



## **Choices and Voices – A Serious Game for Preventing Violent Extremism.**

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Choices and Voices is an interactive simulation encouraging young people to explore and discuss the underlying issues and adverse influences, which can lead to divisions and tensions in communities. In various scenarios the player faces a number of moral dilemmas in which their decisions define their own outcomes, as well as those of their friends and family.

Although the game offers the same range of choices to start with, each player makes a different set of decisions which substantially alter the outcome of their game. The structured group discussions in response to the game further emphasise how real life decisions can have significant consequences.

**Background:**

Evidence shows that the long term solution to tackling violent extremism lies in prevention. The most effective way to prevent young people from turning to violence is to encourage open and honest conversations on attitudes, ideas, choices and consequences in a safe and positive environment.

Local Authorities and the LGA took on a vital role in strengthening communities through Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) under the PREVENT strand of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST).

Cross-Government responsibility for PREVENT was shared between the Home Office and Communities and Local Government with the principal objective; "To prevent people becoming or supporting terrorists or violent extremists".

The PVE agenda funded a range of community projects initially through the PVE pathfinder fund in 2007/08 and became an increasingly important part of the core services delivered by local authorities. The projects that were piloted during this period led to a range of innovative and engaging initiatives, and further developed towards an extensive range of projects throughout 2008-09 with many projects continuing their legacy to the present day. One such project is Choices and Voices, an interactive resource designed by the award winning Serious Games Company, PlayGen, which is aimed at 12 to 16 year olds and is being used in many schools across the UK.

Choices and Voices was instigated and supported by West Midlands Police, developed by PlayGen in collaboration with Birmingham University's School of Education and relevant academics, the DCSF and a number of regional schools. It has been rigorously researched and is in full accordance with the National Curriculum, DCSF's

National Strategy, and covers specific areas within the Citizenship, PSHE and SEAL curriculum.

A focussed research and development phase was undertaken with the objective of creating a resource for schools to make a positive contribution to the prevention of violent extremism in young people. The aim was to provide an inspiring and interactive experience that acted as a catalyst and a focus to discuss, debate, and unpick arguments with the aim to ultimately stop young people getting to the point where they may even contemplate cruelty and violence. This was achieved by developing an interactive resource based on social scenarios that require them to make choices, discuss consequences and understand different points of view.

At specific points in the scenarios, pupils are presented with challenging decisions that form the focal point for class discussion. Positive messages are woven throughout the narrative, and group discussions encourage students to extract the positive ideas and to reflect on their merits.

### **A brief overview of Serious Games**

The term "serious game" was firstly used by Clark Abt in his 1970 book *Serious Games* to differentiate between games for fun and games for learning. In that book, he mainly referred to the use of board and card games. Although he did not refer to computer games, he proposed a definition that can be considered applicable in the computer age: *“Reduced to its formal essence, a game is an activity among two or more independent decision-makers seeking to achieve their objectives in some limiting context. A more conventional definition would say that a game is a context with rules among adversaries trying to win objectives. We are concerned with serious games in the sense that these games have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement.”*

The “serious game” term as we intend today was firstly used in 2002, with the start of the Serious Game Initiative lead by David Rejeski and Ben Sawyer in the US, and taken up in Europe by the formation of the Serious Games movement including the Serious Games Institute in the UK.

SGs were initially conceived to train people for tasks in particular jobs, such as training army personnel, or training insurance salesmen. More recently, serious games are being developed to tackle a range of behavioural and attitudinal issues.

In 2005, the World Food Programme (2004) developed “*Food Force*”, sought to take advantage of the popularity of computer games to educate children about hunger and the work of the aid agency. A further example is the game designed with the help of the New York Fire Department, aimed at training fire fighters on how to deal with conventional, environmental, biological and terror-based incidents while functioning as a team where the players play the game through networked computers communicating through headsets to complete cooperative tasks (Entertainment Technology Center and Carnegie Mellon University, 2005).

Serious Games Interactive has developed Global Conflicts: Palestine, an immersive role-playing simulation that gives the player the chance to explore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict first-hand. Through the diverse stories students engage within the game and learn about issues related to conflicts in terrorism, human rights and media’s role.

PlayGen has continued to develop a wide range of serious games for tackling deep rooted issues. In 2009 PlayGen developed “Anti-Money Laundering game”, used by financial institutions to reduce money laundering that sometime fuels terrorism. In 2010 “What should we tell the children” was developed in collaboration with Coventry University Health and Life Sciences, a game for parents

and children to tackle teenage pregnancy. In 2010 following the success of the original C&V games, discussed in this article, PlayGen developed the Primary school version, designed for 6 to 11 year olds.

SGs offer an enormous potential, because a large and growing population is familiar with playing games, that can present users with realistic and compelling challenges. They are highly stimulating and capable of processing information and capturing players' concentration span for long durations.

Through exploring gaming technologies, SGs are able to contextualize the player's experience in a stimulating and realistic environment. *“Games embody well-established principles and models of learning. For instance, games are effective partly because the learning takes place within a meaningful (to the game) context. What you must learn is directly related to the environment in which you learn and demonstrate it; thus, the learning is not only relevant but applied and practiced within that context. Learning that occurs in meaningful and relevant contexts is more effective than learning that occurs outside of those contexts, as is the case with most formal instruction. Researchers refer to this principle as situated cognition and have demonstrated its effectiveness in many studies over the last fifteen years. Researchers have also pointed out that play is a primary socialization and learning mechanism common to all human cultures and many animal species”*. Richard Van Eck, Digital Game-Based Learning: 2006

Don Menn (1993) claims that students can only remember 10 percent of what they read, but almost 90 percent, if they engage in the job themselves, even if only as a simulation, and this assertion has been supported by evidence from recent studies on the effectiveness of game-based learning (Jarvis and de Freitas, 2009).

Effective SG's challenge players' sense of a given situation and provide compelling contexts where the player can become fully involved. This important element can be used to create the connection between the gaming experience and the everyday experiences outside of the game. SG scenarios can in this way greatly enhance the relationship between possible choices and their outcomes, leading to self realisation of consequences of and attitudes and behaviours.

### **Choices and Voices (C&V) Research and Development:**

The research and development phase of the project revealed 3 key elements that may lead to violent extremism; experiences, mechanisms and attitudes, which became focal points within each scenario.

**Experiences:** C&V incorporates the understanding of key experiences that may lead to violent extremism.

- Underachievement
- Resilience
- Being easily lead
- Seduced by: adventure  
/Secrecy/ Belonging
- Camaraderie
- Migration
- Life change
- Bullying
- Social exclusion
- Peer Pressure
- Alienation/ Isolation
- Exposure to violence
- Trauma and Fragility
- Theological distortion
- Humiliation

**Mechanisms:** C&V incorporates an understanding of the mechanisms that may lead to extremism.

- A disadvantaged position and discrimination are seen not as mistakes in a good system but as the expression of an essentially bad system

- A disadvantaged situation is seen as an expression of dominant cultural – religious contract and of power politics.
- The notion that ‘religious’ identity must be developed in an enclave that is opposed to modern society

**Attitudes:** C&V incorporates an understanding of psychological attitudes that may lead to extremist behaviour

- **The need for cognitive closure**  
The desire for a definite answer to a particular topic, as opposed to confusion, ambiguity or a subjective view of the world.
- **The need for purpose, love and respect**  
The predisposition to unquestioned belief that everything has a purpose.
- **Unquestionable respect for self proclaimed authority**  
Following other peoples authority without questioning the basis of their interpretation
- **The need to be unique and special**  
This is the desire to be the only true saviour of believers of destiny of being the chosen one.

Throughout the interactive experience and outlined in the teacher’s guide are a range of Positive Attitudes and Behaviours that are also in keeping with the National Curriculum’s Citizenship requirements.

These are outlined as:

**Commonality:**

It is important to emphasise commonality between young people and to develop an awareness of shared life experiences, grievances and goals. However, although commonality is important, it is vital not to replace theories of difference with impractical and general

theories of commonality such as 'Britishness'. Teachers and Facilitators are signposted to encourage pupils to develop an understanding of their commonality on their own.

**Working together for common goals:**

Creating opportunities for young people to work cohesively together towards a safe and inspiring community will limit the tendency for violence and the application of extreme notions of difference.

Young people are encouraged to work together on the grievances and concerns they share. Choices and Voices is designed to encourage cohesion and illustrate the value of working together.

**Promoting honest and critical conversations:**

Honest and open conversation about religious groups and cultural differences is essential to the development of positive attitudes within multi-cultural environments. Using interactive games such as Choices and Voices, young people can be engaged and inspired to act positively within their community.



### The Choices and Voices Scenarios:

Choices and Voices is divided into two short scenarios, with each scenario split into a series of acts and scenes. The scenarios take place in a diverse multicultural community in the West Midlands and the player is a local resident and school pupil, with consequent versions made to reflect a range of other regions.



The pupils interact with characters in a virtual community that reflects real life situations, set in a potentially volatile location with a multicultural population. Their decisions will lead to other events unfolding, and the information they gather depends on the approach they take. It is important that they can make choices in any way they choose, ie: they can make the wrong choices in a safe environment and individuals will determine a variety of outcomes, that will range from the negative to the positive, vividly demonstrating the consequences of different styles of engagement. These outcomes become the focus for the all important group discussion. At the end of each scenario pupils are given feedback and key decisions they

have made are highlighted and explained. Key positive messages regarding engagement with one's community, its leaders and the police are woven into the scenarios. Group discussions give pupils the opportunity to reflect on why certain interactions and decisions gave very different results.

In Scenario 1 the player is '**led**' through the interactive story. A new cultural group of people are settling within the player's community and the player's friends, who have negative opinions of the unnamed group, are planning to attack their community meeting with eggs.

They want the player to participate and have told the player not to tell anyone. The player has the opportunity to warn authorities about this attack and a more dangerous attack that follows. Scenario 1 includes issues of peer pressure and the seductive power of adventure and the sense of belonging it can engender.

Players encounter examples of theological distortion and misrepresentation and the characters display a need for cognitive closure. In response to these negative features, the scenario emphasises the characters' commonality and the importance of contributing to a safe and cohesive environment. These are all possible discussion points.

In the second scenario, the player is '**leading**' the group. With this responsibility, they must consider each choice on offer very carefully, as the success of the group depends entirely on their personal choices.

A large-scale regeneration is planned for a local park and the young people are unhappy. The player wants to stop the development and so must decide between violent or peaceful protest.

Scenario 2 includes examples of an unquestioning respect for a self-proclaimed authority and the characters exhibit a need to feel unique or special. Positive aspects include working together for a common goal and committing to honest and critical dialogue. Again these are the primary discussion points from this scenario. The aim is to counter the spread of misinformation, negative ideas and attitudes by offering an interactive session in which students are presented with a series of choices, encouraging them to develop their understanding of consequences.

### Character Profiles:



**Name:** Athena

**Characteristics:** Unstable home with lack of parental contact. Looks for ways to rebel to substitute purpose. Easily swayed to take part in unlawful activities, often under the radar as good at covering her tracks.

**Primary Traits:** Intelligent, rebel

**Secondary Traits:** Lacks purpose, deceptive



**Name:** Han

**Characteristics:** Aggressive and can create havoc. Constantly on the lookout for confrontations to prove his power. Deprived background, violent parents and traumatic childhood.

**Primary traits:** Angry, judgemental

**Secondary traits:** Self-justified, reactionary



**Name:** Rua

**Characteristics:** High achiever but feels isolated due to racial background or religion. They feel they have something to prove.

**Primary traits:** Intelligent, dogmatic.

**Secondary traits:** Suspicious of authority, misfit.



**Name:** Jaffar

**Characteristics:** Takes pleasure in making people laugh and is good at defusing arguments with humour. A confident teenager who generally gets on with a variety of people, including bullies.

**Primary traits:** Laid back, creative

**Secondary traits:** Confident, unassuming



**Name:** Mike

**Characteristics:** Loud, centre of attention, thrill seeker. Bullies others for own enjoyment. Assumes leading positions. Underneath he is unsure and lacks real confidence and good judgment.

**Primary traits:** Extrovert, Adventure driven.

**Secondary traits:** Manipulative, uncaring.



**Name:** Lucy

**Characteristics:** Stable and inquisitive, not taking things at face value. Can see a situation from many viewpoints, offering solutions and trying to help others.

**Primary traits:** Inquisitive, logical.

**Secondary traits:** Empathizes, positive outlook.



**Name:** Linden

**Characteristics:** Has not been exposed to a varied life and looks to those with a similar background to lead them. Susceptible to being bullied into situations or doing things to fit in.

**Primary traits:** Introvert, vulnerable.

**Secondary traits:** Lack of belonging, easily lead



**Name:** Soraya

**Characteristics:** Moderate personality with traditional tendencies. Follows rules without questioning because they look up to authority. Does not like confrontation.

**Primary traits:** Conformist, stable.

**Secondary traits:** Lacks confidence, team player.

### **Choices and Voices Lesson Plans:**

In order to ensure that the resource is useful to schools, an extensive review of the National Curriculum for key stages 3 and 4 was carried out in collaboration with the DCSF and their remit within the PVE agenda. Through working closely with teachers and school based officers, the teacher's guide accompanying the interactive online scenarios clearly outlines these specific areas and offers structured lesson plans. A summary of the research that underpins the scenarios as well as questions, suggested points for discussion and extended home study options is included in the pack. This assures that the resource is both easy to use and accessible to teachers and facilitators who may not be informed about the concepts in PVE.

### **Examples of group engagement:**

**Teachers:** "There is a lot of potential for a deeper and longer enquiry to take place. Its very versatile like that." adding that the game "gives the freedom to relate to real-life issues".

**School Based Officer:** "Its great to see them engage with something so quickly."

"It's a great product, I can see a lot of schools using this. It's important to look through the guide before hand, there is a lot of useful information in there."

**Pupils:** "The game was very interactive and it felt like you was in the game."

"The game was very good at showing the consequences of making bad decisions, it could have involved more scenarios"

“I think this programme really helped me. It helped me in many ways to think about choices. It helped me to understand what good and bad can come out of choices.”

“I liked how it was set in Birmingham. It made the scenarios seem very realistic, like it could be here!”

“I think this game was very good and different from the others. I like the idea that if I make different choices, the situation changes.”

“It reflects on the choices you may have to make in real life.”

Research was carried out by a team at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. Lessons using the game were observed, including how the game was introduced and how the teacher or police officer followed up the game immediately afterwards. Teachers were given a questionnaire about their experience of using the game, and focus groups discussion with students were held. Brief points from the longer report were that:

- a) Pupils enjoyed playing the game, appreciating the interactive nature and seeing what happened to their decisions. They often wanted to play it again to see what would be the consequences of different decisions and paths. This showed engagement with the game and appreciation of the issues involved.
- b) The game deliberately did not specifically focus on religion or the far right, nor use the term extremism or extremist. The question is whether pupils would make the connection. One said ‘As far as the video is concerned, extremism didn’t really come across’. However, the problem of peer pressure was keenly recognised, and pupils felt that this was central. Joining

extremist groups or acting in an extremist way happened 'possibly when you were with friends' and had 'no time to think'. The focus of the game on such peer pressure clearly resonated with pupils and there was much discussion on being drawn into things you know are wrong.

- c) The focus and impact depends therefore greatly on how the game is used by teachers immediately afterwards and for any follow up work. Sometimes the focus was on peer pressure, other times violence, and other times on how to achieve change in the community. Some pupils felt that 'deeper' issues related to religious extremism should *not* in fact be aired, as 'someone could get freaked out'. In this sense the game provides a good medium for a teacher who knows their class to take in an appropriate direction without people being disturbed straight away. It will be important that teachers do not use the opportunity for didactic moralising after the game,
- d) The game cannot on its own be expected to change attitudes overnight. A few pupils in one school still thought that violence did work. Yet the key aim was fulfilled of making pupils reflect on actions and their consequences, in that discussions were lively. Some of these discussion revolved around how 'realistic' the game was, and how it could be made more realistic, but others developed themes of right and wrong, and thinking about 'hanging around with people who might influence me'. It seemed to give a legitimation to 'doing the right thing'. Above all, the game pointed up for pupils that life is about decisions (which seems obvious to adults, but not necessarily to pupils in the course of their daily lives). This enabled a sense of control and is in itself an important learning experience.

**Conclusion:**

Serious games can be effectively used as an engaging and accessible tool to open discussion and meaningful debate on violent extremism.

Through combining a serious game which brings to life and highlights repercussions of the players' decisions, and a framework that enables structured group discussion, it is possible to encourage open and honest conversations on attitudes, ideas, choices and consequences in a safe and positive environment.

For many the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda appeared to present many risks particularly a danger of being accused of racially or religiously discriminatory behaviour. Choices and Voices took a serious and sensitive issue, and provided a tool which gives guidance and confidence to teachers. Young people have the opportunity now to engage in the type of debate and discussion, which will ensure the future safety and cohesion of all our communities.

Serious Games are being increasingly used to target a wide range of law-enforcement issues, from reducing anti-social behaviour to training on interrogation techniques and from tackling violent crime to helping spot money laundering that maybe being used to fund terrorism.

When designed and delivered appropriately, they can offer a 21<sup>st</sup> century method for better engagement and tackling underlying grievances. Serious games can open the door to addressing the root causes of issues more effectively.



**References :**

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- Educating against Extremism, Lynn Davies, Trentham, 2008
- Evaluation of an Immersive Learning Programme, Jarvis, S. & de Freitas, S. (2009). ISBN: 978-0-7695-3588-3.
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**Useful websites :**

- <http://www.choicesandvoices.com>
- <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/288113>
- <http://www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/>

Playable demo of Choices and Voices :

<http://playgen.com/choices-and-voices>