



‘Embedded Well-being’ Guidebook

English version

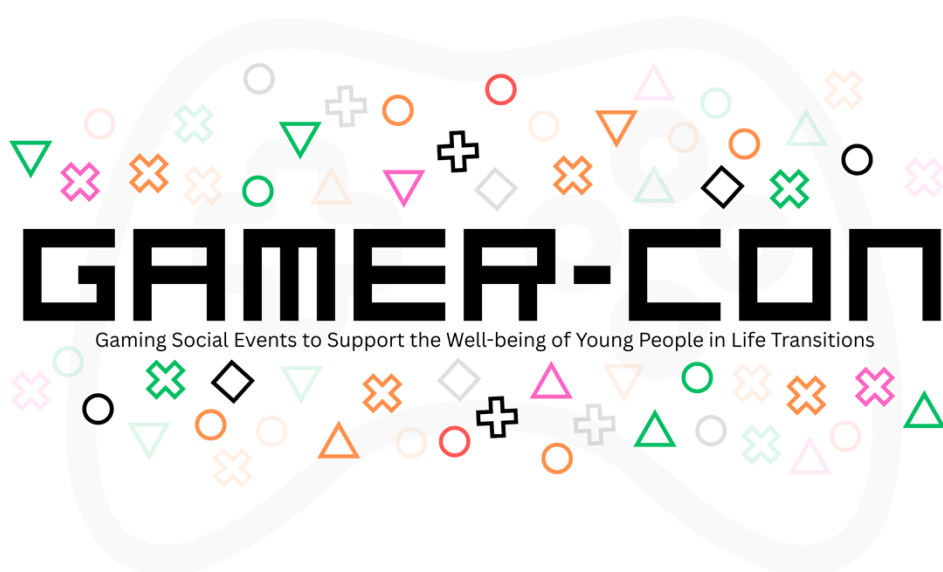


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Introduction

This handbook has been developed through Gamer-Con project to help youth workers to use gaming as a setting for social connection, reflection and well-being. It brings together lessons from gaming events held in Iceland, Spain and Ireland, alongside practical methods that can be adapted for different groups and youth work settings.

The handbook is intended for youth workers, educators, community practitioners and others interested in using gaming with young people. Some of these readers may already run gaming activities and want to develop the well-being element of their work. Others may be exploring gaming for the first time. In either case, the handbook offers a starting point rather than a fixed programme.

About Gamer-Con

Gamer-Con is an Erasmus+ project involving RÍSí in Iceland, BACKSLASH in Spain and Unofficial Media & Training in Ireland. Running from January 2025 to June 2026, the project focuses on young people aged 18 to 25, particularly those experiencing loneliness, uncertainty about their future or limited opportunities to meet and connect with others.

The project began with the recognition that gaming is already an important social activity for many young people. It gives people something to enjoy, discuss and work towards together without requiring them to enter a formal support setting. Gamer-Con examined how youth workers could work within this environment to support social connection and well-being. The partners first consulted young people in their communities about the games they played and the challenges they faced. They then organised regular gaming events in Iceland, Spain and Ireland. These events allowed the partners to try different games, facilitation methods and approaches to group reflection. Feedback from participants, observations from facilitators and lessons from the three countries informed the development of this handbook.

What do we mean by ‘embedded well-being’

Embedded well-being means making well-being part of an activity that young people already find meaningful, rather than treating it as a separate lesson or intervention. In Gamer-Con, that activity was gaming.

Games regularly create experiences connected to well-being. Players deal with frustration, make decisions under pressure, communicate with teammates, recover from mistakes and experience success or disappointment. They may learn when to ask for help, when to change their approach and how their behaviour affects other people.

A youth worker can help participants to notice and talk about these experiences. This does not mean interrupting every game with a discussion or turning an enjoyable activity into a workshop. It may be as simple as asking how the team recovered after a difficult



round, noticing that somebody supported a new player or inviting the group to reflect briefly at the end of a session.

Embedded well-being is not therapy and does not replace mental health or safeguarding services. It is a practical youth work approach that can make conversations about emotions, relationships and coping feel more natural.

Using this handbook

The ideas and activities in this handbook should be adapted to the needs of each group. Participants will have different interests, levels of gaming experience, communication preferences and access requirements. No single game or activity will be suitable for everyone. Youth workers are encouraged to involve young people in choosing games, shaping group agreements and reviewing how sessions are working. A facilitator does not need to be an expert player. It is more important to be prepared, curious and willing to learn from participants.

Handbook structure

The handbook contains six chapters.

- **Chapter 1** introduces Gamer-Con and explains why the project used gaming to support young people experiencing loneliness or uncertainty during important life transitions.
- **Chapter 2** examines embedded well-being in more detail. It connects the approach with non-formal education, experiential learning and social and emotional development.
- **Chapter 3** presents findings from the Gamer-Con social events in Iceland, Spain and Ireland. It describes how the events were organised, who took part and what the partners learned about social connection, emotional well-being and skills development.
- **Chapter 4** moves from the project findings into practice. It explains how youth workers can choose suitable games, plan sessions and use a simple before-during-after structure to create opportunities for reflection.
- **Chapter 5** focuses on supportive and inclusive gaming environments. It considers physical and digital accessibility, group agreements, differences in gaming experience, online behaviour and the conditions that help participants feel that they belong.
- **Chapter 6** looks at open discussion and coping strategies. It offers guidance on recognising useful moments for reflection, asking questions without placing participants under pressure and responding appropriately when difficult emotions or personal concerns arise.

Throughout the handbook, readers will find practical examples, questions and activity formats that can be used directly or adapted. The chapters show how gaming can become a useful part of youth work while remaining, first and foremost, an activity that young people choose because they enjoy it.



Chapter 1: Introduction and overview of Embedded Well-being

Developed by: Unofficial Media & Training

Country: Ireland

1.1 Introduction to the chapter

A lot of young people are doing fine. They have friends, a direction, things to look forward to. But a significant number are not, and the gap between those two groups is wider than it looks from the outside. Many young people in their early twenties are managing considerable uncertainty about work, about money, about where they belong; and they are without the social infrastructure that might once have been taken for granted. The kinds of connection that used to come with a job, a local club or a shared neighbourhood are not experienced automatically any more, and formal mental health support can oftentimes be too expensive, too clinical or simply too hard to access for someone who is not in crisis but who is quietly struggling. Gaming, in this context, can be an escape from the problem. For many young people, gaming is one of the few spaces that reliably delivers what the problem is actually about: other people, shared purpose and the ordinary pleasure of doing something together.

Gamer-Con started from a practical observation rather than a theoretical premise. The partner organisations, namely RÍSí in Iceland, BACKSLASH in Spain and Unofficial Media & Training in Ireland were already working with young people for whom standard provision was not cutting through. They were also all, in different ways, watching those same young people engage with gaming as a social activity: staying in contact with each other through it, building things, managing conflict, getting genuinely absorbed. The question they brought to this Erasmus+ collaboration was: could we work with that? Could we be useful in that space without ruining it? This handbook is what they learned in the attempt.

This first chapter covers the project's background and rationale, introduces the concept of embedded well-being and explains why gaming is a particularly good context for it. It is written for youth workers and practitioners who may be approaching gaming with curiosity rather than expertise; and it does not assume prior knowledge of either gaming culture or formal well-being frameworks. Later chapters go deeper into the theory, the evidence and the practical methods. This one is simply about making the case for why the approach is worth trying.

1.2 Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, readers will:

- Understand the aims and rationale of the Gamer-Con project and the European collaboration behind it.
- Recognise how embedded well-being differs from conventional mental health interventions and why this distinction matters for youth work.



- Appreciate how gaming can create the conditions for natural, meaningful conversations about well-being.
- Feel confident and motivated to learn more about embedded well-being approaches within their own practice.

1.3 Background and context

The need behind the Gamer-Con project

Loneliness among young people is not an abstract concern. According to the first EU-wide survey on loneliness (EU-LS 2022), an average of 13% of young people aged 16 and over reported feeling lonely most or all of the time. Ireland, where UMT is based, recorded the highest rates in the survey, with over one in five respondents reporting frequent loneliness. In Iceland, more than 17% of adolescents reported similar experiences (SDU, 2021), while a Spanish survey of 1,800 young people found that loneliness affected approximately one in four of those aged between 16 and 29 (Fundación ONCE, 2023).

These figures reflect a wider pattern. Many young people are missing key developmental experiences, like completing education, finding secure employment, building stable social networks, not through any failure of effort or ambition, but because structural and economic conditions have made these transitions increasingly difficult. The result is a generation that is digitally connected but socially isolated, engaged online but cut-off from the kinds of meaningful, face-to-face interaction that build confidence and a sense of belonging.

Traditional mental health provision is not meeting this need. Services tend to be expensive, inaccessible in rural areas or simply too formal for young people who are not in crisis, but who are struggling. There is an urgent requirement for lower-threshold, community-based approaches that can reach young people where they already are.

The opportunity presented by Gamer-Con

Contrary to the image of gaming as isolating or harmful, research consistently demonstrates its social and developmental potential. Gaming can provide stress relief, a sense of achievement, connection with peers and the development of skills like communication, strategic thinking and resilience (Ricciuli, 2022). Gamer-Con partners recognised that gaming, when facilitated thoughtfully, could provide an ideal platform for what they came to call ‘embedded well-being’, which is further explained in the following sections.

1.4 Main content

What Is ‘embedded well-being’?

The term ‘embedded well-being’ refers to an approach in which conversations and practices that support mental health and emotional growth are woven naturally into the



fabric of an activity, rather than presented as a separate or specialist intervention. The word ‘embedded’ is deliberate. It implies that well-being is not an addition to what is already happening, but an intrinsic dimension of it, i.e., present in the relationships, the dynamics, the small moments of shared experience that a well-facilitated gaming session will always produce. ‘Embedded well-being’ means that well-being is not something inserted into a gaming session but rather it is something that can be generated through it, when the conditions are right and when a skilled facilitator is present to recognise and gently open the space.

The concept draws on a parallel tradition in education. ‘Embedded learning’, which is the integration of literacy, numeracy and other foundational skills into practical, real-world activities. This approach was developed to reach learners who resist or disengage from formal instruction. The logic is simple: when people are absorbed in doing something they care about, they are more open to learning. The same logic applies to emotional and psychological growth. When a young person is engaged in gaming, focused on a shared goal, laughing or problem-solving with others, their defences are lower. Conversations about how they are feeling, what stresses them, what they hope for, are more approachable and possible in ways they would not be in a clinical or structured setting.

The Gamer-Con project

Gamer-Con is a small-scale partnership funded under the Erasmus+ Programme, running from January 2025 to June 2026. The three partner organisations, namely, RÍSí in Iceland, BACKSLASH in Spain and UMT in Ireland, each brought distinct expertise to the collaboration. RÍSí’s deep knowledge of gaming communities and e-sports provided the project with credibility and insight into how gaming actually functions as a social and developmental space. BACKSLASH’s extensive experience in front-line youth engagement, social inclusion and European project management gave the partnership its methodological rigour and its understanding of young people in challenging circumstances. UMT’s experience of using creative and digital media to support isolated rural communities in Ireland, particularly young men and NEETs in counties Cavan and Meath, grounded the project in the specific realities of the target group. The project unfolded in three sequential phases:

- In the first phase, each partner conducted polling activity with at least 50 young people aged 18 to 25 in their local community, gathering data on gaming preferences and examining experiences of loneliness and social disconnection. This data informed the design of the Gamer-Con Social Events, which formed the core of Activity Two.
- In this second phase, each partner hosted weekly gaming sessions over a minimum period of two months, engaging a core group of 20 young people. These sessions were designed as relaxed, gaming-led social gatherings where well-being conversations could be broached naturally within the activity itself.
- The third phase drew on everything learned during the Social Events to develop this handbook, which was then shared with youth workers through transfer meetings in each country.



Why gaming, and why now?

In the past, gaming has been treated with suspicion by adult professionals and institutions, associated in public discourse with addiction, aggression or social withdrawal. Gamer-Con partners approached it very differently. They began from the recognition that gaming is simply a space and one that young people have claimed as their own, one with its own culture, its own language and its own norms of cooperation and respect. Like any space, it can be used well or used badly. The question that animated this project was not whether gaming is good or bad, but how it can be used well in the service of young people's social and emotional health.

The evidence gathered during the project's Social Events strongly supports this approach. In Ireland, for example, UMT conducted ten Minecraft-based sessions with a core group of 18-20 young people aged between 21 and 25. Rather than imposing a formal well-being curriculum, the sessions used a creative building project as the backdrop for facilitated conversation. Together, these participants undertook the collaborative construction of a Christmas-themed island in a virtual world. Participants reported reduced stress, improved mood and a growing sense of connection with others. Many noted that the shared activity made it easier to talk about things they would ordinarily avoid, including anxiety about the future, work pressures and feelings of isolation. A number of participants stated that they had become more willing to discuss mental health with people outside the gaming sessions as a result of the experience. This is what embedded well-being looks like in practice. It is not a programme. It does not require participants to identify as struggling or to seek help. It meets young people in a space they already occupy and trust, and it uses skilled facilitation to ensure that the well-being dimensions of that space are noticed, valued and gently probed.

1.5 Practical guidance for Youth Workers

If you are reading this handbook as a practitioner, the most important thing to take from this opening chapter is a shift in framing. Embedded well-being is not a new programme to implement. It is a way of attending to what is already happening when young people come together to play or interact. Your role as a facilitator is not to direct or instruct, but to create the conditions in which connection and honest conversation are natural. This means, in practical terms, choosing activities that require collaboration rather than competition where possible. It means creating a group atmosphere that is warm, low-pressure and genuinely welcoming of different levels of skill and confidence. It means being present and attentive during gameplay, noticing when a moment of frustration, success or teamwork might open a door to a brief but meaningful exchange. And it means modelling the kind of openness and curiosity that you hope participants will develop by being willing to acknowledge your own learning, your own uncertainties and your own enjoyment of the experience.

Youth workers who have not previously used gaming in their practice may feel uncertain about how to begin. Later chapters in this handbook will offer detailed guidance on planning sessions, facilitating reflection and creating inclusive environments. For now, the most useful starting point is simply to approach gaming with genuine curiosity. Ask young people what they play, why they play it and what they value about the experience.



Their answers will almost always point directly to the well-being dimensions that embedded well-being is designed to reach, namely, community, belonging, achievement, release and joy.

1.6 Case example

Building something together: The Gamer-Con Ireland experience

When UMT began planning its Gamer-Con Social Events, the team faced a familiar challenge: how to engage young men in a conversation about their mental health without triggering the resistance that tends to accompany any direct mention of the topic. The solution was not to mention it directly, at least not at first.

The sessions used Minecraft as their primary platform, specifically because of its open, creative, non-competitive format. Participants were invited to collaborate on a shared building project (constructing a holiday-themed island) while a facilitator moved through the space, joining conversations, asking questions and gently steering discussion towards the themes of stress, connection and coping whenever participants seemed open to it. The ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ dynamic of gaming proved particularly effective: young people who might resist a face-to-face conversation about their feelings were able to talk while focused on a shared task, reducing the social pressure that more direct approaches often create.

Exit interviews highlighted that participants experienced genuine changes in their willingness to discuss mental health, in the social connections they formed and in their sense of confidence and belonging. Some noted that the sessions had helped them to think differently about the future. One participant shared that hearing others share similar experiences had reduced his sense of being alone with his difficulties.

“I have never really been one to share how I feel or talk about my mental state, but doing so with the group feels easier or more casual – there are no pressures or judgements.”

– Gamer-Con Ireland participant

This case highlights what embedded well-being can achieve when it is implemented with attention, creativity and respect for the young people involved.

1.7 Recommendations

The Gamer-Con experience confirms that embedded well-being is not only possible within gaming contexts but is, in many ways, uniquely suited to them. Gaming creates the kind of shared, low-stakes, collaborative environment in which well-being conversations can happen naturally, provided that those facilitating the sessions are attentive, curious and genuinely invested in the young people involved.



For practitioners thinking about how to bring embedded well-being into their own work, the Gamer-Con project offers a number of clear recommendations:

- First, resist the urge to over-programme. The most powerful moments in the Gamer-Con Social Events were not planned but when they occurred naturally, the facilitator recognised them and probed. This can take some practice, so don't stress if you don't get it right the first couple of times.
- Second, trust the young people. They know what they need and a gaming environment that genuinely belongs to them is one in which they will find their own way towards the conversations that matter.
- Third, invest in your own understanding of gaming culture. You do not need to be an expert player, but you do need to approach the space with respect and a willingness to learn.
- Finally, remember that this handbook is itself a product of embedded well-being. The collaboration that created it, i.e., three organisations across three countries, each with different experiences and priorities, finding a shared language and a shared commitment, reflects the same values that the project asks practitioners to bring to their work with young people. These include openness, trust and the belief that something meaningful can grow in the right conditions.

1.8 References and further reading

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Partner reflection note

Writing this opening chapter required us to sit with what we had actually learned, rather than what we had planned to learn. When UMT began the Gamer-Con Social Events in Ireland, we expected gaming to provide a context for well-being conversations. What we



did not fully anticipate was the speed and depth with which those conversations would surface or how naturally the young people themselves would take ownership of the space. The ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ dynamic proved more effective than any structured exercise we could have designed. The challenge in developing this chapter was translating that lived experience into language that would be accessible and useful to practitioners who have not been there. We found it helpful to keep returning to the voices of participants and to the honesty and warmth of what they shared in exit interviews. We used these interview transcripts as a reminder of what embedded well-being can actually look like when it is working. Our hope is that this chapter communicates not only the concept, but the spirit of what Gamer-Con has tried to do, which is to make well-being less of a destination and more of a direction of travel.



Chapter 2: Understanding Embedded Well-being

Developed by: Unofficial Media & Training

Country: Ireland

2.1 Introduction to the chapter

Chapter 1 introduced embedded well-being as a way of attending to what is already present when young people come together to play, rather than a separate programme to be added on top. This second chapter moves a step further and examines the concept itself in greater depth, outlining where the idea comes from, what theoretical frameworks give it shape and why it is particularly well suited to the realities of contemporary youth work.

In this chapter, we hope that providing an understanding the intellectual roots of embedded well-being will give youth practitioners confidence in integrating this approach into their practice. In this chapter, we aim to describe embedded well-being as a way of demonstrating that what happens in a thoughtfully facilitated gaming session is connected to well-established traditions in education, psychology and youth development. When a young person in a Minecraft session pauses to acknowledge that losing a collaborative build to a server glitch was frustrating and then reflects on how they managed that frustration, something genuinely significant is taking place. This chapter aims to explain why.

2.2 Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, readers will:

- Be able to define ‘embedded well-being’ and explain its theoretical roots in non-formal education, experiential learning and social-emotional development.
- Identify how embedded well-being relates to youth development.
- Recognise examples of how everyday moments in gaming can open meaningful conversations about well-being.
- Begin to see their own facilitation practice through the lens of embedded well-being.

2.3 Background and context

From ‘embedded learning’ to ‘embedded well-being’

The conceptual lineage of embedded well-being runs through the tradition of embedded learning, which became prominent in adult and further education theory and practice during the 1990s and 2000s as a strategy for developing literacy, numeracy and communication skills within vocational and practical programmes. Rather than pulling learners out of their main activity for separate skills instruction, embedded learning integrated those skills into the programme itself through specific activities, including reading a job sheet to develop literacy, calculating materials to develop numeracy, discussing a design brief to develop communication skills, etc. The evidence-base for



this approach is strong, and its core insight is transferable to other concepts like well-being promotion. The central premise is that people learn more readily and more durably when the learning is connected to something they care about and are already doing (Casey et al., 2006). Embedded well-being applies the same logic to the emotional and psychological domain. Rather than pulling young people into a separate space for mental health support, embedded well-being integrates attention to well-being into the fabric of shared activity. The activity provides the engagement and the sense of purpose, and the facilitated reflection provides the opportunity for growth. Neither element works without the other, but together they create something more powerful than either could achieve alone.

2.4 Main content

Experiential learning and the gaming environment

The theoretical framework that most directly underpins embedded well-being is experiential learning, associated most closely with the American educational theorist David Kolb, who proposed in his influential 1984 work that learning is not the passive reception of information but an active process of making meaning from experience. Kolb's cycle describes a movement from concrete experience through reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. This is a process that is described as 'learning by doing' but is more accurately understood as 'learning by doing and reflecting' (Kolb, 1984).

Gaming is exceptionally well suited to this cycle. Every session generates concrete experience through successes, failures, moments of cooperation, moments of conflict, decisions made under pressure. The pause after gameplay then provides the opportunity for reflective observation. Short conversations about what went well, what was difficult, or how a disagreement was resolved begin the process of abstract conceptualisation by connecting the gaming experience to wider patterns in how the young person relates to others and to challenge. And the decision to try something differently in the next session, or to bring a new approach to a real-life situation, is active experimentation. What embedded well-being adds to Kolb's framework is an explicit focus on the social and emotional dimensions of this process. In this way, as well as developing and deepening skills and knowledge through experiential learning, in a gaming context it is also possible to develop and deepen self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation and the capacity for honest conversation. When viewed this way, every game played together is a lived experiment in how people cooperate, communicate, manage frustration and support one another; and with facilitators supporting the reflective process, these games can also become opportunities for personal development and growth. This is linked to the social and emotional development of young people, which is further explained in the next section.

Social and emotional learning and youth development

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a framework which is based primarily on the work of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The CASEL



Framework describes the competences that young people need to develop in order to manage their emotions, build positive relationships and make responsible decisions. The five core SEL competences identified by CASEL include:

- *Self-awareness*, which means understanding your own thoughts, feelings and reactions. It helps young people recognise what makes them feel happy, stressed, confident or upset, and to better understand their strengths, interests and personal values.
- *Self-management* is the ability to manage emotions, behaviours and reactions in different situations. This includes coping with stress, staying motivated, controlling impulses and finding healthy ways to respond when things feel difficult or overwhelming.
- *Social awareness* means understanding and respecting the feelings, experiences and perspectives of other people. It helps young people to develop empathy, recognise differences and become more aware of how their actions can affect others around them.
- *Relationship skills* involve building and maintaining positive and respectful connections with others. This includes communication, teamwork, listening, resolving conflict and knowing how to ask for help or support when needed.
- *Responsible decision-making* is the ability to make thoughtful and informed choices. It encourages young people to consider consequences, think about how decisions affect themselves and others and make choices that are safe, respectful and positive.

These core 5 SEL competences map almost directly onto the capacities that a well-facilitated gaming experience can develop (CASEL, 2020). Consider what happens when a group of young people collaborate on a shared gaming task:

- Self-awareness is exercised every time a player notices their own frustration rising and chooses how to respond.
- Self-management is practiced when someone refrains from abandoning the session after a setback because they recognise that the group needs them.
- Social awareness develops as players learn to read the dynamics of the group, namely, who is struggling, who needs encouragement, who has an idea worth listening to.
- Relationship skills are built through the ordinary negotiation of a shared endeavour like agreeing a plan, dividing tasks, giving and receiving feedback.
- Responsible decision-making is present in every choice about how to proceed, whether to compete or cooperate and whether to take a risk or play it safe.

None of this requires a formal lesson. It requires an environment that is safe enough for genuine engagement, a task that is challenging enough to generate real stakes and a facilitator who is attentive enough to notice when a teaching moment has arrived.

Non-formal education and the role of the youth worker

Embedded well-being sits most naturally within the tradition of non-formal education, i.e., learning that takes place outside of formal schooling, is voluntary, is driven by the



interests and needs of participants and values process as much as outcome. The Council of Europe's framework for non-formal education emphasises its role in developing active citizenship, personal development and social inclusion which are precisely the goals of embedded well-being (Council of Europe, 2017). Within this tradition, the youth worker takes on a distinctive and important role. Unlike a teacher, who holds formal authority and whose relationship with young people is structured around instruction, the youth worker operates in a more lateral and relational mode. Trust is built through shared experience, through consistency, through the demonstration that the worker is genuinely interested in the young person rather than in achieving a predetermined outcome. This relational foundation is exactly what makes embedded well-being possible. Young people are more likely to open up about their experiences and emotions in the context of a relationship they trust; and the gaming session is one of the most natural environments in which that trust can be built and demonstrated.

It is important to stress that within a Gamer-Con session, youth workers should not position themselves as acting as a therapist or counsellor. Their role is to create a space for respect and engagement and then be ready to respond when discussions around well-being can naturally be prompted. As a social profession, youth workers will already approach their practice with empathy and dedication to youth needs, and so this role of facilitating embedded well-being is a natural extension of the existing roles of youth workers.

Gaming as a reflective tool

One of the most significant insights to come from the Gamer-Con Social Events was the way in which the structure of gaming itself, meaning its rules, its objectives, its moments of tension and resolution, etc. provided a natural scaffold for reflection. Within this space, conversations about teamwork and resilience arose organically from what was happening in the game, because the game had made certain experiences vivid and immediate in ways that abstract discussion rarely can.

Consider a scenario that arose during the Ireland sessions:

- A group of participants had spent 4-5 sessions building a structure in their shared Minecraft world. During one session, a mishap resulted in part of the structure being destroyed. The immediate response was frustration, laughter, a brief moment of blame, which was all entirely natural. However, when the facilitator asked the group how they wanted to respond, the group engaged in a genuine and generous conversation about mistakes, about how to move on from setbacks and about the difference between what can be fixed and what has to be accepted and rebuilt. This is an example of resilience being practised in real time, with the game providing both the occasion and the metaphor.

Similar moments arise around themes of empathy and communication:

- For example, when a player notices that a quieter group member has been consistently overlooked in the planning of the shared build and raises this with the group, they are practicing social awareness and advocacy in a context that is immediately meaningful.



- Or another example is when a group has to negotiate a disagreement about the direction of a project without a formal authority figure to adjudicate, they are developing the conflict resolution skills that will serve them far beyond the gaming session.

A reflection on embedded well-being

It is worth being explicit about what embedded well-being is not, because the distinction matters for how practitioners approach their role:

- Embedded well-being is not therapy and it does not seek to replicate what clinical mental health support provides.
- It is not a diagnostic tool and it does not involve the assessment or treatment of mental health conditions.
- It is not a structured curriculum with predetermined learning outcomes that every participant must achieve.

What it is:

- Attentive practice.
- Cultivation of an environment in which young people feel safe enough to be honest, curious enough to reflect and supported enough to take small emotional risks.
- Recognition that well-being is not a separate domain of experience but is woven into every moment of genuine social engagement and that the youth worker's role is to honour that weaving rather than to unpick it and reassemble it in a clinical setting.

This distinction also has implications for how embedded well-being is evaluated. Its outcomes are not always measurable in conventional terms. A young person who comes to a gaming session feeling isolated and leaves feeling slightly less so has experienced something real and valuable, even if it does not appear in a pre-and-post survey. The Gamer-Con project used both quantitative surveys and qualitative exit interviews precisely because the richest evidence for the approach's impact was in the language young people used to describe their experience: words like 'comfortable,' 'supported,' 'not alone' and 'more confident', which quantitative scales can gesture towards but rarely fully capture.

2.5 Practical guidance for Youth Workers

Understanding the theory behind embedded well-being is useful, but its value is in how it changes what practitioners notice and do. The most practical implication of the frameworks discussed in this chapter is attentiveness and learning to recognise, in the flow of a gaming session, the moments that carry well-being significance.

This awareness needs to be practiced and conscious before the session starts. When planning a gaming activity with embedded well-being in mind, it helps to think in advance about the kinds of social and emotional dynamics the chosen game is likely to generate. For example:



- A cooperative building game like Minecraft will surface questions of collaboration, division of labour and collective ownership.
- A puzzle game requiring sequential problem-solving will generate moments of frustration, persistence and the experience of insight.
- A competitive game played in teams will raise questions of fairness, leadership and how to respond to winning and losing.

Knowing to expect from the type of game will support the facilitator to look out for key conversations and moments which these games will cause for the group of young people. This should then be practiced during the session when typically, the lightest of touches is usually most effective. For example, a question asked in the moment like ‘How did that feel when it went wrong?’ or ‘What do you think you could try differently?’, can open a conversation without interrupting the flow of the activity. The aim is to create a habit of gentle noticing, i.e., signalling to participants that their internal experience matters and is worth attending to, without making that attention feel intrusive or obligatory.

After the session, a brief and informal debrief (even just five minutes of open conversation about what stood out) can consolidate the well-being work that has happened during play. Reflective questions do not need to be sophisticated. You could simply ask, ‘What was the best moment?’ and ‘What would you do differently next time?’. These types of questions tend to be sufficient to surface the kinds of insight that make embedded well-being visible and, over time, transferable to the young person’s wider life.

2.6 Recommendations

For practitioners approaching embedded well-being for the first time, the most important recommendation is to resist over-complication. The theoretical frameworks described in this chapter, including experiential learning, social-emotional development and non-formal education are not a checklist to be worked through during a session. They are lenses or ways of understanding what is already happening when young people engage genuinely with one another in a shared activity.

The second recommendation is to begin with curiosity rather than an agenda. Embedded well-being works best when the facilitator is genuinely interested in the young people in the room and in what motivates them, what worries them, what brings them joy, etc. Gaming is one of the most direct routes into that curiosity for many young people today. Asking what someone is playing, and why, and what they love about it, can be the most natural entry point into a conversation that has well-being at its heart.

Finally, embedded well-being is a practice that develops over time. It is not something a youth worker will do perfectly in their first session, or even their tenth. It requires the kind of reflective attentiveness that the approach aims to develop in young people, i.e., the willingness to notice what happened, to ask what it meant and to bring that understanding into the next session with a slightly more attuned and open presence.

The concept of embedded well-being is both simple and demanding. Simple, because it does not require specialist training or clinical expertise. Demanding, because it requires



genuine presence, genuine interest and the willingness to hold a space that is open rather than controlled. The Gamer-Con partnership believes that youth workers already possess these capacities. This chapter, and this handbook, are offered as a way of helping them to recognise and name what they already do.

2.7 References and further reading

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Partner reflection note

Chapter 2 required a different approach from the opening chapter. In Chapter 1, much of the writing came from reflecting on experiences and conversations with young people. This chapter asked us to pause and think more carefully about the ideas and approaches sitting underneath that work. At times, that meant recognising that much of what we were doing had developed naturally through practice and instinct rather than through consciously following theory or educational frameworks.

As we read the literature, however, the process became far more reassuring than challenging. Frameworks like Kolb's experiential learning cycle, the CASEL competences and the Council of Europe's understanding of non-formal education helped us to better understand and describe practices that were already happening within the project. They gave language and structure to experiences that had previously felt intuitive.

We hope this chapter offers the same sense of recognition to other practitioners. Often, people working with young people are already creating meaningful learning experiences without always having the terminology to explain why those approaches work. This chapter is intended to help connect practice with theory in a way that is accessible, relevant and grounded in real experience.



Chapter 3: Findings from Gamer-Con Social Events

Developed by: BACKSLASH

Country: Spain

3.1 Introduction to the chapter

The Gamer-Con social events represent the practical heart of the project. Designed as gaming sessions that embed well-being discussions within shared play, these events brought together young people aged 18 to 25 who were navigating significant life transitions, entering the workforce, managing unemployment, adjusting to post-education life, or simply trying to find their footing in a period of personal uncertainty. The events were not conceived as a clinical programme or a mental health intervention. They were, first and foremost, social occasions built around something many young people genuinely love playing games together.

What made the Gamer-Con events distinctive was the intentional layer of facilitation woven around that shared gaming experience. Facilitators were present not to direct or instruct but to listen, to notice, and to gently open space for conversations about well-being when the moment felt right. The game itself (cooperative, engaging, and demanding enough to absorb participants' attention) provided the conditions in which those conversations could happen naturally. This approach, grounded in the concept of embedded well-being, challenged the common assumption that young people will only engage with support when it is explicitly labelled and formally delivered.

This chapter presents the main findings from the Gamer-Con social events, drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative exit interview material gathered from participants across the three partner countries. It explores how the events were structured, who participated in them, what happened during the sessions, and what outcomes participants reported.

3.2 Learning outcomes

After completing this section, readers will:

- Gain a comprehensive understanding of the structure, format, and purpose of the Gamer-Con social events.
- Understand the key quantitative and qualitative outcomes reported by participants across the project.
- Learn from real participant experiences, including direct voices from exit interviews.
- Recognise the specific conditions that supported positive embedded well-being outcomes in gaming contexts.
- Identify practical lessons and recommendations that can inform similar youth work initiatives.



3.3 Background and context

The Gamer-Con social events were designed in response to a well-documented challenge in youth work: how to reach young people (particularly young men and those navigating life transitions) through well-being and mental health support that they will actually engage with. Research consistently shows that young adults aged 18 to 25 are among the least likely to seek formal psychological support, despite facing significant pressures related to financial stress, social isolation, uncertainty about the future, and the demands of establishing independent adult identities.

The reasons for this engagement gap are multiple and well documented. Formal mental health services can feel stigmatising, inaccessible, or simply irrelevant to young people who do not identify as having a clinical need. Even non-clinical well-being programmes can struggle to attract young people if they are perceived as therapeutic in character or if they require participants to be openly vulnerable with strangers in a structured group setting. Youth workers have long known that the most effective engagement often happens when support is woven into activities that young people already value, and that the most meaningful conversations frequently arise not from direct questioning but from doing something together.

Gaming occupies a particularly interesting space in this context. It is simultaneously one of the most widespread leisure activities among young people and one of the most misunderstood in terms of its social and emotional potential. Public discourse around gaming has historically focused on its risks (addiction, social withdrawal, aggressive behaviour) while the significant body of research demonstrating its benefits in areas of social connection, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and resilience has received far less attention. Gamer-Con was built on the premise that these benefits are real and that, with thoughtful facilitation, gaming can become a genuine platform for well-being support.

The social events were also shaped by the specific needs and contexts of each partner country. Young people in rural and peri-urban communities, those who are NEET, those from marginalised backgrounds, and those who are socially isolated were all represented among participants. The online format of the sessions was deliberately chosen to maximise accessibility, removing the barrier of physical travel and creating a space in which participants could engage from wherever they were comfortable. This decision proved especially significant for participants who described themselves as socially anxious or who had previously found in-person group settings difficult to navigate.



3.4 Main content

Structure and Design of the Events

The Gamer-Con social events were delivered across a period of approximately one month per partner country, with sessions held two to three times per week. Each programme comprised eight to 10 sessions in total, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. All sessions were conducted online, using a combination of a shared gaming platform and a voice communication channel that allowed participants to talk with one another freely throughout the gameplay.

The design of the sessions drew on the well-established concept of 'shoulder-to-shoulder' bonding, an approach that has been shown to be particularly effective in facilitating emotional openness among young men, who make up a significant proportion of the gaming community and who tend to find direct, face-to-face emotional discussion more challenging than activity-based interaction. The logic of shoulder-to-shoulder engagement is straightforward: when people are occupied with a shared task, the social pressure associated with being observed or evaluated is reduced, and conversations that might otherwise feel too vulnerable can arise without forcing. The game does not distract from the well-being work; it enables it.

The sessions run by one of the partners focused on Minecraft, using the game's open-world environment to set the participants a collective creative challenge: to build a holiday-themed island together over the course of the programme. Another partner, meanwhile, used the game LOL (League of Legends) to encourage teamwork and healthy competition.

These approaches provided the participants with a shared goal and helped them develop the soft skills needed for community life.

The facilitation was light-hearted and, at all times, non-clinical. No session was presented as a mental health workshop or a formal discussion group. The facilitator took part in the game alongside the participants, building a rapport as a fellow player rather than maintaining a separate observer role. Topics related to wellbeing (mindfulness, stress, anxiety, coping strategies, relationships and future aspirations) were introduced organically during natural breaks in the game, in response to what was emerging in the room rather than according to a predetermined agenda. The aim was always for the conversation to be perceived as a natural extension of what was already happening, rather than an interruption of it.



Profile of Participants

Across the Gamer-Con social events, each partner worked with a core group of approximately fifteen young people who participated consistently across the programme.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, with the majority clustered in the 21 to 25 age bracket. The group was diverse in terms of employment and educational status: it included tertiary-level students, young people in full or part-time employment, long-term unemployed young people, and those classified as NEET, not in employment, education, or training. This diversity was not incidental but intentional, reflecting Gamer-Con's commitment to reaching young people across a broad spectrum of life circumstances rather than focusing exclusively on any single demographic.

The majority of consistent attendees across the programme were young men, a pattern that aligned with the project's deliberate focus on a demographic typically underserved by conventional well-being provision. Gaming's cultural associations with male participation made it a natural entry point for engaging this group, and the shoulder-to-shoulder facilitation model was specifically chosen with this in mind. Young women also participated across all partner events, though their attendance tended to be less consistent. This pattern is addressed further in the recommendations section and represents an important area for reflection in future iterations of the programme.

Participants came from a range of social backgrounds, including young people from rural and peri-urban communities with limited local social infrastructure, individuals from migrant and minority backgrounds, and those who described experiencing social anxiety or low confidence in group settings. The online format was particularly valued by participants in these groups, who noted that the digital environment reduced some of the social pressures associated with in-person group participation.

Key Findings: Social Connection and Belonging

The impact of the Gamer-Con events on participants' sense of social connection was one of the most consistently reported and striking outcomes across the evaluation data. All survey respondents indicated that they had made social connections through the gaming sessions that had continued beyond the events themselves. This finding is particularly significant given that many participants had joined the programme with limited social networks or with explicit goals around meeting new people.

Nearly 93% of participants reported feeling more socially connected since attending Gamer-Con, with the majority describing a significant increase rather than a marginal one. Exit interview data offered important texture to this finding. Participants described how the shared gaming environment had rapidly dissolved the awkwardness typical of new group interactions, how building something together in the game, or navigating a shared challenge, had created a sense of common experience that accelerated the formation of genuine social bonds.



“Playing Minecraft we quickly got to know each other and talk. I feel like I made some great friends in these sessions.”

Others described the gaming context as actively lowering social barriers that they had found difficult to overcome in other settings, noting that having a shared love of the game created an immediate sense of common ground that made it easier to engage with unfamiliar people. For participants who described themselves as socially anxious or reluctant to put themselves in new social situations, this dimension of the Gamer-Con experience was particularly meaningful.

“Getting comfortable talking to new people is easier through gaming in my opinion, it feels like a barrier is already down through shared love of the game.”

The project also generated evidence of emerging longer-term social impact. Several participants described the experience as prompting them to seek out more social connection in other areas of their lives, to check in with friends more regularly, to be more open to new social experiences, or to maintain the relationships formed through Gamer-Con through other channels. One participant spoke of having set a personal goal to check in with people more regularly as a direct result of the sessions, a small but meaningful shift in social orientation that extended well beyond the programme itself.

Key Findings: Emotional Well-being and Mental Health

The sessions generated equally strong outcomes in terms of emotional well-being. Almost 93% of participants reported that gaming helped them feel more relaxed or less stressed, with many describing the sessions as a valuable opportunity to decompress after demanding days at work or in education. The capacity of cooperative gaming to absorb and redirect attention (to focus the mind on a shared challenge and away from personal stressors) was frequently cited as a significant benefit in its own right, entirely apart from the facilitated well-being discussions.

More meaningfully still, 78.6% of participants reported that the events had helped them feel more comfortable discussing their emotions and well-being, a significant shift for a group in which emotional openness had not previously been the norm. Participants described a gradual process of normalisation: in the early sessions, conversations about personal experience remained fairly surface-level, but as the group developed its own social norms and sense of trust, the depth and candour of sharing increased markedly.

“Yes, the gaming sessions made me feel less stressed. We spent a lot of time talking about our lives and what was going on for each of us, and I think getting some stressful things off my chest was helpful.”



The experience of shared vulnerability (of discovering that other participants were navigating similar pressures and emotions) was repeatedly identified as one of the most valuable aspects of the programme. For many participants, this sense of not being alone in their struggles was itself a significant well-being outcome, reducing the isolation and self-criticism that can accompany unspoken personal difficulties.

“It was nice to know that so many of us experience similar things, and that we're not alone.”

Some participants also noted changes in their relationship with mental health conversation more broadly, describing an increased willingness to discuss well-being topics with friends and family outside of the sessions. For some, this represented a significant personal development, a first step towards breaking a personal pattern of emotional avoidance that they had maintained for years.

“I have never really been one to share how I feel or talk about my mental state, but doing so with the group feels easier or more casual, there are no pressures or judgements as there might be with family.”

Key Findings: Skills Development

A third significant area of impact concerned the development of transferable skills through participation in the Gamer-Con sessions. Communication was the most frequently cited area of improvement, with participants describing how the necessity of working together in the game (coordinating actions, negotiating decisions, offering encouragement) had strengthened their ability to engage effectively with others. Teamwork and collaboration were similarly prominent, with several participants reflecting on how the experience had shifted their approach to working with others beyond the gaming context.

Other skills cited by participants included empathy, patience, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and leadership. One participant described a notable shift in their leadership style over the course of the programme, moving from a more passive, disengaged approach to one characterised by active involvement and a willingness to support and guide others. Another noted that the sessions had strengthened their capacity for active listening, developing the patience to allow others to contribute fully rather than dominating conversations. These are precisely the kinds of interpersonal competencies that youth workers seek to develop through non-formal education, and their emergence through gaming is a significant and encouraging finding.

“My communication skills have definitely improved, I found myself before with a laissez-faire leadership style, but through these sessions I have gained a more engaged leadership style, willing to get involved and help out and support others.”



There was also evidence of emerging longer-term impact in terms of participants' sense of confidence and personal direction. Several participants linked the experience to a greater willingness to invest in their own personal development, to pursue new goals, or to engage more actively with the social and professional dimensions of their lives. One participant described the sessions as having eased their fear about the future and given them a better outlook on life, a modest but meaningful indication of well-being impact that extended beyond the immediate gaming context.

Challenges and Areas for Development

The evaluation also surfaced a number of areas where the programme design could be strengthened in future iterations. The less consistent attendance of female participants across the events suggests that the current format (centred primarily on games and platforms with historically male-dominated user bases) may not be equally accessible or appealing to all young people. While the project did not aim to exclude female participants and actively worked to create an inclusive environment, the engagement patterns observed suggest that more deliberate attention to game selection, facilitation approach, and the framing of the sessions could help to create a more gender-equitable experience.

Some participants also reported initial feelings of awkwardness or intimidation when first joining the group online. While this tended to ease rapidly within the first session or two as the group established its dynamic, the early experience of some participants suggests the value of a more structured onboarding process, perhaps a dedicated introductory session focused entirely on fun and low-stakes interaction, before any well-being dimensions of the programme are introduced.

A third area for development concerns the programme's capacity to support participants beyond its formal conclusion. Several participants expressed a desire to maintain the connections and conversations that had developed through Gamer-Con, and some reported uncertainty about how to continue engaging with the well-being themes the sessions had opened up for them. Future iterations of the project should consider building in formal mechanisms for ongoing connection, whether through maintained online communities, optional follow-up sessions, or signposting to relevant local services and support networks.

Recommendations and Reflections

The Gamer-Con social events demonstrated compellingly that gaming, when facilitated with care, intentionality, and genuine respect for the culture of gaming itself, can serve as a powerful and effective platform for embedded well-being support. The project reached young people who would likely never have engaged with a conventional well-being programme, generated meaningful outcomes in social connection, emotional well-being, and skills development, and did so through an approach that participants experienced as enjoyable, authentic, and free from the stigma often associated with formal mental health provision.



The following concrete recommendations emerge from the project's experience:

- First, **game selection is a critical variable and should be approached with care and intentionality**. Cooperative formats that generate genuine interdependence between players (where participants must communicate, plan, and support one another in order to succeed) provide the richest conditions for embedded well-being facilitation. Youth workers should prioritise inclusivity in game selection, choosing platforms and formats that are accessible to participants with varying levels of gaming experience and different hardware resources.
- Second, the **programme's duration and consistency matter enormously**. The most significant well-being outcomes in the Gamer-Con sessions emerged not in the early sessions but in the third, fourth, and fifth weeks, as social trust deepened and participants became increasingly comfortable with both the group and the format. Funders and organisations commissioning gaming-based well-being programmes should be encouraged to support sustained programmes rather than short-term pilots, and to evaluate impact over a realistic timescale.
- Third, **attention to inclusive participation (particularly with regard to gender) should be a deliberate aspect of programme design from the outset**. This may involve offering sessions with different gaming formats that appeal to a wider range of participants, using mixed and single-gender groups depending on what best suits the community, and ensuring that facilitation approaches are sensitive to the different ways in which young men and young women may engage with both gaming and well-being conversation.
- Finally, the Gamer-Con experience points to the potential of gaming-based well-being programmes to generate lasting impact that extends well beyond the formal programme period. The social connections formed, the new habits of emotional openness developed, and the skills gained through participation do not disappear when the final session ends. Organisations running these programmes should invest in creating conditions (informal online communities, optional follow-up sessions, links to local services) that allow participants to sustain and build on the gains they have made.



Chapter 4: Practical Methods for Embedding Well-being into Gaming Activities

Developed by: BACKSLASH

Country: Spain

4.1 Introduction to the chapter

Understanding that gaming can support embedded well-being is an important starting point, but for youth workers it is not enough. The real challenge lies in translating that understanding into effective practice: knowing how to plan sessions that integrate well-being naturally rather than artificially, how to create the conditions in which meaningful conversations arise, and how to guide reflection without disrupting the energy and enjoyment of the game. This chapter is designed to equip practitioners with exactly that knowledge.

The methods presented here draw directly on the lived experience of the Gamer-Con social events across the three partner countries, as well as the broader expertise of BACKSLASH in youth engagement, social inclusion, and the development of practical tools for youth workers. The chapter is structured to move from planning to facilitation to reflection, offering a progression of methods that practitioners can adopt in sequence or select according to their specific needs and context. Rather than prescribing a single approach, the chapter aims to build practitioners' confidence and flexibility, their capacity to read a group, respond to what is happening in the room, and make informed decisions about when and how to introduce well-being themes within a gaming context. Importantly, the methods in this chapter are designed to be accessible to youth workers who may have little or no prior experience with gaming. Some familiarity with the game being used is helpful and recommended, but the core facilitation skills described here are transferable from any other youth work context. A practitioner who knows how to build rapport, ask open questions, and create a safe group environment already has the most important tools needed for this work.

4.2 Learning outcomes

After completing this section, readers will:

- Know how to plan gaming activities that integrate embedded well-being themes in a natural and non-intrusive way.
- Have a practical toolkit of facilitation techniques for opening and sustaining well-being conversations within gaming sessions.
- Be able to select games and formats that are well suited to well-being work with different groups of young people.
- Understand how to structure sessions using the Before–During–After framework to maximise reflective outcomes.
- Be able to adapt all methods presented here for different groups, needs, levels of gaming experience, and digital access.



4.3 Background and context

The practice of embedding well-being into non-formal activities is well established within the broader field of youth work. Project-based learning, outdoor education, creative arts, and sport have all been used successfully as vehicles for well-being integration, and the evidence base for these approaches is substantial. Gaming, however, presents both unique opportunities and specific challenges that distinguish it from other activity-based well-being contexts.

Unlike a sport or a creative workshop, gaming carries significant cultural weight for many young people. It is not merely an activity; it is, for a substantial proportion of the 18 to 25 age group, a primary social space, a source of identity, and a community of belonging. When youth workers enter that space, they must do so with genuine respect for gaming culture, not treating the game as a hook or a trick to draw young people into a conversation about something else, but recognising it as a meaningful activity in its own right. Young people are perceptive, and they will quickly disengage from a programme in which the gaming feels incidental to a hidden therapeutic agenda. The most effective embedded well-being facilitation in gaming contexts is characterised by authenticity: facilitators who genuinely enjoy or are curious about the game, and who understand that the well-being work emerges from the gaming, not alongside it.

At the same time, the gaming environment offers something rare and genuinely valuable for well-being work: an immediate, shared focus that absorbs attention, reduces self-consciousness, and generates a natural rhythm of cooperation, challenge, failure, and achievement. These are precisely the conditions under which emotional and interpersonal learning tends to occur most readily. When a team fails together in a game and has to decide how to respond, when a less experienced player is supported by a more experienced one, when a group debate about strategy turns unexpectedly heated, these are not distractions from the well-being work. They are the well-being work, in its most authentic and immediate form.

4.4 Main content

Choosing the Right Game

The choice of game is the single most consequential practical decision a facilitator will make when planning a gaming-based well-being programme. Not all games are equally suited to this kind of work, and selecting the wrong format can undermine even the most thoughtful facilitation approach. The key criterion is not whether a game is popular or technically impressive but whether it generates the kinds of social interactions (cooperation, communication, shared problem-solving, negotiation, mutual support) that create natural openings for embedded well-being conversations.

Cooperative and creative formats are consistently the strongest choice. Minecraft, which was used in the Gamer-Con sessions, exemplifies many of the qualities that make a game well suited to well-being work: it requires no prior skill, welcomes players at vastly different levels of experience and confidence, generates genuine interdependence between players, and produces a shared creative output that participants can feel proud



of together. Its open-ended format also means that the group itself determines the direction and character of the activity, which supports a sense of ownership and agency that is itself well-being relevant. Other suitable cooperative formats include *Stardew Valley*, a farming simulation that rewards communication and collaborative planning over time; *Among Us*, a social deduction game that generates rich conversation about trust, observation, and group dynamics; *Overcooked*, which places communication and teamwork under enjoyable and often hilarious pressure; and *It Takes Two*, a cooperative adventure that requires two players to coordinate closely throughout.

Games with strong competitive elements should be approached with care rather than avoided entirely. Competition can generate motivation, energy, and meaningful emotional responses (including frustration, disappointment, and the challenge of managing a loss gracefully) all of which can become valuable material for well-being discussion. However, highly competitive formats can also foreground winning and losing in ways that generate social tension or exclusion, particularly when skill levels within the group are unequal. If competitive games are used, facilitators should consider how to frame competition in a way that emphasises learning and team experience over individual performance.

Practical accessibility should also be a central consideration in game selection. Youth workers should ask: does this game require expensive hardware that some participants may not have? Is it available across multiple platforms, including mobile devices? Does it present barriers for young people with physical or cognitive disabilities? Are the game's themes, imagery, and community culture appropriate and inclusive for all the young people in the group? These questions are not peripheral but essential to ensuring that the programme can genuinely reach and include all intended participants.

The Before–During–After Framework for Session Planning

Effective embedded well-being facilitation requires intentional preparation before the session, attentive and responsive presence during gameplay, and thoughtful structured reflection afterwards. The Before-During-After framework provides a simple and adaptable structure for each session that ensures well-being integration is consistent and cumulative across the programme, rather than occasional or ad hoc.

Before the session, the facilitator's preparation has two dimensions: practical and relational. Practically, the facilitator should have tested the gaming setup, confirmed that all participants have the access they need, and identified any technical issues that might create barriers to smooth participation. Relationally, the facilitator should arrive with a clear sense of the group's current dynamic, who has been engaging actively, who has seemed quieter or more withdrawn, whether there is any tension or any particularly positive momentum within the group. This awareness should inform the facilitation choices made during the session. Facilitators should also identify one or two well-being themes they intend to weave into the session, based on what they know about the group's experiences and needs. These themes should be held lightly, as possibilities rather than requirements, the facilitator's task is to respond to what arises naturally, not to impose a predetermined agenda.



A brief check-in at the start of each session is strongly recommended. This does not need to be elaborate or emotionally demanding. A simple invitation to share a number from one to five representing the current mood, or a single word that captures how participants are arriving today, is sufficient. The purpose is to signal to participants that how they feel matters in this space, and to create a small but consistent ritual of emotional attentiveness that, over time, becomes a natural part of the group's shared culture. Facilitators should acknowledge the range of responses without comment or judgement and move into the session without pressing for elaboration.

During the session, the facilitator's role is primarily that of an attentive and responsive presence. The most important skill in this phase is the ability to notice: to observe when moments arise in the gameplay that connect naturally to the well-being themes the facilitator has in mind, and to offer a brief, light-touch response that opens space for reflection without stopping the game. A player who steps up to lead the group under pressure, a moment of collaborative problem-solving that draws on everyone's contribution, an instance of in-game conflict that the group navigates together, these moments are not interruptions of the well-being work but expressions of it. The facilitator's task is to name what is happening gently and curiously: 'That felt like a real team moment, how did it land for everyone?' or 'I noticed the group had a really different approach to that challenge today. What changed?'

Facilitators should also be attentive to moments of difficulty or negative emotion during gameplay (frustration, disappointment, conflict) and resist the impulse to smooth these over or redirect attention away from them. A participant who expresses frustration at a game outcome is often expressing something broader about their relationship with challenge, failure, or their sense of competence. Handled with care, these moments can become among the most valuable in the entire programme. A simple, non-judgemental acknowledgement ('That sounds genuinely frustrating. Does anyone else know that feeling?') can open a conversation of real depth and significance.

After the session, a debrief of ten to fifteen minutes should be treated as an integral part of the programme rather than an optional extra. This is the phase in which the implicit learning embedded in the gameplay becomes explicit and named, and in which participants have the opportunity to connect their in-session experiences to their broader lives. The debrief should feel conversational and unforced, guided by two or three open questions rather than a formal discussion structure. Over successive sessions, the depth and candour of debrief conversations will typically increase as the group's trust deepens, a gradual process that facilitators should nurture patiently rather than try to accelerate.

Facilitation Techniques and Reflection Prompts

The following facilitation techniques and question prompts are drawn directly from the Gamer-Con experience and are offered as a practical resource for youth workers. They are organised according to the three phases of the Before-During-After framework and can be adapted freely to suit different groups, games, and facilitation styles.



Before the session or as a check-in: 'How are you all coming in today (is anyone carrying something heavy from the week?' or 'On a scale of one to five, how are you feeling right now) one being rough, five being great?' or 'What are you hoping to get out of today?' or 'Is there anything about today's game or task that feels exciting, or maybe a little daunting?' During gameplay, in response to natural in-game moments: 'How does the team want to approach this?' or 'That felt like a tough moment (how did everyone manage?' or 'I noticed something shift just then) what was that about?' or 'What would help the group work better together right now?' or 'That was a really impressive piece of teamwork, what made that work so well?'

After gameplay, in the debrief: 'What felt good about how the group worked today?' or 'Was there a moment that surprised you, either in yourself or in someone else?' or 'Did anything come up during the game that reminded you of something in everyday life?' or 'How are you leaving today compared to how you arrived?' or 'What is one thing you are taking away from this session?'

A few principles should guide the use of all these prompts. First, timing matters enormously: a question asked in the wrong moment (when participants are deeply absorbed in the game, or before sufficient trust has been established) will fall flat or feel intrusive. Facilitators should develop their sensitivity to the rhythm and energy of the group, learning when the conditions are right for a question and when they are not. Second, silence is not failure: if a question is met with a quiet or brief response, facilitators should resist the impulse to fill the silence immediately. Sometimes the most meaningful reflection happens internally, and participants should be given space to process without pressure. Third, facilitators should always model the kind of honest and grounded engagement they are inviting from participants, acknowledging their own responses to the game, sharing their own observations, and demonstrating that openness is welcome in this space.

Adapting for Different Groups and Needs

The methods in this chapter are designed with flexibility built in, but youth workers should always consider the specific characteristics, needs, and circumstances of their group when planning and facilitating sessions. For young people with social anxiety, limited gaming experience, or a history of negative group experiences, the first sessions should prioritise fun, safety, and confidence-building above all else. The well-being themes can be introduced gradually, once the group has established a sense of ease and trust. Pushing too quickly towards emotional depth in early sessions can create the very vulnerability and discomfort that the gaming environment is intended to reduce.

For groups that include participants with disabilities, accessibility must be a genuine and active consideration rather than a box to tick. This may involve choosing games with adjustable difficulty settings or accessible control options, ensuring that the chosen voice communication platform has appropriate accessibility features, adapting the pace of sessions to allow for different processing needs, or providing written alternatives to verbal check-ins for participants who find verbal communication challenging in a group



setting. Youth workers should engage with participants about their accessibility needs directly and without assumption, treating them as experts in their own experience.

For young people who are digitally excluded (whether due to limited internet access, lack of suitable hardware, or low digital confidence) online gaming-based programmes may not be accessible without additional support. Youth workers in organisations with appropriate resources should consider whether equipment loans, data top-ups, or in-person sessions using shared devices can address these barriers. Where online delivery is not feasible, many of the facilitation principles in this chapter can be applied to in-person gaming sessions using locally available hardware or even non-digital cooperative board games, which offer many of the same social dynamics in a lower-tech format.

4.5 Practical guidance for Youth Workers

For practitioners approaching this chapter as a ready-to-use planning resource, the following guidance brings together the key steps in a practical and accessible format. Begin by selecting a cooperative game that is appropriate for your group's age range, interests, and digital access. Invest time in playing the game yourself before the first session, not to become an expert, but to understand the social dynamics it generates and to feel confident enough in the environment to participate as a fellow player rather than an external observer. This preparation will significantly improve your ability to notice and respond to meaningful moments as they arise in the sessions.

Plan your first session primarily as a social event. Resist the impulse to introduce well-being content in the first session: the group needs time to establish its dynamic, to feel comfortable with the game and with one another, and to build the basic social trust that makes genuine reflection possible. A first session that is simply fun and inclusive (where everyone feels welcomed, where the game feels enjoyable rather than pressured, and where the facilitator models warmth, enthusiasm, and genuine engagement) is a highly successful first session. Everything else can follow from there.

Build your debrief practice from session one, even if the debrief is brief and light in the early weeks. A consistent ten-minute debrief at the end of every session, however simple the questions, establishes an expectation of reflection that will become increasingly valuable as the programme develops. Participants who know that a debrief will happen at the end of each session begin to notice and hold their experiences differently during the gameplay itself, which enriches both the session and the debrief over time.

Keep a brief facilitation journal after each session, noting what worked, what generated the richest responses, what you would do differently, and anything significant that emerged for individual participants. This does not need to be lengthy or formal, a few bullet points in a notebook or a voice note recorded on the way home is sufficient. Over the course of the programme, this journal will become a valuable resource for refining your practice and for reflecting on the group's development. It will also be invaluable if you are asked to share your learning with colleagues or to contribute to organisational documentation of the programme's impact.



4.6 Activity: Check In, Play, Check Out

The following template provides a complete session structure that can be applied directly to any cooperative gaming session. It is designed to be brief, consistent, and adaptable to different group sizes, games, and facilitation styles. It is particularly useful for practitioners who are new to gaming-based well-being work and who benefit from a clear and repeatable session structure.

Activity Title	Check In, Play, Check Out
Purpose	To create a consistent session structure that normalises emotional attentiveness, builds cumulative social trust, and supports participants to connect their gaming experience to their broader well-being over the course of the programme.
Game Used	Any cooperative multiplayer game, online or in-person. The template is game-agnostic.
Session Duration	Approximately 90-100 minutes total: 10 min check-in + 65-75 min gameplay + 10-15 min debrief
Check-In (10 min)	Invite each participant to share a number from 1 to 5 representing their current mood. No explanation is required unless they choose to offer one. The facilitator should acknowledge the range of responses with warmth ('Thanks everyone - a real mix today') and move into the session without commentary. Over time, facilitators can build on this ritual by occasionally asking: 'Does anyone want to say a word about their number before we start?'
During Gameplay	The facilitator participates as a fellow player while remaining attentive to natural moments that connect to well-being themes. Brief, light-touch observations or questions can be offered as these moments arise. The facilitator should prioritise the group's enjoyment and engagement above all, the well-being facilitation should feel like a natural part of the session's social texture, not an interruption of it.
Debrief (10–15 min)	Return to the 1-5 scale: 'How are you leaving compared to how you came in?' Then invite responses to two or three of the following: What was the best moment of the session for you? Was there a point where you felt challenged, how did you manage it? What did you notice about how the group worked together today? Did anything in the game remind you of something in your everyday life? What is one thing you are taking away from today?
Facilitator Notes	The check-in and debrief function as rituals even when responses are brief or light. Consistency is more important than depth in the early sessions. Do not pressure participants to elaborate. Over time, as the group's trust develops, the quality and depth of responses will naturally increase. The debrief question 'How are you leaving compared to how you came in?' is particularly valuable because it draws



participants' attention to the well-being effect of the session itself, building their awareness of gaming as a genuine resource for emotional regulation and social connection.

4.7 Recommendations

Embedding well-being into gaming activities is not a technique that can be mastered in a single training session or applied mechanically from a manual. It is a practice, one that develops through experience, reflection, and a genuine commitment to meeting young people where they are. The methods in this chapter are offered as a starting point and a framework, not as a definitive or exhaustive guide. Practitioners who engage seriously with this work will develop their own approaches, their own question styles, and their own sense of when the moment is right to introduce a well-being dimension to the gaming conversation.

What the Gamer-Con project demonstrated, above all else, is that young people are remarkably willing to engage with questions of well-being, mental health, and personal development when the setting feels safe, the activity feels meaningful, and the facilitator feels trustworthy. Gaming, for many young people, provides all three of those conditions simultaneously. The challenge for youth workers is to step into that space with enough confidence, humility, and genuine curiosity to let the process unfold.

The specific recommendations for practitioners are as follows. Invest in game selection and do not treat it as a secondary consideration. Build your programme over sufficient time (at least eight to ten sessions) to allow trust and depth to develop. Maintain the debrief practice consistently from the first session onwards. Stay attentive to the inclusivity of your facilitation, particularly regarding gender, disability, and digital access. Document your experience and share your learning with colleagues. And above all, trust the process: the evidence from Gamer-Con suggests strongly that when the conditions are right, the well-being dimension of gaming-based youth work takes care of itself.

4.8 References and further reading

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Chapter 5: Tips for Creating a Supportive and Inclusive Gaming Environment

Developed by: RÍSí

Country: Iceland

5.1 Introduction to the chapter

A gaming session can look welcoming from the outside and still feel difficult to enter. A participant may be unable to use the standard controller comfortably, may not understand the unspoken language of experienced players, or may worry that making a mistake will let the team down. Others may be managing sensory overload, financial barriers, language differences, discrimination or a previous experience of exclusion in gaming spaces. Inclusion therefore cannot be measured only by who is invited. It is revealed by who can take part meaningfully, who feels safe enough to be themselves and whose contribution is treated as valuable.

This chapter builds on the planning and facilitation methods in Chapter 4 by focusing on the conditions around play. It considers the room, equipment and digital platforms, but also the relationships, expectations and power dynamics that shape a group. In the Gamer-Con approach, these conditions are part of embedded well-being: accessibility, respect and belonging are not separate topics delivered before the game begins. They are created through everyday choices about pace, roles, communication and how the group responds when something goes wrong.

5.2 Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, readers will:

- Understand how physical, digital and social conditions influence whether a gaming space feels genuinely inclusive.
- Be able to establish shared expectations that support respect, accessibility and psychological safety.
- Recognise common patterns of exclusion and respond without shaming or isolating participants.
- Gain practical ways to adapt games, equipment, roles and session rhythms for mixed-ability groups.

5.3 Background and context

Inclusion is an experience, not a checklist

Accessibility is sometimes approached as a technical checklist: whether a venue has step-free access, whether subtitles are available or whether a controller can be remapped. These features matter greatly, but they are only one part of the experience. A technically accessible session can remain socially inaccessible if newcomers are mocked, if one confident player controls every decision or if the group assumes that



everyone communicates in the same way. Equally, a warm atmosphere cannot remove a practical barrier that prevents someone from seeing, hearing or operating the game. Inclusive practice holds both dimensions together.

This matters particularly in youth work because gaming groups often contain large differences in experience. A young person who has played a game for hundreds of hours may sit beside someone who is holding a controller for the first time. Some participants communicate quickly and verbally, while others need more time, prefer text chat or contribute through careful observation. The aim is not to make everybody perform in the same way. It is to design participation broadly enough that different strengths can become visible.

A supportive environment also recognises that identity affects how safe a gaming space feels. Sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and hostility towards inexperienced players are familiar features of some online communities. Even when no openly abusive comment is made, jokes, assumptions or repeated interruptions can signal who is expected to belong. Youth workers should not treat these patterns as inevitable parts of gaming culture. The group can create its own culture, with standards that are clear, credible and modelled consistently by adults and participants alike.

5.4 Main content

Preparing the physical and digital environment

Inclusive preparation begins before participants arrive. Youth workers should check routes into the venue, seating options, lighting, temperature, noise levels and the location of quiet spaces and toilets. Screens should be positioned to reduce glare, cables should not create hazards, and seating should allow people to change posture or use mobility equipment. A quieter station, headphones with adjustable volume and permission to step away can make participation possible for someone who is sensitive to noise or becomes overwhelmed. These options should be presented as ordinary choices available to everyone, rather than special arrangements that single out one person.

Equipment and software require the same attention. Facilitators should explore subtitle size, colour-blind settings, contrast, difficulty levels, motion reduction, audio cues, controller remapping and compatibility with adaptive devices. No single game will meet every need, so the important practice is to ask participants what helps and to test adjustments with them. Where resources are limited, role design can widen access: one person may navigate, another plan, another manage resources and another communicate with the wider team. These are genuine forms of play, not consolation roles, provided that participants choose them and the group values them.

Creating a shared culture of respect

Group agreements are most effective when participants help to create them. Instead of presenting a long list of rules, a facilitator can ask what people need in order to enjoy



playing together and what behaviours make a gaming space harder to join. The resulting agreement might cover respectful language, taking turns, consent before sharing images or usernames, the right to pause, and how the group will handle mistakes. It should be short enough to remember and revisited when new people join or when the group learns that something is missing.

The facilitator's behaviour gives the agreement meaning. If an experienced player laughs at a beginner's mistake, a light but immediate response is usually more effective than silence followed by a private lecture. The facilitator might say, 'We all learn at different speeds here; let's give them space to try,' and then redirect attention to support. More serious or repeated behaviour requires a clear boundary and a follow-up away from the group. The aim is to protect the person affected, interrupt the pattern and help the person responsible understand the impact. Inclusion does not mean avoiding accountability; it means applying boundaries fairly and without humiliation.

Names, pronouns and online identities deserve the same care as any other aspect of identity. Facilitators should use the names participants ask them to use and should not pressure anyone to explain a username, voice or personal history. Consent is also essential when sessions are streamed, photographed or recorded. A participant who does not want to appear in content should still be able to take part fully. Privacy settings, voice channels and friend requests should be discussed so that relationships created in the programme do not expose participants to unwanted contact afterwards.

Balancing skill, competition and participation

Differences in skill can strengthen a group when expertise is shared rather than used as status. Experienced players can be invited to explain options, rotate roles or support a teammate, but they should not become unpaid assistant facilitators or dominate every decision. New players need time to explore without a constant stream of instructions. Asking, 'Would you like a hint or time to work it out?' preserves choice and prevents help from becoming another form of control.

Competition can be enjoyable and emotionally rich, but it needs a frame that protects belonging. Mixed-ability teams, rotating captains, cooperative goals and recognition of communication or creativity can reduce the idea that only the highest score matters. Facilitators should watch for patterns: who is repeatedly chosen last, whose suggestions are ignored, who apologises excessively and who stops volunteering after a loss. These signals often reveal exclusion before anyone names it directly. A short pause, a change of teams or a private check-in may be enough to restore participation.

Supporting digital well-being

Digital well-being is not simply a limit on screen time. The quality, context and consequences of play matter alongside its duration. A long cooperative session with breaks, food, conversation and a clear ending may support well-being more effectively than a shorter session shaped by conflict or pressure. Facilitators can build healthy rhythms by scheduling breaks, making water available, varying posture and giving



advance notice before the session ends. This avoids abrupt stopping and helps participants practise transitions, particularly when a game is highly absorbing.

Online conduct should be discussed in concrete terms. Muting, blocking and reporting are legitimate tools, not signs of failure. Participants should know that they do not have to tolerate harassment to remain part of a community. Youth workers also need safeguarding procedures for disclosures, threatening messages, grooming concerns or harmful content encountered online. These matters should be handled through the organisation's established policy, with clear limits to confidentiality. The facilitator's role is supportive but is not a substitute for specialist safeguarding or mental health services.

5.5 Practical guidance for youth workers

Before the first session, invite participants to share access needs privately and in whatever format is easiest for them. Ask open questions such as, 'Is there anything about the room, equipment, communication or pace that would make taking part easier?' Avoid asking for diagnoses or proof. Test the game and platform, prepare at least one lower-pressure role, and identify a quiet place where someone can take a break without needing to leave the programme.

At the start, co-create a brief group agreement and explain how concerns can be raised. Make it clear that a participant can speak to a facilitator privately and that reasonable adjustments can change over time. During play, observe patterns of airtime, decision-making and access rather than focusing only on obvious conflict. Use specific, neutral interventions: invite an unheard suggestion back into the conversation, ask before offering help, rotate roles and pause when the group's energy becomes unsafe or overwhelming.

After the session, check whether the environment worked as intended. A simple question such as, 'What made it easier or harder to join in today?' can reveal more than a general satisfaction rating. Record practical changes for the next session without documenting sensitive personal information unnecessarily. Inclusion develops through repeated attention: small adjustments, followed by honest feedback and consistent follow-through, build trust more effectively than a perfect-looking policy that participants never experience in practice.

5.6 Activity: Designing our gaming space

This short activity helps a group turn inclusion from an abstract value into shared, observable practice. It can be used before a new programme or revisited when the group's membership or needs change.

Activity Title	Designing Our Gaming Space
Purpose	To create a shared agreement about access, respect, communication and participation, with clear routes for changing the agreement when it does not work.



Game Used	Any game planned for the programme; no gameplay expertise is required.
Duration	30-40 minutes, followed by a five-minute review at the end of the first three sessions.
Materials	A visible sheet or shared digital document, accessible writing options and the game setup so that practical barriers can be tested.
Facilitator Notes	Invite responses to three questions: What helps people join in? What can make a gaming space feel unsafe or excluding? What should we do when a problem occurs? Turn the answers into five or six positively worded agreements. Check that quieter participants can contribute privately or in writing. Agree who will revisit the document and when.
Reflection Questions	Whose needs are easy to notice and whose might be missed? How will we know that the agreement is working? What is one change we can test in the next session?

5.7 Recommendations

A supportive and inclusive gaming environment is created through design, relationships and repair. Practitioners should plan for access from the beginning, ask rather than assume what participants need, and treat different ways of communicating and playing as legitimate. They should make expectations visible, intervene early when behaviour undermines belonging and ensure that privacy and safeguarding arrangements extend into online spaces.

5.8 References and further reading

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Partner reflection note

Developing this chapter reinforced that inclusion is rarely achieved through one large intervention. It is built through many small decisions: where a chair is placed, whether a newcomer is given time to learn, how quickly a joke is challenged and whether feedback leads to a visible change. The main challenge was to hold physical accessibility, digital access and social belonging together without treating any of them as a specialist concern that sits outside ordinary youth work. We were also reminded that young people are often the clearest source of practical solutions. When they are invited to describe what helps them participate, they move the conversation away from assumptions and towards real experience. What surprised us most was how closely inclusion and well-being are



connected. A group does not need to pause gaming in order to work on belonging; belonging is being shaped in every turn, team choice and response to a mistake. Our hope is that practitioners use this chapter as permission to notice those moments, make thoughtful adjustments and keep learning alongside the group.



Chapter 6: Approaches to Facilitate Open Discussions and Support Coping Strategies

Developed by: RÍSí

Country: Iceland

6.1 Introduction to the chapter

Gaming produces emotion in real time. A difficult level can bring frustration, a close match can create excitement or disappointment, and a cooperative success can generate relief, pride and connection. These reactions are not distractions from the activity. They are part of what makes games meaningful, and they offer youth workers natural opportunities to support emotional awareness without turning play into a lesson or asking young people to disclose more than they wish.

This final chapter focuses on how facilitators can open those conversations safely and connect them to coping in everyday life. It builds on the supportive environments described in Chapter 5: honest reflection is more likely when participants trust the group, understand the boundaries and retain control over what they share. The aim is not to provide therapy. It is to help young people notice feelings, recognise strategies that already work for them and practise responding to challenge with greater choice, self-compassion and support from others.

6.2 Learning outcomes

After completing this chapter, readers will:

- Recognise when gameplay offers a useful opening for reflection and when it is better to let the moment pass.
- Be able to use open, non-judgemental questions that support expression without pressuring disclosure.
- Understand how gaming experiences can be connected to emotional regulation, persistence, empathy and help-seeking.
- Know the boundaries of the facilitator role and how to respond when a conversation raises a safeguarding or specialist-support concern.
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6.3 Background and context

Dialogue grows from safety and choice

Open discussion is sometimes mistaken for deep disclosure. In practice, a useful conversation may be brief, humorous or focused on the game. A participant who says, 'I had to walk away before trying again,' has already identified a coping strategy. Another who notices that a teammate became quiet after losing is practising empathy. The facilitator can help make this learning visible but does not need to turn every comment into a personal exploration.



Choice is central. Young people should be able to pass, answer in general terms, write instead of speaking or return to a question later. When participation in a well-being discussion feels compulsory, the gaming space can quickly lose the low-pressure quality that made reflection possible. Facilitators should explain that sharing is voluntary and demonstrate this by accepting a refusal without persuasion, disappointment or public attention.

The approach also depends on emotional safety. This does not mean preventing all discomfort. Games naturally involve uncertainty, loss and disagreement, and these experiences can support growth when the challenge is manageable and the participant retains support and agency. Emotional safety means that feelings are acknowledged without ridicule, boundaries are respected and the facilitator is prepared to slow down or stop when the level of distress exceeds what the activity can safely hold.

6.4 Main content

Noticing openings without forcing them

A useful opening often has three qualities: the emotion is visible or named, the immediate demands of the game have reduced and the relationship is strong enough for a gentle question. After a failed attempt, the facilitator might wait until the group has reset and ask, 'What helped you decide to try again?' Following a tense disagreement, they might ask, 'What did the team need in that moment?' After a success, 'Who helped make that possible?' can direct attention towards support and shared effort.

Timing matters more than the perfect wording. A question asked during intense concentration can feel intrusive, while the same question during a natural pause may be welcomed. Facilitators should watch body language, tone, silence and changes in participation. They can test an opening lightly and then follow the participant's lead. Short answers do not require probing. A change of subject may be a boundary. Respecting that boundary increases the likelihood of future trust.

Using questions that widen rather than narrow

Open questions invite description and choice. 'What was going on for you then?' is usually more useful than, 'Were you angry because you lost?' The second question supplies both the feeling and its cause, leaving little room for the participant's own interpretation. Questions beginning with what or how tend to work well: 'What did you notice?', 'How did the team recover?' or 'What would you want to try next time?' Why questions can sometimes sound accusatory, particularly after conflict, and should be used carefully.

Facilitators can move gradually from the game to wider life. A three-step sequence is helpful: first describe the event, then explore the response, and only then offer a connection. For example: 'What happened when the plan failed?', followed by, 'What helped you stay with it?', and finally, 'Does that strategy work anywhere outside the game?' The final question should be optional. Some participants will make the



connection immediately; others may prefer to keep the conversation within the fictional or competitive setting.

Connecting gameplay to coping strategies

Coping strategies help a person manage emotion, stress or difficulty; they do not necessarily remove the problem. Games make many strategies visible. Players pause, change tactics, seek information, ask for help, lower the difficulty, practise a skill, encourage a teammate or decide that continuing is not useful today. A facilitator can name these choices and help participants build a wider repertoire. The emphasis should be on flexibility: a strategy that helps in one situation may not help in another.

Emotional regulation begins with noticing. Facilitators can use simple language about intensity and body signals: 'How strong was the frustration from one to five?' or 'What told you that you needed a break?' This supports awareness without requiring a clinical vocabulary. Grounding actions can then be practised naturally: putting the controller down, taking a slower breath, stretching, getting water, changing roles or watching one round before returning. These choices should be framed as skilled responses, not punishment or failure.

Persistence is most useful when it remains connected to agency. Gaming culture often celebrates continuing at all costs, but healthy coping includes recognising when to stop, adjust the goal or ask for support. Facilitators can distinguish persistence from pressure by asking, 'Do you want another attempt, a different approach or a break?' Offering options helps a participant move from automatic reaction towards deliberate choice.

Empathy can be developed by exploring different perspectives after a shared moment. A team may be invited to consider what the leader, a newcomer and a quiet observer each needed. This should never become speculation about a participant's private life. The focus remains on observable behaviour and the group's response: who noticed, who checked in and what helped the person rejoin.

Responding to difficult emotions and disclosures

When a participant becomes upset, the first task is to reduce immediate pressure. The facilitator can acknowledge what they see, offer a choice of staying, pausing or moving somewhere quieter, and check what support the person wants. Calm, concrete language is usually best: 'I can see this has landed hard. Would you like some space, company or a break from the game?' Public questioning should be avoided unless there is an urgent safety concern.

A disclosure should be received with care and without promises the facilitator cannot keep. Thank the young person for telling you, listen, and clarify only what is necessary to understand immediate safety and next steps. Facilitators should know their organisation's safeguarding procedure, designated contact and referral options before sessions begin. If information must be shared to protect someone, explain what will happen and involve the young person as far as possible. The embedded well-being



approach creates openings for support; it does not expand a youth worker's professional competence beyond their training or role.

Reflection beyond spoken discussion

Not everyone processes experience through group conversation. Journalling, drawing, choosing an image, creating a short voice note or responding anonymously to a digital poll can widen participation. A prompt such as, 'Describe one moment when you changed your approach,' allows reflection without demanding emotional disclosure. Participants should know who will see their response and whether it will be stored. Private journalling should remain private unless the participant chooses to share or a clear safeguarding concern arises through an agreed process.

6.5 Practical guidance for youth workers

Prepare for discussion by knowing the group's communication preferences and your own organisational boundaries. Keep a small set of adaptable prompts but treat them as invitations rather than a script. During gameplay, notice emotion, coping and interaction. Wait for a pause, describe what happened without judgement and ask one question at a time. Allow silence. If the conversation develops, reflect back what you heard and check your understanding rather than rushing to solve the problem.

Help participants identify their own strategies before offering suggestions. Questions such as, 'What has helped even a little?', 'Who could support you with this?' and 'What would make the next attempt manageable?' build agency. Where appropriate, connect the in-game experience to everyday life, while accepting that a participant may not want to make that connection publicly. End with a practical choice or summary so that the person is not left exposed after sharing.

Following the session, record only information required by policy and follow up on any safeguarding action promptly. Reflect on your facilitation: Did you ask at the right time? Did participants have a genuine way to pass? Whose voice was heard, and whose was absent? Supervision or discussion with a colleague can help youth workers manage the emotional responsibility of the role and avoid carrying concerns alone.

6.6 Activity: Pause, notice, choose

This activity turns a moment of challenge into a brief practice of awareness and flexible coping. It can be used with any game that includes repeated attempts, team decisions or natural pauses.

Activity Title	Pause, Notice, Choose
Purpose	To help participants recognise emotional signals, identify an existing coping response and choose a next step without interrupting the flow of play for long.



Game Used	Any cooperative or individual game with natural pauses. Avoid introducing the activity during highly ranked or time-critical play.
Duration	Five minutes during a pause and ten minutes in the closing debrief.
Materials	Optional one-to-five emotion scale, paper or private digital response option, and information about available support.
Facilitator Notes	After a challenging moment, invite the group to pause. Ask participants to notice the intensity of the feeling, name what helped or might help, and choose among another attempt, a changed strategy, support, or a break. Participation is voluntary. In the debrief, discuss the range of strategies without identifying private responses.
Reflection Questions	What told you that the moment was becoming difficult? What choice gave you more control? Where else might that strategy be useful, if anywhere?

6.7 Recommendations

Facilitating open discussion is a practice of attention, patience and restraint. Youth workers should look for natural openings, ask questions that leave room for the participant's own meaning and accept that a valuable response may be brief or private. They should connect gameplay to coping through concrete choices rather than abstract advice, and recognise breaks, adjustments and help-seeking as capable forms of self-management.

The strongest conversations occur within clear boundaries. Voluntary participation, confidentiality explained honestly, safeguarding knowledge and access to further support protect both participants and facilitators. When these foundations are present, gaming can become a shared language for discussing challenge, recovery, empathy and hope. Embedded well-being is not about extracting personal stories from play. It is about helping young people notice that the skills and relationships supporting them in the game can also become resources beyond it.

6.8 References and further reading

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Partner reflection note

Writing this chapter highlighted how much facilitation depends on knowing when not to speak. It is tempting to treat every strong reaction in a game as an opportunity for a meaningful question, yet participants need space to remain immersed, to recover privately and to decide what an experience means for themselves. The most useful principle we identified was to offer an opening and then follow the young person's lead. We also returned repeatedly to the boundary between supportive youth work and therapy. Gaming can make difficult feelings easier to approach, but that accessibility increases the need for clear safeguarding routes, honest limits to confidentiality and confidence in seeking specialist help. What surprised us was the range of coping already visible in ordinary play: people pause, experiment, encourage one another, adjust a goal and begin again. A facilitator does not have to import resilience into the session. Their role is often to notice it, give it language and help participants consider where else that capacity might serve them. We hope the chapter supports conversations that feel voluntary, grounded and genuinely useful.



Conclusion

Gamer-Con set out to examine whether gaming could help young people form social connections and talk more openly about their well-being. The project's experience in Iceland, Spain and Ireland showed that it can, although not simply because a group of young people has been placed in a room with a game. What we learned is that the environment around the game matters. Participants are more likely to engage when they feel welcome, when different levels of experience are accepted and when they are not afraid of being judged for making a mistake. They also need to know that they can take a break, decline to answer a question or ask for support without drawing unwanted attention to themselves.

Facilitation matters too. The youth worker does not need to be the strongest player or know everything about gaming culture. It is more important to be interested, prepared and attentive to what is happening within the group. This includes noticing who is involved in decisions, who is being left out, how players respond to frustration and when a brief question might help participants reflect on an experience.

The Gamer-Con sessions also confirmed that conversations about well-being do not always need to begin with a direct question about mental health. A discussion about losing a match can lead to a useful conversation about handling disappointment. A difficult cooperative task can show how people communicate under pressure. Supporting a new player can prompt reflection on patience, leadership and empathy. These conversations tend to work because they begin with something the group has just experienced together.

Youth workers must also remain clear about the limits of their role. Gaming activities can help young people to recognise emotions, identify coping strategies and feel less alone, but they are not a replacement for professional support. Facilitators should follow their organisation's safeguarding procedures and know where to seek further help when concerns arise.

The activities and guidance in this handbook are starting points rather than rules. A method that works well with one group may need to be changed for another. Practitioners should ask participants what is working, make adjustments and keep brief notes on what they learn. Over time, this will help them develop an approach that fits their setting and the young people with whom they work.

Perhaps the clearest lesson from Gamer-Con is that gaming should not be treated only as a way of attracting young people to another activity. It has its own social value. People talk, cooperate, disagree, experiment and build relationships while they play. When youth workers take that experience seriously, gaming can provide a practical and familiar setting in which well-being becomes part of what the group does together.



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