

Serious play

Creating video games is helping provide these Raval teens with some real skills.

By David O'Connor.

The plot starts at a town square and ends at a beach. The protagonist is a collective of boys willing to leave for Spain. They decide to start at night. But first they have to collect the material. They split the work—three of them, Kamal, Shaib and Najib have to collect money and another gets the gasoline. To get the money there are different options: to rob, to borrow it from their families or to sell something. They have to give the cash to one of the mafia guys of the village: Mustafa, who arranges the departure, the boat and bribes the police...

A Tom Cruise film script? Dan Brown's next *opus*? A *telenovela*? None of the above.

This is a sample outline for an open-source videogame called *Bordergames* that is in development by an international community of teenagers. The local group of youngsters working on it is from the Raval. They are a mix of nationalities with more than a handful of languages between them (not including



▶ These video games feature working-class heroes and Barcelona

computer languages), and their headquarters is in the heart of Raval, just a few windy corners away from Mercat St. Antonio on the Carrer dels Salvador.

Forget *The Sims*, *SecondLife* or any other online game motivated by making money and keeping the product placement marketers happy. This project's goal is to empower young people from the margins of society—recent immigrants or the economically disadvantaged—with valuable media tools so that they can help deal with the daily 'borders' they have to cross every day.

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Bordergames is a travelling workshop that gives kids the opportunity to learn 3D animation, video-editing, Photoshop and an array of social skills including team building, self-respect and organisation. Currently, the network is connecting kids in Al Hoceima (Morocco), Lavapies (Madrid), Kreuzberg (Berlin), La Calzada (Gijón) and Figueres (Catalunya), and is growing like Google.

In Madrid, for example, the game developed from real-life situations based on an illegal immigrant's quest for working papers. The protagonist must navigate the social system, avoid the police, find food and a place to sleep, and when the wrong choice is made a brick lands on his/her head—game over. In Figueres, the plot settles around a Puerto

Rican rapper who gets involved in a breakdance competition that must be kept secret from the local Mossos d'Esquadra.

"The software is essentially a voice for those who are rarely heard in public. The character who introduces the game comments that the user will find real stories very different from the narratives that politicians distribute through media channels," Javier Rodrigo, a member of the collective, told *Metropolitain*. "The most important thing is not the product, but integration."

TEB, Barcelona's home to *Bordergames*, is an unassuming space dedicated to empowering disadvantaged youth. Founded in 1992, it provides a safe place for kids to work and play together as well as a range of educational tools and equipment. It also hosts *Raval-surf*, which gives these budding bloggers and developing designers a chance to surf in the traditional sense—in the sea.

Programmes like these allow teenagers to find alternative ways to communicate their reality and contact other people, said Rodrigo. "By doing this, we can talk about the urban realities of these young people using a much more intuitive and enjoyable aesthetic."

So why not download *Bordergames* and give it a go? The open-source coding policy guarantees that users will not be bored by a standard computer game formula. You just might get those working papers, win the breakdance cup or get bricked in the head.

At least the story will be coming from the imagination of a local teen. ■

More info: <http://teb.ravalnet.org/index.php>

