BOOKLET OF ABSTRACTS

GAME MATTERS.
Innovating Game Studies and Research

SAE Institute – Conservatory of Matera - Polytechnic University of Bari

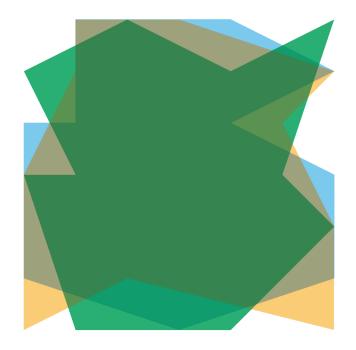*12 December 2025 | ODE (officina degli Esordi) - Bari*

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Game design and innovation

Chair: Claudio Pomo, Polytechnic University of Bari

Selin Kaynar – Beyond Realism: Architectural Stylization as Critical Commentary in Indie Games - Indipendent Researcher

Many independent videogames reject visual realism and instead embrace architectural stylization as a means of expressing alternative spatial logics, emotional atmospheres, and critical perspectives. This paper investigates how stylized architecture functions not merely as aesthetic design but as a reflective tool, inviting players to experience space beyond realism, within worlds that construct and inhabit their own autonomous spatial truths.

Research Question:

How does architectural stylization in indie games challenge conventional spatial realism and foster unique, expressive relationships between players and space?

Methodology:

The study analyzes five independent games; Monument Valley (2014), Townscaper (2020), Pilgrims (2019), Carto (2020), and Potion Craft (2021) through visual and spatial analysis framed by architectural theory. It explores how stylized environments reshape the player's engagement with space, not by mimicking the real world, but by generating new affective, symbolic, and rule-bound spatial experiences. Key theoretical perspectives include Peter Eisenman's notion of narrative form in architecture, Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage and spatial rhythm, and spatial readings drawn from Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth.

Main Findings:

Stylized architectures in these videogames construct meaning through abstraction, exaggeration, and metaphor. Townscaper transforms city-building into an intuitive, purposeless aesthetic play. Pilgrims offers hand-crafted, collage-like stages that prioritize symbolism over function. Monument Valley uses impossible geometry and perspective shifts to evoke emotional resonance and transitions. Carto allows players to actively construct and rearrange the map, defining space through narrative logic rather than fixed coordinates. Potion Craft stylizes medieval interiors around tactile interaction and material experimentation. In each case, these videogames create their own autonomous spatial realities, encouraging players to reflect on architecture as an expressive and interpretive form.

Conclusion:

These videogames show how stylized spatial design can serve as a critical and conceptual

framework, one that resists simulation and opens architecture to interpretation, play, and storytelling.

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Biography. Selin Kaynar is a PhD candidate in architectural design and a research assistant in the Digital Game Design Department. Her research focuses on architecture, game studies, and the visuality of spatial representation in digital environments.

Nicola Zolin – Entangled Sound: Toward a Neo-Materialist Framework for Game Audio Ecologies - University of Venice

This paper proposes a neo-materialist model for analyzing sound in video games, positioning sonic phenomena not as passive environmental cues but as active forces in the co-constitution of virtual experience. Integrating Karen Barad's theory of intra-action and agential cuts, Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, Steve Goodman's sonic affect theory, Tim Ingold's notion of taskscape, and the concept of machinic agency as developed by James Bridle and Alexander Galloway, the model shifts the focus from representational soundscapes to immersive, relational, and politically charged sonic ecologies. Sound is treated as a product of entangled material-discursive configurations - apparatuses composed of hardware, code, bodies, and cultural practices - that do not merely mediate experience but participate in its very construction. Drawing on Barad, sonic events are not pre-given stimuli but emerge through specific cuts that define what can be heard, by whom, and under what conditions. Lefebvre and Goodman help articulate rhythm as both a temporal structure and a force of affective modulation, with sound acting as a vector of intensity that entrains, disrupts, or disorients the player's embodied engagement. Ingold's taskscape reframes sound design as an unfolding of situated action, where meaning arises from the interweaving of movements, tasks, and environments in time. Bridle and Galloway's work expands this ecology by foregrounding the agency of technical systems: not as neutral tools, but as operative agents that shape the conditions of audibility and interactivity. Within this framework, sonic design becomes a site where human and nonhuman agencies converge, producing both aesthetic form and ontological effect. By repositioning sound as an intra-active, rhythmed, and machinically mediated force, this model offers a theoretical lens through which to critically interrogate how game worlds are sounded into being - vibrant, immersive, and deeply relational.

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Iris Zhang – Like mother, like burr: Making and playing for catharsis - UCLA

Arising out of a need to document personal memory and narrative, and more so, to reimagine one's pasts and to reconcile with them, this practice-based research paper seeks to identify the cathartic affordances of games. Through the making of a series of autofictional game sketches that center on the author's own mother-daughter relationship as a first generation immigrant, the practice acknowledges such a relationship as the crux of one's crucial identity formation (and destruction). And the recalling, remaking, and replaying of such a relationship is seen as the heart of crafting one's personal catharsis, answering - What are the affordances of game-making and game-playing in achieving personal catharsis? While grounded in game studies, the research also draws from the conceptual grammars of fields of film, linguistics, literature, psychotherapy, in which memory, identity and language intertwine through frameworks like abjection, the ruminarrative, self-translation, all of which shape the affectual and theoretical terrain of this work. The research and practice engage in an iterative, reflective process of informing one another, adhering to the approach of Reparative Game Design, one that centers on the maker, the making, and the acceptance of uncertainties, gaps and questions in the pursuit of healing and in the pursuit of knowledge. Aesthetic catharsis functions as a conceptual unit of measurement in evaluating the game sketches and the practice, in their reparative impact on the maker-player. Ultimately, this research proposes methods that a game-maker could partake in to truly make a game of one's own, seeing it as agency, as confession, as half-truth, as survival, accompanying one through the disquiets of the past and present, in fact and in fiction.

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Biography. Iris Zhang is an artist and researcher interested in exploring memory, metaphor, and play as ways of creating interactive, reflective and reparative spaces.

Luisa Strangis – Neuro-Driven Interfaces: UX/UI Design, Cognitive Patterns, and Ethical Frontiers in Game Environments - Bari Academy

This presentation explores the intersection between UX/UI design and neuroscientific insights in the context of video game development, focusing on how cognitive responses shape user experience and player immersion. The study investigates how visual interfaces, user feedback systems, and decision-making architectures influence player behavior, engagement, and emotional involvement. By examining scientific case studies and applied examples—from eye-tracking analyses to neurodesign experiments—the paper maps recurring cognitive patterns that affect how players perceive, navigate, and interpret game environments. Particular attention is paid to how affordances, choice architecture, and sensory stimuli are consciously crafted to reinforce immersive loops and drive behavioral engagement, while managing cognitive load in ways that directly affect player agency. The presentation also addresses the ethical implications of designing interfaces that leverage neural triggers and psychological models. Beyond fostering immersion, many interfaces incorporate user retention strategies—such as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), recurrent notifications, and temporal scarcity mechanics—which, while effective in capturing attention, risk deviating from the core purpose of games as creative and voluntary experiences. When interface design prioritizes behavioral conditioning over meaningful interaction, games are reduced to tools of compulsion,

undermining their expressive, artistic, and playful dimensions. Methodologically, this contribution combines neuroscientific literature with interface analysis, highlighting how design elements such as feedback loops, user flow, interface contrast, and navigation logic can influence cognitive performance and player satisfaction. The findings underline that immersion is not merely a matter of aesthetic realism, but a neurologically traceable response triggered by intentional design. The goal is to offer a critical framework for understanding how UX/UI strategies, when informed by neuroscience, can enhance inclusivity and player empowerment—while also raising questions about ethics and the future of interactive design. This contribution is aligned with the "Game Design and Innovation" panel, as it discusses technological and cognitive innovations that directly impact player experience, ethics, and accessibility.

Biography. Luisa Strangis is a Game Designer and Game Artist specialized in UX/UI Design. She teaches 3D Modeling and Interface Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bari (ABA Bari), with a research focus on cognitive aesthetics and neuro-driven interactive systems.

Giuseppe Candido – AI and Procedural Content Generation in Game Design - Bari Academy

My talk explores how Procedural Content Generation (PCG) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) currently represent vast potential for the development of interactive content, both within and beyond the world of video games and game design. By analyzing the historical evolution of this field, we can observe a growing need among companies for technological support capable of accelerating the creation of video games in order to quickly meet the demands of the ever-expanding video game market. PCG involves the use of algorithms and rule-based systems, implemented through programming languages, to dynamically and randomly generate expansive maps, enemies (NPCs), and assets. This approach allows game artists to focus more on the experimental and creative aspects of production, as well as on improving the overall user experience of the game. According to research, as early as the 1980s, video games such as Rogue (for the procedural generation of dungeon maps), Elite (for galaxies and planets), and No Man's Sky (a game entirely based on procedurally generated elements) already demonstrated the implementation and potential of PCG. This approach enables players to explore ever-expanding worlds, stimulating curiosity and a sense of mystery, while also introducing unpredictability. As a result, players have been shown to experience high levels of engagement, feeling more in control of their in-game environment and demonstrating increased attention to their gameplay experience. However, for game designers, relying heavily on PCG can gradually limit creativity and the ability to manage complexity due to the automation of design tools. Therefore, a careful balance between artistic expression and procedural systems is essential. Many companies have incorporated PCG in the creation of assets and characters. Among them is Epic Games, which has integrated advanced AI models for Non-Player Characters (NPCs) within its Unreal Engine game engine. Thanks to new advanced language models, AI can now generate realistic dialogues, allowing for meaningful and context-aware conversations in every game session. This results in a more relational engagement between the player and the character, breaking down virtual barriers and blending the two worlds. A practical example can

be seen in Fortnite, where AI enables players to have direct conversations with characters like Darth Vader, who respond with realistic behaviors. At the same time, players do not always recognize whether content is authentic or AI-generated, especially when the design is well-controlled. For this reason, safety models are being developed to ensure responsible use of these technologies. This contribution is part of the panel Game Design and Innovation, focused on the evolution of game mechanics, player experience, and how emerging technologies impact the design of games.

Biography. Giuseppe Candido is a 3D Artist specializing in Video Game Art, Digital Animation, and VFX for Cinema. Currently teaching Digital Modeling Techniques and Digital Animation Techniques at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bari (ABA Bari).

Gustavo Bülow – Level Design Table Generation with Artificial Intelligence - Universidade Feevale

With the rapid advancement of digital game development technologies and the increasing demand for rich, immersive user experiences, AI supported level design warrants thorough investigation. This study aimed to investigate the capacity of AI in creating level design tables, with the goal of facilitating the planning of progressive and heterogeneous challenges. The intention is to improve player retention and, consequently, contribute to the success of games.The methodology used was the creation of level design tables with AI, prototyping, and comparative analysis. The research was based on the concept of Rational Game Design. A simple game was conceived where the player jumps over approaching animals. Seven obstacles (animals) with progressively increasing difficulty were defined. This data was provided, via prompts, to different AI models: ChatGPT, Copilot, Qwen, DeepSeek, and Perplexity, to generate 30-level tables. A comparative analysis was performed among the proposed solutions, based on criteria of completeness, challenge diversity, difficulty progression, and variation capability. A digital game prototype was developed to validate the effectiveness of the generated tables. This prototype can be fed with new tables via CSV files, allowing for future studies and practical evaluations of AI-generated content. The ChatGPT and Copilot models showed limitations in difficulty progression consistency, with Copilot requiring multiple iterations for correction. Qwen and DeepSeek initially faced problems with challenging diversity. DeepSeek demonstrated the best results, generating more balanced tables with good diversity and difficulty progression after various interactions and specific prompts. Perplexity produced consistent tables but failed to generate complete variations. The study concludes that AI can be a valuable tool for level design, provided there is careful human supervision to ensure the quality and coherence of the stages.

Biancamaria Mori & Marco Bielli – Beyond the Bridge: A Historical Edu-LARP Exploring War, Choice, and Memory in Secondary Schools - SAE Institute

"Oltre il Ponte" ("Beyond the Bridge") is an educational project carried out in 2024–2025 by the OMAR Technical Institute in Novara, Italy, aimed at upper secondary school students. At its core is a historical edu-LARP designed to explore the impact of war on everyday life in occupied Italy during the final years of World War II. Through immersive role-play, students engaged with a historically grounded scenario that brought into focus not only the military conflict, but also the ethical tensions, social fractures, and political complexities that defined the Italian home front.

Biographies. Biancamaria Mori is a game designer and Course Leader in Game Design at SAE Institute. She teaches in multiple institutions and has worked as a developer of immersive and multimedia experiences.
Marco Bielli is a writer and narrative designer specializing in live-action role-playing and historical storytelling. He collaborates with educational institutions and cultural organizations to design immersive experiences focused on collective memory and civic awareness.

Panel 2 – Games and Art languages

Chair: Fabrizio Festa, Conservatorio di Matera

Paolo Clemente, Dario Mattia, Antonio Colangelo, Fabio Natale, Gianpaolo Cassano – Generative Sound Design & Gamification of Urban Exploration - Conservatory of Matera

This research, addressing the Games and the Arts panel, originated within the Conservatorio E. R. Duni of Matera. Our focus is on sound mapping and sonification, allowing sound to represent diverse spaces, from outdoor to indoor, and from macro to micro environments. ITACA is a transmedia project blending experimental game practices, performing arts, and generative sound design. More than a simple mapping tool, it's an experiential game environment where urban movement dynamically generates real-time melodies. This transforms every journey into a performative, sensory, and narrative event. Users are invited to "sing their path," using sound as their guide and map, implicitly challenging visual GPS and conventional digital navigation. The application, developed in C# with a web application framework, leverages mapping APIs for tracking and cartographic updates. MIDI generation is powered by open-source libraries and a proprietary algorithm, forming the project's core. ITACA builds a system where orientation is musically driven, utilizing adaptive algorithms, machine learning, and procedural audio. User actions—like turns or deviations—dynamically alter pitch, rhythm, and intensity, creating interactive storytelling. Here, sound isn't just background; it's both the narrative structure and the game's core mechanic. ITACA elevates urban gameplay, transforming historical, emotional, or tourist itineraries into explorable levels. Each point of interest becomes a narrative sound node, unlocked only by physically moving through the space. Deviations from linear paths generate sonic variations and new narrative combinations. The entire system functions as a playable map, a geolocated score where the city is simultaneously background, instrument, and co-author. Our research demonstrates that each user's unique path generates a distinct sonic output, emphasizing the profound connection between embodied movement and real-time generative sound. ITACA thus reimagines the urban landscape as a participatory composition, where every user's trajectory inscribes a unique sonic trace into an ever-evolving sound archive.

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Biographies. Paolo Clemente. Musician, composer and PhD student at the Conservatorio E.R. Duni in Matera. Graduated in Electronic Music, he develops integrated analytical methods for sound mapping to explore relationships between sound, space and landscape.

Dario Mattia Composer and sound designer for documentaries, films and installations, he holds an Electronic Music degree at the Conservatorio E.R. Duni, provides audio post-production services; he's collaborated with Italy's Ministry of Transport, the CNR and serves as research expert at the Conservatorio di Matera.

Antonio Colangelo. Sound Designer and Engineer, graduated in Electronic and Applied Music at the Conservatorio E.R. Duni. He conducts research in Sonic Interaction Design and applies computer-music techniques to automate programmable systems within electroacoustic composition.

Fabio Natale. Composer, sound engineer and designer, with a BA in Commercial Music (University of the West of Scotland), an MA in Film Scoring & Video Game Music (ADSUM) and an Electronic Music degree at the Conservatorio E.R. Duni. He works as producer, engineer and audio editor for film and advertising.

Gianpaolo Cassano. Musician, educator, composer, sound designer and programmer. Graduated in Applied and Electronic Music at the Conservatorio E.R. Duni, he specializes in sound mapping, sonological computation and develops generative audio algorithms and data-driven tools for exploring sound geometries.

Valentina Fedele, Brunella Botte, Giada Marinensi – Skin Deep: An Exploratory Analysis of the Identity Value of Skins in Fortnite - Link University

Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) is an online Battle Royale game whose popularity and widespread use, particularly among adolescents and pre-adolescents, has frequently attracted scholarly attention. Studies, in general, have focused on specific elements, especially its violent aesthetics and freemium business model (Neely, 2021), problematizing its references and models of engagement (King et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2020). This focus has often overshadowed cmore specific aspects of the game's narrative and structure, allowing for an exploration of its value as a social space for identity negotiation in a digitalized context (Etura Hernández et al., 2022). From this perspective and in continuity with the literature on identity construction in digital and video game spaces (Muriel, 2021), this paper argues that specific processes of self-recognition and social recognition (Honneth, 2002) are activated within

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Fortnite's social space, involving a redistribution of prestige and legitimacy according to criteria tied not only to the dynamics of the game itself, but also to the discursive and visual practices that constitute its community of practice (Wenger, 1999). The hypothesis is tested by focusing on the relationship between signifier and signified in skins, which, although purely aesthetic rewards, are a key feature in characterizing it, fundamental for player engagement. Unlike avatars, skins, initially assigned randomly and varying from game to game, can only be customized through the addition of pre-determined accessories or by selecting among fixed variants. Therefore their identity value refers not so much to the aesthetic projections and affiliations of the players themselves, but rather to a system of recognized meanings and values that intersect expectations and imaginaries. The study was conducted using a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative tools, namely focus groups and semi-structured interviews, with a quantitative survey designed using visual research techniques.

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Biographies. Valentina Fedele is Associate Professor of Cultural and Communicative Sociology at Link Campus, where she also serves as Coordinator of the Bachelor's Degree in Communication Sciences, including a curriculum in "Videogames Design and Production." Her research interests focus on visual representations of subjectivities and identities related to gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and sports.

Brunella Botte is PhD candidate in Computer Science and Psychology at Utrecht University, where she conducts research on adaptive gamified systems through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. She is Adjunct Professor at Link Campus, where she co-coordinates the Applied Games Lab. Her work integrates technology, psychology, and education, with expertise in UX design and immersive environments.

Giada Marinensi is Adjunct Professor at Link Campus, where she teaches "Applied Games," "Gamification Strategies," and "Interactive Storytelling." She co-coordinates the Applied Games Lab, also serving as scientific coordinator of national and international research projects focused on the design, implementation, and evaluation of serious games, gamified applications, and interactive storytelling solutions.

Luca Malcangi – Videogames as Participatory Art Forms - University of Bari

Whereas books or films follow a fixed narrative, videogames provide a distinctive experience in which the player has agency over the story. When following a set plot, players can decide how deeply to engage with the narrative, adapting it to their own gaming and aesthetic preferences: optional quests, cutscenes, and music all contribute to a customizable storytelling experience that unfolds at the player's pace. This flexibility makes the experience "rhizomatic," as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. Videogames share traits with performative art: the meaning of a game emerges through the interaction between player and medium, changing from one individual to another—much like in the works of Marina Abramović. Through in-game choices, players become the main actors, shaping outcomes and triggering unexpected consequences. Baldur's Gate 3, which affords a non-linear, player-driven narrative structure, makes a perfect example for such interactivity. The performative aspect becomes clearest when examining how player communities extend this creativity beyond the game itself. Players create custom content, tribute art, and even fan-made publications. For example, Final Fantasy XIV's GPose community demonstrates aesthetic engagement through production of fashion magazine-style fanzines. These spaces make the "product" a medium hijacked by players. This paper analyzes selected case studies, notably the Final Fantasy franchise and Baldur's Gate 3, employing participant observation and direct engagement. Drawing upon aesthetic theory—particularly Shusterman's critique of the distinction between high and popular art, and Dewey's definition of aesthetic experience as something not entirely separate from other types of experience—we argue for the recognition of videogames as complex art forms, as they not just innovate aesthetically but expose the limitations of static art forms, challenging the definition of "art" and "spectatorship" altogether.

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Biography. Luca Malcangi, born in 1994, got his Master's Degree in Philosophy in 2020. His research interests include games aesthetics, sci-fi literature, and oriental aesthetics. He held seminars in the History of Aesthetics class in the university of Bari.

Richard Bingham – Engine Interpretation: Decoding Time and Temporality in Zelda64 - Queen Mary University of London

Engines are collections of "core" functions and assets that enable the production of interactive digital simulations, such as videogames. As such, they are transient objects, subject to updates and revisions and existing in their execution rather than as static objects. Nonetheless, engines have a character, "protocols, standards, and affordances" that "orient users towards particular design methodologies", producing a "look and feel" shared among games built using it (Nicoll and Keogh). Yet are individual engines themselves meaningful texts, rather than influential agents in the process of creating texts? Addressing the Games and the Arts panel, this paper experiments with the extent to which we can interpret a videogame engine. Interpretation is the practice of uncovering a text's "hidden" meaning. Often, this involves applying an external "master code", such as Marxism or Freudian psychoanalysis, to reveal "deeper" meanings behind the surface (Jameson). Critics of such frameworks argue that searching for latent meanings obscures aspects of a text that neither affirm nor negate the applied code (Sontag). This debate mirrors another concerning the significance of source code in digital cultures. To distinguish their subject from literature and film, games scholars have traditionally located a game's true meaning in the "procedural" system beneath the surface of screen-based representations (Anabel). Some have criticised a fetishization of source code as the origin of a piece of software's meaning, rather than understanding it to be one "re-source" among many (Chun). Both these framings presuppose a normative gameplay situation: the game running on official hardware with the player working towards the designed goal. Yet player communities regularly upend this situation by emulating pirated game files, sharing hacking tips and running supplementary software. These practices reorient games toward new goals decided among community members—goals including, but not limited to, speedrunning challenges (Boluk and Lemieux). While these are often geared towards better modifying or speedrunning a game, they also lead to instances of interpretation for pleasure. This paper adapts these community tools and insights to a new interpretation of the "Zelda64" game engine, created for the two Legend of Zelda games released on Nintendo 64 (1998/2000). This experimental approach levels the surface/depth metaphor of image and code, exploring a single plane upon which computation is encountered alongside – rather than hidden "beneath" – the game-world (see image above). This provides "weird" encounters with the basic ontology of these once-familiar environments. People and things are reshuffled into hierarchies of "actors" in which distinctions between humans, animals and inanimate objects disappear. We find these actors are not singular but exist as multiple "instances" across the game-world. Moreover, previously invisible actors crawl out of the woodwork, including ones that embody the passing of time. Beginning in this weird space, my paper demonstrates that interpreting the tangles of computational temporalities in the Zelda64 engine enriches the thematic explorations of time and temporality offered by both games. Indicative

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Biography Richard Bingham is Lecturer in Digital Cultures at Queen Mary University of London.

Matteo Genovesi – Updating Narrative Seriality in Digital Games: The New Telltale and Don't Nod - Bari Academy

As I have argued elsewhere (Genovesi, 2020), Telltale Games and Dontnod have represented peculiar cases for the progressive complexity of narrative seriality and interactive storytelling in the game industry. Telltale Games established a flexible schedule for their serial projects, focusing on work-in-progress development (Bruner, Grossman, 2007). As a result, there were often several weeks between the release of one episode and the next of a Season. For long periods, Telltale Games has had success with this format, especially with The Walking Dead (series, 2012-2019), and other companies have followed its approach. One of these is Dontnod, which applied a work-in-progress development for its acclaimed Life Is Strange (series, 2015-2019). Nevertheless, Telltale Games closed for bankruptcy protection in 2018, and the company re-established itself with a shorter name: Telltale. The developers declared to follow the praxis of contemporary narrative seriality, aiming for shorter release periods (Telltale, 2024). On the other side, Dontnod partially changed its development process and published some stand-alone games in the last years, and it also rebranded its name in Don't Nod (2022) to highlight the focus on non-conventional themes. However, the recent episodic release of Lost Records: Bloom and Rage (Don't Nod 2025), divided into two "tapes" published within two months, resembles the work-in-progress tendency of the past decade. This contribution has two interdependent purposes: 1 - emphasize the connections between the new identities of the two companies with the global media landscape of narrative seriality. 2 - focus on textual aspects of the interactive storytelling structures in some of their last projects, which continue to highlight

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some semiotic principles of narrative seriality that digital games can always valorize. Therefore, this contribution is based on a hybrid disciplinary approach that combines media and game studies.

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Biography. Matteo Genovesi achieved his PhD in 2019 at the University of Udine with a final dissertation focused on game studies. Today, he is a Professor of Game Writing and Multimedia for Cultural Heritage at the Academy of Fine Arts of Bari. More details of his academic background here: https://accademiabelleartiba.academia.edu/MatteoGenovesi

Michele Varini – Virtuaverse: Nostalgia, Rebellion, and the Sonic Pixel - Catholic University of Sacred Heart

The Virtuaverse video game, developed by the singer of the underground band Master Boot Records, is a curious confluence of retro aesthetic, electronic music, and metal subculture, in a visual and sound experience that powerfully reminds us of the technological and musical past. Set within a dystopian virtual reality, Virtuaverse utilizes 8-bit graphics that recall the nostalgia for the early videogames of the 1980s, with pixel art that, though simple, evokes a strong sense of longing for the dawn of electronic gaming (Juul, 2019; Ensslin, 2014). This retro aesthetic serves not merely as a reference to gaming's history, but as a medium to explore the relationship between nostalgia and modernity (Uricchio, 2020; Flanagan, 2009). The graphic style is emblematic of a subcultural identity that bridges vintage game design, electronic music, and the heavy metal scene (Huntemann & Payne, 2019). The game's soundtrack, composed by the artist himself, reflects the sonic identity of the Master Boot Records collective, a project deeply entwined with retro videogame culture. This music, in and out of game mechanics, creates a layered atmosphere charged with tension and rebellion— aligning with the visual world of Virtuaverse (Isbister, 2017; McErlean, 2018). Here, music transcends its typical role, becoming integral to immersion and meaning. Nostalgia drives every audiovisual layer of this title. Its recreated sounds and visuals point back to a time when digital and musical cultures were perceived as more authentic and less commercialized. Yet, rather than a critical deconstruction, this nostalgia functions primarily as an aesthetic strategy (Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Juul, 2019). As such, Virtuaverse can also be read as a form of cultural resistance—using the past to question contemporary norms and mass-market expectations (Bogost, 2007; Sicart, 2011). This study employs comparative visual analysis and content analysis to explore how

Virtuaverse fuses retro game culture and metal subculture into an experience that is not merely nostalgic, but also a reflective commentary on authenticity, rebellion, and digital identity in contemporary gaming and music culture (Shaw, 2014; Taylor, 2018).

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Michele Varini: PhD in Sociology, Organisations, Cultures, at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. He currently conducts research on digital fashion issues, mainly on the hybridisation between the world of gaming and that of fashion production. A collaborator of the ModaCult study centre, he is interested in the phenomena of digitalisation, digital fashion, new forms of production and consumption, and post-humanism.

Panel 3 – Games, Society, and Culture

Chair: Alessandra Micalizzi, SAE Institute

Marika Mascitti, Salvatore Messina, Alessandro Soriani – Decolonial Playgrounds: Intersectional Pedagogies of Resistance in Video Game Design - University of Bologne.

Often dismissed as trivial or apolitical, video games are in fact cultural artifacts shaped by—and shaping—dominant social imaginaries. Through their interactive nature and capacity to simulate relational systems, games hold the potential to problematize frameworks of productivity, normativity, and coloniality. This potential, however, is not automatic: it requires intentional design practices and critical pedagogical approaches grounded in Media Literacy Educational (Gee, 2009; Kellner & Share, 2007). Building on transfeminist, queer, decolonial, and Black game studies (Ruberg, 2019; Flanagan, 2009; Gray, 2014; Grace, 2021; Chess, 2020), this study explores video games as cultural spaces of resistance to neoliberal, ableist, patriarchal, and colonial design logics. The central hypothesis is that video games, as a complex and expressive medium, can function as alternative cultural spaces and sites of resistance when they're designed and analyzed through explicitly political, situated frameworks. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do video games convey, reinforce, or challenge dominant cultural logics through mechanics, narratives, and aesthetics? (2) How can they support alternative forms of agency and subjectivity based on care, emotional plurality, and relationality? (3) Which principles should inform a politically conscious game design practice grounded in decolonial and intersectional feminist perspectives? The methodology includes a comparative critical analysis of selected games through a custom analytical grid, developed from Media Education research (Soriani, 2024) and adapted though the Queer Media Education Framework (Messina, 2025). This grid evaluates narrative content, mechanics, emotional and aesthetic structures to surface themes that can become subject of reflection and dialogue with the audience.

Federico Gorziglia – Coping with Burnout through Coziness: How Wanderstop Teaches Players to Resist Perfectionism over a Cup of Tea - Rome, University La Sapienza

As a way of coping with burnout (Aguiar, 2025), game designer Davey Wreden (The Stanley Parable, 2011) wrote the narrative for Wanderstop (Ivy Road, 2025), a cozy game featuring Alta, a once-undefeated warrior who, in her quest to "better herself", finds herself running a tea brewery. This contribution explores, through the dual interpretative lens of cozy (Boudreau et al., 2025) and serious games (Virgilio, 2023), how Wanderstop's innovative approach to game and narrative design offers players tools to engage with complex emotions in a protected context, while also supporting the transfer of emotional management strategies to real-life situations

(Virgilio, 2023). The analysis adopt a broader socio-cultural framework drawing on research that links the neoliberal rhetoric of personal growth and self-fulfillment through competition (Scharff, 2016) to the reinforcement of individualistic psychological tendencies, which contribute to the weakening of broader solidarities that might otherwise buffer individuals against failure (Adams et al., 2019). In this context, this investigation adopt the burnout conceptualization proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2020). Reflecting on how video games can provide meaningful entertainment by depicting the human condition (Olivier et al., 2016) and fulfilling basic psychological needs (Przybylski et al., 2012), this research focus on how Wanderstop exemplifies a unique hybrid of cozy and serious game design. Acknowledging its slow-paced core mechanics (Adams, 2014), which offer an alternative to performance-driven gameplay through non-linear and non goal-oriented features, this study analyzes, through a textual analysis, how Wanderstop's comforting visual, narrative and sound design allows players to reflect upon the concept of perfectionism, which has been identified as positively related to burnout (Spagnoli et al., 2021).

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Federico Ferrari, Massimiliano Panarari – Political Gaming and Local Democracy: A Comparison of Some Serious Games Designed by Local Municipal Governments - University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Abstract:

Since the late 1990s, gaming and gamification have become increasingly popular topics of academic study. In recent decades, serious games have demonstrated considerable potential as learning platforms that use the entertainment paradigm typical of postmodernity (Neys &

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Jansz, 2019) to convey educational content. This success is primarily attributed to the generational characteristics of their users, who often «[...] prefer to play an active role in their learning process and are uncomfortable with methodologies that merely involve one-way information transfer» (Pacheco-Velazquez et al., 55). Political gaming first emerged in the social sciences after World War II, in the form of simulation games that replicated the decision-making processes in negotiations and conflicts within international politics (Cohen, 1962). Since then, it has extended to numerous sociopolitical issues and problems, including social inclusion, climate change, and racial discrimination (Westera, 2022). As Johan Huizinga argued in his seminal 1938 book Homo Ludens, human communities express their interpretations of life and world through games, as well as their rules of coexistence and functioning. Thus, games also express a political vocation (Bittanti, 2023). We are proposing the following paper for the "Games, Society, and Culture" panel. It intends to analyze political gaming in the context of local community building, where the dimension of participatory methodology aimed at the younger generation comes into play particularly strongly. The paper begins with a comparison of three original (and currently unique) serious gaming experiences aimed at teaching the mechanisms of local democracy and municipal administration. These three gamification formulas were created by public entities: two were developed directly by the Municipality of Pesaro and Fiorano Modenese (Delibera), which is a unique feature in the realm of Italian political gaming, and the third was developed by "Scuola-Città Pestalozzi", a public primary and secondary school founded in 1945 by Ernesto Codignola and his wife Anna Maria Melli. These serious games have several notable features: they are analogical in nature, belong to the subcategory of reality games in which players take on the roles of decision-makers or policymakers, and are based on political pedagogy, which is more participatory and engaging than merely illustrative. With reference to the Fiorano Modenese experience, we have collected data through a qualitative-quantitative satisfaction and experience feedback questionnaire administered to all students involved in the project in the 2024/25 school year. Methodologically, this paper's research is a mixed-methods approach involving qualitative comparative analysis, a quantitative questionnaire, and in-depth interviews. The paper aims to identify positive elements that empower young people in community life and local policy mechanisms, while also discussing some weaknesses (Loh, 2019) of this original type of serious game.

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Biographies. Massimiliano Panarari, associate professor of Sociology of Communication at the

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia; member of the editorial board of Rivista di Digital Politics (Il Mulino) and of the editorial board of Rivista di Politica (Rubbettino).

Federico Ferrari, research fellow at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and councillor for Culture and Tourism at the Municipality of Sassuolo (MO).

Sabino Di Chio – TV Series and the Ambivalence of Gamification - Università degli Studi di Bari

Research questions and methodology- Gamification spreads on television screens by replicating the ambivalence that distinguishes it in everyday life. The recent success of some tv shows focused on hybridization between game and reality suggests the impact it has on collective imaginary and the persistence of a demand of knowledge for understanding it. What representation of gamification do tv shows offer? What is it possible to learn about this practice through the "school of life" (Klapper 1960) of television? The paper we are proposing starts from these questions to deal with the content analysis of the audio-visual texts of six titles published by Netflix in the last three years: Dash&Lily (USA), Love&Anarchy (Sweden), You vs Wild (USA), Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (UK), Alice in Borderland (Japan) and Squid Game (South Korea). Theoretical framework –Digitalization has allowed the playful experience to expand and intertwine with everyday life (Le Lay et al. 2021; Waltz, Deterding 2014). The paper starts from a reconstruction of the ambivalent reading that characterizes hybridization: on the one hand, the use of game design outside playful contexts is welcomed as an incentive to engaging audiences in complex contexts, transforming intentions into actions, and problem solving (Zimmermann 2014; Granic, Lobel, and Engels, 2014). From a critical perspective, however, gamification seems a disciplinary guide that orients the late modern subject towards the measurement, surveillance, and commercialization of behaviour (Bogost 2016; Finn 2018). Key findings - The first approach ("Gamification as liberation") is reflected in romantic comedies such as Dash & Lily or Love & Anarchy, in which analogical gamification offers inventiveness to subjects lost in the performance imperatives of the metropolis and the digital transition. Interactive series such as You vs Wild or the Black Mirror episode entitled "Bandersnatch" transform the same fruition into a game, adopting the dynamics and mechanics that elevate the viewer to the privileged role of hidden director. Finally, Alice in Borderland and Squid Game refer to the tradition of survival games to narrate the "gamification as exploitation", that is a form of totalizing and unintentional involvement that deprives the game of autonomy, gratuity, and generosity to transform it into "instrumentalizing power" (Zuboff 2019).

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Biography. Sabino Di Chio is Associate Professor at the University of Bari, where he teaches Sociology of Communication. His research explores digital asymmetries, temporality and popular media narratives.

Alessandro Franzò – Precarity by Design: Gaming Houses as Organisational Spaces Legitimising Precarious Playbour inside the Esports Ecosystem - University of Milan

This paper investigates gaming houses—shared residential spaces where professional eSports athletes live and train—as innovative yet ambivalent organisational forms that reconfigure the boundaries between work, play, and domestic life. Situated within the broader culture of competitive gaming, these spaces reveal how the professionalisation of play operates through architectural, technological, and social arrangements that both enable and exploit. This paper investigates gaming houses—shared residential spaces where professional eSports athletes live and train—as innovative yet ambivalent organisational forms that reconfigure the boundaries between work, play, and domestic life. Situated within the broader culture of competitive gaming, these spaces reveal how the professionalisation of play operates through architectural, technological, and social arrangements that both enable and exploit. Research Question: How do gaming houses function as socio-technical infrastructures that legitimise precarious labour practices while sustaining the innovation narrative of eSports?Combining a grey literature review with ethnographic interviews and archival analysis, this research draws on perspectives from organisation studies and digital labour sociology to analyse the sociomaterial composition of gaming houses and their evolution from grassroots setups to corporate-managed environments. Key Findings: Three core insights emerge. First, the digital infrastructures and physical layouts of gaming houses transform domestic spaces into sites of labour, normalising surveillance, overwork, and always-on productivity. Second, their social hierarchies and immersive routines cultivate a rhetoric of passion and self-discipline that obscures economic insecurity. Third, the integration of streaming and content production into these spaces commodifies players' everyday lives, revealing tensions between community, performance, and exploitation. While often celebrated as incubators of excellence and innovation, gaming houses also institutionalise precariousness, blurring the line between agency and coercion in digital playbour. As such, they exemplify how game cultures are reshaping notions of labour, identity, and space—raising broader questions about the socio-economic conditions underpinning gaming innovation.This text has been drafted with the help of generative AI tools, specifically corrections and reorganisation of sections, oU'ered by ChatGPT (OpenAI).

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Biography. Alessandro Franzó is a PhD student of the University of Milan – NASP, with ongoing research in digital labour, media infrastructures, and the organisational cultures of play. Its current work explores how the inquiries in the esports industry can deepen reflections on the ecosystemic functioning of contemporary digital economies.

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Luca Falzea, Matteo Botto – To Woke or Not to Woke? Gamers Discuss Baldur's Gate - University of Genoa

This contribution explores how the term "woke" is used within gaming communities and how conservative groups strategically mobilize it to uphold exclusionary structures—particularly those targeting women and trans individuals. Our analysis addresses two main research questions: What does woke mean in gaming communities? How is it used to legitimize exclusionary practices? We conducted a thematic analysis of approximately 250 posts and comments from a forum historically linked to Gamergate. A recurring narrative frames gaming as a predominantly male domain, suggesting that "going woke"—by introducing diversity in game narratives or mechanics—inevitably leads to failure, as "gamers won't buy the game." Interestingly, Baldur's Gate 3, a game featuring many so- called woke elements, is not framed as such within the forum discourse—largely due to its commercial success. To understand this contradiction, we also performed a critical discourse analysis of the game, noting that it presents gender and sexuality in a depoliticized manner and allows players to "play straight." This tension between freedom and non-wokeness reveals how conservative narratives cast opposition to wokeness as resistance to a perceived tyranny, inverting power relations and portraying straight men—still dominant in the gaming industry—as victims of a progressive imposition.

Biographies. Luca Falzea holds a PhD in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research and is a research fellow at Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. His main research interests are masculinities, gender in academia and visual studies.
Matteo Botto is a research fellow at University of Genoa. His main research interests are manosphere and digital research, gender studies and education.