



Digital Game-Based Learning Effectiveness in Formal Education: A Review

I Kadek Budi Sandika^{1*}, I Nyoman Yoga Trisemarawima², Anggie Birda Ardelia Ghani³

^{1*,2,3}Institut Bisnis dan Teknologi Indonesia, Denpasar, Indonesia

[*ikbsandika@instiki.ac.id](mailto:ikbsandika@instiki.ac.id)

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ABSTRACT

The 21st-century technological landscape has significantly transformed conventional education through the adoption of Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) and gamification. This study aims to conduct a systematic literature review using the PRISMA protocol to map publication trends, pedagogical effectiveness, ideal game mechanics, and research disparities across one hundred peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2026. The findings reveal an exponential growth in publication volume, heavily dominated by contributions from Asia, Europe, and North America. Integrating core game elements such as points, leaderboards, badges, challenges, and narrative framing empirically enhances intrinsic motivation, long-term memory retention, and cognitive learning outcomes. Furthermore, this review identifies a noticeable research divide: computer science journals prioritize technical architectures and adaptive algorithms, whereas educational journals focus on psychopedagogical validation. Practical implications highlight the urgent need for interdisciplinary collaboration, teacher digital literacy programs, and equitable ICT infrastructure to support inclusive digital curricula.

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1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology in the 21st century has transformed conventional education into dynamic learning environments, where educational games are widely adopted to enhance student engagement and intrinsic motivation [1]. However, the current body of literature remains highly fragmented, making it difficult for researchers and practitioners to systematically map methodological trends and pedagogical efficacy [2]. Identifying and synthesizing scholarly publications on digital game-based learning is crucial to address this knowledge gap and provide an evidence-based foundation for curriculum design [3], [4]. The increasing adoption of Education 4.0 has further accelerated the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning activities. Educational institutions are increasingly utilizing digital game-based learning not only to improve students' academic performance but also to foster collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking skills. The incorporation of game elements into learning environments has demonstrated considerable potential to transform passive learners into active

participants by providing immediate feedback, interactive challenges, and adaptive learning experiences. Consequently, DGBL has become one of the most widely discussed instructional approaches in educational technology research due to its ability to accommodate diverse learning styles and improve overall learning engagement. Existing studies often examine isolated implementations, leaving a critical need for a comprehensive synthesis evaluating institutional contributions, cross-border collaboration patterns, and shifting thematic focus over time [5].

To address these challenges, this study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework, analyzing one hundred selected peer-reviewed articles [6]. The primary objective of this paper is to resolve four key research dimensions: first, mapping the geographical distribution and publication volume trends of DGBL literature; second, identifying the theoretical frameworks and game elements that optimize cognitive and affective learning outcomes; third, analyzing the focus disparities between computer science and educational research domains; and fourth, evaluating technical-pedagogical implementation barriers alongside future directions in frontier technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Augmented/Virtual Reality (AR/VR) [7]–[9]. By synthesizing these dimensions, this study bridges the gap between technical software architecture and psychopedagogical evaluation, offering a holistic roadmap for future interactive educational media [10].

Although numerous literature reviews have investigated the effectiveness of digital game-based learning, many studies remain limited to specific educational levels, subject domains, or technological implementations. Furthermore, previous reviews rarely integrate publication trends, geographical research distribution, pedagogical perspectives, technological advancements, and implementation challenges into a single comprehensive analysis. Therefore, a broader synthesis is required to provide a holistic understanding of current research developments while identifying future research opportunities that can support educators, researchers, and educational policymakers in developing more effective digital learning environments.

2. Method

This study utilizes the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol [11], [12]. The selection procedure consists of four distinct phases: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion [13].

To ensure the reliability and transparency of the review process, each selected publication was evaluated according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The reviewed articles were limited to peer-reviewed journal publications published between 2014 and 2026 and written in English or Indonesian. During the screening stage, duplicate records, conference abstracts, editorial papers, non-peer-reviewed documents, and articles lacking sufficient methodological information were excluded. This systematic selection process ensured that only high-quality publications relevant to digital game-based learning in formal education were included in the final analysis.

The extracted information from each article included publication year, country of origin, research methodology, educational level, technological platform, implemented game mechanics, and reported learning outcomes. Subsequently, qualitative synthesis was conducted to identify recurring research themes, technological developments, pedagogical approaches, and implementation barriers. This analytical procedure enabled the identification of current research trends while providing a comprehensive overview of future opportunities for the implementation of digital game-based learning.

Database searches were conducted across global and national academic indexing engines, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore, SpringerLink, SINTA, and Google Scholar [14]. Boolean search strings were formulated using combinations such as ("digital game-based learning" OR "educational games" OR "gamification in education") [15].

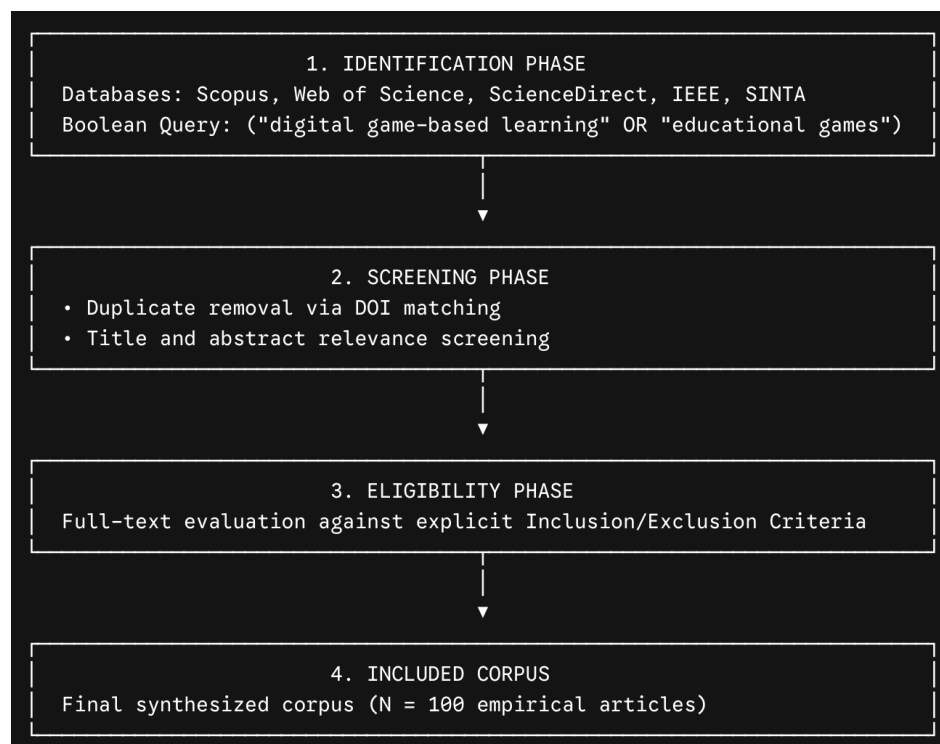


Figure 1. PRISMA Systematic Review Flowchart

[Source: Primary SLR Analysis Framework]

Explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to maintain rigor and methodological quality, as summarized in Figure 2.

Criterion Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed empirical journal articles	Grey literature, conference proceedings, opinion pieces
Timeframe	Published between 2014 and 2026	Dailies, non-peer-reviewed blogs, published prior to 2014
Context	Formal educational settings (K-12 & Higher Ed)	Commercial games without explicit pedagogical targets
Language	English or Indonesian	Languages other than English or Indonesian
Data Quality	Contains empirical data (Quant/Qual/Mixed)	Lacks empirical evaluation or full-text access

Figure 2. Literature Selection Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

3. Results and Discussions

Analysis of the 100 included articles reveals a sharp escalation in publication volume between 2020 and 2025 [16]. Geographically, research output is heavily concentrated in North America, Europe, and East Asia, with emerging contributions from Southeast Asia [17], [18]. Co-citation networks highlight journals such as Computers & Education as central dissemination hubs [19].

The increasing number of publications indicates that digital game-based learning has become one of the major research topics in educational technology over the past decade. This trend is strongly influenced by the rapid development of digital learning platforms, the widespread adoption of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the growing availability of affordable digital devices. These factors have encouraged researchers from multiple disciplines to investigate the effectiveness of game-based instructional approaches across different educational contexts.

The empirical synthesis identifies six fundamental game mechanics that significantly influence learner cognitive load and motivational states, as detailed in Figure 3.

Game Element	Core Characteristics	Pedagogical Implication
Points & Scores	Immediate performance feedback	Promotes self-regulated progress tracking [20]
Leaderboards	Peer comparison mechanism	Fosters healthy social competition [21]
Badges	Visual skill certification	Builds self-efficacy and mastery recognition
Quests & Challenges	Problem-based scenario framing	Exercises Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)
Narrative Framing	Immersive storyline integration	Facilitates long-term memory retention
Level Progression	Scaffolded difficulty adaptation	Prevents cognitive overload and maintains flow state

Figure 3. Mechanics, Characteristics, and Pedagogical Implications in DGBL

A critical finding of this study is the divergence in focus between discipline-specific journals [22]. Computer science publications primarily emphasize system architecture, algorithmic efficiency, and adaptive game engines [23]. Conversely, educational and psychological journals center on learning gain metrics, behavioral engagement, and psychopedagogical validation [24].

Among the identified game mechanics, points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, feedback, and storytelling consistently emerged as the most influential elements in improving student engagement and learning performance. These mechanics encourage continuous participation through reward-based motivation while simultaneously supporting self-regulated learning. Several studies also reported that adaptive game mechanics provide personalized learning experiences by adjusting task difficulty according to learner performance, thereby improving knowledge retention and reducing cognitive overload.

Furthermore, recent literature highlights the integration of frontier technologies [25]. Artificial Intelligence (AI) enables adaptive learning paths that adjust game difficulty dynamically based on real-time learner performance [26]. Concurrently, Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) enhance spatial understanding and conceptualization in STEM disciplines [27].

In addition to technological innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration between computer scientists, educators, psychologists, and instructional designers has become increasingly important for developing effective educational games. While technological sophistication contributes to system functionality, pedagogical design determines whether digital games successfully achieve intended learning objectives. Consequently, future

educational game development should emphasize the integration of technological innovation with evidence-based instructional strategies to maximize educational effectiveness.

Despite these benefits, implementation challenges persist [28]. Key barriers include ICT infrastructure disparities in rural schools, low teacher digital literacy, and data privacy concerns regarding AI-driven analytics [29], [30].

Addressing these implementation challenges requires comprehensive policy support and institutional commitment. Investment in ICT infrastructure, continuous professional development for teachers, and clear guidelines regarding data privacy and ethical AI utilization are essential to ensure sustainable adoption of digital game-based learning. Furthermore, collaboration among educational institutions, government agencies, and technology providers can accelerate the implementation of inclusive digital learning environments that benefit learners across diverse educational settings.

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review demonstrates that digital game-based learning and gamification serve as highly effective pedagogical instruments in formal education. When designed with balanced mechanics such as progression levels, points, and narrative framing, educational games consistently enhance student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and cognitive retention. The convergence of AI and immersive AR/VR technologies further opens new avenues for personalized, adaptive learning. To overcome implementation barriers, future initiatives must focus on interdisciplinary research collaborations, robust teacher training, and equitable technological infrastructure.

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