

What Makes a Video Game “Good”? A Case Study with Secondary Students

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Abstract: Video games are a central part of youth culture, yet their educational use often relies on adult assumptions about students’ gaming practices. This study explores lower secondary students’ video game preferences and the criteria they use to define what makes a video game “good”. A questionnaire was administered to 301 students aged 12–16 from two secondary schools in northern Spain. Results show a strong concentration of preferences around mainstream commercial games, especially Fortnite, FIFA and Roblox, as well as clear gender differences in preferred titles. Boys more frequently selected competitive, sports-oriented and action-based multiplayer games, whereas girls showed a broader distribution across social, casual, simulation and sandbox games. Students rated audiovisual and technical quality and gameplay higher than narrative, with boys assigning significantly greater importance to technical quality and gameplay than girls. These findings suggest that students’ video game literacy is shaped by mainstream gaming cultures, gendered forms of participation and unequal exposure to different kinds of games. The study provides a diagnostic basis for designing educational interventions with commercial and independent video games that expand students’ critical, cultural and interpretive understanding of the medium.

Keywords: Video game literacy, Media literacy, Video games, Game-based learning, Civic competence, Personal and social competence

1. Introduction

Video games are now a central part of youth culture, yet their presence in schools remains limited. In many educational contexts, games are still approached either as instructional tools for delivering curricular content or as motivational systems inspired by gamification (Oceja & Torres-Toukoumidis, 2022). Both approaches tend to simplify the medium: the former by treating games as vehicles for predefined learning outcomes, and the latter by reducing them to points, badges, rewards, and other external incentives (Bogost, 2011). As several authors have argued (Fuchs et al., 2014; Bogost, 2011), these uses may overlook the cultural, aesthetic, social, and interpretive complexity of video games, while also risking the instrumentalisation of play.

In contrast, socio-cultural approaches to game-based learning have emphasised the value of commercial video games not explicitly designed for education (Gee, 2014). From this perspective, games are not simply tools for teaching content, but complex semiotic and participatory environments in which players interpret systems, make decisions, inhabit identities, solve problems, and engage with others. This view is especially relevant for the educational use of independent video games (indie games), whose creative autonomy often allows for distinctive aesthetic, narrative, emotional, and ethical experiences (Hanghøj & Meyer, 2010; Juul, 2019). However, before such games can be meaningfully incorporated into classroom practice, it is necessary to understand how students themselves perceive and evaluate the medium and explore their preferences.

This paper therefore focuses on video game literacy, understood as the ability to operate within (understand, act upon, and produce) the system of symbols that constitutes the semiotic domain of video games (active learning), as well as the understanding of how certain cultural practices impact the people involved with games (critical learning) (Gee, 2014).

For this reason, understanding which games students consider their favourites and what makes a video game “good” offers a valuable diagnostic entry point into their existing forms of game knowledge.

Previous research has also suggested that gaming practices and evaluative criteria may differ according to gender, influencing not only game preferences but also the aspects of games that students value most. Exploring these differences may therefore contribute to an understanding of students’ video game literacy and help educators design more inclusive and reflective game-based learning interventions.

The present study is situated within the diagnostic phase of the Playcomp project (<https://playcomp.es/>), funded by the Spanish State Research Agency. While the broader project aims to design educational activities mediated by independent games for secondary education, this paper focuses specifically on an initial snapshot of students’ video game literacy, as captured through questionnaire responses. The aim is to analyse students’ favourite

games and explore which attributes they associate with a “good” video game. More specifically, we examine how students rank key features such as audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay.

Students are frequently presumed to be naturally competent because video games are familiar to them. However, familiarity with games does not necessarily imply critical or reflective literacy. By examining students’ own evaluative language, this study seeks to establish a more grounded basis for future educational interventions with commercial and independent video games. From a game-based learning perspective, this diagnostic analysis can help educators identify the gaming perspectives students bring into the classroom and anticipate possible barriers to engagement.

The data reported here are preliminary, as they come from two of the five participating schools and focus only on students’ video game preferences and the elements they consider to make a video game “good.” Thus, this study addresses four main research questions:

RQ1. *Which video games are preferred by lower secondary students?*

RQ2. *How much importance do lower secondary students assign to audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay when evaluating video games?*

RQ3. *Are there statistically significant gender differences in the importance assigned to audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay?*

RQ4. *Do the differences between audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay follow the same evaluative pattern within boys and girls?*

1.1 Methods

The wider project follows a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. During the first phase, quantitative data are collected through questionnaires in order to obtain an initial understanding of students’ video game literacy, while a later qualitative phase will incorporate discussion groups to further interpret and contextualise the quantitative findings. However, as the project is still ongoing, the present study reports only the quantitative data obtained through the questionnaires.

The questionnaire was validated through expert judgement and pilot testing (Manzano-León et al., 2025). To ensure content validity, a two-stage validation process was implemented. First, each instrument was reviewed through expert judgement (Rubio et al., 2003). Second, a pilot test was conducted within a reference research team in order to identify potential ambiguities, improve the clarity of items and prompts, and refine the final versions of the instruments (Tate et al., 2023).

Participation in the expert review process was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before their involvement. The confidentiality of their responses was guaranteed, and the information collected was used solely for academic and scientific purposes.

The final structure of the questionnaire was organised into four blocks:

- **Block 1:** Descriptive data (7 items)
- **Block 2:** Player preferences (6 items)
- **Block 3:** Perceptions about video games and meaning-making processes (7 items)
- **Block 4:** Knowledge of video game culture and forms of knowledge acquisition (5 items and 1 open-ended question)

Item development was primarily based on Oceja and González-Fernández (2020), as the instruments addressed similar research objectives related to students’ relationships with video games and video game culture.

The participating schools were two secondary schools located in northern Spain, both characterised by socially diverse student populations composed predominantly of working- and middle-class families. In order to improve representativeness across the two main school models in the Spanish educational system, one school was public and the other semi-private.

The questionnaire was administered to students in Grades 7–10 (ages 12–16) during October 2026, yielding a total of 301 valid responses.

To address the first research question, a descriptive frequency analysis was conducted on the item asking participants to identify their favourite video game. Absolute frequencies were calculated in order to identify the most frequently mentioned titles, and results were visually represented through a bar chart ordered by

frequency. To facilitate interpretation and improve readability, only video games mentioned by at least three participants were included in the final graphical representation, while less frequent responses were omitted from the. Preferences were also disaggregated by gender in order to explore possible distributional differences across groups.

To examine the relative importance assigned to different video game dimensions (audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay), within-subject comparative analyses were conducted. Since all participants evaluated the three dimensions using the same six-point Likert scale, paired-samples t-tests were used to compare mean differences between each pair of dimensions.

To examine gender differences in the importance assigned to these dimensions, independent-samples t-tests were conducted using gender as the grouping variable. Participants who identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender were excluded from inferential analyses due to the limited number of cases, although they were retained in the descriptive analyses.

Finally, in order to explore whether evaluative patterns differed within each gender group, paired-samples t-tests were conducted separately for boys and girls, replicating the same pairwise comparisons performed in the overall sample.

Prior to inferential analyses, descriptive statistics and visual inspection of score distributions were examined to assess the suitability of parametric testing. Given the sample size and the robustness of parametric tests to moderate deviations from normality, parametric procedures were considered appropriate throughout the study. To control for Type I error inflation derived from multiple comparisons, Bonferroni correction was applied, setting the adjusted significance threshold at $p < .017$.

2. Results

RQ1. Which video games are preferred by lower secondary students?

A total of 290 valid responses were analysed regarding students' video game preferences. Although 23 participants indicated that they did not have a favourite video game ("none"), these responses were excluded from the graphical representation in order to focus on actual game preferences, while remaining part of the descriptive dataset.

As shown in Figure 1, video game preferences were highly concentrated around a small number of titles, followed by a long tail of more fragmented choices. *Fortnite* emerged as the most frequently preferred video game ($n = 51$), followed by *FIFA* ($n = 37$) and *Roblox* ($n = 25$). A second tier of preferences included *Block Blast!* ($n = 12$), *Clash Royale* ($n = 11$), and *Mario Kart* ($n = 9$), while the remaining titles were mentioned less frequently, indicating a substantial diversification of interests beyond the most popular games.

Clear gender-based differences were also observed. *Fortnite* ($n = 45$) and *FIFA* ($n = 33$) were predominantly preferred by boys and represented the most clearly male-dominated preferences in the sample. In contrast, *Roblox* showed a markedly different pattern, being considerably more popular among girls ($n = 19$) than boys ($n = 5$). Similarly, games such as *Block Blast!*, *Mario Kart*, and *Animal Crossing* were almost exclusively or predominantly selected by girls. Conversely, titles such as *Rocket League*, *EA Sports FC*, and *Call of Duty* were selected exclusively by boys in this sample.

Overall, the results suggest both a strong concentration of preferences around a limited set of highly popular commercial games and a gendered distribution of gaming tastes. Boys showed a stronger preference for competitive, sports-oriented, and action-based multiplayer experiences, whereas girls displayed a comparatively broader distribution of preferences across simulation, casual, sandbox, and social games.

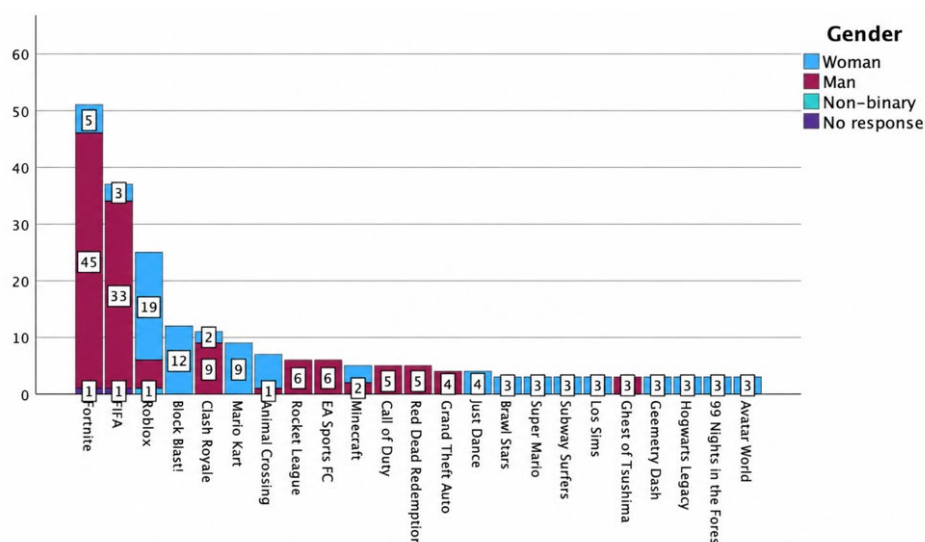


Figure 1: Most frequently preferred video games among lower secondary students by gender (only titles mentioned by at least three participants are displayed)

From a game-based learning perspective, this concentration suggests that classroom interventions can encounter low and uneven levels of game literacy: many students will recognize only mainstream competitive titles, whereas independent or less visible games may require greater contextualization and pedagogical mediation.

RQ2. How much importance do lower secondary students assign to audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay when evaluating video games?

Descriptive analyses showed that audiovisual and technical quality received the highest ratings overall ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.40$), followed closely by gameplay ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.36$), while narrative received comparatively lower ratings ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.37$). This pattern was also observed across gender groups, although boys reported higher mean scores than girls in all three dimensions (see Table 1).

Pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = .017$) revealed statistically significant differences between audiovisual and technical quality and narrative, $t(300) = 5.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.33$, with audiovisual and technical quality receiving higher ratings. Statistically significant differences were also found between gameplay and narrative, $t(300) = 4.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.28$, with gameplay receiving higher ratings. In contrast, no statistically significant differences emerged between audiovisual and technical quality and gameplay, $t(300) = 1.31$, $p = .192$.

Taken together, these results suggest that narrative occupied a comparatively less central position than gameplay and audiovisual/technical quality in students' evaluations of video games, while gameplay and technical quality appeared to constitute similarly valued dimensions (see Table 2).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Importance Assigned to Videogame Dimensions by Gender

Dimension	Total M (SD)	Female M (SD)	Male M (SD)
Audiovisual and technical quality	4.70 (1.40)	4.34 (1.49)	5.05 (1.23)
Gameplay	4.60 (1.36)	4.12 (1.46)	5.05 (1.09)
Narrative	4.22 (1.37)	4.03 (1.37)	4.39 (1.35)

Table 2: Pairwise Comparisons Between Videogame Dimensions

Comparison	Mean Difference	t(df)	p	Cohen's d	Significant
Technical quality vs. Narrative	0.48	5.74 (300)	< .001	0.33	Yes
Technical quality vs. Gameplay	0.10	1.31 (300)	.192	0.08	No
Narrative vs. Gameplay	-0.38	-4.89 (300)	< .001	0.28	Yes

These results are relevant to game-based learning as students may initially judge classroom games through their technical presentation and playability rather than through the narrative, ethical or educational possibilities.

RQ3. Are there statistically significant gender differences in the importance assigned to audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay?

Independent-samples t-tests revealed statistically significant gender differences in the importance assigned to audiovisual and technical quality, with boys assigning higher importance ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.23$) than girls ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(296) = -4.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.52$. Similarly, boys rated gameplay as significantly more important ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.09$) than girls ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(296) = -6.30$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.73$.

Although boys also reported slightly higher ratings for narrative ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.35$) compared to girls ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.37$), this difference did not remain statistically significant after Bonferroni correction, $t(296) = -2.29$, $p = .023$.

Overall, these findings suggest that gender differences in video game evaluation were especially pronounced in dimensions associated with gameplay and audiovisual/technical quality, whereas narrative appeared to constitute a comparatively less gender-differentiated evaluative criterion (Table 3).

Table 3: Gender Differences in the Importance Assigned to Videogame Dimensions

Dimension	Female M (SD)	Male M (SD)	t(df)	p	Cohen's d	Significant
Audiovisual and technical quality	4.34 (1.49)	5.05 (1.23)	-4.51 (296)	< .001	0.52	Yes
Narrative	4.03 (1.37)	4.39 (1.35)	-2.29 (296)	.023	0.27	No*
Gameplay	4.12 (1.46)	5.05 (1.09)	-6.30 (296)	< .001	0.73	Yes

RQ4. Do the differences between audiovisual and technical quality, narrative, and gameplay follow the same evaluative pattern within boys and girls?

A more fine-grained analysis by gender revealed notable differences in the internal hierarchy of video game values (Table 4). Among boys, narrative occupied a comparatively less central position, being rated significantly lower than both audiovisual and technical quality and gameplay, while no significant differences emerged between audiovisual/technical quality and gameplay. This pattern largely mirrored the overall evaluative structure observed in the full sample.

By contrast, among girls, audiovisual and technical quality was rated significantly higher than narrative, but no statistically significant differences emerged between audiovisual/technical quality and gameplay or between narrative and gameplay. These findings suggest a more polarised evaluative structure among boys, in which narrative occupied a clearly secondary role, whereas girls displayed a comparatively more balanced distribution of video game values.

To facilitate comparison between the overall evaluative structure observed in the full sample and the gender-specific patterns identified in this analysis, Table 5 provides a synthetic overview of the significance patterns across all pairwise comparisons. This comparative summary allows for a clearer identification of which evaluative differences remain stable across gender groups and which appear to be more strongly shaped by gender.

Table 4: Pairwise Comparisons Between Videogame Dimensions Within Gender Groups

Comparison	Girls Mean Difference	Girls t(df)	Girls p	Girls Significant	Boys Mean Difference	Boys t(df)	Boys p	Boys Significant
Technical quality vs. Narrative	0.30	2.73 (145)	.007	Yes	0.65	5.23 (151)	< .001	Yes
Technical quality vs. Gameplay	0.22	1.87 (145)	.064	No	-0.01	-0.07 (151)	.943	No
Narrative vs. Gameplay	-0.08	-0.74 (145)	.462	No	-0.66	-6.18 (151)	< .001	Yes

To facilitate the comparison between the overall evaluative structure observed in the full sample and the

gender-specific patterns identified in this analysis, Table 5 provides a synthetic overview of the significance patterns across all pairwise comparisons. This comparative summary allows for a clearer identification of which evaluative differences remain stable across gender groups and which appear to be more strongly shaped by gender.

Table 5: Comparative Significance Patterns Between Videogame Dimensions in the Overall Sample and by Gender

Comparison	Overall sample	Boys	Girls
Audiovisual/technical quality vs. Narrative	Significant (Technical > Narrative)	Significant (Technical > Narrative)	Significant (Technical > Narrative)
Audiovisual/technical quality vs. Gameplay	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Narrative vs. Gameplay	Significant (Gameplay > Narrative)	Significant (Gameplay > Narrative)	Not significant

Note. Significance based on paired-samples t-tests with Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .017.

These gendered differences suggest that interventions should not rely on an assumed universal student gaming culture.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore lower secondary students' video game preferences and the criteria they use to evaluate what makes a video game "good". The results offer a preliminary but relevant picture of students' video game literacy, understood not simply as familiarity with games, but as the capacity to interpret, evaluate and give meaning to games as complex cultural and semiotic artefacts (Gee, 2014). Findings confirm the importance of analysing students' existing gaming cultures, rather than assuming that young people's frequent contact with video games automatically translates into critical or reflective forms of literacy.

First, students' preferences were strongly concentrated around a small number of highly popular commercial titles, especially *Fortnite*, *FIFA* and *Roblox*. This concentration should not be read only as a matter of individual taste. It also reflects the cultural and industrial conditions through which certain games become especially visible and socially desirable among young players. Large-scale commercial games benefit from powerful marketing structures, constant updates, platform visibility, influencer ecosystems, multiplayer infrastructures and strong network effects. As Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2003) argue, digital play is deeply embedded in wider circuits of media capitalism. From this perspective, the success of mainstream games over independent games is not necessarily evidence of greater value, but of their stronger position within the cultural economy of games.

As Juul (2019) notes, indie games are frequently associated with authenticity, authorial expression and aesthetic experimentation, but they do not usually possess the same promotional power, social presence or infrastructural continuity as AAA or platform-based titles. Therefore, the limited presence of independent games in students' spontaneous preferences should not be understood as a rejection of these games. Rather, it suggests that many students may simply have had fewer opportunities to encounter, discuss and value them. This unequal exposure should also be understood in relation to cultural capital and social class. As Vilasís-Pamos & Pirés (2020) have argued, students' literacy around independent video games is shaped by the cultural resources, interpretive repertoires and media practices available to them, which influence not only what games they access, but also what they are able to recognise as aesthetically, culturally or educationally valuable.

Second, the results show that audiovisual and technical quality and gameplay were more highly valued than narrative. This pattern is significant because students appear to associate the quality of a game with dimensions that are immediately perceptible during play. In the broader culture of commercial video games, these dimensions have historically functioned as markers of value, progress and technological achievement. Kirkpatrick (2015) argues that video game culture has often been shaped by a strong attachment to technical performance and visual display. Similarly, Swink's (2009) notion of "game feel" helps explain why responsiveness, smoothness and audiovisual feedback may be perceived by players as central indicators of quality.

The higher importance assigned to audiovisual and technical quality, especially among boys, may also be interpreted through the gendered history of gaming culture. Technical competence, mastery, performance and hardware-oriented discourse have often been coded as masculine within gaming communities (Bryce & Rutter,

2003). In this sense, boys' stronger emphasis on gameplay and technical quality may reflect not only personal preference, but also a form of gaming capital: knowing how to recognise "good graphics," competitive balance, performance, difficulty or mechanical precision can operate as a marker of legitimacy within peer cultures. Consalvo (2007) has shown how gaming knowledge circulates as a form of cultural capital, shaping how players demonstrate expertise and belonging. For some students, then, valuing technical quality and gameplay may be part of how they position themselves as competent players.

Third, the gender differences identified in the study deserve careful interpretation. Boys' preferences were more concentrated around competitive, sports-oriented and action-based multiplayer games, whereas girls' preferences were more distributed across social, casual, simulation and sandbox games such as *Roblox*, *Block Blast!*, *Mario Kart* or *Animal Crossing*. These patterns are consistent with previous research suggesting that gaming preferences are shaped by gendered processes of access, socialisation and recognition, rather than by innate differences between boys and girls (Oceja, 2020). Cassell and Jenkins (1998) already warned against simplistic assumptions about gender and games, showing that game preferences are culturally produced. Later work has similarly argued that many girls and women are positioned at the margins of dominant gaming culture, particularly when "real games" are implicitly associated with competition, violence, mastery or technological expertise (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Shaw, 2014).

These tendencies should be understood as the result of gendered gaming cultures that make some forms of play more legitimate. For example, *Roblox* can be attractive not only because it is accessible and social, but because it supports creation, identity work, communication and participation across different types of experiences. Similarly, casual and simulation games may offer modes of engagement that are less tied to the competitive and masculinised norms that have historically dominated public gaming culture.

The internal evaluative patterns reinforce this interpretation. Among boys, narrative occupied a clearly secondary position in relation to gameplay and technical quality, while among girls the three dimensions appeared more balanced. This may suggest that boys' evaluative frameworks are more strongly aligned with dominant commercial discourses of game quality. Girls' more balanced pattern may indicate a broader or less hierarchically organised conception of what makes a game valuable. From an educational point of view, this finding is particularly important: it suggests that classroom work with games should avoid reproducing the idea that only technically sophisticated, competitive or visually spectacular games are worth serious attention.

For the Playcomp project, these findings provide a useful diagnostic basis for designing future educational activities mediated by independent games. In this sense, the educational value of indie games does not lie in their capacity to transmit predefined content, but in their ability to create situations for dialogue, interpretation and critical reflection. This aligns with approaches that understand games as cultural forms and learning environments, rather than as simple motivational tools or gamified reward systems.

At the same time, the study has several limitations. The data are preliminary and come from only two of the five schools participating in the project. The analysis is also based on questionnaire responses and focuses on a limited set of evaluative dimensions. Future qualitative work, particularly discussion groups, will be necessary to better understand what students mean when they refer to technical quality, gameplay or narrative, and how these categories are connected to their actual playing practices. It will also be important to examine whether students' criteria change after participating in classroom activities involving independent games, especially those designed to promote civic, personal and social competences.

In conclusion, this study shows that asking students what makes a video game "good" is not a trivial question of preference, but a productive entry point into their video game literacy. The findings suggest that educational work with video games should begin from students' own gaming cultures but should not remain confined to them. The challenge for game-based learning is not merely to bring games into the classroom, but to transform the classroom into a space where games can be interpreted, questioned and discussed as meaningful cultural experiences. Commercial independent games, when approached critically, can therefore contribute not only to improve media literacy, but also to broader forms of personal, social and civic education.

Acknowledgements

Grant RYC2022-038521-I funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ESF+ and Project PID2023-148476OA-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and ERDF/EU

Ethics Declaration: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Universitat de les Illes

Balears. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the academic and scientific purposes of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. The study did not involve any foreseeable risks for participants, and all data were treated anonymously and used exclusively for research purposes.

AI Declaration: Artificial intelligence tools were used only to review and correct orthotypographic errors. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation of results, or the generation of the study's scientific content.

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