

global network player authority PewDiePie guilt god Let's Play angel undead with authentic meurization Skill PVP digital
 game rule system representation WoW blessing noob kills demon face body fight experience Twitch rebirth discussion wedding
 religion game analysis The Last of Us death resurrection funeral tunes virtual identity buff priest genesis clan
 simulation ludology narrative immersion community symbols salvation mage Xbox 360 PVE



Beyond Play in one of Yayoi Kusama's Obliteration Room Installations.

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Special Issue

Beyond Play

edited by

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Digital games and gaming are carriers, accelerators and subjects of change in media, culture and society. In this capacity they interlink media industries, digital technologies, social practices and cultural norms, which makes them telling cases for analyzing contemporary transformation in the context of (deep) mediatization, digitalization and datafication (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025, Hepp 2020). A world with digital gaming in it is different from a world without digital gaming. The premise sounds almost trivial, yet what it implies for the study of games and gaming, and for

the broader investigation of media-related change in culture and society, is far from settled. This special issue takes the premise seriously and presents case studies, which show transformation processes in different societal fields entangled with and caused by gaming-related practices.

The guiding idea behind the issue is captured in the phrase *beyond play*. This approach takes the concept of *gamevironments* (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, Radde-Antweiler 2018, Radde-Antweiler 2024) a step further, a concept which already emphasized that gaming should be understood as a media ecology in which technological innovations emerge, communicative practices are transformed, and new cultural forms take shape (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014, Radde-Antweiler 2024). Approached in this way, gaming is at once a mirror and a motor of social development. It offers a setting in which the emergence, diffusion, transformation and disappearance of media cultures can be observed within a remarkably short historical window, and in which the entanglement of media, technology and everyday meaning-making becomes unusually legible. This is what makes gaming such a fertile, and curiously neglected, terrain for media and communication research that is interested in transformation rather than in games alone.

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The idea of *beyond play* directs attention away from games as self-contained objects of entertainment or as systems of mechanics but towards gaming-related practices. Gaming-related practices do not only comprise the levels of production, the game as such and the players, but also extend to all areas related to the gaming production, to gaming and to the reception of gaming (Radde-Antweiler 2024, 14). In contrast to a game-centered focus, "gaming instead of games made clear, that there is more than the game when it comes to media that is involved in gaming" (ibid., 16). The

beyond play approach now shifts the perspective even further, moving from gaming-related practices to societal spheres, and asks what impact gaming-related practices have on spheres that are not, strictly speaking, directly connected to gaming or in other words, gaming as a formative force whose relevance extends across social domains (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025). Gamification has brought gaming logics and mechanics into politics, health, education and work, while, conversely, other realms of life increasingly “impress their forms on games” and seek to harness them for their own purposes (Deterding 2015, 23). Gaming-related practices, experiences, emotions and forms of sociality are valorized through datafication; games become experimental sites for novel business and subscription models within platform capitalism. Gaming itself has also become a professionalized enterprise, from esports to streaming. Moreover, communicative processes centered on gaming, such as learning or politics, are at the innovative forefront of social practices. The influence of gaming on contemporary politics becomes strikingly visible in cases like Elon Musk's use of gaming aesthetics and memetic communication, which illustrates how digital gaming literacy, narrative structures, and symbolic codes are increasingly mobilized to shape political identities, rebrand power, and forge ideological alignments across transnational online communities.

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It is important to acknowledge, however, that neither (digital) media nor video games can be considered the sole or primary drivers of social change; rather, they must be understood as embedded within a broader network of interconnected social and cultural processes. In this sense, video gaming should be viewed as an integral part of evolving media landscapes, as well as a component of broader cultural and social transformation – one that is always in dialogue with other media formats and wider processes of change. (Radde-Antweiler 2024, 10) But: wherever mediatization is heading, gaming tends to be at the forefront of change (Reer, De La Hera and

From this conference the special issue matured. A call for papers translated the conference theme into an open invitation. We deliberately kept the framing broad, welcoming conceptual, theoretical and methodological contributions alongside

empirical studies from all disciplines. The contributions gathered here, selected through editorial and double-blind peer review, are where the conversation begins and continues. They are not meant to exhaust the agenda but to populate it, and to show what becomes visible once gaming and gaming-related practices are taken seriously as a site of transformation.

Coordinates for Researching Gaming Beyond Play – A Non-Gaming-Centric Gaming Research

To contextualize the contributions, it is helpful to make the programmatic framework explicit. Even though concepts such as communicative figurations and mediatization theory have been productively applied to discuss digital gaming in other disciplines (e.g., Wolf and Wudarski 2018, Radde-Antweiler 2024), digital gaming has remained notably absent from communication and media studies (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025). We therefore propose a distinction between different interrelated areas of transformation in which gaming is especially instructive. These build on our previous work (for the first categories see Schwarzenegger and Koenen forthc.) and are further developed and refined here.

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1. *Digital Gaming as a Site of Prototyping Media Change*

Following Wimmer (2012), digital gaming can be read as a prototype for mediatization processes elsewhere. Gaming generates its own emergent cultural and social formations, practices and platforms, and these change over time under technological, economic, cultural and legal pressures (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025). Crucially, the case of gaming also makes visible that media cultures and practices can disappear again: they become obsolete, are replaced, or merge into new forms, and sustaining them requires effort

and agency (Balbi et al. 2023). Compared with the rather time-flattened notions of *digital* or *social* media, the change over time in gaming is so palpable that it is almost impossible not to think historically. This temporal density is methodologically valuable: it permits the kind of diachronic comparison that mediatization research demands but rarely achieves, while also opening connections to media memory and nostalgia, from retro-gaming to the way VR, AR and AI-driven game companions prefigure further stages of deep mediatization (Menke and Schwarzenegger 2019, Hepp 2025).

2. *Datafication, Platformization and the Production of Measurable Experience*

Digital games are among the most intensively datafied media environments: nearly every action, decision and movement can – or even has to – be tracked, quantified, ranked and algorithmically processed. Scores, achievements and leaderboards structure the experience of play while also shaping understandings of success, progress and skill, and they feed monetization models from free-to-play onwards (Elmezeny 2021). Platforms such as Steam, console ecosystems, app stores and streaming services like Twitch organize access, visibility and sociality, and they standardize the metrics through which gaming is rendered economically valuable (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Here gaming again works as a prototype: reward systems, leveling and grinding migrate into fitness tracking, education, productivity and news use. What a mediatization perspective adds to platform studies or political economy is its attention to the communicative and cultural dimensions of these entanglements, asking not only how platforms govern participation, but how datafied environments reshape the very categories through which people understand agency, progress and social worth.

including modding, collaborative wikis, instructional videos, grassroots campaigns, and companion apps – not only leave a tangible imprint on game design (Sotamaa 2010), but also act as catalysts for broader innovation in how communication unfolds in general.

These four coordinates operationalize, in one particular way, the broader program of *beyond play* (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025), where we have argued that the transformative power of digital gaming becomes legible in several registers at once: in the proliferation and diffusion of new digital technologies, devices and imaginaries, in the emergence of media cultures and practices in non-gaming contexts and beyond play, in the negotiation and transformation of representation, social norms and values, and in the communicative environments that grow up around play, from games journalism and streaming to gamification in non-gaming settings. The coordinates we propose here are best read as one way of cutting across that shared agenda, not as a competing scheme. They are a next step in the lineage of thinking which we aim to develop and propose here. The step away from researching games as a sole object and center of study was already made with the concept of *gamevironments*, that called for a broader attention for the gaming-related practices surrounding games. Attention was then brought to figurations, media environments and communicative practices in, though, with, around, and related to gaming. Gaming is more than the actual usage of games and the communicative phenomena characteristic extend beyond play. The dimensions proposed here build on this approach and broaden the perspective to societal spheres and contexts *beyond play* – where gaming does not obviously play a role – in order to understand and demonstrate how the transformative power of digital gaming for deeply mediatized societies can be understood and researched – drawing on the tradition of non-media-centered media studies.

We use them here less as a taxonomy than as a set of coordinates: overlapping perspectives that help locate where individual studies sit and how they speak to one another. They are also not separate boxes into which a study must fall. Most of the contributions in this issue touch more than one, and the more interesting moments often occur where they intersect, for instance where datafied platforms become the very infrastructure through which gaming logics creep into other domains. We therefore offer the coordinates as orientation, not as a grid.

Contributions in this Issue

Most of the seven contributions gathered here touch more than one of these coordinates, and we read them in the order in which they appear in the issue, noting in passing where each sits.

The issue opens with a contribution that works on the analytical apparatus itself. In *Genre as Gameenvironment: Epistemic Genres Beyond Play*, Hurezeanu, Nunes, Schmidt and Heeg take up Radde-Antweiler's (2024) call for a critical revision of *gameenvironments* and propose genre, understood as a socially and culturally situated practice, as a complementary lens. Building on the notion of epistemic genres as constellations of games shaped by players' historical, cultural and experiential positioning, they show how genre operates as a collaborative environment that structures play and circulates within wider gaming cultures, cutting across the categories that industry and scholarship habitually impose.

With Holroyd and Parker's *Video Games as Neoliberal Therapeutic Techno-Solutions*, the issue moves from concept to a domain where gaming has quietly become

something else. Through a critical technocultural discourse analysis of the promotional materials and testimonials of three digital ludic wellness services – Hero Journey Club, MindJam and Mightier – they examine how games are imagined and marketed as therapeutic tools for treating neurodivergence in children and adolescents. This is a prime example for ludic drift: the play form migrates into therapy, coaching and care, and as it drifts it takes on the valence of self-responsibilization, productivity and self-regulation. By showing how such services commodify play and profit from the precarity of neurodivergence, the article concludes where the datafied production of measurable, improvable experience meets the cultural consequences of gaming beyond play.

Huang, Arora and Yerkes turn to platformed play in *Belongingness and Resistance in Platformed Play: Feminist Agency among Female Gamers in China*. Drawing on a netnography of 343 multimodal posts from Douban, Xiaohongshu and Bilibili, they trace how Chinese female gamers navigate gendered inequalities under conditions set by platform governance, algorithmic ordering and local patriarchal structures, mobilizing an adaptive feminist agency through humor, aesthetic critique, everyday digital activism and the renegotiation of gaming authority. The study crosses the coordinates of datafication and platformization, while extending them: belongingness, the authors argue, works as a feminist agency across platformed cultures more broadly, not only within gaming. In doing so it corrects the Western-centric bias of much existing scholarship and brings the negotiation of representation, norms and values into view.

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This attention to gender and its asymmetries continues in Sarikakis, Becerir, Gudkova and Baumgartner's *Asymmetries and Limits in the Transformative Power of Video Games for Women*. Combining desk research with 30 semi-structured interviews

across gaming communities, industry and policy, they distinguish individual from structural transformation and find that while gaming can support individual empowerment and connection, structural inequalities in gaming cultures and the industry constrain broader change. Their account of how the industry displaces the burden of change onto individuals, demanding emotional labor and self-censorship while leaving structures intact, resonates with the neoliberal logics that Holroyd and Parker identify in the wellness sector. Read together with Huang and colleagues, the contribution holds the question of transformative power open, insisting that whether gaming advances gender equality or reproduces exclusion depends on conditions that require empirical scrutiny.

The communicative environments that have grown up around play take center stage in Wurm, Nitschke and Wimmer's article on *Gaming Streamers as Intermediaries: A Multi-Level Intermediation Framework across Self, Community, and Platformised Industry*. The article conceptualizes streaming as intermediation processes connecting self, community, and platformized industry across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, with intermediation emerging from the dynamics between rather than within these levels. Participation is converted into visibility and economic value, while platform governance imposes asymmetrical, hyper-flexible conditions. Game streaming thereby serves as a prototype for platformed cultural production, prefiguring dynamics now spreading across the wider creator economy.

Roth and Idone Cassone stay with game-related videos but shift from actors to artefacts and method in *Capturing Play Beyond the Game. A Category System for Game-Related YouTube Videos*. Responding to a literature that has largely equated game-related video with let's plays on Twitch and with the English language, they develop, over two years and several hundred videos, a category system for the

content of game-related videos on YouTube, tested across *Nintendo's Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (2023) and *Capcom's Street Fighter 6* (2023) in Japanese, Korean, Chinese and English. The article confronts the methodological challenge that a datafied and multilingual gaming landscape poses for description and comparison, and its attention to game culture exemplifies the beyond gameplay agenda this issue pursues. Like the preceding contribution it works on the coordinate of platformization, here from the angle of how the sprawling paratextual culture around games and its communicative innovations can be made analytically tractable.

The issue closes by following gaming into a domain still rarely openly associated with it. In *Harnessing the Soft Power of Videogames in Digital Diplomacy*, Rodriguez asks how games operate as instruments of cultural engagement and soft power, treating them as cultural artefacts that carry values and traditions, drawing on procedural rhetoric, and reading *Never Alone* (2014) as a case of games serving diplomatic ends. This is ludic creep in perhaps its most expansive form: the codes and capacities of play travelling into international relations, where purposeful design becomes a resource for cross-cultural exchange. Placed last, the contribution points outward from the issue's coordinates towards the wider question of what gaming becomes once it is taken up well beyond play, and it returns us to the conviction with which we began, that there is a lot left to discover.

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Taken together, the contributions illustrate the range of what becomes researchable once gaming is approached beyond play.

Researching Gaming Beyond Play: There Is a Lot Left to Discover

We see this special issue as a starting point rather than a conclusion. Approaching

gaming *beyond play* means treating it as a formative force in deeply mediatized societies and asking what media and communication research has to gain by doing so, instead of asking only what the field can say about games. The contributions gathered here begin that work; they sketch directions, raise questions and mark out terrain, but they do not survey the whole field, and they are not meant to. If the conference made gaming visible as a shared concern, this issue is where that concern becomes a research conversation.

Part of what makes gaming so productive here is its double temporality. It offers a rare vantage point on historical transformation, compressing decades of media-cultural change into a single, still-living object of study. But it is equally a place where futures are made. Gaming is one of the settings in which competing digital futures are prototyped before they settle, or fail to settle, elsewhere: it provides testbeds of transformation and exemplary early cases in which emerging technologies, practices and imaginaries are tried out, contested and either stabilized or abandoned. To research gaming beyond play is therefore also to attend to these formative moments, when what later becomes ordinary across social domains is still open, experimental and undecided.

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Much remains to be done. The agenda we have outlined, of prototyping media change, of datafication and platformization, of communicative innovation and of ludic creep and drift, is an invitation as much as a program. This special issue hints at where the journey can go. There is a lot left to discover, and we hope readers will take up the invitation to discover it with us.

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