

Promoting reflective practice in prison education: the potential of video games as educational tools

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Abstract: This contribution aims to explore the potential of video games as educational tools in the penitentiary context, addressing the fundamental tension between security requirements and educational aims in prison environments. With particular attention to current Italian penitentiary policies and practices, and drawing from inclusive pedagogy, we explore how video games could promote authentic engagement in educational processes, moving beyond the instrumental participation in educational programs that typically characterizes incarcerated individuals' involvement.

Keywords: inclusive pedagogy; prison education; videogames

1. Introduction²

The idea that prison constitutes a barrier intended to demarcate a boundary between inside and outside, between society and isolation, between good and evil (Zimbardo, 2007) still persists in broad sectors of society. From an inclusive perspective, it is essential to overcome these divisions by adopting an educational approach that values individual potential through the design of "percorsi di sviluppo commisurati a ogni situazione soggettiva impegnando in modificazioni coevolutive il contesto" (Pavone, 2010, p. 60). Such design, within the prison environment, requires action that considers the specific peculiarities of this context. In the context of prisons, a significant gap often emerges between the transformative and emancipatory goals of education and the day-to-day management practices, which tend to focus on preserving order and enforcing discipline within an inherently coercive and punitive setting (Crispiani, 2010). At the same time, while management issues related to security and discipline requirements represent an indispensable prerequisite for implementing educational paths (Rogers et al., 2016), from a pedagogical perspec-



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² A terminological note: while in this paper we use the term 'education', it should be noted that within Italian penitentiary institutions the term 'rieducazione', established in Article 27 of the Constitution, entails specific constitutional, theoretical and praxeological implications that characterize both scientific reflection and institutional practices

tive, there is no clear evidence that repressive solution are more effective than a critical re-elaboration of the behaviors and life trajectories associated with their imprisonment. A widespread doxa generates a pedagogical paradox according to which repression, as behavioral inhibition, is preferable in terms of costs and benefits to more complex paths of awareness-building and reflection regarding incarcerated persons' life stories. In this sense, recognizing the subject's perspectives of autonomy and self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2017) means enabling them to act upon the processes of signification (Bertolini, 1988; Bertolini & Caronia, 1993; Mortari, 2013) that led them to commit crimes. Within educational projects, this implies reflecting on certain categories of prison life linked to victimism (Maruna, 2001), stigmatization (Goffman, 2018), and isolation (Smith, 2006), which convey, at least partially, the complexity that characterizes intervention in penitentiary contexts, where subjects experience processes of infantilization that render them increasingly less autonomous, increasingly less active subjects in their path to change.

2. Educational Planning in the Prison Context: the “*Patto trattamentale*”

One of the main tools for promoting the agency of incarcerated individuals is the Treatment Agreement (Patto Trattamentale). As defined by circular DAP (Dipartimento Amministrazione Penitenziaria) n. 3593/6043 of June 9, 2003, it is an instrument that, from a perspective of co-participation in the educational process, assigns primary importance to the formulation of shared objectives and mutual responsibilities between the subject and the institution. This co-responsibility is evident in the State's obligation to provide and promote educational opportunities and, at the same time, in the absence of any obligation for incarcerated persons to participate, allowing them to choose whether to take advantage of these opportunities. This frames the new role of the penitentiary institution, whose fundamental task becomes that of motivating individuals to undertake their own personal path of change, engaging with the educational programs.

More specifically, the objectives of the “treatment agree”, organized around the domains established by Law n. 354/1975 and by related D.P.R. n. 230/20003, concern education, work, relationships, as well as cultural, sports, and recreational activities. Indeed, Article 15 of the Penitentiary Law states that: “Il trattamento del condannato e dell'internato è svolto avvalendosi principalmente dell'istruzione, della formazione professionale, del lavoro, della partecipazione a progetti di pubblica utilità, della religione, delle attività culturali, ricreative e sportive e agevolando opportuni contatti con il mondo esterno e i rapporti con la famiglia”. Regarding cultural, sports, and recreational activities, Article 27, paragraph 1 (L.354/1975) states: “Negli istituti devono essere favorite e organizzate attività culturali, sportive e ricreative e ogni altra attività volta alla realizzazione della personalità dei detenuti e degli internati, anche nel quadro del trattamento rieducativo”. Within the European framework, Article 27.6 of the European Prison Rules emphasizes the need to offer persons: “Recreational opportunities, which include sport, games, cultural activities, hobbies and other leisure pursuits, shall be provided and, as far as possible, prisoners shall be allowed to organise them.”

Although the importance of these activities in educational pathways is recognized, professionals working in prison settings often struggle to fully implement these directives using appropriate tools and methodologies. These directives, while not exhausting the range of possible interpretations and implementations, offer the potential for enhanced personalization of educational programs while simultaneously presenting the risk of fragmenting established good practices. Indeed, when monitoring, evaluation, and publicity pathways for initiatives are not established to ensure a balance between flexibility and systemic coherence, it becomes difficult to assess the actual effectiveness of educational intervention. These critical aspects were the subject of a broad debate during the Stati Generali proceedings (Ministero della Giustizia, Stati Generali dell'Esecuzione Penale, Table 9 - Education, Culture and Sport, 2015), which identified the need to create an activity portfolio, as well as to define indicators that could enable and facilitate monitoring and evaluation processes of initiatives.

However, obtaining a comprehensive overview of programs implemented in correctional facilities remains challenging. The "schede di trasparenza", documents published by the Ministero della Giustizia to provide information about penitentiary institutions' activities, in some cases present information that is not fully comprehensive or up-to-date regarding the methods, tools, and types of interventions (cf. Ministerogiustizia.it). A review of programs shows that theatre is one of the main activities offered in prison. This could be attributed to not only its cost-effectiveness, but also and most importantly for its potential, through theatrical practice, to facilitate new processes of self-understanding and to explore different aspects of self that may encourage the development of new existential perspectives (Hughes, 2005; Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2014; Castellano 2015; Giordano et al., 2017).

3. The video game as an educational tool: an of international overview of best practices

In recent decades, the world of video games has gained increasing attention not only as a form of entertainment, but also as an educational and therapeutic tool in different contexts, including the prison environment. We intend here to illustrate some international experiences, which show particular coherence with the reflections proposed in this contribution. These project proposals reflect the aforementioned concept of "educative treatment" introduced by the 1975 reform of the Prison Order (Law No. 354/1975). Addressing the problem of criminal recidivism, which is frequent among those exiting the criminal justice system and has significant impacts on social costs (Alper et al., 2018; Wickramasekera et al., 2015), Diehl et al. (2024) from the University of Texas explored the effectiveness of correctional interventions based on the Risk-Needs-Response (RNR) model, known to reduce recidivism rates when rigorously applied (Drake et al., 2009; Wormith & Zidenberg, 2018). In this context, the corrective video game Project Choices (PC) was developed to offer realistic scenarios and feedback on cognitive and behavioural skills. In a pilot study, 24 probation participants showed similar levels of engagement with a recreational video game (Tetris) and, although no significant effects on primary therapeutic outcomes emerged, the Project Choices correctional video game showed

potential in reducing criminogenic thinking and improving problem solving (Diehl et al., 2024). The integration of technologies in rehabilitation contexts offers new opportunities to reach and engage prisoners, proving useful in fostering inclusion processes and their effectiveness in educational services (Grove et al., 2021; Kip et al., 2018; Eichenberg & Schott, 2017). Although the adoption of these technologies is still limited, they show promise in the prison context, with potential effects in reducing recidivism and building prisoners' confidence in their own decision-making abilities (Kirschstein et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2015).

In the United States, the use of video games was introduced as a tool to improve family ties between inmates and their children in the Stafford Creek Correctional Centre, Washington. This programme is part of the 'Washington Way' initiative, which aims to transform the prison environment to make it more inclusive. The integration of video games in the visitor area allows children to interact with their fathers in a family context, creating positive relationship experiences and fostering their future inclusion.

This educational experience is part of a broader reading of the process of education of prisoners, which involves the process of improving the quality of life in prison, facilitating the creation of moments of growth and well-being for prisoners and their families. An education whose objective is to recreate lost ties, which is realised in an intervention aimed at stimulating change in the subject that becomes, therefore, also parenting support, aimed at promoting responsible and participatory behaviour within the family context, even in the conditions of forced distance between parent and child. Within the prison context, education in an inclusive perspective, and thus as a process aimed at the wellbeing of the person, cannot be 'understood as a process aimed at bringing the individual back to a condition that does not disturb the social order. In this context, the term 'disturbance' (of medical origin) does not so much refer to the 'disturbed' person, but rather to society, which is perceived as disturbed by dissonant behaviors and presences, which must be monitored and punished" (Iori, 2015).

In Belgium, researchers Ribbens and Malliet not only describe video games as one of the most popular forms of entertainment among young people and adults, but also highlight their positive contribution in satisfying psychological needs and relieving stress, as well as being a source of entertainment. This characteristic makes video games particularly suitable for contexts characterized by difficult emotional conditions, such as prisons. In particular, the scholars analyze two experiences carried out respectively in the Bruges and Leuven prisons in Flanders where inmates in their cells were allowed to use computers and game consoles not connected to the network. The two scholars' research shows that video games are used to manage stress and frustration, providing temporary relief from the difficult reality experienced, and are a welcome distraction from the daily routine of the prison regime.

In Italy, the shift from a punitive view to a educative approach represents a fundamental change in correctional measures within the penal system. In the traditional perspective, punishment was primarily conceived as a means to maintain social order through the suffering inflicted on the offender (Ruggiero V. 1995). However, with the evolution of criminological and pedagogical theories, a more complex vision has emerged that emphasizes education, highlighting the individual's wellbe-

ing and self-determination as key elements for fostering social inclusion. Self-determination is defined as "an individual's ability to choose between various opportunities and to employ those choices to determine his or her personal actions" (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Similarly, Hoffman and Field (1995) describe it as the personal ability to identify and achieve goals, based on knowledge and self-validation. An educational vision, in this sense, is not limited to punishing the criminal act, but aims at transforming the subject to make him or her capable of self-determination, intervening on the root causes of offending behavior, often linked to social, psychological or cultural factors. It is an approach based on a pedagogical model that does not simply aim to 'inhibit' such behavior, but to put the subject in a position to narrate (Cambi 2007) himself/herself about his/her history and choices in a new way, establishing the links between cultural, social, emotional and educational dimensions. The objective from a training point of view is to make the subject aware so that through this awareness he/she can redesign his/her life project.

In the prison context, the formative process of awareness not only aims at self-improvement, but also helps to recognize and integrate the different identities that are part of their lives, such as the identity of husband, father, and individual prisoner. These aspects, if recognized and cultivated, thus promoting a coherent and constructive life project, can contribute to the process of resocialization and reduction of reoffending.

The identity of a father in detention presents a unique challenge, as the parental role is physically and often emotionally separated from the children. However, maintaining and reinforcing this role through psychological and educational support can help prisoners still feel an integral part of their children's lives (Crawley & Sparks, 2006). Indeed, the possibility of exercising an active role as a father can provide the prisoner with a strong incentive for pro-social behavior, allowing him to maintain an emotional bond with his family and contributing to the inclusion process (Arditti, 2012). Similarly, the identity of husband, or partner, in prison is often compromised by limitations in communication and physical contact. Awareness of this role, however, is essential for preserving family stability and facilitating reintegration. According to Ward and Maruna (2007), relationship support can have a positive impact on the reformulation of the prisoner's self, promoting a future perspective oriented towards relationship repair and affective stability.

The 'prisoner' identity is often associated with stigma and social marginality, factors that can undermine self-esteem and self-perception (Goffman, 2010). However, conscious reflection on this aspect of one's identity, supported by targeted educational interventions, can help the prisoner distinguish between his temporary role as a prisoner and his future. Such a distinction helps reduce 'identification with crime', creating a symbolic divide between past and future that supports change (Maruna, 2001). The aim of these educational interventions is to facilitate a self-awareness that enables prisoners to recognize and harmonize these different identities, so as to build a coherent and positive life project. Awareness of the different roles -as father, husband and individual with a history of imprisonment- allows prisoners to restructure their identity so as to become active agents in their future lives and in the community (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Bandura, 1986).

These approaches support the idea that identity is not fixed, but can be renegotiated through reflection and educational support, promoting an integrated identity that fosters resilience and social reintegration (Canevaro, 2006).

This process of identity reconfiguration passes through the "educational care" that implies the responsibility to welcome the other through a relationship that promotes mutual change (Palmieri, 2014, p. 147). In the field of inclusive pedagogy, taking care means promoting a self-emancipative projectuality, within which the subject consciously makes his own existential choices, cultivating commitment and motivation for self-care, and accompanying him in the construction of cognitive and emotional processes necessary to trace, with autonomy and passion, the path of his own existence (Sabatano, 2019).

The educational process, therefore, is not limited to considering the prisoner as a 'prisoner' of his past, but offers him the opportunity to re-elaborate his history, imagining a different and desirable future; education should therefore aim at transforming the individual's perception of himself, not focusing on past choices, but on what he wishes to become. (Bertolini and Caronia 1993). This approach makes it possible to give meaning to one's experiences, overcoming shame or remorse and promoting an identity oriented towards change and personal growth.

The educational action thus takes on a 'guiding' function that accompanies the prisoner in his path of re-signifying experiences. Through educational and relational activities, the subject is encouraged to explore new social roles, such as that of an active and responsible citizen, capable of contributing to the community (Canevaro, 2006). This educational perspective is not only an individual process, but also a social one: inclusion occurs when the prisoner manages to build positive bonds with others, establishing a relationship of trust and respect that supports him in his path.

In this context, innovative tools such as video games can become an integral part of the treatment process, as they facilitate contact with emotions, cognitive and social skills that contribute to strengthening resilience and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Maruna, 2001). The imagined future thus becomes a reference point that orients present choices and allows the prisoner to "reconstruct" his past in function of what he wishes to become, tracing a trajectory that looks ahead but integrates the lived experience, transforming it into a learning and awareness experience.

The educational aspect of video games, according to the reported experiences, emphasizes 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 2003), which conceives learning as a critical and reflective process, in which the adult consciously reworks his or her past experiences, attributing new meanings to them in order to guide present and future actions. In this perspective, the focus does not lie in the accumulation of new experiences, but rather in the individual's ability to reinterpret previous experiences through a new perspective, enriched by an updated system of meanings (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 18-19).

The integration of video games in prisons thus represents an opportunity to foster critical reflection, allowing prisoners to question their previous points of view and restructure their perception of the world. This process begins with an initial disorientation, generated by the questioning of one's beliefs; subsequently, the subject reflects on his or her values and beliefs, exploring new perspectives. Video games, due to their ability to improve interpersonal relationships, develop cognitive and so-

cial skills and encourage correct behaviors, prove to be effective tools not only for entertainment, but also for promoting positive change and facilitating the inclusion of prisoners.

4. Promoting Reflection in Prison Through Real-Time Games.

The introduction of video games as an educational tool represents a novel opportunity that remains largely unexplored in the Italian penitentiary context. The reasons could be attributed to risks associated with managing technological components. Indeed, in penitentiary practice, security issues may arise with devices that potentially allow network access. Media representations often frame the relationship between video games and prisons through stereotypical narratives. Within these narratives, video games are portrayed primarily as recreational tools that potentially compromise the punitive and afflictive nature of imprisonment (Jewkes, 2002; Marsh, 2009). In current penitentiary practices, video games, where present, are predominantly understood as either recreational activities (Reed & Lyne, 2000) or tools for managing imprisonment-related stress (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006; Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Approaching video games in educational terms means considering how such devices could become an integral part of educational design capable of promoting, among incarcerated individuals, a modification in their relationship with reality: video games, as "multimodal ensembles" (Bezemer & Kress, 2016), could be capable of "farmi pensare cose nuove riguardo a ciò cui dò o non dò valore" (Gee 2013, p. 44). In this contribution, we aim to explore the potential of the video game "The Longing" regarding its capacity to promote reflexivity and awareness among incarcerated person.

The video game is a real-time, single-player game, as gameplay unfolds in a continuous temporal flow that reflects real time. The game's distinctive feature lies in the interweaving of narrative time and gameplay time. Indeed, the story spans 400 days of real life. The game's protagonist is *Shade*, a small creature in service to an ancient sovereign. The narrative device presents *Shade* receiving a single task: to wait for the king's awakening.

While waiting for this awakening, the player can explore an underground kingdom being called upon to manage time and resources. The game features slow-paced exploration of its environments, without providing a map. Players must rely on memory and perception to navigate through these subterranean spaces.

Furthermore, the player may encounter game areas that remain inaccessible for weeks or areas where physical obstacles can only be overcome through external intervention.

While exploring the game environment, players can engage in various activities: customizing their room to create a more welcoming space, reading open-source texts, and collecting materials to create functional artifacts within the game.

These activities allow players to influence gameplay time, either reducing or increasing it. Time decreases when the player engages in intended gameplay actions, while it increases when taking "shortcuts" that lead to less favorable alternative endings.

From a pedagogical perspective, implementing this game in penitentiary contexts offers potential for expanding incarcerated individuals' field of experience

(Bertolini, 1988), promoting critical reflection processes on lived experience (Mortari, 2013) and offering opportunities for narrating and reframing one's personal narrative (Demetrio, 1996, 2012).

Although the video game's solitary and monolithic nature might initially appear to limit intentionality through its minimal feedback system, this very characteristic establishes its emancipatory potential.

The video game could represent a useful proposal for reversing perspectives of the "stesso segno" (Bertolini, 1993) by offering a model that, by rewarding reflective action, discourages an instrumental approach to the educational process. This approach, indeed, contrasts with the development of a "false self" (Winnicott, 1970), often observed in prison contexts (Turco, 2011). In this sense, gaming experiences can help individuals discover new meanings and perspectives, even in apparently limiting circumstances, enabling them to break free from old habits. The emancipatory potential lies in reflective processes that open up new interpretations of reality and alternative meaning constructions. This reinterpretation of lived experience is essential for promoting transformative change (Mezirow, 2003). Through this process, individuals can critically examine their meaning perspectives while developing new ways of understanding and engaging with the world:

"In quanto discenti adulti, siamo prigionieri della nostra storia personale. Per quanto abili a dare un significato alle nostre esperienze, tutti noi dobbiamo partire da ciò che ci è stato dato, e operare entro gli orizzonti fissati dal modo di vedere e di capire che abbiamo acquisito attraverso l'apprendimento progressivo" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 9).

This process, as conceptualized requires a moment of suspension where conventional understanding is disrupted, allowing "acts of cognition" (Freire and Macedo, 1995, p. 67). In this sense, 'The Longing' can serve as a space of productive disruption, where players can explore and define objectives that transcend the gaming context to encompass broader life experiences. The game's protagonist, Shade, embodies this disruption of gaming conventions, with characteristics that depart from typical video game protagonists (Meints & Green, 2019). The game offers an experience centered on values such as waiting and perseverance, with its main character representing an antithesis to the traditional hero archetype. Rather than displaying physical prowess or the ability to impose will on the environment through decisive action, Shade's strength emerges precisely from the limitations of available resources.

These features create a space that fosters critical thinking and questioning (Dewey, 2019), prompting reflection on resource utilization and goal setting: "How can limited resources be used creatively? What meaningful and achievable objectives can be set within these constraints?" This reflective decision-making process can support incarcerated individuals in developing critical control over their lives through intentional action and future-oriented thinking (Aiello, 2016; Biesta & Tedder, 2006).

The constraints offered by the game, rather than being mere obstacles, can become promoters of reflection on one's choices and actions, encouraging the player

to establish a coherent connection between their intentions and behaviors adopted in the game, evaluating their actions in relation to meaningful long-term goals. Within this gaming environment, players move beyond mere reaction to proactive engagement, planning and anticipating the consequences of their choices. This experience fosters both strategic thinking and deeper reflection on personal motivations and objectives. This aspect becomes particularly significant within the penitentiary system, where institutional dynamics of dependency, infantilization, and bureaucratization tend to undermine the very agency they are meant to develop. The video game can thus create spaces for emancipation within an institutional context that inherently restricts opportunities for meaning-making (Eusebi, 2006; Melossi & Pavarini, 1979) and active identity expression.

5. Conclusions

“Le pene non possono consistere in trattamenti contrari al senso di umanità e devono tendere alla rieducazione del condannato”,

This is stated in Article 27, paragraph 3 of the Italian Constitution, "capovolgendo il sentire comune e introducendo un nuovo criterio di giudizio," as highlighted in a recent *Il Sole 24 Ore* article by jurist Natalino Irti who, while not denying individual culpability, defined not by chance as "condannato" with a past participle that unequivocally calls into question a concluded judgment process, which nevertheless does not conclude the subject's path toward freedom. Not certainly physical freedom, but the freedom to choose (Sabatano, Pagano 2019) to determine one's future autonomously and consciously, seizing the opportunities for perspective change offered by the educational path, which becomes educational the very reason for the "punishment" of imprisonment: "il rieducare non si aggiunge al punire, ma lo fonda e lo giustifica" (idem).

In the penitentiary context, where inequalities and marginalizations are often amplified (Caldin & Cesaro, 2015), inclusive pedagogy is called upon to play a crucial role in designing inclusive educational interventions capable of effectively promote change among incarcerated individuals.

Educational planning in detention settings, to be genuinely inclusive, should be able to motivate the subject toward change, moving beyond professional skills to consider the person as a whole (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993). Indeed, motivation to change represents one of the central pivots of the educational proposal, configuring itself as a true duty of the penitentiary administration (Bortolotto, 2002).

In this sense, the process of change, intrinsically linked to educational action, cannot be imposed externally but must arise from the subject's intrinsic motivation (Canevaro, 2013). However, in the prison context, this function faces a challenge intrinsic to the penitentiary system itself. A crucial issue emerges that highlights the complexity of educational intervention in this field: how to reconcile the security requirements inherent to the prison institution with an educational approach aimed at promoting the autonomy and personal responsibility of the persons in prison. A potential solution might lie in adopting educational practices that stimulate inmates' reflexivity and self-awareness (Iori, 2016). In this context, the introduction of tools such as educational video games represents a largely unexplored possibility within the Italian prison system.

However, implementing such practices would require a paradigm shift in the approach to prison education (Mancaniello, 2017), directing design and intervention perspectives toward a model capable of promoting self-re-narration processes, where inmates can "explore new interpretations of reality and [...] construct alternative meanings" (Demetrio, 1996). From this perspective, what philosopher Ugo Spirito called the "storia del delitto" takes on a central role, emphasizing the importance of circumstances, relationships, experiences, and emotions connected to that choice - which is certainly wrong and thus condemned, but which must be reexamined in its complexity to enable access to the "educational phase".

Therefore, it becomes necessary to envision and implement educational practices that can create "spaces of possibility" where inmates can exercise forms of reflexivity and autonomy, develop a sense of responsibility, and experience new ways of being and acting

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