What can **video games** offer to forcibly displaced people?

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UNHCR
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The UN Refugee Agency

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"My community feels guilt about engaging in leisure activities. 'I'm a refugee and I have work to do, I shouldn't be smiling.' My community needs a chance to rest and play, to connect and be happy with other people." — *A statement jointly formulated with refugee co-designers*

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Executive Summary

In the digital age, access to digital leisure isn't just beneficial – it's indispensable for leading a fulfilled and dignified life. This is just as true for people forced to flee as for anyone else. Recent UNHCR research on the Digital Leisure Divide has illuminated the vital necessity of ensuring displaced people have access to digital leisure to support their overall well-being. This access serves as a crucial avenue for refugees to rest, recuperate, maintain connections with loved ones, build community, access essential information, and more. With a player base of more than three billion people and annual revenue exceeding 187.7 billion USD, video games are a universal, omnipresent medium in the lives of people across the planet. To date, humanitarian organizations have had limited, albeit successful, involvement with this massive cultural force.

For many, video games lie at the very heart of digital leisure. Such games act as both shared activities and online community spaces with the potential to transform the lives of forcibly displaced people. Based on our feasibility study, we have collected evidence, presented in this document, that gaming initiatives can serve to:

Boost mental health and educational outcomes while driving adoption of essential digital technologies.	Foster dignity through digital skills and employment opportunities in the rapidly growing video game industry and creative industries.	Enable displaced people to safely access and engage in online communities, share spaces with host populations and foster a sense of belonging.	Empower refugees to express themselves through video games, as players, content creators, esports athletes, streamers, game developers, sharing their stories and talents with the world.

Displaced people should have a leading role in shaping the initiatives meant to benefit them. Of the 57 eligible people who participated in our study, 74% play games. Of those, 92% are interested in learning to make games. Like the refugee participants in a co-design workshop aimed at designing game events for forcibly displaced people, study participants also spoke of the barriers to access and the need for technology access, psychosocial support, and financial support to meet their basic needs and enable them to make the most of opportunities to learn new skills.

> "My community feels guilt about engaging in leisure activities. 'I'm a refugee and I have work to do, I shouldn't be smiling.' My community needs a chance to rest and play, to connect and be happy with other people."

— A statement jointly formulated with refugee co-designers

Having consulted with forcibly displaced people and gathered their thoughts about gaming, we learned that the majority of people who participated in our study would like to become involved in games as players, content creators (streamers), and game makers. They need support to do so.

Now, more than ever, there are opportunities for humanitarian organizations to meaningfully engage with this medium. Having started with an evidence-based approach through this feasibility study, UNHCR is now developing a programme that aims to make these opportunities a reality for forcibly displaced communities and set a foundation for future humanitarian engagement with the gaming industry. It builds on path-breaking work by the UNHCR Innovation Service and UNHCR North Macedonia to explore digital leisure as a vehicle for refugees' aspirations and creative agency.

> **Ultimately, this initiative aims to lay the foundation for refugees to actively participate in various roles within the realm of video games — helping to address the digital divide facing refugees and boost their wellbeing and self-reliance. We see this as the first step toward a future where refugees find joy, community, and opportunity in games and the video game industry; where refugees compete at the highest levels of esports and develop pathbreaking games to share their stories with the world; and where they can earn a living doing what they love.**

This report is the first part of a two-part report arising from our research, representing results of our desk research, a survey with forcibly displaced people, and partial results of our co-design workshop with refugees. It also proposes four key principles for engaging with gaming and refugees, including the importance of **leisure for its own sake, co-design with displaced communities, taking an evidence-based approach**, and **respecting distributed expertise**. More details about this research and its guiding principles are available in the body of this report.

Glossary

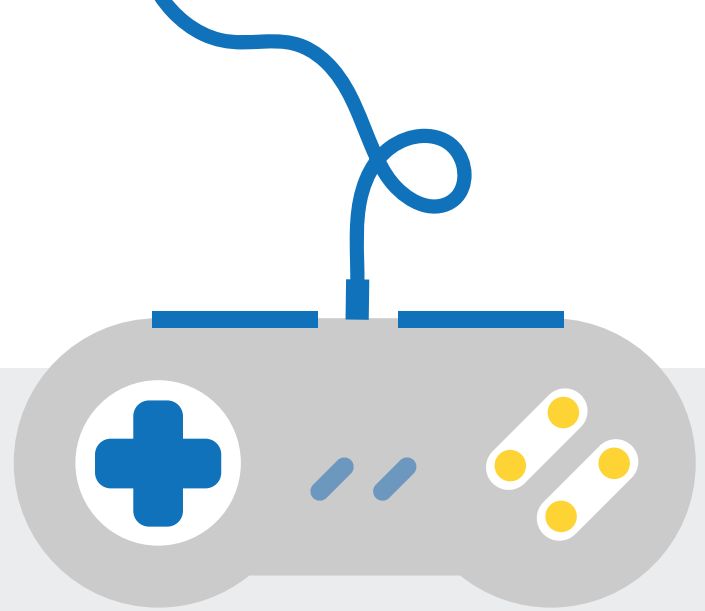|	
Co-design	An approach that enables a wide range of people to make a creative contribution in the formulation and solution of a problem. This approach goes beyond consultation by building and deepening equal collaboration between people affected by, or attempting to resolve, a particular challenge. A key tenet of co-design is that users, as 'experts' of their own experience, become central to the design process.
Content creation	Creating and sharing content (images, memes, blog posts, podcasts, videos, live broadcasts) on the internet that is related to a chosen subject, such as video games, in order to build a following or monetize these materials. Usually, content creators try to keep to a particular schedule to make sure that their viewers keep coming back. Certain sites – such as Medium, Substack, YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, and Instagram – are very popular with content creators.
Digital inclusion	The ability of individuals to have equitable access to digital technology and channels and can use them to pursue opportunities for lifelong learning, inclusion in the digital economy, leisure, and solutions. It includes factors such as internet connectivity, affordability of devices, and digital skills necessary to participate fully in the digital society.
Digital literacy	The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for participation in economic, social and political life. Digital literacy is a broad topic ranging from basic/foundational skills, like the ability to access the internet and search for content via an internet browser or apps, to more advanced digital skills like digital content creation, coding and data science.
Digital leisure	The use of digital tools and platforms for entertainment, recreation, acquiring knowledge, communication, socialization, and escaping from a negative mood during free time.
Esports	Short for "electronic sports". A video game played competitively for spectators, usually by professional gamers. Players can compete individually or as teams, depending on the game.

Gaming	The practice or activity of playing video games, over the internet or offline, with other players or computer-controlled opponents. It includes various genres and platforms such as computers, consoles, handheld devices and others, allowing players to connect and interact virtually.
Gamification	The process of taking game elements and characteristics and adding them to a non-game context to make it more game-like and make a task more engaging. This often includes elements such as scores and achievements, a themed progression track, and other commonly known game elements.
Game development	The process by which games are concepted, funded, created, marketed and made available to an audience. There are many roles in game development. Most development teams have a game designer, a programmer, and an artist. At minimum, every game needs a game designer to design the rules of the game and record them. Teams can range in size from a single person to hundreds of people working on different parts of a game
Game jam	An event where participants try to make a video game from scratch during a limited time period, ranging from 24 hours to multiple days. Depending on the format, participants might work independently or in teams. Participants are generally programmers, game designers, artists, writers, and others in game development-related fields. While many game jams are run purely as a game-making exercise, some game jams are contests that offer prizes.
Streaming	Live production and sharing of video content, usually featuring the creator's presence (voice, face, home, etc.) to a live audience online. Many streams are based around a particular activity, such as playing video games. When streaming games, people usually capture the contents of their screen. Some streams feature commentary while others are purely about watching someone else play a game skillfully. Audience interaction is usually a core feature of streams.

Introduction

Humanitarian crises have a long tail. What may start out as a sudden, acute crisis may not stay that way forever. An important part of weathering and recovering from a crisis are additional support programmes aimed at providing assistance past the initial moment of displacement. Another key part of recovering and regaining one's well-being and livelihood is the opportunity for rest and leisure.

UNHCR's engagement with video games was born from the intuition that games and gaming could have a practical use in humanitarian interventions. We believe that games can change lives for the better. With many refugees already playing games, we believe that more should have access to this opportunity.

This work does not take away from the importance of providing immediate, life-saving humanitarian aid in the form of food, clean water, medical care, and shelter. Rather, we see rest and leisure as complementary to this essential work. Engaging with gaming has the potential to help all refugees through a wide variety of channels. This could include empowering refugees to express their stories and talk about their experiences, potentially reaching new audiences who may not be aware of humanitarian issues, improving mental health, connecting people to communities, helping provide a dignified life through improving digital skills and livelihoods, and fundraising. Of course, games can be a lot of fun, and we absolutely believe in the right to rest and leisure for its own sake. Games can also be transformative experiences. Not only do games share qualities with cinema and literature, which are commonly considered to be media that can educate, move us emotionally, and transform us, they also invite players to act. In a game, players have the agency to explore different actions and their consequences within a system (the game environment).

The point of this feasibility study has been to test our initial intuitions about gaming and transform them into evidence-based practice, informed and guided by the wishes and needs of forcibly displaced people. We hope that this can be transformative for forcibly displaced people and begin to help create a model that engages with all parts of gaming, from the parts that are disguised as "just fun" to the parts that have clear and immediate possibilities for the livelihoods and wellbeing of forcibly displaced communities.

We also believe that this is a chance to inspire young people who may not even have considered that they could make the games they play, and to show the world what refugees can create if they have access to resources and time to work on their craft.

Research questions

The initial purpose of this feasibility study was to explore whether a game-making event would be possible and recommendable in the humanitarian context. While our scope has since broadened, this study marks UNHCR's first focused exploration into the intersection of displaced people and video games. Going forward, we hope to expand this research by involving a wider and more diverse range of forcibly displaced people. This research might also generate further avenues of study that could form the future basis for humanitarian strategies around video games.

Below are the key questions that guided our study.

What can video games offer to refugees?

Or, in other words, can video games provide positive possibilities for forcibly displaced persons such as improved livelihoods, better mental health outcomes, and social support networks? What do forcibly displaced communities use video games for currently, and what might they use them for in the future? How can the UNHCR use video games to support skill development and other beneficial activities for the forcibly displaced? How can co-creation and own-voice storytelling through gaming create inflection points for changing attitudes and behaviours? Given the right tools, can forcibly displaced people find livelihoods within the game industry?

What do refugees want from video games and video game–related events?

To be more specific, what kinds of events would be most beneficial and is there a desire and need for such events? What are the best practices for organizing game jams for marginalized people and how might the best practices change to accommodate the needs of displaced persons?

These questions guided us through our research and have informed the activities that we have undertaken as part of this study. The following document describes our findings.

Where do the video game industry and related organizations stand vis-a-vis refugees and UNHCR?

For example, what partnerships might UNHCR forge with supporters of digital inclusion in games? Who are potential allies among industry partners, game development companies, non-profit organizations, and other groups and individuals for this initiative and beyond? Are there opportunities for joint advocacy through existing initiatives or events we might imagine together? Given that the games industry is a multi-billion dollar economic force, would it be possible to leverage these partnerships for fundraising for much-needed advances in digital access?

The scope of the medium

Right now, more than 3 billion people on the planet play video games. In 2023, the gaming industry brought in an estimated revenue of 184 billion USD. That is twice the size of Hollywood and the music industry's revenue combined. For those who can afford digital access, gaming is already incredibly common, with even people who do not consider themselves gamers usually having a game app or two (or more) on their phones.

People play games on a variety of devices, each catering to different gaming experiences and player preferences. The most common ones include mobile devices (smartphones and tablets), gaming consoles (Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo) and personal computers (desktops and laptops). Mobile gaming dominates the market with 49% of the revenue, followed by console gaming at 28% and PC gaming at 22%. Refugees, who often face significant barriers to digital access, are frequently mobile-first as mobile phones are a vital part of their daily lives. This trend extends to digital leisure activities, including gaming.

Being a popular pastime for decades, gaming has seen a steady increase in the average age of gamers as gaming enthusiasts continue to play while new players join the community. For instance, 63% of gamers in Brazil are aged 25-34, with 46% of them identifying as women; the average gamer in China is 35, with 45% identifying as women; while 50% of gamers in India are aged 18-30, with 41% identifying as women. Africa has the youngest player base, reflecting its overall younger population.

Another way that we can consider the influence and impact of games is through viewership. Esports (professional video game competitions) had an estimated 577 million viewers in 2023. There is a clear upward trend in viewership, which indicates that watching esports is likely only to get more common.

Esports competitions, teams and athletes, sponsored by international companies like Coca-Cola, Samsung, and Mercedes-Benz, have dedicated fan bases numbering in the millions. A gameplay streaming platform like Twitch, which is by far the most popular at the moment, averages 2.5 million viewers at any given time, with over 7 million unique streamers (or content creators) holding accounts on the platform.

While these numbers and projections should be taken with a grain of salt given different reporting methods, standards and sources, what remains clear is that gaming is colossal and that it has substantial cultural and financial significance.

It is well-known that human beliefs and behaviours are at least in part shaped by what media we consume. That being the case, the medium of games, and all the industries that surround it, present a meaningful opportunity for humanitarian organizations to help influence behaviours for the better and possibly help improve access to digital livelihood opportunities at the same time.

Our work, through this feasibility study and future initiatives, will be to empower refugees to express themselves and create new livelihoods through video games, as players, content creators, esports athletes, streamers, and game developers, sharing their stories and talents with the world. We are motivated by our findings about the power of the medium to create initiatives to transform the lives of the forcibly displaced.

Leisure time allows us to recover, get inspired, and prepare for the challenges ahead. **It is, in and of itself, essential to leading a fulfilled and dignified life**.

The right to rest and leisure

Having enough rest and leisure is how a person maintains physical and mental health, overall happiness and well-being. Leisure time allows us to recover, get inspired, and prepare for the challenges ahead. It is, in and of itself, essential to leading a fulfilled and dignified life. In fact, rest and leisure are so important to a person's well-being that they are recognised as human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. For these reasons, leisure activities — like reading a book, watching a movie, or playing a game — should have a place in the design of humanitarian interventions, especially in protracted situations.

Forcibly displaced people – whether in refugee camps or in urban settings – have many basic needs, just like the rest of us. Leisure is one of these. Leisure and play can help people in difficult situations be resilient in the face of their problems, manage stress, strengthen relationships and improve skills, especially when there is nothing to do but wait.

When it comes to digital leisure, there are over 5 billion people online, spending an average of six and a half hours a day connected. As a growing proportion of our personal and professional lives takes place online, so, too, do leisure activities. Given the internet's prevalence, most of us probably take it for granted. But not everyone has the same ease of access.

Payal Arora is a digital anthropologist who collaborates with UNHCR's Innovation Service on digital leisure. To quote her research, as the next billion people in developing countries connect to the internet for the first time, they will prioritize digital leisure time activities, such as social media, gaming and watching movies. Unless blocked, games always appear in the top three uses of telecentre and cyber-kiosk facilities (alongside social media and movies). Thanks to recent UNHCR research into the Digital Leisure Divide, we know how crucial digital access is for the well-being of refugees. Digital access allows refugees to stay connected to loved ones, find community, express their challenges and experiences, access important information, and much more.

We also now have a sense of how challenging it can be to maintain that access. For example, many refugees have access to mobile devices, but may have intermittent access to internet connectivity or charging stations to keep these devices powered. Some refugees further experience restricted digital mobility because of lower digital literacy rates (this is especially true for women, girls, and the elderly), and a general lack of online content in their native languages.

Desk research: What can video games offer refugees?

Beyond the intrinsic value of rest and leisure, play has been shown to release endorphins, improve brain functionality, support injury rehabilitation, and stimulate creativity. It also happens to be one of the best ways to learn skills and acquire knowledge. When it comes to playing video games, evidence suggests that it is time well spent.

Across the world, people use play to learn to cope physically and emotionally with unexpected, potentially harmful events, invent new, sometimes useful tools and practices, and learn to cooperate and co-exist with others. Current research suggests that playing games can have many positive impacts in areas such as learning and education, mental health outcomes, rehabilitation after an injury, and much, much more.

A study of more than 3,000 young children from across six countries found that playing five or more hours of video games per week was "significantly associated with higher intellectual functioning, increased academic achievement, a lower prevalence of peer relationship problems and a lower prevalence of mental health difficulties."[1]

Meanwhile, just 14 hours of gameplay across eight weeks showed a self-reported positive effect on communication ability, adaptability, and resourcefulness in adult learners.

Other studies show positive mental health impacts for military veterans managing mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and people coping with stress during COVID-19 lockdowns.

There's no reason to think these benefits would not apply to displaced populations, if they are empowered to access play opportunities. Indeed, in Turkey, an online game-based intervention for Syrian refugee children called Project Hope has been shown to have had a positive effect on education, language acquisition, and mental health. After participating in this short pilot programme, the children showed "significant improvements in Turkish language acquisition, coding, executive functioning and overall sense of hopefulness".

Being part of a community

The benefits of sports as a tool for social inclusion and overall wellbeing are well recognized in the humanitarian and development space. Alongside their benefits to physical health and stress relief, sports build camaraderie and teamwork skills like cooperation and communication. Although the barriers to accessing video games are different (and perhaps higher, in some cases), just as sport provides psychosocial support and community, so, too, can video games.

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[1] Our bibliography, found at the end of this document, is organized by topic and you can find out more about these benefits according to your interests.

If you've ever seen a child proudly giving a tour of their Minecraft base to a parent or a friend, it is easy to see how video games can create meaningful moments of socialization and intimacy. What is less widely known is that players who game online together regularly create strong social ties that extend into offline social support for each other. This has been found to be especially true for esports and games involving teams that engage in shared play with shared goals. So, the friendship and teamwork that makes sports so special is also present in the gaming sphere.

Sports can also provide opportunities for integration with host communities, simply by enabling displaced and stateless people to do the same things in the same forums as everyone else. In some ways, this shared forum is more easily available in an online space than in person. Although digital devices can be costly, that investment removes the need for organization, physical proximity, and travel. This expands the opportunities to socialize and belong to communities for people with disabilities and those who simply feel more comfortable in an online forum. It also means that, for, example, displaced and stateless children with online access can more easily and regularly share online spaces with their counterparts without needing a special opportunity or organized activity to do so. Both organized and ad hoc spaces have a lot of value for connecting people and integration.

Gaming enables refugees to participate in the same digital space as host populations, playing the same games by the same rules. Spending time getting to know and be known by the host communities.

Digital skills and livelihoods

After fleeing war or persecution, one of the most effective ways people can rebuild their lives in peace and with dignity is by gaining access to work opportunities. Video games can help by supporting skill development and adoption of new technologies and ultimately opening pathways to jobs in the video game industry and related industries.

Being immersed in digital environments improves digital literacy — a near-universally important skill set across modern professions, and one that is especially crucial for remote work. Displaced people in northern Lebanon and South Sudan taking part in a study explained that "the more time they spent using their mobile phones, the more they discovered new features and became comfortable navigating the settings and downloading and sharing media." Many of them developed these skills through digital leisure.

More specifically, skills from game making — for instance, programming, animation, storytelling, and communication — can be transferred to other areas, boosting employability. Some games teach the basics of many of these skills through their play and through player-created content. These skills can also be self-taught through online tutorials. As displaced people often face barriers to mobility; remote jobs can enable livelihoods in cases where other employment opportunities are not available. Currently, the computer, IT and marketing industries have the highest demand for remote workers. Developing these skills could provide the opportunity to secure in-demand remote jobs in the fields of software development, digital marketing, graphic design, project management and others.

One potential outcome of this study is an event or series of events during which forcibly displaced people could start learning how to make games. Learning to create games can be empowering and help marginalized people tell their stories. Lual Mayen, who was displaced from South Sudan as an infant, and Jack Gutmann, who fled Syria as a young adult, are two examples of game designers who have lived experience of forced displacement – and who are using their skills to shine a light on that experience.

Both have worked to make games that inform people about the difficult journeys refugees are compelled to take to survive. *Path Out*, which Gutmann helped design with the Causa Creation team, enables players to experience for themselves his perilous journey out of Syria. Mayen's game, *Salaam*, allows players to buy supplies for refugees; these are delivered with the help of UNHCR and other organizations. For these designers, video games have been a conduit for self expression, professional growth, and the ability to help others.

It is worth noting that the period following the end of the pandemic has been difficult for game workers. Following the explosive growth during the pandemic, many companies have conducted layoffs, even as they were reporting record profits. This is consistent with the broader trend in the tech industry. While layoffs cannot always be prevented, worker protections can help mitigate some of the harm caused by job losses.

The video game industry is not alone in undergoing a pushback on labour rights and protections in the present moment. As humanitarian organizations move forward with exploring opportunities for digital livelihoods, it is crucial to recognize that the forcibly displaced are especially vulnerable to abuse and asymmetric power dynamics, and ensure that these risks are being mitigated.

Raising awareness and funds

Gamers are exceptionally skilled at mobilizing around issues that matter to them. Many of them build communities, champion social causes, and contribute to philanthropy. For example, Extra Life – a charity supporting children's health that is supported by thousands of game creators, game players and streamers across the globe – has raised over 100 million dollars USD since its inception in 2008. Video game content creation company Yogscast has raised over 25 million GBP for charity through Jingle Jam, a bi-weekly charity drive that has taken place around Christmas since 2011. Meanwhile, Epic Games, the company behind Fortnite, raised 144 million USD for humanitarian relief for the war in Ukraine by donating all *Fortnite* proceeds from just a single two-week stretch. These are just a few of the many cases of games being used to raise funds.

Games also have a proven track record of exploring nuanced social issues such as forced displacement and migration, the civilian experience of war, COVID-19, cancer, divorce, LGBTQIA+ experiences, mental health, and more. Humanitarian collaborations with game creators to raise awareness and help change attitudes on many of these issues are already happening. For example, the Playing for the Planet Alliance supports the video games industry in taking action to advance the environment agenda and reduce its environmental impact. Games are ideal for building awareness and helping players make sense of experiences because they place the player in the shoes of someone else, exposing them to another's lifestyles and circumstances. Instead of passively watching events unfold, players make decisions and face consequences.

This, coupled with the ever-increasing amount of time that people across the world spend playing video games as well as emerging technologies that enable deeper physical, psychological, and social immersion, means that, as Ian Bogost has argued, "videogames can disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change.

Misconceptions around gaming

We have already discussed some of the positive impacts arising out of video games on mental health and resilience, educational outcomes, and finding community, among other things, but video games still have their detractors. If you are interested in planning video game events for forcibly displaced people, you may encounter some questions and misconceptions about the impact of video games on their players, particularly from those who may not yet have had much contact with them. Here are some common myths that we encountered and some evidence-based responses that you may find useful in addressing them. If you would like to dive deeper into the studies behind these arguments, please refer to the bibliography at the end of the document.

As with other media, not all games are appropriate for all players. We can and should use discretion in what media we provide to young audiences, or older audiences, or those who may have experienced trauma, among other specific needs.

Misconception 1   **Video games promote aggressive behaviour**

While some video games do contain violence, there is [no substantial evidence of a causal link between playing video games and heightened aggression](#), nor is there proof that playing video games increases the likelihood of committing violent crimes. Concerns regarding video games and violence have persisted since the inception of the medium, leading to decades of research on the subject. However, the narrative of video games causing violent behaviour, often propagated by the media and politicians who are not experts on the subject, tends to overshadow empirical research.
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Renewed interest in the links between playing video games that depict violence and increases in violence occurred after the Columbine High School massacre in the United States. Following a national tragedy, it is unsurprising that the subject quickly became emotionally charged, and the medium became a scapegoat for a complex societal problem. Christopher Ferguson, who has researched the link between video games and violence for many years, suggests that these perceived high stakes [encouraged false positives in many studies about violence and video games](#).

The methodologies used in some research to link video games and violent behaviour have also been called into question. For example, Prescott, Sergent and Hull (2018) use methodologies to measure access to aggression-related words and aggression-related feelings and suggests that experiencing or voicing an emotion is the same as acting on it.

This is simply not the case. Additionally, many studies fail to include other factors as statistical controls, which means that there may be other variable relationships at play (Ferguson 2018, Drummond et al. 2020). Meta-analyses of such studies suggest that, at the longitudinal level, there is no credible evidence to support that there are accumulated effects from playing violent video games and that this area of research may suffer from "researcher expectancy effects" or other "methodological weaknesses" (Drummond et al. 2020).

There are studies that show a weak but significant estimated effect size when it comes to aggression (Prescott et al. 2018). This effective size of playing violent video games is, in some recent studies, the equivalent of 1% in the variance of whether or not children and teenagers would otherwise engage in aggressive actions. It's worth noting that aggression is also observed in team sports, but that the prevailing research posits that by creating a contained place in which to express aggressive actions and behaviours, these sports allow young people to express their aggression in a healthy context. Given that sports continue to be encouraged for their positive impacts, perhaps we should consider whether video games can fulfill a similar role.

Further, not all games involve violence; there are numerous non-violent genres, such as puzzle, simulation, and adventure games. Just like books, movies and other means of telling stories, video games can be about any topic related to human experience, and that can include depictions of violence. As with other media, this can also mean that not all games are appropriate for all players. We can and should use discretion in what media we provide to young audiences, or older audiences, or those who may have experienced trauma, among other specific needs.

Misconception 2 Video games are trivial or only for children

Video games have evolved into a diverse and sophisticated form of entertainment that appeals to a broad range of age groups. There are games designed specifically for children, but there are also complex and mature-themed games created for adults. The gaming industry is a significant part of the entertainment landscape, with many games exploring intricate narratives, complex characters, and thought-provoking themes.

Here are some games that are thought-provoking and address sophisticated topics in a meaningful way:
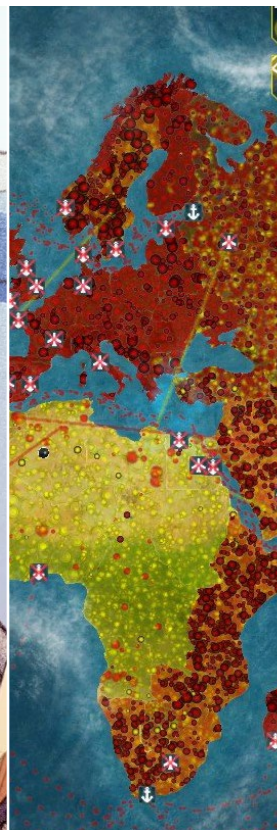

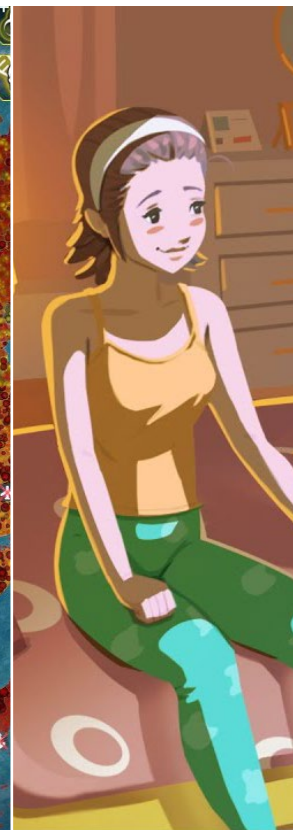*That Dragon, Cancer* addresses a parent's experience of their child's pediatric cancer.

This War of Mine addresses civilian experience of war.

Bury Me, My Love is about one person's experience of forced displacement.

Plague Inc: The Cure is about how viruses like COVID-19 spread.

LongStory is about self-acceptance and the experience of being a LGBTQIA+ youth.

Misconception 3 | Video games are addictive

It is true that it is possible to design video games and other technological experiences in ways that encourage addiction. For example, some games engage in unsavoury practices that share commonalities with gambling, such as the use of loot boxes.

This is not the case for all games. Games are a diverse, engaging medium that can facilitate many kinds of play. As with subject matter appropriateness, it is important for adults to make decisions for themselves and for their children about what kinds of games they engage with and how often. Further, there is a difference between engagement and enjoyment of a hobby and addiction. At the moment, there is a lack of clarity and agreement around what video game addiction and other terms related to technological addiction mean and what behaviours they should include. This is a primary issue within the study of games and addiction today. After all, we do not categorize avid readers as being

"book addicts", perhaps in part because reading enjoys wide acceptance as an enriching activity. In this paper, we have demonstrated that gaming can have many positive benefits for those who play. These unclear definitions of video game addiction risk pathologizing what may be a normal, healthy engagement with a beloved hobby.

One important feature of addiction is whether the activity in question has a negative impact on our day-to-day lives. Most experts agree that video game addiction is possible, if not necessarily common. As with smartphone usage and any other technological device, monitoring and being mindful of usage is important. The topic of addiction is important to consider, but it should not interfere with our use (rather than abuse) of technologies and tools that can have positive impacts on our lives. Playing video games does not mean that one will become addicted to them and frequent play is not necessarily associated with increased levels of addiction.

Our interventions: What refugees want from games

Given that our feasibility study starts from the basic principle that forcibly displaced people are experts on their own experience and that their guidance is necessary to develop appropriate interventions and programmes, it was essential for the purpose of this study and resulting programming to reach forcibly displaced people directly to gather their thoughts.

To that end, we created a survey to be filled in by forcibly displaced people. The survey covers gaming habits, access to technology, opinions about games, and interests in educational activities about games.

We received insights from 61 eligible survey respondents[2] from a sample of diverse refugee populations across the globe, and conducted 25 interviews with game developers, including refugee game developers, as well as inclusive game event organizers, digital inclusion experts and humanitarian workers. We also hosted a co-design workshop with five refugees in Helsinki, Finland, to try and get more targeted insights on key questions, and to to shape future initiatives that UNHCR could support in the gaming sphere.[3]

Due to the constraints of the study, our sample size is small and cannot be said to be representative of the larger refugee population. Our aim is to provide a snapshot of the context and needs of forcibly displaced communities – particularly those with a pre-existing interest in gaming – to guide future UNHCR engagement in the medium. There are more insights to be had by expanding the study to additional participants in the future. Nevertheless, the data from the survey points to encouraging trends in attitudes toward games. Moreover, having fewer workshop attendees allowed us to focus in greater depth on specific topics related to refugees and gaming.

Some of our key findings are detailed below. These sections focus primarily on the survey statistics, which include responses from our workshop attendees, followed by some of the key takeaways from the co-design workshop.

Respondent profiles

Our respondents were living in Africa, Asia, and Europe, with respondents' aged between 10 and 83, with the average age being 30. The majority of respondents were men (67%), while 27% of respondents were women; the remaining four respondents wished to self-describe. Of those, one was a trans man, another was non-binary person, and two did not use the provided box to supply their chosen gender identity.

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2   Eligible respondents were those that responded positively to the question: "Do you consider yourself to be a refugee, asylum seeker, state less person or displaced person?"
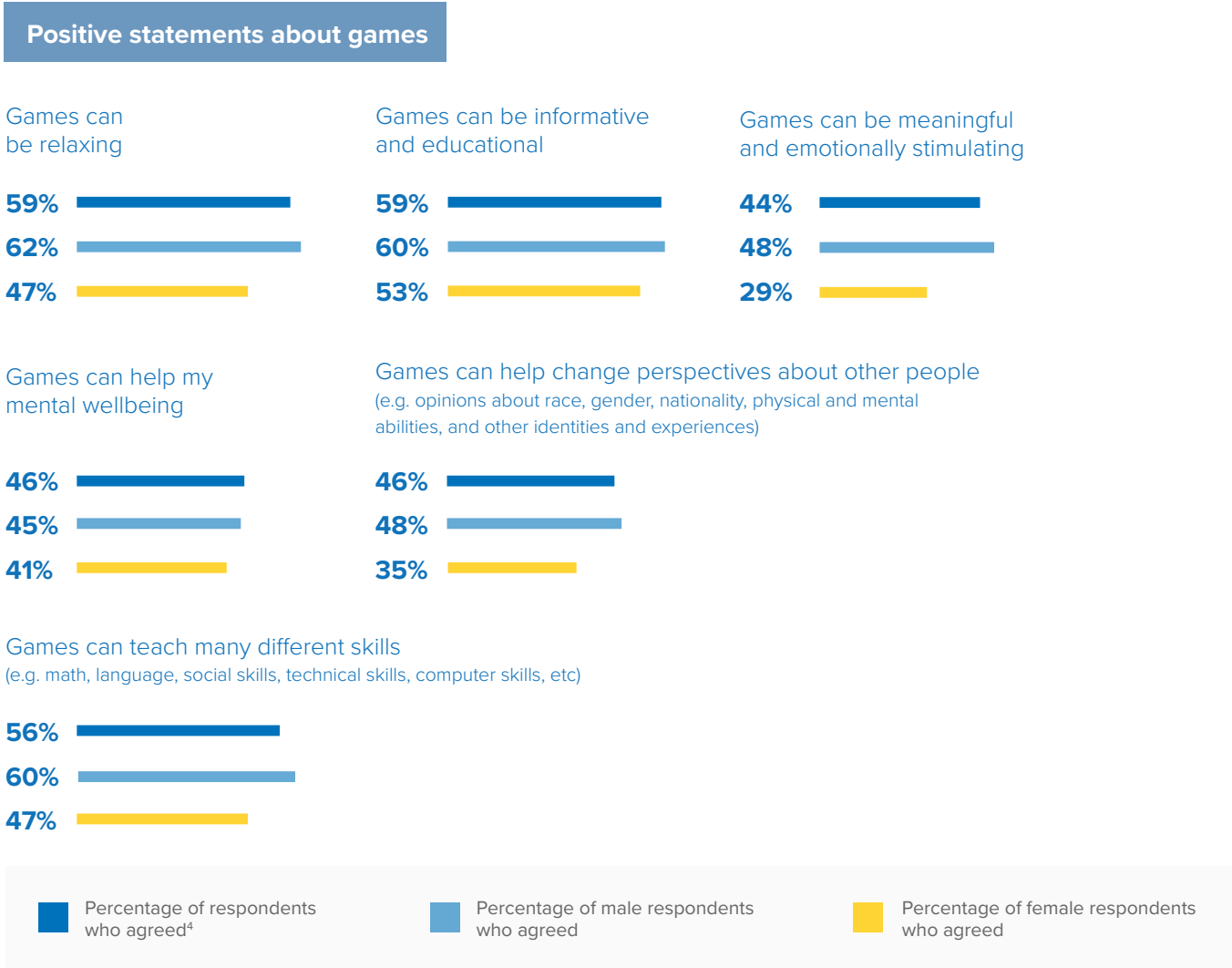
3   This workshop was developed in English and delivered to a group who spoke English as a second language with a high degree of fluency. This was a limitation of scope for this study.

Because we wished to obtain as many responses as possible and were concerned that certain questions might feel invasive, we did not ask about additional specifics regarding legal status, disability, race or ethnicity, gender identity, income, and so on. We feel that while these demographic questions will be crucial in the future, they were not appropriate to ask at this stage, as they might have repelled respondents who would otherwise have engaged.

Refugee interest in gaming

While 75% of our respondents were gamers, many of those who never or almost never played games would still be willing to try some and see what they offer. **Of those who have not played video games, sixty percent said that they would be willing to play, if given the opportunity.**

Although gamers were more likely to have positive attitudes toward gaming (91% of our game-playing respondents), 73% of the 15 eligible respondents who did not play games still agreed with one or more statements about the potential of games to provide positive benefits. Overall, male respondents reported higher positive attitudes about games, but the gap decreases significantly when comparing both male and female respondents who play video games.

Positive statements about games

Games can be relaxing

59%
62%
47%

Games can be informative and educational

59%
60%
53%

Games can be meaningful and emotionally stimulating

44%
48%
29%

Games can help my mental wellbeing

46%
45%
41%

Games can help change perspectives about other people
(e.g. opinions about race, gender, nationality, physical and mental abilities, and other identities and experiences)

46%
48%
35%

Games can teach many different skills
(e.g. math, language, social skills, technical skills, computer skills, etc)

56%
60%
47%

■ Percentage of respondents who agreed[4]
■ Percentage of male respondents who agreed
■ Percentage of female respondents who agreed

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4   We had four gender-diverse respondents to our survey. We have not created a disaggregated entry in this table to avoid misrepresenting the data but have included their answers in the aggregated data. We do not wish to draw conclusions from such a small sample size. A future area of research could specifically look at gender-diverse refugees and their opinions about gaming.

We also asked all eligible respondents whether they agreed with these statements about negative aspects and perceptions of games. Thirteen percent of eligible respondents who did not play games did not agree with any of these statements, compared to 57% of eligible respondents who did play games.

Games are a waste of time

18%
17%
24%

Games are for children[5]

11%
10%
30%

Games are expensive[5]
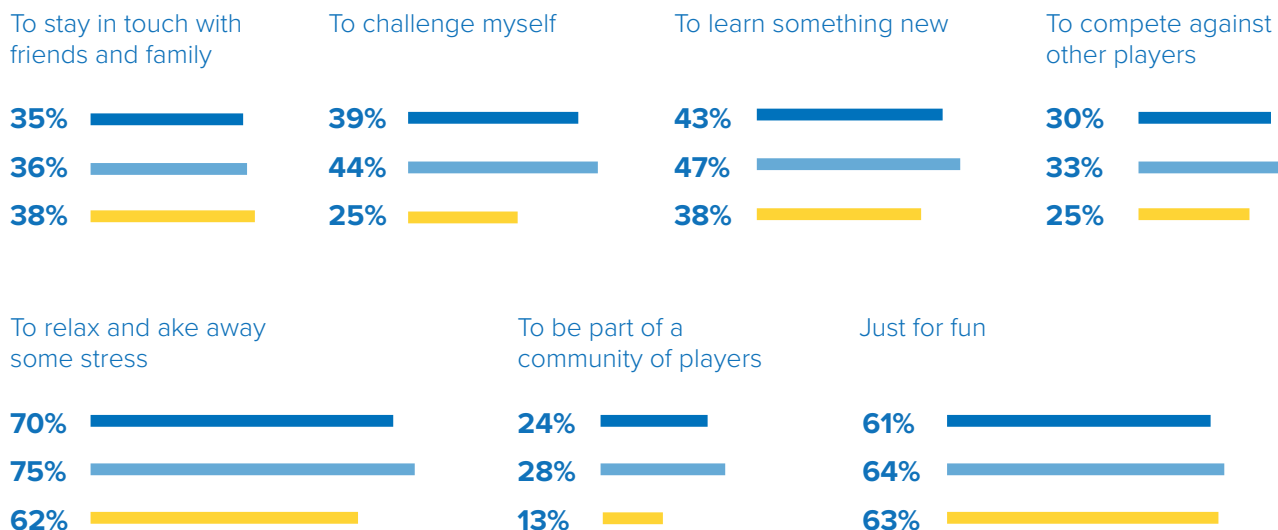
25%
24%
24%

Games can cause addiction (like gambling)

20%
12%
53%

Games cause violence

8%
5%
24%

Games are trivial/ unimportant

2%
2%
0%

I do not agree with any of these statements

48%
64%
29%

Reasons for playing games

Reasons for playing games

To stay in touch with friends and family

35%
36%
38%

To challenge myself

39%
44%
25%

To learn something new

43%
47%
38%

To compete against other players

30%
33%
25%

To relax and ake away some stress

70%
75%
62%

To be part of a community of players

24%
28%
13%

Just for fun

61%
64%
63%

■ Percentage of respondents who agreed[4]　　■ Percentage of male respondents who agreed　　■ Percentage of female respondents who agreed

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5　　Although games may be for children, that doesn't mean that they are only for children. This statement should have been worded differently.

6　　Although there are games that are free to play, they often require expensive devices to play on.

What games do refugees play?

A word cloud of video game titles displayed on a tablet, including: tell tales the walking dead, beamng.drive, red dead redemption, borderlands, truck driver 202, dark souls iii, the witcher iii, harry potter: hogwarts mystery, forge of empires, paladins, resident evil, dead by daylight, mobile legends, elden ring, clash of clans, bus simulator, monster hunter: rise, free fire, the elder scrolls v: skyrim, modern combat, call of duty, zelda, solitaire, goldeneye, sims, gta v, rocket league, efootball, driver simulator, life is strange: true colors, counter-strike, zombie hunter, pubg, halo, ufo, metal gear solid, warcraft, mass effect, elevate, god of war, slime rancher, overcooked, roblox, pro evolution soccer 2017, nioh 2, sonic, township, fifa, jeu d'échec, stray, fruit ninja, super soccer, dark souls ii, tembo the badass elephant, jawaker, subnautica, nfs (need for speed), contra, neverwinter, genshin impact, dls23 football game, super mario, fatal frame, jeu de carte du monde, hello charlotte, megapoli, bus simulator indonesia, pes, disco elysium, bus simulator 2023, asphalt 8, paper mario 64, candy crush, minecraft, gran turismo, tell tales the wolf among us

Refugee interest in esports and streaming

Seventy percent of respondents who played games had some level of interest in esports (50% of female respondents and 72% of male respondents), with 7% being esports competitors already and 45% having an interest in becoming competitors. Fourteen percent either already watched or were interested in watching esports.

Seventy-four percent of respondents who played games had some level of interest in streaming (70% of the female and 67% of the male respondents). Seven percent were already streaming while 44% had an interest in becoming a streamer, and 22% were interested in watching streams.
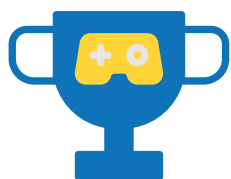
70% percent of respondents who played games had some level of interest in **esports**

74% percent of respondents who played games had some level of interest in **streaming**

Refugee interest in game making

Out of those respondents who already played games, 93% believe that it is possible to make a living by making video games, while 92% reported being either somewhat interested (40%) or very interested (52%) in making games. While our sample size is small, this may still point to widespread interest from refugees and other forcibly displaced people in learning how to make games.

The most sought-after skill that respondents would like to learn is game design, which we defined as: "creating rules, challenges, goals, and other systems" for games. In our survey, 59.5% of respondents wished to learn this skill. Programming or coding was the second-most desired skill at 57%. Art and animation were next (48%), followed by game writing/storytelling (19%) and sound design (19%).

Part of our ongoing work will be to reach these interested individuals and other people like them and remove barriers to access from their path.

93% percentage of respondents who believe that it is possible to **make a living** by making video games

Barriers to access

The survey data points to the need for multilingual support and barriers to digital access. Almost one-third of respondents would not feel comfortable with receiving training in English and 31% did not have access to their own laptop computer.

The workshop revealed further barriers to access and added some nuance to already identified challenges and themes, such as the right to rest and leisure. What follows are statements that were crafted in collaboration with workshop attendees, based on what they told us about their experiences.

"My community feels guilt about engaging in leisure activities. 'I'm a refugee and I have work to do, I shouldn't be smiling.' My community needs a chance to rest and play, to connect and be happy with other people."

Attitudes toward rest and leisure in refugee communities may echo similar arguments from some humanitarians about how rest and leisure are trivial or somehow unimportant when faced with other concurrent needs. This may manifest for some as guilt toward resting, leisure time, and the concept of having fun. Our workshop attendees were very clear that this guilt could be quite pervasive and that they believed their communities might need help in feeling good about taking the time to rest and play, in part due to attitudes that they might have encountered previously about forcible displacement.

"My community is struggling to meet basic needs and maintain mental well-being. I know people who would be very excited to learn to make games and pursue careers in the gaming industry, but not everyone can afford the time investment. My community needs to be supported in order to be able to get started."

At the same time, our workshop participants highlighted the importance of getting help meeting basic needs and bettering mental health. According to participants, the time investment needed to learn these skills, even if they could lead to a better job, is a large barrier for many forcibly displaced people. With a lack of monetary, psychosocial and basic needs support, many people are unable to take the time to access opportunities that could help them gain access to better livelihood opportunities.

"My community is traumatized. It can be painful, many times at a subconscious level, to be approached with certain concepts, assumptions and language. My community needs to work with people that understand these traumas and the cultural contexts we are coming from."

Humanitarians engaging with gaming for refugees will have to blend trauma-aware approaches with a delicacy around assumptions and identities. At these events, an unexpected incident may unwittingly activate attendees, or the event may explicitly create space where refugees have the opportunity to speak about their experiences, which is important but can nevertheless engender difficult feelings. For that reason, it is important to provide options and support, giving participants choices about how they engage with different subjects and activities. What this could mean is explicitly identifying what topics participants in certain "tracks" or "rooms" of an event will engage with. Participants can then decide if they wish to enter those spaces. Crucially, it also means ensuring trained staff are ready to provide psychosocial support on-hand at the event.

"My community is wary of taking part in refugee-specific events. My community needs to not be treated with assumptions about what it means to be a refugee. We need to be treated as people, not identities."

The co-design workshop attendees expressed that it is tiring and alienating to be treated as a refugee all the time. At the same time, we must be prepared to meet any particular needs that refugees are likely to have, particularly in regard to trauma, which was another topic that arose in our discussions. Navigating these twin realities of refugee experience will be important for our future plans and for humanitarian interventions with digital technology more generally.

"It can be intimidating to be around experts who seem to know everything about game design. A refugee-only space might be more comfortable, especially when delving into game design for the first time."

One option that we considered when thinking through the game jam structure and how team formation could work was whether experienced non-refugee developers should be embedded in teams to ensure a greater chance of "success" – specifically, successfully completed and polished projects.

Defining how "success" will be measured and what the desired outcomes are is a crucial step in planning engagements with gaming. There is a possible tension in creating humanitarian game-making events that create opportunities for deep experimentation that runs the risk of failure (in an accepted, welcomed way) versus events that are meant to showcase or raise awareness through more polished, perfected end results. We must frame the expectations of the event cautiously.

On the one hand, we may be tempted to create the optimal conditions for participants to produce something polished and complete that can help to say something about important topics related to refugee experiences – by, for example, bringing in expert team members to assist. However, this may not align with creating a learning environment where incompleteness and failure are not only allowed but even encouraged in the name of learning, exploration, and experimentation.

For refugees engaging with creating games for the first time, the second kind of space where the experts take on a mentoring role was identified as more important, in our co-design process. While some projects might eventually go on to become polished games, initially having space for refugees to engage with each other without the pressure of perofming for experts or an audience is important in encouraging people to take the risk of trying out new things.

This is one of the many reasons that we propose a multi-phase process for Ref Jam, which would include workshops for beginners to teach introductory game-making skills, followed by a game jam, and then a selection process for participation in a game incubator. While we will still have expert instructors and mentors, we are confident that we can set up an environment where it is OK to fail and to ask for help.

It is our hope that, by identifying some of the key barriers to refugee participation in game-related events, these can be surmounted by careful planning and engagement with these problems. As we engage with these subjects, there are four principles that we aim to keep in mind and that we encourage other humanitarian workers interested in gaming to think about as well.

How should the humanitarian sector engage with gaming

Our guiding principles
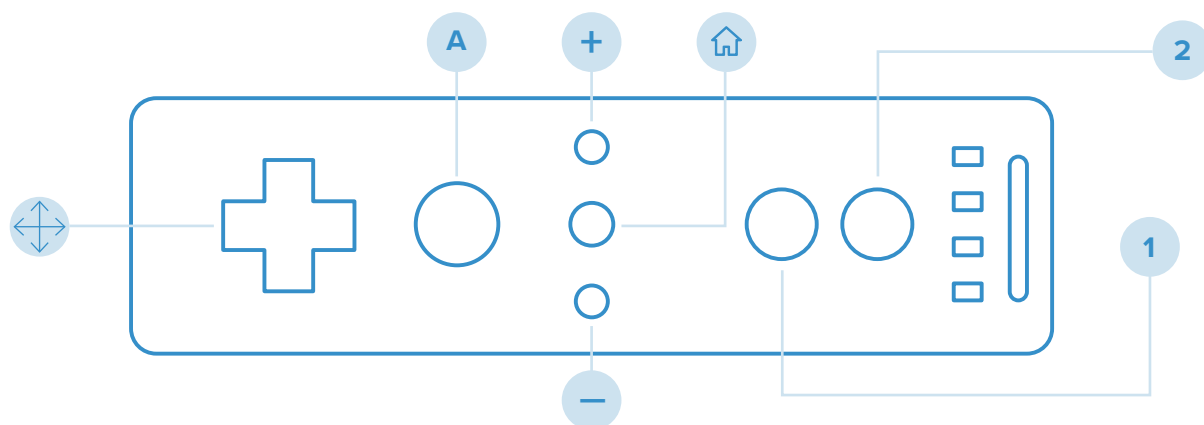
1 Leisure for its own sake

Leisure time allows us to recover, get inspired, and prepare for the challenges ahead. It is, in and of itself, essential to leading a fulfilled and dignified life. In fact, rest and leisure are so important to a person's wellbeing that they are broadly considered human rights.

2 Co-design with displaced communities

Displaced people should have a leading role in shaping the initiatives meant to benefit them. Through inclusive co-design, we collaborate closely with forcibly displaced people of diverse age, gender, and abilities to understand their aspirations and preferences concerning video games. This ensures that the interventions undertaken by UNHCR are jointly developed and tailored to their needs and perspectives.

3 Evidence-based approach

Our engagements with the video game industry are grounded in comprehensive research and supported by data. By relying on an evidence-based approach, we seek to maximize the positive impact of our initiatives on the lives of forcibly displaced individuals. This empowers us to make informed decisions that enhance the impact of interventions with digital tech and create better outcomes for forcibly displaced communities.

4 Respecting distributed expertise

We acknowledge and appreciate the specialized skills of game developers and esports professionals in crafting gaming experiences and fostering the competitive gaming landscape. Simultaneously, we recognize our own subject matter expertise in understanding the needs and challenges faced by forcibly displaced communities. By respecting the boundaries of expertise and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, we strive to create the best possible products and solutions.

Types of gaming activities

In a digital world, access to digital leisure is, in and of itself, essential to leading a fulfilled and dignified life. Video games, a key component of digital leisure, can play a transformative role in the lives of the forcibly displaced. Gaming initiatives can serve to:

Boost mental health and educational outcomes while driving adoption of essential digital technologies.	Foster dignity through digital skills and employment opportunities in the rapidly growing video game industry and creative industries.	Enable displaced people to safely access and engage in online communities, share spaces with host populations and foster a sense of belonging.	Empower refugees to express themselves through video games, as players, content creators, esports athletes, streamers, game developers, sharing their stories and talents with the world.

Humanitarian organizations could engage in a wide variety of activities related to gaming, particularly if they collaborate with the right partners. As per our fourth guiding principle, it is important to respect the expertise of people from different disciplines and enlist the support of people who have the experience needed to help implement game-related programming. That includes, for example, game creation being executed by expert designers, or event planners who have experience with game events being brought on board to help with such events. Here are some examples of the kinds of engagement with games that humanitarian organizations could involve themselves in:

- **Fundraising and awareness-raising activities** – such as charity streams or esports gaming competitions bringing together known streamers, players, or advocates with forcibly displaced players. Successful models already exist within UNHCR, such as soccer streaming from professional players and events like Gamers Without Borders, the world's largest charitable esports and gaming tournament, where viewers can support refugees with a single click.

- **Targeted learning programs for digital and creative skills**, ranging from workshop series and longer-term educational programs (lasting weeks or months) to incubators and gaming campuses focused on both education and esports training.

- **Community-building activities**, such as game-playing clubs or tournaments, can serve as educational opportunities to improve digital literacy and critical thinking. They can also foster integration with host communities and act as a channel for providing psychosocial support, enhancing well-being and mental health.

- **Professionalization activities,** including networking events, studio tours, job shadowing programs, mentorship opportunities, and sponsorship or funding for refugee-led game development startups.

Many of these activities can be scaled up or down based on available resources. Interventions could range from starting a gaming collection at a local, digitally connected community center with a facilitator for a few hours a week, to establishing dedicated gaming campuses, organizing refugee esports leagues, and training refugee teams to compete at the highest levels of esports.

Regardless of the scale or scope, it is essential to collaborate closely with displaced communities to understand their specific needs and aspirations. Interventions must be designed with these needs in mind, ensuring that any initiatives are not imposed from the outside but rather developed in partnership with the communities themselves. A systematic approach should be taken to provide the necessary support and space for gaming communities to flourish organically. This includes fostering environments where connections can grow, talents can be nurtured, and meaningful networks can form. Without this, interventions risk becoming isolated, one-off events with limited impact, rather than sustainable platforms for long-term growth and empowerment.

What comes next

We are [working toward the digital inclusion of displaced people](#), to ensure communities have equitable access to digital technology and channels and can use them to pursue opportunities for lifelong learning, inclusion in the digital economy, leisure, and solutions.

As more humanitarian actors begin to engage with the power of gaming and digital leisure activities, it is our hope that this feasibility study and future publications arising from it can provide a starting point for how to engage effectively with the medium of gaming, starting from the point of view that rest and leisure are intrinsically worthwhile while also having other knock-on benefits.

This paper has engaged with arguments for the utility of gaming and what refugees have told us they want out of gaming. The second paper in this series will address how to run an inclusive game event, taking into account concrete advice from expert inclusive-event organizers, as well as refugees who have told us what they would most like to see at such an event, and more.

Although this feasibility study focuses primarily on game-playing habits as they apply to making the transition to game development, we have since broadened the scope of activities to include streaming and esports activities as well as the creation of community-centre programmes in refugee communities to increase access to digital leisure and create opportunities for socializing as well as learning.

Ultimately, this study helps to lay the foundations for refugees to actively participate in various roles within the realm of video games – addressing the digital divide facing refugees and boosting their wellbeing and self-reliance.

We see this as a movement toward a future where refugees find joy, community, and opportunity in games and the video game industry; where refugees compete at the highest levels of esports and develop pathbreaking games to share their stories with the world; and where they can earn a living doing what they love.

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The following bibliography collects the sources from our initial desk research as well as some additional targeted research.

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Leisure time allows us to recover, get inspired, and prepare for the challenges ahead. **It is, in and of itself, essential to leading a fulfilled and dignified life**.

Connect with us