

Welcome to Mapping the Global Game Cultures: Issues for a Socio-Cultural Study of Games and Players

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Need for Socio-Cultural Study of Games

The range of different digital games and the geographical and cultural range of game playing has expanded greatly during their years of adoption. Initially isolated into research laboratories and universities, digital games are currently within the reach of billions of people – in the form of mobile phone games, if not as computer games or video games for various arcade and home consoles.

There are claims that game playing is something that almost everyone does in a modern, late industrial society, but we are lacking reliable international studies to back up even such basic claims about the social position and role of digital games. In addition to such general demographical facts, we are also missing more the 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 starting to appear, but often remains isolated and still often lacking in standardised theoretical framework at the methodological level.

This short paper is a call for more international and interdisciplinary collaboration in gathering and sharing of game play data, and into collaborative development of theories and methods suitable for analysing game cultures.

Study of Meaningful Games/Meaning in Games

Culture as a concept is closely related to meaning, as structures of cultural systems organise how purpose, value and significance is produced and expressed within social interaction. Meaning is often studied with the diverse tools that semiotics, the study of signs and symbol structures can offer. In semiotics, or in the French style of de Saussure, semiology, there exists a fundamental distinction between the level of langue and that of parole, or abstract systematic principles and meaningful utterances.

The ontology of games has been a subject of considerable discussion within game studies, and it has been interesting to follow how few recent years have advanced from oppositional claims towards more comprehensive theories; rather than simply true or not-true, theories of games and play can actually contribute to each other and when combined, provide a basis for more sophisticated approach into games.

Such synthesising trends are commendable, and also this paper holds to a view that games are inherently complex as meaning-making systems. Thus scholarly models of games need to take into account their multi-dimensional basic character.

Reading Games, Playing Games?

Many researchers have paid attention to the distinction between ludic and 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 of drama or survival horror, ludic aspect is concerned with what players can do in the game, or its gameplay. Interactional and representational signifying processes further complicate when combined.

Within any culture, as well as between them, one fundamental fact is diversity. Players have different proficiency in gameplay skills, and they also differ in their emphasis on the gameplay and representation – while playing games differently, people are also 'reading' them differently. On the basis of their skills and play styles, they approach games in a variety of manners which lead them into having different gameplay experiences and also different interpretations of what these games mean to them. Sweeping statements about the 'meaning' of a certain game do not generally take such diversity into account.

Dual Structure in Games and Play

As parts in the production of meaning, both interaction-based and symbolic potentials for meaning should be taken into account. While playing, all such dimensions interact and have an effect to players' overall gameplay experience.

There is an illustration of this dual structure in Figure 1, emphasising the interaction of 'core' with 'shell' as a dynamic state and process that changes in different genres and playing situations.

Cultural Semiotics for Games?

To address such multiplicity reaching to the core of games and play, the cultural study of games needs to be informed by multiple traditions and disciplines.

Important particularly for those game scholars coming from qualitative social sciences traditions, cultural anthropology has been important, as it has directed attention to the structures that are organising the behaviours, norms and language of a group of people, and also established participant observation for use as a method. From a slightly different scholarly direction, scholars coming from the humanities and cultural studies tradition have more often been informed by literary or cinema studies style of textual and

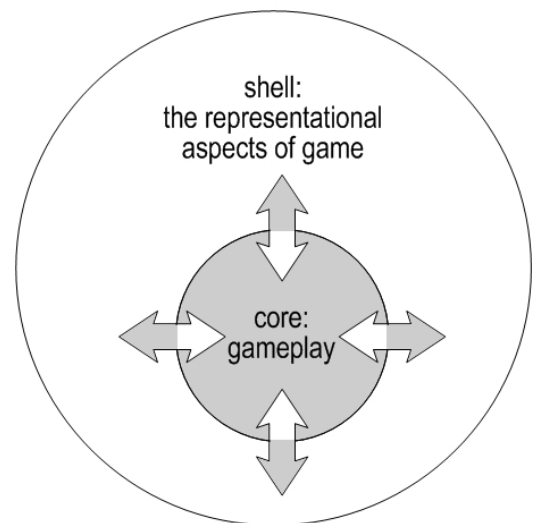


Figure 1: Core and Shell, or representational and gameplay related dimensions in a game. (Mäyrä, forthcoming.)

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theoretical analysis and have focused on finding new critical interpretations for games as cultural products.

Rather than trying to deny the value of some particular approach, it is important to understand their particular strengths, and apply them appropriately into proper research questions. Due to the complexities reaching down into games' dual structure, study into sociology and psychology of play are equally important, as are also multiple the traditions of media research.

Basics: What We Actually Know about Game Playing?

There are many individual studies looking into the use of games particularly from the angle looking for effects of game playing, but there are no reliable national or global surveys of basic demographic player data in the same manner that the reading of literature or watching of television are researched. The most quoted player statistics still come from ESA, which stands for Entertainment Software Association, an American industry organisation. ESA regularly publishes press releases which base on an annual survey they commission, and the most recent one (ESA 2006) makes claims like "69 % of American heads of households play computer and video games" or "the average game player age is 33 years," but as the actual study is not public, they do not specify how do such key concepts as 'playing' and 'player' were defined in the study.

Not all industry commissioned research is automatically of low quality or otherwise suspect, but it needs to fill at least the same minimal criteria for scientific knowledge and scholarship as academic studies do. As long as our picture of games cultures and players are based on various marketing surveys, which do not make their methods, criteria or data publicly available, we are on a shaky ground.

A slightly more positive example is a recent study commissioned by the BBC (2005). Even if the published methods and results have not been subjected to 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 6-65, with a sample size of 3442 individuals, which were taken from six different age sections. This material was enhanced with the outcomes from a qualitative study of fourteen group interviews. The quantitative and qualitative research were commissioned to different market research agencies (TNS and Firefish Ltd). (BBC 2005, 2.)

This study approached the UK residents as gamers, and gave some interesting results that would be worth revisiting and expanding on also in the context of academic game studies. However, the definition adopted to identify a 'gamer' is very broad in this study:

We defined a "gamer" as someone who had played a game on a mobile, handheld, 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. (Ibid.)

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

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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 % 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 among of 6 to 65 year olds in the UK are “heavy gamers,” meaning that 48 % of this population plays at least once a week, or daily. (Ibid.)

The BBC commissioned study is an example on a basic socio-cultural study into gaming, with a distinct emphasis coming from a market research tradition; the organisation of results appears to profile target audiences for media industry. The commissioning party was, after all, the BBC New Media and Technology division, joined with the BBC's Audience Research Department. The report is nevertheless an interesting look into data which is aimed to answer such fundamental questions as how often people play, what they play, why they play, where they play, are they using other media while playing, and how important part they consider game playing to be in their lives. The research also includes responses to attitude statements such as “Games are part of my identity,” and “There are too many racing, shooting and fighting games.” Particularly this kind of statements could easily be criticised; for example, what does it exactly mean to say “Games are part of my identity”? ‘Identity’ appears as a rather abstract concept something that not everyone will assess or understand in the same sense.

Towards an International Study of Games Cultures

Based on this discussion, I see a need for an international, academic 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 it methods and results publicly available. Rather than based on the commercial interests of any single organisation, such study needs to link to more general interests and standards of knowledge. It is easy to grow the ambitions, since there is so much need for various kind of information regarding the actual realities of game playing. The socio-cultural significance of games can be assessed in various ways, where some are more easily quantifiable than others. For example, the amount of time spend on playing games as well as the use of money in games are something that can be measured numerically, but such more elusive elements as the role of games as social capital, or for creating significant experiences and memories, need to be assessed in a different manner.

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

Starting: the Areas to Research

Our team at the University of Tampere is currently starting their work for realising such research project. We have received some start-up funding from Neogames Centre and The Finnish Cultural Foundation, available for years 2006-2008. To expand upon this initial work, and to make it truly international, we need other partners who are interested in collaboration in this kind of research issues. Hopefully a broad international research consortium will make it also easier to attract funding for different parts of the project.

We have started our research with a broad qualitative study into the role of games in lives of Finnish people; for this purpose we designed a research method adapted from 'cultural probes' approach which produced rich array of materials such as memories, photographs, life stories, and association maps around games and playing (Sotamaa et al. 2005). On the basis of this study we moved into looking for criteria in games' social signification, and sketched a preliminary four part division that can be set to organise the initial research questions:

1. Consumption of time in games
2. Investment of money in games
3. Attitudes surrounding games and playing
4. The actual practices around games in people's lives.

To look into the role that games hold in people's lives it can be compared and contrasted with other activities in terms of economics as well as in investments of time. Sales charts do not tell the truth about popularity of games, since there are many free games in the Internet that do not show in the sales charts of boxed games. It is also interesting to map and compare social practices surrounding games and play behaviours. Also, some specific markers for charting the games' impact on individual and group identities can be developed. Participation into games related web forums, readership of games magazines or regular socializing with other game players might be some of such, but we also need to identify the practices and attitudes that are typical for more casual players.

In order to provide comprehensive knowledge about the socio-cultural role of games playing, positive as well as 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. There are also probably specific issues that players perceive as parts of the holding power of games, or some alienating factors that keep people away from digital games. In the long term, one may even start to look into how game playing changes along time, in different phases of life, in terms of its content, frequency or practices adopted.

In addition to the 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 studies might focus on issues like how games are addressed in talk in different age groups, in different countries. Identifying such features as well as any specific discourses that are created around playing require adopting more qualitative approaches. But even with the help of surveys one should be able to gain some information into the possible impact games have to the consumption of media, or organisation of media and technology in homes and family lives.

Preliminary Outline of Research

According to current plans, this research will start in three phases. First there will be an initial prestudy phase, which involves researchers reviewing the existing relevant literature, considering strengths and weaknesses of various methodologies, as well as designing and prioritizing the research questions.

Next, in there will be the first actual research phase, which will consist of pilot studies in one to five countries with a quantitative survey into game playing practices, behaviours and attitudes, possibly supported by some qualitative work.

After this, the second research phase will involve expansion of scope into multiple countries and scaling up of research. It is still very early phase in this project at the moment and many of these plans are still sketchy at best, but there exists the initial funding received for the Finnish team. There are also ongoing plans of collaboration with South Korean and North-American partners in the first research phase.

Community Effort

In order to be able to scale up, the research project will be created in a structured manner. 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-review venues. A spin-off is a subproject carried out by a single member, aiming to expand or focus differently from the nucleus, while having link to the whole. Network part includes different visualisations 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 (forthcoming in 2006-2007 in address www.gamescultures.org).

Hopefully this short presentation has been enough to raise some interest in such collaborative effort, and possibly also some ideas on how to evolve it further. Interested parties are invited to contact either directly me (frans.mayra@uta.fi), or the research team (at researchers@gamescultures.org) regarding your approach and interests in the this type of international collaborative study. It is clear that focusing and coordinating this kind of initiative will require major effort, but it will hopefully serve the games research community in many useful ways in the future.

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