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The Educational Potential of Video Games: The Case of *This War of Mine* in the Polish Context

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Abstract

This article examines the educational potential of digital games through a case study of *This War of Mine* in the Polish institutional context. The analysis argues that game mechanics, interpreted within the framework of procedural rhetoric, generate experiences of didactic value by fostering empathy, critical reflection, and civic awareness. Methodologically, the study combines a genological perspective with selected analytical tools of game design theory, focusing on how rules, challenges, and fairness shape the player's experience. In addition, the article presents three original lesson plans for Polish language and literature, civics, and ethics, developed by the authors, which illustrate how the game can be effectively integrated into interdisciplinary teaching. The findings emphasize both the unique potential of digital games to support humanistic and civic education and the challenges of implementation, including digital exclusion, institutional constraints, and the necessity of careful pedagogical planning.

Keywords: digital games in education, *This War of Mine*, lessons plans, game-based learning, serious games

1. Introduction

In recent decades, video games have increasingly attracted the attention of researchers as a medium with significant educational, developmental, and competence-building potential. Findings from psychological, pedagogical, and neurological studies indicate that playing games can foster the development of

cognitive functions, including supporting decision-making and strategic processes (Reynaldo et al., 2021), enhancing reaction time (Ziv, Lidor, Levin, 2022) and more precise implicit temporal processing (Foerster et al., 2022), as well as stimulating creative thinking and neural plasticity (Ganter-Argast et al., 2023). Given that digital games contribute to significant and beneficial improvements in the efficiency of various cognitive processes—including working memory and task-switching abilities—they may emerge as an important tool in formal education, with studies indicating that children who play video games regularly achieve higher scores on tests assessing working memory and impulse control (Słupczewski, Gut, 2020). The demonstrated positive effects of gameplay also point to its therapeutic applications, particularly in work with children with perceptual-motor disorders (Ahn, 2020). Furthermore, games can serve as both educational and formative tools, teaching perseverance, cooperation, and coping with failure (Hefkaluk, Linehan, Trace, 2024).

From the perspective of contemporary digital humanities, it is therefore worthwhile to move beyond the reductionist perception of games as merely a source of addiction or a "waste of time". This is all the more important given that the positive dimensions of digital gameplay—particularly its educational, cognitive, and social functions—are increasingly recognized, including at the institutional level. A particularly notable example comes from Poland: the domestically produced *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014)—a mainstream game that addresses serious themes—was added to the list of optional readings in upper secondary schools, illustrating the growing institutional acceptance of games as educational tools. This gesture carries both symbolic and practical significance: it acknowledges games as a legitimate cultural medium and highlights their didactic potential, paving the way for their treatment as instruments for shaping humanistic and civic values within formal education.

Although *This War of Mine* remains an exception in this regard—no other video game has yet achieved a comparable status within the education system—it simultaneously reflects a broader trend of recognizing the educational value of games, even when they were not explicitly designed with didactic purposes in mind. As James Paul Gee (2003) observes, many commercial games naturally support learning through systems of challenges, rewards, and progression that foster the development of strategic and critical thinking. Kurt Squire (2004), in turn, emphasizes that simulation games such as *Civilization* (Sid Meier, Firaxis Games, 1991–2025) enable students to explore complex historical and cultural processes, thereby functioning as tools of experiential learning. Research by Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams (2006) demonstrates that online games promote social and communicative competencies, while Jane McGonigal (2011) highlights their potential in cultivating cooperation and perseverance. Even in the realm of movement- and music-based games, such as the *Dance Dance Revolution* series (Konami, 1999–2014), scholars have identified oppor-

tunities for developing coordination and motor skills (Gee, 2003). Taken together, these examples demonstrate that diverse game genres, although not necessarily designed as didactic instruments, nonetheless find educational applications in practice and are increasingly subject to academic reflection concerning their formative and competence-building potential.

Particular attention from researchers and educators has been directed toward serious games—productions whose implicit purpose extends beyond entertainment. These games primarily serve educational, training, therapeutic, or developmental functions, while also engaging critically with socio-political discourses. As Ian Bogost (2007) argues, serious games address weighty issues in order to provoke discussion, raise doubts, or foster specific attitudes. Their credibility is established by embedding narrative and gameplay mechanics in contexts that resonate with players' real-world experiences. Such projects are increasingly employed both within formal education and in broader cultural spaces. Notable examples include *PeaceMaker* (Impact Games, 2007), which simulates the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the context of civic education; *Darfur is Dying* (Susana Ruiz, TAKE ACTION Games, 2006), designed to raise awareness about the humanitarian crisis in Sudan; and *September 12th* (News-gaming.com, 2003), which invites reflection on the consequences of the war on terror.

Closely related to serious games is the category of empathy games, which has developed primarily within the independent scene and aims to foster empathy toward real social issues. As Martyna Bakun (2016) observes, the creators of such games abandon escapist conventions in favor of difficult themes rooted in real-world and everyday experiences. The purpose of empathy games is not only to tell a story but also to create conditions for emotional or cognitive empathy through gameplay mechanics and modes of immersion. Representative titles include *Depression Quest* (Zoë Quinn & Patrick Lindsey, 2013), *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016). Each of these engages the player in distinct ways: through ergodic, hypertextual storytelling, environmental exploration, or the fusion of autobiographical narrative with metaphorical imagery.

From the perspective of the present discussion, what is particularly significant is that both serious games and empathy games derive their educational, social, formative, and therapeutic value not primarily from narrative or visual ornamentation, but from the very grammar of gameplay. In this sense, they confirm Ian Bogost's (2007) intuition that the rhetoric of games does not emerge from narrative commentary but from procedures, rules, and interactions—from what the game compels players to do, rather than from what it tells them. Within this framework, *This War of Mine* presents itself as a particularly compelling case. Although formally part of the commercial sector, from the moment it was included in the canon of school readings and released in a free

version by the Polish government, it has also functioned as a didactic tool, generating meanings akin to those typically attributed to serious games. The rules and procedures of this game, operating as a subtle mechanism of persuasion, construct an experience of empathy that is not imposed by a narrative moral but emerges directly through the act of participation. In other words, it is the ludic layer—rather than the narrative one—that shapes player reflection and opens an educational space in which attitudes, values, and critical thinking skills can take form.

In the following sections of this article, we seek to capture this potential in a systematic manner. We will first examine how the mechanics of *This War of Mine*—including resource balancing, the dynamics of moral decision-making, and the role of failure—generate experiences of a didactic nature, prompting reflection on the human condition in situations of extremity. This analysis will be grounded in the framework of procedural rhetoric and a genological perspective. We will then demonstrate how the game can be integrated into school practice by presenting lesson plan proposals developed in our educational handbook for *This War of Mine* (Pigulak, Pigulak, 2020).

2. From Rules to Reflection: The Pedagogical Dimension of Game Mechanics

This War of Mine stands out against the dominant representations of war in digital game culture. Unlike classical war games—and, more broadly, the war genre—which center on the experience of the soldier, a combatant who is armed and exerts tangible influence over the course of the conflict, this game shifts the focus to an entirely different perspective: that of the civilian trapped in a besieged city, whose experience it seeks to simulate. Such an approach has been largely marginalized within interactive war narratives (Bomba, 2015), and it distinguishes *This War of Mine* thematically as well as ludically from other simulation-survival titles addressing the experience of war. The narrative revolves around a group of random individuals who must struggle together to survive in a world torn apart by civil conflict. There are no heroic battles, spectacular victories, or storylines that glorify military strength. Instead, the player confronts a daily existence marked by hunger, illness, fear, and the relentless scarcity of resources.

The aesthetics of *This War of Mine* serve as an integral complement to its procedural message. The stark color palette, dominated by muted, almost monochromatic tones, does not merely function decoratively but actively co-constitutes the experience of perpetual crisis and unspoken despair. The game's visual layer—evoking at once the qualities of a documentary report and of a testimonial graphic novel—aligns with aesthetic traditions in which a reduction of expressive means amplifies semantic intensity. The accompanying music, sparse and melancholic, does not illustrate so much as underscore the

ludic situation, enabling the player to feel the weight of the characters' fate rather than merely describing it. The universality of the depicted world, stripped of place names and unequivocal locations, does not, however, result in abstraction. The developers drew direct inspiration from civilian accounts of the siege of Sarajevo during the Yugoslav wars (Warr, 2014), thereby granting the game the character of a quasi-archival testimony—anchored in real history yet simultaneously open to resonating with any context of armed conflict.

What is particularly significant from the perspective of the educational potential of *This War of Mine* is its decidedly anti-war stance, which radically undermines the dominant model of heroic agency characteristic of military games. Instead of triumph and victory-driven narratives, the player is confronted with helplessness, ethical dilemmas, and the inevitability of failure. In this way, the game reveals that war is not a stage for heroism but a space of suffering, where the subjects are those deprived of both voice and visibility. *This War of Mine* thus aligns with a broader current of critical representations of war, which, rather than glorifying violence, activate reflection, empathy, and an experience of tragedy as a mode of knowledge. Comparable tendencies can be observed in works such as *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012), which deconstructs the conventions of the military shooter; *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014), which highlights the human costs of World War I through puzzle-adventure mechanics; or *11-11: Memories Retold* (DigixArt & Aardman Animations, 2018), which combines painterly aesthetics with narrative strategies to foreground the civilian and emotional dimensions of conflict. Together, these titles testify to the growing importance of anti-heroic and empathetic approaches to war in contemporary game culture.

At the same time, the broader metacontext of *This War of Mine*—namely, the fact that it was the first video game in the history of the Polish education system to be included in the canon of supplementary school readings—further extends the scope of its impact. This institutional gesture not only symbolically affirms games as a legitimate cultural medium but also opens up an entirely new field of questions: about pedagogical techniques, didactic strategies, and modes of working with young people in a space where knowledge is not a linear transmission but an immersive practice of experience. Indeed, *This War of Mine* does not provide a factual compendium—it is neither a textbook nor an archive of events—but instead operates through mechanics that model attitudes, cultivate empathy, and foster critical reflection, thereby expanding the repertoire of humanistic and civic education.

Although the game has already been the subject of extensive analysis within academic discourse—Radosław Bomba (2015) interpreted it through the lens of procedural rhetoric, demonstrating how the ludic layer models experiences of community and resistance to war; Stephanie de Smale, Martijin Kors and Alyea Sandovar (2017) emphasized its ethical potential; and Levent Durdu (2021) described its capacity to cultivate empathy—relatively little attention has so far

been devoted to the question of how *This War of Mine* functions in an educational context and what specific competencies it may foster. To capture this dimension, it is necessary to situate the game within a broader genological framework. As a simulator, it belongs to a tradition of games that, as research suggests, possess a distinctive didactic potential: they become laboratories of social experience in which learning occurs through action and reflection on the consequences of one's decisions (Gee, 2003). *This War of Mine* not only simulates the daily existence of civilians entangled in the realities of war but also creates a space for empathetic understanding, shifting the emphasis from "playability" to "reflectivity" (Bogost, 2007).

The distinctly reflective character of *This War of Mine* becomes evident in its mechanics. The day–night cycle compels players to make decisions under conditions of perpetual scarcity: during the day, characters must tend to the shelter and care for one another, while at night they must risk their lives in search of food, medicine, or fuel. The simulation of imbalance between needs and resources teaches the management of limited supplies but also enables players to experience the psychological weight of responsibility for the group. Additional mechanics—such as the possibility of suffering negative physiological and psychological consequences, including illness, hunger, or depression—demonstrate that in wartime it is not enough to satisfy biological needs; morale and social bonds must also be maintained. Another element that diversifies each playthrough is randomness (e.g., unexpected raids or encounters with strangers seeking help), which prevents full control and underscores the fragility of daily existence in a besieged city. These mechanics, structured around unpredictable iterations of scenarios, force the player to reflect on the fate of those deprived of influence over the course of war. In this way, *This War of Mine* functions as a kind of ethical laboratory in which students can perform attitudes related to crisis management, solidarity, and responsibility for others.

To deepen the analysis of *This War of Mine's* gameplay mechanics in the context of their educational potential, we draw on Jesse Schell's framework from *The Art of Game Design* (2008), in which he proposes a series of so-called "lenses" for examining game design. One of these is the lens of fairness, according to which a well-designed game treats all playable characters in a balanced way, without favoring any particular side. In *This War of Mine*, this principle is realized through the analogous construction of its characters: all playable figures—defined by a handful of leading traits and a limited yet evocative backstory—share largely similar capacities and needs. The differences among them are reduced to minor nuances: one may be a better cook, another moves more quickly, yet another struggles with nicotine addiction or requires aesthetic stimulation. This structuring of characters significantly affects the balance of gameplay, ensuring that the player cannot "hide" behind a stronger avatar, as is often the case in classical war games. On the contrary, every character is

equally vulnerable to suffering and death, and survival depends on cooperation and the equitable distribution of burdens across the group.

From a didactic perspective, this balance of gameplay functions as a lesson in justice and solidarity. The game demonstrates that war affects everyone—regardless of age, gender, or social status (cf. Bomba, 2015)—and that survival is possible only through cooperation rather than competition. This mechanic not only enhances realism but, more importantly, operates as a tool for shaping social sensitivity, teaching egalitarianism, a sense of community, and responsibility for others. *This War of Mine* can therefore be interpreted not only as a space of empathetic engagement with the fate of its characters (Durdu, 2021), resulting from the shift in perspective from the representation of the soldier to the performative role of the civilian, but also as a practical lesson in equality and co-responsibility—one that the player must undergo if they wish to see their characters (wards) through to the end of the war.

In contrast to many games that guide the player toward a satisfying state of flow—characterized by a sense of gratification resulting from the appropriate alignment of challenge difficulty with the player's skills and knowledge of the game's rules (Cowley et al., 2008)—*This War of Mine* deliberately operates through experiences of frustration and failure. Jesse Schell (2008), in his analysis of games through the "lens of challenge," emphasizes that balancing difficulty is fundamental to sustaining player engagement and thus can serve as a primary tool for fostering immersion. In the case of *This War of Mine*, however, the balance of challenges does not rely on harmoniously adjusting difficulty to the player's situation and abilities, but rather on gradually depriving the player of any sense of control. Resources run out faster than they can be replenished; characters' illnesses and injuries erode the group's strength; and the onset of winter further raises the stakes. As a result, nearly every decision carries significant risk and very often culminates in failure.

Jesper Juul (2013), in his analysis of the specificity of failure in games, emphasizes that games possess a unique capacity to teach through failure, with failure itself serving as a carrier of ludic meaning. The player experiences the painful sensation of defeat but simultaneously gains the opportunity to try again and to analyze previous choices in order to succeed. *This War of Mine* radically reverses this mechanism: repeated failures are not the result of insufficient skill but constitute an immanent part of gameplay, reflecting the hopelessness of civilians' circumstances in a besieged city. This structuring of difficulty—where challenges rarely end in success due to the characters' limited capacities—aligns with Ian Bogost's (2007) concept of the rhetoric of failure, which he frames as an important complement to procedural rhetoric. Bogost, analyzing games such as *September 12th* (Newsgaming.com, 2003), notes that failure in such titles is not the outcome of the player's individual mistakes but rather the deliberate consequence of a system of rules that precludes complete victory.

Games, in this sense, may be consciously designed to prevent success, with failure itself becoming a crucial meaning-making, persuasive, and rhetorical device. *This War of Mine* employs this mechanism in a radical way: repeated failures are not the result of a lack of dexterity but are built into the very fabric of play, mirroring the despair of civilians trapped in a city under siege. As Radosław Bomba (2015) observes, the game systematically confronts the player with the consequences of selfishness, isolation, and violence, underscoring the importance of solidarity and collective action.

From an educational perspective, frustration and the constant risk of failure carry particular significance. They allow the player to experience emotions such as loss of control, anxiety about the future, and a sense of helplessness states that accompany civilians in real armed conflicts. As Kurt Squire (2004) notes, historical games achieve their greatest didactic potential not when they merely reproduce facts, but when they enable students to assume roles and encounter cognitive conflicts that compel critical reflection. In this sense, *This War of Mine* does not perform a didactic function by transmitting a body of factual knowledge, but rather through the simulation of wartime experience and the emotions bound up with it. The omnipresent specter of failure—carefully designed at the level of game rules and emerging from specific gameplay mechanics (event randomness, limited resource pools, the diverse needs of characters)—fosters empathetic reflection on the consequences of armed conflict.

In the didactics of history and ethics, this translates into the possibility of introducing students to situations that cannot be fully conveyed in a classroom or textbook: extreme circumstances in which every decision carries both moral weight and the tangible risk of losing one's life. As David Shaffer (2006) emphasizes, the educational power of games lies in their capacity to create "epistemic frames" that allow learners to think and act as participants in particular social practices. Frustration and failure in *This War of Mine* perform precisely this function: they teach humility, reflection on the consequences of one's choices, and sensitivity to the suffering of civilians during wartime. Consequently, the game shapes a specific habitus—a set of dispositions that guide the understanding of social practice and enable meaningful, intuitive action (Bourdieu, 1977). In this case, the habitus is associated with the perspective of civilian participation in war, marked by an awareness of the fragility of life, empathy for the suffering of others, and the capacity to recognize the ethical dimension of everyday decisions. Through this process, players internalize experiences that go beyond the mechanics of survival and become an exercise in practical ethics: they learn to think in terms of responsibility, solidarity, and the moral costs of actions taken in situations of extremity.

As Stephanie de Smale, Martijin Kors and Alyea Sandovar (2017) emphasizes, *This War of Mine* activates an affective–ethical dynamic not at the level of linear narrative but through the materiality of gameplay itself—by inscribing the

player into a virtual network of decisions and consequences. An act of theft, refusal of help, or use of violence is not a purely symbolic gesture but a node within a web of feedback loops in which affect (empathy, guilt, disgust) intertwines with the mechanical structure of the game (loss of morale, diminished control over the avatar, illness, or self-destruction). It is precisely at this intersection—between affect and mechanics—that ethical reflexivity emerges. What is at stake here is not a narrative, moralizing instance instructing the player, but a processual pedagogy in which ethics arises as the outcome of participation in a system where every decision is existentially weighted and performatively consequential.

From a didactic perspective, the crucial element here is not so much the mechanism of "learning through choice" as the individual map of affective–decisional actions, in which choice is constituted as an irreversible event that generates difference within the field of experience. In pedagogical literature, this practice is described as "learning through experience" (Dewey, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1983), yet in the case of digital games it assumes the form of a distinctive generator of critical experiences: a mechanism that does not simply replicate the process of cognition but rather destabilizes it, opening up new, unexpected interpretive perspectives for the participant. As research on the didactics of games and simulations suggests (Gee, 2003; Shaffer, 2006; Squire, 2004), decisions imbued with moral and social consequences do not lead to straightforward problem-solving but instead produce cognitive ruptures—moments of undecidability that catalyze critical reflection. When the player–learner is forced to make a choice with irreversible consequences—for instance, saving their own community at the expense of strangers—an intense affective tension is activated, one that cannot be dispersed through rational calculation. It is precisely this tension that serves an initiatory function: it becomes the ignition point of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), in which not only strategies of action but also the very frames of perception, matrices of value, and the ontology of the participant's identity undergo transformation.

Analyzed in this context, *This War of Mine* does not so much teach "correct" moral answers as it creates a simulated ethical laboratory in which every solution carries its own cost. Theft may enable survival, yet it undermines social bonds and damages the characters' psychological well-being; refusal to use violence preserves moral integrity but often results in death. In this way, the game's mechanics illustrate a fundamental feature of moral choices—their tragic nature and irreducible ambivalence. In educational practice, such an experience can be interpreted as an exercise in situational ethics, where clear-cut notions of good and evil do not exist, and the meaning of decisions emerges only in light of their consequences.

Extending the analysis, it is worth noting that *This War of Mine* also challenges the typical game conventions of "good" and "bad" endings. Instead of clear rewards and punishments, the game presents an open spectrum of consequences: a character who has survived through theft may struggle with depression until the end of the war, while a group that refused to help others may endure at the cost of persistent guilt. This is not a lesson in morality in the traditional, normative sense, but rather a practice of reflection on the ethics of survival. Students entering this space become participants in a kind of thought experiment that is difficult to reproduce in classroom settings through other didactic methods. The game functions here as a system of differences and interrelations, where ethical meanings emerge not from predetermined rules but from the immanent relations between decision and its affective resonance. In this way, *This War of Mine* fosters a process in which the player's identity and values are continuously negotiated and reconfigured.

The didactic potential of the game under analysis is revealed not so much through narrative moral dilemmas as through its very procedural structure, which continually stages experience as a field of differences, tensions, and uncertainties. Resource scarcity, chronic imbalance between playable and non-playable characters (e.g., armed looters), spirals of psychophysical consequences, and the variability of living conditions function here not as mere ludological components but as simulation operators that compel the player to enter into the logic of permanent negotiation at the limits of survival (Gee, 2003; Shaffer, 2006; Squire, 2004). As a result, gameplay emerges as a kind of laboratory of experience in which knowledge is not transmitted linearly but performatively produced in the very act of participation within a machinery of procedural rules (Dewey, 1938/1997; Kolb, 1984). It is precisely this specificity of mechanics—rather than narrative commentary—that makes *This War of Mine* a medium of humanistic and social pedagogy: a tool that initiates in the player a liminal experience where tensions between individual and community, safety and risk, responsibility and the necessity of survival are enacted. Incorporating the game into educational practice is therefore not merely a gesture legitimizing games as a cultural medium but an act of deterritorializing didactics, opening a space in which learning arises through immersion in simulated processes and negotiation with uncertainty as a condition of knowledge. For this reason, *This War of Mine* became the foundation of the educational handbook we developed: we approached the game as a tool whose didactic potential was captured and amplified through lesson scenarios, presented in detail in the following section. In this part, we also reflect on the conditions, opportunities, and challenges of implementing the game within the school environment.

3. Opportunities and Challenges of Using *This War of* Mine in Education

Ongoing technological transformations, which render digitality an integral sphere of contemporary social life, make it more than a truism today to describe digital games as a significant aspect of culture—comparable to literature, music, or cinema. By treating video games, encompassing diverse forms, genres, and themes, as an important element of our lives, we naturally ascribe to them meanings that extend beyond their original (and often only seemingly) purely entertainment-oriented character. In short, once a game becomes a cultural text, it simultaneously acquires the status of an educational tool.

In the publication *The Impact of Console Games in the Classroom: Evidence from Schools in Scotland*, cited in the report *Using Video Games in School. Guidelines for Successful Learning Outcomes* (Bray & Hosein, 2023), Jennifer S. Groff, Cathrin Howells, and Sue Cranmer point to a number of conditions related to the implementation of digital games in education systems. According to the researchers, game-based learning:

1) "approaches present an excellent opportunity to engage students in activeities that can enhance learning and produce a range of educational benefits;
2) approaches need to be well planned and classrooms carefully organised to engage all students in learning and produce appropriate outcomes;
3) approaches build on many children's existing interests, skills and knowledge and can narrow the gap between children's home and school cultures;
4) approaches can increase communication between parents, teachers and school leaders and enhance parental engagement in children's learning;
5) approaches have the capacity to increase teacher motivation."

Among the additional aspects identified, it was noted that teachers often have to overcome various prejudices and barriers related to game-based teaching methods. At the same time, the article emphasizes the "need support from peers, school leadership and outside resources to use games well for learning and integrate them effectivelyn." (Groff, Howells, Cranmer, 2010, as cited in Bray & Hosein, 2023).

Although the above factors were presented from the perspective of experiences within the Scottish educational system, their inclusion in a publication prepared at the European Union level clearly attests to their universal character. It is equally significant that these observations align with the findings of scholars analyzing the Polish context, who point to similar barriers in introducing digital games into educational practice. For instance, Danuta Smołucha highlights the low level of implementation of gamification systems in Polish universities, the very limited experience of secondary school graduates with educa-

tional games, the lack of necessary competencies among teaching staff (stemming from the shortage of specialized training in the use of new media and technologies), as well as the difficulties associated with reliably assessing the outcomes of their incorporation into didactic practice (Smołucha, 2016). Although these observations date back nearly a decade, it remains fully justified to take them into account when planning educational initiatives that integrate digital games into curricula.

An important manifestation of overcoming barriers to the implementation of digital games in school practice is our development of original lesson plans, which constitute the central component of the handbook designed for working with *This War of Mine*. A lesson plan—understood as "plan that the teacher prepares to create effective learning in the students" and as a "regular and organized framework for educational events" (Aghazadeh, 2014, as cited in Farhang, Hashemi & Ghorianfar, 2023)—functions as a didactic map, defining objectives, methods, and modes of evaluation. The lesson plan is thus a cornerstone of education and plays a crucial role in shaping the learning process (Farhang, Hashemi & Ghorianfar, 2023). Accordingly, ready-made teaching scenarios not only facilitate the integration of the game into the didactic process but also enhance the coherence and effectiveness of instruction.

The preparation of lesson plans was preceded by consideration of key assumptions aimed at mitigating two fundamental problems of a technical and economic nature: the time required to become familiar with the game and to conduct effective lessons (a particular challenge in the context of the overloaded curriculum in Polish schools), as well as the costs associated with access to game copies. In the first case, the solution was to assign students the task of playing short, individualized sessions as homework (not exceeding one hour, sufficient for implementing a sample lesson plan). In the second, a significant advantage remains the possibility of downloading the game free of charge via the government website as part of the *Games in Education* program (Ministry of Education and Science, n.d. [online] https://www.gov.pl/web/grywedukacji/this-war-of-mine [Accessed: 15 June 2025]).

It should be emphasized, however, that the adopted solutions do not eliminate problems arising from digital exclusion, related above all to the lack of access to appropriate equipment in students' homes. The relatively low technical requirements of *This War of Mine*, however, make it possible to conduct classes using computers available in school IT laboratories (for instance, through cooperation between the teacher implementing the lesson plan and the IT instructor). In extreme cases, all lesson scenarios can also be carried out on the basis of gameplay recordings available on the YouTube platform.

A separate issue, inherently embedded in the concept and content of the lesson plans, was the attempt to counteract the still widespread stereotypes surrounding digital games. Although—as argued in the introduction to this section—the perception of this medium is undergoing constant change, its educational role may still be hindered by approaches that frame games exclusively in terms of low-level entertainment, addiction, or violence (Matusiak, 2016). Given the weight of meanings inscribed in the character of *This War of Mine* as an example of a serious game, it was particularly important to target the recommended age group of the final years of secondary school, as well as to closely align the game's message with the cultural and scholarly representations of war and social threats present in the curricula of three subjects: Polish language, civics, and ethics.

The developed lesson plans demonstrate how *This War of Mine* can be creatively adapted across different subjects. The Polish language lesson focuses on a comparative analysis of the game and literature, highlighting the narrative specificities of both media. The civics lesson foregrounds issues of human rights, enabling students to reflect on their protection within different political systems. The ethics lesson, in turn, is aimed at cultivating empathetic and solidarity-oriented attitudes through the analysis of moral dilemmas encountered during gameplay.

The first of the developed lesson plans—titled *War from the Civilian's Perspective: A Comparative Analysis of "This War of Mine" and "Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising" in the Context of Hero Construction*—is a Polish language class designed to juxtapose a digital game with a literary work. The comparative analysis of the fictional city of Pogoren, marked by the experience of war inspired by the siege of Sarajevo (1992–1996), and the occupied Warsaw of 1944 provides an opportunity to discuss the narrative dimensions of both cultural texts. Particular emphasis is placed on the perspective of the individual (considered through the categories of the "everyman," the "anti-hero," or the "civilian"), as well as on the narrative specificities of literature and video games. Nonlinearity, interactivity, variability, and the simulation-based character of the digital medium are here accorded the status of significant didactic categories. In this way, This War of Mine becomes a tool that supports the interpretative process, enabling students not only to develop a deeper understanding of the realist convention and the category of tragedy but also to identify the universal values present in the analyzed cultural texts. Outlined in the scenario, the detailed objectives, core methodologies, and expected learning outcomes of this lesson are set out in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Learning Objectives, Teaching Methods, and Expected Outcomes of the Polish Language Lesson Plan *War from the Civilian's Perspective: A Comparative Analysis of "This War of Mine" and "Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising"*

Didactic Map of the Polish Language Lesson		
Learning Objectives	Teaching Methods	Expected Outcomes
1. Analysis and interpretation of literary and interactive texts. 2. Comparison of character construction in the game and in literature. 3. Recognition of the realist convention and the category of tragedy. 4. Analysis of the represented world and civilian characters. 5. Consideration of historical, cultural, and biographical contexts. 6. Identification of universal values in cultural texts.	1. Brainstorming. 2. Problem-based discussion. 3. Individual and group work. 4. Textual analysis. 5. Associative method.	1. Interprets literary and interactive texts at the level of meaning. 2. Identifies modes of constructing the represented world and characters. 3. Compares cultural texts in the context of character construction. 4. Recognizes the realist convention and its transformations in video games. 5. Analyzes the notion of tragedy and its means of expression. 6. Identifies the thematic dimensions of works in social, historical, and existential contexts. 7. Distinguishes between memoir and recollections as genres of applied literature. 8. Takes into account historical, cultural, and biographical contexts in interpretation. 9. Recognizes universal values present in texts.

Source: Own elaboration based on the educational handbook for *This War of Mine* (Pigulak, Pigulak, 2020)

The second lesson plan concerns a civics class entitled *Perceiving "This War of Mine" as a Basis for Discussing Human Rights in the Context of Armed Conflicts*. Its principal educational value lies in the possibility of directly employing the experiences derived from gameplay. Students' confrontation with the fate of characters deprived of basic guarantees of security, medical care, or even the right to life enables not only the identification of cases involving violations of fundamental human rights but also reflection on their significance and scope. In this approach, gameplay becomes a point of departure for working with legal documents—most notably the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*—and for analyzing differences in the protection of individual rights in democratic versus non-democratic states. By applying activating teaching methods such as brainstorming, problem-based discussion, and individual and group work, students gain the opportunity not only to deepen their understanding of the importance of humanitarian law but also to cultivate social sensitivity, critical thinking, and the ability to argue for the universality of human rights. The detailed learning objectives, principal teaching methods, and expected outcomes for this lesson are presented in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2. Learning Objectives, Teaching Methods, and Expected Outcomes of the Civic Class Lesson Plan *Perceiving "This War of Mine" as a Basis for Discussing Human Rights in the Context of Armed Conflicts*

Didactic Map of the Civic Class Lesson		
Learning Objectives	Teaching Methods	Expected Outcomes
1. Understanding the significance of human rights and humanitarian law during wartime. 2. Analyzing examples of human rights violations in armed conflicts. 3. Comprehending differences between democratic and non-democratic states in the context of human rights protection. 4. Reflecting on the universality of human	1. Brainstorming. 2. Individual work with the game. 3. Group work with the text. 4. Problem-based discussion. 5. Analysis of a cultural text.	1. Explains the concept of human rights and establishes their hierarchy. 2. Develops sensitivity to violations of rights and freedoms. 3. Discusses examples of human rights violations in wartime conditions. 4. Identifies differences in the protection of rights in democratic and non-democratic systems. 5. Argues for the universality of human rights

rights and the necessity of their protection.		and the necessity of their protection. 6. Enhances skills of logical reasoning and argumentation.

Source: Own elaboration based on the educational handbook for *This War of Mine* (Pigulak, Pigulak, 2020)

The third lesson plan, designed for ethics classes (*Solidarity Regardless of Circumstances: The Video Game as a Space for Shaping Empathetic Attitudes*), focuses on the themes of empathy and solidarity in the context of wartime experiences depicted in *This War of Mine*. The practical aspects of the game—including the necessity of making difficult moral choices regarding the distribution of resources, providing aid to others, or sacrificing one's own needs for the good of the community—serve here as a stimulus for reflection on altruistic and empathetic attitudes. The analysis of the characters' decisions enables students to identify ethical dilemmas and relate them to their own daily lives, thereby fostering self-awareness and self-reflection. The applied didactic methods (brainstorming, group work, and problem-based discussion) promote the exchange of perspectives, the cultivation of dialogical skills, and the strengthening of capacities for self-knowledge. As a result, gameplay is transformed into an educational tool that supports not only cultural analysis but also the formation of attitudes grounded in empathy and moral responsibility. The learning objectives, teaching methods, and expected outcomes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Learning Objectives, Teaching Methods, and Expected Outcomes of the Ethics Classes Lesson Plan *Solidarity Regardless of Circumstances: The Video Game as a Space for Shaping Empathetic Attitudes*

Didactic Map of the Ethics Classes Lesson		
Learning Objectives	Teaching Methods	Expected Outcomes
1. Understanding the concept of empathy and empathetic attitudes. 2. Reflecting on emotional identification and	1. Brainstorming. 2. Problem-based discussion. 3. Group work. 4. Textual analysis.	1. Explains what empathy is. 2. Understands and interprets human behavior.

solidarity in everyday life and in cultural texts. 3. Analyzing the attitudes of the game's characters in the context of moral community. 4. Developing self-awareness and empathetic self-reflection.		3. Analyzes and evaluates attitudes in cultural texts. 4. Identifies ethical dilemmas (using *This War of Mine* as an example).

Source: Own elaboration based on the educational handbook for *This War of Mine* (Pigulak, Pigulak, 2020)

The analysis of the three lesson plans confirms that *This War of Mine* can serve as an interdisciplinary didactic tool. The game fosters not only literary analysis, reflection on human rights, and the cultivation of empathy, but it can also be applied in other subjects such as history or civic education. Its particular value lies in combining emotional engagement with the development of critical thinking, empathy, and social competencies—an approach that, as highlighted in the report *Using Video Games in School...* (Bray & Hosein, 2023) cited in the introduction to this section, constitutes the key to effective game-based learning.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the educational potential of *This War of Mine* allows us to formulate several conclusions of both practical and theoretical significance. From the perspective of humanistic didactics, this game proves to be an exceptional tool, since it does not convey knowledge in a linear or encyclopedic manner but constructs an experience in which the student becomes a participant in a liminal situation. This situation—marked by scarcity of resources, a sense of helplessness, and the constant risk of failure—is not merely a ludological mechanism but also a vehicle of values. It is within the procedures of the game, rather than in its narrative commentary, that the possibility for reflection on the human condition is embedded: on the relationship between the individual and the community, on responsibility and solidarity.

The lesson plans presented in this article demonstrate that *This War of Mine* can be effectively integrated into the school curriculum at various levels and across different subjects—ranging from Polish language and literature to civics

and ethics. In each of these cases, the game functions as a laboratory of attitudes, in which young people not only analyze a cultural text but also confront existential and moral questions. The game's ability to combine emotional engagement with critical reflection constitutes its greatest didactic value, enabling the transcendence of traditional models of education based on transmission and opening up a space for learning through experience.

On a theoretical level, *This War of Mine* demonstrates that digital games—even when produced within a commercial framework—can operate as instruments of humanistic education. It belongs to a broader process of institutional recognition of games as a cultural medium, comparable to literature or film, and challenges both scholars and practitioners of education to consider new forms of a pedagogy of experience. What is at stake here is not merely the adoption of innovative methods to activate students, but a profound rethinking of knowledge itself: knowledge is no longer a resource to be assimilated, but a process in which meanings emerge through immersion in simulation, through action, and through reflection on its consequences.

From this perspective, *This War of Mine* may be regarded as a kind of humanistic experiment: a game that does not provide simple answers but opens up a field of constant negotiation between the individual and the collective, between survival and ethics, between historical memory and present experience. In this sense, education through digital games is no longer a marginal element of the school system but its future—a future in which what matters most is not only what we teach, but how we teach, and what kinds of attitudes we cultivate in the process.

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