Does Game Thinking Have the Potential to Boost Youth Participation? An Innovative Solution for the Inclusion of Hard-to-Reach Groups in Local Decision-Making Processes. Insights from Poland

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Abstract: The shift from government to governance has redefined public sector engagement, yet young people remain a "hard-to-reach" and underrepresented group (Council of Europe & European Commission, 2023). While youth express interest in social issues, they often bypass traditional civic channels perceived as unresponsive (Sloam & Henn, 2019; Banaji & Mejias, 2018). This paper examines the role of game thinking in bridging this gap within local governance frameworks. The research addresses five key questions: 1) What motivates youth to engage through games in civic contexts? 2) Can gamification reach youth more effectively than traditional tools? 3) Does it empower youth to participate in public life? 4) Can it foster sustained civic engagement? and 5) How does gamification interact with local governance outcomes and policy processes? Using a mixed-methods approach, a survey and Participatory Research Methods (PRM) were conducted in Lublin; this study involves young people as co-researchers (Christensen & James, 2008). This approach ensures that the research is conducted with rather than for youth (Rodriguez Espinosa & Verney, 2020). The findings confirm that gamification (Latorre-Cosculluela, 2025) enhances accessibility and interactivity, making civic participation more relatable for younger generations. It allows for fast expression of opinions, diverse engagement formats, and creates an attractive, relatable environment. However, effectiveness depends on a design responding to youth needs rather than top-down assumptions. The paper concludes that game-based approaches can be successfully integrated into the broader toolkit of participatory instruments. By adapting these tools to specific local contexts, municipalities can capture youth input as a vital contribution to local development and governance outcomes, treating gamification as an authentic bridge between youth engagement and local policy goals.