patterns in fiction helps students **recognise them in real political contexts** too. As Synnowich (2019) notes, dystopia teaches us what is at stake when democratic norms weaken.

Civic responsibility and participation

Many dystopian stories include characters who resist, who refuse to comply, who organise, who act at personal cost. These figures model what **active citizenship** looks like, showing that it is not always easy or safe. Students who engage with these stories can begin to **develop their own sense of civic identity and responsibility**.

Ethical decision-making

The moral dilemmas in dystopian fiction (when is it right to disobey? who bears responsibility for collective injustice?) are not unique to fictional worlds. They are the kinds of questions citizens face in real democratic societies. Classroom engagement with these dilemmas builds the **capacity for nuanced, principled ethical reasoning** (Bonilla 2024).

Environmental and sustainability awareness

Many contemporary dystopian stories, especially those written for younger readers, are set in worlds shaped by environmental collapse, resource scarcity, or climate crisis. These narratives make visible the **long-term consequences of political inaction**



on environmental issues. Short (2025) highlights how these texts can stretch students' thinking toward future-oriented, sustainability-conscious civic engagement.

Links to European competence frameworks

These learning outcomes are not just informally valuable, they align directly with recognised frameworks for democratic citizenship education. The **Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture** (RFCDC), for example, identifies the following as core democratic competences – all of which are actively developed through well-taught dystopian fiction:

- ◆ Critical thinking and analytical reasoning
- ◆ Respect for human rights and human dignity
- ◆ Tolerance of ambiguity and complexity
- ◆ Civic-mindedness and a sense of collective responsibility
- ◆ Openness to sustainability and future-oriented thinking

3.4 Methods and classroom practices

There is no single right way to use dystopian fiction in civic education, the best approach depends on the age of the students, the subject, and the educational goals. Here is an overview of the most common and effective methods.

Reading and analysis

- ◆ **Comparative text analysis:** Students read two or more dystopian texts alongside each other or place a novel next to real historical or journalistic documents, looking for patterns and connections.
- ◆ **Historical parallels:** Teachers guide students to match elements of a dystopian story (surveillance systems, propaganda, class hierarchies) with real historical events. This deepens both literary understanding and historical knowledge.



Scenario-based and creative activities

- ◆ **"What if" scenarios:** Students are asked to think about what real-world conditions could lead to a situation like the one in the book, and what policy choices might have prevented it.
- ◆ **Alternative endings:** Students rewrite or extend the story in ways that reflect what they have learned about civic agency and democratic values, an exercise that is both creative and analytical.

Light simulation and role activities

These activities bring elements of role-play into the classroom without the full immersion of edu-larp (covered in later chapters):

- ◆ **Debates:** Students argue positions on political or ethical questions inspired by the text.
- ◆ **Mock parliaments or councils:** Students simulate democratic decision-making processes, practising the skills of deliberation, negotiation, and compromise.
- ◆ **Ethical councils:** Groups must collectively decide on a morally complex question. Students know they are playing roles, and the exercise is always followed by structured reflection.

Multimedia approaches

- ◆ **Film adaptations** (e.g. "The Hunger Games") can open up discussions about how medium and visual storytelling shape political meaning
- ◆ **Graphic novels** and **digital storytelling** reach learners who may be less comfortable with extended prose reading
- ◆ **Short documentary** or **news clips** can be paired with fictional texts to reinforce the connection between fiction and real-world civic issues



Assessment

How students are assessed also matters. The most effective approaches go beyond factual recall and ask students to demonstrate real understanding:

- ◆ **Reflective essays:** Students write about what the text revealed to them about civic life or democratic values.
- ◆ **Civic position papers:** Students take and argue a stance on a real civic issue that the text has illuminated.
- ◆ **Group presentations:** Students present their analysis collaboratively, developing communication and teamwork skills alongside civic literacy.

3.5 Opportunities and limitations in formal education

Using dystopian fiction in formal civic education brings real advantages but also genuine challenges. Being honest about both is important for educators who want to use these texts effectively.

What works well

- ◆ Dystopian texts have **curricular legitimacy**; when they appear on official reading lists, they signal that the civic questions they raise are genuinely important.
- ◆ They make **abstract civic concepts feel concrete** and emotionally relevant.
- ◆ They work across subject boundaries, supporting **interdisciplinary learning**.
- ◆ They can sustain **long-term impact** when integrated into a broader civic education programme over multiple years, rather than being used as a one-off activity.

What is more difficult

- ◆ **Time pressure:** Covering a novel thoroughly takes time that is often squeezed by other curriculum demands.
- ◆ **Standardised assessment:** Exam rubrics do not always reward the kind of open-ended, exploratory thinking that dystopian pedagogy works best with.

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- ◆ **Political sensitivity:** Some dystopian texts touch on themes (surveillance, authoritarianism, reproductive rights) that require careful handling in different cultural or political contexts.

Ethical risks and how to manage them

Two risks deserve attention:

- ◆ **Emotional overload:** Some students, especially younger ones, may find dystopian scenarios genuinely distressing. Teachers should be attentive to this and build in time for grounding and reassurance.
- ◆ **Fatalism:** If students encounter one bleak dystopian world after another without a framework for imagining change, they may conclude that political action is pointless. This is the opposite of what civic education should produce.

The best safeguard against both risks is good facilitation: **contextualising the text** within real-world history and politics, **guiding reflection** that connects fiction to democratic agency, and always **leaving space** for students to imagine and articulate what a better alternative might look like. Dystopia should be taught as a provocation, not a prophecy.

The goal is not to leave students frightened of the future, but it is to leave them curious, critically aware, and motivated to shape it.

3.6 Bridging formal and non-formal learning

Formal education, with its curricula, assessments, and institutional structures, is not the only place where civic learning happens. Youth organisations, community programmes, simulations, and immersive role-play experiences (explored in later chapters) offer very different but equally valuable kinds of civic education. Dystopian fiction is a natural bridge between the two.



How formal and non-formal approaches complement each other

- **Formal education provides:** Structured analysis, conceptual vocabulary, reflective depth, and assessed evidence of learning. A student who has studied 1984 carefully understands the mechanisms of totalitarian control well enough to engage critically with an immersive role-play scenario, rather than just experiencing it.
- **Non-formal education provides:** Immersion, experimentation, emotional engagement, and the experience of navigating civic dilemmas in real time. These experiences can deepen and make personal what the classroom has made intellectually clear.

Formal curricula can also integrate the outputs of non-formal learning, treating reflections, creative work, or civic arguments developed through simulations or role-play as legitimate evidence of civic competence. This integration is not just administratively convenient; it reflects a richer understanding of what civic learning is and how it happens.



Part II: Educational dystopian games

Chapter 4: Games and gamification in civic education

Written by Tara Laura Della Selva (EGLE)

4.1 Definitions and clarifications

While definitions are always difficult in practice as games are quite varied, here are some basic starting points for understanding the variety of types of games in education:

- ◆ **Gamification** most commonly refers to the use of game elements such as points, badges, levels or leaderboards in non-game contexts (Deterding et al. 2011). It can increase engagement but does not necessarily create deep learning experiences on its own. Gamification also tends to encourage competition.
- ◆ **Game-based learning** involves using actual games as learning tools. These may be digital or analogue and are designed or adapted to support specific learning outcomes.
- ◆ **Serious games** are games created with a primary purpose other than entertainment, such as education, training, or social change.
- ◆ **Role-playing games (RPGs)** allow participants to take on fictional roles within a structured scenario. They exist in various forms, including video games, simulation activities, tabletop, freeform, and live-action role-playing games (larp). When used in education with clear learning aims, these are often referred to as **edu-larp** (educational larp).
- ◆ **Simulation games** are games that model real-world systems, processes, or environments. In educational contexts, simulation games are often used to



explore complex social, political, or environmental systems, helping learners understand cause-and-effect relationships, long-term impacts (Gordin and Pea 1995), and train skills.

- ◆ **Transformative role-play** creates meaningful experiences that shift perspectives, attitudes, or behaviours on a deeper level (Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind, eds. 2024).

In civic education, various forms of light gamification may help introduce topics, but immersive role-play and in-depth simulation are often more suitable when the goal is to explore complex systems, ethical dilemmas, and democratic processes. In Dystolarp, we focus on edu-larp, which allows for greater flexibility in settings and mechanics, as well as deeper character and relationship design.

4.2 Why games belong in civic education

Civic education is not only about knowing how institutions work. It is about learning **how to participate, deliberate, disagree, negotiate and take responsibility**. These are skills that are difficult to develop through traditional educational methods alone.

Games, especially transformative role-playing activities, create safer simulation spaces to confront societal and political challenges. As such, they provide what can be described as “**laboratories for democracy**”, with some authors arguing that the co-creative nature of role-playing is inherently democratic (Garcia 2016; Haarman 2022). Within a structured fictional frame, young people can experiment with **leadership, policy-making, resistance, or collaboration** without real-world consequences. They can explore questions such as: Who has power? Who is excluded? What happens when resources run out?

Research shows that well-designed games can **foster engagement, empathy, and systems thinking** (Gee 2003; Squire 2011). Transformational play positions learners as **actors within a meaningful context, rather than as passive recipients of information** (Barab et al. 2010). In simulation and role-playing games, participants see how their character's choices shape outcomes, which can **increase motivation and personal**



investment (Bachen, Hernández-Ramos, and Raphael 2012), making the content more personally relevant.

In the context of civic learning, this **shift from knowledge transmission to active rehearsal** is crucial. Instead of talking about democracy and analysing injustice from a distance, participants experience structural systems and explore inequality through their character's perspective within a designed system. This experiential dimension helps bridge the gap between theory and lived understanding.

4.3 Why dystopian framing works well in games

Dystopia is powerful as a game mechanic. Political games have been shown to strongly **stimulate civic engagement and participation**, particularly when they position players as active decision-makers rather than passive observers (Neys and Jansz 2010; Kahne, Middaugh, and Evans 2009). On the other hand, even experiencing powerlessness through oppressive dynamics can be educational by raising awareness on important issues and encouraging empathy for people in such situations (Johansson et al. 2026). Dystopian scenarios are particularly powerful in game-based civic education because they **transform abstract risks into immersive settings and/or tangible systems**.

Common dystopian themes can easily be translated directly into game scenarios. For example:

- ◆ **Surveillance** experienced as information asymmetry or hidden monitoring, where certain roles have access to private data or can secretly observe others.
- ◆ **Propaganda** experienced as unreliable communication or manipulated news, forcing players to question the credibility of all information.
- ◆ **Censorship** experienced as restricted speech, filtered messages, or the risk of punishment for expressing dissenting views.
- ◆ **Scarcity** experienced as resource allocation dilemmas, requiring difficult choices about who receives limited supplies or opportunities.
- ◆ **Social stratification** experienced as unequal roles with different rights, privileges, and constraints built into the rule system.

- 
- ◆ **Environmental crisis** experienced as collapsing ecosystems, depleted resources, or escalating disaster mechanics that demand collective response.

In Dystolarp, we design scenarios in which characters have agency to make change on an individual and group level. By embedding these themes into playable systems, dystopian games encourage participants to decide whether to comply, resist, negotiate or reform the system. In doing so, they do not simply analyse civic issues; they must **navigate problematic situations and find solutions**.

4.4 Developing civic competences through dystopian games

Democratic participation

Within a dystopian scenario, participants may:

- ◆ Practice leadership and debate policies under crisis conditions
- ◆ Deliberate, negotiate and vote on resource distribution
- ◆ Form alliances or opposition groups
- ◆ Represent different social interests and identities

Such activities rehearse **negotiation skills and collective decision-making**.

Ethical decision-making

Dystopia often involves difficult trade-offs under pressure. Players may have to decide:

- ◆ Who receives limited food or medical supplies
- ◆ Whether to obey unjust laws or maintain tense order
- ◆ Whether to protect personal safety or support collective resistance

These dilemmas highlight **responsibility and accountability**, and allowing participants to explore **tensions between majority interests and marginalised voices**.



Environmental and social awareness

Post-apocalyptic or climate-collapse scenarios enhance the importance of sustainability. Participants may simulate:

- ◆ Depleted ecosystems and crisis responses
- ◆ Community resilience and rebuilding after disaster
- ◆ Conflicts over water, energy, or land

By embedding environmental crises into game systems, **abstract sustainability debates become concrete and embodied.**

Media and information literacy

Dystopias frequently involve propaganda, censorship, surveillance, or the pitfalls of technology. In role-play, these themes can translate into:

- ◆ Controlled information channels and manipulated data
- ◆ Artificial intelligence systems influencing decisions
- ◆ Lack of privacy and digital rights

Participants must then learn to **question sources, verify claims and identify manipulation.** This is particularly relevant in the current digital age, where misinformation spreads rapidly and where **technology has many benefits and countless risks** that require adequate training and awareness.

When carefully facilitated, dystopian role-playing games expose the mechanisms of oppression, helping learners understand the impact of each decision they make regarding policies, laws, resources, sustainability, media, and information. Role-playing games allow for deep emotional engagement, making the stakes more personally relatable, impactful, and meaningful.

4.5 Core game components that support civic learning

Role allocation

Assigning participants to different social groups, political positions, and identities creates **structured power dynamics and asymmetry.** Some roles may be privileged



and hold authority; others may be marginalised or silenced; while some will be inclined to rebel and prompt necessary conflict and change. This design choice **makes structural inequality visible and experiential.**

Rule systems and governance

Role-playing games can involve laws and law-making procedures. Through dystopian stories, participants can explore voting procedures, emergency policies, authoritarian decrees, rebellion structures, and community assemblies. By interacting with these rule systems, players learn **how governance structures shape behaviour and impact individuals in various ways.**

Consequence mapping

Well-designed games include **clear cause-and-effect relationships**. Players' decisions may trigger:

- ◆ Short-term benefits but long-term harm
- ◆ Social unrest and critical feedback loops
- ◆ System collapse or reform

These direct consequences of each choice **mirror real-world policy dynamics and support systems thinking** (Meadows 2008).

Scarcity and resource systems

In dystopian settings, a variety of resources can be limited, such as budgets, food supplies, energy units or access to information. Scarcity then **forces participants to prioritise certain resources and reveals social tensions and inequalities.**

Reflection and debriefing integration

Post-activity reflection is essential to civic learning: No educational game is complete without structured debriefing, metacognition, and adequate integration in the learning process. During such sessions, participants can discuss:

- ◆ How did the system and situations feel?
- ◆ Who benefited from the rules of this world?
- ◆ Who was marginalised, silenced, or harmed by these rules?

- ◆ What parallels exist in contemporary society or potential futures that we can project based on current social, political, and environmental trends?

Relevant resource: The [Mixing Desk of Larp](#) by Martin Nielsen and Martin Eckhoff Andresen (2012) Nordic Larp is a useful documentation platform that helps tune roleplay mechanics (bleed, conflict, collaboration, intensity) (Nordic Larp Wiki n.d.). It provides practical criteria of how mechanics and narrative structures are implemented in socially engaged games and is useful in various forms of games besides typical larps.

These discussions help participants **identify the similarities between the fictional dystopian experience and real-world applications, and learn key behaviours, skills and mindsets** to replicate in real life and hopefully make positive changes.

4.6 From engagement to civic agency: The transformative potential of play

The ultimate goal of dystopian civic games is not simply engagement; it is agency. Transformational play positions learners as protagonists within systems (Barab et al. 2010), empowering them to understand various systems so that, instead of asking: “What would citizens do?”, participants begin to ask: “**What would I do?**”

Through supervised role-play and debriefing, players **practise metacognition**: they reflect on their decisions, their values, and their assumptions. In doing so, they can identify the impact of **ethical decision-making, civic awareness, and green action** and better recognise structural injustice, systemic risk, environmental dangers, and **the importance of collective action**. This practice can help enhance, or at least encourage, young people’s **motivation to act responsibly and ethically in the real world, address real global issues, and make a real change**.

Importantly, dystopian games do not aim to produce fear or hopelessness, but they function as **warnings and rehearsals**. By exploring the consequences of authoritarianism, environmental neglect, or technological misuse in a fictional,



curated, and controlled setting, participants can better understand how to **prevent such potential timelines**.

When connected to thoughtful facilitation and real-world discussion, dystopian gameplay can truly **foster ethical decision-making, civic awareness, and motivation for social and environmental action**. In this sense, the **shift from “playing an engaged citizen” to “being an engaged citizen”** becomes possible.

Dystopian games do not replace civic engagement, democratic participation, and sustainability, but they can help prepare young people for them by giving them the tools and practices they need to **understand their rights and responsibilities** in such matters.

Chapter 5: Educational dystopian games

Written by Mikołaj Wicher (Liveform)

Dystopian games are useful in civic education not because they all do the same thing predictably, but because they place players in very different positions inside a system. Some ask players to obey and apply rules. Others ask them to survive collapse, resist surveillance, or watch how public discourse is shaped. That variety is pedagogically valuable: it allows educators to work with different scales of experience, from a five-minute browser game to a longer facilitated tabletop session.

Taken together, the examples below illustrate three questions educators often ask when choosing material:

- ◆ **What medium does the activity use** e.g., browser game, video game, board game, tabletop role-playing game, larp?;
- ◆ **What position does the player occupy inside the system**, e.g., official, observer, civilian, resistance member, community participant?;
- ◆ **How accessible is the activity in practice**, from something immediately playable to something that requires extensive facilitation?

What unites these games is not simply that they are “about dystopia.” Each one asks players to inhabit a structure and make decisions inside it. That is where their educational potential lies. The key question is not only what kind of world the game depicts, but **what habits of thought, forms of pressure, and moral choices it makes players perform.**

Here are a variety of examples of these principles in existing games.

5.1 “Papers, Please” (Pope, 2013)

Medium: Video game

Year: 2013

Perspective: Border inspector

Theme: Bureaucracy and migration control

“Papers, Please” places the player in the **role of an immigration inspector working at a border checkpoint** in the fictional state of Arstotzka (Pope 2013). Each day, the inspector must review passports, permits, and other documents to decide who may enter the country.

The game begins with relatively simple rules. Very quickly, however, procedures multiply. New document types appear, regulations become stricter, and the player is expected to process people quickly and accurately. Mistakes reduce the inspector's salary.

That salary supports the inspector's family. As a result, **moral choices are inseparable from economic pressure**. Letting someone through may be ethically compelling, but it may also endanger the household that depends on the player's wages.

What “Papers, Please” makes visible is **procedural violence**. The game is not primarily about spectacular cruelty. It is about **routine compliance**: the way injustice can be enacted through ordinary decisions inside an administrative system (Carolan 2020).

Among the games discussed here, “Papers, Please” is one of the better documented examples of educational use. ACMI has published a classroom lesson plan built around the game, focusing on dystopian narrative, player choice, and the relation between mechanics and meaning (ACMI n.d.). Lucas Pope's own educational usage note also explicitly acknowledges classroom adoption and explains licensing options for schools (3909 LLC 2023).

There is stronger evidence of higher education use as well. Gene Carolan (2021) documents the use of “Papers, Please” in an immigration and asylum law module at TU Dublin, where students played the game over several weeks, submitted reflective blog posts, and later developed those reflections into a more formal written



assignment. This supports a stronger claim than simple appearance on a syllabus: in this case, the game is not merely recommended, but integrated into assessment design.

At the same time, the pedagogical case should still be stated with some caveats. The game is well suited to **discussions of borders, migration, state power, and ethical decision-making**. It also contains mature themes, including political repression and violence, so in many contexts it is most effective when paired with a limited play segment and a structured debrief rather than treated as a stand-alone activity (Pope 2013; ACMI n.d.).

5.2 “We Become What We Behold” (Case, 2016)

Medium: Browser game

Perspective: Media observer

Theme: News cycles and social polarisation

“We Become What We Behold” is a short browser game created by Nicky Case (2016). The **player controls a camera and photographs small events** taking place among groups of characters in a public space.

Each photograph becomes a headline. What receives attention begins to spread. Over time, the player observes **how selective visibility shapes collective behaviour and how media attention amplifies specific narratives**.

The game lasts only a few minutes, but its central logic is clear. Its dystopian force lies in **media amplification**: extreme or emotionally charged events become disproportionately visible, and this visibility contributes to further escalation of social tensions (Case 2016).

Educational materials describing the game emphasise its usefulness for discussions about media influence, perception, and the dynamics of public attention. For example, teaching resources on the Norwegian NDLA educational platform use “We Become What We Behold” to prompt reflection on how media framing and selective reporting influence social attitudes and group behaviour (NDLA 2023).



However, the available documentation suggests treating the game primarily as a **discussion catalyst rather than a fully documented educational intervention**. While ‘We Become What We Behold’ is referenced in teaching materials and learning resources, limited research has been published measuring its classroom outcomes or structured pedagogical implementation.

For that reason, the strongest defensible claim is that the game works effectively as an entry point into discussion. “We Become What We Behold” can quickly open questions about agenda-setting, framing, click-driven media logics, and algorithmic amplification. Because it is short, metaphorical, and deliberately exaggerated, the game is particularly effective when followed by facilitated reflection on where the model illuminates reality and where it oversimplifies it.

5.3 “Oceania 2084” (Jocher Games, 2023)

Medium: Tabletop role-playing game

Perspective: Resistance members inside a surveillance state

Theme: Propaganda, deviancy, and institutional control

“Oceania 2084” is a **tabletop role-playing game with asymmetric power dynamics** in which one player takes the role of Big Brother and the others play members of a fragile resistance inside ‘The City’ (Jocher Games 2023). Players define the ways in which their characters deviate from the regime’s ideal, develop relationships under pressure, and decide how much risk they are willing to take to survive or resist.

The official description emphasises social pressure rather than combat. The game is built around surveillance, institutional force, classification, and fear, but also **focuses on trust, mutual dependence, and small acts of defiance** (Jocher Games 2023).

In this game, the central dystopian mechanism is **how ideological control is made personal**. The system does not simply punish disobedience after the fact, but it defines deviation, structures institutional response, and pressures individuals to internalise fear before open resistance even becomes possible (Jocher Games 2023).

The educational relevance of the game is persuasive, but the currently available evidence is thin. Publicly accessible sources document the game itself and its civic



themes, yet they do not provide strong evidence of established classroom or workshop use comparable to “Papers, Please”.

For that reason, “Oceania 2084” is best presented here as a game with clear pedagogical potential rather than as a documented educational case study. It appears especially well suited to **facilitated work on surveillance, propaganda, dissent, and the social production of conformity**, particularly with older learners who can reflect critically on the relation between fictional pressure and real political systems.

5.4 “This War of Mine” (11 bit studios & Awaken Realms)

Medium: Video game (2014) and cooperative board game adaptation (2017)

Perspective: Civilians in a besieged city

Theme: War, survival ethics, and civilian vulnerability

“This War of Mine” is a survival game originally developed by 11 bit studios (2014) and later adapted into a cooperative board game designed by Michał Oracz and published by Awaken Realms. In both versions, players control a **group of civilians trying to survive in a besieged city**.

Gameplay centres on managing hunger, illness, shelter, scavenging, exhaustion, and encounters with other survivors. **Cooperation** between characters is necessary, but the game deliberately avoids presenting cooperation as simple or reassuring. Many decisions involve **moral trade-offs**, such as whether to steal from others, whom to help, or how to **prioritise limited resources**.

The board game adaptation reinforces these ethical dilemmas through narrative elements such as the ‘Journal’ and the ‘Book of Scripts’, which introduce story events and unexpected situations. These narrative devices shift the focus from pure resource optimisation toward moral decision-making and social consequences (Awaken Realms n.d.).

The dystopian dimension of the game lies in the perspective it adopts. Unlike most war games that focus on military strategy or combat, “This War of Mine” places players in the position of civilians living through the collapse of institutions and social



order. The central tension revolves around **maintaining dignity and solidarity under extreme conditions of scarcity and danger**.

The game has also been used in educational contexts. In Poland, the digital version of “This War of Mine” has been included in the government programme “Gry w Edukacji” (‘Games in Education’), which provides teaching materials and lesson scenarios designed for classroom use (Ministry of Education and Science 2020). These resources frame the game as a starting point for discussions about the civilian experience of war, ethical decision-making, and the social consequences of armed conflict.

Scholarly discussion supports the broader pedagogical potential of games for teaching history and empathy through structured decision-making situations (Iglesias Amorín 2022). However, there is limited published research documenting classroom implementations specifically centred on “This War of Mine”. For that reason, the most defensible claim is that the game provides a powerful prompt for **reflection on wartime ethics and civilian vulnerability**, particularly when accompanied by facilitated discussion.

5.5 “Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You” (Osmotic Studios, 2016)

Medium: Video game

Perspective: Human analyst inside a government surveillance program

Theme: Surveillance, privacy, and the politics of information

“Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You” places the player inside a **government surveillance system**. After a terror attack, the player investigates citizens, gathers information from websites, private messages, files and social media, and decides what is passed on to the authorities (Osmotic Studios n.d.).

The game’s crucial mechanic is selection. Only the information submitted by the player enters the official case. In that sense, the player is **not a neutral observer but an active filter**, shaping how the state interprets the lives of others.

The game’s dystopian mechanism is therefore **selective surveillance**. Control does not operate only through watching. It also operates through sorting fragments,



framing relevance, and converting private traces into official suspicion (Osmotic Studios n.d.).

The German project “Games im Unterricht” (“Games in Classroom”) provides a substantial teaching unit built around the game, linking it to **democracy, terrorism, privacy, critical thinking, and artificial intelligence** (Games im Unterricht n.d.).

Taken together, these materials make ‘Orwell’ relatively easy to justify in formal education. Not because the game automatically teaches those topics on its own, but because openly accessible teaching resources already show how it can be structured into a sequence of play, documentation, and reflection.

This is exactly the kind of distinction that matters in this chapter: here the pedagogical fit is not only plausible but supported by existing teaching material. At the same time, the game still benefits from guided discussion, since its power lies in forcing players to confront how easily bureaucratic suspicion can be assembled from partial information.

Chapter 6: Dystopian larps for civic education with youth: theory and practice

Written by Sarah Lynne Bowman & Kjell Hedgard Hugaas
(Evocative Games)

6.1 Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- ◆ Describe the basic theories in transformative role-playing game design.
- ◆ Evaluate design choices for dystopian larps based upon basic best practices.

For more extensive information on these topics, we recommend reading:

- “Larp Design: Creating Role-Play Experiences” (Koljonen, Stenros, Grove, Skjønfsjell, and Nilsen, eds. 2019);
- “Transformative Role-playing Game Design” (Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind eds. 2024); and “Analog role-playing game design with dystopian themes”

This chapter will introduce basic principles of transformative role-playing game design with an emphasis on analogue, e.g., tabletop, and larp. Such experiences are different from many other types of games because players inhabit a character and co-create a consistent fictional world for an extended period of time. For our purposes, that world will focus on dystopian themes, whether in the setting materials or in the actions taken by the **player-characters** – meaning the participants who

attend the game – or the **facilitators**, who are sometimes playing non player characters.

- **Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs)** are typically played around a table with players describing their actions.
- **Live action role-playing games (larps)** are typically physically embodied, with players enact their characters, usually while interacting with each other.

The tabletop role-playing game “Dream Askew” by Avery Alder (2018) takes place in a post-apocalyptic queer enclave isolated from the remains of society that has remained intact. The actions taking place in that enclave may sometimes be dystopian in nature, but the **mechanics** of the game – meaning, the ways in which the game enables players to represent actions taken in this world -often incentivise prosocial behaviour.

Therefore, consider carefully what **activities** you want youth and youth workers to practice through play:

- ◆ Are they **collaborating** to overthrow a broken system?
- ◆ Are they **competing** for scarce resources or social status?
- ◆ **What lessons** would you like them to take away from this experience?

6.2 Theory and key concepts

This chapter will introduce key theoretical concepts that are generalisable across most – if not all – larps, with hypothetical examples from dystopian games.

1. Ritual

First, games can be understood as a form of **ritual** (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1995), in which players experience:

- ◆ A **separation** from their previously known social reality,
- ◆ A **liminal space** in which the rules of reality and identity work differently, and

- 
- ◆ A **return**, in which they go back to their previous lives with takeaways, from the experience.

In this theory, rituals are experienced in a group setting, and reinforce a sense of **communitas**, meaning community connection resulting from play.

While all larps can be considered rituals, rituals within dystopian larps can also be conducted, such as a wedding ceremony, inauguration, or induction into a secret society.

2. Framing

Ritual theory is especially important to understand when planning the **framing** surround the game, whether in the design, implementation, or assessment phase:

- ◆ **What conditions** before, during, and after the larp will make learning most likely to occur?
- ◆ **What structures** can you provide to help players feel safe throughout the process?

Therefore, make sure you consider the game itself to be only **a small part of a larger process of onboarding** your players and guiding them out of the experience and back into daily life.

This principle is especially important when playing games dealing with heavy themes related to dystopian fiction and/or aspects of a player's background they may have already experienced in some capacity or their ancestors faced in past generalisations. Examples include themes of enslavement, genocide, human rights violations, sexual abuse, bullying, misogyny, queerphobia, xenophobia, and others.

While these themes can be powerful and are often associated with dystopian fiction, they should be approached with strong attention to providing **supportive framing**, including safety structures and debriefing.

Depending on your target group, certain themes may not be appropriate for your participants or too challenging to tackle in a short amount of time without proper framing. Always **consider your educational goals** and which elements are most essential to include to meet them.



3. Alibi

The game and framing activities provide the protection of **alibi** (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018): an assurance that actions taken while in-game will be interpreted as fictional, i.e., “It wasn’t me; it was the character.” Alibi is especially important to **help build and maintain when playing difficult topics**, such as oppression or suffering resulting from dystopian conditions. Players should feel safe enough to take risks during play without fear of consequences, as long as they maintain the **social contract** established before the game.

Again, consider which types of activities you want to incentivise through play. Games offer **affordances**, meaning ways in which the environment encourages certain actions while discouraging others (Gibson 2014). In game design language, consider the **verbs** your design invites players to perform as their characters (Townser and Li 2019; Brind 2022):

- ◆ Do you want them to have an experience of brutal competition against one another to survive?
- ◆ Do you want them to work together to defeat a common ruthless enemy?
- ◆ Or do you want them to have few possible actions and rather experience loss of privilege, helplessness, or even dehumanisation?

Consider carefully **which actions you want characters to take and not take**, clearly communicating these beforehand.

4. Bleed

Related to framing is the concept of **bleed**, which refers to the spillover of psychological aspects from the player to the character and vice versa. Examples of **bleed-out** in dystopian games might include:

- ◆ **Emotional bleed** (Boss 2007; Montola 2010): Feelings, such as loss after a treasured loved one dies during the game;
- ◆ **Procedural bleed** (Hugaas 2019): Movements associated with the character, such as a lingering habit of walking with stealth even after the threats of the game are gone;

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- ◆ **Memetic bleed** (Hugaas 2019): Thoughts or ideologies spilling over after the game, such as a strong commitment toward advocacy that a character believed still experienced by the player;
 - ◆ **Relationship bleed** (Waern 2010; Bowman 2013): Interpersonal dynamics, such as a greater sense of camaraderie with the people who played within one's in-game faction;
 - ◆ **Ego bleed** (Beltrán 2013): Personality traits and archetypal contents, such as heroic, cowardly, or manipulative aspects persisting in the player's self-concept afterward;
 - ◆ **Emancipatory bleed** (Kemper 2017; 2020): A feeling of liberation from marginalisation persisting after the game, such as after overthrowing an oppressive system during the game.

While any of the forms of bleed can be useful for educational purposes, memetic bleed is often implied in informal and nonformal education. However, **bleed is a mostly temporary, unconscious process**. To cement the learning from these experiences, we recommend thorough structured debriefs with questions focused specifically on your learning objectives.

5. Symbolism and myth

While dystopian larps can be gritty and socially realistic, such stories can often be appealing to youth when told through the lens of symbols and mythic structures. Examples include:

- ◆ **Popular genres of zombie post-apocalyptic fiction**, such as in the larp “Dystopia Rising” by Most Improbable LLC, in which the zombie symbolises inhuman behaviour when conditions are their most desperate; and
- ◆ **Cosmic horror**, such as in the larp versions the Cthulhu mythos originated by H.P. Lovecraft, such as in the Chaos League larps “Sahara Expedition” (2020-) and “Miskatonic University” (2022-). In Cthulhu games, people from various historical periods in our world seek out forbidden knowledge about malevolent monstrous deities, which eventually leads to insanity and destruction.



Note that such genres may take place in the past, present, or future, but are notable for taking human characteristics that provoke terror or disgust and amplify them through symbols and myths.

This practice can allow the game to feel different enough from “real life,” and yet exciting, which can motivate players to **feel more comfortable engaging with difficult content** through play through greater alibi. At the same time, **be careful the alibi is not so strong** that it prevents players from taking the game seriously or developing empathy for others (Brown and Morrow 2015; Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

However, genres often carry baggage with them, such as a history of classism, sexism, or racism. We recommend deciding carefully **which elements are necessary and appropriate to include for your learning objectives** when working with youth, and which are likely better to explicitly leave out.

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dystolarp

This resource was developed as part of the Dystolarp project, which uses the immersive power of live action role-playing (larp) to foster a deeper understanding of civic engagement, environmental stewardship and democratic values among young people.

Discover more information and project resources: www.dystolarp.eu



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