

## DigiCloser - Virtual reality for engaging youth and promoting cultural heritage

Virtual Reality as a tool for skills development and recreation for children and youth, creating the opportunity to decrease geographical remoteness and bring people closer together.

### EAFRD-funded projects

**Location:** Rundāle, Latvia

**Programming period:** 2014-2020

**Priority:** P6 - Social inclusion and local development

**Focus Area:** Local development

**Measures:** M19 - LEADER CLLD

**Funding:** Total budget: 5 247 (EUR)

EAFRD: 3 211 (EUR)

National/Regional: 1 511 (EUR)

**Timeframe:** 07/2022 - 05/2023

**Project promoter:** NGO "We own the world" (Mums pieder pasaule)

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### Summary

To enhance recreational options and foster skills development among the children and youth in the small rural parish of Rundāle in Latvia, the non-governmental organisation "The World is Ours" implemented a virtual reality LEADER project. The initiative involved the acquisition of essential resources, including four sets of virtual reality glasses, a computer, video camera, tablet, and microphones. These hardware components were needed for a number of digital activities, which included the digitisation of historical materials, the creation of excursion materials for Svitene Manor, the production of educational videos exploring the history of Svitene Manor and the local population, and the series "Cooking with a Local Resident", featuring the rediscovery of traditional recipes. These digital undertakings not only served as a means of learning but also contributed to the objective of promoting the rich cultural and historical heritage of the village. The project enabled young people to access new technology and opportunities.



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### Project results

- The project successfully involved 50 youths in diverse activities, reaching those who were previously inactive.
- The activities fostered community participation and strengthened social cohesion by pioneering a novel free-time activity for the local population, providing an immersive experience in virtual reality.
- The project contributed to preserving and conserving cultural heritage. The use of state-of-the-art digitalisation equipment helped preserve and share the cultural heritage of the region. Notably, historical materials from Sventene Manor, traditional recipes, and stories from seniors have been digitised, ensuring their accessibility for future generations.

### Key lessons and recommendations

Focus on executing a comprehensive umbrella-style project. This entails not only the acquisition of equipment, but also the inclusion of various use cases for virtual reality interaction, including, but not limited to, strategic planning, training sessions, and meetings. This approach ensures a more holistic and impactful implementation within diverse rural settings.



## Context

The NGO 'The World is Ours' is a dynamic youth organisation based in the quaint village of Rundāle in Latvia, with a population of approximately 400 residents. The NGO operates across a number of municipalities, focusing on children and young individuals between the ages of 13 to 30. The organisation operates from a historical manor house in Rundāle, a significant landmark in the area.

Dedicated to fostering engaging leisure activities, 'The World is Ours' strives to provide local youth with enriching experiences and valuable skills. The goal is to instil a feeling of pride and sense of belonging through cultural heritage, skills acquisition, and stimulating experiences, across various digital themes.



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Virtual reality and its ability to encompass a wide range of experiences provides stimulating and engaging activities for young people, such as virtual travel to different global destinations, artistic endeavours such as drawing and painting, and social interactions in virtual classrooms and environments. These activities open new horizons and skills for children and youth who may otherwise feel geographically isolated and with few opportunities.

The idea of this innovative project was not only to respond to the evolving interests of local youth, but also to establish a unique offering within the municipality.

As part of the Local Action Group 'Bauska District Partnership,' the applicant was able to complement EAFRD support, with additional backing from the European Social Fund. Further support stemmed from the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Finance Mechanism.

## Objectives

The main objectives of the LEADER project were to enhance the diversity of recreational pursuits for children and young people, and to provide them with opportunities for acquiring new skills. The initiative also aimed to foster the engagement of young people with their local cultural and historical heritage.

## Activities

Project activities included:

- For this multi-faceted initiative, a collaborative approach with seniors, cultural workers, educators, and other village activists was used to strengthen the youth engagement process.
- Acquisition of Equipment: Procuring essential equipment, including four sets of virtual reality glasses, a computer, video camera, tablet, and microphones.
- Digitalisation Initiatives: A number of activities were implemented:
- Digitising historical archives from Svitene Manor.
- Compiling and publicising short stories derived from digitised materials.
- Developing excursion materials showcasing the historical significance of Svitene Manor.
- Producing educational videos showcasing the history of Svitene Manor and its inhabitants.
- Creating a series comprising a minimum of 10 videos titled 'Cooking with a Local Resident,' where youth explore ancestral recipes, connecting them with the historical narrative of Svitene Manor.
- Virtual Reality Afternoons: Scheduling regular VR afternoons every second Sunday, offering a platform for young individuals to familiarise themselves with virtual reality glasses. These sessions provided an interactive environment featuring curated content such as videos, games, and virtual chat rooms.

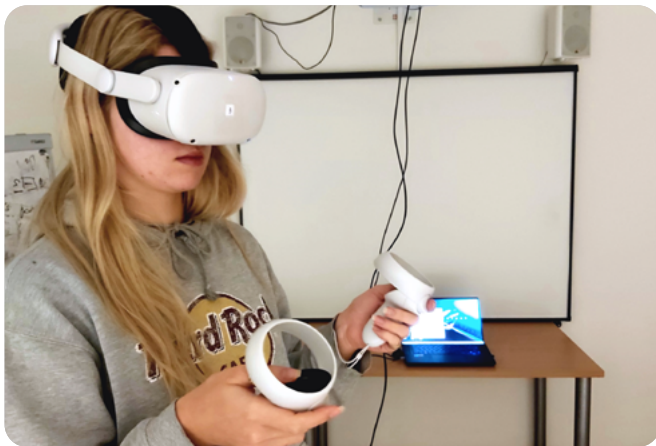
## Main results

- The project successfully involved 50 youths from the village and neighbouring municipalities across the various activities, reaching those who were previously inactive.
- The inclusive approach fostered community participation and strengthened social cohesion by pioneering a novel free-time activity for the local population, providing an immersive experience in virtual reality.



This initiative has introduced residents to a spectrum of activities, including gaming, artistic pursuits, virtual meetings, travel simulations, and participation in training sessions.

- > The project contributed to the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage. The use of state-of-the-art digitalisation equipment helped to preserve and share the cultural heritage of the region. Notably, historical materials from Svitene Manor, traditional recipes, and stories from seniors have been digitised, ensuring their accessibility and conservation for future generations.



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- > The successful implementation of the project has instilled a spirit of exploration and innovation within the local community. Residents are now actively seeking new opportunities in the realm of virtual reality. The NGO, in collaboration with local youth, is preparing additional proposals to facilitate the acquisition of advanced skills and knowledge in using virtual reality technology. This forward-looking approach aligns with our commitment to continuous learning and the sustained enhancement of opportunities within the community.

## Key lessons and recommendations

- > Focus on executing a comprehensive umbrella-style project. This entails not only the acquisition of equipment, but also the inclusion of various use cases for virtual reality interaction, including but not limited to strategic planning, training sessions, and meetings. This approach ensures a more holistic and impactful implementation within diverse rural settings.
- > Be mindful to integrate comparable equipment for both entertainment and educational objectives to maximise the added value of the project.
- > The use of virtual reality as an innovative means of communication, particularly for young people in remote rural regions, can reduce geographical disparities and foster a heightened sense of community.

## Quote

*“Demand to use VR exceeds opportunities. Those who are not using it can follow what is shown in virtual reality on the computer and comment, learn and discover together. It has been a great success not just as a unique free time activity, but also as an opportunity for youth workers to involve children and youth that have not come to the community centre before.”*

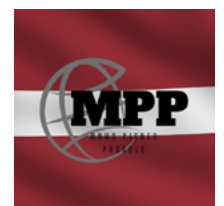
Project stakeholder

## Additional information:

<https://mumspiederpasaule.com/>

<www.facebook.com/mumspiederpasaule/>

<www.instagram.com/mppasaule/>



Funded by  
the European Union

