PLAYFULNESS AS A META-STRATEGY

FRAMING ESPORTS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE YOUTH MEDIA WORK AND EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Stephanie Wössner

Education systems currently operate under conditions of profound uncertainty shaped by the omnicrisis and rapid societal change. In this context, debates around digital games and Esports in education often remain limited, framing them either through risk-oriented perspectives (e.g. addiction or excessive use) or through instrumental logics focused on skills, performance, and employability. This opinion paper argues that such framings overlook the transformative potential of Esports as a lived educational practice in youth cultures.

Drawing on the meta-strategies articulated in the *Future:Guide Bildung*—Playfulness, Lifelong Learning, Learning Environments, and Human–Machine Teamplay—the paper reframes Esports as a laboratory for educational transformation and democratic learning. Rather than positioning Esports as a model or solution, it is understood as a protected space for experimentation in which questions of learning, participation, power, technology, and diversity are actively negotiated.

By examining Esports as a site of playful engagement under uncertainty and reflective human–machine collaboration, the paper positions it as a cultural impulse contributing to the democratization and future orientation of education, pointing toward the emergence of an era of human digitality.

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Education at a Point of Rupture

Education systems across Europe and beyond are currently facing a fundamental tension. On the one hand, schools, universities, and youth media institutions are expected to provide stability, orientation, and reliability in times of profound uncertainty. On the other hand, they are increasingly confronted with demands for innovation, flexibility, participation, and responsiveness to rapid societal change. Digitalization, climate crisis, demographic shifts, political polarization, and accelerating technological development are not isolated challenges; they interact and amplify one another. This constellation is increasingly described as an "omnicrisis": a condition in which multiple systemic crises overlap, reinforce each other, and undermine established modes of planning and control (e.g. Horx et al., 2024). Education is therefore no longer operating in a phase of incremental change, but within a broader transformational condition.

In such a context, it becomes insufficient to ask which tools, platforms, or curricula should be updated. The more pressing question is how learning itself is understood, organized (or not), and experienced. What kinds of learning cultures enable people – especially young people – to remain capable of acting, imagining, and co-shaping the future under conditions of uncertainty?

Against this background, Esports appears at first glance to be a marginal or even distracting topic. Competitive digital gaming is often associated with leisure, entertainment, or commercial interests, and educational debates tend to frame it in reductionist ways: either through a risk-oriented lens focusing on problematic use, addiction, or excessive screen time (e.g. Pontes et al., 2024), or through an instrumental perspective that emphasizes professionalization, career pathways, academic performance and transferable digital skills within the gaming and Esports ecosystem (e.g. Kwan, 2025). Both perspectives remain limited. They fail to recognize that Esports is already a lived educational practice for many young people – one that embodies forms of learning, collaboration, failure, reflection, and identity work that formal education often struggles to create.

This opinion paper argues that Esports can serve as a productive impulse for the transformation of education when it is framed through the lens of Playfulness as a meta-strategy, in combination with three further meta-strategies articulated in the *Future:Guide Bildung*: Lifelong Learning, Learning Environments, and Human–Machine Teamplay. Together, these strategies do not describe methods or tools, but orientations that shape how learning cultures emerge and need to evolve. Esports, in this sense, becomes neither a curricular add-on nor a trend to be adopted, but a laboratory in which future-oriented educational principles can be explored, tested, and transferred.

Transforming Education and the Role of the four Meta-Strategies

The *Future:Guide Bildung* emerges from the observation that educational systems are increasingly confronted with situations for which no established solutions exist. Rather than treating transformation as a project that can be planned, implemented, and evaluated step by step, it understands transformation as a cultural and relational process. This process unfolds over time, involves multiple actors, and cannot be reduced to technical innovation or structural reform alone.

At the core of the *Future:Guide Bildung* is the distinction between surface-level change, i.e. 21st century learning, and deep transformation, i.e. future-oriented learning. Surface-level change focuses on optimization: new tools, new curricula, new formats. Deep transformation, by contrast, addresses how learning is framed, how roles are understood, and how meaning is created within educational contexts. It affects values, expectations, and forms of interaction

and challenges the basic understanding of the goal of education. The four meta-strategies operate precisely on this deeper level: They provide orientation without prescribing outcomes. They help educational actors navigate uncertainty by shaping how they perceive challenges and opportunities. Importantly, they are not sequential steps or checklists. They are simultaneously active orientations that interact and reinforce one another. Their relevance does not depend on specific technologies or trends; rather, they remain applicable across contexts and over time.

Esports offers a particularly illustrative field for examining these meta-strategies, because it condenses many of the tensions currently facing education: competition and cooperation, formal and informal learning, human agency and algorithmic systems, individual performance and collective meaning. By analyzing Esports through the lens of the *Future:Guide Bildung*, it becomes possible to explore how educational transformation can be understood not as disruption, but as a process of cultural reorientation.

Playfulness: From Method to World-Relation

Playfulness occupies a central position within the *Future:Guide Bildung* because it addresses a fundamental question: how do people relate to learning when outcomes are uncertain and futures are open? In many educational contexts, learning is still framed as a linear process aimed at predefined goals. Success is measured through performance indicators, assessments, and standards. While such structures can provide orientation, they often leave little room for exploration, deviation, or imagination.

Playfulness challenges this logic by shifting attention from outcomes to processes. It invites learners to engage with complexity without the immediate pressure to deliver correct results. This does not mean abandoning seriousness or responsibility. On the contrary, playfulness allows for deep engagement precisely because it creates a protected space in which experimentation is possible. Within such spaces, failure loses its stigmatizing function and becomes a meaningful source of learning.

Esports exemplifies this orientation in practice. Even under competitive conditions, players constantly experiment with strategies, roles, and interactions. They analyze losses, adjust tactics, and test new approaches. Learning emerges not through instruction, but through participation in a dynamic system. Importantly, this learning is social. It is embedded in communication, negotiation, and shared reflection.

From a transformation perspective, playfulness is essential because it supports the development of transformational capacity: the ability to remain capable of acting when established routines no longer suffice. It fosters imagination, resilience, and self-efficacy – competencies that are crucial not only for Esports, but for navigating societal change more broadly.

Lifelong Learning: Education Beyond Institutional Boundaries

Lifelong learning goes beyond the notion of continuous qualification. It emphasizes learning as a permanent, life-spanning process of participation, identity formation, and societal engagement. In this perspective, learning does not belong exclusively to childhood or youth, nor is it confined to educational institutions. Instead, it unfolds wherever people engage meaningfully with challenges, communities, and questions of relevance.

Esports makes this understanding visible. Learning trajectories within Esports rarely follow linear or standardized paths. Young players often develop complex competencies long before they are formally recognized: strategic thinking, communication, leadership, emotional regulation, and critical reflection. These competencies continue to develop over time, often extending into adulthood as players take on new roles such as mentors, coaches, organizers, or educators.

When Esports enters educational contexts, it disrupts traditional boundaries. Schools and youth centers become spaces of encounter between formal and informal learning cultures. External actors bring expertise and perspectives that challenge institutional routines. At the same time, educational institutions open their doors to people of different ages and backgrounds, enabling intergenerational learning processes.

From a transformation perspective, lifelong learning thus contributes to the opening of education to society. It shifts the focus from standardized pathways to diverse biographies and from certification to participation. Esports illustrates how learning can remain meaningful across life phases and how educational spaces can evolve into inclusive arenas for shared learning cultures.

Learning Environments: From Classrooms to Ecosystems

In transformation-oriented education, learning environments are no longer understood as static settings defined by architecture or schedules. Instead, they are conceived as dynamic ecosystems composed of relationships, roles, technologies, and practices. The *Future:Guide Bildung* emphasizes that environments shape learning not only through physical conditions, but through the possibilities they open or restrict for interaction, participation, and agency.

Esports operates within highly hybrid environments. Physical venues, digital and virtual platforms, streaming infrastructures, and online communities intersect and overlap. These constellations challenge traditional educational designs, but they also offer new possibilities. Learning becomes distributed across spaces and moments, embedded in real-time interaction and collective problem-solving.

A key characteristic of Esports-based environments is the diversity of roles. Participation is not limited to playing. Strategic analysts, organizers, moderators, designers, and storytellers contribute in different ways. This plurality supports inclusion by recognizing multiple forms of competence and engagement. Learning environments thus become spaces where difference is not a problem to be managed, but a resource for collective learning.

From a transformation perspective, such environments enable learners to experience themselves as co-creators. Rules are negotiated, conflicts addressed, and cultures shaped collectively. Youth media work can build on these dynamics to design learning environments that foster democratic participation and responsibility.

Human–Machine Teamplay: Rethinking Technology in Education

Human–Machine Teamplay addresses one of the most pressing questions of education: how do humans relate to increasingly autonomous and data-driven technologies? Rather than positioning technology as a neutral tool or an external force, the *Future:Guide Bildung* conceptualizes technology as a relational partner that shapes future-oriented learning processes, identities, and possibilities for action.

Esports provides a concrete context in which this relationship becomes visible. Players interact continuously with game engines, algorithms, matchmaking systems, and analytics tools. These systems influence performance, behavior, and perception. Importantly, their effects are not abstract; they are experienced directly in play.

Within Esports contexts, learners develop forms of technological literacy that extend beyond functional skills. They learn to interpret data, to question metrics, and to recognize how systems embed values and biases. This reflective engagement supports agency rather than dependency. Learners do not merely adapt to technology; they learn to negotiate with it.

From a transformation perspective, Human–Machine Teamplay enables education to move beyond simplistic narratives of digitalization. It opens space for ethical reflection, critical awareness, and co-design. Youth media work can use Esports to foster competencies that are essential for democratic participation in digitally mediated societies.

Esports as a Laboratory for Educational Transformation and Democratic Learning

Understanding Esports as a laboratory for educational transformation means shifting perspective. A laboratory is not a showcase of finished solutions, nor a blueprint to be replicated. It is a protected space for exploration, experimentation, and learning under controlled yet open conditions. In this sense, Esports does not offer ready-made answers for education. Instead, it provides a setting in which fundamental questions about learning, participation, power, and technology can be actively negotiated, and it helps to re-establish the connection between education and societal life that is explicitly articulated in educational mandates yet often experienced as disconnected in everyday schooling.

Within this laboratory, young people experience what it means to act in complex, dynamic systems. They are confronted with uncertainty, rapid feedback, and interdependence. Decisions have consequences, but these consequences remain within a manageable frame. This combination is pedagogically powerful: it allows learners to develop self-efficacy and responsibility without exposing them to irreversible risks. Failure becomes a shared experience rather than an individual stigma.

Crucially, the laboratory character of Esports also reveals tensions. Competition and cooperation coexist. Inclusion and exclusion are constantly renegotiated. Commercial interests intersect with community values. Rather than treating these tensions as problems to be eliminated, a transformation-oriented perspective treats them as learning opportunities. Youth media work can make these tensions explicit, reflectable, and discussable – thereby supporting critical awareness and ethical judgement.

Beyond questions of access and participation, Esports as a laboratory also offers a concrete entry point into democratic education. The constant negotiation of rules, roles, fairness, and recognition within Esports environments mirrors core democratic processes. Decisions about team composition, communication norms, conflict resolution, and inclusion are not abstract principles, but lived practices. In this sense, diversity is not merely represented; it is actively worked through. Learners experience that participation is neither automatic nor equally distributed, and that democratic cultures require conscious design, reflection, and shared responsibility.

From a transformation-oriented perspective, this is particularly relevant for educational equity. Esports laboratories can make visible how power relations, exclusion mechanisms, and implicit norms operate in learning contexts—and how they can be challenged. Youth media work can intentionally frame these dynamics as opportunities for democratic learning: by foregrounding voice, enabling negotiation, and supporting collective decision-making. Diversity thus becomes a driver of democratic competence, rather than a challenge to be managed.

Equally important is the question of transfer: how the competencies developed in Esports translate into broader life contexts. The laboratory metaphor helps to clarify this point. Transfer does not mean applying isolated skills to predefined situations. Rather, it concerns the development of dispositions that shape how individuals engage with complexity across contexts. In Esports, learners practice collaboration under pressure, deal with uncertainty and failure, negotiate roles and responsibilities, reflect on mediated power structures, and act within hybrid human–technology systems. These experiences foster future-oriented competencies such as adaptability, critical judgement, communication, and collective problem-solving. When supported through reflection and pedagogical framing, such competencies extend far beyond gaming contexts and inform how learners navigate education, work, civic participation, and everyday life.

The laboratory metaphor further highlights the transfer potential of Esports. What can be transferred are not games or formats, but principles: playfulness as orientation, lifelong learning as openness, learning environments as ecosystems, and human–machine teamplay as reflective collaboration. These principles can inform diverse educational contexts, from project-based school learning to vocational education and civic engagement initiatives. Esports thus becomes a site where future-oriented learning cultures can be rehearsed before they are scaled or adapted elsewhere.

Learning to Play with the Future – Playfulness as a Transformative Capacity

Educational transformation is often discussed in terms of strategies, reforms, and innovations. While these elements are not irrelevant, they risk overlooking a more fundamental question: how do people learn to relate to an uncertain future? In times marked by rapid change and overlapping crises, education must do more than transmit knowledge or optimize performance. It must enable learners to remain capable of acting, imagining, and co-creating under conditions that cannot be fully predicted.

This opinion paper has argued that Esports, when framed through the meta-strategies articulated in the *Future:Guide Bildung*, can contribute meaningfully to this challenge. Playfulness fosters imagination and resilience; lifelong learning opens educational spaces to society and diverse biographies; learning environments evolve into participatory ecosystems; and human–machine teamplay supports critical and ethical engagement with technology. Together, these orientations form a coherent framework for transformation.

In this context, the question of transfer becomes central. The competencies developed in Esports laboratories do not transfer because games resemble "real life," but because learners cultivate dispositions that shape how they act across contexts. The ability to collaborate under uncertainty, to deal productively with failure, to reflect on power relations, and to participate in collective decision-making does not remain confined to gaming environments. When accompanied by reflection and pedagogical framing, these dispositions inform how learners engage with education, work, democratic life and co-creating a good future more broadly. Seen this way, Esports does not prepare learners for a predefined future. It enables them to engage with the future as an open, contested, and shared space. The laboratory

becomes a bridge: between youth culture and civic culture, between informal learning and institutional education, and between individual agency and collective responsibility.

Importantly, the argument is not that education should adopt Esports as a model. Rather, Esports serves as a mirror that reflects what learning already looks like for many young people – and what education will become if it takes these practices seriously, recognizing them as equally valuable forms of learning rather than marginal or extracurricular activities. In doing so, it draws attention to forms of personal development, self-efficacy, and identity work that are often more tangibly experienced in such contexts than in many formal schooling settings. It reveals the limits of instruction-centered paradigms and highlights the potential of relational, participatory, and exploratory learning cultures. This does not point toward another top-down reform or controlled innovation cycle, but toward a cultural impulse that challenges how education understands learning, value, and participation at a fundamental level.

To learn to play with the future does not mean trivializing its challenges. It means approaching them with curiosity, courage, and a willingness to experiment collectively. In this sense, Esports is not about games. It is about cultivating a cultural capacity for transformation – one that contributes to the democratization of education by broadening whose knowledge, practices, and experiences are acknowledged as educationally meaningful, and that positions Esports as one meaningful building block among others, rather than a singular solution, for an education that urgently needs to remain relevant, humane, and future-oriented by contributing to the emergence of what will become the next era: the era of human digitality.

Acknowledgments

AI Disclaimer

This article was developed in dialogue with an AI-based language model (ChatGPT 5.2) as part of a human–machine teamplay approach. AI was used as a reflective and generative partner to support structuring, drafting, and linguistic refinement of arguments. Conceptual framing, theoretical positioning, and all editorial decisions remain the responsibility of the author. The use of AI in this process aligns with the article's core argument: understanding human–machine collaboration not as automation, but as a relational practice that can enhance reflection, creativity, and agency in knowledge production.

About the Author

STEPHANIE WÖSSNER is a freelance consultant and speaker for future-oriented learning. Her main areas of expertise are extended reality, game-based learning, artificial intelligence, design and futures thinking, as well as the Metaverse and future-oriented learning environments. Stephanie has worked as a foreign language teacher for English and French

for more than ten years and is currently working full-time for the Landesmedienzentrum Baden-Württemberg as head of the Future of Learning Unit. She also has extensive experience in teacher training and earned a B.A. in Japanese and American Studies in 2007, as well as a Master of Arts in Game Studies and a Master of Science in Game-based Media and Education from the University for Continuing Education Krems. In 2025, she published the *Future:Guide Bildung* – her contribution to a much-needed discussion about the future of learning.

Website: https://www.steffi-woessner.de.

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