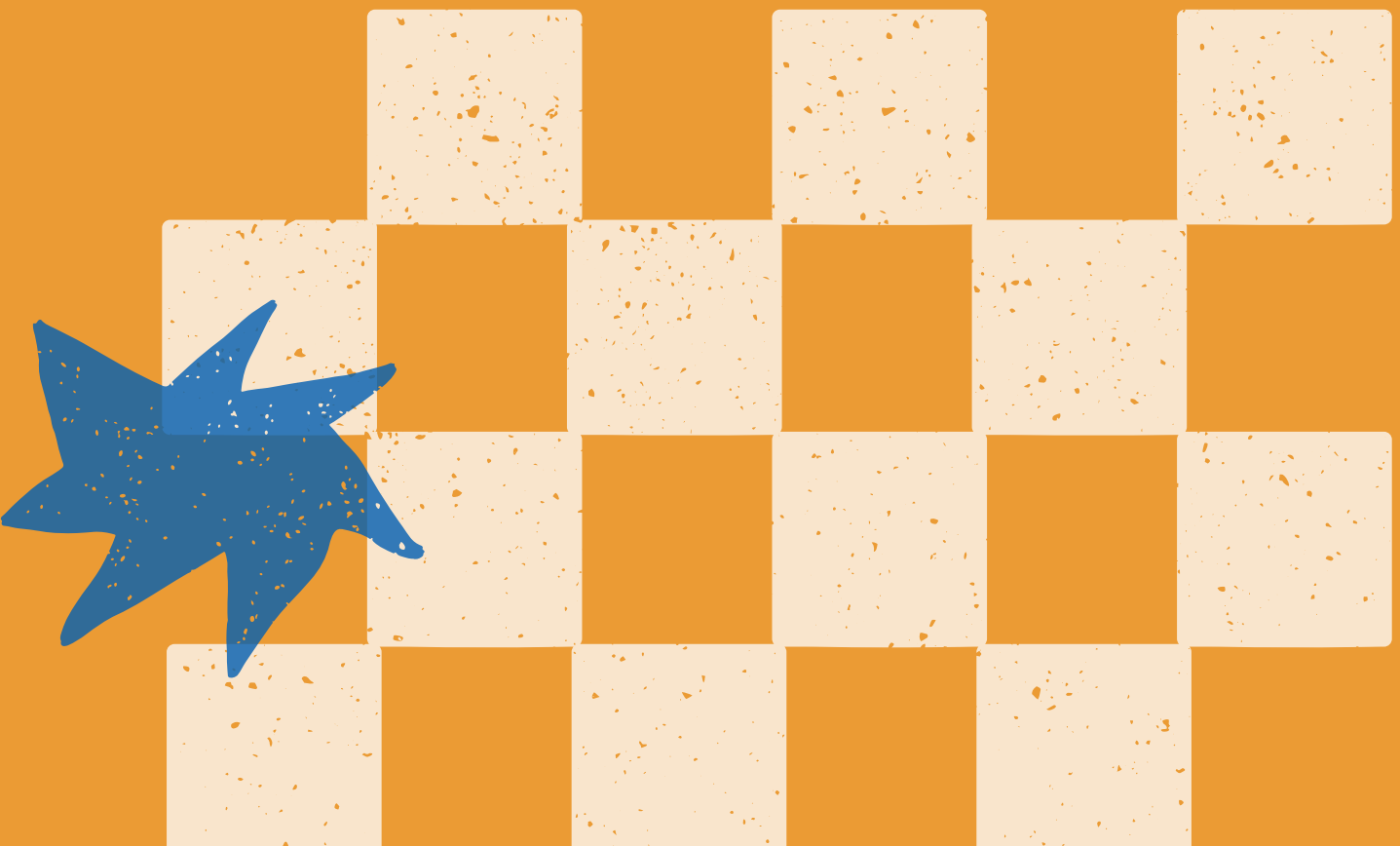


The GAME MASTER PATHWAY



A practical guide to preparing
and facilitating educational games



Co-funded by
the European Union



erasmus+ and
european solidarity
corps agency





ABOUT THE PROJECT

"Facilitator's Playground" brought together, in January 2026 in Estonia, youth workers and educators who wanted to strengthen their skills in facilitating educational games. Through **escape, tabletop and live action role-play games**, participants explored how to guide players, support different types of groups and turn game experiences into meaningful learning processes.

The training aimed to help participants gain confidence in running educational games with diverse groups of young people, design complete sessions from introduction to debriefing, and expand their toolkit with tested games and facilitation methods. It also created opportunities to exchange experiences and build an international network of practitioners interested in game-based learning.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

These pages follow the **game master pathway**: the steps that help turn a game into a complete educational experience. It offers practical guidance for preparing a session, supporting players during gameplay and helping them reflect afterwards.

Use it when preparing your first educational game, onboarding new game masters or reviewing your game facilitation practice. The checklist at the end can support a preparation meeting or serve as a reminder before a session.

Adapt the guidance steps to your specific game, group and context. Different formats require different levels of explanation, support and involvement.

Let's change the way we teach, one game at a time.





WHAT DOES A GAME MASTER DO?

In the field of game-based learning, a game master **creates the conditions for people to play, explore and learn**. Their role includes introducing the game world, explaining rules, managing time, noticing group dynamics and guiding reflection.

A game master knows more than they reveal, offers information when it becomes useful to the group and recognises when to step forward or step back. **This requires a balance between leading and observing**. Too much intervention can limit players' initiative. Too little support can make them confused or excluded. The aim is to give players enough structure to participate confidently while leaving space for their decisions, mistakes and discoveries.

CHOOSING HOW MUCH GUIDANCE TO GIVE

We often rely on three metaphors for talking about guidance in game facilitation:



Taking players on a boat ride

The game master provides a clear structure and helps players understand the process by providing explanations, context and support before and during the activity. This approach can be useful when a group is unfamiliar with educational games or when the game requires shared understanding of rules.



Letting players swim

Players enter the experience with limited explanations and discover how things work through action. Some aspects might even become clear only during reflection. This approach can create curiosity and immersion, but uncertainty about the game must remain manageable: players need to understand essential boundaries, how to ask for help and how to stop participating.



Letting players jump into the water with a life jacket

Participants explore independently, with support available through check-ins, reminders or agreed ways of requesting help. This approach combines discovery with reassurance. The game master stays attentive and adjusts support according to what the group needs.

These approaches are choices, rather than levels of quality. The important question is: how much guidance will help this group engage with this experience?





THE NINE STAGES

1 Preparation beforehand

Know the game and prepare the team

Read the full game instructions/outline and review all the materials players will encounter. Understand both how the game works and what participants will learn through it. Playing through a puzzle or trying a role can reveal unclear instructions, missing materials and practical difficulties that are easy to miss when reading.

Consider the group you will work with. Their age, language confidence, previous experience and access needs may affect how you explain the game or organise the session. Identify any sensitive content and decide how to introduce it properly.

Prepare all materials, including extra items/copies that may be lost, damaged or used up. If several groups will play, check that every set is complete. Prepare alternatives as well as a main plan. Know what you can adjust if time becomes shorter, equipment fails or the group needs a different pace.

When working with other facilitators, divide responsibilities clearly. Agree who welcomes participants, explains the rules, introduces the story, monitors each group, keeps time and leads the debriefing. Rehearse important transitions and decide how to communicate during the gameplay.

2 Preparation on site

Make the space ready for the experience

Arrive early enough to check and set up the playing area without rushing. Place materials where they belong and test any equipment, locks, audio or digital tools.

Look at the space from a player's perspective. Can everyone hear the introduction, read the materials and move around? Is it clear which areas belong to the game? Are there obstacles or distractions that could affect players' attention?

Plan how you will divide the group, and prepare a suitable space for reflection as well. A circle of chairs separate from the playing area, for example, helps participants detach from the game world and see/listen to one another fully during debriefing.

Be ready to welcome people as they arrive. A calm, organised welcome helps establish trust before the game begins.



3 Session introduction

Explain what participants will experience

Before introducing the game world, give participants a clear understanding of the session: introduce yourself and the facilitation team. Explain the game format, the broad topic and the approximate duration, including time for reflection. Avoid assuming that everyone knows what an escape game, simulation or live action role-play game is and how the process goes.

4 Game intro/story

Open the game world

The intro story helps participants enter into character. It establishes who they are, where they are and what they are trying to achieve.

Use a tone that suits the feeling and topic of the game. Speak slowly and confidently, allowing players time to understand and imagine the situation. Your voice, posture, room arrangement and simple props can support the atmosphere.

Finish with a clear mission. Players should understand their starting point and immediate goal, even if other information will emerge later. Check that everyone understands their role and purpose, and start the timer only when the group is ready.

5 Game rules

Make participation understandable

Explain the rules confidently following the instructions provided in the outline and use examples or demonstrate an action when this makes a rule easier to understand. Explain how players should handle materials and how to ask for help, and make your own role clear: will you observe silently, answer questions, play a character or provide information at particular moments only? Knowing this helps players understand what support to expect.



NB!

*The order in the presentation of game story and rules often depends on the type of game. In **tabletop and live action role-play games**, it is common to introduce the story first, helping players understand the setting and get into character before explaining how to play. However, **in escape games**, we recommend explaining the practical rules first: how to ask for help, whether objects can be used more than once, how to handle fragile materials, etc.. Always check which rules apply to your particular game in order to allow players to enter the game world prepared and stay immersed without interruptions.*



6 Gameplay

Observe actively and support with care

During the gameplay, stay present and available to players. Watch how players communicate, make decisions, handle frustration and involve one another. Notice who takes initiative, who stays quiet and whether anyone seems unable to participate.

Observation is an active responsibility, so avoid distractions such as phone use or unrelated conversations with other facilitators. Your attention helps you recognise when support is needed.

Allow space for productive struggle. A difficult puzzle, disagreement or unsuccessful strategy can become valuable learning material. Before intervening, consider whether players are still exploring or whether they are genuinely stuck. When support is needed, use the smallest intervention that helps: a question, a reminder, or a hint.

Keep track of time and coordinate with your team. If groups progress at different speeds, manage the pace so that everyone can join the reflection together, or make arrangements for separate debriefings, if needed. Remember to protect the time reserved for debriefing and don't sacrifice it for gameplay time.

7 De-roling

Help players leave their characters behind

After a role-play or an emotionally intense simulation, provide a transition out of the game: announce that the fictional situation has ended and invite participants to remove name tags or costume items, put down role cards, move to another space or introduce themselves again using their own names.

A short movement exercise or symbolic action can help mark the transition. Remind participants that the views and actions of a character do not necessarily represent those of the person playing them.

8 Debriefing

Help participants turn experience into learning

Debriefing gives participants time to make sense of what happened, hear other perspectives and connect the game to life beyond the session.

Arrange the group so everyone can see one another. Ask open questions, allow thinking time and avoid rushing to explain the "correct" lesson. Participants can draw different conclusions from the same experience.



A useful flow moves through four areas:

- **The experience: What happened?**

Invite participants to recall important moments, decisions and turning points.

- **Feelings and perspectives: How was it for you?**

Explore how people experienced the activity and how experiences differed.

- **Meaning: What can we learn from this?**

Look for patterns, assumptions and consequences. Explore what influenced decisions and what participants noticed about the topic or their own behaviour.

- **Application: What will we take forward?**

Connect the experience to situations outside the game. Ask what participants might question, try or do differently.

Share your observations taken from the gameplay as invitations to explore further aspects, and close with a concrete takeaway, question or possible action.

9 Follow-up and reset

Support the next steps

Offer relevant resources, handouts or activities that help participants explore the topic addressed by the game. A small selection with a clear purpose is easier to use than a long list of links.

After the session, compare observations and participant feedback with other facilitators and identify where people needed more help and what should change before the next session. Check and reset materials so the game is ready to use again.



NOTES





THE GAME MASTER CHECKLIST

1. PREPARE BEFOREHAND

- Know the whole game: instructions, materials, mission and learning purpose.
- Try it out. Anticipate where players might get stuck.
- Prepare extra materials, especially for multiple rounds.
- Divide team roles: who introduces, monitors, keeps time and debriefs?
- Plan the full session. Leave enough time for reflection!

2. GET THE SPACE READY

- Arrive early. Set up materials and test equipment.
- Plan team distribution and the space for debriefing.
- Be ready to welcome players when they arrive.

3. WELCOME THE GROUP

- Introduce yourself and explain what will happen.
- Present the game format, topic and approximate duration.
- Build curiosity!

4. INTRODUCE THE STORY

- Set the mood with your voice, posture and surroundings.
- Tell the story slowly and confidently.
- Make players' roles and mission clear.
- Start the timer.

5. EXPLAIN THE RULES

- Don't just read: explain.
- Cover the goal, possible actions, limits and playing area.
- Explain your role and how players can ask for help.
- Invite questions and check understanding.

Story or rules first? Follow the game's structure. For escape games, explain practical rules before the story so players can enter the game world without interruption.

6. STAY PRESENT DURING PLAY

- Observe participation, communication, energy and wellbeing.
- Give players space to explore, struggle and make decisions.
- Support without taking over. Offer a question or hint when needed.
- Stay attentive: put your phone away and avoid side conversations.
- Watch the time, coordinate with your team and remember useful moments for debriefing.



7. HELP PLAYERS STEP OUT

- Clearly announce that the game has ended.
- After role-play, help players leave their characters: remove role tags, shake out or say their real names.
- Give everyone a moment to settle before reflection.

8. TURN PLAY INTO LEARNING

- Gather where everyone can see and hear one another.
- Ask open questions. Listen and allow different perspectives.
- Follow the flow:
 - What happened?
 - How was it?
 - What does it mean?
 - What will you take forward?
- Share observations to open discussions.
- Finish with a concrete takeaway.

9. CLOSE AND FOLLOW UP

- Thank players and share useful resources or next steps.
- Reflect with your team: what worked, what needs adjusting?
- Reset materials and record improvements for next time.



This resource was developed as a result of the international training course "Facilitator's Playground", organized in January 2026 in Estonia as part of the Erasmus+ KA1 Accreditation of Shokkin Group Estonia, funded by the Erasmus+ programme through the Estonian National Agency.



Shokkin Group Estonia

We are a youth organization with the main aim of empowering young people of Estonia to live a pro-active lifestyle by providing them with opportunities to develop competencies for personal, professional and social growth. We love educational games, urban arts and outdoor education.

See what we are up to and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



Co-funded by
the European Union



erasmus+ and
european solidarity
corps agency

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.