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EDITORIAL

Games and Game Studies Are Meaningful—Are They?

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Abstract

Building on the idea that digital games are more than trivial pastimes and can have deeper meanings, this article collection brings together emerging findings from the field of game studies. The foundation for this thematic issue was laid at the 2023 symposium of the Digital Games Research Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) held in Madrid. The articles in this collection examine the rich content of games as cultural artifacts and how they encourage reflection, the role of games as social environments and learning tools, the dynamics of identity negotiation and socialization in gaming contexts, the societal perceptions of games, and the increasingly important roles of games and game studies in mediatized societies.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The foundation for this thematic issue was developed in 2023 at the symposium entitled *Digital Games at the Forefront of Change: On the Meaningfulness of Games and Game Studies*, organized by the Digital Games Research Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) in Madrid. The event examined the diverse facets of games' meaningfulness, fostering dialogue on what constitutes meaningful engagement in gaming and exploring the future trajectory and cultural relevance of game studies as a field.

For a long time, digital games were regarded as trivial and superficial entertainment, primarily providing *hedonic* gratifications such as fun and amusement (Oliver et al., 2016). In general, game studies is still a relatively new research field, and within media and communication studies, it is often perceived as a niche topic (Chess & Consalvo, 2022; Siitonen et al., 2021). However, in recent years, digital games have become more complex and differentiated, and interest in their deeper meanings as cultural artifacts and social environments has increased (e.g., de la Hera et al., 2021; Reer & Quandt, 2020). For example, more researchers are now focusing on the *eudaimonic* aspects of gaming, examining the potentials of digital games to elicit self-reflection, social relatedness, psychological need satisfaction, and emotional engagement (Daneels et al., 2021; Jacobs & Jansz, 2021; Possler et al., 2023; Reer & Quandt, 2020). Further, scholars have called for game studies to be taken more seriously and to recognize the central role they can play in an increasingly convergent media culture (Chess & Consalvo, 2022).

Against this background, this collection of articles positions games as cultural artifacts with the power to engage deeply with questions of identity, ethics, and social norms. In this sense, the authors explore how these experiences extend beyond traditional academic frameworks, arguing that games—through their immersive and interactive nature—invite players into unique forms of engagement with profound personal and social implications.

The articles in this issue approach game studies from diverse perspectives, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of games' role as instruments of cultural insight and social impact. This plurality underscores the heterogeneity of game studies, a field that thrives on multiple methodological approaches. In the following section, we provide an overview of the articles, highlighting how they explore the meaningfulness of games in today's media landscape.

2. Articles Included in the Thematic Issue

The article collection begins with contributions that focus on the diverse content transported in games and the significant roles they play in different societal contexts.

In the first article, Que et al. (2025) demonstrate that mobile games can hold deeper meanings by representing intangible elements of Chinese cultural heritage, such as folklore, traditional crafts, dialects, and customs. By weaving cultural heritage into character design, world-building, and combat mechanics, these games provide players with an immersive, culturally rich experience that promotes understanding and appreciation of Chinese traditions. Through a thematic analysis of 30 Chinese mobile games, the authors situate game content within broader social and historical contexts, emphasizing the potential of games as tools for cultural education and representation.

Further examining the rich content of games and the messages they convey, Soto de la Cruz et al. (2025) provide a comprehensive review of the scientific literature on how digital games communicate contemporary political discourse. Based on a review of 25 journal articles, the authors propose a new framework for categorizing political messages communicated through games, which they call the PRICE model— participation, representation, ideology, conflict, and education. Their study notes that first-person shooters and newsgames are frequently analyzed in this context, likely due to their immersive qualities and broad audience reach.

Delving deeper into the meanings of war-themed first-person shooters, Pattison (2025) examines how players experience and interpret games of the *Call of Duty* franchise. Through 25 thematic interviews, the author explores how these games evoke emotions such as guilt, discomfort, and remorse—particularly when players are confronted with war and violence. These emotional responses often prompt players to engage in self-reflection, positioning them as active agents in constructing meaning from their gaming experiences. Although commercial war games are frequently criticized for glorifying conflict, the author suggests that they can also foster introspection, encouraging players to question the realities of war.

Commercial games can not only encourage self-reflection, but can also teach valuable skills and serve as tools in learning contexts. Sanz et al. (2025) investigate the unique educational affordances of different versions of *Cities: Skylines* (i.e., digital, board game, and virtual reality) in urban planning education. The study identifies the specific educational strengths of each format: The digital version enables simulations of urban systems, the board game promotes collaborative planning and policy discussions, and the virtual reality version engages students in sustainable design practices and urbanization. The findings underscore the adaptability of games to various learning objectives and their significant potential in enhancing urban planning education.

In line with the idea that educational games must be thoughtfully designed to maximize their learning potential, Reyes-de-Cózar and Merino-Cajaraville (2025) provide a systematic review of serious game design models and propose a novel framework called FABLE (fun and balanced learning experience). FABLE highlights the importance of balancing entertainment with educational goals to create impactful and engaging learning experiences. By aligning game mechanics with learning outcomes, the model provides a structured approach to developing serious games that effectively promote meaningful learning.

Wei et al. (2025) contribute to the discussion on educational games with a focus on the design and impact of serious games aimed at promoting prosocial behaviors, specifically within the context of anti-bullying interventions. Their research examines how two design features—player-avatar similarity and in-game control—affect the narrative engagement, empathy, and prosocial intentions of players. One central finding of Wei et al.'s (2025) study is that the player's perspective (bully vs. victim) is decisive in determining whether these design features enhance empathy and prosocial intentions through increased narrative engagement.

Focusing on the social aspects of gaming, Gao et al. (2025) examine the development of romantic parasocial relationships and emotional bonds between female players and virtual characters in otome games. Through in-depth interviews with 25 female Chinese players, the authors find that female players establish intimate connections with male characters through game mechanics, such as character customization and branching narratives, as well as through their imaginative engagement. While these relationships are virtual, they impact players' perceptions of real-life intimacy and self-identity, providing emotional support and helping them manage negative emotions.

Further exploring gender in gaming contexts, Lynch et al. (2025) challenge conventional critiques of female stereotypes in games by focusing on the positive experiences players have when interacting with well-developed female characters. Through a mixed-methods approach with 751 participants, the authors reveal that both male and female players experience feelings of empowerment when engaging with strong female protagonists, suggesting that such representation can enhance players' well-being and offer eudaimonic gaming experiences.

Ruotsalainen and Meriläinen (2025) likewise take an interesting and novel perspective on gender in gaming by examining female players' hostile behaviors (instead of focusing on their role as victims). Conducting a critical discourse analysis of the subreddit r/GirlGamers, the authors examine how women discuss and critique each other's behavior, highlighting the complexity of female identity in gaming. They identify four main discourses and indicate the characteristics of the "ideal gaming woman," one who must balance different expectations, potentially restricting her freedom of expression and agency.

Liu et al. (2025) contribute to the discussion on hostile behaviors in gaming contexts by exploring how toxicity affects player retention and community dynamics. Drawing on the group engagement model and rejection-disidentification model, the authors propose a mediation model that is tested using gameplay data and survey responses from 1,217 players. The analyses reveal that both reporting toxic behavior and being reported contribute to decreased player engagement. The perceived discrimination of players and a weakened sense of community are identified as mediators.

Accounting for the complexity of the many different social and psychological dimensions of gaming, Sokka et al. (2025) introduce the digital gaming relationship framework (DGR)—a novel theoretical approach to understanding how and why games become meaningful to players. Based on concepts developed in sports and physical activity research, DGR assumes that the relationship between players and games is shaped by many factors (including individual, social, and cultural) and varies over one's lifetime. The authors emphasize that DGR goes beyond motivation-oriented approaches and understands meaning-making in gaming as an individual socialization process.

The contribution by Reer et al. (2025) shifts the focus away from players' experiences toward the question of how digital games are perceived by the public. Specifically, the authors examine attitudes toward the addictive use of games (gaming disorder) based on a survey of German internet users aged 16 to 84. The results show that many German citizens hold skeptical opinions about games and that gaming disorder rates are often overestimated. Moreover, individual gaming habits and demographic factors (such as age and gender) can influence how games and gaming are perceived.

In the final article of this thematic issue, Schwarzenegger et al. (2025) elaborate on the increasingly important roles of games and game studies in mediatized societies. They advocate for a holistic approach to game studies that acknowledges the broad influence of digital games and their integration with culture and other media. A core concept introduced in the article is "gamevironments," referring to the dynamic media ecosystems surrounding digital games. These ecosystems include "transmedia narratives, cross-media adaptations, social interactions, user-generated content, and the cultural and educational impacts of gaming" (Schwarzenegger et al., 2025, pp. 7–8). According to the authors, digital games have to be considered a vital part of mediatized life, significantly transforming culture and the public.

3. Conclusion

In the headline of this editorial, we posed a somewhat provocative question: "Games and Game Studies Are Meaningful—Are They?" The articles in this collection clearly demonstrate the complexity of games and gaming, showing that they can take on meaningful roles in different respects—be it as cultural artifacts that convey meaningful messages and encourage reflection, as tools for learning and socializing, or as

multilayered virtual worlds and platforms for identity negotiation and socialization. Given an increasingly convergent and mediatized society, the importance of game studies as a research field is likely to grow further in the future.

However, it is imperative to remain critical and reflective as we navigate the evolving landscape of digital media, ensuring that the study of games remains dynamic and responsive to societal shifts. We aim to inspire further dialogue and research in game studies, encouraging scholars to delve deeper into understanding the impact of games. We invite readers to join this conversation, contributing to a field that is as rich and varied as digital games themselves.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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