

From Games to Consequences: Scaffolding Professional Accountability Through Game-based Learning and High-Fidelity Simulation

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Abstract: Game-based learning (GBL) is widely used in higher education to introduce complex professional concepts through low-risk, engaging activities. While its motivational benefits are well established, a persistent challenge remains: how to design learning pathways that extend the strengths of games into high-stakes contexts where learners must demonstrate credible, profession-ready performance. This paper addresses that challenge through a case study of a master 's-level International Project Management programme that intentionally scaffolds learning from low-stakes serious games to a high-fidelity, performance-oriented simulation. In the first phase, analogue and digital games are used as conceptual springboards to support shared understanding of planning, risk, governance, and ethical dilemmas. In the second phase, students transition into a six-week commercial-style simulation, adopting formal project roles and delivering an international project under strict evidential and assessment constraints. Drawing on portfolio analysis, a PRME-aligned survey, and documentary evidence, the paper shows how this progression supports deeper professional accountability, reflective control, and responsible decision-making without sacrificing engagement. For GBL practitioners, the study offers a transferable design pattern for bridging low- and high-stakes learning environments. This study contributes to games-based learning research by evidencing how deliberately escalating stakes—from low-risk games to high-fidelity simulations—supports the transfer of game-based insight into accountable, profession-ready practice.

Keywords: Game-based learning, Simulation-based training, Project management education, Experiential learning, Responsible management education PRME

1. Introduction

This paper reports a substantive development in an ongoing longitudinal investigation into the effectiveness of game-based learning (GBL) in project management education. Moving beyond reliance on numerical indicators alone, the study foregrounds qualitative and documentary evidence to provide observable accounts of how students progress from engaging with abstract concepts in low-stakes games to applying those concepts in complex, practice-oriented situations. In particular, a student-produced documentary is used alongside portfolio evidence to capture learning behaviours and decision-making as they unfold in authentic project contexts.

Earlier phases of this research demonstrated the broad educational benefits of GBL through quantitative analysis. Building on that foundation, the present paper focuses primarily on qualitative findings drawn from student portfolios, documentary material, and supporting statistics to examine how learners adopt and enact advanced project management practices over time. By combining deductive thematic analysis with rich narrative accounts of student experience, the study reveals how serious games and simulations contribute to professional development across successive stages of learning.

Three key outcomes are identified. First, reflective insight: portfolio analysis provides direct evidence of how students interpret and internalise abstract project management theory, a process made visible through documentary footage. Second, practical adaptation: portfolio artefacts demonstrate how students respond to uncertainty, manage stakeholder dynamics, and make governance decisions within high-fidelity simulations. Third, qualitative depth: personal reflections document a shift in student identity, from theoretical learners to practitioners capable of practice-based judgement and accountable decision-making. Together, these findings offer a clearer view of how GBL supports the longer-term transition from classroom learning to professional competence.

While GBL offers a low-risk and engaging environment for developing foundational skills, its capacity to support transfer to real-world practice is limited when learning remains confined to simplified scenarios. Simulation-based training (SBT) extends GBL by introducing high-fidelity environments in which learners assume formal project roles, navigate crises, and operate under realistic constraints. This phase of the study examines three consecutive modules within the MSc Project Management programme at the University of Limerick, where AI-supported simulations and Project Twin war-room games are used to replicate authentic project conditions.

The educational aim underpinning this design is to prepare graduates to address contemporary project challenges, including geopolitical uncertainty, supply-chain disruption, and escalating costs. Simulation-based

exercises foreground ethical reasoning during crises, while sponsor role-plays expose the moral trade-offs inherent in stakeholder conflict. The United Nations frames these elements in the aligned Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), which provide an ethical foundation for business education. In particular, the PRME i5 pedagogical approach—emphasising collaborative, meaningful, joyful, iterative, and active learning—aligns closely with GBL principles. Within this study, PRME and i5 inform the ethical and relational dimensions of project-based learning, highlighting the role of ethical teamwork, reflective control, and flexible leadership in contemporary project settings.

2. Literature Review

The project management landscape reveals a persistent divide between theory and practice. Employers often find graduates possess strong technical skills but struggle to apply them in people-centred, real-world contexts, prompting a shift towards experiential learning that balances soft skills with technical prowess (Choi-Lundberg *et al.*, 2024; Kearney, Bond-Barnard and Chugh, 2024; Kshirasagar and Kheni, 2025).

Aligned with the Project Management Institute (PMI) Talent Triangle, contemporary project management education increasingly emphasises technical competence, leadership, and strategic awareness, while also recognising power skills as critical to project success and stakeholder engagement. Accreditation frameworks operationalise this emphasis by mapping curricula to behavioural competencies such as communication, collaboration, influence, and conflict resolution (Huemann and Turner, 2024; PMI, 2026; Turner, 2016). Sector analyses link soft skills to success, with failures often due to communication or team issues rather than technical faults, supporting the embedding of behavioural training in project management education (Scheepers *et al.*, 2018; Stewart, 2020).

2.1 Governance Structures and Behavioural Accountability in PM Education (Theme 1)

Standard project management texts view governance tools such as charters, RACI matrices, approval processes, and quality controls as vital for managing complex projects. Yet studies on teams and leadership show that structures alone fail to deliver results; success demands active behaviours such as direct communication, prompt feedback, and reliable delivery on commitments. Teaching resources similarly portray governance as effective only when supported by ongoing dialogue, clear expectations, and explicit escalation routes.

The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) and similar guides position governance tools as essential for coordinating interdependent tasks, but emphasise that these tools require behavioural accountability to be effective (Ayers, Bryant and Missimer, 2020; Choi-Lundberg *et al.*, 2024; Mohammad, Hinduja and Siddiqui, 2023). In varied sectors, formal structures alone fail to secure consistent delivery; accountability instead emerges through leadership actions and team interactions. Prompt feedback, clearly defined roles, and transparent communication are directly associated with strong outcomes, while distributed leadership approaches focus on activating governance through relationships rather than documentation alone (Eynon, Török and Gambino, 2013; Lam, 2015; Nguyễn, 2022). Teaching governance as a dynamic practice rather than a fixed set of tools has therefore become central to project management education. Experiential methods such as live projects, case studies, and capstone simulations aligned with PMI and IPMA guidelines support the development of ethical judgement, stakeholder engagement, and reflective capability alongside technical competence (Ayers, Bryant and Missimer, 2020; Bollinger, 2024; Chiang, 2021; Henri, Johnson and Nepal, 2017; Müller *et al.*, 2013; Turner, 2016).

2.2 Game-based Learning and Transfer to High Fidelity Simulations (Theme 2)

To advance the pedagogical design of project management education, researchers increasingly emphasise integrating serious games and simulation-based learning to address the persistent divide between academic theory and professional practice. By providing risk-free environments in which learners can apply concepts, simulations support the development of problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making skills (Calderón, Ruiz and O'Connor, 2019).

The introduction of generative artificial intelligence further extends this approach by enabling adaptive, narrative-driven simulations rather than fixed scenarios. Prior work associated with this study positions AI as a pedagogical co-orchestrator that modulates challenge and stakeholder dynamics, supporting the development of adaptive expertise and reflexive leadership (Daniels, 2025; Daniels *et al.*, 2025a).

Integrating systems thinking into the serious game lifecycle further supports deep learning by enabling learners to visualise feedback loops and structural causes of project outcomes. When paired with structured debriefing

and assessment, serious games transition from engagement tools to mechanisms that strengthen both conceptual understanding and professional capability (Armenia *et al.*, 2025).

2.3 Reflection as a Mechanism for Learning and Control (Theme 3)

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle supports movement from experience to action through structured stages of evaluation and planning (Gibbs, 1988), while Kolb's experiential learning model frames reflection as part of an iterative process linking experience, conceptualisation, and experimentation (Kolb and Kolb, 2022). Moon's framework extends this view by positioning reflection as an embedded practice that enables learning transfer beyond descriptive accounts (Moon, 2013). Together, these models underpin the argument that reflection should actively inform decision-making within governance and risk contexts rather than remain retrospective.

Flanagan's Critical Incident Technique (CIT) further supports this approach by focusing attention on pivotal events that reveal patterns in practice and inform behavioural change. When combined with reflective models, CIT enables targeted learning from success and failure, linking experience directly to improved professional outcomes (Farrell, 2013; Flanagan, 1954; Wijaya and Kuswandono, 2018).

2.4 Multicultural Collaboration and Informal Leadership in Simulations (Theme 4)

International project management increasingly relies on multicultural and geographically dispersed teams in which formal authority is limited. Research on global virtual teams highlights that members must actively negotiate meaning across cultural, organisational, and contextual boundaries to achieve shared understanding and coordination (Gluesing *et al.*, 2003).

The TOPOI model provides a practical framework for addressing intercultural communication breakdowns by examining language, structure, personal relationships, organisational context, and intentions (Hoffman, 1999). Research consistently shows that informal leadership emerges through credibility, trust, and reliability rather than formal position, shaping coordination and decision-making in diverse teams (Gibson and McDaniel, 2010).

While diversity enhances innovation and knowledge exchange, unmanaged communication differences and inconsistent feedback can hinder performance. Frameworks such as BELF and culture-sensitive communication practices support shared identity and trust in virtual teams, though digital environments can amplify misunderstandings if cultural cues are overlooked (Louhiala-Salminen and Charles, 2006; Feitosa, Grossman and Medina, 2018; Johnsson, 2023; Ramalingam *et al.*, 2014).

Research emphasises experiential, scenario-based training that develops intercultural communication, feedback, and informal leadership skills in realistic project contexts (Chande, 2024; Lee-Kelley, Crossman and Cannings, 2004; Smith, 2024; Sulastri, 2023; Daniels *et al.*, 2025b).

2.5 Responsible Management Education, PRME and SDGs in PM Curricula (Theme 5)

This review links PRME principles, the Sustainable Development Goals (Nations, 2026) and responsible leadership research to project management education, positioning game-based modules, simulations, and portfolios as mechanisms for embedding ethics, accountability, and stakeholder responsibility in practice (Asheim, Laudal and Mykletun, 2023; Igwe *et al.*, 2022; Secretariat, 2017).

PRME encourages business schools to integrate ethics, sustainability, and stakeholder responsibility across curricula. In project management education, this supports the use of simulations to surface moral dilemmas, fairness, and governance under realistic constraints (Asheim, Laudal and Mykletun, 2023; Igwe *et al.*, 2022; Wagstaff, Hadjimarcou and Chanoi, 2020). The following lists the goals emphasised in the context of this study:

- SDG 4 promotes quality education through inclusive, flexible learning designs.
- SDG 10 emphasises equity, inclusion, and fair participation.
- SDG 16 foregrounds ethical governance, accountability, and trust.

SDG 17 highlights collaboration and partnership in education and practice.

Responsible leadership literature further supports experiential designs that foster ethical judgement, reflective capability, and sustainability-oriented decision-making (Asheim, Laudal and Mykletun, 2023; Jones *et al.*, 2024; Voola *et al.*, 2024)

3. Mixed Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods design with triangulation, combining student portfolios, a PRME-aligned survey, and a student-produced documentary to provide convergent evidence of learning outcomes in game-based and simulation-based project management education.

Student portfolios from the MN6052 simulation-based training module were analysed. These portfolios document reflections on a crisis-focused documentary project and include artefacts that evidence the application of project management tools, governance practices, and ethical decision-making within a simulated professional context.

In addition, a student-produced documentary was used as an observational data source. The documentary captures decision-making, governance practices, and stakeholder interactions during the simulation-based phase of the module and was reviewed thematically alongside portfolio evidence to identify observable professional behaviours.

A PRME-aligned survey administered to the 2026 module cohort yielded 43 responses. The survey comprised 27 Likert-scale items measuring perceived project management competence, ethical and sustainability awareness, and perceptions of game-based learning, alongside open-ended reflections on ethical and sustainability trade-offs.

Portfolio data were analysed using deductive thematic coding across five literature-derived themes—GBL transfer, governance accountability, reflection as control, multicultural collaboration, and PRME/SDGs responsibility—using a five-point scoring rubric and double-masked review procedures. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics (overall mean = 4.37). Documentary material was analysed thematically, and findings were triangulated across data sources to enhance credibility and validity.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Students submitted portfolio artefacts, reflective narratives, and action plans. Content was coded deductively against the predefined thematic framework by the lead researcher, with scores assigned on a five-point scale and supported by explicit analytic justifications. Coding followed a structured rubric (Table 1). To enhance reliability, inter-rater checks were conducted on 20% of the dataset by a second reviewer, achieving 85% agreement.

Theme-level averages were calculated from individual scores, and patterns across portfolios were identified through cross-case synthesis.

3.2 Quantitative Survey Results (PRME)

Descriptive analysis of the PRME-aligned survey ($n = 43$) indicated consistently high perceived learning gains across all measured domains. Mean scores for core project management competencies ranged from 4.37 to 4.58 (on a 5-point Likert scale), including project planning, risk assessment, stakeholder management, and systems-level understanding of cost, schedule, quality, and risk interactions. Confidence in reflective practice and decision-making under constraints was particularly strong, reflecting the module's emphasis on active learning and governance.

Responses related to ethics and responsible management also showed high agreement. Students reported strong capability to recognise ethical issues in project decisions ($M \approx 4.44$) and high confidence in managing projects responsibly overall ($M \approx 4.67$). Understanding of sustainability implications was positive ($M \approx 4.23$), though explicit linkage of project decisions to specific Sustainable Development Goals scored slightly lower ($M \approx 4.05$), suggesting emerging but not yet fully articulated SDG integration.

Perceptions of the learning design were uniformly positive. Students rated the pedagogical approach as more engaging than traditional lectures ($M \approx 4.58$), more effective at linking theory to practice ($M \approx 4.56$), and more relevant to their future careers ($M \approx 4.60$). The use of Microsoft Teams to mirror hybrid project work received the highest endorsement ($M \approx 4.74$), followed by the documentary deliverable as a mechanism for deep reflection ($M \approx 4.53$). Willingness to recommend the approach was strong ($M \approx 4.67$).

Overall, the survey results provide cohort-level confirmation of learning outcomes related to competence development, engagement, and ethical awareness, supporting the subsequent thematic analysis of portfolios and documentary evidence.

3.3 Theme Scoring Rubric

Scores assess depth from description to mastery. Justifications link to portfolio evidence.

General scale: 5: Exemplary (proactive mastery, double loop). 4: Strong (clear application), 3: Adequate (basic examples), 2: Weak (superficial), 1: Absent.

Theme criteria:

Table 1: Rubric for thematic scoring

Theme	5 (Exemplary)	4 (Strong)	3 (Adequate)
GBL Transfer	Adaptive crises	Theory practice link	Basic recall
Governance Accountability	PMO interventions	Tool action pairing	Tool mention
Reflection Control	Policy shifts	Behavioural changes	Descriptive
Multicultural Collaboration	Informal leadership	Framework fixes	Awareness
PRME/SDGs	Explicit SDG alignment	Implicit ethics	General

4. Thematic Results

This section reports findings from the deductive thematic analysis of student portfolios and documentary evidence generated during the simulation-based phase of the module. Portfolio artefacts were coded against five predefined themes derived from the literature and assessment rubric: (1) GBL transfer, (2) governance and accountability, (3) reflection as control, (4) multicultural collaboration, and (5) PRME and SDG responsibility. Scores were assigned on a five-point scale and triangulated with documentary observations and survey responses to enhance validity.

4.1 Transfer from GBL to High-fidelity Simulation

Across the cohort, portfolios demonstrated strong evidence of transfer from low-stakes game-based learning to high-fidelity simulation practice. Students consistently referenced earlier GBL experiences when interpreting disruptions, sponsor-driven scope changes, and coordination failures during the live project. Average GBL transfer scores were high (typically 4–5), indicating movement beyond recall toward adaptive application.

In several cases, students explicitly described recognising patterns encountered in earlier games—such as delayed escalation or unclear role boundaries—and proactively adjusting governance structures within the simulation. These adaptations included re-sequencing tasks, renegotiating responsibilities, and intervening in emerging coordination breakdowns. Documentary footage corroborated these accounts, capturing students articulating links between earlier game abstractions and real-time project decisions.

4.2 Governance and Behavioural Accountability

Strong evidence emerged that students moved beyond treating governance tools as administrative artefacts toward using them as mechanisms for behavioural accountability. Portfolios showed consistent pairing of formal tools (e.g. RACI matrices, WBS, risk registers, EVM) with active interventions such as escalation protocols, PMO reporting routines, and accountability discussions.

High-scoring portfolios demonstrated proactive governance behaviours, including early identification of coordination risks, enforcement of role clarity across sub-teams, and mid-project corrective action rather than post-hoc justification. These behaviours were particularly visible during periods of disruption, where students intervened to realign expectations and responsibilities. Average scores for governance and accountability ranged from strong to exemplary (4–5), indicating widespread adoption of active governance practices.

4.3 Reflection as an Active Control Mechanism

Reflection emerged not merely as a retrospective learning activity but as an active control mechanism shaping ongoing decision-making. Most portfolios demonstrated structured use of reflective frameworks (notably Gibbs' cycle) to diagnose issues and trigger concrete behavioural or policy changes during the simulation.

Higher-scoring portfolios demonstrated double-loop learning, in which reflection led to adjustments in governance processes rather than isolated fixes. Examples included introducing mid-sprint retrospectives, altering communication formats, and redefining escalation triggers. Average scores for reflection and control

clustered around 4–5, indicating a shift from descriptive reflection toward embedded, practice-shaping reflection.

4.4 Multicultural Collaboration and Informal Leadership

Multicultural collaboration was evident across portfolios, particularly in diagnosing and managing communication breakdowns in international virtual teams. Students frequently applied structured frameworks (e.g. TOPOI) to interpret misunderstandings related to language, role expectations, and coordination norms.

Informal leadership was most visible where students adjusted communication styles, facilitated cross-team sensemaking, or redistributed tasks to stabilise performance. While most portfolios demonstrated awareness and competent practice (scores typically around 4), fewer showed sustained informal leadership across the full project lifecycle, suggesting this capability was developing but not yet fully embedded.

4.5 PRME, SDGs, and Responsible Decision-making

Portfolios provided evidence of growing ethical awareness and responsible decision-making aligned with PRME principles. Students demonstrated sensitivity to issues such as consent, fairness in task allocation, transparency, and data protection. In several cases, ethical considerations directly influenced governance decisions during periods of time pressure.

Explicit mapping to specific SDGs was less consistent. While some portfolios clearly aligned project decisions with SDGs (notably SDG 4, 10, 16, and 17), others demonstrated implicit ethical reasoning without formal SDG articulation. As a result, scores for this theme were slightly lower on average (typically 3–4), indicating emerging but uneven integration of responsible management frameworks.

5. Discussion

The findings provide robust evidence that a structured progression from game-based learning to simulation-based training supports the development of adaptive, practice-ready project management capability. Rather than treating games as standalone interventions, the results suggest that GBL is most effective when positioned as a conceptual scaffold that prepares learners for escalation into higher-stakes, performance-oriented environments.

High levels of transfer from GBL to simulation indicate that early-game experiences helped students recognise patterns of risk, coordination failures, and delayed escalation when confronted with real-time disruptions. This supports experiential learning theory by demonstrating that abstraction in games can meaningfully inform action under pressure, particularly when learners assume formal roles and take on accountability. In this sense, simulation-based training does not replace GBL but extends it by making consequences explicit and unavoidable.

A key contribution of this study lies in reframing reflection as an active control mechanism rather than a retrospective learning activity. While reflection is commonly embedded in GBL debriefs, the findings show that it began to shape governance behaviour only when students operated under time pressure, evidential scrutiny, and role-based responsibility. This transition aligns with double-loop learning theory (Argyris, 2002) and suggests that increasing stakes is essential if reflection is to influence decision-making rather than merely document experience.

The findings also highlight the relational dimension of learning progression. Multicultural collaboration and informal leadership became visible primarily in moments of breakdown, where students were required to interpret communication failures and intervene without formal authority. While most participants demonstrated awareness and competent use of intercultural frameworks, sustained informal leadership remained uneven, indicating that such capabilities develop gradually and benefit from early, explicit prompts within the simulation design.

Finally, the study demonstrates that ethical and responsible decision-making is more likely to emerge implicitly than explicitly within GBL-to-SBT pathways. Although students frequently acted in ways consistent with PRME principles and SDGs—particularly in relation to fairness, transparency, and accountability—explicit articulation of SDG alignment was less consistent. This suggests that ethical competence may precede ethical labelling, and that stronger design cues may be required if responsible management frameworks are to be made visible and enacted.

Taken together, these findings position simulation-based training as a critical inflexion point in GBL design, where learning shifts from exploration to accountability. For GBL practitioners, the results underscore the

importance of deliberately designing transitions that increase stakes, constrain choice, and require evidence-based justification if games are to support professional readiness rather than remain motivational tools.

Ethical Clearance Statement: This study involved standard classroom teaching and publicly available teaching materials as part of a routine educational programme and therefore did not require formal ethical clearance under the University of Limerick policy. Nevertheless, all data were anonymised, and informed consent was obtained for student contributions.

AI declaration: AI was not used in this paper.

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