

Introduction to the Games & Gaming Minitrack

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Abstract

The Games & Gaming mini-track is now in its second year in the Digital and Social Media track at HICSS. Games and play are an important part of the human foundation, spanning issues of learning, sociality, wellness, and social capital. More broadly, games reflect who we are as a species.

1. Games & Gaming

Games are an important part of human culture, psychology, and history. The earliest board game known today is senet, from the ancient Egyptians around 3,500 BCE. Today we have a wide variety of games, including digital ones. Games are played by millions of people around the world on their computers and portable devices. 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.

The digitization of games—today a combination of not just digital devices but of their widely networked nature—allows for greater reach of play into lives and across geography, and for research opportunity. Digital traces provide a broad picture of human behavior, albeit not as deep or all-encompassing as some proponents say, and often digital research is well-informed by more qualitative angles. 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. Foci range from positive hopes for sociality and efficacy to 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.

Sociality in games is often looked at within one particular game setting, most often with massively multiplayer online games, which have enjoyed (or suffered from) acronyms such as MMORPG,

MMOG, and MMO. These are games where, depending on the era, thousands or millions of people are playing the game. Getting data on millions of players is not always easy, but can be intoxicating if possible. Yet, non-MMO games persist, with both multi-player and single-player games still widely in vogue. Furthermore, single-player games do not put a stop to our innate sociality, although it may seem harder to achieve. People, as hyper-social primates, do not let such limitations stop them from being social.

Not only do people realize social outcomes through play and games, but they can also achieve educational goals as well. Games can provide a variety of understandable and structured environments that aid in the learning process. However, the use of any educational tools is often context-dependent, and games are no exception, where social and cultural contexts must be understood in order to be useful.

Games and wellness have also been a focus of research and public attention, where too much sitting while videogame playing is seen as detrimental to people's health. One could make a similar argument for writing research papers. However, some games, such as on the Nintendo Wii platform, required players to stand and move about, flailing their arms madly. With smartphones and low-rate data plans, augmented reality games, which overlay game maps onto the actual physical world, have generated excitement as such games, like Pokémon GO, might actually get gamers up and off their sofas.

More than physical wellness though, games also give us concern over broader social wellness and the social support that gamers have, and beyond that, the different types of social capital that gamers may be able to muster within games. As people, we exist within webs of sociality and communities, and the health of the many and the health of the few are interrelated.

All of these issues relate to who we are as a species, and all are to be found in our gameplay.