Location: Nairobi & Mombasa, Kenya
Dates: May 19–29, 2025
Organized by: Africa Alliance of YMCAs (AAYMCA) through the Africa Rennissance Hub
Supported by: Y-Global & Brot für die Welt
Participating Organizations: YMCAs from Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Kenya, South Sudan, Namibia, Youth Peace Makers of Tanzania, and Y-Global Tanzania

1: Introduction

This report summarizes the outcomes of the AAYMCA Games Design and Ethnography Masterclass, hosted across Nairobi and Mombasa between May 19 and 29, 2025. The masterclass was organized with the overarching goal of strengthening the innovation, programmatic, and research capacities of 19 youth workers, staff, and organizational members from participating YMCAs and strategic partners. The initiative was coordinated by the Africa Renaissance Hub of AAYMCA, with the technical facilitation of ThinkPlace Africa and a seasoned ethnographer consultant. The workshop was made possible through the generous financial and institutional support of Y-Global and Brot für die Welt.

The masterclass was designed in two interlinked phases, each conducted in a different city and focusing on a specific set of skills and conceptual frameworks. The first phase, held in Nairobi from May 19 to 23, focused on the integration of game design as a tool for youth engagement and social transformation. Participants explored design thinking as an approach to co-create low-cost, high-impact educational games. This segment emphasized participatory learning, creative problem-solving, and the systemic application of innovation to youth development work.

The second phase, conducted in Mombasa from May 26 to 29, transitioned the group into the domain of research and ethnography. This phase introduced the theory and practice of ethnographic research, focusing on community-centered approaches to data collection and analysis. Participants examined the philosophical and ethical foundations of ethnographic methods, including feminist, Afrocentric, queer, and disability-lens approaches to research. The training was highly experiential, culminating in a live field exercise along the Mama Ngina Drive Market, where participants applied newly acquired tools to engage with community members.

Together, these dual training modules delivered a comprehensive capacity-building experience. The convergence of game design and ethnographic practice demonstrated how innovation and evidence can be jointly harnessed to drive socially responsive programming. The workshop not only built individual competencies but also deepened cross-border collaboration among African YMCAs and aligned stakeholders, offering new pathways for localized and impactful youth engagement strategies.

2.0 Training content

Game Design for Social Impact through Design Thinking-Nairobi Sessions (May 19–23, 2025)

The first phase of the masterclass in Nairobi provided a rich and rigorous learning experience designed to equip youth development professionals with the tools, strategies, and collaborative frameworks to harness game design as a transformative approach to youth engagement. The sessions were intentionally crafted around the principles of design thinking—a human-centered, iterative process that fosters innovation through empathy, ideation, prototyping, and testing. With participants drawn from across seven countries, the sessions also served to strengthen inter-country exchange, build networks of practice, and promote regional ownership of youth innovation across the African YMCA movement.

Key Objectives:
- Strengthen capacities to ideate, prototype, and test games as educational and advocacy tools.
- Foster an understanding of game mechanics through design thinking and participatory methodologies.
- Promote co-creation across national and organizational teams.

Session Overview

1. **Understanding the YMCA and Vision 2030:** The opening session grounded participants in the Pan-African identity and mission of the YMCA movement, specifically the Vision 2030 strategic framework. This vision reaffirms the centrality of young people as agents of transformation and situates innovation as a critical pathway to achieving youth justice, civic engagement, and organizational resilience. The facilitators emphasized how game design, rooted in play, learning, and imagination, can serve as a viable medium to catalyze youth agency and intergenerational dialogue.
2. **The AAYMCA Innovation Landscape:** This session presented findings from the AAYMCA Innovations Audit, which mapped both existing and emerging innovations across the continent. Participants engaged with data illustrating trends in community-led interventions, barriers to scaling innovation, and institutional gaps that constrain experimentation. Through discussion, participants critically reflected on their program contexts and began identifying areas where game-based tools could support greater reach, relevance, and inclusion.
3. **Design Thinking: Principles and Practice**: This pivotal session offered a deep dive into the five stages of design thinking: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test;

anchored in real-world application and participatory exercises. Through this stage, the emphasis was on the fact that design thinking is not a linear checklist but a cyclical and iterative process. Each stage built upon the previous one while allowing for revisiting and refining ideas as new insights emerged.

A. The Empathize stage required participants to move beyond assumptions and deeply engage with the lived experiences of their intended beneficiaries. Through empathy mapping, stakeholder interviews (simulated), and storytelling, participants gained a clearer understanding of users' feelings, frustrations, and aspirations. This emotional and cognitive immersion helped cultivate a mindset of compassion and curiosity. Participants practiced active listening techniques and role-played potential users of their games to uncover meaningful insights.

B. Next, the Define stage challenged teams to distill their findings into a clear and actionable problem statement. Using tools such as Point of View (POV) statements and problem framing matrices, each team worked to articulate user needs and root causes. Facilitators stressed the importance of focusing on 'needs' rather than 'solutions' at this stage. Participants learned to craft concise definitions that served as design anchors throughout the remaining stages.

C. During the Ideate phase, the energy shifted toward divergent thinking. This stage encouraged quantity over perfection, welcoming wild ideas without judgment. Using creative techniques like "How Might We" questions, Brainwriting, and Crazy 8s sketching, participants generated a wide array of possible solutions. To structure ideation, the facilitators introduced methods such as SCAMPER (Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to another use, Eliminate, Reverse) and lotus diagrams. Teams were pushed to defer criticism and build on each other's suggestions, fostering a playful and imaginative atmosphere.

D. The Prototype stage transformed ideas into a tangible form. Participants created low-fidelity mock-ups of their game concepts using everyday materials such as paper, dice, markers, and recycled objects. The emphasis was not on perfection but on speed and expression, allowing teams to explore how their ideas might work in the real world. Prototyping served as a thinking tool, not just a demonstration tool. Facilitators highlighted that prototyping allows designers to externalize assumptions, reduce ambiguity, and prepare for feedback.

E. Finally, the Test stage involved presenting prototypes to peers for critique and validation. Using structured feedback sessions modeled on "I Like, I Wish, What If," teams received constructive input on usability, impact, clarity, and appeal. Testing was reframed not as evaluation, but as learning. Participants reflected on how testing often led them to revisit earlier stages—refining their user definitions, ideating new features, or improving gameplay mechanics. The iterative nature of testing revealed that design is a fluid conversation between idea and user experience.

Throughout the session, participants developed key outputs to solidify their understanding of design thinking, including detailed personas, user journey maps, and critical assumptions. Personas helped humanize the design process, providing fictional but data-grounded characters that represented typical users of the game. Journey maps trace the emotional and behavioral path users might follow while interacting with a game, illuminating pain points and opportunities.

Assumption mapping allowed teams to identify and test beliefs that could make or break their designs.

A critical insight that emerged from these exercises was the transformative value of embracing failure. Participants were encouraged to view early-stage flops, glitches, and misunderstandings not as setbacks, but as valuable data. The facilitators also introduced the concept of "design ethics," urging participants to reflect on the consequences and inclusivity of their games. Questions such as "Who is excluded by this game?" or "How does this reflect power dynamics in society?" deepened the conversation. These reflections pushed participants to think about equity, accessibility, and cultural resonance as they designed solutions for young people across diverse African contexts.

Game Design- Facilitated by ThinkPlace Africa

In addition to the topics covered during the first week of the Masterclass, Think Place Africa took the stage from the 21st to lead the session on Games Design, using Design thinking. This session was a dynamic and highly participatory learning session that immersed participants in the principles and practices of designing games with purpose, with a focus on using games as tools for social transformation. The workshop provided both theoretical grounding and hands-on opportunities to co-create, test, and reflect on games intended to address real-world issues. Drawing from lived experiences, cultural contexts, and strategic design thinking, participants were guided through a powerful process that highlighted the relevance of games in solving complex issues.

At the heart of the workshop was the recognition that games are more than entertainment; they are participatory systems that can generate emotional resonance, critical reflection, and community engagement. Particularly in under-resourced or marginalized contexts, games offer a low-cost, youth-friendly, and adaptable medium to address pressing societal challenges. The facilitators led participants through a structured yet creative journey that began with foundational theories and culminated in co-designed, low-fidelity game prototypes.

The introductory session on Design thinking laid the conceptual groundwork for this segment of the workshop by exploring the three building blocks of game design: mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics. Mechanics refer to the rules and structure of a game, what players can or cannot do. Dynamics encompass how players interact with these rules and with one another, including elements like competition, cooperation, or strategy. Aesthetics capture the emotional and experiential qualities of the game, how it feels to play, and what emotional responses are evoked. Through reflection and facilitated discussion, participants were encouraged to think about games they had played in their childhood or in community settings and identify how those experiences had shaped their learning, decision-making, or resilience.

To deepen this understanding, the facilitators introduced a critical distinction between gamification and game-based learning. While both use elements of play, they operate differently. Gamification refers to the use of game-like elements (such as points, levels, badges, and competition) in non-game contexts to motivate behavior like encouraging punctuality, enhancing productivity, or promoting health-seeking behaviors. In contrast, game-based learning uses entire game systems, rules, narratives, goals, and feedback loops as the primary vehicle for delivering

learning or facilitating dialogue. This distinction helped participants clarify their design intentions and informed how they would later approach game creation during the practical segments of the workshop.

One of the standout features of the session was its commitment to inclusive and context-sensitive design. Participants were challenged to consider how their games could be made accessible and meaningful to diverse users. This included thinking about physical and cognitive abilities, literacy levels, gender dynamics, cultural symbols, and emotional triggers.

Building on this foundation, the workshop progressed into more hands-on and interactive phases. The first of these was the case study review segment, where participants discussed a range of existing games, both analog and digital, that had been used in development, education, or advocacy contexts. These case studies offered a window into how different game mechanics and strategies could be adapted to real-world themes such as public health, environmental action, conflict resolution, and youth leadership.

Following this, the group engaged in a **"Game Sprint" activity**, an intensive, time-bound creative session where participants were divided into three distinct groups based on their organizational identity and roles: YMCA staff, youth representatives, and Y-Global participants. Each group was tasked with co-designing a low-fidelity prototype of an original game concept, using basic materials such as cards, markers, flipcharts, tokens, and dice. The emphasis was on rapidly transforming ideas into playable forms, focusing on function rather than aesthetics.

This structure allowed each group to draw from their unique perspectives and lived experiences. The YMCA staff approached game design with a programmatic and facilitative lens, leveraging their experience in youth development and community engagement. The youth group brought fresh, grounded insights into what resonates with their peers, emphasizing authenticity, relatability, and emotional appeal. Meanwhile, the Y-Global participants contributed a more global development perspective, focusing on issues of inclusion, sustainability, and systems thinking.

Each team was guided to define their game's core objective, identify their target players, articulate the rules and mechanics, and think through the desired emotional and behavioral outcomes. The diversity of perspectives across groups enriched the design process, resulting in prototypes that were contextually relevant and creatively distinct. Facilitators circulated among the teams, offering real-time support and challenging participants to refine their design logic and ensure inclusivity and clarity.

The next phase of the workshop involved game testing and structured feedback. The team listened to each group present their games and provided feedback. This was a crucial step in the learning process. Each group evaluated the games on criteria such as clarity of rules, emotional engagement, inclusivity, alignment with stated goals, and playability. The feedback process was constructive and collaborative, focusing not on criticism but on identifying opportunities for improvement and creative growth. The final segment of the workshop was a **"Gallery Walk" and a collective reflection session**, where all teams displayed their refined game prototypes after the feedback and invited open feedback from peers and facilitators. This informal exhibition allowed participants to showcase their creativity, explain their design choices, and discuss how they might implement or scale their games in real-life settings. The gallery walk fostered a spirit

of celebration, mutual respect, and shared purpose, as participants recognized the depth of imagination and care that had gone into each design.

In closing, the AAYMCA led a debriefing dialogue, inviting participants to reflect on what they had learned not just about game design but about themselves as educators, community leaders, and agents of change. Many shared how the workshop had expanded their understanding of participatory methods, opened their minds to new forms of engagement, and challenged them to think more creatively about how to address complex issues with young people.

3.1 Mombasa Sessions (May 26–29, 2025)

The second phase of the masterclass took place in Mombasa, where participants transitioned from creative design work to deep ethnographic inquiry. This phase emphasized the value of immersive research, grounded in community realities and human stories, as a tool for transformative programming. Led by expert ethnographer Simekha Cynthia, LMSW;MA,MS,PhDC . In this session, participants explored the theory and practice of ethnography as a participatory, justice-oriented approach to understanding lived experiences. The Mombasa sessions built on the creative energy from Nairobi but shifted the focus toward listening, learning, and uncovering meaning through everyday realities. Ethnography was introduced not merely as a research method, but as a relational act, an invitation to see the world from the perspective of others, particularly those on the margins.

Core Concepts and Learning Themes
Participants were introduced to the philosophical roots of ethnographic practice, beginning with positionality and reflexivity. They learned that ethnographic research requires deep introspection about one's biases, social location, and power as a researcher. The facilitators emphasized feminist, Afrocentric, queer, and disability-inclusive approaches to ethnography underscoring the need for research that honors difference, challenges dominant narratives, and centers justice. A key theme was the ethical obligation of researchers to "do no harm" and to engage communities not as subjects but as partners. The training encouraged participants to embrace humility, patience, and radical empathy. Participants explored how ethnographic insights can enrich program design, amplify youth voices, and generate data that speaks to the realities of lived experience, especially in contexts of inequality and exclusion.

Methodology and Field Practice
The sessions were highly interactive, blending theory with practical skill-building. Participants practiced observation, note-taking, interviewing, and meaning-making techniques, including the use of field journals and photographic prompts. In small groups, they reviewed anonymized case examples to interpret behavior, generate hypotheses, and build empathy-driven narratives as well as research questions for their field visit. The culminating activity was a live ethnographic field exercise along Mombasa's vibrant Mama Ngina Waterfront Market. Here, participants engaged directly with local vendors, youth, and everyday citizens through structured conversations and guided observation. With research prompts tailored around youth livelihood, informal economies, and social belonging, participants gathered stories, reflections, and contextual data in real time. Many described the experience as eye-opening, moving them from assumptions to insight.

A structured debrief followed the fieldwork, during which participants processed their experiences through collective dialogue, storytelling, and data synthesis. They identified emerging patterns and themes, reflecting on how these insights could inform program development

Challenges

One of the most frequently cited challenges by participants was the overall duration of the masterclass. Spanning ten consecutive days across two cities, the two-week training was intense especially given the dual focus on game design and ethnographic research, both of which require cognitive energy, deep reflection, and active participation. Many participants acknowledged that the extended timeframe was physically and mentally demanding, particularly for those balancing organizational responsibilities back home or managing personal fatigue.

Despite this, the challenge was largely mitigated by the well-structured approach to facilitation, the dynamic pacing of sessions, and the immersive learning environments created by the organizing team. The use of interactive, hands-on methods kept the energy high, while the change of scenery, from the urban innovation setting in Nairobi to the coastal, community-grounded experience in Mombasa helped refresh the group. Furthermore, the professionalism and expertise of the facilitators played a crucial role in maintaining participant motivation and enthusiasm throughout. Their sensitivity to participant energy levels, integration of movement and creativity, and attention to mental well-being helped ease the strain of the intensive schedule.

Another minor challenge mentioned was the time pressure during group work sessions, especially in the game sprint and field-based ethnographic assignment. While these high-pressure activities encouraged rapid ideation and decision-making, a few participants expressed a desire for slightly more time to refine their outputs before peer review. Nonetheless, many agreed that these constraints actually spurred creativity and simulated real-life programmatic conditions where innovation must occur within limited time and resources.

Lessons Learned

A key lesson emerging from the masterclass experience is the realization that combining two complex, hands-on methodologies, game design and ethnographic researchwithin a single, intensive learning program is both demanding and deeply enriching. For many p articipants, this was the first time they had been exposed to either methodology in such depth, let alone both within a continuous learning arc. The structure challenged them to shift between design-oriented thinking (which prioritizes innovation and prototyping) and research-oriented thinking (which emphasizes listening, observation, and reflection). This mental toggling was, at times, exhausting, but ultimately fostered a richer and more holistic understanding of how innovation and evidence can work hand-in-hand.

This dual-method approach underscored the importance of interdisciplinary learning in youth work. Participants noted how skills acquired during the first week such as empathy mapping, ideation, and iterative prototyping complemented the ethnographic skills introduced in the second week, such as cultural observation, community listening, and participatory inquiry. The

design thinking framework helped them approach research with a user-centered mindset, while the ethnographic lens helped them see the deeper cultural and social dynamics that influence how young people experience programs. This synergy helped participants not only design more grounded solutions but also understand the "why" behind the problems they aim to solve.

From an institutional standpoint, the Africa Alliance of YMCAs gained valuable insights into the feasibility and potential of delivering longer-term, cross-cutting capacity-building programs. As the first of its kind for AAYMCA, this two-week masterclass demonstrated that with the right facilitators, pedagogical planning, and logistical support, it is possible to execute intensive, high-impact training experiences. The successful implementation across multiple countries and contexts revealed strong demand for this type of deeper learning, especially when grounded in real-world application and peer exchange.

Moreover, a noteworthy insight from the participants was how the facilitators managed to make the experience feel engaging and manageable despite its length. The intentional use of participatory methodologies, storytelling, collaborative activities, and structured reflection created a rhythm that minimized burnout. Many shared that, although the days were long, they seldom felt overwhelmed due to the sense of shared purpose, camaraderie, and creativity fostered throughout.

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