



COLECCIÓN CONOCIMIENTO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Cartografía lúdica: Enseñar, aprender, cuidar y transformar la cultura y la sociedad jugando

Coords.

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Dykinson, S.L.

CARTOGRAFÍA LÚDICA:
ENSEÑAR, APRENDER, CUIDAR Y TRANSFORMAR LA CULTURA
Y LA SOCIEDAD JUGANDO



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Dykinson, S.L.

2025



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CARTOGRAFÍA LÚDICA: ENSEÑAR, APRENDER, CUIDAR Y TRANSFORMAR LA CULTURA
Y LA SOCIEDAD JUGANDO

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INTRODUCCIÓN. CARTOGRAFÍA LÚDICA: UN MAPA VIVO POR EXPLORAR..	13
MARINA CAMINO CARRASCO	
RAQUEL RUIZ PAREJA	
INMACULADA MARTÍN-ESPINOSA	
LAURA JIMÉNEZ RÍOS	
CAPÍTULO 1. DINAMICHE DI COINVOLGIMENTO NEL GIOCO DA TAVOLO MODERNO.....	17
MARCO ARNAUDO	
CAPÍTULO 2. LA INFLUENCIA EN EL DESARROLLO PSICOMOTOR Y LOS VALORES ÉTICOS DE LA PARTICIPACIÓN DE JUEGOS TRADICIONALES DURANTE LA INFANCIA: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA	31
LAURA BELLO BELLO	
JOSÉ MANUEL DODERO ANILLO	
CAPÍTULO 3. GAMIFICATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A DIGITAL ESCAPE ROOM AT THE B1 LEVEL	45
CRISTINA HERAS RAMÍREZ	
CAPÍTULO 4. LOS CELTAS: APRENDIZAJE INTERACTIVO DE LAS CULTURAS Y ETNIAS EN EUROPA OCCIDENTAL A PARTIR DE CARTOGRAFÍAS DIGITALES	67
ADRIÁN DÍAZ MORETA	
CAPÍTULO 5. UMBRALES SAGRADOS: IMPLICACIONES LÚDICAS EN LA ARQUITECTURA FUNERARIA ETRUSCA.....	87
GONZALO NICOLÁS ACCARDI BARRIENTOS	
CAPÍTULO 6. JUEGO Y ACULTURACIÓN POLÍTICA EN LOS TRATADOS PARA LOS AUSTRIAS	107
EDUARDO FERNÁNDEZ GARCÍA	
CAPÍTULO 7. “KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE” Y LA REPRESENTACIÓN DIGITAL DEL CONTEXTO SOCIAL, ECONÓMICO Y POLÍTICO BAJOMEDIEVAL Y SU POTENCIAL USO COMO HERRAMIENTA DOCENTE PARA LA DIDÁCTICA DE LAS CIENCIAS SOCIALES	126
LORENZO LAGE ESTRUGO	
CAPÍTULO 8. HEARTS OF IRON IV, CRUSADER KINGS 3, MANOR LORDS Y LA NUEVA GENERACIÓN DE JUEGOS DE RECREACIÓN HISTÓRICA. UNA HERRAMIENTA DIDÁCTICA DE PRIMER NIVEL PARA LAS AULAS DE HUMANIDADES.....	148
LORENZO LAGE ESTRUGO	
CAPÍTULO 9. LAS TEORÍAS DEL JUEGO: CLAVES PARA COMPRENDER EL COMPORTAMIENTO Y EL DESARROLLO HUMANO.....	165
EVA MARÍA LÓPEZ PEREA	
MARÍA DÍEZ OJEDA	
NURIA ALONSO ALCALDE	
VANESA BAÑOS MARTÍNEZ	

CAPÍTULO 10. NEUROLUDISMO Y MOTRICIDAD: BIOLOGÍA LÚDICA TRANSESPECIE.....	182
ELISEO ANDREU CABRERA FRANCISCO JAVIER ROMERO NARANJO	
CAPÍTULO 11. LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL CAMPO DE LOS ESTUDIOS LÚDICOS. DOS JUEGOS TEÓRICOS: HUIZINGA Y CAILLOIS	201
RAMÓN RAYMUNDO RESÉNDIZ GARCÍA	
CAPÍTULO 12. UN JUEGO NUNCA ACABADO LA MUÑECA DE CREPEREIA TRYPHAENA	216
LUCA SALEMME	
CAPÍTULO 13. EL JUEGO Y LA EXPRESIÓN CORPORAL COMO ESPEJOS DE LA HUMANIDAD	233
ELISEO ANDREU CABRERA FRANCISCO JAVIER ROMERO NARANJO	
CAPÍTULO 14. LA BIOGRAFÍA LÚDICA. UN PROPUESTA EÓRICO-METODOLÓGICA PARA EL ESTUDIO DEL JUGAR Y DE LA SUBJETIVIDAD.....	247
MARTÍN PÉREZ POLLERO MARÍA JESÚS MONTEAGUDO	
CAPÍTULO 15. APRENDIZAJE EXPERIMENTAL: VOLANDO AVIONES DE PAPEL	266
GERARDO REYES GUZMÁN	
CAPÍTULO 16. ¿A QUÉ TENGO DERECHO?: JUGANDO Y ENSEÑANDO DERECHOS HUMANOS A NIÑAS Y NIÑOS DE PRIMARIA	282
YEDIDI CHÁVEZ VÁSQUEZ ANGÉLICA MARÍA BURGA CORONEL MÓNICA AYALA MIRA OLIVIA CASTRO MASCAREÑO	
CAPÍTULO 17. EL VIDEOJUEGO DE FANTASÍA ÉPICA PARA EL FOMENTO DE LA EXPRESIÓN ESCRITA Y LA ESCRITURA CREATIVA EN LA EDUCACIÓN NARRATIVA Y UNIVERSITARIA. UNA APROXIMACIÓN TEÓRICA.....	299
ANTONIO CASTRO BALBUENA	
CAPÍTULO 18. POR QUÉ ES IMPORTANTE SABER A QUÉ JUEGAN LAS NIÑAS Y LOS NIÑOS	322
ITZIAR ARREGI LANDA	
CAPÍTULO 19. O JOGO E A IMPROVISAÇÃO NO ENSINO DE TEATRO NA EDUCAÇÃO BÁSICA NO BRASIL	344
MARIANA LIMA MUNIZ	
CAPÍTULO 20. DESARROLLO DE HABILIDADES SOCIALES EN LA FORMACIÓN INICIAL DOCENTE: APRENDER JUGANDO EN LA ASIGNATURA SOCIEDAD, FAMILIA Y EDUCACIÓN	358
INMACULADA MARTÍN ESPINOSA	

CAPÍTULO 21. EFECTOS DEL APRENDIZAJE FÍSICAMENTE ACTIVO EN EL DESARROLLO LECTOR. ANÁLISIS DE UNA EXPERIENCIA PSICOMOTRIZ	377
MARÍA DEL CARMEN GONZÁLEZ-ANDRÉ MARCELO BRAZ	
CAPÍTULO 22. SAQUEADORES DE TUMBAS: GAMIFICANDO EL ANTIGUO EGIPTO EN E.S.O.....	398
VÍCTOR SÁNCHEZ DOMÍNGUEZ	
CAPÍTULO 23. ROL PLAY Y GAMIFICACIÓN EN ASIGNATURAS DE POSTGRADO: IMPERIO ROMANO	422
VÍCTOR SÁNCHEZ DOMÍNGUEZ	
CAPÍTULO 24. USO DEL VIDEOJUEGO COMO HERRAMIENTA DOCENTE. PROPUESTA DE TRABAJO DE CURSO PARA LAS AULAS DE CIENCIAS SOCIALES: PENTIMENT (2022) Y LA RECREACIÓN HISTÓRICA, ECONÓMICA Y CULTURAL DE UN MUNDO EN TRANSICIÓN.....	445
LORENZO LAGE ESTRUGO	
CAPÍTULO 25. EL VIDEOJUEGO COMO HERRAMIENTA PARA SENSIBILIZAR AL ALUMNADO UNIVERSITARIO SOBRE LA PROBLEMÁTICA DEL TRABAJO INFANTIL EN LA INDUSTRIA DE LA TELEFONÍA MÓVIL.....	466
JUAN ANTONIO POSADA CORRALES PABLO GARMEN MARÍA TERESA VEGA ESTRELLA	
CAPÍTULO 26. EL JUEGO EN EL MOVIMIENTO SCOUT: UNA HERRAMIENTA CLAVE PARA EL APRENDIZAJE EN CONTEXTOS DE EDUCACIÓN NO FORMAL	485
SUSANA ESCORZA PIÑA REGINA CRUZ TROYANO	
CAPÍTULO 27. EL JUEGO COMO HERRAMIENTA TERAPÉUTICA: INTERVENCIONES LÚDICAS EN EL ABORDAJE DE TRASTORNOS PSICOLÓGICOS EN ADULTOS	506
EDUARDO DE LA FUENTE ROCHA	
CAPÍTULO 28. EXPLORANDO EL POTENCIAL DE LOS <i>SERIOUS GAMES</i> EN AULAS DE ONCOLOGÍA PEDIÁTRICA: DISEÑO, EVALUACIÓN Y PERSPECTIVAS FUTURAS DE UN PROTOTIPO DE <i>SERIOUS GAME</i>	522
JUAN PEDRO TACORONTE SOSA	
CAPÍTULO 29. CUERPO EN ACCIÓN, MENTE EN JUEGO: ESCAPE ROOM Y BREAKOUT COMO ESTRATEGIA DE APRENDIZAJE ACTIVO	540
MIREIA PORTERO AYLAGAS	

CAPÍTULO 30. PLAY ANIMATORS: A TRAINING COURSE TO LEARN HOW TO SUPPORT OLDER PEOPLE IN PLAY	558
GUARDABASSI VERONICA MARANESI ALESSANDRO NICOLINI PAOLA	
CAPÍTULO 31. IMPACTO DEL JUEGO SOBRE EL ABORDAJE FARMACO-TERAPÉUTICO DEL DOLOR CRÓNICO. UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA	572
JOSÉ MANUEL DODERO ANILLO	
CAPÍTULO 32. RELACIÓN ENTRE EJERCICIO FÍSICO Y DETERIORO COGNITIVO EN PACIENTES CON ENFERMEDAD CON PARKINSON: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA	592
ALICIA ALBA MÁÑEZ	
CAPÍTULO 33. REPERCUSIÓN CLÍNICA DE LA TERAPIA ANIMAL ASISTIDA COMO ACTIVIDAD LÚDICA EN PACIENTES PEDIÁTRICOS HOSPITALIZADOS.....	608
MARTA FERNÁNDEZ-PUJOL MARZO	
CAPÍTULO 34. EL JUEGO DE LA CAPOEIRAY EL DIÁLOGO CORPORAL: REFLEXIONES DESDE LA EDUCACIÓN PSICOMOTRIZ...	631
MARCELO BRAZ MARCELA HERNÁNDEZ LECHUGA MARÍA DEL CARMEN GONZÁLEZ-ANDRÉ	
CAPÍTULO 35. GAMIFICACIÓN PARA EL APRENDIZAJE DE LAS GREENCOMP EN EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: UNA EXPERIENCIA EN EL GRADO EN ENFERMERÍA.....	647
MÓNICA GIMÉNEZ BALDAZO MARÍA SANDÍN VÁZQUEZ NANCY ARMENTA PAULINO	
CAPÍTULO 36. DISEÑO DE UN VIDEOJUEGO EDUCATIVO PARA DOTAR AL ALUMNADO DE PRIMER CICLO DE EDUCACIÓN PRIMARIA DE ESTRATEGIAS Y CONOCIMIENTOS SOBRE PRIMEROS AUXILIOS.....	667
PABLO GARMEN LORENA BUSTO-PARADA JUAN ANTONIO POSADA CORRALES MARÍA TERESA VEGA ESTRELLA	
CAPÍTULO 37. EFECTO DE LOS JUEGOS DE MESA FÍSICAMENTE ACTIVOS SOBRE LA ATENCIÓN SOSTENIDA	687
SARA SUÁREZ MANZANO	
CAPÍTULO 38. EL JUEGO COMO MEDIO DE ENSEÑANZA DE LOS DEPORTES PARALÍMPICOS.....	701
FLAVIA ESTEFANÍA AMAR CANTOS	

CAPÍTULO 39. COMUNICACIÓN FUNCIONAL, INCLUSIÓN SOCIAL Y JUEGO EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL ESPAÑOL COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA EN MARRUECOS	730
REGINA CRUZ TROYANO	
SUSANA ESCORZA PIÑA	
TERESA-G. SIBÓN-MACARRO	
CAPÍTULO 40. EDUCACIÓN ARTÍSTICA, GÉNERO Y METODOLOGÍAS ACTIVAS: UNA ALIANZA ESTRATÉGICA PARA CONTRIBUIR EN LA PREVENCIÓN Y AFRONTAMIENTO DE LA VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO	751
SANDRA PATRICIA BAUTISTA SANTOS	
CAPÍTULO 41. A GUIDE FOR THE USE OF THE GAME “GUESS WHO?” FOR PRACTICING GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE IN THE EFL	769
LUCÍA MUÑOZ MARTÍN	
CAPÍTULO 42. EL JUEGO COMO HERRAMIENTA DE TRANSFORMACIÓN. REPENSANDO LA CIUDAD DESDE LA MIRADA DE LAS NIÑECES	784
EMILIA ACURIO VINTIMILLA	
CAPÍTULO 43. VOZ, JUEGO Y PATIO: UNA APROXIMACIÓN A LOS PATIOS ESCOLARES DESDE LA VOZ DE LAS INFANCIAS	807
ROBERTO ALBORNOZ BRAVO	
CAPÍTULO 44. FOMENTANDO EL DISEÑO DE JUEGOS EDUCATIVOS PARA LA PROMOCIÓN DE LA IGUALDAD DE GÉNERO Y HÁBITOS SALUDABLES EN MAGISTERIO DE EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL	833
MARÍA SANDÍN VÁZQUEZ	
MÓNICA GIMÉNEZ BALDAZO	
NANCY ARMENTA PAULINO	
CAPÍTULO 45. UN NUEVO JUEGO BASADO EN DEFINICIONES Y EN CÓDIGOS, QUE PUEDE SER DE UTILIDAD PARA APRENDER BIOQUÍMICA	849
JOSEP JOAN CENTELLES SERRA	
SANTIAGO IMPERIAL RÓDENAS	
ESTEFANIA MORENO GUILLÉN	
PEDRO RAMON DE ATAURI CARULLA	
CAPÍTULO 46. CONTROL INTELIGENTE DE TRAYECTORIAS EN UAV MEDIANTE MODELOS DE JUEGOS POSICIONALES Y MATRICIALES CON PERCEPCIÓN RADAR	871
EMILIO RAMÍREZ JUIDIAS	
CAPÍTULO 47. EL USO DE VIDEOJUEGOS COMO HERRAMIENTA PARA LA EDUCACIÓN AMBIENTAL EN EL CONTEXTO DEL HUERTO ESCOLAR	891
DANIEL TRIGUEROS VERA	
LOURDES ARAGÓN	

CAPÍTULO 48. UNA EXPERIENCIA CON MATHCITYMAP PARA FUTUROS MAESTROS Y MAESTRAS EN EDUCACIÓN PRIMARIA	905
PABLO MONTIEL LÓPEZ	
CAPÍTULO 49. TEACHING THROUGH PLAY AND PLAYING THROUGH TEACHING: THE IMPACT OF CLASSDOJO IN SECONDARY VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS A STUDY IN TWO SCHOOLS IN THE METROPOLITAN AREA OF BARCELONA	920
JOSEP MIQUEL PUERTAS SALAS	
CAPÍTULO 50. PACKAGING GAMIFICADO Y REALIDAD AUMENTADA, JÓVENES Y MENORES. EL CASO OREO.....	944
PABLO MARTÍN-RAMALLAL	
JUAN PABLO MICALETTO-BELDA	
CAPÍTULO 51. TEMU COMO ESCENARIO LÚDICO: PUBLICIDAD Y GAMIFICACIÓN EN EL COMERCIO ELECTRÓNICO	960
JUAN PABLO MICALETTO BELDA	
PABLO MARTÍN RAMALLAL	
CAPÍTULO 52. VIDEOJUEGOS Y POSNARRACIÓN	975
JESÚS ESPAÑA RODRÍGUEZ	
CAPÍTULO 53. ORIGAMI Y JUEGO: UN VÍNCULO ARTÍSTICO	989
MARÍA ASENJO BEJARANO	
CAPÍTULO 54. MANIFESTACIONES ARTÍSTICAS Y LUDISMO. PROPUESTAS ÓPTICAS Y CINÉTICAS.....	1023
MARÍA-JOSÉ MULET-GUTIÉRREZ	
JUAN CARLOS OLIVER TORRELLÓ	
CAPÍTULO 55. REGULANDO EL JUEGO ONLINE INFANTIL: GAME OVER..	1047
HÉCTOR AYLLÓN SANTIAGO	
CAPÍTULO 56. LA PRESENCIA DEL JUEGO COMO DERECHO FUNDAMENTAL Y DE CIUDADANÍA EN LA LEY DE EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL EN CATALUNYA (DECRETO 2023/FEBRERO) Y CHILE (BASES CURRICULARES DE EDUCACIÓN PARVULARIA 2018).....	1066
MARCELA HERNÁNDEZ LECHUGA	
MARCELO BRAZ VIEIRA	
CAPÍTULO 57. EL PARADIGMA ZOUKEI ASOBI: JUEGO, PROCESO Y CREATIVIDAD EN LA EDUCACIÓN ARTÍSTICA JAPONESA.....	1085
SOFÍA PASTOR-MATAMOROS	
CAPÍTULO 58. EPISTEMOLOGÍA DE LO LÚDICO Y LA COMUNICACIÓN. UNA MIRADA DEL “YO” DESDE LA INTERACCIÓN CON EL ENTORNO	1106
MANUEL-J. PICADO SÁNCHEZ	
TERESA-G. SIBÓN-MACARRO	

CAPÍTULO 59. EL CINE COMO MEDIO ARTÍSTICO DE CONCEPTUALIZACIÓN PARA EL JUEGO DE ROL. LOS CASOS DE <i>ACCIÓN MUTANTE</i> (ÁLEX DE LA IGLESIA, 1993) Y <i>EL CORAZÓN DEL GUERRERO</i> (DANIEL MONZÓN, 2000).....	1126
SERGIO GARCÍA MAESO	
CAPÍTULO 60. HERRAMIENTAS DE GAMIFICACIÓN EN LA ENSEÑANZA UNIVERSITARIA: GAMIEDUCA II	1144
ROSA MARÍA RUIZ-ORTIZ	
MARÍA DEL CARMEN CANTO LÓPEZ	
CAPÍTULO 61. LA GAMIFICACIÓN COMO ESTRATEGIA METODOLÓGICA EN ENTORNOS EDUCATIVOS.....	1164
FERNANDO BOILLOS GARCÍA	
MIREIA PORTERO AYLAGAS	
CAPÍTULO 62. MARCO PARA EL DISEÑO DE JUEGOS EDUCATIVOS EN ABJ Y SU APLICACIÓN PARA ENSEÑAR GEOPOLÍTICA EN ENSEÑANZA SECUNDARIA. CASO PRÁCTICO: “ <i>FAKE NEW(S) WORLD</i> ”	1184
JAVIER MORILLA ORDÓÑEZ	
CAPÍTULO 63. GAMIFICACIÓN UJUWARTS EN EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA Y SU DIDÁCTICA PARA ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS	1204
SARA SUÁREZ MANZANO	
CAPÍTULO 64. CHESS960 AND THE CONTEMPORARYZEITGEIST: INSTABILITY AS THE NEW ORDER.....	1216
DINIZ CAYOLLA RIBEIRO	
CAPÍTULO 65. BALONNET: INNOVACIÓN HÍBRIDA EN LA EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA Y LA INCLUSIÓN SOCIAL.....	1233
ABRAHAM GARCÍA FARIÑA	
RAIDEL ALEJANDRO CABEZAS MIRABAL	

PLAY ANIMATORS:
A TRAINING COURSE TO LEARN
HOW TO SUPPORT OLDER PEOPLE IN PLAY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rise in the average age of the population has increased the focus on interventions that can promote a positive ageing (Jarvis, 2007). Among these strategies, the use of games seems to be successful, as playing games provides an opportunity for socialisation, satisfaction and flow (Nakao, 2019). Actually the verb “to play” is a word that can be easily associated with childhood, but not with all other phases of life. However, we have played so intensively as children that play has become part of our essence, so much so that it is present in everyday life in numerous expressions of our language such as when we say “it's a child's game”, “to play your cards right”, “to put yourself on the line” and many others (D'Urso, 2012). Play is the first tool that humankind uses to explore and learn about the world and is often used during childhood to foster learning and socialisation with peers (Baumgartner, 2010). The game of bowls and cards used by older people suggests that the characteristics of play (Caillois, 1958) are still enjoyable and cognitively stimulating even for older people. In particular our project adopted board games, considering how they can be useful for older people, helping to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, offering

opportunities for socialization and connection with family and friends (Fancourt et al., 2021).

Board game is a generic term used to describe a game played by placing, moving or removing pieces on a board, using a format in which the pieces are moved according to certain rules on a patterned board. Sometimes board games involve answering questions, but they can also involve logical tasks, recognising pictures, balancing or assembling pieces, creating stories and recalling previous knowledge. In addition, board games require strategies to be discovered and applied, as well as keeping in touch with the person a player is playing with and paying attention to the way the other team is playing. They can be competitive or cooperative, played by two or more people. In all cases, board games are not just a fun way to spend time, but also powerful tools for engaging players in strategic planning, problem-solving, planning, decision making, logical and critical thinking, cooperation, competition, how to deal with mistakes, deferring gratification, all of which sharpen analytical abilities. For these reasons, playing board games can help keep the mind active and promote cognitive health (Ammar, 2024), considering a lifelong perspective on learning as a point of reference (Baltes & Reese, 1984). On the other hand, playing board games requires at least two people, i.e., some kind of social relationship, to come out of isolation and loneliness. Playing together means leaving the active role to the other participants, waiting for your turn, and at the same time understanding the rules and actions together. Even in competition, playing board games requires understanding the strategies and goals of others, and thus exercising social skills. Winning or achieving goals in board games triggers the release of dopamine, which reinforces positive behaviours and increases motivation. The reward system activated by these games promotes a sense of accomplishment and encourages continued engagement. This process not only makes the games more enjoyable, but also increases motivation in other areas of life. Playing games can lead to increased satisfaction and happiness, contributing to overall individuals' well-being (Guardabassi et al., 2024).

Engaging in games can induce a state of "flow", where individuals become completely absorbed in the activity, leading to improved mood

and quality of life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990). The flow state is reached when there is a balance between the challenge of the game and the ability to play because the task has a clear and concrete goal and is perceived as affordable, as well as the feedback is immediate and direct, clearly perceptible. To play requires full concentration and adaptation to players, but it doesn't require much effort. Players feel a sense of control over the situation, which allows them to avoid the fear of failure. Attention is focused on the activity and mental energy is concentrated on the task. The quality of time becomes unmeasurable and the duration is altered: hours can seem like minutes and seconds like eternity.

The use of board games as a strategy to promote positive ageing is supported by all these motivations, and confirmed by researches that indicate benefits in cognitive function, emotional satisfaction and socialisation. Exploring the literature on this topic provides valuable motivation for using board games with adults and older people, even when they are not in good health (Estrada-Plana et al. 2021).

The current proposal arose from the awareness about all these considerations, and the request of Auser⁴⁴, a network of voluntary and social promotion associations. The Auser regional association responded to a call for proposals and was awarded funding to run a course for its members to become play animators. Auser's aim was to have experts available to promote and plan play events to promote the well-being of older people throughout the region.

2. OBJECTIVE

Considering these premises, and based on a previous collaboration with the University of Macerata and Clementoni S.p.A. company⁴⁵, the

⁴⁴ Auser is an Italian association registered in the Italian Single National Register of the Third Sector and committed to promoting the active ageing of the elderly and enhancing their role in society. Its associative proposal is aimed primarily at the elderly, but is open to relations of dialogue between generations, nationalities, different cultures. The aim of the activities is to strengthen a society in which people of all ages are protagonists and resources for themselves and others.

⁴⁵ Clementoni S.p.A. is a company based in the Marche region that specialises in the design and production of games, including board games. The company has a long-standing research collaboration with the University of Macerata, which is currently focusing on the use of board

Auser Marche wanted to realize a training course within the wider project “Active Network for Tomorrow: Together for an Integrated Community”. The aim of the course was to train skills for the management and animation of play activities, so that participants may be able to design and/or use games that promote well-being and support older people’s development. The training course was conducted in collaboration within Le Marche Region (IT), and provided both theoretical background and practical skills in the field of games to the participants.

3. METHODOLOGY

An action research was designed and planned in collaboration between Auser, Clementoni and the team from the University of Macerata⁴⁶, taking into account that the learners were adults. Formal processes characterised by a series of deliberate actions aimed at triggering understanding and shaping updated representations were designed, trying to involve the cognitive, affective, social and value structure of the participants. The trainees were placed at the centre of the training process and encouraged to actively participate in the training course through discussions, practical play activities, group work, and reflection on situations realised during the course activities. Following Johnson and colleagues (1994), cooperative learning was offered to improve the theoretical background, but also to give the opportunity to exercise social skills to achieve common goals. Peer interaction and time to reflect on lived experience promoted awareness and critical thinking (Slavin, 1995; Comoglio, 1999).

games for adults and older people, both in good health or affected by dementia. The company offered the board games, both its own products and those of other companies, following marketing research into adult preferences.

⁴⁶ The team of trainers from the University of Macerata is composed by 8 experts in the field of psychology, pedagogy, philosophy and toy design: Elisa Cirilli and Evelyn Manoni are Pedagogists, Veronica Guardabassi is a Psychologist and a Researcher at the University of Macerata in the field of Developmental and educational Psychology, Susanna Iraci is a toy designer, Michele Feliziani and Benedetta Smargiassi are specialist in Philosophy with children, Alessandro Maranesi is a research fellow at the University of Macerata in the field of Developmental and educational Psychology, Paola Nicolini is a Psychologist and a Professor in the field of Developmental and educational Psychology.

A metacognitive approach has been also offered to encourage trainees to become aware of their cognitive, emotional and social processes (Cornoldi et al., 2018; Cottini 2004; Flavell 1979), with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the training path and giving participants autonomy and self-regulation skills (Schraw & Dennison, 1994). The integration of theoretical lessons, practical experiences, opportunities for joint discussion and reflection has the main objective of providing a dynamic and inclusive learning environment, taking into account the age and the differences between the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants.

Practical activities, discussions, reflections, theoretical frameworks were provided along with a total of ten meetings. Seven meetings were with the presence of the training team and three organized in autonomy in their own clubs by the trainees. In terms of knowledge acquisition (objective a), the contents proposed was about the nature of play, the psychological value of play, the usability of board games for adults and older people, commercially available board games and their possible uses. With regard to the development of competences (objective b), the participants were given the opportunity to exercise democratic leadership, to plan a playful activity within their association, to evaluate and adapt the right board games to offer them to people of different ages.

After an online meeting (meeting one) dedicated to a playful activity of mutual presentation and the presentation of the whole training pathway, the group of participants met in presence with the experts two more times (meeting two and three). They were then asked to plan a meeting (meeting four) on their own premises, within their association, and to invite their associates to take part in the playful activity. The experts also attended this meeting and shadowed the trainees in the role of animators, helping them with advice, adaptations and tips. It was an opportunity to apply what they had learnt and put the theoretical concepts into practice in order to have a trial. A checklist was given to the play animators in training to enable them to observe the dynamics among the players and to collect data on the level of satisfaction and active participation of the people involved. Subsequent to the fourth meeting, the participants planned and carried out three more activities (meeting five, six and seven) on their own, using board games, having the

opportunity to further test the knowledge and competencies they had acquired. Data were collected to assess the level of satisfaction of the participants during all the meetings. Three further meetings are planned. The eighth meeting was online and was aimed at giving the participants the opportunity to share their experiences within their clubs, reflect on strengths and weaknesses, and learn from each other's playing activities. The ninth meeting will involve people in public events in the main cities of the five provinces of Le Marche region, with the aim of proposing playful activities to a larger number of people and inviting them to play in turn. At the end of the course there will be a closing ceremony with the participants and the awarding of certificates during the tenth and final session, which will take place next June.

Data collection was carried out at the beginning of the training course, involving the participants. Further data collection was conducted at each meeting in order to know their opinion about the training, their satisfaction and learning along with the different phases of the activity, in order to adapt subsequent actions.

The project is still ongoing and the present paper mainly focus on the first meetings with participants, i.e., theoretical contents and workshop aimed to increase trainers' knowledge about game activities. Some preliminary data concerning the first appointment in participants' club are also presented.

3.1 MEASURES

At the end of each theoretical session, which were more content-based and aimed at raising participants' awareness of the different motivations behind the choice to use board games as a tool for cognitive training, emotional wellbeing and opportunities for social interaction for older people, participants answered to a questionnaire. The aim of this data collection was to find out how satisfied the trainees were with their training over time and to tailor the sessions to their own needs, requirements and preferences.

3.1.1. Lectures

After the first online session, participants expressed their opinion about teaching method (5 items) and general satisfaction (7 items), by using

a scale ranging from 0 (at all) to 4 (very). After the offline session, participants expressed the same questionnaire with queries regarding teaching method and general satisfaction with the following additional dimensions: topics (6 items); organization (6 items); teachers (7 items). For each training experience, the mean values was computed to have an overall evaluation of the first, the second and the third training.

Teaching method

Participants were asked if they considered the method: (1) appropriate with regard to the content covered; (2) supportive to the involvement of the participants; (3) supportive of the learning process; (4) conducive to discussion and exchange; (5) useful for developing skills.

General satisfaction

Participants' satisfaction was investigate with the following items: (1) Considers that the meeting was useful for: (2) knowledge acquired; (3) operational skills acquired; (4) interest aroused; (5) applicability of contents to the association's activities; (6) reflections solicited; (7) exchange of experiences.

Teaching topics

To know participants' opinions about presented topics the following questions were used: "The topics covered in the course were: (1) clear; (2) interesting; (3) consistent with your needs and expectations; (4) close to your association; (5) appropriate to your level of knowledge; (6) comprehensive".

Organization of the course

Questions regarding organization were the following: "To what extent do you consider the following organisational aspects useful: (1) appropriateness of duration; (2) appropriateness of space and equipment; (3) management and adherence to timetables; (4) completeness and timeliness of information; (5) appropriateness of timetable; (6) quality of materials".

Teachers

Participants' opinions about teachers were measured in the following way: "Do you feel that the lecturers were: (1) prepared and competent; (2) able to communicate in a clear and comprehensible manner; (3) able to arouse interest; (4) attentive to everyone's needs and/or requests; (5) able to manage and coordinate groups; (6) able to offer food for thought; (7) able to provide useful indications for association activities".

3.1.2. Game activities in social centres

The trainees were asked to propose match sessions in their clubs to apply what they had learned. Two experts from the University of Macerata team were present at the first meeting in the different clubs to provide scaffolding during the exercise to apply the learning outcomes to a real situation. Three further meetings were then organised in complete autonomy and data was collected on the satisfaction of all the participants. This phase has not yet been completed, but some preliminary data has been collected.

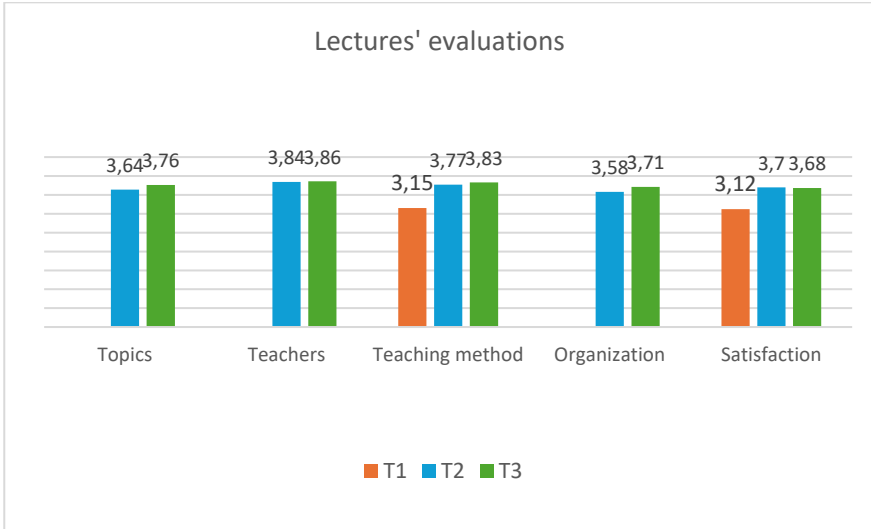
4. RESULTS

38 people took part in the training course for play animators. There were 28 women and 10 men with an average age of 63.5 years. The majority of them were retired (63.2%) and their educational level was high school (44.7%). They are all associated to Auser.

4.1. INITIAL LECTURES

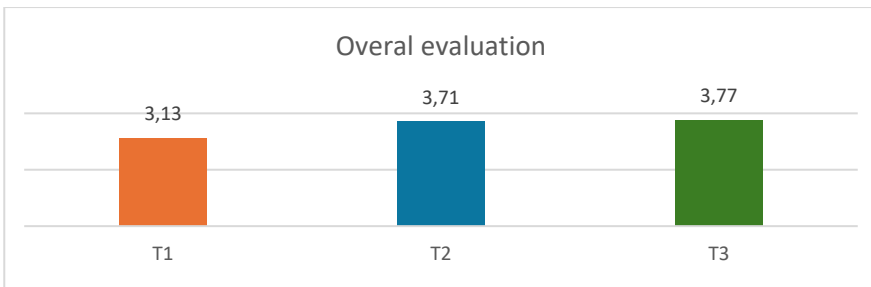
As it was described in the Graphic 1, participants have greater levels of satisfaction in all the explored dimensions: topics, teachers, teaching method, organization and satisfaction. Indeed, all values were higher than 2, the middle value.

GRAPHIC 1. Training participants' evaluation and satisfaction with topics, teachers, teaching methods, organisation



The overall evaluation of the first, second and third lectures of the training was positive (see Graphic 2) and it seems to have an increasing trend: $X_{\text{training}1}=3.13$, $X_{\text{training}2}=3.71$, $X_{\text{training}3}=3.77$.

GRAPHIC 2. Training participants' overall evaluation



4.2. GAME ACTIVITIES IN SOCIAL CENTRES

Currently the course design seems to fit the proposed objectives, as the meetings in the singular clubs were realized and participants commented positively on the time spent together playing. Here are some of the comments collected during an online meeting, in which trainees were asked to reflect together about the strengths and the weaknesses observed in their clubs:

“I had often heard about this game, but neither I nor they were familiar with it. The frenzy to play was so great that the group members did not give me time to read the instructions-they wanted to play!... Initially one of the group had some difficulties, she cannot describe the word indicated but then slowly she loosened up and got really good enough that her team won. It was a joy to see this change, this gaining confidence in her own qualities. It was a real joy for me. Mission accomplished!”

“Thanks to the University of Macerata and all its collaborators for giving us this opportunity and thanks to Auser for involving us in this project”

“Fun and laughter in the afternoon games at the Club”

“Play means being together, feeling good, learning and emptying your mind of the usual tasks: taking some time for yourself and sharing it”

“For some time now we have been engaged in research that has to do with well-being in adults and the older people, because their presence and need to feel an active part in social life is increasingly evident. The game, from this point of view, is proving to be a very effective device, both for the cognitive activation necessary to understand it, and for the social dynamics of competition but also of collaboration that it unleashes, and because it allows a mental state of momentary estrangement from reality, a being inside the game that distances itself from the burdens of everyday life and suspends attention from worries for a few moments”

“It is a constant observation: after a few minutes of play, the rooms of the circles come alive with laughter and a cheerful chatter that also refreshes us as play animators”

“It happens every time that someone who understands the dynamics of the game or a particularly complex rule to decipher before the others, helps those around the same table, no matter if an ally or an opponent”

“It's been a long time since I've had so much fun”

“And to think that people say these are things only for children”

“I want to play again at home, maybe with my grandchildren”

“Finally, an hour without any worries: it hasn't happened for a long time! We therefore thank all those who are collaborating on the project for this wonderful opportunity”

5. DISCUSSION

The results so far show how much the participants appreciated the first part of the training, even if it was theoretical. They also seem to be satisfied with their experiences in their clubs, where they were able to apply what they had learned and put their learning into practice. This supports the importance of using a collaborative and metacognitive approach (Slavin, 1995; Comoglio, 1999; Cornoldi et al., 2018; Cottini 2004; Flavell 1979) to promote learning and satisfaction in adult education, allowing a positive and active participation, proposing to start with an experience and then reading it within a theoretical framework.

In addition, participants' first reactions can be considered central to achieving the objectives that the Auser centres set themselves: to encourage active ageing by creating situations in which, in addition to cognitive stimulation, there is also fun and well-being. Having a team of play animators who are able to choose the right board games and plan play sessions for adults and older people can be a useful tool for intervention in the field of active ageing (Fancourt et al., 2021). Moreover, because of the multiple benefits that play can bring, play animators can be seen as actors in the field of wellbeing.

The research is a true action research (Lewin, 1946) because the need and the request came from the Auser Association to give their own associates the chance to be trained, adopting a lifelong learning perspective. At the same time, social relationships were cultivated and cognitive commitment was requested, activating mental processes in the participants, but also cultivating social dynamics in the communities in which they live. Meanwhile, data is being collected to try to understand how much the activities affect the well-being and mental training of the participants. Answering questionnaires and filling in other survey forms was felt sometimes to be tedious, difficult, as a complication and even as an intrusion, but it was clearly explained from the starting point that this is the way to have data to work on and interpret, to design other

training activities that are more and more suitable for an audience of adults and older people, on the basis of the experimentation carried out. Gradually, this was understood and a positive collaboration developed for this part of the research as well. Encounters are realised that have an impact on the reality of those who participate, social ties are strengthened and the foundations for further activities are created. Psychological and educational culture is disseminated on a scientific basis and the sense of community is acted upon.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the positive results reported in the scientific literature on interactions with board games for adults and older people, having a group of trained play animators, able to propose this kind of playful activities, can act as a support for the diffusion of wellbeing. Considering the positive effects of the presented training course, it may be desirable: 1) to extend the project on a national level; 2) to use games that promote the well-being and learning processes of people in the third age on a large scale, involving other associations and institutions; 3) to develop specific games for people in the third age in cooperation with the involved company; 4) work with those attending the training to develop guidelines for similar pathways.

With regard to point (1), an event is planned in the coming months to disseminate the results obtained and to communicate the benefits of the participation to the training path for play animators, both in the trainees and in the other people involved in the Auser's Clubs. The aim can be (2) to involve other associations and institutions in order to have a larger group of play animators, with the current trainees as trainers, also enlarging the zone in which they can operate, beyond the regional borders of Le Marche.

As a side-effect of the training path (3), some of the observational data collected will provide suggestions for the development of board games for an adult and older audience, which can be discussed and shared within the participating institutions and teams from the University, Auser and Clementoni company.

Finally (4), the training path can be analysed in its strengths and weaknesses, with the participation of the trained people who have acquired knowledge and competences, but also the experience as participants, in order to design guidelines for similar training courses.

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