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# Editorial: Video games for impact: design projects that can change the way we think

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

[Video games for impact: design projects that can change the way we think](#)

The academic and research community has used different terms over the years to define and frame video games that go beyond entertainment. The term *serious games* has proven the most enduring, particularly since the early 2000s. Since then, it has been applied to computer games, video games, and, more recently, hybrid and XR games whose primary design purpose is not entertainment (Sawyer, 2007). Every legacy, however, carries its own advantages and disadvantages. The qualifier *serious* introduces a tension between games marked by serious content and those considered non-serious, reproducing the traditional dichotomy between leisure and work, or between productive and unproductive time. Rooted in classical social theory, free time has rarely been imagined as world-saving; from Weber's moral work ethic to neoliberal ideology, leisure has been equated with idleness and, ultimately, civic irrelevance.

This is where serious games change the narrative: an artifact from the land of the “lazy,” designed to educate, train, inform, sensitize, empower—or at least to try. Video games have emerged as significant cultural forms, carrying the potential to engage diverse audiences across social, political, and cultural contexts. Beyond entertainment, they increasingly demonstrate the potential to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, raise awareness of social and environmental issues, and broaden access to meaningful play. These games are classified as serious games and forms of serious play, highlighting that their purpose goes beyond mere fun.

The term “serious,” however, is a broad category including different game genres and types of games—from simulation and corporate training games to social awareness and radical games, as well as educational or newsgames. Some of them have more instrumental goals than others, focusing on the development of technical skills, soft skills, specific pedagogical knowledge and professional competencies. While such objectives are valuable to their target audience, they are narrow in scope and moral purpose, or at least in what

we could call a movement toward positive social change, and do not self-evidently entail a moral purpose (Czauderna, 2013; Voulgari et al., 2024). The Games for Impact Award, established in 2014, reflected the need to acknowledge and promote games that, as the description mentions, entail social or emotional change. The term impact emphasizes this dimension—games that are designed to leave something behind—social, cultural, political. But this is exactly where things become complicated. Even among the editors of this topic, the term “impact” brings with it conversations about binaries such as high morality vs. unethical design, the dangers of relativism, and, of course, how we frame, measure or evaluate the term impact itself.

The aim of the Research Topic is to foster a dialogue on how games can serve as vehicles for social, cultural, and interpersonal change. It seeks to bring together projects and perspectives that highlight design practices, research frameworks, and gameplay experiences that might shed light on this matter. Our sense is that Games for Impact differ from serious games in that they make a distinct claim: that games can act as catalysts for embedding significant social and cultural issues into the public consciousness. In its literal sense, *impact* refers to a force of impression that brings two “things” into contact, even forcefully. The question we raise—whether and under what circumstances games can acquire this role, and how design thinking and design methodologies can be applied to foster—or even evaluate—such impact—remains an open and interdisciplinary area of exploration.

The four contributions collected here exemplify this diversity of approaches.

The article *Negotiating artefacts: student game creation for education and introspection* explores how students engage in the creative process of game-making, using artifacts not only as design outputs but also as tools for reflection, learning, and self-discovery (Jerrett). By highlighting the educational and introspective dimensions of game creation, it points to the transformative potential of design practice itself.

In *Virtual play and real connections: unpacking the impact of rice farming simulation video games* the authors analyze how simulation games can mediate cultural knowledge and social connection (Nishimura et al.). By focusing on rice farming simulations, the study illustrates how virtual play can translate into meaningful awareness of real-world practices, values, and community ties.

The study *Spontaneous recognition of impactful video games: a user-centric classification framework* addresses the methodological challenges of defining and assessing impact in games (Terron-Lopez et al.). Proposing a framework based on player recognition and categorization, it offers a structured approach to understanding how users themselves identify which games are impactful and why.

Finally, *Inclusive gaming through AI: a perspective for identifying opportunities and obstacles through co-design with people living with MND* emphasizes accessibility and inclusivity (Dwyer et al.). By centering the experiences of people living with motor neuron disease, this perspective piece demonstrates how co-design and AI technologies can contribute to more inclusive play experiences and broaden participation in gaming.

Taken together, these contributions showcase the breadth of what “games for impact” can mean in practice: from fostering self-reflection and cultural connection, often through the immersive mediation of new technologies (e.g., Theodoropoulos and Antoniou, 2022), to developing frameworks for evaluation and promoting accessibility. They reaffirm that impactful game design is not limited to specific genres or purposes, but rather spans education, culture, social inclusion, and methodological innovation.

Looking ahead, future research should explore further how impact can be also in the long term assessed, and which design principles most effectively lead to lasting change. This includes developing robust evaluation methodologies, exploring new narrative and technological forms, and engaging with diverse player communities. By continuing to build bridges between theory, practice, and lived experience, we can appreciate the transformative potential of video games beyond entertainment, but as catalysts for empathy, awareness, and social innovation.

## Author contributions

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## Conflict of interest

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