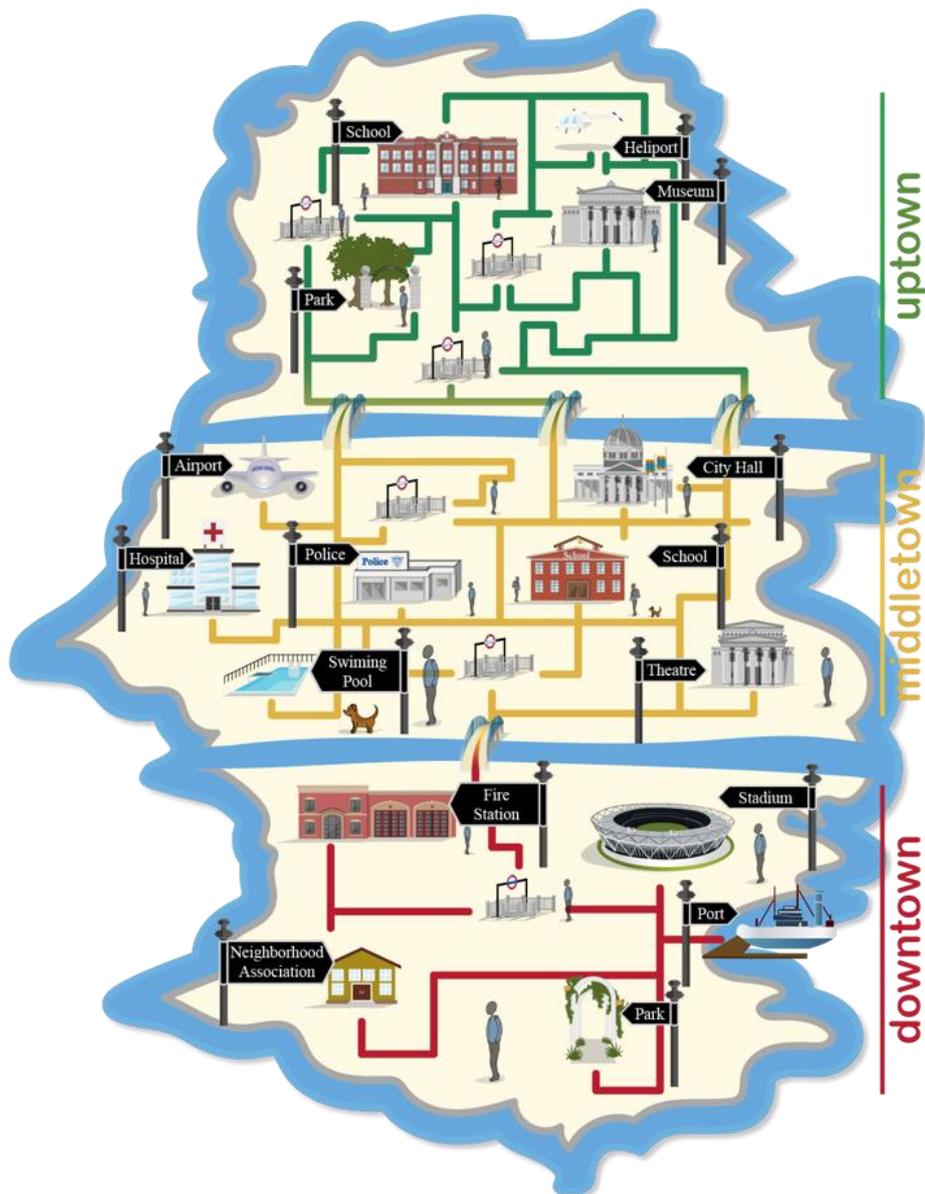


# empaville

The EMPATIA role-playing game

## Empaville Report



Empaville Map



## Overview

**Empaville** is a role-playing game that simulates a gamified Participatory Budgeting process in the imaginary city of Empaville, integrating in-person deliberation with digital voting.

**Participatory Budgeting (PB)** is a decision-making process in which citizens deliberate and directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. The game is based on real PB experiences combined with gamification elements in order to provide an educational and critical experience on public participation. It also allows one to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) adaptations to implement democratic processes. All the online phases of the game take place within the EMPATIA UX (User Experience) digital platform that technologically supports the process. This gives users the opportunity to test various tools and modules like uploading proposals, digital voting, reporting modules and data analysis.

### **Gamification - Refer to: Page 8**

(Noun)

The application of typical elements of game playing (e.g. point scoring, competition with others, rules of play) to other areas of activities to afford gameful experiences and to encourage engagement with a process, service or product.

During the game the participants are invited to discuss and elaborate **project proposals for the City of Empaville**. A specific proportion of the public budget for civic projects will be decided democratically after project proposals have been developed on the platform. They are asked to describe the proposals and indicate their geographical location, budget range and category chosen from predefined selection of: security; public parks and environment; public works; social and cultural activities; accessibility and transport. After being uploaded in the platform, the proposals are presented and voted individually. The game is designed to generate conflict within and across neighbourhoods to showcase how a participatory process deals with such conflicts.

The imaginary city is divided into **three neighbourhoods** each with different features:

- **Downtown**, the lower socio-economic part of the city: lacking services and inhabited by workers who are often employed in other areas, this is where the harbour and stadium are situated.



- **Middletown**, the economic and cultural hub of the city: it hosts most of the services and business activities and it is the most populated area.
- **Uptown**, the most residential and richest area of the city: aesthetically well kept and catering to luxury services.

The participants **play as citizens of Empaville** according to the characters cards distributed to each one before starting. Each card provides personal data of the character i.e. age, gender, citizenship, profession, place of residence, workplace, interests & motivation and behavior. The features trace the profiles that the participants will have to perform throughout game, which stimulate two gaming dynamics. At the individual level, participants are motivated to empathize with social actors that have different personal and social characteristics from their own. At the collective level, the game benefits from a virtually varied group, which carries different interests that could potentially be in conflict.

The **simulation ends** with the announcement of the winning proposals. Thereafter, the data analysis and debriefing take place, giving the opportunity to examine the process in detail from outside the game. This is important to highlight critical issues and discuss the process in both methodological and practical terms.

The **number of participants** can vary from a minimum of 12 to a maximum (currently) of 60 people. In each game session, a team of facilitators (generally between 3 and 5) guides the activity, in whole and in smaller groups. Facilitation focuses on the deliberative phase and digital support, with the possibility of taking confederate actions within the group in order to encourage realistically distorted dynamics that can be analysed at the final stage.

### **History**

The current game is an evolution of an offline game that was developed and refined over the course of sixteen years by Giovanni Allegretti and later by the UK PB Unit. This version of the game has been developed by the Center for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra (Portugal) with the support of the IT company OneSource within the consortium of the EMPATIA Project - Enabling Multichannel PArTicipation Through ICT Adaptations, funded by Horizon 2020 EU programme, Call: ICT-2015/H2020-ICT-201, grant agreement n. 687920. Currently, thanks to constant updates and partner support, it is available in four languages: English, Portuguese, Italian and French. Dozens of Empaville sessions have been conducted in several countries, including Portugal, Italy, United States, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Sweden, Spain and Czech Republic.



## Objectives

Empaville's role-play aims to foster digital evolution and the culture of public participation, providing critical tools to the participants in order to reveal benefits and challenges on the use of technologies in public participation. In particular, the game seeks through gamification and direct experience to reach the following objectives:

- To stimulate the role of citizens as proactive actors in the community. This goal is framed in the citizens' empowerment, which is a key element for a substantial and effective participation base.
- To empathize with other categories of the society, potentially different from the personal perspective in terms of gender, age, profession and social status. This allows to highlight the complexity of social instances and to promote the importance of mutual respect within the community.
- To encourage collaboration situations of conflict and to promote group work on public issues as an approach, which is able to overcome the one-on-one dialogue with institutions.
- To provide the possibility for politicians, technicians and public officers to sit on the side lines of participatory processes, understanding the procedural and practical difficulties and discussing how to improve organization and tools.
- To point out the positive and negative elements of a digital democracy, with particular reference to the balance between safety and privacy on the one hand, and accessibility alongside the increase of participants on the other. This goal is crucial to convey the need of taking the procedure seriously, while giving attention to the technical skills.
- To strengthen the role of games as learning methods for adults as well as for children. This point is examined in more depth, in the "Gamification" section. It promotes critical learning through empirical experiences and fun, without hindering its limits and potential risks.



- To test new methods and tools in the framework of democratic innovations. Small groups in monitored environments can offer vital opportunities to experiment innovative dynamics, platforms and tools in both an online and offline context. This can later be applied in real world contexts. The simulation also offers a safer environment to safeguard against potential ethical dilemmas, subject to the information and consent of the participants.

## Target

Empaville addresses **three different targets**, the first two groups have the same type of game structure, but partially different goals emerge and some phases take on more importance.

Firstly, there are the **practitioners such as politicians, technicians and public officers**. The emphases of the simulation for them is experiencing a participatory process as participants and not just as organizers; testing a digital platform for participation; experimenting with the dynamics of digital voting; and scrutinizing the game process and data analysis at the end of the process, focusing on topics such as safety, timing and possible distortions.

The next target is dedicated to **citizens** participating in a predetermined public issue and the focal points of the simulation become: understanding the dynamics of a participatory budgeting process; familiarizing themselves with online participation platforms; reflecting on the limits and potential of digital democracy; and empathizing with other social categories.

In addition, a version of the game for **young people under 15** was recently developed as: **Empaville for Schools**. This simplified version is based on extremely different group dynamics and requires less technological equipment. The Empaville for Schools version asks students to develop proposals for an imaginary park frequented by six different groups: aficionados of traditional sports (football, volley and basket); skaters/roller derby (lovers of unconventional sports); dog owners (with environmental awareness); elderly residents; youngsters (who want to have fun and throw parties); park staff and businessmen/women. This simulation has already taken place in five different Portuguese schools, with over 200 students partaking in the game.



## Phases Of The Game

The Empaville session normally lasts around 90. In addition, if predetermined, participants can comment on the proposals during the game, expressing positive, negative or neutral opinions/considerations. (It is possible also to allow for anonymous comments in the software.)

The role-playing game Empaville is structured in 7 phases:

- 1) **Presentation:** The main facilitator will introduce the context to the participants by describing the city, its neighborhoods and their features. After the story telling the character cards and the rules are explained. Generally, to reinforce the narrative, one of the facilitators impersonates the mayor of Empaville assuming the neutral role of referee. From this moment, each participant is invited to recreate the character on their card, interpreting the profile described and acting only in his/her interests.

**Suggested time: 10 minutes.**

- 2) **Deliberative Tables:** Participants are divided into ‘neighborhood groups’ (normally one group for each area, with the possibility to split Middletown in two) to discuss and elaborate the project proposals. This is generally limited to two at a time. The platform allows groups to enter each proposal with the specifications of: title, description, location on the map, budget range, category, photos, videos and attachments. Depending on the settings previously discussed and chosen by the facilitators. The table facilitator generally proposes an initial round where the participants can get-to-know-each-other in respects to their predefined and vastly diverse characters.

**Suggested time: 20/30 minutes.**

- 3) **Proposal Presentation:** One or more representatives per group are invited to briefly present the proposals uploaded on the platform. Generally, the facilitator-mayor coordinates the presentations and checks the time.

**Suggested time: 15 minutes.**

- 4) **Voting Phase:** Each participant will log into the platform and vote for the uploaded proposals. Each participant has 3 optional votes: 2 positive and one negative. The vote is personal and must



be based on the identity of the assigned character. Participants can access the platform through different devices: computer, smartphone, tablet or an electronic kiosk (provided by us). The login is made by entering a user ID/email and password printed on their specific cards, by using a QR Code (Quick Response Code), or with a RFID (Radio-Frequency Identification) by the electronic kiosk.

**Suggested time: 15 minutes.**

- 5) **Winning Ceremony:** After the voting phase is closed, the simulation ends when the facilitator-mayor showcasing the results and announcing the winning proposal(s). Winning proposal(s) (and real PBs) are not necessarily the most voted proposals, but the most voted ones that fit within the previously established budget. The most voted proposal has the 'first right' to the required budget. The following proposals are selected based on the remaining budget, sliding the voting rank in the process. For this reason it is often seen that lower budget proposals have more chance of winning. Generally, the winning group(s) are rewarded with a fake check.

**Suggested time: 5 minutes.**

- 6) **Data Analysis:** Facilitators and participants proceed with the analysis of the data. The platform develops diagrams and data tables to facilitate the analysis of data. Currently, it is possible to analyze the: total votes, votes for each proposal, percentage of positive and negative votes for each proposal, votes by gender, votes by neighborhood, votes by age and votes by profession. At this stage, some risks and distortions may arise, for example the risk of compromising the privacy of the participant's vote, due to the collective data potentially being able pinpoint a participant's specific vote.

**Suggested time: 15 minutes.**

- 7) **Debriefing:** The activity ends with an open discussion on the overall process of the game, the online platform, digital democracy, participatory budgeting, and on further topics that may emerge from the specific group at hand.

**Suggested time: 10 minutes.**



## Gamification Elements

The Empaville covers the topic of democratic innovations, with the simulation of a Participation Budgeting process, however beyond this, the game is inspired and critically employs the dynamics and analysis of another important topic: that of gamification.

The vital book on the subject “The Gameful World”, edited by Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (2014), defined gamification as “ludic elements or qualities, or non-game objects and experiences that use design elements from game and/or are designed to afford gameful experiences”. In recent years, gamification is emerging as an important trend in the field of public participation. Participatory processes frequently apply game dynamics to promote engagement of a more diverse set of actors and to incentivize participants’ behaviors that are considered desirable by the organizers. In particular, it is possible to frame the role-play game Empaville in the so-called cluster of Pervasive games, defined by Sebastian Deterding (in “The Gameful World”, 2014) as a game that can “take the substance of everyday life and weave it into narratives that layer additional meaning, depth, and interaction upon the real world”.

Empaville uses gamification both to create an attractive, fun, and participatory context within its activities, but also provides an practical example for its participants, allowing them to generate a critical discussion on the ludification of democracy that generally takes place during the debriefing phase. The advantages and disadvantages of gamification applied to public participation are a central topic for the EMPATIA team and for its community.

It is possible to identify in Empaville the following **main elements of gamification**:

1. **Learning By Experience:** through fun and practical approach participants quickly acquire higher and more durable skills than by texts or tutorials;
2. **Projective Identity:** the role-playing game requires leaving their own identity and social role to impersonate a character; this encourages participants to relinquish the habitual learning context and offers them the opportunity to act with different behaviours.
3. **Competition:** no one likes to lose. Even in the presence of a purely symbolic prize, the context of the game pushes the participants to engage in the competition, both as individuals and as a group.



4. **Time Pressure:** in reduced time, checked and spelled, participants are pushed to focus on the problem and act. It is interesting to see how it can also lead to different decisions.
5. **Story-telling:** an accurate and engaging description of the context helps the participants to identify themselves in the game and so to be involved in it. Moreover, participants presenting the characters' profiles and interpreting them reinforce the narrative.
6. **Scarcity:** limited resources, as budget, encourage participants to strive to acquire and spend them artfully.
7. **Strategy:** individual and group dynamics, competition and prizes stimulate participants to develop gaming strategies. In the case of Empaville, for example, submitting a proposal with a minimum budget can lead a group to victory even if its content is controversial or even hostile to other groups.

## Further Developments Of Game

Empaville is not a finished product; rather it is a constantly evolving process, both in its online and offline phases. The sessions and evaluation surveys carried out; allow the participants and the EMPATIA team to foresee some limitations, challenges and amendments to the platform design and to the game process. Many people, who answered the survey, highlighted the usefulness of Empaville as a learning and community tool that allowed them to test the use of technology in a realistic scenario of participatory budgeting and to thereafter critically analyse it. Most of the participants argued that it is safer to have these experiments set out in the format of a game, so as to test all the vulnerabilities that should be avoided in real situations.

### Empaville's Short Term Developments:

- Working on the back-end of the platform to achieve a more intuitive and user-friendly software;
- Improving the platform's capacity to handle multiple sessions at a time;
- Simplifying the back-end path to access the data analysis;
- Fixing small visualisation errors in the user-page template;
- Organizing predetermined ID card packages in all EMPATIA available languages online (English, Italian, Portuguese, French);
- Continue translating the game in other languages with the support of partner organizations.

