# Assessing the Intercultural Game *Megacities* and its Learning Outcomes: A Transnational and Cosmopolitan Virtual Exchange Project?

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**Abstract** *Virtual Exchange (VE) is an educational practice which connects students of diverse cultural backgrounds in virtual interactions and collaboration with the aim of developing linguistic, intercultural, and digital skills that benefit them on their personal and professional pathways. While traditional approaches to VE have usually involved bilingual class-to-class partnerships with shallow comparisons of cultural information, recent trends lead towards transnational approaches to VE involving lingua franca communication, themes of social and political relevance, a more complex view of culture, and a focus on collaborative activities. To find out whether the Megacities intercultural game can be considered an example of a transnational VE project and whether it is aligned with postdigital cosmopolitan ideals, the present case study examines the task design in the game and the learning outcomes resulting from it as described by the players themselves. The study was based on the analysis of two datasets: (a) the task descriptions in the game and (b) thirty-one student reflection reports. For the latter we conducted an inductive qualitative content analysis with MAXQDA. Through the analysis of the game tasks and activities, we identified several features that are aligned with current descriptions of transnational approaches to VE. The analysis of the reflection reports unveiled four major learning outcomes: appreciation for difference, a critical examination of the self, appreciation for English as a lingua franca (ELF), and dealing with difficulties. These outcomes are compatible with some descriptions of postdigital cosmopolitanism, centring on a processual change in self-understanding and increased sensitivity towards cultural Others.*

## Cosmopolitanism: Growing Self-Understanding and Going Beyond the Local

The total number of internet users in the middle of 2024 was estimated to be approximately 5.44 billion (DataReportal, 2024). Technological advancements in the form of platforms, tools, and features now allow us to engage in online shopping, take part in international research projects, and act as members of virtual teams in organiza-

tional and educational settings. In the context of the latter, the potential of virtual communication is undeniable: Many students in different parts of the world now have the means to communicate with each other and engage in educational projects that build on their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

In this post-digital context (Cramer, 2014), in which the shift from the local to the global is only one click away, educational curricula should be able to foster cosmopolitanism, understood by Warf, leaning on several authors, as "an ethical, moral, and political worldview in which each person is obligated to humanity as a whole" (Warf, 2015: 37). Building on Delanty (2019), Lenehan (2022: 16) explains that cosmopolitanism has been described as a conceptualization of the world as not only transnational but also democracy-fostering. Lenehan (2022: 17) categorizes three strands in the study of cosmopolitanism: A normative-philosophical orientation, including philosophical reflections concerning moral, legal, political, cultural, and economic aspects; an empirical-descriptive strand, focusing on the description of behaviours and social habits underlying "feelings of solidarity beyond the local"; and a processual orientation, with both normative and descriptive elements and which results in a "transformation in self-understanding as the result of engagement with others over issues of global significance" (Delanty, 2008: 218, cited in Lenehan, 2022: 17). The case study described in this chapter explores cosmopolitanism from the perspective of a processual change in self-understanding and behaviours. In the intercultural communication literature, this change has been equated with the display or acquisition of intercultural competence, defined as the ability to transform unfamiliarity into familiarity (Rathje, 2007: 264) or to navigate differences in appropriate and effective ways (Deardorff, 2020) (for a discussion on digital intercultural competence, see Mendes de Oliveira, forthcoming).

Other scholars have already connected interculturality with processual cosmopolitanism and have described the internet as a space where cosmopolitan relationships may emerge from "intersubjective reflexiveness arising out of discursive intercultural exchanges" (Hall, 2019: 410, cited in Lenehan, 2022: 25). Lenehan refers to a so-called "benign processual post-digital cosmopolitanism" (2022: 24) characterized by "global flows of […] potential conversations" enabled by the Internet "which can, very feasibly, be part of a dialogical process leading towards self-transformation." Investigating the potential for self-transformation is at the heart of the present case study, which aims to (1) examine whether the task design in the intercultural game *Megacities* corresponds to current trends in VE projects that call for transnational approaches, and (2) analyze participants' self-reported learning outcomes arising from the virtual exchange project to investigate the actual effect of the tasks on intercultural learning and an evolving cosmopolitanism.

## Virtual Exchange

Virtual Exchange (VE) is an umbrella term used to refer to various educational initiatives involving individuals from different cultural backgrounds in online activities of social interaction and collaboration for the purpose of developing professional and personal skills (O'Dowd, 2018: 5). In a review of emerging trends and new directions in VE, O'Dowd (2016a: 295) noted that traditional approaches to VE are still heavily based towards "bilingual-bicultural exchange between groups of native speakers", which means that, for example, a Spanish group learning English would be paired with an English group learning Spanish.

However, there seems to be a growing understanding that we need to "move beyond the traditionally conceived target language–target culture relationship to incorporate an awareness of dynamic hybrid cultures and the skills to successfully negotiate them" (Baker, 2009: 567). In terms of language use, it is often English as a lingua franca (ELF) that is used in actual intercultural communication situations. ELF has been defined as English used in settings in which most, if not all, participants are non-native speakers of English (Seidlhofer, 2001). Slowly, more accounts of lingua franca VEs are emerging in the literature, but practitioners generally still stick to traditional and essentialist models of VE that resort to fixed understandings of languages and national cultures (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

One underlying but misleading assumption of bilingual/bicultural exchanges is that there are national communicative styles that can be learned through VE (Godwin-Jones, 2019). In fact, VEs that aim to analyze and compare these styles have been criticized for reinforcing the notion of homogenous national cultures in the tradition of Hofstede (1984), who is known for having measured national cultures according to so-called cultural dimensions, ignoring the fluid and dynamic nature of the concept of culture itself. In today's globalized world, speakers might cling to certain aspects of national communicative styles (in terms of, e.g. directness or indirectness, politeness strategies, etc.) but will eventually be influenced by multiple other identity markers, which makes it even more evident that there is not one fixed English communicative style, for example (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Comparisons of such supposed "styles" in VEs have reinforced this simplified vision. In addition, it is important to note that engaging in VE itself means creating a small community with its own communication style and culture (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Using ELF in VEs has the potential to move past essentialist and static notions of culture and towards transnational – and possibly cosmopolitan – models of VE, because participants are not considered *a priori* experts in the language being used in the VE (as in bilingual-bicultural exchange between groups of native speakers) and have leeway to negotiate the use of language in more flexible ways.

One important characteristic of the ELF perspective is its critical view of the native speaker as the model in language education. While the "aim that learners of

another language should become, or attempt to become, native speakers, has long dominated language teaching and been implanted in the minds of most language teachers and language learners" (Byram & Golubeva, 2020: 73), from an ELF perspective, there is no native-speaker resemblance needed as long as mutual understanding is assured. In traditional models of VE, the native speaker is implicitly positioned as the authority of the language and the non-native speaker as the learner, leading to "[a]symmetrical relationships in virtual exchange projects" (Verzella & Tommaso, 2021: 1). The problem with native-speakerism is that it emphasizes the myth that native speakers use a static code that automatically guarantees mutual understanding and successful communication, putting the learner in a deficit position (i.e. lacking linguistic accuracy) and ignoring the resources that non-native speakers bring to the communication situation (Verzella & Tommaso, 2021). Among others, Kohn (2020a; 2020b) takes a pedagogical lingua franca approach and argues that VEs can provide rich opportunities for exploiting the potential of lingua franca communication. For him, authentic communication in VE can foster learner agency and what he calls "learner emancipation" (Kohn, 2020a: 5) by, e.g. recording interaction and allowing students to analyze and reflect on their own ELF communication.

There has been a tendency in VE to avoid difficult themes in interaction and to engage in negotiations of a shallow and superficial nature when it comes to course content (Godwin-Jones, 2019; O'Dowd, 2016a). In their review of VE task design, O'Dowd and Ware (2009) found that common task types are based on themes such as school systems, food, travel, sports, music, or tourism, limiting themselves to a certain kind of transfer of factual information about the partner's culture instead of critically reflecting on, for instance, political issues with more promising effects on the development of intercultural competence. This is what Kramsch (2014: 302) calls "surfing diversity", and it is prone to cause students to ignore differences and focus on what unites them. Helm (2013) also found that most educators would like to avoid controversial topics in their VEs because they could lead to conflict.

Contrary to this, more current and critical models of VE are based on genuine engagement and negotiation, in which difficult issues that cause conflict and inequalities in the world are addressed with a wide range of perspectives. This can be more favourable for learning because miscommunication, conflict, or touching upon sensitive or political topics is usually memorable, as it appeals to the participants' emotions (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Godwin-Jones (2019) also warns against instances of shallow interactions and argues that avoiding conflict misrepresents the reality of intercultural encounters. "In fact, exploring the sources of a disagreement over serious issues […] can be revelatory, […] taking learners into deeper dimensions of cultural understanding" (Godwin-Jones, 2019: 12). The aim is not to lead all participants to the same conclusions but to gain a deeper understanding of why people have different perspectives. For advocates of critical VE, conflict in interaction is seen as a productive source of learning and has the function of transforming perspectives

(Godwin-Jones, 2019; O'Dowd, 2016a). Similarly, Nicolaou (2020: 527) argues that, in current VEs, "themes should revolve around critical 21st-century issues, highlighting the interconnectedness of our world today and the dynamics of international partnerships in the global arena."

In the past, VEs have been text-based and asynchronous, mainly using e-mail communication (Godwin-Jones, 2019; Wicking et al., 2021). However, in their study across various VEs, Baroni et al. (2019) found that this type of communication is prone to make students feel depersonalized and that synchronous communication gives them a greater sense of engaging in actual human interaction. Therefore, synchronous videoconferencing is increasingly used in VEs (Avgousti, 2018; Werneck Barbosa & Ferreira-Lopes, 2021). According to Godwin-Jones (2019: 13), "[t]he direct, visual, and auditory contact between interlocuters [sic] can be highly motivating", yet also more challenging as speech, facial expressions, and gestures have to be analyzed and reacted upon in real-time. He also stresses that the medium of choice is never neutral and that it always has an impact on communication.

## O'Dowd's (2020) Transnational Model of VE and Task Design

In 2020, O'Dowd (2020: 486–487) outlined the characteristics and principles of good practice for VE, defining his own model. For him, contemporary VEs should consider the following:

- Fostering rich intercultural dialogue that can involve, but is not restricted to, contrasting cultures and languages
- Fostering collaboration with individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds and employing lingua franca communication
- Motivating students to discuss subjects that are significant to all participants on a social and political level
- Allowing students to collaborate with their foreign partners in order to bring about change and action in their respective local and global communities
- Providing plenty of chances for supervised reflection on intercultural interactions
- Being acknowledged and incorporated into academic coursework and institutional activities
- Fostering an understanding of the role of online technologies in intercultural communication and the ways in which social media influences message creation and interpretation

Concerning the specific task design, O'Dowd and Ware (2009) have reviewed the tasks usually found in VE and have synthesized them using three categories: infor-

mation exchange tasks, comparison and analysis tasks, and collaborative tasks. The information exchange task type usually requires students to exchange information about themselves or their cultures. The comparison and analysis task type "requires learners not only to exchange information but also to go a step further and carry out comparisons or critical analyses of cultural products from both cultures (e.g. books, surveys, films, newspaper articles)" (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009: 175). The collaborative task type "requires learners not only to exchange and compare information but also to work together to produce a joint product or conclusion" (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009: 178). According to Godwin-Jones (2019: 13) this phase "deepens the collaboration by having partners work together in creating some kind of shareable product or artifact, such as a blog, wiki entry, webpage, website, digital story, or presentation". This task type usually promises the highest learning gains and involves the most crucial deal of negotiation as students strive to come to a conclusion. However, O'Dowd (2016b: 6) laments that:

> "[i]t would appear that most telecollaborative exchanges never move on beyond the first and second task types as students present, exchange and compare information but rarely go that extra step to actually collaborate [...] to complete a document or project together. I would argue that it would be very beneficial for telecollaboration practice to focus more on this third type of telecollaborative task type in order to exploit the learning potential of this activity to the maximum."

## Study Design

Thirty-one students from six different countries participated in the case study.[1] They were all enrolled in either Intercultural Business Communication or English language programmes at a German university. The interactions involved several digital tools, most importantly Zoom, the Moodle platform, and Conceptboard, where students could collaboratively edit text and drawings.

The *Megacities* game (Bolten, 2015) is a virtual simulation for intercultural learning. The game's premise is that a wealthy citizen aims to donate an abandoned area (Wasteland) to three diverse bordering cities under the condition that they establish a holistic plan for the development of the area that benefits all. The game ran from 20th May 2021 to 17th June 2021, including an introductory meeting and four game rounds. The game's goal is to improve intercultural competence and personal development by cooperating and communicating in an intercultural online environment characterized by uncertain situations. In the introductory meeting, the stu-

1 Thirty-five students participated in the game, but only thirty-one wrote the final reflection report.

dents were introduced to the game, basic concepts were explained, and they were divided into their city teams with their respective Zoom rooms.

This study was guided by two research questions: Firstly, we aimed to analyze whether the task design in the intercultural game *Megacities* fits O'Dowd's description of a transnational model of VE (for a similar undertaking, see Brownlie, 2024). Secondly, we set out to examine the learning outcomes of the game project by considering students' own perceptions of their learning trajectories and thereby verify whether their perceptions can shed light on intercultural learning and a type of evolving cosmopolitanism. To answer the first research question, the task descriptions were studied in detail as well as the task implementation during the actual game. For the latter, the method of participant observation (Musante, 2015) was chosen. The first author participated as an observer in all rounds of the game. For the second question, qualitative content analysis with MAXQDA (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019) was used. The first step of the data analysis was to read the reflection reports various times to get a thorough understanding of their content. In the second phase, thematic categories were inductively developed from the material. The third step was to code all reflection reports along the main categories for the first time. After the first coding process, codes that belonged together were merged, and subcategories were inductively determined to gain a better understanding of the main categories. Thereby, the code system was reorganized, rearranged, and meaningfully systematized. In the second coding process, we worked through the complete data set again with the fully differentiated code system, and coded segments were reassigned to the more differentiated subcodes.

In the following, we present our findings for the first and the second research questions in different sections. The findings for the second research question (learning outcomes) are illustrated with examples extracted from the reflection reports. We opted for keeping the original entries as written by the players and only added corrections where we thought spelling or grammar incongruities could lead to reading difficulties. In these cases, we added the possibly 'right' term in square brackets.

## Findings

### Task Design in the Virtual Intercultural Game *Megacities*

When scrutinizing the previously described game design against O'Dowd's (2020) description of a transnational model of VE, it became evident that the course not only reflects the new trends explained above but also follows O'Dowd's recommendations for good practice in VE. In line with O'Dowd's (2020) vision, the goal of the *Megacities* game was to move away from essentialist notions of culture and towards a more transnational approach to culture. In accordance with his model, the VE un-

der investigation provided a valuable environment for intercultural interaction that was not based on shallow comparisons of cultures since students did not focus on superficial topics. Instead, students worked on a topic of social and political relevance, developing a holistic plan for the wasteland that benefits all. Although it was a simulation, it made them aware of issues in the 'real world', such as sustainability and the reconciliation of different opinions. The participants' main task was to negotiate, considering their own city's preferences and those of the other teams. Not only did they create a team culture (see Conti et al., 2022), but they also had to accommodate new team structures when new teams were created in the middle of the game. Thus, throughout the VE, students were confronted with challenges and difficult situations in interaction, such as silence, or negative reactions. The instructor and the student assistants consciously intervened as little as possible in these situations of conflict in order to give students the agency to resolve their problems by themselves. This is how, according to O'Dowd (2020), real student engagement and negotiation should look so that the VE not only establishes interactions but also gives opportunities for critical intercultural learning from these interactions.

In line with O'Dowd's (2020) model, the *Megacities* VE also addressed the relevance of lingua franca communication and the impact of the medium. Students came from various academic and national backgrounds with different first languages and were not positioned in a bi-cultural set-up, in which the groups "represented" their country's cultures for intercultural learning. Instead, participants were seen as part of a transnational group using ELF for communication. Some of the participants were native speakers, but they were not presented as the authority of English within the task design. Regarding communication tools, the *Megacities* VE did not just employ one asynchronous communication tool but a variety of synchronous and asynchronous digital platforms, such as Zoom, Moodle, and Conceptboard, reflecting previously described new trends in VE. Raising awareness of how interaction is influenced by the communication tool is also one of the characteristics of O'Dowd's (2020) model of VE.

The course design of the VE under investigation is also in accordance with previously described recommendations for task design. In the introductory phase, students exchanged information about themselves and engaged in ice-breaker activities for relationship-building; in the main phase, students explored rich points in interaction when they negotiated and faced challenges, misunderstandings, and uncomfortable situations in interaction; and finally, students had to collaborate to produce a joint product, a press release. According to O'Dowd's model (2020), guided reflection is also critical for intercultural learning in VE. The course design of the *Megacities* VE included ample opportunities for reflection. For example, students were provided with theoretical input on intercultural communication and recommendations on collaborating effectively in an online environment. In addition, participants were given a reflection sheet with guiding questions on the game, and the

VE also ended with a reflection phase about challenges, learning outcomes, and suggestions. For assessment, a reflection report was required in which students analyzed interactions from the VE through the theory lens. In line with O'Dowd's (2020) model, the VE was also an official and recognized part of students' coursework, not an additional voluntary activity.

## Learning Outcomes

### Appreciation of Difference

Twenty-four out of 31 students displayed a particular appreciation of differences in their reports in various ways. Students noticed various differences during the VE and elaborated on the advantages and disadvantages of these differences for collaboration. In particular, they valued the gain in knowledge due to the presence of different perspectives and ideas, increased problem-solving in collaboration, better-quality results, and a sense of inspiration from their fellow students' creativity. For example, some students mentioned that they appreciated the impact of differences on the city's development. In addition, students also emphasized the change in perspective, stepping back from their own preconceived notions due to the diversity of the group. They were able to take different perspectives, question their own stereotypes and thinking patterns, and embrace different ways of thinking.

> "(1) Firstly, I think it is important for us to understand that difference can be a catalyst of productivity and innovation. Our team sprit [spirit] is quite open towards diversity, I think this team spirit had transformed into a force that brought many agile solutions in dealing with multiple tasks. Different people might value different things, hence, for members in a new team, working methodologies and interpersonal rules that one had taken for granted could be slightly challenged in some ways." (P28, pos. 14–15)

> "(2) Although we differed in culture, native language, age or gender, I was really impressed by our harmonic cooperative work. Everyone was accepted and appreciated and our communication was very respectful and friendly. Furthermore, I was impressed by the creativity of some members – no matter if it was about creating a logo or writing fictional texts. It was absolutely amazing!" (P33, pos. 5)

Appreciation for difference could also be identified in different forms of contribution. This VE gave students the opportunity to understand that an unwillingness to speak actively in the plenum is not necessarily a sign of laziness or unwillingness to contribute. Due to the complex task design, various forms of contribution were possible so that everyone had the chance to contribute individually, and students also

noticed and appreciated this. There were signs in the reflection reports that students learned that active listening is also a form of contribution and that different forms of contribution can also be attributed to cultural or personal differences.

> "(3) What surprised me a lot was the behaviour of one of the Chinese students. I had never once heard him speak in a large group or participate in any written work. Consequently, I perceived him as a person who did not want to listen, understand or make an effort to participate. However, in this smaller group work he surprised me by the way he expressed himself and how much he contributed to the group work. He spoke very politely, acknowledged the contributions of others and expressed his own opinion in a calm and convincing manner. This showed me that even if someone does not always express themselves immediately, it does not mean that the person does not want to contribute. I would attribute this partly to the person's cultural background and personality. For the future, I have learned that one should not judge a book by its cover and that people should give others more time to get used to a situation, to express themselves and to be more understanding in general." (P13, pos. 33–35).

Taking a deeper look at the reflection reports, it became evident that students seemed to acknowledge their differences and embrace them, seeing them as a source of innovation, learning, and productivity instead of lamenting the difficulties in collaboration. Thus, it seems to be more about coming to terms with the differences than overcoming them. They emphasized the positive collaboration experience despite their differences and managed to build relationships with people they would not have met otherwise.

## A Critical Examination of the Self

In the reports, students reflected on themselves and displayed critical examinations of their own actions. Many students criticized their lack of active participation in the group discussions and reflected on potential reasons why this was the case, such as a lack of confidence or their cultural background (on cultural ideals of social interaction, see Mendes de Oliveira & Stevanovic, forthcoming). Students also mentioned that the game had taught them to pay more attention to their communication style in intercultural situations. Some students, for example, explained that empathy was important in intercultural settings and how their participation in the game had led to rethinking their words and actions so that everyone felt comfortable. Some students also reflected critically on their communication style and criticized their own urge to respond quickly when they could have thought a little more. However, most students expressed a feeling of having learned something for themselves and their professional future, for instance, what kind of work position they would like to have

in the future, such as a leading position, or that their fear of speaking in the plenum was unfounded.

> "(4) Since we were very international in the team, we correspondingly had very individual ideas that were very culture-specific. This led to the fact that I noticed that every culture had different points of view on a topic. This broadened my horizons so much that with this game I learned to always look at the other culture from a different perspective. And then to communicate in such a way that I paid attention to my choice of words so as not to hurt anyone and also developed my empathy skills. […] Without empathy, it is difficult for us to reflect on our own behavior. And I honestly say that we as a team have always respected each other and were open to all ideas." (P01, pos.15-16, 19)

> "(5) What I learned about myself is that I consider myself even more in a professional multilingual and cultural context, especially in taking the lead, as I believe I fulfilled my role as group leader sufficiently during the game. I also became more aware of my own cultural socialisation. […] I realised that I was so eager that sometimes I spoke too quickly and too fast before I had really thought. I noticed that I comment quite harshly on some posts, which is difficult for me to control because I tend to speak directly and keep my statements as concise as possible." (P13, pos. 8–9).

## Appreciation for ELF

In the reflection reports, most students displayed a certain awareness and appreciation for ELF, which was used throughout the game. Twenty students elaborated on this concept, both explicitly naming the concept of ELF and implicitly describing what it meant to them. In particular, they expressed satisfaction with the fact that the VE was conducted in (almost) nobody's first language. Many of them expressed feeling more comfortable communicating, not being pressured to adhere to strict linguistic accuracy, and having more capacity to focus on content and mutual understanding. As they were all in the same situation, they reported increased participation and confidence to share their ideas in the plenum.

> "(6) The circumstance of the game being that we used English as a lingua franca was very nice, because I didn't feel so much pressure to do everything right and this way was able to participate more than I initially expected. […] Personally, I take away that it is totally ok to not speak perfect English when communicating an idea or a thought with someone. What matters the most is that you understand each other and that happens through good communication. It is also important to know that verbal communication isn't the only possible way to communicate with someone and it can be helpful to use more than one way of communication." (P24, pos. 2–3, 8–9)

> "(7) Based on the theory learned and through my practical experience with the intercultural game, I now have a better understanding and a deeper appreciation of ELF and IC [intercultural communication] in the digital age." (P21, pos. 13)

Most students emphasized that the fact that they all communicated in a common foreign language with different levels of English did not negatively affect mutual understanding. On the contrary, students paid more attention to making sense of what their fellow students wanted to express and intervened whenever help was needed. In the case of not being understood, students had the chance to practice their spoken language skills by rephrasing and clarifying their points. Students were forced to accommodate so that mutual understanding could be achieved, if necessary, also using alternative forms of communication.

> "(8) Furthermore, I observed differences in the level of English spoken, the fluidity, and the accents, which I thought weren't as important of differences [weren't important differences], since they did not strongly interfere with communication. Disadvantages are of course that it comes to misunderstanding, but almost always somebody jumped in to explain and specify the meaning if statements were not precise in speech or unclear. But this as a mediation resembles our day-to-day experiences and live [life] in a work environment so I don't think it is wasted time but can rater [rather] been [be] seen as a learning experience." (P26, pos. 10–12)

## Dealing with Difficulties

The number of students experiencing difficulties during the VE was high. Twenty-two students reflected on difficult situations that they experienced during the game. Analyzing code relations in MAXQDA indicates that perceived difficulties are mostly in connection to collaboration, as these codes were often intersecting in the data. However, most students, after lamenting on insecurities, conflicts, misunderstandings, or uncomfortable situations in interaction, also elaborated on how they resolved the conflict and how they were still left with a positive collaboration experience.

One of the most prominent challenges was active participation in discussions in the plenum. For one student, for example, it was a challenge to share her ideas in the main Zoom room with many different participants because she considered herself shy and felt judged by her fellow students. However, as she explained, after reflecting more on these challenging situations, she realized it was just her personal fear, and there was no reason to be shy because the group was very accommodating. Ultimately, she was glad that the VE had lured her out of her comfort zone, forcing her to speak up because it helped improve her communication skills. Although it was a challenge for many students to speak up in the plenum, most students were able

to overcome their fear and were left with positive learning outcomes, such as higher confidence or increased communication skills.

> "(9) I feel like putting myself in challenging situations helps me improve to come out of my shell. Thanks to the course I feel like I can communicate more and maybe, if I have the chance in the future to take a similar course, I would try to talk also in the main room with more people." (P35, pos. 13)

One reason participation was perceived as challenging was the virtual nature of the game. Many students shared the view that intercultural interaction was even more complicated due to the virtual setting. Nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions or body language, can convey important information about how interlocutors react to what has been said. These cues are especially important in intercultural settings because they are prone to lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, it was perceived as an additional challenge that students could only see the little tiles and, in some cases, only black tiles.

> "(10) Looking back, I consider the participation in the game to be an enriching experience. During the sessions however I had mixed emotions. […] On the other hand, there have been some situations in which I felt slightly overwhelmed since discussions with many people are sometimes hard to follow for me, particularly in an online format in which I do not see my interlocutors. In addition, I experienced that it can be challenging to lead discussions with people from different cultural backgrounds in the sense that I aim to rethink my argumentation and way of expressing my point of view a lot more when I am unfamiliar with the respective discussion culture in order to not offend anyone. Not being able to see the other person's reaction make it even more difficult, to my mind. This leads to the fact that I often felt a bit exhausted after the game sessions." (P03, pos. 2–3, 5–6)

Another perceived challenge was to find common ground in a very diverse and extensive group. Many students elaborated on this point, guiding attention to the difficulties of finding compromise because there have been many different ideas, for example, on how the wasteland should be designed. These situations made them reflect and question their own perspective. Most students realized that the different ideas were often culture-specific, giving them a deeper understanding of why ideas were sometimes conflicting. However, despite their differences, they were mostly able to find a suitable solution in the end, leaving them with a positive collaboration and learning experience. Sometimes this also means making compromises at the expense of one's own idea in order to come to an agreement and move on. One of the students realized that, despite the various diverging ideas and opinions, the group managed to come up with a very good result, which changed her perspective as she usually does not believe in group work with many participants.

> "(11) I usually don't have a lot of faith in group work when there are a lot of different opinions involved. Despite the multitude of diverging opinions and discussions about whether we understood the tasks right I still think that the different supervising groups managed to create results that were really good considering what we were working with." (P30, pos. 6)

> "(12) I think that a major point is that we adjusted to making comprises [compromises], which we were at first not actually comfortable with. But at the end, I assume that all our group members realized that those compromises do not mean to banish the idea as a whole but to make it more diverse through contributions of members belonging to other groups but also to other cultural contexts. In order to reach a mutually acceptable solution, each group had to give up some part of their own conviction. Eventually, this process was for sure not easy but definitely worth it because initial ideas of our group were overthought and specialized." (P32, pos. 15–16)

> "(13) It seems to me that disagreement usually produces sparks. For example, different understandings of the same task can generate a variety of novel ideas, or different ways of solving problems can exist because some people organize and assign work relatively, some remind people of time arrangement, some put forward ideas, and some integrate ideas." (P09, pos. 17)

## Concluding Remarks

This study aimed to first analyze whether the task design in the intercultural game *Megacities* was in line with O'Dowd's transnational model of VE, which proposes moving away from an essentialist conceptualization of culture while fostering rich intercultural dialogue and collaboration. Secondly, we set out to examine the learning outcomes of the game project by considering students' own perceptions of their learning trajectories and thereby verify whether their perceptions can shed light on intercultural learning and a type of evolving cosmopolitanism. The findings reveal that the *Megacities* intercultural game is indeed in line with O'Dowd's recommendations for good practice in transnational VE and reflects current trends in VE towards cosmopolitanism. Concerning the learning outcomes, participants pointed to various ways to deal with difficulties in interaction. They displayed high levels of appreciation for difference, a high appreciation for ELF, and, crucially, a critical examination of the Self, which, again, make evident a gradual change in "self-understanding as the result of engagement with others" (Delanty, 2008: 218, cited in Lenehan, 2022: 17).

The main limitation is the small scope of the study. It only reveals students' perceptions of the VE under investigation. In a more extensive study, we would aim

to expand the analyses and gather further data sources, such as expert interviews or follow-up participant interviews. These interviews could provide a deeper understanding of the intercultural processes experienced by the player before, during, and after the game. Concerning limitations in task design, one can potentially argue that the intercultural game *Megacities* lacks more explicit discussions on conflict and inequality (Helm, 2013), which can lead players to only 'surf diversity' (Kramsch, 2014: 302) instead of scrutinizing serious issues such as asymmetrical power relations and politics (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

All in all, our findings lend support to the idea of an evolving type of cosmopolitanism as a result of this intervention designed for the development of intercultural competence. In short, the intercultural game *Megacities* has been shown to lead to (a) a heightened awareness of the cultural Other and the intercultural processes experienced during the game and also to (b) perceptible changes in behaviour. The former is based on a kind of cosmopolitanism aligned with an "intersubjective reflexiveness arising out of [...] intercultural exchanges" (Hall, 2019: 410 cited in Lenehan, 2022: 25). The latter, empirically manifested through changes in behaviour, can be connected to a display of "digital intercultural competence", which refers the ability to co-create opportunities for participatory citizenship in digital interactions (see Mendes de Oliveira, forthcoming).

The findings are in line with Lenehan's (2022) notion of processual cosmopolitanism and Warf's (2015: 46) definition of cosmopolitanism as a kind of "discourse that foregrounds human similarities and worldwide concerns in an attempt to bridge differences in constructive and imaginative ways." Warf (2015: 46) argues that "[c]osmopolitanism invites a reconfiguration of geographical imaginations, of horizons of belonging". The intercultural game *Megacities* was shown to provide fertile ground for this endeavour in the complex configurations of today's postdigital societies.

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