The Global and Local in Fantastic New Media: The Case of Finland

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Introduction: Approaching Fantasy in Games

Digital and interactive media is by nature highly malleable and open to use for simulating non-realistic as well as realistic, or everyday objects and processes, making it thereby a natural platform for fantasy. The interaction between user and the digital programming code, as intermediated by different user interfaces, also often invites metaphors of windows or portals, mediating between two sets of realities, the one inhabited by the user, the other consisting of the imaginary space that user projects inside, or beyond the computer. At the cultural level computers, or, more generally, interactive media devices, have also grown into important sites of encounter as well as confrontation between different realities.

This article will feature discussion of the game design and game cultures in Finland in order to highlight some of the tension lines cutting through the European new media scene in general. Finnish games are designed drawing inspiration from diverse set of cultural elements that are sometimes rooted in national culture or Nordic myths. Much of the technological know-how required for creating compelling visual, auditory and interactive digital experiences is also local in the sense of being cultivated from the grassroots efforts of Finnish digital underground, like the one that gathers annually in Assembly, one of the largest "demo scene" parties in the world. However, the science fiction and fantasy imagery that populates many games created in Finland is also involved in complex cultural dialogue of global scale. For example, the artistically ambitious *Max Payne* (2001) and *Alan Wake* (2010) games by

Remedy Entertainment draw much of their inspiration from such elements of popular culture as Hong Kong action films, and horror novels of Stephen King, but also more obscure sources such as the Norse myth of Ragnarök. On the more casual end of Finnish gaming scene, *Angry Birds* (2009) by Rovio Entertainment is an example of a popular game that is not designed to be particularly deep or complex in the thematic level, but which features a novel implementation of interactive pleasure that has appealed to millions. Rather than being framed as a question of the periphery versus the centre, the fantasy in new media thus displays traces of global circulation and reinterpretation of elements, constantly playing with the boundary between the familiar and unfamiliar cultural domains or worlds.

The primary focus of this article is to provide examples that display the diversity of fantastic art in the worlds of digital gaming in general and in the Finnish context in particular. Taking into account both the traditions of fantasy and game studies, it constitutes also a call for dialogue in the fantasy gaming studies. Game Studies in this context refers particularly to the contemporary, culturally and socially oriented study of digital games as a form of art and entertainment. An emerging discipline, it is also an interdisciplinary research field where people interested in games from multiple different angles meet.[1] The work in the Game Research Lab in the University of Tampere, which I am heading, is based on scholarship within the humanities, as well as to games related research work carried out in computer sciences, social sciences, psychology and several other fields. Particularly the Nordic countries have been active contributors to the evolution of Game Studies, playing key roles in the establishment of journals, conferences and an academic association (DiGRA) to this area. Several Nordic game scholars like have a background in literary studies.

Game Studies also constitute an on-going negotiation that what is actually the 'gameness' in the games, what are the epistemology and the ontology of games. My own contribution in this area is based on dividing digital games into two main

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[1] See Frans Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture* (London & New York: Sage Publications, 2008).

component parts, gameplay as the core of games, and the shell as the representational aspects of games.[2] This model is designed to illustrate on the other hand the idea that games are complex phenomena, and also that they are based on certain kind of mixing and dialog that is built at the heart of their gameness. All games rely on some kind of medium to convey the game state to the player, even while the representational layer does not have to be visual as there are, for example, audio-only based sound games. At the surface level of the shell, you can identify space opera games, games that are about the Second World War. But the game actual gameplay experience might convey a different kind of idea what these games are all about. For a game player, games are primarily about certain kind of behaviours and potentials for activities. What appears like a computer generated cinema to an external observer becomes something different when explored in gameplay. During play, digital games start to unravel their spatial architecture, which allows some kinds of activities and not some others. This opening and closing of players' options is interesting from a humanities and cultural studies perspective, since the dynamic expressive form of games also embodies a certain kind of power relationship. The game designer holds power over the fundamental structural and artistic choices that influence the overall architecture of game, but game players make significant decisions and employ power in how they decide to play or not to play these games.

Evolution of Fantasy in Gaming

The evolution of gaming fantasy reaches beyond the era of old teletype writers or black-and-green monitors of the mainframe terminals. The fantasies of these early days of computer gaming were distinctively of a literary kind and had close relations to fantastic adventures popular in literary traditions of the fantasy genre. Many of the

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[2] Ibid., p. 18.

text-based games of the early 1970s were text adventures like the *Colossal Cave Adventure* by Will Crowther (1976). These were games that were limited in their user interface or audiovisual expressiveness, but could nevertheless convey a very rich experience of player participating in storytelling that is interactive to a certain limited degree.[3] The adventure game genre gradually developed into directions where it became more complex, particularly when they were recast as multi-user interactive narratives, suitable for 'multi-user dungeons', where several people participated and shared their textual inputs and outputs in real-time within a shared fictional realm.

The evolution of computer graphics was a major element for the shape, user interface design and visual appearance gaming fantasy would take. The multi-user dungeons were gradually letting go of their textual basis and were reborn within the real-time, immersive computer graphics of massively-multiplayer virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* (2004).[4] The representational aspects of fantasy gaming have clearly undergone a major transformation in just a couple of decades, but actually, when these games are approached at the fundamental level of gameplay, not so many completely new elements have been introduced since the first text-based adventure or computer role-playing games.

The high-speed dynamism of arcade and console video games of the 1970s and 1980s goes somewhat to the opposite direction from the fantasy embodied in adventure or role-playing games. Typically more abstract and more or less devoid of extensive narrative or storytelling potential, also these kinds of games have been interpreted to embody drama of a kind. For example, Janet Murray has argued that the fast-paced puzzle game *Tetris* (1984) with its endlessly falling pieces can be seen as an "enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s – of the constant

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[3] For a history and analysis of text adventure games, see Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (Cambridge [Mass.]: MIT Press, 2003).

[4] There are good accounts and intepretations into the development of virtual worlds and online role-playing games in e.g. Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago [Ill.]: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overworked schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the new onslaught".[5] This somewhat far-reaching symbolic interpretation has aroused critique among game scholars, and it is clear that it is harder to interpret a game like *Tetris* as a fantasy in narrative terms. The basic game mechanics of solving puzzles through match-making and speedy reactions to programmed challenges nevertheless often produce an intense experience of 'flow' that will remove everything else from immersed players' minds.[6] The fantasy that an immersive game of action promises may just be its capacity for transposing the player from the everyday mind-set to another one, where game becomes private, personal space where player can enjoy the luxury of solitude and release from everyday toil.

Psychologists like Robert W. White also speak about the 'effectance' motivation, that you touch upon when you feel that you have an effect on the universe, consequently feeling empowered.[7] A small game like *Tetris* sets very tight limits on what that ludic micro-universe is all about. The laws of the universe of *Tetris* are based on the random appearance of seven different types puzzle pieces, dropping down at steady pace, and the player needs to figure out a way to combine them and thereby gain control of that universe. The so-called 'casual games' that are popular in various Internet web sites and mobile devices provide often similar promise of effectance and control. For example, the virtual farming game *FarmVille* (2009) for Facebook social networking service allows players to participate in a kind of toy version of farmer's life, providing rewards from dutiful planting and lifting

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[5] Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 144.

[6] On optimal flow experiences, see: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York [N.Y.]: HarperPerennial, 1991). A model of gameplay immersion is presented in Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion", *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005* (Vancouver: University of Vancouver, 2005). Online: http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.41516.pdf.

[7] See the collection of essays about player psychology in Peter Vorderer and Jennings Bryant, eds. *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses, and Consequences* (Mahwah [N.J.]: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).

crops and taking care of virtual farm animals. The promise of soothing fantasy that is available from such casual gaming entertainment is partly related to the relaxing and non-threatening theme, and partly to the endless, meditative clicking activity on the virtual crops.

In addition to fantasy as adventure narrative and fantasies of empowerment and release, there exists also the gaming fantasy as a commodity. Particularly in the development, manufacture and marketing of new gaming technologies lies promises of certain kinds of fantasies. Games have been driving the evolution of information technology for a long time already, and the new processors, sensors or graphic chips are often primarily made to carry the promise of novel gaming experiences. In the evolution of technology there is a dynamic fluctuation between the pursuit for realism and otherworldliness. The new hyper-realistic, 3D displays or movement controls that map players' real-world physical movements into the game world promise to deliver the illusion of reality for the digital gaming. On the other hand, entering a digital game is advertised so that it appears to mean unlocking completely new abilities and interacting with another, new world. Games should, according to this logic, provide their players with something that is distinctive from their abilities in this world. Often it means that games somehow aim to make players' actions more dramatic and their outcomes more spectacular than what the case would be in this everyday reality.

Fantasy in Gaming: Multi-Layered Realities

My discussion in this paper will not focus particularly on the classic history of 'fantasy gaming' as genre fantasy in popular games such as aforementioned *World of Warcraft* or *Might and Magic* (1986-2002) or the Japanese *Final Fantasy* (1987-2012) game series. Rather, the aim here is on trying to understand the operations of fantasy in the game form and within the game culture, particularly in the Finnish and European context. For that aim, this article will address more broad dimensions of

fantasy. Fantasy is here understood primarily as something that is related to the sense other-worldliness or sense of wonder – which is of course situated also at the heart of fantastic genres. Somewhat similar, basic element of fantasy is also situated to our confrontations with information technology, when we approach the display screens as portals or gateways to another reality.

The MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle already in her book *The Second Self* (1984) quoted young people addressing computers as windows to different realities. She noted how everyone does not feel that the face-to-face mode of interaction is their strongest area.[8] Through the interviews of active game players and the Internet users in her later book, *Life on the Screen* (1997), a view emerges where the 'escape' into gaming fantasy can actually be experienced as a mode of self-fulfilment, as the active users appear to be able to cultivate abilities and develop social networks within these alternate realities, constructing a 'second life' on the other side of the screen that might be actually in some cases richer or more rewarding than the physical realities of their everyday social life.[9] The development where 'simulation' of life appears to substitute the 'original' is an area where research can inquire with concern or with interest. The dialogue between fantasy studies and games research is consequently inspiring from multiple angles.

Approaching fantasy as an 'imaginative impulse' that we can identify in multiple forms of fantasy art can be also seen evidently displayed in games, as well as these various clusters of conventions that are important for fantasy as a (trans-medial) genre and fantasy as a rhetoric.[10] My emphasis in this article is particularly on 'identity fantasy', meaning here mainly putting focus on themes that are related to building different kind of representations of yourself and also experiencing your own

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[8] Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

[9] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

[10] See: Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981) and Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

capacities as an agent or subject in different ways through fantasy gaming. 'Fantasy of escape' is a related theme, as well as are the different 'expressive forms' fantasy takes – what kind of shapes, elements and behaviours are possible to express and explore through fantasy gaming, here in the framework of Finnish games particularly.

A fantasy game can be approached through the figure of 'portal'. There are a number of magic portals in adventure and fantasy games of various kinds, and there is even a popular computer game called *Portal* (2007). A fantasy game appears to be a kind of touching point between technology and imagination, physical and virtual, identity and the otherness, which might explain some of the popularity of transportation, door, lock, key and related portal imagery in games of this kind. Much of fantasy gaming is also self-referential in the sense of providing allusions to previous games and other works of the fantasy genre, consequently inviting analytical and interpretative play and reflection of the various meta-fictional puzzles. Fantasy games evoke multiple questions like: what kind of realities interface in gaming fantasy, what kind of ambiguities do these processes involve, and, how do they relate to the global or local cultural frameworks?

As this kind of meta-reflection is growing in digital gaming, it becomes rather obvious how multi-layered the experience of gaming actually is. In a general sense one can of course say that any mediated communication is multi-layered. From the study of art, literary works and theories textuality we have a rich tradition of thought that suggests that all communication that utilizes signs and symbols is open to multiple interpretative directions and layers of meaning under analysis. And for example the tradition of reception aesthetics pays very close attention to the ways that seemingly linear work of literary art is actualized and realized in the act of reading through rather complex and individual processes.[11] But in gaming, the process of actualization differs from the process of reading as the player is generally provided a more central role in the construction of interactive art than in the more artist-driven

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[11] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

expressions of non-interactive media. The multi-layered character of games and gameplay requires multi-disciplinary approach from the start: both the aesthetics of game as a coded and designed object needs to be taken into account, as well as the uses, behaviours and interactions of game players. Games are emphatically hybrid objects for research: both designed works and emergent performances.

The status of in-game fantasy in relation to the empirical reality of game players can be captured with a quote from a seminal sociologist of play, Erving Goffman: "Fanciful words can speak about make-believe places, but these words can only be spoken *in* the real world".[12] There is an inherent and intimate dialectic between the layer of fantasy and the layer we commonly recognize as the everyday reality. A more finely detailed analysis of the fantasy gaming situation was developed by the American sociologist Gary Alan Fine in his book *Shared Fantasy* (1983). Fine followed Goffman in detecting many kinds of different layers or frames that are constructed on top of each other, like layers in the onion, in the fantasy gaming situation. Fine's objects of analysis were the traditional, table-top role-playing game sessions he observed and participated in during his field studies. In this kind of game there is firstly the layer of physical reality where several people come together, have rulebooks, many-sided dice, pen and paper available and possibly also some pizza and Coca-Cola, too. On the other hand, there is also the invisible layer of reality where all of them are taking control of a fantasy character, typically a hero using a sword or magic to fight fantastic monsters while hunting for treasure. While carrying out analyses of the interactions in the game play situation, Fine suggests three main frames or layers: there is the primary layer or frame of everyday reality and participating persons' understanding of themselves in a wider social context. There is the secondary frame where they adopt their roles as fantasy game players and modify their acts so that they could create an interesting game session together. And in the third frame they identify (to various degrees) with their fantasy characters and their

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[12] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 247.

in-game challenges.[13] An individual action or utterance by a player can be interpreted within all of these three frames or layers of fantasy gaming reality, or just referring to one of them.

When fantasy gaming is analysed to this level of detail, it appears as a kind of laboratory of different kinds of social frameworks and imaginative worlds, and a lesson to how to create realities on top of each other. To some degree, similar layering is taking place every time someone is playing a game. Even in simple, non-fantasy video games the players are constructing separate subsets of reality, each of which have their own distinctive rules and which operate within the other realities that we are engaged with in our daily lives. Following the early formulations by cultural historian Johan Huizinga in his classic work *Homo Ludens* (1938/1955), this fundamental capacity of games and play situation for sub-world creation has been theorised under the heading of 'magic circle' of game play – the more recent research though is careful to point out that the separation of gaming fantasy or gameplay reality from the empirical, social reality is never complete and should be conceived as a porous boundary or as an on-going negotiation of how to differentiate between in-game and out-game realities.[14]

Game Culture in Finland

The cultural tradition of Finland is rich, and contains both the oral poetry that has been collected and published as the national epic, *Kalevala* (1835; 1849), as well as in the 34-volume *Suomen kansan vanhat runot* (Old Poems of the Finnish People, 1908-1997). The oral tradition also included many riddles and verbal puzzles of

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[13] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[14] See: Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1955 [orig. 1938]; Mia Consalvo, "There Is No Magic Circle" *Games and Culture* 4:4 (2009), pp. 408–417.

various kinds. Scholars of folklore and cultural history have later revealed how different games and play have long been an important element of life for Finnish people of all ages.[15] In a modern society, games and play were, however, not something that a civilized person would often publicly advertise as an important focus of their life. After some early experiments, the era of digital gaming arrived to Finland in the late 1970s, with the first electronic games and video game arcades, and then in the 1980s with the home computers and video game consoles, transforming the role of games and play also more generally. Games gained new visibility in their incarnation into the digital, audio-visual spectacles that quickly started to form into a multi-billion part of the entertainment industry. No longer only children's toys, digital games evoked also new kind of critical and academic interest during the late 1990s and early 2000s.[16]

Particularly strong was the role of Commodore 64 home computer as the epitome of early Finnish game culture. It was the device that introduced an entire generation to computer games, programming and other forms of digital culture when it became popular in Finland during the mid-1980s. Single-purpose video game consoles did not reach similar levels of popularity as the more flexible home computers did in Finland, and home computers were providing the incentive for the first dedicated computer subcultures and game cultures to start their growth. Bit later, in the 1990s, the popularity of Nintendo's and particularly Sony's PlayStation reached new heights, and expanded digital gaming as a trendy element in young adult's lifestyles.

The cultural role of digital games is not limited within the relatively small group of passionate game hobbyists. Rather, digital games had become one thread in the evolution of late modern consumer culture; they are one element in home electronics gaining a powerfully growing role in people's home. But within the younger

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[15] For a classic of Finnish game and play culture studies, see: Yrjö Hirn, *Barnlek* (Helsingfors: Söderström, 1916).

[16] A concise overview of this process can be found in: Frans Mäyrä, "A Moment in the Life of a Generation (Why Game Studies Now?)." *Games and Culture* 1:1 (2006), pp. 103–106.

generations, entire computer subcultures were growing up during the 1980s and 1990s, and certain game genres were gaining dedicated following. From this point onwards, it was obvious that it made no longer sense to talk about one 'game culture'; rather, game players developed practices and cultural norms as fantasy or role playing gamers, strategy gamers, war gamers, or through their interest in certain kinds of sports games, for example.

Already in the 1980s computer game hobbyists were actively communicating, and sometimes gathering together. Particularly the shady activity of breaking copy-protection of commercial games and distributing them stimulated the creation of community – much like Johan Huizinga had already suggested in *Homo Ludens*: game play "promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy".[17] Particularly the practice of inserting personalized messages, 'crack intros' to cracked copies was something that helped to evolve scattered individuals into the 'demo scene', a subculture of computer game art.

Since 1992 there has been one of the largest computer festivals, Assembly, organised annually in Finland. Thousands of young people have gained recognition for their skills in gaming and programming first in this subculture. Game cultures have consequently gained a notably social character in Finland, often mixing with the conventions and activities of science fiction and fantasy subcultures or 'fandom'. One aspect of demo scene was its focus on technical excellence, in the form of demo competitions, for example. An excellent computer demo is a display both of programming competency and artistic vision. Demo programming is also the art of compression; some of the best work has made extremely efficient use of computing resources, fitting the entire demo into few bytes or kilobytes of program code. This was something that proved useful later particularly as demo scene trained game developers started designing games for mobile phones with rather limited processing and memory capabilities. Demo scene was also instrumental in distributing not only

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[17] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1955 [orig. 1938]), p. 13.

games-literacy but also code-literacy: a computer subculture emerged where it was common not only to be able to appreciate the operation or audio-visual content of an interactive art work, but also the achievements reached at the level of technical execution. In this field, programming was not merely an instrument for commercial interests, but also something that people can do for its own sake, a form of art and culture. Many other computer and game subcultures emerged during the years, but the fruitful cross-fertilization between game playing and demo making has had unique, influential position.

The Early Finnish Game Design: *Octapolis*

In the following, I will provide some quick examples of what has taken place in the early Finnish digital game design. As the first one, Jukka Tapanimäki was a student of literature in the mid-1980s in the University of Tampere. After dropping out, he became one of the earliest commercial game developers in Finland. He is an example of a single developer who designed the gameplay, created the art resources, programmed the entire game, and sometimes even composed the music and created the necessary sound effects for their games. Tapanimäki was a versatile, self-taught game developer who also worked as a game reviewer for computer hobbyist magazines, which published some of his early experiments as printed program code, and later his articles about game programming. His later commercial games, for example *Octapolis* (1987), and *Netherworld* (1988) evidently display programming proficiency, but also awareness and influences from various other cultural directions, mostly from earlier published games, as well as from fantasy and science fiction literature and cinema.

Quoting from the backstory of *Octapolis*:

By the year 3897, the Galactic Imperium was mightier than ever. One by one, it had swallowed up all solar systems and alien races. The dreaded fleets of the Imperium were feared all over the Galaxy, and with good reason: one fully armed battle cruiser was enough to blow up a whole planet. No one was strong enough to resist the power of the Imperium.

Except for a small defiant planet which had eight towering cities rising above its barren surface: the planet of Octapolis. Its secret weapon was one of enormous mental power. In the vicinity of the planet, the most valiant enemy space warrior became a bumbling idiot and even the most sophisticated artificial intelligence began to contradict the Laws of Robotics.

The Imperium hadn't attacked the planet of Octapolis for centuries. To space pilots it was just a black spot on the space map, the Zone of the Evil Eye, as they called it. No one even dared to talk about Octapolis any more, but in the deep secrecy of the Galactic Intelligence Agency (GIA) a most cruel and desperate series of experiments were carried out.

They kidnapped innocent space pilots, and sent them inside the zone, and hoped that somehow, somewhere, they could find one who has immune to the immense mental power of Octapolis. If they could only reduce it just a little, then a gallant battle cruiser could get close enough to wipe out the planet. It took GIA 200 years to find such a pilot - YOU are that pilot!![18]

The references to *Star Wars* movies and Isaac Asimov's robot stories, for example, are clear. But rather than being placed as the hero fighting for the right as one the rebel forces, the player is positioned as a kind of ambiguous warrior-victim of the galactic empire itself. This semi-powered position detectable from the shell of the game, frames interestingly the gameplay action as something that both fulfils the colonialist mission of the empire to expand, exploit and destroy other civilizations, but at the same time the player can be interpreted to perhaps be escaping from the cruel experiments that the empire has been carrying on the pilot himself.

When studied at the level of gameplay, *Octapolis* is similarly constructed as a kind of ambiguous hybrid. The player has access to multiple viewpoints, like in the

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[18] The original backstory was printed in the English manual of Octapolis. Quoted from *Tec Dubelin Xbox* web page at: <http://www.tdubel.com/emulaattorit/sc64pelit/octapolis.html#the_story>. (Accessed: 9 September, 2012.)

split-screen mode of the shooter game section, where top-down and sideways views have both been implemented. *Octapolis* is also ambitious in joining together two game genres, space shooter and platformer. Tapanimäki was utilizing elements that were coming from diverse sources, including the shoot'em up style games based on the early *SpaceWar!*, developed in the MIT during the early 1960s, and *Space Invaders* (1978), which was published by Taito in Japan. Also of evident influence were the platform jumping games, which originated in Japan, when games such as Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* (1981) and *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) popularized the game genre during the 1980s. *Octapolis*, however, can be interpreted to be aiming for something original, while making efficient use of the international game genre elements as well as fantasy and science fiction influences in its representational, narrative and gameplay levels.

The dependence from international sources has gone under a kind of half-ironic reversal that is detectable from the manner the previous games' popular features have been treated, as well as in the ambiguous hero-victim status of the protagonist, as stated in the backstory. In the level of allegorical readings, *Octapolis* can be related both to the ambiguously free and dependant position of the Finnish fantasy game developer, as well as to the status of Finland in the 1980s, and its relation to the "Empire" of Soviet Union at the time.

Hi-Tech Fantasies of the 1990s

If the 1980s can be seen as the era of the first steps of commercial game development in Finland, the 1990s were the decade when the actual Finnish game industry was born.[19] The expressive, interactive form of digital game evolved fast during this

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[19] An overview of the Finnish game development history is provided by: Petri Saarikoski and Jaakko Suominen, "Computer Hobbyists and the Gaming Industry in Finland" *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 31:3 (2009), pp. 20–33.

decade. There were major technological factors that contributed, including the introduction of CD-ROM disks and faster processors that made possible to handle the challenges that realistically detailed and extensive game worlds presented to gameplay. The expansion of games and the sheer amount of art resources that modern games required also meant that digital games were typically no longer single-person development projects. They were requiring growing teams of artists and coders, working in close collaboration. For a small country like Finland, the access to global distribution channels became a crucial issue at this point. Distribution of games was also closely related to game production at the time: the computer and video games were typically also financed by the few large publishers, who had access to global game retail channels. The major distributors were typically located in the United States, the United Kingdom, or in Japan, and securing a business relationship with these international corporations presented a considerable threshold of entry for a start-up game development studio from a small Nordic country.

The first Finnish game companies were established in the early nineties, and after a decade of hard work, it was in year 1999 that is remembered as the high-water mark in Finnish games industry: it was then when the first Finnish game surpassed one million in sales – *Supreme Snowboarding* (1999) by Housemarque. A fast-paced, stylish snowboarding game featuring a rocking, hip-hop style soundtrack, *Supreme Snowboarding* can be seen as a game that captures some of the Finnish fantasies typical for the end of the millennium. Following the trajectory of information technology hype, the Finnish new media and game companies were participating in the exuberant optimism, ready to follow Nokia's mobile phone success and conquer the world. The combination of technological virtuosity and Nordic exoticism appeared to be successful in the case of *Supreme Snowboarding*. Rather than trying to convey the authentic, Finnish milieu of Finnish snowboarding, *Supreme Snowboarding* was providing access to a spectacular fantasy what snowboarding would look like when augmented with the powers of digital simulation. The

representational shell of this game borrowed from the landscapes of Alps or North American skiing resorts as much as from mediated, MTV generation view of what the young, international audience might want to see from the North.

Supreme Snowboarding translates the tiny movements of its players' fingers into jumps and other manoeuvres that make it possible to vicariously participate in the fantasy of becoming a master snowboarder. On the other hand, it is also an ambiguous fantasy, limited by the capabilities of what has been programmed into the simulation. The game was tapping into subcultural sensibilities shared by those who followed hip-hop music and snowboard scene of the time, and played on the desires to gain some kind of sportsmanship, a special skill set. For different players, the game might resonate differently: primarily as a computer game of a certain, winter sport genre, or as something that links with the feelings and muscle memories gained from also being a snowboarder for real. Either way, *Supreme Snowboarding* as a high-tech winter sport fantasy could successfully serve the identity work of its young players and aspiring developers alike.

Internet and Global Fantasies

The early 2000s were a mixed period for new media in Finland. On the one hand, it was a period of powerful expansion as both the investments, corporate interest and the first wave of enthusiastic users emerged. On the other, the over-heated financial expectations soon burst along the 'new media bubble' and in 2001 many several new media and information technology companies lost most of their market value, often also going bankrupt as their investment money ran out.[20]

There were, however few companies who were able to emerge from the new media bubble with a concept that actually resonated with the users and managed to

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[20] See Roger Lowenstein, *Origins of the Crash: The Great Bubble and Its Undoing* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

create a viable business model. One of them was Sulake, the developer of *Habbo Hotel*, the most successful massively multiplayer online game environment or virtual world to emerge from Finland. Originally developed by two young men, Sampo Karjalainen and Alpo Kyrölä as an online environment for their fiends' band, *Habbo* was initially launched in 1999 with the name "Mobiles Disco". Revised, rebranded and expanded during the following years, the service had a distinctive, retro style which reminded visually about the era of 8-bit video games, but it was capable of supporting synchronous chat and simple gameplay and various creative interactions. Decorating one's own 'hotel room' became quickly a central element in how the users could express their personality and sense of humour; as Sulake relied on micro-payments from virtual furniture that were used as decorations, this was also the foundation of their business success.

The miniature world with decidedly toy-like avatar figures provides access to a shared fantasy of a particular kind. The pleasure available from the collecting, arranging and constructing one's own small room to suit one's preferences is akin to the role dollhouses have long served in both children and adult toy cultures.[21] The avatar figure and her room in the virtual environment of *Habbo* is ambiguously empowering and hiding its users; the 'toy self' of the playful virtual character can be used for interactions with one's real, everyday friends, as well as for playing around with strangers. The expressive potentials for identity work and identity fantasies may explain why this service has become especially popular among teenagers and pre-teen children. The anonymous, children and teenager oriented nature has also related to some of the more recent problems the service has been having. In June 2012, Channel 4 News from the United Kingdom published a report where a journalist posing as an eleven-year-old girl witnessed sexual advances and pornographic chat directed

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[21] Jeffrey H.Goldstein, ed., *Toys, Play, and Child Development* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jeffrey H. Goldstein, David Buckingham, and Gilles Brougère, eds., *Toys, Games, and Media* (Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2004); Lois R. Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

towards her game character while visiting *Habbo*.[22] The difficult combination of sexuality and pre-teen children led to a powerful reaction and the chat functionality of the service was suspended for a while, and restored gradually as new moderation mechanisms were implemented. At the autumn of 2012, *Habbo* continues to operate globally, with eleven different language versions of the service operating in different parts of the world, and reporting over 273 million avatars being created by users coming in from over 150 countries.[23]

As the Finnish digital game industry continued to provide for an expanding, international audience, the stylistic and cultural elements evident in their products continued to enrich and diverse. An important milestone of the early 2000s in this respect was Remedy Entertainment's action game *Max Payne* (2001). Reflecting both the role of digital game industry as the challenger to cinema, and personal taste of its makers, *Max Payne* was a highly intertextual and intermedial game, borrowing heavily from such sources as hardboiled detective fiction, *film noir*, as well as Hong Kong's *kung fu* action cinema. Particularly notable element was the 'bullet time' effect where player enters a special game mode where the game slows down so that it is possible to aim carefully and execute several action sequences with higher precision than would otherwise be possible. While familiar from the stylized cinema narration of *kung fu* films and the *Matrix* science fiction film series, Remedy was the first game developer to apply bullet time as a gameplay element in interactive fiction.

The fantasy of participating in simulated shooter action is combined in *Max Payne* with the storyline and gameworld where the player is invited to participate in a dark drama of violence and revenge. The main character, policeman named Max, has his wife and new-born child brutally murdered and player is invited to play out his personal crusade while trying to unravel the puzzles surrounding the crime. The game

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[22] Seifert, Rachel. "Striptease and Cyber Sex: My Stay at Habbo Hotel", *Channel 4 News*, June 12, 2012. Online: <http://www.channel4.com/news/striptease-and-cyber-sex-my-stay-at-habbo-hotel>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.)

[23] Sulake, "Habbo Hotel – Where else?" Web page at: <http://www.sulake.com/habbo/>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.)

is carefully designed; it makes use of literary devices and for example integrates pages of graphic novel as cut-scenes to fast-forward the storyline between the interactive, playable sequences. There are also mythical subtexts underlying the game, most notably the Norse myth of Ragnarök, the end of times, which is evoked by many names and other references as the game progresses. Generally considered an artistic success, *Max Payne* won several "game of the year" awards and became the basis of franchise that continued to sell millions of games.[24] *Max Payne* had also been discussed by academics as an example of a digital game that aims and at least partially succeeds to reach the status of 'art'.[25] As an interactive fantasy, it can be approached as an exploration and reinterpretation of both Nordic mythology and international cinematic influences; and as a game it provides an interesting combination of action sequences, puzzle solving and unravelling of a pre-scripted narrative.

The pursuit of Finnish digital game design towards global reach and scope that crosses boundaries between several media can be best highlighted by the final example, *Angry Birds* (2009) by Rovio Entertainment. At its heart, *Angry Birds* is a physics-based puzzle game, where the player needs to use a virtual sling to shoot bird characters of different colours and behaviours towards green pigs that are hiding behind various kinds of obstacles and fortifications. There is some rudimentary backstory suggesting that the pigs have stoles birds' eggs, which explains why the birds are motivated to go after them. The pleasure and fantasy of playing *Angry Birds*, however, is not based on some rich narrative or mythological layer. Rather, the

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[24] The publisher, Take Two Interactive reported that the sales of the series had passed 7.5 million units in 2011, according to *Gamasutra News*: <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/37228/Grand_Theft_Auto_IV_Passes_22M_Shipped_Franchise_Above_114M.php>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.)

[25] See, for example: Anders Sundnes Løvlie, "End of Story? Quest, Narrative and Enactment in Computer Games", *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005* (Vancouver: University of Vancouver, 2005), online: <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.38324.pdf>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.) Aaron Smuts, "Are Video Games Art?" *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (2005), online: <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=299>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.)

game benefits from the general design principles of good 'casual games': it is easy to start, but difficult to master. There were over sixty differently designed levels in the original Apple iOS version of *Angry Birds*, and every update has added dozen or more levels to the already rather extensive game. Special editions, such as *Angry Birds Seasons* (2010) and *Angry Birds Rio* (2011) have included game levels that provide the core, physics puzzle gameplay, in newly themed representational contexts. The sequel, *Angry Birds Space* (2012) both changed the theme and game world into space, as well as modified the gameplay to include gravitational effects around planet-like objects.

There have been puzzle games similar to *Angry Birds*, but none have managed to achieve the same level of popularity – the games of *Angry Birds* series were reported to have been downloaded more than billion times by May 2012.[26] One could even claim that the gravitational navigation and skill gaming has been part of digital game culture and design from the earliest experiments with electronic tennis games and space shooters such as the aforementioned *SpaceWar!* created by the MIT hackers in 1961.[27] What was new in the case of *Angry Birds* was that it was easily playable on touchscreen, and deliberately aimed to appeal to a casual gamer, who had short sessions every now and then available for playing short sequences. It was also mixing classic, familiar game mechanics with representational elements that display humour and toy-like design features that are all something that casual games often are based on, in order to appeal to as wide audiences as possible.[28] However, there is also something slightly anarchistic and mischievous in the humour of *Angry Birds*. The scream of the birds, as they are hurled, kamikaze style on top of glass, metal and

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[26] Matt Brian. "Rovios Angry Birds Titles Hit 1 Billion Cumulative Downloads", *TheNextWeb.com*. Online: <http://thenextweb.com/mobile/2012/05/09/rovios-angry-birds-titles-hit-1-billion-cumulative-downloads/>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.)

[27] Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2001), pp. 39-60.

[28] Annakaisa Kultima, "Casual Game Design Values", *Proceedings of MindTrek 2009* (Tampere: ACM, 2009), pp. 58–65. Online: <http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=1621841.1621854>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.) Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

wood constructions of top of the hiding pigs, and the pigs' helpless reactions as they are annihilated under collapsing debris – all of these can be seen to contribute to certain infantile fantasy of breaking things up, delivering playful destruction and slapstick violence. Finally, the marketing and franchising effort invested into *Angry Birds* is also a considerable element in their international popularity. From theme parks to plush toys to lunch boxes and with an animated television series in the works, *Angry Birds* has been positioned as something that can be used as a 'lifestyle brand', which is open for expressive use and personal statement in many different areas of life.[29]

Conclusion and Future Directions

From its roots in the folk culture and early home computer games, the Finnish game culture has expanded to include commercial production of computer, video and mobile games, as well as applications and extensions of games to other media and different areas of life. The roles of local and global have become placed in an interesting cultural dialectic in this development. *Angry Birds* is at one extreme of this evolution, showing how the global marketplace and digital distribution models can be utilized to spread content created in Finland to hundreds of millions players and consumers, worldwide. In terms of traditional cultural signals, it is questionable whether there is initially anything distinctively "Finnish" in a game like *Angry Birds*, but as the Finnish government is eagerly adopting information technology success stories to re-brand Finland internationally, one can already see the bird characters becoming a new kind of symbol for Finland – much like the Nokia brand and logo was used in days its global mobile phone success. For a member of casual game culture, the bird figure carries however different kind of symbolism; one that is based

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[29] Martin Kornberger, *Brand Society: How Brands Transform Management and Lifestyle* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

on the distinctive gameplay experience providing both engagement, empowerment through skill development, and momentary release from different kinds of daily burdens and stress. At a very different end of this dialectic would be a game like *The Heroes of Kalevala* (2010) by MythPeople (10tons Ltd). In this case the Finnish culture is brought to the surface of the game, with the lands of national epic, Kalevala, providing the backdrop for the three-in-a-row, matching style puzzle gameplay. There is clearly much room for experimenting with various combinations of the thematic and gameplay elements, both innovative and borrowed from different sources, as the culture of play and game design continues to mix and produce new kinds of hybrids.

I want to conclude this article by highlighting certain tensions that run through Finnish game cultures. The tension between global and local is certainly one, as Finnish players and game designers adopt international contents and practices while also trying to find and make their own, unique approach to games and play. The tension between commercial production and independent, gameplay experience and innovation driven experimentation is another. In the era of large, digital game productions there is relatively little room for independent publishing, but the arrival of digital, online distribution has changed the situation a bit.[30] Nevertheless, the publishers and distributors remain as controllers and censors of the digital gaming content, and it is in the non-digital forms of play where the greatest degree of artistic freedom can be experienced and explored. An important example is the live action role-playing culture, where sometimes politically, sexually or psychologically controversial or transgressive games are being organised. A major project to document some of this ephemeral, underground art was published as the book *Nordic Larp* (2010), edited by Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, two researchers from the Game Research Lab in the University of Tampere.[31] None of the games featured in

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[30] Olli Sotamaa and Tero Karppi, *Games as Services – Final Report*, TRIM Research Reports 2 (Tampere: University of Tampere, 2010). Online: <http://tampub.uta.fi/handle/10024/65772>. (Accessed: 15 September, 2012.)

[31] Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, eds., *Nordic Larp* (Stockholm: Fea Livia, 2010).

this work were created for commercial reasons, but rather to provide alternative viewpoints and experiences, entertainment, education, or just to explore some human situations. Another interesting, and to a certain degree overlapping field of experimental games is the field of pervasive gaming, where the possibilities opened up by combinations of new technologies, social innovations and transgressive game designs are being investigated.[32]

Apart from the cultural and commercial tensions, there are also some tensions that we can identify that relate directly to the fantasy itself in gaming context. Since these are also paradoxes at the heart of fantasy gaming, I will follow here the poststructuralist tradition of theorizing and call them *aporias*. I suggest that these are also interesting directions for further study of this area.

The first is the *aporia of escape* in fantasy gaming: there appears to be much ambiguity surrounding the promises and claims of escape and escapism of games. One the one hand digital fantasy gaming can be seen of providing a sort of release from the everyday reality, but at the same time many of the games of this kind are actually modelled on the basis of the operations of our everyday reality. Much of the marketing and interest in games is focused on how realistic is the fantasy world that they manage to simulate. In this sense the fantasy games both aim to simulate of our daily reality, and be different from it. In some cases, the 'fantasy' of a game world appears as a kind of wish-fulfilment and shows how our world could be repaired and perfected; in some cases, the game world is fantastically twisted shadow of our world and explores its nightmarish alternatives.

Second, the *aporia of work*, is somewhat related to the escapism. As digital games are positioned as entertainment, the dominant idea seems to be that games are leisure and fun, something designed for relaxation. While this may be true to a certain degree, that is also a rather limited view. Many games are hard work. As good games aim to challenge their players, they are often also rather laborious. Indeed, some of

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[32] Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern, *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2009).

the most popular forms of fantasy games like massively multiplayer online role-playing games appear to be modelled on hard labour, while they simultaneously are situated within the context of leisure and free time.

Thirdly, the *aporia of identity* is something that has been a pervasive thread in the above discussion of fantasies in gaming. There are some signs that player characters are created and chosen to provide a kind of compensation for players' real-life shortcomings. The beautiful, powerful or mysterious fantasy gaming character might appear as an opposite of the mundane, everyday social persona, but it is also simultaneously intimately connected and informed by the social and psychological needs of this particular gamer. Identity is also closely related to capability in games; while the initial character choice might be based on the pretty visuals or fascinating background storylines, the more experienced game player is more likely to choose and design her character primarily on the basis of its gameplay affordances. The fantasy of game worlds and gaming characters is balanced at the intersection of something that is both self and non-self, the other.

The unique European contribution to the global culture of games and game design appears framed in similar aporias. The games produced and played in Finland are both the same as those played in Asia, or America, but due to their societal significance and experienced meaning being situated in the culture of play and design in the local context, they are not the same. The unique local contexts of gaming, and the highly mutable forms that the actual uses of games take, are both very interesting and clearly worth of more research in the future, in addition to the developing art form of digital game itself. It is after all precisely at that level, at that local situated context, where the actual meaning and value of games is generated.