A Moment in the Life of a Generation

(Why Game Studies Now?)

Frans Mäyrä
Hypermedia Laboratory, The University of Tampere

Game studies entering academia means that games are finally positioned at the heart of a dedicated field of learning. There is a tension however as the need and demand for game studies has faced the opposing, structural forces that slow down the development. It is hard to ignore the cultural significance of digital games and play, particularly as numerous game play experiences underlie personal relations and histories within an ICT-penetrated society. Rather than a single "game culture," there are several of them, as visible and invisible sense-making structures that surface not only in games themselves, but in the language, practices, and sensibilities adopted and developed by groups and individuals. As the academia is loaded with expectations of providing games industry with workforce or opportunities for more innovative and experimental game culture, it is good to remember that the fundamental task of universities is to create knowledge and promote learning.

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One of the favorite questions that journalists regularly have put to me during the past few years is the reason for the current popularity of game studies. It is one of those trick questions, both easy and hard to answer, leaving often a feeling of vague dissatisfaction to the mind of interviewee after the session is over. What are we actually talking about when we discuss the popularity of games in academia?

Research into play behavior or games as historical or anthropological subjects for study are not recent inventions. There has been passionate and detailed work focusing on games long in the history of learning, but these studies are often products of a lone scholar or work in development psychology, cultural anthropology, educational sciences, or some other field that studies games to learn something more about their proper subject of study by using play and games as a means to approach these goals. Game studies in its current, emergent format is concerned with games at the heart of a dedicated field of learning, and that is a novel situation.

Academia is not always the first to endorse a change in society, and there is even much to say about the inherent friction or resistance toward change in academic insti-

tutions. Therefore, the birth of game studies cannot be explained away simply as an academic vogue. In many cases, the first generation of games scholars has been pursuing their passion to study games despite the unremitting opposition and sometimes even hostility from their peers and superiors. I remember thinking I was lucky when in 1999 as an assistant professor in comparative literature I got away with organizing a spring seminar of role-playing games (RPG) research. This was of course due to nobody giving a damn; there was finally only an enthusiastic group of students and RPG fans participating in the event. No members of faculty showed up from any university. I am eternally grateful for that experience though: When set against the backdrop of indifference and ignorance from academia, the passion these young people showed toward games underlined that some change was inevitable and already in the making. You can ignore the obvious only so long.

The change that had been taking place was cultural, social, economical, and technological, and games were playing both the part of a catalyst and also major articulation of the nature of this process. Stepping back for a moment, one can point toward the moment when information technologies became intermingled in the social and cultural processes of late industrial societies during the 1970s and 1980s. This was also when they began to derive those networking, life-accelerating, and identity-forming potentials they carry today. The harmless toys that Pong, Pac-Man, or Donkey Kong represented in this development were the Trojan horse for culture to start developing around IT.

What does it mean to say that games have culture? Or what is *game culture*?

Looking at the lessons from cultural anthropology, linguistics, and cultural studies, culture can be seen as the structure and key mechanism of sense making. We see things through our cultures, culture is part of every why and how of our actions because we are creatures of culture down into our core. If we pick up a pebble in a seashore or draw a line into the sand, there is culture in the very gesture. Digital games were the moment when microprocessors and memory chips became the production lines of culture for wider audiences.

It would be sometimes interesting to see an estimation of how many hours or how many individual button presses players of computer and video games have collectively committed to their "idle pastime" since the early 1970s. There are substantial amounts of mental and physical energy invested in solving the puzzles of monster-infested dungeons or development of skills suitable for overcoming alien invasions every hour in these digital days. As platforms for these activities, the technical specifications of video game consoles have been pushed to the level of supercomputers and beyond by the double logic of marketing and player preference. This all would not make any sense if games would not carry a specific kind of significance for the people making all these efforts.

There is no doubt that games can provide engaging experiences for their players. A nonplayer does not necessarily perceive all aspects of the particular holding power that interactive experiences can have. The fascinations of an unexplored world, unsolved puzzle, or unlocked but nevertheless attainable skill level can be very compelling indeed. They do not only show us something new, but they grant us something

new in ourselves—a new venue or potential for self-realization. When flying a griffin high over the lands in World of Warcraft, I in a sense become something new, a subject transformed and redefined by its capacity to engage in this kind of fantastic action.

Games have been culture from times immemorial, and play can even be said to anticipate humanity, as proved by the play behavior exhibited by higher animals. When the first Pong terminals arrived in corner bars, there already existed a cultural language of situated actions around table tennis, slot machines, and pinball devices. It was possible to place a video game machine within those familiar frames, although the use of a television monitor and high-technology associations with computers meant also that some readjustments were necessary. The arcade gaming culture started to evolve from the logic of rituals, language, and preferences that were adapted into the conditions of public spaces and coin-operated gaming devices. Home video console cultures and computer gaming cultures have similarly their own distinctive roots.

For a long time, it has been necessary to speak about game *cultures* in plural rather than of any single and undivided cultural logic surrounding all systems of meaning, around all kinds of games. Even within a subset of game cultures such as role-playing games cultures, there are several important cultural differences that become noticeable if one ventures from one's favorite game, game series, or online world into another one. The dominant rules of conduct, values, and ways of speaking vary greatly. At the same time, there have emerged certain venues for public debate and articulation where the nature, limits, and identity of these cultures are called into question. For a long time, popular games journalism was the main site for active and articulate players to describe their experiences and make their preferences heard. In the process of increasing self-reflection in the evolution of a culture, this is of course a crucial step: Outspoken criteria for culture and setting its standards for high or low, desirable or nondesirable opens up ways for individuals and small groups to propagate their views and foster development of community and cultural continuity. Internet, with its mailing lists, Usenet News forums, WWW pages, and lately blogs, has accelerated the processes of language creation, value sharing, and community formation further.

Academic study of games is a natural next step in critical self-reflection from the perspective of gamer communities on one hand and an adaptive reaction to the changed realities from the perspective of the university institutions on the other one. It is hardly possible to stop young researchers from studying games when they have spent their formative years engaged with digital games and can perceive the evident role it has in the lives of their generation. The institutional resistance is also gradually giving up as if not the artistic merits, then at least the sales figures of games start to penetrate the increasingly commercially informed realities of university administration.

It is still quite early to analyze the future of game studies among the other new disciplines or interdisciplinary fields within academia. It is easy to point to the establishment of *Game Studies* journal in 2001 and DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) in 2003 as certain early formative steps into the institutionalization and establishment of games as a legitimate subject of academic study. In the surrounding society, digital games have already taken their place as a major form of entertainment industry and as sites where creative energy is increasingly channeled and shaped. As

the gamer demographics change and appear to get more equally distributed along the spectrum of age, gender, and nationality, the majority of produced game titles keeps to the tried and true formulas of years past. In this situation, the attention directed toward games research and education in universities is loaded with various expectations. On one hand, universities are expected to provide games industry with the workforce it constantly demands; on the other, university games programs are perceived as opportunities where artistic experimentation can lead into new kinds of revolutionary game designs that have potential to transform the marketplace. Among all this, it is good to remember the basic task of universities as places of learning and research. A games researcher who finds university as an attractive environment does so probably because he or she is first of all driven toward creation of knowledge and understanding for their intrinsic value.

Games academics will still be academics after all. Creating game studies just means that love of learning in their case is combined with love of games. Or in some cases, to informed critique of them. In any case, work in science and scholarship has much in common with games: Both are irresistible because of the infinite challenges and rewards they are capable of providing.

Frans Mäyrä has studied the relationship of culture and technology since the early 1990s. He has specialized in the cultural analysis of technology, particularly on the ambiguous, conflicting, and heterogeneous elements in this relationship, and has published on topics that range from information technologies, to science fiction and fantasy, to the demonic tradition, to the concept of identity and role-playing games. He is currently teaching, researching, and heading numerous research projects in the study and development of games, new media, and digital culture. He is also the founding president of Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA).