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Beyond Play: Researching the Transformative Power of Digital Gaming in Deeply Mediatized Societies

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Abstract

Digital gaming has evolved from a peripheral activity to a central aspect of mediatized lifeworlds, significantly impacting media culture and society. Despite its pervasive influence, digital gaming research often occupies a marginalized status within broader academic disciplines. This article advocates for recognizing digital gaming as an integral part of the media landscape and understanding its role within a deeply mediatized society. By adopting a holistic perspective, this study emphasizes the interconnectedness of digital gaming with other media forms and cultural practices, highlighting its significance in driving digital transformation. Therefore, we argue for a dual development: one that removes gaming from its segregated special status and recognizes it as an integral part of the media landscape, and another that situates the unique aspects of gaming within the broader context of a society deeply transformed and shaped by media; capturing both its significance and its role as part of the whole. We elaborate on the concept of gamevironments bridging deep mediatization research and communicative figurations to comprehend change brought about by the transformative power of digital gaming in deeply mediatized societies. Gamevironments encompass transmedia figurations and narratives, cross-media adaptations, social interactions, user-generated content, and the cultural and educational impacts of gaming. We discuss the analytical potential of gamevironments along five distinct yet interrelated areas (making of gamevironments, values in and of gamevironments, governance of gamevironments, education in and for gamevironments, and researching gamevironments) to provide a comprehensive view of digital gaming's transformative impact on digital society.

Keywords

communicative figurations; consequence; deep mediatization; digital gaming; emergence; gamevironment; media cultures; transformation

1. Introduction

Digital gaming is no longer a peripheral phenomenon in society. Computer, console, as well as mobile games, are now—and have been for some time—an integral part of deeply mediatized lifeworlds (Engelstätter & Ward, 2022; Wimmer, 2012). They have become one of the dominant sectors in the media industry in terms of economic relevance and user engagement (Goh et al., 2023). Furthermore, games and gaming have been catalysts for the emergence of unique media cultures, playing a crucial role in mediatized everyday culture (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Game development has become well-established and professionalized but also a vivid arena for DIY-amateurism (Aasman et al., 2021) and exploration of technologies and skills (e.g., in modding communities; Gee & Tran, 2016). In this trajectory, digital gaming has fostered innovative forms of media expression and established contexts and norms for communicative interaction. Beyond gaming-specific contexts, the consequences of digital gaming in deeply mediatized societies influence various aspects of our social and cultural interactions (Kowert & Quandt, 2017). It is remarkable that while other new media—such as written culture, radio, television, the internet, and recently communicative AI (Hepp et al., 2023; McLuhan, 1995, 2011; Meyrowitz, 2005; Ong, 2012)—have been thoroughly researched and discussed for their societal impact from their inception, a similar perspective on gaming is lacking. Despite its widespread popularity and influence, gaming's effects on digital life, thinking, and orientation remain underexplored, even though its prominence and impact rivals that of earlier media innovations. Rather than delving into the reasons for this notable absence, this article aims to illustrate how a similar approach can be applied to understanding the transformative power of digital gaming within deeply mediatized societies.

Since the very advent of gaming from the rise of arcade culture (Kocurek, 2015) to the domestication of computer gaming (Haddon, 1992), peripheral media emerged. The proliferation of video game journalism, ranging from again community-based amateurism to professionalized editorial work falls into this category (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023; Perreault & Vos, 2020). Against this backdrop, digital gaming can be seen as an incubator of creative formats of public expression, from more traditional magazines and participatory television shows to live coverage of eSports events, from print to online portals and multimedia online content, and the hybridization between journalism and opinionated influencer-style communication (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023); highlighting some of the boundary work between journalism and interlopers (Eldridge, 2018). YouTube and streaming cultures where gamers record themselves playing and commenting on games, current affairs, and whatever else (Radde-Antweiler et al., 2014) created subcultures centered around gaming entertainment and commentary (Wolf, 2012). Platforms like Twitch, perpetuating practices from the early days of gaming, became global hubs for translocally organized gaming communities, fostering a sense of community and belonging beyond their territorial location (Hepp & Vogelgesang, 2008; Quandt & Wimmer, 2008; Selnow, 1984; Wolling et al., 2008). Additionally, under the concept of gamification, principles and elements of gaming are increasingly transferred to non-gaming contexts (e.g., health prevention and educational settings; Johnson et al., 2016; Raczkowski & Schrape, 2018; Walz & Deterding, 2015). Gaming therefore diffuses a more playful and experimental approach to the appropriation of new media formats or platforms with a much wider impact on society's communication practices than more technical pioneer groups such as DIY_MAKER (Wolf & Wudarski, 2018). Digital gaming has long since found its role as an accelerator and driver of the diffusion of new digital technologies into society, bringing about particular social and cultural formations—like the arcade (Kocurek, 2015)—or impacting existing formations and arrangements of mediated communication with their long-standing logics of inclusion or exclusion

(Kiesler et al., 1985). First, the computerization of the private home (Haddon, 1992), then the proliferation of gaming whilst on the go and its huge impact on the evolution of mobile devices, mobile and smartphones respectively, and currently digital gaming's role in penetrating society with virtual reality technologies (Foxman, 2021) and shaping an understanding of AI applications in playful contexts and beyond. Imminent and possible technological futures were presented at tech fairs (Schwarzenegger & Balbi, 2020) and gaming conventions (Trattner, 2020) where new games, consoles, and technologies are showcased to the world, influencing, and synchronizing digital gaming culture and trends globally. In this regard, digital gaming opens venues to engage with digital futures that might come about and the impact they might bring to our social world—on the level of technologies to engage with the imminent future as well as through the content of the games that is simulated within a game.

Digital games and gaming are located at the forefront of change in media culture and society, as the examples above demonstrate. Yet, digital games research often occupies an "odd place" within the broader disciplines in which it is conducted, as Chess and Consalvo (2022) have noted. The study of digital games and gaming is frequently relegated to niches, and the scholars involved often hold an outsider status—whether this status is imposed or embraced—engaging in activities that are seen as out of the ordinary and beyond the typical scope of their disciplines.

In this article, we advocate for a holistic perspective that shifts from analyzing games and gaming in a separate field and in a sort of self-sufficient seclusion to understanding digital gaming as an influential part of a deeply mediatized society that has consequences for its broader communicative practices and that therefore research on digital gaming should be an integral part of communication and media studies nowadays. This approach emphasizes the necessity to place digital gaming within digital media environments. We call out to researchers of deep mediatization in and beyond media and communication scholarship, emphasizing that research into deep mediatized societies can no longer ignore gaming studies and the rich research performed there, but has to include them as part of the research objective. We elaborate on the notion and concept of gamevironments (Radde-Antweiler et al., 2014) to research how our communicative practices and their contexts/situations transform through gaming (related) practices. Digital gaming is therefore portrayed as a focal point for media theoretical, practical, and ethical challenges, allowing us to derive insights into broader dimensions of digital transformation and life in a digital society. These dimensions include media appropriation, technology acceptance, social and individual consequences, new communication formats, innovative learning practices, implications for memory culture, and the mediation of discursive worldviews, knowledge, and values. The deep integration of gaming practices into everyday practices and social relationships, and their diverse intersections with other phenomena of media communication and digital transformation raise various communication, ethical, educational, and media scientific questions. This positions computer games and gaming as a comprehensive subject within communication and media studies, demanding transmedia, diachronic, situational, and long-term transformative perspectives on (dis)empowerment and (in)equality. Integrating digital games research with perspectives on media change and deep mediatization allows us to move from merely examining the consequences of games and gaming to exploring the emergence, maintenance, transformation, and occasional disappearance of phenomena, practices, and cultures within gamevironments. This opens new vistas for change in digital gaming, with digital gaming, and through digital gaming. So, let's level up and press start to continue.

2. Research Relevance on Change in Digital Gaming in a Deeply Mediatized Society

Media and communication research is somewhat obsessed with change and newness (Menke & Schwarzenegger, 2019). Speaking metaphorically, Driessens (2023) described change as the dominant gene immediately sticking out of the DNA of communication inquiry. Change is typically seen as both imminent and perpetual (Postill, 2012), and as Balbi (2023) has noted, for decades now, people have believed they are living in a time of digital revolution. It may be reassuring and comforting for people (and academics) to believe they are witnessing a decisive moment when the most profound changes are happening or about to happen. One of the main lenses to address change over time in media and communication research is the mediatization approach.

Within mediatization research, the technologies, interactions, and implications of digital gaming have largely played a subordinate role. While the scope of mediatization research has continuously expanded—recently encompassing the deep mediatization of culture and society (Hepp, 2020)—gaming has rarely caught significant attention. As Hepp, Bolin, et al. (2024) summarized the field's evolution beyond its origins in mass media research, "expanding its scope, mediatization research now delves into a wider range of cultural and societal domains, including fashion, war, sports, finance, and everyday life." Gaming can be seen as an element subsumed within the notion of everyday life (Kaun & Fast, 2014), but it is not explicitly mentioned or indexed. While it is broadly accepted that media and their infrastructures uniquely "weave" themselves into nearly all domains of social life, there is a notable absence of gaming-related studies in the inquiry of transforming communications in times of deep mediatization (Hepp, Breiter, & Hasebrink, 2018). We find this discomforting, not so much because a topic we care about does not find the attention we argue it deserves from media and communication scholars researching the digital transformation of media, culture, and society. Instead, we argue that digital gaming provides a prime example of the emergence, diffusion, and transformation of a media phenomenon in its entirety (Wolf & Wudarski, 2018). It is very rare that the life cycle of cultural and technological innovations can be observed in its completeness. Digital gaming would provide such a case, but it is not being adopted to its full potential by media and communication scholars.

The engagement with change over time and digital transformation in media and communication history—a field devoted to transformation in media, culture, and society—again demonstrates a suspicious absence of almost anything gaming-related (Balbi, Ribeiro, et al., 2021), unless gaming or digital games are the main focus of the work. A few notable exceptions appear to prove the rule (Balbi & Magaudda, 2018; Schwarzenegger et al., 2022; Stöber, 2013). For example, Jesper Verhoef's 1980s and 1990s media history manifesto (Verhoef, 2023), an enigmatic call to inquire the neglected histories of new technologies in these seminal decades, mentions Nintendo very briefly in a footnote but does not discuss Atari, Commodore, or Amiga—the powerful and fascinating gaming systems through which many people of those generations first encountered the potentials, joys, and conflicts that digital technologies could bring into their homes. This negligence becomes significant in its outcome: While gaming might not be decisive for many questions regarding digital transformation and change, its absence leaves an incomplete picture. We need to understand digital gaming and gaming-related or gaming-derived practices not only explicitly connected to core gaming but must additionally recognize the deep-rooted influence gaming might have on all other activities in a deeply mediatized world. Consequently, a perspective that takes the transformative power of digital gaming seriously not only addresses when and how people engage with digital gaming, but also what they do when they don't and how they do other things.

A world in which digital gaming exists is fundamentally different from one without it. This seemingly banal observation gains a significant trajectory when considered comprehensively within the context of media change and transformation. Following Balbi (2015), Scolari (2013, 2023), and others, we argue that the advent of new media, such as digital games, affects and transforms all pre-existing media within a media ecology. Digital games enter the media environment and not only carve out their place and role within this ecology, but also establish relationships with previously existing media forms and their users. This process changes the functions of media and user practices, forcing established media to adapt or redefine their unique purposes. Yet, importantly, imagining these developments as just the consequence of digital gaming would be shortsighted. Instead, we observe a complex interplay of emergence, expansion, and diffusion, sometimes of resistance and persistence against change (Balbi, Hagedoorn, et al., 2023). This interplay causes consequences on the one hand, but on the other, it opens a space of possibilities for new forms and formats to emerge, including those around older media:

> As games and play move from the periphery of playgrounds, living rooms and arcade halls toward the center of our cultural, social and economic life, so cultural, social economic actors become interested in shaping an harnessing them for their purposes: other realms of life impress their forms on games and play. (Deterding, 2015)

Digital gaming, therefore, should be understood not only for its direct impact but also for its broader influence within the dynamic media landscape:

> The point here is that video games and their tools are integral parts of the broader media industries. Companies have bought and sold products, processes, and ideas, attempting to crack the code on video games (so to speak) for two decades now, and the result is that video game content has diffused into everything. (Chess & Consalvo, 2022)

For instance, the emergence of digital gaming expands the options for media entertainment: Listening to music, reading, watching TV, or going to the movies are complemented by the option of gaming, thereby redefining their roles in users' repertoires of practices. Digital gaming introduces—and is introduced with (Moretti, 2023)—new expectations for the "good life" (Moretti, 2023), imaginations of the future, fantasies, desires, and experiences for those who can use the technology and play games, as well as for those who cannot afford gaming or lack interest. Actively rejecting gaming offers a path to distinction in the Bourdieusian sense, but it also necessitates thoughtful communication and self-positioning. This approach sets one apart while requiring careful navigation of social perceptions. When digital gaming exists in the world, whether we engage with it or not, it calls for a stance and expression. The world is changed by the presence of digital gaming, but how this change plays out, evolves, and is appropriated in different localities around the globe or within countries remains to be observed and clarified. The dissemination of home computer technology (for gaming purposes), gaming consoles, game genres, and more, results from the transnational flow of hardware, software, and information. This process makes visible the complex and diverse local appropriation of potentially global technologies and practices (Wasiak, 2014). The advent of digital gaming can illuminate political, legal, technological, and cultural influences in the making of "glocality" (Meyrowitz, 2005) in digital gaming—specific local expressions within the context of globalized communication on the one hand and local media systems and cultures on the other.

Generally speaking, the impact of digital gaming on society is often described with a focus on the consequences for players at an individual level, particularly during vulnerable stages of the human life cycle. This focus tends to highlight mostly detrimental effects, such as cognitive and psychological harm, violence, and addiction (Burkhardt & Lenhard, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Wolf, 2007). Occasionally, beneficial consequences are noted, particularly in the context of informal learning and education (Clark et al., 2016; Ito et al., 2009; L.-H. Wang et al., 2022; Wolf & Wudarski, 2018). Also, collective consequences playing out for the whole of specific societies or social domains can be addressed, e.g., as studies about gamification demonstrate—although these studies tend to examine gamification more from an instructional (Sailer & Homner, 2020) or a managerial (Hammedi et al., 2021) point of view. In this trajectory, gaming and gamers have long been described with a sense of exceptionalism and formalism, treating them as "the other." This perspective then characterizes individuals, collectives, or domains primarily through their relationship to games and gaming, rather than considering games as just one strand of media engagement in hybrid media environments. Communication and media researchers have otherwise acknowledged that in media-saturated societies, it is not a single media offering that drives personal or social and cultural change. Instead, the role of specific media for society, collectives, or individuals should be assessed against the whole of the media environment, domain-specific media ensembles, and individually curated media repertoires through which people navigate and make sense of the digital realm and participate in digitalized societies. With gaming, it appears, we are not there yet. It is almost a constant of communication history that the advent of new communication technologies has perpetually been welcomed with reservations, resentments, and rejection as perilous. However, it is rather unique to games and gaming that communication and media studies as a collective body of knowledge production have only partially overcome this initial stage of concerned curiosity and cursoriness. Ignorance of games and gaming is still viable for communication studies engagement with (deep) mediatization of culture and society.

Therefore, we need a dual development: one that removes gaming from its segregated special status and recognizes it as an integral part of the media landscape, and another that situates the unique aspects of gaming within the broader context of society deeply transformed and shaped by media; capturing both its significance and its role as part of the whole. Only through this dual approach can we comprehensively understand and appropriately appreciate the role of gaming in a deeply mediatized society. The strong focus on the consequences of change brought about by media, however, may play out in peculiar ways with the case of gaming, but it is characteristic of how communication and media research and related fields address their subjects of interest. In a forthcoming article, Hepp (in press) argues that most research in media and communication studies revolves around the idea that the establishment of new media and infrastructures has consequences for culture and society. According to him, this leads to an implicit questioning of the consequences of these developments and innovations as a main orientation in the field. The alleged relevance of the phenomenon under investigation is then derived from its status as an integral part of a globalized media-related transformation. The research into consequences requires retrospective and reconstructive thinking that takes the influential factor as something that is given, e.g., through the innovation of new media technologies or practices and sees change as its consequence. In contrast to that, he advocates for a re-shifting of our focus from consequence to emergence. A concept of emergence underscores that media, infrastructures, related practices, and cultures do not just appear to then have consequences but that they arise and are socially (co-)constructed within specific social configurations that must be understood within their broader societal and cultural contexts. This entails studying the development of new media technologies as well as the transformations of culture and society, thereby

offering insights into the complex interrelationships between digital gaming and broader societal trends. Research should thus encompass both the study of the development of new media and communication technologies and the transformations of culture and society. Therefore, combined research into consequence and emergence is called for.

Digital gaming, in our understanding, provides a prime example to illustrate the potential of such an emergence approach, as it calls for perspectives that situate gaming in wider social contexts and as part of changing media environments and transformative societies. We propose a perspective on digital gaming that is capable of viewing gaming as part of a whole, anchored within the overall phenomena of deep mediatization and digital transformations of society. This approach recognizes that digital gaming itself:

a) Generates its own emergent cultural and social formations and practices;
b) Is disseminated through these formations and practices, spreads and expands further in the process of diffusion, and has consequences as it begins to play a role in societal (transformation) processes beyond gaming;
c) Evolves and changes through influences from beyond gaming in a complex entanglement of technological, social, cultural, economic, and legal factors;
d) Is related to the transformation and emergence of new cultural and social formations of media communication beyond digital games, including interactions with older media;
e) Requires agency and effort to maintain and sustain themselves over time and in the face of technological, social, and cultural change;
f) And, furthermore, this perspective acknowledges that singular cultural and social formations and practices may disappear because they become obsolete, are replaced by others, or merge into new forms, while new digital forms and formations of gaming can continuously emerge in an ongoing process of emergence.

Combining these elements requires a complex, holistic, context-sensitive, and long-term perspective, which we believe we have found in the concept of gamevironments for the case of digital gaming. Gamevironments can be understood and conceptualized as gaming-related communicative figurations (Radde-Antweiler, 2018). Change over time, the digital transformation of societies, and the refiguration of social life are characterized, driven, and shaped by the emergence and consequences of cultural and social formations and practices. Gamevironments can provide an understanding of the broader contexts and settings in which digital gaming-related change plays out. They allow us to identify and compare varying preconditions and outcomes for change and transformation, and they highlight the subtle changes related to gaming that extend beyond the realm of gaming itself.

3. Gamevironments as Gaming-Related Communicative Figurations

Gamevironments is a concept used to describe the dynamic media environments built around digital games, extending beyond the games themselves to encompass related media content, community interactions, and various forms of engagement. The notion was coined as a neologism bringing together gaming and environment, originally in the context of the study of religion and digital gaming, but can be expanded beyond this field (Radde-Antweiler, 2018; Radde-Antweiler et al., 2014). This concept encapsulates the broader ecosystem of media and cultural practices that emerge around games, involving transmedia

narratives, cross-media adaptations, social interactions, user-generated content, and the cultural and educational impacts of gaming.

Based on the deep mediatization concept, gamevironments adopt a research paradigm of a *non-media-centered* analysis of communicative processes (Hepp, Breiter, & Hasebrink, 2018). Instead of games, the (empirical) starting point and element of analysis are social domains, such as groups, communities, organizations, (sub)systems, life-worlds, social worlds, or even whole social fields (Hepp & "Communicative Figurations" research network, 2017). Every social domain has its own typical constellation of actors (Schimank, 2010), which describe all relevant actors, and their shared practices and relations to each other. Furthermore, a communicative figuration is characterized by a thematic framing that serves as a guiding topic. Based on that the gamevironments approach—instead of analyzing one-way media "influences"—focuses on (a) the transformations of communicative practices; (b) media changes and adaptations to communicative practices; as well as (c) consequences of these transformations, changes, and practices to the social subsystem(s) of the respective social domains. As a theoretical framework, the concept of *communicative figurations* helps to tackle fundamental problems of individuals' autonomy vs. mutual dependency of individuals and society, as well as the distinction between social change and structural change. According to the process sociology approach by Norbert Elias (Elias, 1978), every structural change can be understood as a transforming interrelation between individuals and society. Elias calls these dynamic networks as *figurations* of individuals (Elias, 1978). In the communicative figurations approach, the *constellation of actors* is analysed together with their *communicative practices*, to describe the processes of the communicative construction of social reality within specific social domains (Hepp & "Communicative Figurations" research network, 2017). Understanding gamevironments as gaming-related communicative figurations helps to research how trends within society that are related to digital gaming are evolving and connected to transformation processes. For example, the trend of differentiation that refers to the variety of technologically-based communication media is, nowadays, quite important in relation to digital gaming: Playing a game does not only contain the game—be it on a PC or on a console, but furthermore instant messaging services such as Discord, video streaming services for Let's Plays, and discussion forums, just to name a few. This is also connected to the other trend "increasing connectivity of and through these media" (Hepp & "Communicative Figurations" research network, 2017). Another important point becomes clear here: These trends have not only an impact on the field of digital gaming but also on other fields. Due to the specific requirements of gaming, new technological platforms such as instant messaging for example were developed, which were then also discovered and used for other areas.

Originally, the gamevironments concept was used to advocate for an actor-centered approach to digital gaming, rather than focusing too much on the artifact of games, their aesthetics and symbolism. However, since and beyond that, the concept was refined to incorporate even more gaming-related and gaming-inspired aspects of digital life worlds (Radde-Antweiler, 2018). In our understanding, gamevironments offer a unique lens to understanding the pervasive influence of digital gaming on various aspects of digital culture and communication, far beyond gaming. In a similar vein, Chess and Consalvo (2022) emphasize that the exploration of human interaction within virtual environments is essential and that the insights from game studies are vital and must inform broader communication and media studies in these areas. Following their argument, we agree that by examining the intersections of gaming with broader digital phenomena, we can uncover how elements of gaming resonate in diverse—sometimes unexpected and unlikely—areas. For instance, digital activism often adopts strategies and aesthetics from gaming, utilizing

game mechanics for engagement, gamifying participation, and creating immersive narratives to drive social change. Even extremist groups have exploited game environments to recruit, communicate, and strategize, highlighting how deeply gaming's influence can permeate. Political communication and news consumption are also affected; gamified elements in apps and platforms encourage user interaction and retention, shaping how people engage with information and political discourse. From social media platforms incorporating game-like features to news outlets adopting interactive storytelling, or not least monetization strategies, the principles of game design and gaming are embedded in the fabric of digital experiences far beyond what gamers do with their video games. Digital gaming, its design logics, mechanisms, logics, language, and practices have ceased to be the exceptional or the other but have become part of the inventory of life-worlds in deeply mediatized societies. For better or worse, they can no longer be studied in isolation. Along these lines, the argument that "digital gaming is just not for me" loses traction. If, as a communication and media scholar, you aspire to research the deep mediatization of society, the digital transformation of life-worlds and how media and media-related practices are woven into the very fabric of culture and society, digital gaming should matter to you because it matters to what you are researching:

> Video games should matter to media studies scholars, broadly, because as convergence culture becomes less of a special case and more of an everyday reality, the medium itself matters less. Video games are dispersed throughout all industries, not just in overt ways but in subtler ways such as gamification in streaming services, and the increasing reliance on games as a part of transmedia storytelling. Video games, as a proper and defined medium, may not be relevant to everyone, but game studies analysis and theorization is relevant to the field, in subtle yet compelling ways. (Chess & Consalvo, 2022)

Understanding gamevironments allows us to see the intricate ways gaming shapes behaviors, interactions, and perceptions across various domains, providing a comprehensive view of its transformative impact on digital society. But beyond that, gamevironments are also a vessel to observe and research change, transformation, and refiguration of culture and society as part of the deep mediatization of society between the emergence and consequence of phenomena, cultures, social formations, and practices.

For studying gamevironments and using them as a framework to examine digital gaming-related phenomena as well as changes in media culture and society, we propose an agenda comprising several key research areas to explore their multifaceted impact on digital culture and society in three dimensions.

First, the making of gamevironments area focuses on the emergence, expansion, maintenance, and transformation of gaming-related media environments and cultures over time. It aims to understand how these environments and cultures were created. For instance, this includes the rise of early gaming communities sharing online dungeons or the subcultures that "played beyond the manual" (Schäfer, 2006). Examples include the cracker-warez scene, the demoscene (Hartmann, 2017; Polgár, 2008), hacking (Gül Erdogan, 2021), community of practice building (Wolf, 2007), phreaking, and the ASCII art scene using the Commodore 64 and Amiga. These cultural formations contributed to the proliferation and expansion of gamevironments. Additionally, the evolution of games journalism as part of gamevironments, and the many stages of transformation it has undergone.

Secondly, the values in and of gamevironments area examines how values, social norms, imaginations of the good life, future visions, and ethical frameworks are portrayed, disseminated, and integrated into society

through games and around games. Grieve et al. (2020) stress that game rules, narratives, and design, as well as gaming as such, are deeply connected to decision-making processes and with specific values that give meaning to the gamers' decisions. Games then trigger the discussion of ethical and moral behavior. For example, the ethical dilemmas in games illustrate how games can shape players' understanding of moral complexities. Furthermore, games promote values of community, cooperation, and sustainable living. How games are presented, advertised, and normalized, and what values and vision of how we should strive to live are implemented in the process is also an area of inquiry. Moretti (2023), for instance, has investigated how gaming advertisements in the 1980s and 1990s have helped spread a neoliberal mindset around gaming. More recently, the potential of digital gaming to advocate for climate awareness finds scrutiny in the context of environmental-friendly gaming and ecogames (Beke et al., 2024).

And third, the governance of gamevironments strand investigates how governance—by developers, external regulators, and user communities—shapes gaming environments (Eccleston & Gray, 2013; Vasiliev et al., 2023). It seeks to uncover the impact of policies, didactical design (Wolf, 2012), and rules on these spaces, such as content moderation policies affecting online gaming communities. Questions regarding which elements of a game can be copyright protected, which are free to share and redistribute, and what limitations legal frameworks impose on creative processes are of relevance here. Additionally, it explores how governance addresses unruly actors within gamevironments, such as cheaters, glitch-users, and gold farmers. The study of governance in gamevironments demonstrates their dynamic and conflict-ridden nature, contributing to the continuous emergence of new cultural and social formations on two levels: education in and for gamevironments, and researching gamevironments.

In regards to education in and for gamevironments, this area looks at the educational potential of games and their use in learning environments. It aims to leverage the engagement factor of games to enhance educational outcomes, such as through gamified educational platforms that improve student engagement and retention. For example, games like Minecraft: Education Edition (Bar-El & E. Ringland, 2020) and platforms like Kahoot! (A. I. Wang & Tahir, 2020) illustrate how gaming can be integrated into educational settings to promote interactive and immersive learning experiences. Moreover, it also considers unintended educational outcomes, such as how players learn technical skills through activities like modding, optimizing gaming PCs, or game development (Acevedo, 2021; Valdez et al., 2023; Wolf & Wudarski, 2018).

As for researching gamevironments, this area addresses the specific methodological challenges associated with studying gamevironments. It involves developing and refining interdisciplinary methods and innovative data collection techniques to study the complex interactions within these environments. While communication and media research are well-equipped for studying consequences, the study of emergence and transformation remains a challenge. This area seeks to overcome these challenges by advancing methodologies that capture the dynamic and evolving nature of gamevironments.

By exploring these dimensions, we aim to grasp how digital gaming serves as an extraordinary catalyst for change while becoming an ordinary aspect of daily life. We see the potential of gamevironments as a framework to focus and reflect on who and what serves as agents of change within gamevironments, how their agendas influence the making of gamevironments, and what formations emerge, transform, disappear, or are reconfigured within and outside gamevironments across cultures, technological environments, and infrastructures in different times and places. Through this comprehensive approach, we seek to understand

how digital gaming reconfigures media consumption, social interactions, and cultural narratives, driving transformation and signaling broader societal shifts toward digital futures.

4. Conclusion

In this article, we argued that digital gaming should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon or "the other stuff" separate from the media we as communication and media scholars have long explored with seriousness and dedication. The transformative power of digital gaming in deeply mediatized societies influences various aspects of all our social and cultural interactions. Therefore, it must be understood both as a distinct entity and as a crucial part of the overall media environment. By recognizing its pervasive influence, we can better comprehend the full scope of its impact on contemporary media practices and societal transformations.

By integrating digital games research with perspectives on media change and deep mediatization, we have moved from merely examining the consequences of games and gaming to exploring the emergence, maintenance, transformation, and occasional disappearance of phenomena, practices, and cultures within gamevironments. The research we suggest opens new vistas for change in digital gaming, with digital gaming, and through digital gaming. We advocate for a comprehensive perspective on digital gaming, one that considers its multifaceted impact within the broader context of media and societal transformations putting it at the forefront of change. This holistic approach, embodied in the concept of gamevironments, emphasizes the interconnectedness of digital gaming with other media forms and cultural practices. By adopting this perspective in communication and media studies (with an emphasis on change), we can better grasp the complex interplay between digital gaming and broader societal dynamics. In conclusion, our work suggests shifting the focus from games research to the transformative power of digital gaming in deeply mediatized societies, emphasizing its role as both a distinct entity and a crucial part of the overall media environment.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declares no conflicts of interests.

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