

Games & Gaming in the Digital and Social Media Track

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Abstract

The Games & Gaming mini-track is an important new addition to the Digital and Social Media track at HICSS. Games and play have been an important component of humans' social lives for thousands of years; here we explore some of the current digital dimensions of that long history.

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.

Massively multiplayer games (MMOs, such as World of Warcraft) with millions of players have been popular both with players and researchers. At one point in the mid-2000s, one researcher opined that game studies had become “World of Warcraft studies” instead. The mechanics of group formation, cohesion, and dissolution via a game's affordances, akin to social psychology, has been a fruitful area of research with MMOs due to the large number of social groups found within.

Yet groups stemming from games do not only form or sustain due to action within the game. People who play both solo and non-solo games use a wide variety of other social media, such as blogs, discussion forums, and social networking sites. Even with solo games and players who play the same game but have never met in-game, social bonds can form via these mediated communications.

General norms of accepted behavior in games, and how they form and sustain, are also a focus. How players define what is accepted gameplay, and how they seek to play outside what was supposed to be technologically possible or socially acceptable—forms of play and resistance—explore the reasons why people seek to push beyond what is defined as possible.

Cultural dimensions within games—narrative settings, character presentation, and issues of power—have also been explored by researchers, looking at broad issues of identity, grasped by players and allowed by designers. Researchers have studied the economic activity of players, in-game cheating, game modification by players, and many other topics.

All of this human behavior is still a ripe area of study within games. Although prediction is difficult, one area that may be possible in the future is greater cross-cultural work, given the increase in global gaming. With an increasingly connected world, and political resistance to it (e.g., Brexit), how we get along with our global neighbors is of vital importance. Digital gaming is one area where research can cast some light.