

Transcription Workshop 3, Identity Development, presentation by Simone van Galen

Welcome everyone, my name is Simone. I'm going to tell you something about identity development in the digital age for young people. I thought I'd start by telling you a little about myself, so it gives you a bit of an idea of what I do. I'm Simone, a game designer, and I coach and mentor young people in schools and educational settings. I also give various workshops and training courses, both for young people and adults. I've been active online in communities since 2000, and I currently have several communities. I'm also a moderator for several communities where we talk about groups of myself. I have a community of about 400 people, but I also have communities with over 16,000 to 20,000 people, up to 150,000 to 500,000 people in a community. Where I'm also a moderator. So I meet a lot of young people here, with a wide range of ages, from young to older. And I often find the young people who join.

And then I think it's really interesting to talk about what's going on and how it all works in online communities. And of course, we'll discuss the three competencies: digital youth culture, gaming, stand-up reality, and youth identity and identity development for youth workers.

And when I look back on my own childhood, I think a lot about my own online identity, both now and then. For me, it was very much like, I hid myself. I was really someone who didn't really have anyone outside of my life, so to speak, back then. I had no friends; I only had people who, so to speak, made my life unpleasant.

In short, I was looking for a safe place where I could be myself, where I could talk about my week. A place where I still had the freedom to be myself. So I looked for a place, and that turned out to be online. And very quickly, I noticed that I felt safer online at that moment.

So I started looking for a forum where I could talk to a community. That's a place where I could truly be myself, where I didn't have to think about everything else going on in my life. But what happens when you're involved in such a community?

You really notice that you're really starting to build something yourself. You create your own profile, and from that moment on, you stay with that profile until the end. I still have my old name, SimyMona, which I used to be called back in that era. I still have it. And I still use it in my email. So it's still a name that comes up a lot, and it really is. So it will always be my name. And I find that especially important. But what does your own profile actually say about you? And what does it actually do? And where does that culture come from? And why are so many young people spending so much money to look even better in different types of profiles? So if we look at that, for example, at the skills you need to know when it comes to youth culture, then I really think of Discord as a place where a lot happens. It's a place where you can truly be yourself. So, discussion groups, the places where the communities are, the places where you can be yourself. And when I look at my own community, there are so many young people. I sometimes ask them, "Hey, why do you keep coming back? Why are you here every time?" They often tell me how safe I feel here. I feel I can be myself here. I can be something different for a while. I don't have to constantly think, "I have to be the same person I am at school." I can just be

myself. I don't have to put on a front like, "I'm tougher than I think." And I notice that very often. That it really helps. Because you see that young people really feel safe.

And because of that, I also get the chance to do that. And one of the things I do very often is activity sessions. I find it very important to be online every day, usually in the evening, on Monday or Tuesday evenings. I'm usually online around eight o'clock. I turn on my Discord. And then I'm always in that voice chat.

A voice chat is a place where you can just talk... ..where you can just talk to someone with your microphone on. And I always do that. And I really notice that young people really appreciate that. You often see that when you do that, one or two or three people will stop by... to say, "Hey, how's it going?" "What's going on?" Or talk about how they're feeling. It's really because they feel safe then. In the beginning, you'll notice that it's a bit difficult. And that it's often a bit tricky. And that you really have to build that up with them. But once they feel safe, they'll open up completely. And then they're really there to do it. So one of the things I do, for example, is create an event with a game. Then I make sure it's a game that's accessible to everyone. So, that everyone can join. And one of the things I do, for example, is Geoguessr.

I created an account there myself. I think I paid about 20 euros for it. And then I created it. Then young people can log in with their own names. And then they can always participate. They just play a few of those games in an evening. And you see that young people are very competitive with each other in the beginning. Like, I have to win, I have to win. And that's really great to see. Because you see a kind of community developing, that they really start competing against each other. And that's what makes it so great. To do that. I have a screenshot I wanted to share. This is my own profile. Here I also tell a little about who I am. I also shared a screenshot of what it looks like in my own Discord server. I removed the photos of the people themselves for privacy reasons, but this is roughly what it looks like. Someone shares their screen, shows what they are doing and then there are several young people in the Discord who tell them how it is going, so you can have your own profile that way.

And besides that, there are of course also different kinds of things that I do a lot.

I'm the one who led a project, for example, called the Game Dev Group. That was an MDT project I ran. It's called The Game Project, and in it, I give young people different kinds of specific roles. So I say, you're the game dev, you're the creator, you're the initiator, you're the maker, you're the moderator, you're the one who keeps everyone together. You're the one who does this. And in that, I really give young people a role in it. And you just saw that in the previous slide. There, I also gave myself different kinds of roles. I'm the one who explains. I'm the one who's the admin in this case. Well, that... Then you naturally have that role. But of course, there are also different roles. I also have people in my community who, at some point, I've given a role because that person really enjoys doing that, for example. Or that person really enjoys that. And so everyone gets their own role. And therefore, also their own leadership role. I think that's really important. Because it gives young people the opportunity to do that. Yes, as you just said, I did the MDT project. It's called The Game Project. And that was a project where I

essentially gave young people the opportunity to develop their own game. And therefore to give something back to society. And that's why I thought it was super important to create that Discord group. Where young people could truly be themselves. We did have rules, and those came from the MDT itself. But I really noticed that young people just wanted to be themselves.

And we had it first via Zoom. The first meeting was via Zoom. And I noticed right away that it wasn't working for me. I noticed it was a real hindrance because you were in a specific group. You couldn't quickly send a message in the chat, but that was a bit different...

So I quickly moved away from that and just always said, "Everyone can keep their microphone on whenever they want." And if you're talking and I'm saying something, you can always interrupt. Because I think it's really important that they can give their opinion right away.

That's just how it is; it works the easiest. So that happened a lot. So I often had young people popping in and saying, "Hey, how's that going, you know?" And at a certain point, they took control. And then they started asking if someone wasn't there, and it was like, "I'll just ask." And then they'd spend five minutes sending someone a message, like, "Hey, how's it going?" And then a culture really started to develop, a real identity of their own. They really created their own space. And that's still the case. And that's really beautiful to see. That they're still constantly asking, "Hey, how are you? I haven't spoken to you in a while. How's it going?" And that's why Discord really became a place where you can do that. And Discord is actually a bit like the old forums. So it really harks back to how I felt back in 2000. Is it still exactly the same? So that's actually really important. They ended up creating a game called Mind Forest. They published it. It was also about someone who had an anxiety attack, which they had to overcome. It was a very small game, but they were able to create it together. And so you really see the pride the young people had in creating a game. And it's also true that some young people simply didn't leave. They just stuck around. They simply found it far too interesting to continue with. And you see that coming back. So they didn't want to leave. They're still here. And that was the most beautiful thing about the whole project, I think. Well, that's how the young people immediately know who they are, what they hear, and where they belong. And that's obviously much easier for some than for others. What was really striking is that the first time I gave the presentation, some young people didn't turn on their cameras. But the second time they did. Or the third time they did. It was very different. And I wasn't going to force them. So I wasn't going to say, "You have to turn on your camera because..." I didn't want that. I wanted them to start feeling safe. The moment they felt safe, they would come. They would show themselves. They would be there. They would indicate that. And that's how you actually give young people real control over what they want. So, also over their own digital culture. Because they've revealed certain things for themselves. And therefore also created certain things the way they want them. And that's how you really achieve that growth.

Like I said, I found it really important to be online in the voice chat every evening at eight o'clock. I happen to do that more often now. In the beginning, it was only two days a week, but now I do it more often. Simply because I like being open. I don't have much to do in the evenings, and I'm often working anyway. So when I turn on my channel, someone always

comes over to chat about how things went. So you're always busy, and that's how I know a lot about what's happening. And I hear stories like, for example, about what's happening in my country, what's happening politically, what's happening regarding a game... and they keep you very informed about what's happening. You never really have to ask. Because someone always comes along and tells you what's been going on. And that's also a good thing, because then you give them some space to really engage in that dialogue with you. And so you know what's going on. And because of that I also know a great deal.

And what I also find incredibly important, and I'm talking about myself, is that I know what's going on. So I also have a mental picture of, hey, that game is happening now, or that's happening now. That's why I'm always thinking, hey, what's going on now?

So if there's resistance, there's a boy who withdraws, which sometimes happens. So they're a bit more reserved about sharing information or what they're doing. You really notice that. They're a bit more reserved. And then I don't respond immediately. I'm not going to send a message right away saying, "Hey, why don't you go ahead?"

Because then you can also encounter resistance. So it's very important to say, "I'll wait a few more days." Maybe they'll come back. And often they do, or they'll indicate themselves, like, hey, something's going on, how or what. So it's very much a matter of waiting and seeing, like, when do you respond to something like that? I usually don't do it right away because I find that works much better that way. Well, as I said, a relationship of trust is also really important. That you give young people the space to share themselves and their online experiences. But also be open with them. I'm very much into openness. I'm very open about who I am. I often tell people who I am. And I make it very clear. So I'm not going to mince my words or anything like that. I'm just myself. And I think that's also super important. Because if you open up, they'll be open with you too.

And I noticed that it works really well, especially on Discord. If you share yourself. I had a sandwich with this this morning, and I really enjoyed it. Maybe you should try it sometime. It sounds crazy. It's a small thing, but it does create dialogue. So those are really nice things. Young people really feel at ease, so if they share you, if you share your personal story, they often share it back. So that's really the moment you gain someone's trust; that's when you really get it. And that works really well...

And here's another conversation we had with the guy. We always have a Grant VC chat, which is what we call a place where if you can't get on the mic, or your mic isn't working, or something else is going on, they can always message something, send a message in the canned VC chat, that's what we call it. And then you can always just say, "Hey, I'm just..., can't I do this...?" Could you maybe...? Well, like this, that's how we do it. Then you can always send a message. So always keep it open. Because imagine if your mic isn't working, or you're too busy, or there are people around you.

This way, you always have the chance to be yourself. As I briefly mentioned, I've been online since I was fourteen. Since 2000. That's actually since I was ten. But at fourteen, I was finally allowed to create my own forum. And that's how I really started creating my own identity. And as I mentioned, my name, Simy Mona, truly became my name. And everyone recognizes me by that name. Because I've been using it ever since. So if you Google it, you'll probably find a lot of information about it. Because that name always comes up.

And because I work a lot with young people and adults, the topic of bullying comes up occasionally. From that perspective, I started telling my own story to young people, asking them why I went online, and what was the reason behind it. The word "bullying" soon came up, and so I developed a game called "She Tells Her Story," in which I share myself, telling my own story about bullying. And how I deal with it. I also noticed that at a certain point, I really wanted to go further in that story. So I wanted to know their story. But I also wanted to know how that works. And at some point, I also started creating my own community. And that was mainly about the game Destiny. I've included a link in the presentation, so you can always watch it again if you ever want. There you see a part of a raid. Which, strangely enough, doesn't go quite as it should. But you're playing a game where you have to work together with six people. Collaboration is, of course, a very important skill. Especially when you're dealing with a lot of things. Especially in life. And as a youth worker, you'll notice that too. Collaboration isn't always easy. And young people, in particular, can be quite challenging when they have to work together. And that's why I think it's very important to share that aspect. So I'm really creating a community around Destiny. And does that collaboration always go smoothly? Does it always go smoothly? Just a little hint: Not always! And that's actually also because they have their own personalities, of course.

And that's why I always say, that youth identity is just super important. You have your own personality, you have your own life, you have your own thing. So that's just really important. So that's why I also thought, hey... And I also want to highlight that because one of the things that is of course covered in the competencies: understand that gaming and XR are used by youth workers for educational and social activities, guided by the principles of youth work.

Well, here's an example of that. Destiny 2 is a clear example of a social and educational activity, because it gives young people the opportunity to develop themselves. Who are they? And what can they do? But of course, there are also several other activities you could consider games. So I've mentioned those as well, so if you reread or watch it, you can always see it.

But I always give this boy the chance to be himself. And that's incredibly important. Because it gives them the opportunity to do that. But then again, games are just that. For example, Destiny isn't just free. It's also a paid game. So sometimes I can get codes that are a bit cheaper. Or I get them through the developer. And then I often give those codes to boys. So they can participate too. So they're not left behind. So they always have the chance to participate. So I don't say, for example, "Well, sorry, but you don't have the money for it."

So you can't join? No, I always insist that everyone is open to participating. And I do that very much, because that's what I really enjoy most. But also give them the opportunity to do something themselves. That's also super important. For example, I've had young people say...

...yes, I just want to play this game together sometime next week... ..sometime. So I say, fine, let's do that. Um... let's make art.

And what I also find very important is making sure you have the necessary equipment for something. The Game Project. I applied for twenty licenses for A-Sprite. I just sent an email saying, "Hey, could you arrange that?" That way, everyone has the opportunity to participate. So you don't hold anyone back. And that's really the most important thing. And finally, I shared a few screenshots of my game.

Then you get a sense of what it's about. It's really about what bullying does to you. The comments, the things. But also a warning about exactly what happens in the game. So if you watch it, you'll have a bit of an idea of what's going on.

But as I said, not everything always runs smoothly. So, as a digital youth worker, be aware of this. Things don't always run smoothly. Not everything is accessible to everyone, but not every problem can be solved. Sometimes you have a moment where you think, "That story you're telling me is really intense." Then there's always a way to do something with it, of course.

That's why I've always collaborated with the Respond project. A Respond platform, or rather, Respond, is a specific method we used for mental health. So, when someone really goes too far and you realize it's gone too far, you know, you need to be able to involve support agencies to ensure it's handled further.

So you don't always have to keep it to yourself, because it can get quite intense sometimes. And of course, you have to be able to handle that professionally in a different way. But what's also really important is that young people have their own will, their own place, be aware of that. And just let them see what they want; don't get in their way; I think that's the most important thing. Recently, I wanted to share this photo, these things. As I said at the beginning, young people create their own identity. In a game like Destiny, your own identity is incredibly important, so that's why I shared this screenshot. This is during a raid. Where young people also show their own pictures, their own photos, their own character. And that's, of course, the best thing about video games: what games do to you. What they really do to your own identity in general. So they will ultimately develop that. And they will truly be themselves. That's also really important. So I always say, above all, let young people be truly themselves.

Always be open to yourself. Stay true to yourself. Don't try to put on a different face. And let them grow into their own identity. So give them space. That was my presentation. Thank you.