

GAMECHANGE: Innovative Board Games for Youth Engagement
Agreement Number: 2025-1-CY01-KA210-YOU-000350542

Chapter 2

Qualitative Research Analysis – Expert Interviews

2.1 Purpose and Analytical Orientation

The qualitative research phase of the GAMECHANGE project aimed to generate in-depth analytical insights into how gamification and board game-based learning function in real educational and youth work contexts. Beyond documenting practices, the research sought to **interpret expert knowledge**, identify **underlying pedagogical mechanisms**, and extract **design principles** relevant to inclusion, human rights education, and youth engagement.

Semi-structured expert interviews were selected as the primary qualitative method because they allow for reflective professional discourse, enabling participants to connect theory, practice, and design logic. The analytical focus was placed on *how* and *why* gamification works, under what conditions it is effective, and how it can be meaningfully translated into board game formats within the GAMECHANGE framework.

2.2 Participants and Profiles

The qualitative sample consisted of four experts representing complementary domains:

- **Dr. Georgios Tsalakos** – Educational expert and trainer at the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus, with extensive experience in secondary education and teacher professional development.
- **Dmitri Sergeev** – Educational game designer with over five years of experience in business simulations, economic modeling, and applied gamification in higher education.
- **Catherine Dinar** – Game producer and consultant with more than ten years of experience in educational game design and inclusive, learner-centered game mechanics.
- **Dr. Theodoros Aslanidis** – PhD researcher in Gamification, educator, and practitioner in game-based learning, inclusion, and digital pedagogy.

This combination ensured triangulation between **educational practice**, **game design expertise**, and **academic research**.

2.3 Analytical Findings by Participant

2.3.1 Dr. Georgios Tsalakos: Gamification as Structured Pedagogical Practice

Dr. Tsalakos' contribution highlights gamification as a **systematic pedagogical framework**, rather than a motivational add-on. His development of the "*Physics Decathlon*" represents a structured model where gamification is embedded into formative assessment processes.

Analytically, this example demonstrates that gamification is most effective when it is:

- aligned with curriculum objectives,
- embedded in long-term learning processes,
- and designed to assess both cognitive and transversal competencies.

The observed increase in student engagement and collaboration suggests that gamification operates as a **social regulator of learning**, promoting collective responsibility and peer

interaction. Importantly, Dr. Tsalakos emphasized the distinction between *competition* and *constructive rivalry*, identifying excessive competitiveness as a potential risk if not pedagogically controlled.

From an inclusion and human rights perspective, his insistence that educational games should **generate dialogue rather than transmit content** is analytically significant. It positions board games as *discursive spaces* where values are negotiated collectively, aligning directly with GAMECHANGE’s objective of learning through participation and reflection rather than instruction.

2.3.2 Dmitri Sergeyv: Experiential Learning and Systems Thinking Through Games

Dmitri Sergeyv’s interview provides a strong analytical lens on **experiential and systems-based learning**. His descriptions of macroeconomic simulations and role-based business games illustrate how gamification enables learners to *inhabit complex systems* rather than merely study them.

Analytically, his experience confirms that gamification:

- reduces abstraction by transforming theory into action,
- creates low-risk environments for experimentation,
- and increases intrinsic motivation through role identification.

A key insight is Sergeyv’s assertion that gamification does not depend on technological sophistication, but on **intentional design grounded in a clear educational problem**. This directly supports the GAMECHANGE approach to board games, where learning outcomes must drive mechanics, not vice versa.

His reflections also reinforce the idea that games function as **safe cognitive laboratories**, allowing learners to test decisions and observe consequences without fear of failure—an essential condition for youth engagement and empowerment.

2.3.3 Catherine Dinar: Inclusive Design and Learning Accessibility

Catherine Dinar’s contribution adds a critical **inclusive design perspective** to the research. Her analysis extends gamification beyond motivation, framing it as a tool for **accessibility, equity, and differentiated learning**.

From an analytical standpoint, her emphasis on:

- alternative sensory cues,
- varied interaction modes,
- adaptive learning curves,

demonstrates that inclusion must be designed *into* the game architecture, not retrofitted afterward. This insight is particularly relevant for GAMECHANGE board games addressing human rights, as it ensures participation regardless of learners’ abilities, preferences, or prior experience.

Dinar also critically addressed cultural resistance to gamification, identifying the misconception of games as “mere entertainment” as a structural barrier. Analytically, this highlights the need for **awareness-raising and professional legitimization** of game-based learning—an area where Erasmus+ projects can play a strategic role.

2.3.4 Dr. Theodoros Aslanidis: Constructivism, Empathy, and Human Rights Education

Dr. Aslanidis provided the most explicit theoretical articulation, framing gamification within **constructivist learning theory**. His analysis positions board games as environments where learners actively construct meaning through interaction, reflection, and perspective-taking. His proposal for board games on inclusion and human rights introduces three analytically significant elements:

1. **Historical anchoring**, allowing sensitive topics to be explored through case studies at a safe cognitive distance.
2. **Role-based debate mechanics**, fostering cognitive empathy by requiring players to argue from different social positions.
3. **Formative feedback loops**, ensuring that learning is continuously monitored and guided.

These principles align directly with GAMECHANGE's ambition to move beyond factual knowledge toward **values education and democratic competence**. His emphasis on pedagogical alignment reinforces the finding that gamification must be integrated into instructional design, not treated as an optional enhancement.

2.4 Cross-Interview Thematic Analysis

Six analytical themes emerged consistently across all interviews:

Theme 1: Gamification as a Driver of Intrinsic Motivation

Gamification increases engagement by fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Theme 2: Learning Through Action and Consequences

Games support deeper understanding by enabling experimentation and decision-making.

Theme 3: Inclusion Requires Intentional Design

Accessibility and participation depend on adaptive, cooperative mechanics.

Theme 4: Board Games as Dialogical Spaces

Games are effective for human rights education when they provoke discussion and reflection.

Theme 5: Structural Barriers Persist

Lack of training and misconceptions limit mainstream adoption.

Theme 6: International Cooperation as Quality Enhancer

Cross-cultural collaboration strengthens inclusivity, relevance, and design quality.

2.5 Implications for the GAMECHANGE Project

Analytically, the qualitative findings confirm that GAMECHANGE board games should:

- prioritize **discussion over instruction**,
- embed **role-taking and perspective diversity**,
- ensure **inclusive mechanics by design**,
- and align closely with **clear learning objectives**.

The interviews validate the project's core premise: that innovative board games can function as powerful tools for youth engagement, inclusion, and human rights education when grounded in pedagogy, research, and collaborative design.