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Open invitation
Mapping global game cultures. Issues for a sociocultural study of games and players

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ABSTRACT   Simultaneously lacking some fundamental data about the role of digital games in culture, while being faced with the challenge of games' near global presence, cultural game studies is in need of collaborative research efforts. This article discusses some starting points for cultural and social-psychological study of games and digital play, while inviting participation into an international, comparative research project.

KEYWORDS   digital games, game cultures, gameplay experience, ludic meaning-making, players

The range of different digital games and the geographical and cultural range of digital play has expanded greatly during their years of adoption, between the 1970s and the present. Initially isolated in research laboratories and universities, currently digital games are within reach for billions of people in the form of mobile phone games, computer games or video games for various arcade, handheld and home gaming consoles.

There are claims that digital play is something that almost everyone is involved with in contemporary, late industrial society, but we lack reliable international studies to substantiate and concretize that kind of view. Even backing up very basic claims about the social position and role of digital games is hard. In addition to general demographical facts, we miss a more detailed picture of games as they are integrated into the daily lives of the various groups of people who play them. This kind of research is beginning to appear, but often remains isolated and lacks standardized theoretical frameworks at the methodological level, including basic understanding of what to research, and how, if we intend to make claims about games' social and cultural roles.

At the same time, enthusiastic authors have begun to publish their views about entire 'gamer generations', whose thought processes, practices and

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attitudes towards life are allegedly fundamentally affected by formative years spend in digital play (see e.g. Aldrich, 2005; Beck and Wade, 2004; Gee, 2003, 2005; Prensky, 2001, 2006; Wolfe, 2003). Given this new body of work, which demonstrates how education scholars and professionals, economists and business trainers alike are all turning to games, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the centrality of game studies. This short article is a call for more international and interdisciplinary collaboration in gathering and sharing game play data, and collaborative development of theories and methods suitable for analysing game cultures. The interdisciplinary and critical character of cultural studies provides an excellent starting point.

Study of meaningful games/meaning in games

Culture as a concept is closely related to meaning: the structures of cultural systems organize how purpose, value and significance are produced and expressed in social interaction. Often, meaning- and sense-making are studied with the diverse tools that semiotics, the study of signs and symbol structures, can offer. In semiotics, or as de Saussure would have it, semiology, there exists a fundamental distinction between the level of *langue* and the level of *parole*, or between abstract systematic principles and meaningful utterances.

The ontology of games, the study of games' ways of existing, has been a subject of considerable discussion within game studies, and it has been interesting to follow how the field has advanced in recent years from extreme oppositional claims towards more comprehensive theories. Rather than simply true or not-true, theories of games and play actually contribute to each other and when combined, they provide a basis for a more sophisticated approach to games. Such synthesizing trends are commendable. This commentary holds the view that games are inherently complex as meaning-making systems. Therefore, scholarly models of games need to take into account their multidimensional basic character. Our analyses need to account for the system, structure and performance-level aspects of games ontology, but we need analyses that focus on games' 'ludosis' as well as their semiosis. By this, one means that we have to consider games' non-symbolic dimensions seriously. It is not enough to examine what games superficially *look* like, or what they appear to represent. We need to approach real players from different backgrounds and inquire into what the actual, embodied experience of playing *feels* like.

Studying games or studying gaming?

Much research has paid attention to the distinction between the ludic and the representational dimension of games, which is one of the key elements behind games' signifying complexity. While the representational aspect

of games may involve spaceships, Wild West-type drama or survival horror, ludic aspects are concerned with how players can play the game, the 'gameplay'. Interactional and representational signifying processes become more complex in their operation when they are combined in player experience, providing multiple challenges for researchers.

Players have different proficiencies in gameplay skills, and they differ in their emphasis on the importance of gameplay and representation. Not only do people play games differently, they also 'read' games differently. On the basis of their skills and play styles, they approach games in a variety of different ways that lead to different gameplay experiences and different interpretations of what games mean to them. Generally (and to their detriment), sweeping statements about the 'meaning' of a certain game do not take this diversity into account.

As part of the production of meaning, both interaction-based and symbolic potential for meaning should be taken into account. While playing, all such dimensions interact and have an effect on players' overall gameplay experience. There is an illustration of this dual structure in Figure 1, emphasizing the interaction of the 'core' of playing a game with the 'shell', depicted as a dynamic state and process that changes in different genres and playing situations. This model has been discussed in more detail in a recent book (Mäyrä, 2008).

To address the multidimensionality and multiplicity of meaning reaching to the very core of games and play, the cultural study of games needs to be informed by multiple traditions and disciplines. This is in fact what is happening: particularly for game scholars coming from qualitative social sciences traditions, cultural anthropology has had an influential role. It
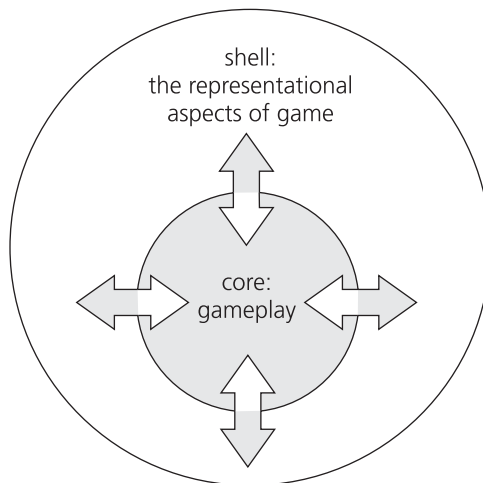

Figure 1   Core and shell, or representational and gameplay-related dimensions in a game (Mäyrä, 2008: 18)

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directed attention to the structures that organize the behaviour, norms and language of groups of people, and established participant observation as a key research method. From a slightly different scholarly direction, researchers coming from the humanities and cultural studies traditions have used literary or cinema studies style textual and theoretical analysis to develop new critical interpretations of games as cultural products. Rather than criticize the weaknesses of a particular approach, it is important to understand their particular strengths, and use them in relation to appropriate research questions. The dual structure of games makes this a complex field in which sociological and psychological studies of play are as important as the 'media' qualities of games, more easily approached via the multiple traditions of media research. What we need is a truly cultural and social-psychological look into games' meaning-making processes.

Basics: what do we actually know about game playing?

There are many individual studies that look into the supposed effects of game playing on player behaviour, but there are no reliable national or global surveys of basic demographic player data in the same manner that reading of literature or television watching are monitored. The most quoted player statistics still come from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), an American industry organization. ESA regularly publishes press releases which draw its findings from an annual survey commissioned from a market research company. The 2006 survey (ESA, 2006) claims that '69% of American heads of households play computer and video games' and 'the average game player age is 33 years'. However, the actual data are not made public. ESA does not specify how it derived the data, or how such key concepts as 'playing' and 'player' are defined. Not all industry-commissioned research is automatically of low quality or otherwise suspect, but any data that we use for scholarly research need to satisfy the same key criteria for scientific knowledge and scholarship as academic studies. As long as our overall view of games and players in culture and society is based on figures derived from various marketing surveys that do not make their methods, criteria or data publicly available, our scholarship is on shaky ground.

However, there are more positive examples, such as a recent study commissioned by the BBC (2005). Even if the published methods and results have not been subjected to an academic peer review process, this study at least describes its approach and details some of its criteria. Designed to give a 'light-touch window into the gaming life of the UK residents today', the research was based on a survey of people between the ages of six and 65, with a sample size of 3442 individuals taken from six different age ranges. This material was combined with the outcomes of a qualitative study of 14 group interviews. The quantitative and qualitative research

was undertaken by two different market research agencies (TNS and Firefish Ltd; BBC, 2005).

In the overall study, UK residents were approached decidedly as gamers. Game playing behaviour was not treated as a footnote in a media consumption survey, as is often the case. This resulted in interesting finds that would be worth revisiting and expanding in the context of academic game studies. For example, the definition adopted to identify a 'gamer' is rather broad in this study:

> We defined a 'gamer' as someone who had played a game on a mobile, hand-held, console, PC, Internet or interactive TV at least once in the last 6 months: a broad definition designed to capture any 'light' gamers as well as medium or heavier gamers. (BBC, 2005: 2)

Keeping this in mind, some of the main results from this study were that:

> 59% of 6 to 65 year olds in the UK are gamers. In total there are 26.5 million gamers in the UK. The average age of a UK gamer is 28 years old, and the gender split is almost even, averaging out at 45% female and 55% male. (BBC, 2005: 5)

Another way of reading these results is that more than 40 percent of people in the UK do not touch a digital game at all, or that their gaming is very rare. Nevertheless, it is an interesting claim that the largest group of six to 65-year-olds in the UK are 'heavy gamers' (BBC, 2005: 5), meaning that 48 percent of this population plays at least once a week or daily.

The BBC-commissioned study is an example of a basic sociocultural study of gaming, with a distinct emphasis coming from a market research tradition. The main focus in analysis and reporting of results appears to be on profiling different target audiences to fit the needs of the media industry. The commissioning party was, after all, the BBC New Media and Technology division, joined by the BBC's Audience Research Department. The report is interesting because it includes fundamental questions about how often people play, what they play, why they play, where they play, do they use other media while playing, and how important they consider game playing to be in their lives. We could be more critical to responses to attitude statements such as 'Games are part of my identity' and 'There are too many racing, shooting and fighting games'. For example, what does it mean to say: 'Games are part of my identity'? 'Identity' is a complex and abstract concept and something that not everyone will approach or understand in the same way.

Towards an international study of games cultures

Based on this discussion, one sees a need for an international, academic comparative study of players and game cultures. The main criteria for such a study would be to gather comparable information in different

countries and parts of the world, and make its methods and results publicly available. Rather than be based in the commercial interests of single organizations, such a study needs to link to more general interests and standards of knowledge. My ambitions for such a project are high (just consider the required scope of research for such a project). There is so great a need for information regarding the actual realities and roles of game playing in society. The sociocultural significance of games could be assessed in various ways, with some more easily quantifiable than others. For example, the amount of time spent on playing games, as well as the use of money in games, could be measured numerically, but more elusive elements such as the role of games in terms of social or cultural capital, or for creating significant experiences and memories, need to be assessed in a different manner.

Hopefully such a study would address a wide range of game playing behaviours, from casual to very dedicated, while taking into account genre (and gender) differences, as well as micro- and macro-level of games' sociocultural significance. In order to gain such information, a combination of multiple methodologies is likely to be needed and, rather than a solitary effort, teamwork would appear to be appropriate. Luckily, the academic community has efficient tools for communication and collaboration available. If this kind of international study becomes a community effort, relying on the power of networks, it could well result in an expanding global repository of game cultural data.

Our team at the University of Tampere started work to realize such a research project in late 2006, with the help of a research grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation. A pilot study was conducted in Finland, and the results have been published in a freely-available report (Kallio et al., 2007). To expand upon this initial work and make it truly international, we need partners interested in collaboration in this kind of research and its issues (contact addresses are provided below). Hopefully, by the time that this article is published, a broad international research consortium will have been formed and begun to attract funding to expand the project into different parts of the world.

We began the Finnish study with a broad qualitative inquiry into the role of games in the lives of Finnish people. To this end we designed a research method adapted from a 'cultural probes' approach, which produces a rich array of materials such as memories, photographs, life stories and association maps around games and playing (see Sotamaa et al., 2005). On the basis of this study we moved to looking for criteria to identify games' social signification, and sketched a preliminary four-part division to organize initial research questions into the following:

- consumption of time in different types of games;
- investment of money in games;
- attitudes surrounding games and playing;
- the actual practices around games in people's lives.

To look into the role that games have in people's lives, they can be compared to and contrasted with other activities in terms of economics as well as investments of time. Sales figures cannot tell the truth about the popularity of games, since there are many free games on the internet that do not appear in the sales charts of boxed, off-the-shelf games. It is interesting to map and compare social practices surrounding games and play behaviours: are there customs, norms or specific slang or terminology which would help to identify particular game cultures? Also, some specific markers for charting a game's impact on individual and group identities can be developed. Participation in games-related web forums, readership of games magazines or regular socializing with other game players might be used, but in addition we need to identify the practices and attitudes of more casual players.

In order to provide comprehensive knowledge about the sociocultural role of game playing, the positive as well as the more negative aspects of life related to games need to be studied. There might be distinct differences in the roles that different game genres hold in people's lives. Furthermore, there are probably specific issues that players perceive as parts of the holding power of games, or alienating factors that keep people away from digital games. In the long term, one may even begin to look into how game playing changes along time and in different phases of life, in terms of content, frequency or adopted practices.

In addition to basic survey data, there is much room for more targeted studies that look into specific areas in detail, comparing different game cultures. This kind of comparative study might focus on issues such as how games are addressed in talk by different age groups, in different countries. Identifying such features as well as specific discourses that are created around game playing require the adoption of more qualitative approaches such as interviews or self-reporting. But even with the help of surveys, one should be able to gain some information into the possible impact that games have on the consumption of media and the organization of media and technology in homes and family lives.

In order to be able to scale up the local Finnish project to an international comparative study, the research is created in a structured manner. According to its design, it will have a nucleus, as well as some spin-off and network parts. The nucleus is formed by professional research consortia members utilizing shared study instruments, publishing jointly in scientific, peer-reviewed venues. A spin-off is a subproject carried out by a single member, aiming to expand or focus upon different areas to the nucleus, while having a link to the whole. The network part includes different visualizations of the findings, as well as an open, Wikipedia-style portal where the larger community can volunteer data and submit observations, according to instructions provided (beta version in: www.gamescultures.org).

Hopefully this article will have raised some interest in a collaborative, community effort, and will have stimulated new ideas on how to evolve

it further. Interested parties are invited to contact either the author or the research team (researchers@gamescultures.org) with details of your approach and interest in this type of international collaborative study. Clearly, focusing and coordinating this kind of initiative will require major effort, but we hope that it will serve the games research community in many useful ways in the future.

Acknowledgement

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