

EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF GRADE VI STUDENTS OF SD N 1 BOGOR IN PLAYING THE GAME FREE FIRE TOWARDS THEIR ACADEMIC CAREER JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores how sixth-grade elementary students experience playing Garena Free Fire and how these experiences intersect with their learning motivation and academic development. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from purposively selected student players, alongside parents and homeroom teachers, through semi-structured interviews, naturalistic observations, digital questionnaires, and academic documentation. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model (data reduction, display, and conclusion). Findings indicate that gaming is primarily motivated by entertainment and peer socialization, with engagement intensity varying across participants. The most dominant positive impacts include enhanced peer collaboration, stress regulation, and teamwork—competencies that indirectly support classroom engagement and learning readiness. Conversely, the most salient negative effects involve attention fragmentation, academic procrastination, and post-gaming cognitive fatigue, which undermine intrinsic study motivation. Crucially, gaming's academic impact is non-deterministic and strongly moderated by students' self-regulation capacity, structured time management, and consistent adult scaffolding. This study advances educational psychology by empirically challenging binary narratives of digital play, demonstrating how game-derived skills can be pedagogically leveraged while mitigating cognitive and motivational risks. It further offers evidence-based guidelines for educators and caregivers to co-regulate screen time and integrate digital play insights into developmental support strategies for pre-adolescents.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought significant changes to people's lives, including in education and the activity patterns of elementary school-aged children. One prominent phenomenon is the increasing use of online games as a means of entertainment and social interaction. Online games are internet-

based games that allow players to interact in real time with other users from various regions (Mertika & Mariana, 2020; Novrialdy, 2019). Easy access via devices such as smartphones has made online games increasingly popular among children, especially elementary school students. Among the various online games, *Garena Free Fire* has become one of the most popular among elementary school students because of its interactive gameplay, strategic challenges, and teamwork features.

The popularity of online games is inseparable from their engaging characteristics, such as interactive visuals, tiered challenges, and in-game reward systems. These conditions tend to make players intensely involved in gameplay, even potentially becoming addicted (Ondang, 2020). On the other hand, online games also have both positive and negative impacts. Positive impacts include improved cognitive skills, creativity, and foreign language skills, while negative impacts can include decreased learning motivation, impaired concentration, and decreased student academic achievement (Syafi et al., 2023). This phenomenon is further exacerbated by children's high interest in certain games, one of which is Free Fire. This battle royale game demands strategy, dexterity, and teamwork. However, this appeal also leads to excessive play, particularly due to the reward system and virtual items that encourage players to continue playing (Maulana Ardiansyah & Safitri, 2025; Maulidia, 2023). This has the potential to disrupt the balance between play and learning in elementary school-aged children.

Several previous studies have examined the impact of online games on elementary school students. Research by Lisnawati et al., (2021) showed that the intensity of gameplay affects students' well-being, with prolonged playtime tending to lead to negative impacts such as addiction and decreased motivation to learn. These findings are supported by Bastul Birri et al., (2022), who stated that habitual online gaming causes students to lose focus on learning and become more interested in playing than studying. Furthermore, research by Septinarini et al., (2024) found a significant relationship between the intensity of playing Free Fire and decreased interest in learning and increased aggressive behavior in students. Meanwhile, research by Masfiah & Vidia Putri, (2019) and Zendrato & Harefa, (2020) showed that online game addiction significantly contributes to decreased academic achievement and student motivation. This indicates that uncontrolled gaming activity can directly impact the quality of the learning process.

Family factors are also important variables in controlling the impact of online gaming. Research by Saputra, (2023) confirmed that open family communication patterns and effective parental supervision can reduce the risk of gaming addiction in children. Similar findings were presented by Alwaely et al., (2023) and Kim & Kim, (2009), who stated that parental involvement significantly influences children's gaming behavior and levels of online gaming addiction. However, most previous studies primarily focus on the causal relationship between gaming intensity and academic outcomes, positioning students mainly as objects affected by gaming behavior. There is still limited research exploring the subjective experiences of elementary school students in playing online games and how these experiences relate to their academic development or learning trajectory.

This research gap is important because elementary school age is a critical developmental stage in which children begin to form self-concepts, interests, discipline, and future learning orientations (Putri et al., 2025). Students' subjective experiences in gaming may provide new insights into informal learning processes, time management, and motivational changes that are not fully captured through quantitative approaches. The gap between theory and fact is evident in the positive potential of games as a learning medium through a gamification approach. However, in practice, games often have a more negative impact on student motivation and achievement. In other words, there is a mismatch between the expectation that games can function as educational tools and the reality in the field, where games are predominantly used for entertainment. This situation indicates the need for a more in-depth and contextual study. Therefore, this study aims to examine the subjective experiences of sixth-grade elementary school students in playing *Garena Free Fire* and to analyze how these experiences relate to their learning motivation, time management, and academic development. This study offers novelty by emphasizing students' lived experiences through a phenomenological approach, thereby providing a more contextual understanding of the role of online games in children's academic lives.

METHOD

The research method used in this study was qualitative, with a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen because the study aimed to deeply understand students' subjective experiences playing the online game Free Fire and its relationship to academic development. The research design used was phenomenology, an approach that focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. Through this design, the researchers sought to uncover the meaning of sixth-grade students' experiences playing Free Fire and how they interpret this activity in relation to their learning motivation and academic orientation. The phenomenological approach is considered relevant because it can depict reality from the participants' perspectives directly (Creswell, 2023).

The research subjects consisted of six sixth-grade students of SD Negeri 1 Bogor who actively play Free Fire. The subjects were selected purposively based on certain criteria: (1) students who play regularly, (2) have a basic understanding of gaming activities and their learning experiences, and (3) are willing to participate as informants. In addition, this study also involved supporting informants, namely six parents and one homeroom teacher, to obtain more comprehensive data regarding student behavior both at home and at school.

Data collection techniques were conducted using several methods, including questionnaires, interviews, observation, and documentation. Questionnaires were used to obtain a general overview of students' play habits, while semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences and perceptions in depth. Observations were used to observe student behavior in the learning context, while documentation provided supporting data in the form of academic records and student activities. The data were analyzed using phenomenological analysis procedures adapted from Creswell (2023), which involved several stages: (1) organizing and preparing the data, such as transcribing interviews and compiling observation notes; (2) reading the entire data repeatedly to gain a general understanding; (3) coding significant statements related to students' experiences in playing Free Fire; (4) grouping these statements into themes or meaning units, such as motivation for playing, time management, and perceived academic impacts; (5) developing textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how they experienced it); and (6) interpreting the essence of the phenomenon as a whole. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing information relevant to the research objectives, then presenting the data in a descriptive narrative format for ease of understanding. To support the analysis, the findings were then presented descriptively in narrative form, and conclusions were drawn continuously by identifying patterns and relationships among themes (Creswell, 2023).

To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation techniques. Triangulation was carried out by comparing data from various sources, namely students, parents, and teachers, as well as from various data collection techniques such as interviews, observations, and questionnaires. This technique aims to increase the validity and credibility of the data, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness of the research results (Creswell, 2023). In addition, member checking was conducted by confirming the interview results and interpretations with participants to ensure that the findings accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the analysis of interviews, observations, and questionnaires, this study identified five major themes regarding sixth-grade students' experiences in playing *Free Fire* and its relationship to learning motivation and academic development: (1) gaming habits and intensity; (2) motivation to play; (3) self-control and time management; (4) impacts on learning activities and social competencies; and (5) perceptions of education and future orientation. The discussion does not merely describe the findings but interprets them through the lens of learning motivation, self-regulation, children's digital literacy, and career development theories.

Gaming Habits and Intensity

The findings show that playing *Free Fire* has become a routine activity for most students. They generally play after school for 1–2 hours, while some students spend longer durations. This pattern indicates that online gaming has become integrated into students' daily lifestyles as part of leisure and digital culture. At the elementary school stage,

play remains an essential developmental activity because children use play to regulate emotions, release stress, and establish peer relationships.

From the perspective of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, gaming can fulfill psychological and social needs, especially the needs for enjoyment, belongingness, and social recognition (Akbar Mu & Priyatmono, 2025). Students often described gaming as “fun” and “not boring,” indicating that games provide immediate emotional gratification. In addition, *Free Fire* offers a sense of achievement through rank progression, rewards, and victories, which can satisfy esteem needs. This instant gratification may explain why students repeatedly return to the game.

Table 1 Frequency and Duration of Playing Free Fire

No	Student Initial	Playing Frequency	Playing Time per Day	Information
1	IK	Almost every day	1–2 hours	-
2	RN	Every day	2 hours	Interspersed with breaks and then playing again
3	AD	5 times a week	1 hour	Plays for 30 minutes, takes a break, then continues
4	RQ	Every day	2 hours	-
5	RS	Every day	2.5 hours	-
6	AV	1–4 days	2 hours	-

Source: interviews January 14 and January 22, 2026

Table 1 indicates variation in playing intensity, with RS showing the highest duration. This is important because gaming intensity appears to correlate with differences in academic outcomes. RS was also the student who showed the most visible decline in concentration and classroom participation. This finding reinforces previous research stating that gaming intensity is a strong predictor of reduced learning motivation and academic difficulties (Lisnawati et al., 2021; Septinarini et al., 2024).

This phenomenon can be explained by Flow Theory (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). *Free Fire* provides clear goals, immediate feedback, and balanced challenges that create deep engagement or “flow.” In a flow state, students become fully immersed and lose awareness of time. As a result, after gaming, students may experience cognitive inertia, where attention remains attached to the game, making it difficult to shift to academic tasks. This explains why some students reported still thinking about the game during study time. At a broader level, this finding reflects the increasing role of digital leisure culture among children. Children are no longer passive users of technology; they actively participate in interactive digital environments. However, without digital literacy skills, leisure-oriented technology use may dominate over educational use.

Students’ Motivation to Play

Students’ motivation to play *Free Fire* was dominated by entertainment, peer influence, and challenge.

Table 2 Students’ Motivation in Playing Free Fire

No	Student Initial	Entertainment	Challenge	Peer Influence	Information
1	IK	✓	-	✓	-
2	RN	✓	-	✓	-
3	AD	✓	-	✓	-
4	RQ	✓	-	✓	-
5	RS	✓	-	✓	Fill free time
6	AV	✓	-	✓	-

Source: interviews January 14 and January 22, 2026

Table 2 shows that entertainment is universal among all students, while peer influence is also highly dominant. This means students are motivated not only by internal enjoyment but also by external social factors.

From Self-Determination Theory (Hamzanwadi & Zainul Mukminin, 2024), students’ motivation can be understood through three needs:

1. Relatedness → students play to feel connected to friends.
2. Competence → students enjoy winning and improving rank.
3. Autonomy → students feel free in choosing when and how to play.

This explains why gaming is highly motivating compared to formal learning. School tasks are often structured, delayed in reward, and perceived as demanding, while games provide immediate rewards and visible progress. This creates a motivational imbalance, where students may prioritize gaming over studying. Peer influence was particularly significant. Students often played because their friends invited them or because they feared being excluded. This can be interpreted through Vygotsky’s social constructivism, which emphasizes that social interaction shapes behavior and learning (Indah Lestari et al., 2024). In this context, gaming acts as a “digital social zone” where students negotiate identity and belonging. From the perspective of children’s digital literacy, this finding suggests that students’ engagement with technology is still dominated by consumption and recreation rather than productive or educational use. They have digital access but have not yet developed critical or academic-oriented digital literacy.

Self-Control and Time Management

The findings indicate that students showed early awareness of balancing play and study. Many reported patterns such as playing in the afternoon and studying at night. This suggests the emergence of self-regulation. However, this regulation was inconsistent. Some students delayed studying, forgot assignments, or remained mentally distracted after playing. This indicates that self-regulation skills are still immature. According to Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Susetyo & Kumara, 2012), students must be able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning behavior. In this study:

Planning was visible in students scheduling play and study time.

Monitoring was weak because students often lost track of time.

Evaluation was limited because students only realized the negative impact after academic difficulties emerged.

Thus, students are still in the early developmental stage of self-regulation.

Table 3 Level of Parental Supervision in Reminding Children of Study Time

No	Answer	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
1	Very Suitable	6	100%

Source: parent questionnaire

Table 3 shows that parental supervision was high. Parents consistently reminded children to study and limit gaming time. This supports Saputra, (2023), who found that open communication and supervision reduce gaming addiction risk. Teachers also played a disciplinary role by communicating with parents and assigning additional work. This external regulation is important because, according to Vygotsky, self-regulation develops first through external regulation before becoming internalized. Thus, discipline in gaming behavior is not solely an individual issue but is socially constructed through family and school support systems.

Impacts on Learning Activities and Social Competencies

The findings confirm the dualistic nature of gaming.

The negative impacts included:

1. reduced concentration,
2. procrastination,
3. lower learning motivation,
4. decreased academic performance in some cases.

The case of RS illustrates how excessive gaming may interfere with academic functioning. Teachers observed reduced classroom participation, poor focus, and declining performance. This can be explained by attentional control theory and cognitive overload theory (Puspasari, 2014). Highly stimulating environments such as games may overload attention systems, making slower-paced academic tasks seem less engaging. From the perspective of motivation theory, games offer immediate reinforcement, whereas academic achievement often involves delayed rewards. Therefore, students may become less motivated to engage in learning tasks requiring persistence.

However, gaming also generated positive impacts:

1. teamwork skills,

2. communication,
3. strategic thinking,
4. problem-solving,
5. limited English vocabulary acquisition.

This aligns with Vygotsky's theory, where social interaction promotes learning. Team-based gameplay trains collaboration and role distribution. The findings also support the concept of transfer of learning, where experiences in one context can influence behavior in another. Some students applied teamwork learned in games to classroom group work. In terms of digital literacy, students are developing operational and social digital skills, but not yet higher-order digital literacy such as critical thinking or educational technology use. Thus, gaming's impact depends on whether children can transform recreational digital experiences into productive competencies.

Perceptions of Education and Future Orientation

Despite active gaming habits, students still valued education positively. They understood school as important for knowledge and future success. This finding is important because it suggests that gaming has not entirely displaced academic aspirations. Students can cognitively separate recreation from long-term goals. According to Super's Career Development Theory (Fitriyani et al., 2019), children at this age are in the growth stage, where self-concept and future aspirations begin forming. Some students had clear aspirations, while others were still exploring. Interestingly, most students recognized that gaming does not directly help them achieve these aspirations.

However, gaming may indirectly shape future orientation by building soft skills such as:

1. teamwork,
2. communication,
3. persistence,
4. strategic planning.

These are valuable competencies in future academic and career development. At the same time, excessive gaming may weaken discipline and reduce the consistency needed to achieve long-term goals. Thus, gaming can influence future orientation in both constructive and disruptive ways. Overall, this study shows that children's gaming experiences are complex and multidimensional. *Free Fire* is not merely entertainment but also a space where children develop social identity, digital habits, and self-regulation patterns. Therefore, the role of parents and teachers is crucial in guiding children's gaming experiences toward more meaningful academic and developmental outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that playing the online game *Free Fire* has become part of elementary school students' daily lives, mainly as a form of entertainment and social interaction. Its impact on learning motivation and academic development is not uniform, but depends on students' gaming intensity, self-control, time management, and environmental support. While excessive gaming may reduce concentration, learning readiness, and study discipline, gaming can also develop social skills such as teamwork and communication.

The main contribution of this study is to reveal that online gaming should not be viewed solely as a negative activity, but as a digital social experience that can influence students' learning behavior, self-regulation, and future orientation. The findings emphasize that students' subjective experiences in gaming are shaped by both internal factors and external guidance.

Therefore, practical efforts are needed to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive values. Parents are encouraged to implement digital parenting through supervision, communication, and clear rules regarding screen time, while teachers can guide students in balancing gaming and learning activities through discipline reinforcement and adaptive learning strategies. Proper time management and collaborative support between parents and schools are essential to ensure that gaming does not hinder students' academic development and future readiness.

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