



## Play as Infrastructure: The Effect of Video Games on the Organization of Virtual/Real Life

Videogames are no longer adequately understood as discrete cultural texts, entertainment products, or objects of moral panic. They have become infrastructures through which virtual space is built, experience is designed, sociality is organized, labour is distributed, attention is monetized, and technological futures are rehearsed. From home consoles and mobile platforms to live-service ecosystems, in-game economies, AI-assisted production, and immersive environments, games increasingly operate as sites where fantasy and extraction, play and work, code and capital, world-building and governance converge.

This panel invites contributions that critically examine videogames as complex socio-technical, cultural, and experiential formations. Rather than approaching games only as narratives, representations, or isolated player experiences, we ask how experience itself is materially and economically organized through game infrastructures. How are virtual worlds produced, maintained, inhabited, and felt? What forms of labour, value, identity, embodiment, and power do they organize? How do platforms, engines, monetization systems, hardware ecologies, interface design, and regulatory frameworks shape what play can become and how it is experienced?

The panel is especially interested in the tension between games as spaces of imagination and games as systems of extraction. Contemporary games invite players into worlds of fantasy, competition, experimentation, embodiment, and sociality; yet these worlds are also increasingly structured by microtransactions, subscriptions, data capture, platform governance, content moderation, precarious labour, global production chains, and algorithmic design. The question is therefore not simply what games represent, but what kinds of worlds they build, what kinds of experiences they make possible, and under what political, economic, and technological conditions those experiences are produced.

We welcome theoretically informed and empirically grounded papers from game studies, media studies, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, political economy, software studies, STS, gender studies, design research, and related fields.

Contributions from PhD researchers and early-career scholars are particularly encouraged.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- games as infrastructures of virtual space and virtual experience;
- platformization and the transformation of play;
- player experience, embodiment, affect, immersion, and presence;
- live-service games and the end of the finished game object;
- game engines, software infrastructures, and world-building tools;
- interface design, feedback loops, and the shaping of player behaviour;
- labour, crunch, outsourcing, and unionization in the games industry;
- gender, race, class, and inequality in game production and play;
- in-game purchases, virtual currencies, loot boxes, and consumer rights;
- mobile gaming, retention design, and monetized attention;
- player data, surveillance, metrics, ranking systems, and behavioural design;
- modding, fan labour, streaming, and creator economies;
- the domestic history of consoles and the transformation of private play;
- VR/AR, embodiment, presence, and immersive environments;
- affect, frustration, flow, boredom, reward, and repetition in game design;
- geopolitical dimensions of game production, distribution, and regulation;
- climate, hardware, e-waste, servers, and the material ecology of games;
- the preservation, disappearance, and shutdown of online game worlds;
- moral panics, public discourse, and the changing legitimacy of games;
- methodological approaches to studying games as socio-technical and experiential systems.

By bringing together critical, theoretical, and empirical perspectives, the panel asks how video games can help us understand the broader transformation of virtual life today. What happens when play becomes infrastructural? What happens when experience is not only represented, but designed, measured, monetized, updated, governed, and eventually switched off?

We invite papers that do not merely celebrate or condemn video games, but use them as privileged sites for analysing contemporary relations between technology, culture, experience, labour, capital, and imagination.