

Games & Gaming in the Digital and Social Media Track

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Abstract

The Games & Gaming mini-track is now in its fourth year in the Digital and Social Media track at HICSS. Games and play are an important part of the human foundation, but despite the digital nature of the games in this minitrack they often mirror real-world social issues. More broadly, games and play deeply reflect who we are as a species.

1. Games & Gaming

Games and play are an important part of human life experience, from infancy to adulthood, and have always been. Today our playfulness and gaming have greatly expanded in terms of the objects we use for games and the reach we have to play with others—with computers, smart phones, and the internet, we play with people from around the world, perhaps partially in the real world or perhaps with purely digital objects. Games are solo, multiplayer, and massively multiplayer. Some games have playtime of a few minutes, others can take hours per session across years of play. Some games are free, others suggest, allow, or require an economic investment beyond the time spent. Some are played privately, while others are streamed to thousands of viewers around the world.

The digitization of games—a combination of both digital devices and the global connectedness—allows for greater reach of play into lives, across geography, and for research opportunities. Digital traces provide a broad picture of human behavior, and can be analyzed with big data approaches, traditional statistics, or qualitative methods. As such, games and gaming are an important aspect of digital and social media research.

Gaming research spans a wide variety of disciplines, and includes the technological, the economic, and the social and psychological. We have positive hopes for sociality and efficacy, and also fears of game-inspired violence reminiscent of historical media panics. Given humanity's social bend, social aspects have been a major part of gaming research.

As internet bandwidth has increased, today's games have moved beyond playing with hundreds of others to playing for many others with popular live-streaming platforms such as Twitch. Gaming is not just entertainment for those directly involved, but can be a more passive entertainment that is engaged with by viewing, much like television.

Gaming has also moved solidly into the realm of performance, with gaming stars and popular teams, and has been re-labeled to mimic already widely accepted entertainment forms: esports. Esports, like the label email before it, takes something new and repackages it in familiar, easily understood, terms.

Cast in this manner, esports has sponsored teams, team names and logos, and advertising dollars. Despite its professionalization there is still a social element, yet like many other socio-technical structures on the internet, esports can reproduce social structures and inequalities found more broadly in sports and society. Within esports, who gets to play? What types of people are given paid sponsorships? Like with many things, becoming digital does not erase inequality. People's social tendencies for both inclusion and exclusion are still on display within esports.

In the Games & Gaming mini-track at HICSS, we focus on the aspects which are primarily social within the digital gaming world. Gaming is not just a reflection of the positive aspects of humanity, but of all facets of who we are.