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Research Report

Persistent priorities in video game research: a cross-sector benchmark for coordinated progress

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Abstract

Video game research increasingly depends on collaboration across sectors that generate, control, and interpret evidence about digital play. Many of the field's recurring challenges have been recognized for years but remain unresolved. We examined which priorities remain salient within a heterogeneous expert panel and what barriers and possible routes forward emerge when they are considered through dialogue. Combining a modified Delphi procedure ($n = 85$ round one; $n = 59$ round two) with an in-person World Café workshop ($n = 30$) across academia, industry, policy, civil society, and research funding organizations, we identified ranked priorities and four cross-cutting conditions for progress: strengthening evidence, improving communication, fostering collaboration, and building literacy. Rather than treating these as novel or as sector-wide consensus, we interpret their persistence as a continuing coordination problem. We present the findings as a dated 2025 benchmark against which future progress, changing priorities, or continued inertia can be assessed.

Keywords: video games, cross-sector collaboration, Delphi method, World Café method, benchmark

Video game research increasingly takes place across institutional boundaries. Academic researchers produce independent analyses, technology companies control much of the behavioral data needed to study digital environments, policymakers govern the social consequences of these technologies, and civil society organizations interpret and communicate scientific findings to the broader public. As a result, the production, interpretation, and governance of knowledge about video games often occur in parallel rather than in coordination.

This misalignment helps explain why debates about video game effects remain persistent despite a growing body of research. As games have become more embedded in daily life, scientific, political, and public scrutiny has intensified, yet cumulative progress in understanding their effects on cognition, emotion, and behavior remains limited and highly contentious (Ballou et al., 2025; Drummond et al., 2020; Elson & Ferguson, 2014; Vuorre et al., 2022). Similar patterns are evident in the adjacent literature on social media and adolescent mental health (Ferguson et al., 2025;

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Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Progress is constrained by methodological heterogeneity, restricted access to platform data (Davidson et al., 2023; Zendle et al., 2023), and a persistent lack of cross-national and cross-cultural evidence, particularly from low-income countries in the Global South (Thomas et al., 2022, 2024). Together, these conditions contribute to fragmented findings and policy debates that frequently outpace the available evidence.

Many of these challenges are longstanding rather than newly recognized. Calls for stronger evidence, improved data access, and greater coordination between researchers and industry have recurred across video game research for years (e.g., Davidson et al., 2023; Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2023; Zendle et al., 2023). Their persistence therefore raises a question: why have repeatedly identified needs proved so difficult to translate into durable change?

The 1993 United States congressional hearings on violent video games, prompted by Mortal Kombat and Night Trap, produced industry self-regulation through the Entertainment Software Rating Board, a governance structure born of public alarm rather than systematic evidence. Germany's "Killerspiele" debates following the 2002 Erfurt school shooting followed a similar trajectory, and the two decades of research on violent games that accompanied these controversies produced one of the most contested literatures in the behavioural sciences (Elson & Ferguson, 2014). The 2014 #GamerGate campaign extended these dynamics beyond the policy arena. Game scholars themselves became targets of coordinated online harassment, and academic work on games was recast as a partisan intervention rather than a contribution to evidence (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Public controversy in this field therefore shapes not only how evidence is received, but who is willing to produce and communicate it. More recently, the World Health Organization's recognition of gaming disorder proceeded amid open disagreement among researchers about the strength of the underlying evidence (Aarseth et al., 2017; van Rooij et al., 2018). Across these episodes, evidence, policy, and public concern moved on different timescales and through different institutions, with limited coordination between them.

We argue that many of these challenges reflect a broader coordination problem in video game research. Knowledge about video games is produced within an ecosystem in which data, expertise, governance authority, and public communication are distributed across different sectors. Researchers are incentivised to produce publishable findings under conditions of limited data access and short funding cycles. Technology companies must balance commercial, legal, ethical, and practical obligations that often restrict transparency and external collaboration. Policymakers and civil society organizations must interpret and act on scientific evidence while technologies evolve rapidly and public debates remain highly visible. When these actors operate without shared infrastructure or aligned incentives, the result is a research environment in which evidence accumulates unevenly and struggles to translate into coherent public understanding. In this sense, the coordination problem concerns not only identifying shared needs, but aligning the incentives, resources, and responsibilities required to act on them.

These coordination challenges also have important communicative consequences. Scientific findings about digital media frequently circulate through news coverage, political discourse, and online debate, where evidence can be simplified, selectively amplified, or contested (Schäfer, 2017; Scheufele, 2014). Communication scholars have long emphasized that scientific knowledge travels through media systems and policy arenas where it is interpreted and reframed for different audiences (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009; van der Bles et al., 2019). When coordination across sectors is weak, findings enter public discourse in inconsistent forms.

Video games provide a particularly useful empirical site for examining these coordination dynamics. Unlike social media research, where a small number of platform companies control both data and infrastructure, the video game ecosystem involves a more differentiated set of stakeholders, from independent developers to major publishers, platform holders, ratings boards, and dedicated policy bodies, each with distinct roles and accountabilities. This pluralism makes it possible to examine whether coordination across sectors is achievable under conditions where no single actor holds full decisive power, and where the structural tensions between data access, governance, and public communication are especially visible.

A central barrier to cumulative knowledge in this domain is the structural imbalance between researchers and industry. Game developers and publishers possess the most comprehensive behavioural datasets but face commercial, legal, ethical, and practical constraints that often discourage open collaboration. Companies may also fear that internal data could later be used against them in litigation or regulatory proceedings (see Ferguson, 2013). A further and less discussed constraint is competitive: detailed player-behavior data reveal how a company's products are used and monetized, and sharing them risks ceding commercial advantage to competitors, not only regulatory exposure. Academic researchers face no equivalent tension, which can make industry reluctance appear obstructive when it is partly structural. As a result, collaboration agreements are often selective, privileging particular academic institutions or research groups (e.g., Johannes et al., 2021; Larrieu et al., 2023). This dynamic can exacerbate inequalities in the global research ecosystem (Ghai, 2021) and enable selective data sharing that avoids inconvenient public health questions (Zendle et al., 2023) or allows companies to shape study design unilaterally (Bak-Coleman et al., 2025; Turner et al., 2025).

Although initiatives have attempted to formalize collaboration across sectors, for example the UK's Video Games Research Framework (DCMS, 2023), such efforts have struggled to gain traction. This likely reflects a broader collective-action problem common in digital media research: while many actors recognize the value of collaboration, few are well positioned to initiate or sustain it, and shared infrastructure and incentives remain weak.

It is fair to ask what industry stands to gain from such coordination, particularly for large firms with well-resourced internal research teams. Potential benefits include access to independent expertise and evidence, as well as a stronger evidence base for public and policy debate. At the same time, these benefits may be diffuse compared with the more immediate commercial, legal, and reputational costs that collaboration can impose. This asymmetry helps explain why recognizing the value of coordination does not necessarily translate into action.

To better understand how coordination across video game sectors might be improved, this study examines which of the

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field's long-recognized challenges a heterogeneous expert panel currently ranks highest, and what practical actions and barriers emerge through subsequent cross-sector discussion. We conducted a multi-stage study combining a modified Delphi procedure with an in-person World Café workshop involving stakeholders from major game studios, international policy bodies, NGOs, research funders, and academic institutions. In doing so, the study provides a systematic, dated record of the field's longstanding and emerging priorities as of 2025, together with the barriers and proposed actions identified through subsequent discussion. Rather than treating familiar priorities as novel discoveries, we use this record as a benchmark against which future change, or its absence, can be assessed.

These challenges are widely presumed to be shared across the field, but that presumption has not been tested against systematically elicited data. Existing articulations take the form of commentaries, position statements, and consultation-developed frameworks (e.g., DCMS, 2023). Structured priority-setting methods have been applied nearby to diagnostic criteria for gaming disorder (Castro-Calvo et al., 2021), and to screen use and adolescent mental health from the perspectives of young people, parents, and teachers (Vera San Juan et al., 2022), but not, to our knowledge, to research priorities across the sectors that produce, govern, and communicate evidence about games. Whether those sectors converge on the same priorities, and where they do not, is therefore an open empirical question.

Our study addressed two research questions:

RQ1: Which priorities does a heterogeneous, multi-sector expert panel rank highest in video game research?
RQ2: What practical cross-sector actions do experts identify as feasible next steps, and what challenges shape those actions?

Method

Study design

Classical Delphi methods aim to achieve convergence toward consensus across iterative rounds (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Our objective, however, was to identify and prioritize concerns within a heterogeneous expert panel, rather than to establish a unanimous consensus. We therefore adapted several features of the traditional Delphi method. First, we used two rounds rather than continuing until consensus stability was reached. Second, responses were analyzed and ranked using a preferential voting system (single transferable vote [STV]; described below), rather than predefined consensus thresholds. Third, while participant anonymity was retained during the online Delphi rounds, we incorporated a subsequent in-person World Café workshop, which departs from the fully anonymous, survey-only structure of classic Delphi designs. This design aligns with established Delphi adaptations used for priority-setting and field-building, where the goal is structured knowledge synthesis rather than agreement per se (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Humphrey-Murto et al., 2019). We retain the label "modified Delphi" because the design preserves the method's defining features: structured iterative rounds, controlled feedback between rounds, and response anonymity, while replacing its consensus-seeking rule with preferential ranking. Two-round designs are established in priority-setting applications of the method (Boulkedid et al., 2011).

The World Café complemented the online Delphi rounds by translating abstract priorities into possible cross-sector next steps. While the anonymous Delphi process allowed us to identify and rank priorities within a heterogeneous expert panel, it could not directly address the structural misalignments central to the coordination challenges we examined in this study. The World Café therefore provided a forum for direct cross-sector dialogue, allowing participants to engage with divergent perspectives and consider practical actions that might advance those priorities (see Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

Ethics and consent

This study received ethical approval from the Social Sciences and Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford (reference #2003912). All participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the Delphi survey. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Participants

We used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit a diverse panel of experts from across academia, industry, policy, funding bodies, and civil society. Initial participants were drawn from the lead research team's professional networks and invited to nominate additional experts who met the inclusion criteria, allowing the sample to expand iteratively and capture a wider range of perspectives. Inclusion criteria required that participants (a) work in a relevant sector (such as academia, the video game industry, policymaking, funding, civil society, or legal advisory), (b) have substantive knowledge of how video games are developed, regulated, studied, or experienced, and (c) be familiar with current challenges and opportunities facing the field. Expertise was defined functionally, based on participants' professional roles, years of experience, and demonstrated engagement with video games research, development, governance, or regulation, rather than by any single credential.

Before taking part in the Delphi survey, participants reported their primary professional sector and the lens through which they approach work on video games (e.g., theoretical understanding, gathering or analyzing evidence, strategy or implementation). See Table 1 for sector representation across research phases. Two features of Table 1 warrant emphasis. Academia dominated the Delphi rounds (50 of 85 round-one participants identified with academia), whereas industry comprised the majority of the World Café panel (16 of 30). Sector counts also moved differently across phases: academic counts fell from 50 to 27 to 9 across Round 1, Round 2, and the workshop, while industry counts held near-constant (17, 16, 16). The two phases of the study therefore rest on differently composed samples, and we return to the interpretive consequences of this in the Results and Discussion.

The expert panel comprised participants from 17 countries, with the largest representations from the United Kingdom and the United States, alongside contributors from Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Middle East (see Table S1). Participants had substantial field experience (median of 11–20 years) and represented a range of professional lenses, including theoretical and

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Table 1 Sector representation across all research phases.

	Delphi round 1	Delphi round 2	World Café workshop
Total participants	85	59	30
Sector representation			
Academia	50	27	9
Industry	17	16	16
Policy/Government	5	6	2
Civil society/non-profit	8	5	2
Funders	2	1	0
Other	7	5	1

Note. Participants could select more than one sector; counts therefore exceed total participants.

conceptual work (28%), evidence generation and application (27%), policy and governance (18%), cross-cutting roles (12%), and strategy or implementation (11%).

Selection for the World Café workshop reflected practical constraints on in-person participation and an effort to include representation from multiple sectors. The World Café panel included academic researchers from a range of universities; industry professionals from major video game companies in senior roles (e.g., vice president, director); representatives from NGOs and civil society organizations in leadership positions (e.g., team leads); and policy professionals holding senior advisory or council-level roles. Selection prioritized professional roles rather than institutional affiliation. Each participant's contribution reflects their individual views and not those of their employer.

Delphi procedure

The Delphi process consisted of two online rounds conducted via Qualtrics between July and September 2025. We predefined three overarching domains to structure input: game design and player experience, responsibility and governance, and research and data. In round one, participants responded to one open-ended question per domain: "What should be prioritized when it comes to [domain]?" They were encouraged to list three to five priorities per domain and could suggest priorities that did not fit within the pre-defined categories.

Responses were analyzed using an inductive coding process grounded in Thomas's (2003) general inductive approach. The first author conducted a close reading of all responses and generated initial open codes that reflected participants' statements. These codes were iteratively grouped into higher-order categories representing salient priorities within each domain. A second researcher independently reviewed the coding for consistency and clarity, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Several retained categories are conceptually adjacent, notably harms and benefits and long-term effects, and child safety and protection and regulation and enforcement. These were kept distinct because round-one responses differentiated them. Responses coded to harms and benefits concerned the nature and direction of outcomes, whereas long-term effects responses concerned temporal scope and the absence of longitudinal designs. Child safety responses concerned protection targets, whereas regulation responses concerned governance instruments and enforcement mechanisms. Where participants themselves collapsed a distinction in the discussion, we followed them (e.g., the two research and data priorities were merged during the World Café at participants' initiative; see Note 1).

The priority categories from round one were synthesized into a consolidated list per domain and presented in round two. Participants were asked to rank at least their top five priorities per domain using a drag-and-drop interface. Following the Round 2 ranking, two priorities per domain were selected for discussion in the World Café, a cutoff which was chosen to keep each room's 90-minute discussions tractable. Selection generally followed the STV ordering, with one exception. 'Dark patterns' ranked first in the Game Design and Player Experience domain in the preferential vote. Because Round 1 responses primarily characterized dark patterns as a mechanism through which harms arise rather than as a distinct outcome, we treated it as a component of the broader 'Harms and Benefits' priority for the World Café rather than as a separate discussion topic. It accordingly featured within that room's discussion. This reflects a difference in level of analysis (dark patterns describes a design mechanism, whereas the similar priorities in its domain describe outcomes or populations) rather than a judgement about its importance. The original coding and complete Round 2 rankings are preserved in the open materials. Consistent with guidance on conducting and reporting Delphi studies (CREDES; Jünger et al., 2017), ranked responses were aggregated using an STV procedure. This is a preferential voting system that captures both top-ranked priorities and the relative weight of lower-ranked preferences. We selected STV over mean or median ranking because it better reflects both intensity and distribution of support across the full set of priorities (Tideman, 1995). The STV analysis was conducted in R using the stv package (Emerson, 2025).

Delphi analysis

Round one was completed by 85 participants and produced 287 open-ended responses across all domains. Round two rankings were completed by 59 participants, resulting in 69% retention, consistent with typical Delphi responses (Hasson & Keeney, 2011).

World café procedure

An in-person World Café workshop was held at the University of Oxford in September 2025, involving a subset of the Delphi participants invited with the goal of balanced sectoral representation. World Café is a participatory qualitative method suited to large groups with the goal of organizational or community change (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Löhr et al., 2020).

The workshop was organized into three rooms corresponding to the three Delphi domains, each seeded with two of the top-ranked priorities from the final online round. Participants were assigned to mixed-sector groups to maximize cross-disciplinary exchange. Each room included two facilitators with prior experience running World Café sessions.

Discussions followed semi-structured prompts per priority. First, participants jointly identified the key actors involved in or affected by the priority. Second, they individually assessed the current state of progress using a five-point scale ranging from "not yet started" to "fully achieved." Divergences in these ratings

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were then used to spark discussion on cross-sector perspectives. Third, participants worked collaboratively to identify concrete actions that could feasibly advance the priority beyond its current state. After 90 minutes, participants rotated rooms to integrate insights across domains. Discussions were documented through anonymized facilitator notes in shared Google Docs.[1]

To protect anonymity in a small and professionally identifiable panel, facilitator notes did not record the sectoral affiliation of individual speakers. Quotations reported below therefore cannot be attributed to sectors, and we flag this constraint where it bears on interpretation.

World café analysis

World Café notes were synthesized using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), an approach that emphasizes iterative engagement with the data and explicitly recognizes the analytic role of researcher interpretation. Members of the lead research team both facilitated the workshop and conducted the analysis (an acknowledged limitation addressed through transparency about analytic positionality rather than claims of independence). Initial coding and theme development were conducted by the first author, focusing on recurring ideas and actionable next steps. All qualitative analyses were conducted using Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis tool that supports transparent workflows (Rampin & Rampin, 2021).

Reflexivity statement

The qualitative analysis and synthesis were conducted by the lead research team, whose strong commitment to open science principles likely sensitized the analysis to issues of evidence quality, transparency, and cumulative knowledge building. Members also have prior experience conducting collaborative research with industry partners, which provides contextual insight into industry practices and constraints, but may have predisposed the analysis toward more empathetic interpretations of industry perspectives.

The wider author group includes contributors from industry, policy, and non-governmental organizations. While these co-authors participated as experts in the World Café and contributed to manuscript editing and review, they were not involved in the qualitative coding or thematic synthesis. This separation was maintained to limit the influence of sector-specific interests during theme generation.

Results

We report the two phases of the study separately and encourage readers to hold their differing compositions in view throughout. The anonymous Delphi rounds were represented more by academics, while the in-person World Café was industry-majority (Table 1). The Delphi rankings and the World Café themes are accordingly best read as products of two differently composed expert groups rather than evidence of a single continuous cross-sector consensus.

[1] Early in the first session, participants in the Research and Data room determined that the two priorities ('industry-academic data sharing' and 'open data and transparency') overlapped sufficiently to be combined and discussed as one priority, referred to simply as 'data sharing'.

Thematic analysis of open-ended questions

In round one, participants responded to three open-ended questions, one per domain: "What should be prioritized when it comes to [domain]?"

Table 2 presents all priorities identified in Round 1 and their subsequent Round 2 rankings. For the five highest-ranked priorities within each domain, we report the STV election order. First-preference counts are provided for all priorities as a descriptive indication of initial support and should not be interpreted as determining the final STV ordering, which incorporates

Table 2 Priorities identified during Delphi round 1.

Priority	STV order	First-pref. votes
Game design and player experience		
Dark patterns[a]	1	11
Harms and benefits[b]	2	9
Long-term effects[b]	3	5
User trust and safety	4	7
Who is playing	5	4
Motivations	–	4
Supportive mechanics	–	3
Families and children	–	3
Creativity and innovation	–	3
Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)	–	2
Accessibility	–	2
Cheating	–	0
Social connection and community	–	0
Research and data		
Industry-academic data sharing[b]	1	16
Open data and transparency[b]	2	7
Funding and infrastructure	3	7
Interdisciplinary work	4	5
Sector-wide collaboration	5	7
Theory development	–	5
Qualitative and mixed-method research	–	4
Responsibility and governance		
Self-regulation and co-regulation[b]	1	10
Child safety and protection[b]	2	9
Regulation and enforcement	3	7
Dark patterns (regulatory perspective)	4	6
Monopolization and platform power	5	3
Data sharing and transparency	–	5
Sector-wide collaboration	–	4
Player perspectives in governance	–	3
Artificial intelligence (AI)	–	3
Corporate social responsibility and labor practices	–	2

Note. Within each domain, the five highest-ranked priorities are shown in single transferable vote (STV) election order. First-preference votes indicate initial support and are reported descriptively; because STV incorporates transferred lower-order preferences, first-preference counts do not determine the final ordering (e.g., in Game design and player experience, User trust and safety received more first preferences than long-term effects yet ranked below it). Remaining priorities are listed without an STV order.
[a]Ranked first in the preferential vote; treated as a component of Harms and benefits for the World Café because Round 1 responses characterized it as a mechanism of harm rather than a distinct outcome, and it featured within that discussion (see Method).
[b]Carried into the World Café workshop.

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transferred preferences. Priorities selected for further discussion in the World Café are marked separately.

Exploratory descriptive comparisons suggested that sectoral patterns varied by domain (Table S4). Academia and industry showed similar prioritization in the Research and Data domain, particularly around industry-academic data sharing, while clearer differences emerged in Game Design and Player Experience and Responsibility and Governance. Given the modest and uneven sector sample sizes, these comparisons are descriptive and should not be interpreted as population-level sector differences.

World café data

The World Café produced three types of material: identification of relevant stakeholders, assessment of current progress, and discussion of practical next steps. The stakeholder identification exercise was intentionally facilitative. Participants spent approximately 2–3 minutes per priority listing key actors involved or affected, to prompt discussion and encourage cross-sector perspective-taking. These lists were not analyzed as an outcome. Progress assessments used a five-point scale and served as a diagnostic tool to structure discussion rather than as consensus measures; results are reported in Figure S1. Practical next steps discussions formed the primary dataset for thematic analysis.

Using reflexive thematic analysis, we developed 24 themes that captured patterns of shared meaning in how participants described what would be required to move priorities forward. Table S3 in the Supplementary Materials summarizes the themes developed within each priority, and these were subsequently compared and synthesized into the cross-cutting themes reported below.

Synthesis across priorities

Across the three World Café rooms, participants developed a total of 24 themes describing practical next steps for advancing the five top-ranked priorities (self-regulation and co-regulation, child safety, harms and benefits, long-term effects, and data sharing). When considered together, many of these themes addressed similar issues despite arising in different priority areas. Discussions repeatedly returned to questions of evidence quality, communication between sectors, mechanisms for collaboration, and the capacity of different groups to engage with research and governance processes**,** suggesting that participants were reasoning about priorities through a shared set of underlying coordination challenges rather than treating each priority as analytically distinct.

One interpretive caution is required before presenting these themes. Industry participants comprised the majority of the World Café panel, and the constructive, incremental tone of the resulting themes (particularly the emphasis on gradual trust-building and low-threshold engagement) plausibly reflects that composition. Incremental approaches to data sharing may also be particularly compatible with industry interests because they preserve discretion over pace and scope. We therefore present the themes as what emerged through discussion within this particular cross-sector panel, while acknowledging that a differently composed panel might have framed the same issues in sharper terms.

To capture these cross-cutting patterns, we conducted a secondary synthesis using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), involving an explicit analytic shift from organizing themes by priority area to interpreting patterns of shared meaning across the full World Café dataset. This process resulted in four overarching themes: strengthening evidence, improving communication, fostering collaboration, and building literacy (see Figure 1). Their recurrence across different priority discussions is notable because none represents a novel concern in isolation. Instead, they identify the conditions to which participants repeatedly returned when considering why longstanding priorities remain difficult to advance. These themes do not replace the domain-level themes reported in Table S3 but capture recurring ways in which participants articulated the conditions shaping coordinated progress across different areas of video game research.

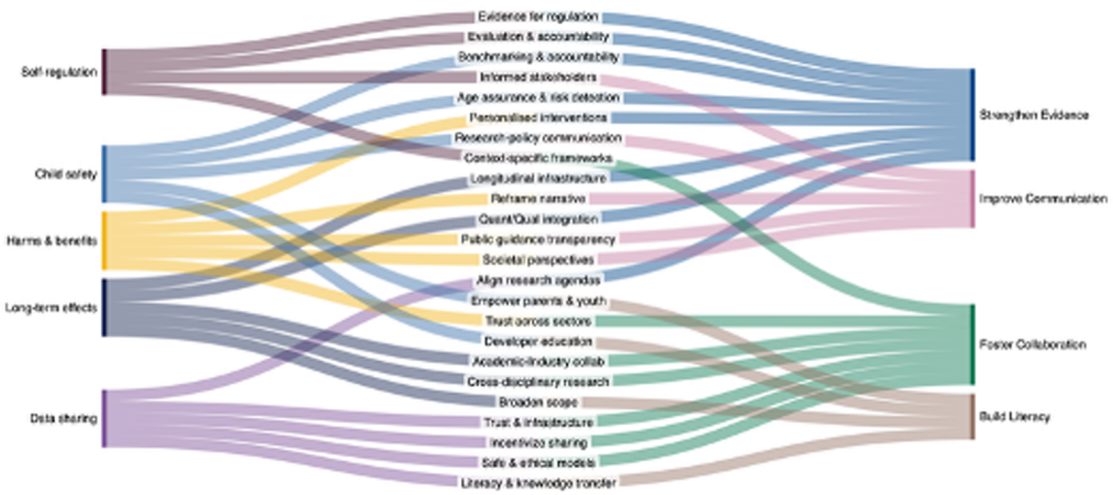

Figure 1 Process of priorities, themes, and overarching themes.

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Overarching themes

Strengthen evidence

Across priorities, participants emphasized the need for a more credible and cumulative evidence base, highlighting evidence that is longitudinal, context- and culture-sensitive, and capable of supporting causal inference. Participants expressed concern that many existing debates persist because current research designs struggle to capture how video games are used over time, by whom, and under what conditions (see Table 3).

Participants described several interrelated challenges that shape how evidence can be generated in practice. Long-term research was widely viewed as desirable but difficult to sustain, given uncertainty around which video games will remain available, stable, and relevant over extended periods. Industry participants highlighted structural and technical limits on the availability of telemetry data, noting that changes in game engines, data-retention practices, and commercial priorities often render historical data unusable. Alongside these constraints, participants expressed concern about the feasibility of funding multi-year studies at the required scale in ways that would preserve scientific independence and public trust.

Despite these challenges, discussions were oriented towards constructive pathways forward. Participants emphasized that strengthened evidence also requires recognizing negative or null findings as informative rather than as reputational threats.

> "[Negative findings are] not a negative mark toward industry, it's a warning sign that you need to do something."

Proposed actions focused on building infrastructure and capacity for stronger evidence generation. These included establishing new longitudinal cohorts that incorporate gameplay measures and integrating gaming variables into existing population studies, which participants saw as necessary for understanding how patterns of play, risk, and benefit unfold over time. Participants also emphasized the importance of expanding qualitative and interdisciplinary research to better capture mechanisms and contextual variation, and of supporting domain familiarity among researchers studying video games.

> "Games are such a niche market that you have to be knowledgeable about them to study them. It's not a coincidence that when those folks [gamers] do research it's a lot more balanced; it's a lot more nuanced."

Collectively, these discussions positioned the quality and credibility of evidence as a recurring condition for progress across priorities.

Improve communication

Across domains and priorities, participants used the term communication to refer to multiple, interrelated processes including communication between sectors, communication within sectors, and communication from research to the public (including parents, players, and policymakers). Discussions emphasized that breakdowns across these forms of communication contribute to misunderstanding, mistrust, and the persistence of polarized narratives around video games.

Participants expressed concern that research findings are poorly translated across sectoral boundaries. Academic outputs were described as difficult for non-academic audiences to interpret, while industry practices and constraints were frequently viewed as opaque from the outside. Policymakers and civil society representatives were, in turn, seen as operating under time pressure and public scrutiny, often relying on simplified summaries or their own interpretations of evidence. Participants suggested that these disconnects can result in well-intentioned decisions being made on the basis of partial or misunderstood information.

> "What is needed is to break down the ivory tower."

Communication challenges were also discussed in relation to public discourse. Participants noted that although uncertainty

Table 3 Strengthen evidence challenges and practical steps.

Challenges	Proposed actions
Sustainability **Longitudinal research is constrained by uncertainty about long-term game availability and stability.**	**Build longitudinal research capacity** Integrate gameplay measures into new and existing cohort studies.
Limited historic telemetry data **Engine changes and data-retention practices limit access to older gameplay data.**	**Expand qualitative and interdisciplinary work** Use ethnography, in-context play & interviews.
Fragile funding pathways **Long-term, data-intensive studies require sustained funding without compromising independence.**	**Broaden demographic and cultural coverage** Priorities under-represented ages, regions, and cultural contexts.
Reputational risk **Independent evaluation is perceived as risky when findings may be negative or politicized.**	**Leverage real-world variation** Use updates, policy changes, and platform differences to support causal inference. **Build researcher domain familiarity** Ensure study designs reflect how video games are actually played. **Avoid evidence-light policy responses** Maintain dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and industry. **Develop research-ready games** Use games, mods, or experimental platforms designed for research.

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and nuance are communicated by some professionals across sectors, such complexity is often lost in wider media coverage and public debate, where incentives likely favor clear-cut or moralized narratives. In this context, null or mixed findings were seen as particularly vulnerable to misrepresentation, either being dismissed as inconclusive or framed as evidence of harm. Several participants emphasized that this environment may discourage nuanced engagement and reduce incentives for researchers and industry actors to communicate openly.

> "Media often reports on what is hot and what sells headlines. Harm is more likely to do that."

Despite these challenges, participants also focused on ways to improve how evidence is shared and interpreted. They emphasized the need for clearer expectations around what evidence can and cannot reasonably establish, and for uncertainty to be communicated as a normal feature of cumulative science rather than a weakness.

Proposed actions centered on establishing clearer, more consistent communication practices across and beyond sectors. Participants emphasized the need for more regular, two-way communication between academia, industry, and policymakers, rather than engagement being limited to moments of controversy or regulatory pressure. They also highlighted the importance of clearer public-facing guidance to support interpretation of research findings and game features, particularly for parents, including transparent information about parental controls and engagement-related design. In addition, participants called for improved dissemination practices, such as closer collaboration between researchers and policymakers in producing accessible policy briefs, greater academic engagement with industry venues, and increased visibility of existing industry safeguards.

Collectively, these discussions framed communication as extending beyond dissemination to questions of alignment: ensuring that evidence is interpreted consistently, uncertainty is acknowledged openly, and dialogue across sectors is sustained over time (see Table 4).

Foster collaboration

Within each discussion, participants framed collaboration as a necessary condition for progress rather than an optional enhancement. Collaboration was discussed both in terms of partnerships between sectors and as inclusive engagement across disciplines and communities.

At the same time, participants highlighted several practical and ethical challenges that complicate collaborative efforts. One recurring concern was how to meaningfully involve children and young people in research and governance processes. While participants noted that child protection is relatively well established, they viewed participation, access, and voice as less developed, particularly when engagement must be sustained over time. Questions were raised about how to create structures that allow young people to contribute to discussions about child safety without placing undue burden or risk on them.

Participants also identified barriers to collaboration related to the diversity of actors within the video game ecosystem. Independent developers and small studios were seen as particularly difficult to involve, despite their growing presence and influence. Unlike large publishers, these actors often lack the resources, legal infrastructure, or capacity to engage in formal research partnerships. Similarly, participants expressed concern about how to manage access to restricted or sensitive data, including who should be eligible for access, how decisions should be made, and how trust can be established without excluding less well-resourced researchers or organizations.

Despite these challenges, discussion focused strongly on pragmatic ways to lower the barriers to collaboration. Participants repeatedly emphasized that trust needs to be built incrementally rather than assured at scale when establishing data-sharing relationships. Rather than proposing immediate large-scale agreements, participants advocated for smaller, lower-risk forms of engagement that could build familiarity and confidence over time.

> "First learn to crawl before you walk." (referring to gaining trust before data-sharing)

Proposed actions centered on creating structures that make collaboration more routine and less exceptional. Participants highlighted the value of regular opportunities for cross-sector interaction, including face-to-face meetings that allow stakeholders to better understand one another's constraints, incentives, and data realities.

> "Low-threshold academic-industry meetups [are needed] to facilitate mutual understanding of data available and data needed."

Table 4 Improve communication challenges and practical steps.

Challenges	Proposed actions
Mistrust in public-facing communication **Guidance on video games and child safety may be viewed with skepticism when produced or operationalized by industry-linked actors.**	**Support sustained, cross-sector communication** Regular, bi-directional dialogue between academia, industry, policymakers, and regulators beyond moments of controversy.
Loss of nuance **Uncertainty and complexity are often flattened in media coverage, favoring simplified or harm-focused narratives.**	**Improve clarity and transparency in public guidance** Provide accessible explanations of research findings & features including parental controls
Maintaining independence in dissemination **Joint communication across sectors is valuable but can raise concerns about perceived influence of conflicts of interest.**	**Strengthen collaborative dissemination practices** Promote joint dissemination through policy briefs and public-facing outputs, with transparent and independent funding arrangements

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Table 5 Foster collaboration challenges and practical steps.

Challenges	Proposed actions
Youth participation **Mechanisms for youth voice in research & governance are underdeveloped compared to protection frameworks.** **Small studio capacity** **Independent developers lack the legal, technical, and administrative resources for formal collaboration.** **Access governance** **Uncertainty regarding equitable oversight, eligibility, and trust-building for access to sensitive datasets.**	**Incremental trust** Priorities small, low-risk pilots before large-scale sharing. **Youth pathways** Develop ethical structures for youth feedback on design/safety. **Tiered access** Adopt "trusted data service" models with vetted oversight. **Shared infrastructure** Centralize template NDAs to reduce transaction costs. **Routine engagement** Establish low threshold meetings to maintain relationships.

Collectively, these discussions highlight both institutional infrastructure and relational work as conditions for sustained collaboration (see Table 5).

Build literacy

Across priorities, participants emphasized literacy as a foundational requirement for meaningful engagement with video game research and policy. Literacy was discussed in terms of technical understanding, and the capacity of different groups to interpret evidence, understand game design features, and recognize the limits of what current knowledge can establish. Participants suggested that gaps in literacy often amplify misunderstanding and contribute to reactive or overly simplistic responses to video game-related concerns.

Participants highlighted several challenges that complicate efforts to build literacy across stakeholder groups. Parents and caregivers were described as navigating a complex and unfamiliar landscape, often relying on varied or inconsistent sources of information when making decisions about their child's play. Policymakers were seen as facing similar constraints, operating under time pressure and limited specialist knowledge while being asked to adjudicate complex technical and behavioural issues. Participants also noted that researchers themselves may lack sufficient familiarity with contemporary game design and player practices, which can limit the relevance or interpretability of research outputs.

> "The role of guardianship is unclear to the involved parties. Parents think it's the platform's responsibility to protect their children and platforms think parents must use parental control features to control their children's experiences on the platform."

Discussions also emphasized that literacy gaps are not evenly distributed and can reinforce existing power asymmetries. Participants noted that when technical or design knowledge is concentrated within industry, other stakeholders may struggle to critically assess claims, evaluate evidence, or meaningfully participate in governance discussions. This imbalance was seen as contributing to mistrust and to policy responses that priorities visibility over effectiveness.

Despite these challenges, participants framed literacy-building as a shared and achievable responsibility. Rather than placing the burden on any single group, discussions emphasized the need for clearer, more accessible explanations of game systems, research findings, and uncertainty, tailored to the needs of different audiences.

Proposed actions focused on developing accessible resources and practices that support understanding without oversimplification.

Participants emphasized clearer public-facing guidance on game features and research findings, greater transparency around design choices that shape engagement, and opportunities for policymakers, researchers, and parents to develop domain familiarity through direct engagement with video games.

> "Encourage parents/carers to play video games with their children. In an effort to help parents learn the console better, but also to strengthen the relationship and the foundation for a good dialogue on topics like screen time etc."

Collectively, these discussions positioned literacy as an important condition for translating evidence into practice and for reducing the reliance on polarized or moralized narratives (see Table 6).

Discussion

Taken together, our findings indicate that participants returned to four practical conditions associated with progress in video game research: stronger evidence, clearer communication, more routine collaboration, and improved literacy. None of these conditions will surprise researchers in this field. Calls for better evidence, improved data access, and stronger cross-sector collaboration have appeared repeatedly in the literature and in existing research frameworks (DCMS, 2023; Zendle et al., 2023). The contribution of this study is therefore not the discovery of previously unknown priorities, but their systematic documentation within a heterogeneous expert panel at a particular point in time. The Delphi provides a dated record of what experts prioritized in 2025 and how those priorities ranked, while the World Café documents the barriers and proposed actions that emerged when a

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Table 6 Build literacy challenges and practical steps.

Challenges	Proposed actions
Role confusion **Disagreement between parents and platforms regarding safety responsibilities.** **Tool underutilization** **Parental controls exist but are often misunderstood.** **Technical gaps** **Stakeholders often lack detailed knowledge of game mechanics.**	**Applied briefings** Hands-on briefings for policymakers to understand current game mechanics. **Parental education** Expand initiatives that meet parents at their level of familiarity. **Child safety at developer-level** Integrate child safety considerations into development workflows. **Media literacy** Resources to help audiences contextualize headlines and evidence. **Researcher domain engagement** Support opportunities for researchers to understand current game mechanics.

differently composed cross-sector group considered how those priorities might be advanced.

The persistence of familiar priorities is itself informative. If stronger evidence, data access, communication, and collaboration have been repeatedly identified as necessary yet continue to emerge as priorities, the central problem is unlikely to be diagnosis alone. Rather, the findings point toward a continuing coordination problem in translating recognized needs into durable change. We therefore treat this study as a benchmark: a fixed point against which the field can assess whether priorities shift, whether proposed structures and practices emerge, and whether the same barriers continue to be identified.

Interpreting the findings in context

Participants consistently described recurring constraints on progress in video game research, particularly around data access, cross-sector collaboration, and the interpretation and use of evidence. Our reflexive thematic analysis suggests these should be understood as interconnected features of a broader coordination problem. This interpretation aligns with developments in adjacent areas such as social media, online safety, and adolescent digital well-being research, where uneven data access and sectoral silos have repeatedly undermined cumulative knowledge building (Bak-Coleman et al., 2025; Breuer et al., 2023; Davidson et al., 2023; Dienlin & Johannes, 2020; Zendle et al., 2023). Our findings therefore reinforce a growing view that progress depends on addressing system-level barriers rather than sector-specific or purely technical refinements.

Our findings also resonate with existing frameworks. Participants' emphasis on trustworthy evidence and cross-sector communication echoes recommendations in the UK Video Games Research Framework (DCMS, 2023), yet the continued prominence of these concerns helps explain why such frameworks struggle to gain traction: structural incentives for collaboration remain weak, and shared infrastructure, communication channels, and trust are often missing. Unless open research practices are supported by aligned norms, tools, and standards, evidence is unlikely to accumulate in ways that are cumulative or broadly credible (Nosek et al., 2015).

A cross-sector roadmap for change

A central aim of this work was to move beyond identifying barriers and toward outlining possible routes forward (RQ2). Many of the practical next steps identified in the World Café hinge on cross-sector alignment and participants repeatedly emphasized that even evidence-based actions may be difficult to implement if stakeholders lack shared understanding, trust, or basic communication channels. The findings therefore suggest that collaboration should be understood as a prerequisite for cumulative progress at the level of the research ecosystem, rather than as a requirement for every individual study (see Xiao, 2023).

Because practical change was central to our aims, we translated participants' recommendations into a cross-sector roadmap outlining actions across three time points (see Figure 2). We treat the roadmap as an implementation benchmark: identifying proposed directions, the barriers that constrain them, the actors with relevant capacity or leverage, and observable indicators that would suggest progress has occurred.

In presenting the roadmap we distinguish three tiers of action. A small number are enactable now by identifiable actors: centralizing template data-sharing agreements (enactable by trade bodies or research consortia), integrating gameplay measures into existing cohort studies (enactable by cohort custodians), and releasing research-ready games or modifiable platforms (enactable by individual studios). A second tier requires resource commitment before action is possible (principally new longitudinal infrastructure and tiered data-access systems) where the binding constraint is funding rather than will. A third tier is directional: sustained communication and broadened literacy, where progress is real but not attributable to a single actor or date. Progress can be assessed most directly against the first tier, where the relevant actors and required actions are comparatively identifiable.

We want to be explicit about who can use this roadmap, because agenda-setting exercises can otherwise read as the plans of the well-connected. For researchers without existing industry or policy relationships, the findings offer entry points rather than a spectator's view. The low-threshold engagement forms endorsed under fostering collaboration (meetups, template agreements, small pilot exchanges) are the forms of contact that do not require

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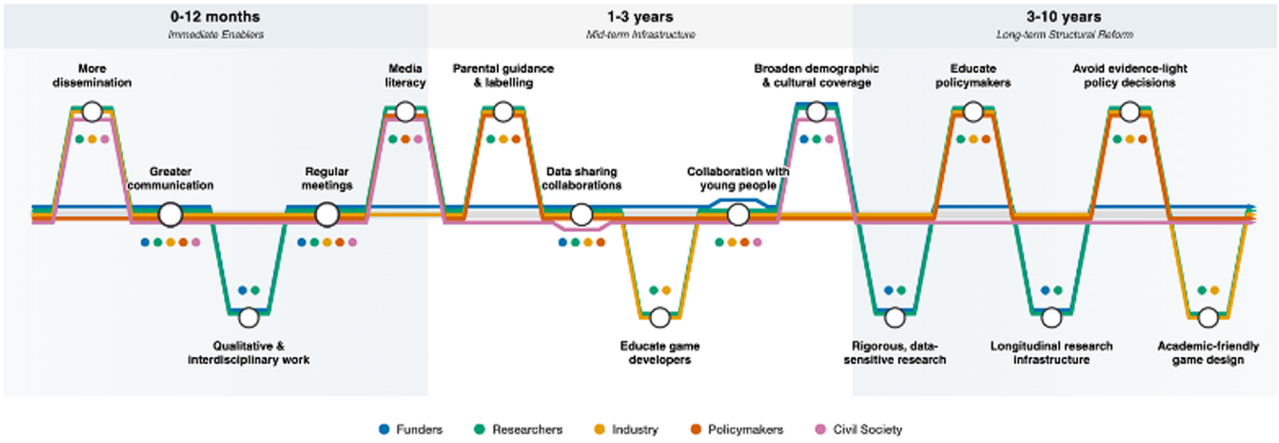

Figure 2 A cross-sector roadmap for change.

institutional privilege to propose, and we provide worked templates for two of them (see S3 and S4). And the roadmap itself can function as a neutral reference document that any researcher can put on the table in an initial conversation.

Most of the conditions identified in this study have been advocated in some form for years, yet many have not materialized. If they were straightforwardly feasible, they would already exist. Our view is that the explanation for this is the structure of the coordination problem itself. For many of the proposed actions, the actors who would bear the costs (e.g., industry in the case of data access, funders in the case of longitudinal infrastructure) are not the actors who reap the benefits, which are instead diffused across the research ecosystem. Agreement within a workshop carries relatively little cost, but implementation often does not. The sector with the greatest capacity to expand access to behavioural data may face some of the most direct commercial, legal, and reputational costs from doing so, and any honest account of why feasible-sounding actions remain unimplemented must begin there.

A complementary reading locates the same problem in the systems within which each sector operates, which are themselves resistant to change. For academics, cross-sector work is slow and weakly rewarded by the criteria that govern hiring, promotion, and tenure, which are among the strongest levers on research behavior (e.g., Moher et al., 2018; Nosek et al., 2015). That the barriers identified here are not new is, in this sense, itself informative: they are reproduced by stable incentive structures rather than by inattention. This is also why the benchmark function of this study is important. A documented, dated record of what was prioritized, what barriers were identified, and what actions were proposed allows the field to assess whether the coordination problem is being addressed or merely restated.

Better coordination would also change what the field can know, not only how it operates. Several of the priorities ranked highest here (e.g., long-term effects, harms and benefits, child safety and protection) are those that current arrangements are least equipped to answer, because they require linked behavioural and self-report data, longitudinal designs, and cross-national samples that no single sector can produce alone. For industry specifically, the return is a shared evidence base to draw on when the next controversy arrives, rather than contested findings produced without their input. The infrastructure endorsed here would make these questions tractable rather than perennial.

Limitations

Our study entails several limitations. First, Delphi studies assess the judgments of a particular expert community rather than measuring objective features of a field. Participation was voluntary and the study was conducted in English. Our sample overrepresented experts with connections to academic networks in Europe and North America, with limited representation from the Global South (Adetula et al., 2022). We also did not include video game players or parents as expert voices. Although academics constituted the largest group, sustained participation from 17 industry stakeholders across Delphi rounds is itself unusual: industry perspectives in this literature are more often inferred from public statements or single informants than directly sampled at scale. We therefore regard the sector composition achieved here as a strength of the study, while acknowledging that academic voices remained overrepresented.

Second, our predefined domains and prompts shaped the scope of responses. Importantly, because our method was explicitly designed to convene diverse stakeholders for communication and collaboration, this may have increased the likelihood that communication and collaboration emerged as priority outcomes. Participation in the World Café was also subject to selection effects. Researchers concerned about reputational risk or public criticism associated with industry engagement may have declined involvement, meaning perspectives more skeptical of industry collaboration may be underrepresented. World Café participants also occupied relatively senior roles. The perspectives of more time- and resource-constrained professionals in every sector are underrepresented. The workshop was also industry-majority and explicitly designed to facilitate constructive, face-to-face collaboration. These conditions may have favored incremental and relationship-preserving proposals over more adversarial approaches to structural change.

Third, access to industry partnerships is often shaped by institutional privilege (see Bak-Coleman et al., 2025; Zendle et al., 2023). The lead research team recognizes that our position within

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a well-resourced and internationally visible university likely facilitated our ability to convene a broad expert panel. The resulting roadmap should therefore not be read as evidence that researchers without comparable institutional access can readily convene comparable panels, though the low-threshold engagement forms it identifies remain accessible starting points (see Turner et al., 2025).

Fourth, the combination of Delphi and World Café methods identifies ranked priorities, implementation barriers, and proposed actions, but it does not establish the effectiveness of those actions, test causal claims about implementation, or bind any participant to act. Future work could extend this approach by eliciting specific, attributable commitments and tracking whether they are subsequently enacted.

Finally, priorities identified at the time of data collection may shift as new platforms, governance models, and research tools emerge. This temporality is central to the benchmark value of the study: repeating similar priority-setting exercises would allow future work to examine which concerns recede, which persist, and which new barriers emerge.

Conclusion

This paper argues that persistent debates in video game research reflect a coordination problem across the sectors that generate, govern, and communicate evidence. Structured cross-sector dialogue does not eliminate these tensions, but it can make them more visible and more tractable.

The findings presented here outline what more coordinated video game research might require: stronger evidence infrastructure, clearer communication, sustained cross-sector collaboration, and shared literacy around digital environments and their impacts. These conditions are not novel in isolation. Video game research will not become more cumulative through isolated datasets or declarations of consensus alone, but through the deliberate construction of infrastructures, relationships, and communication practices that allow evidence to be generated, interpreted, and used across sectors.

We therefore treat this study not only as a benchmark, but also as a call to action. The field has now articulated what it sees as important, what continues to stand in the way, and what might move these priorities forward. The challenge is to ensure these proposals do not simply become another record of familiar ambitions. The roadmap sets out what the field says needs to change. The task now is to build, fund, share, and sustain the structures required to make change visible.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Global Perspectives in Communication* online.

Data availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available via the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/wmxbv. Data are openly accessible without restriction. Study materials, including Delphi prompts, coding frameworks, and supplementary documentation, are available via the Open Science Framework at: https://osf.io/wmxbv.

Author contributions

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Conflicts of interest

This study was conducted in collaboration with industry professionals, some of whom contributed as both co-authors and participants in the Delphi rounds and workshops. To ensure academic rigor and minimize bias, all research activities followed the University of Oxford's academic integrity codes, and findings were analyzed independently of any sponsoring entity's influence. Y.A. and J.T. are researchers at the Sync Digital Wellbeing Program at Ithra, where Y.A. also serves as the Advocacy & Global Outreach Lead. A.E. participated in an employee share scheme whilst working at TikTok. She has no affiliation or partnerships with TikTok or any tech company and is currently a member of Ofcom's Making Sense of Media

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Advisory Panel which is an unpaid advisory role. T.H. is supported by the Oxford Internet Institute Research Programme on AI, Government and Politics, funded by the Dieter Schwarz Foundations. M.L. is employed by Ubisoft International as a CSR researcher, and his doctoral thesis was financially supported by Ubisoft International and the ANRT (National Agency of Research and Technology, France) via CIFRE grant 2018/1498. A.B.P. and M.R. are affiliated with the World Health Organization (WHO); A.B.P serves as Team Lead for Digital Channels, managing strategic partnerships with over 35 technology companies including Google, Amazon, Meta, and TikTok, while M.R. is a Technical Officer for Digital Communications focusing on partnerships within the technology and video game sectors and the application of AI/ML in health literacy. T.Q. is employed by the University of Münster, and his contributions reflect his individual views and not those of his employer. D.S. is the founder of Sweeney Consulting and provides global coordination on digital health for Video Games Europe and the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), while also serving as Senior Counsel to AGICOA and advising various international media and technology entities. L.Y.X. is supported by a Presidential Assistant Professors Scheme Start-Up Research Grant (9382009) awarded by the City University of Hong Kong [香港城市大學] (March 2025). 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provided advice to the Google Expert Advisory on Youth and Tech and the Open AI Expert Council on Well-Being and AI. In 2025, he provided advice to UK's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, funded research and analysis on Understanding the impact of smartphones and social media on children and young people (led by the University of Cambridge). A.K.P. is a member of the UK's Department for Culture, Media & Sport's College of Experts, and he is now writing a book based on his research. A.K.P. donates any fees from industry to charity and conducts his research in line with the University of Oxford's academic integrity code of practice.

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