Teaching Game Studies: Experiences and Lessons from Tampere

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Introduction: Origins and Orientation

Game studies can be conceptualized in many different ways – for example, as a young academic discipline with multiple theoretical and methodological approaches, but unified in its subject matter and thus rather similar to literary studies or film studies. Or, game studies can be interpreted more loosely, as a research field where multiple academic approaches and traditions interact, but one that is not organized into a discipline of its own. The multiplicity and complexity of different kinds of games, play forms, player motivations and applications for games makes it very hard to precisely define the academic identity of game studies. As interest in games and play studies continues to expand into novel areas of the research community, it is becoming even harder to narrow down and precisely capture what game studies really is. However, this is exactly what a teacher or a curriculum designer needs to be able to do when games are included in the practical agenda of academic education. This short article discusses how this kind of process has been implemented at the University of Tampere (UTA), and some of the key lessons one might learn from game studies at UTA.

The general approach of game studies in Tampere (see below, figure 1) is based on a three-pronged approach featuring game analysis, player research and game design studies, which reflect the goals of scientific research, the nature of knowledge and the roles of academic practice (for a seminal text discussing knowledge interests, see Habermas 1972). The underlying disciplinary framework is based on the combination of perspectives that are derived from the styles of academic thinking and practice found in the research fields of the humanities, social sciences and design.
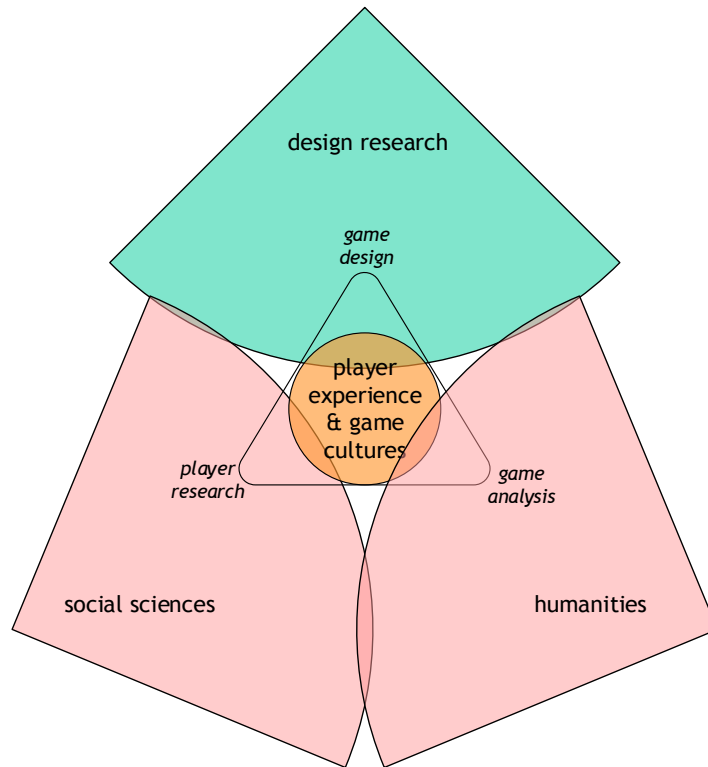
Figure 1: Multi-perspectival organization of game studies at Tampere.

This combination of fundamental orientations has served us well and it reflects the contemporary "intellectual complex" that is responsible for much of the dynamism in this field. According to an international study concerning the educational backgrounds and current disciplinary identities of researchers in game studies, a large number of game researchers are engaged in multi- or interdisciplinary collaboration; their career paths often lead them to change their orientation in work, e.g. they move to externally funded research projects with applied interests and goals (Mäyrä, van Looy & Quandt 2013). At the same time, it should be emphasized that the particular form of game studies featured at UTA was partially born out of necessity, partly from historical roots and developments that took place locally, as well as internationally in academia.

The digital media's entrance to the academic agenda took place particularly during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as there was an awakening among university administration to the development of information technology, and personal computers with novel multimedia capabilities were in demand from students and staff for educational purposes. The public discussion and policy setting that was focused on "information society" was one of the factors in this development, which also resulted in the establishment of Hypermedia Laboratory at the University of Tampere in 1992. The "Hyperlab" was at first just a small university service project, and part of the Computing Centre, then it eventually grew into a small academic department of its own. At the same time, and even as early as the late 1980s, the UTA Department of

Literature and the Arts was the home for early artistic experimentation with expressive hypermedia, including early experimental interactive hyper-novels made with the Macintosh program HyperCard. Within the department, a young generation of scholars gained theoretically-oriented training that was based in the humanities and aesthetics before they moved on to study of hypermedia, games and other forms of digital creativity as parts of "digital arts and culture". Much of the theoretical backbone of the UTA approach to game studies was developed within this early circle of digital cultural studies during the 1990s.

Creating Identity and Critical Mass

The University of Tampere is one of the largest universities in Finland, with a student population of about 15,000 and 2,000 faculty and staff members. Currently negotiations are underway concerning the merging of UTA with the Tampere University of Technology (TUT) and the Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) – a merger which would bring the UTA total student population to 35,000. UTA is also often ranked as the most popular university in Finland among student applicants, partly due to its central location and the reputation of Tampere as a desired living area and partly due to the longstanding UTA tradition that students are free to combine elements from many secondary subjects ("minors") into their individual, tailor-made degrees. Provided by the Hyperlab, the courses that focused on numerous fundamental ICT skills (such as the creation of home pages in HTML, or image editing in Photoshop) developed into an increasingly popular minor during the 1990s. In 2002, new media studies became institutionalized as a discipline of its own at the University of Tampere. Called "Hypermedia", this bachelor-level selection of studies was a combination of design and implementation-oriented courses as well as more theoretical elements that included humanities and social science-approaches to both Internet and game studies.

2002 was also the year UTA's Game Research Lab was officially started. I was appointed as a Professor of Hypermedia and deputy director of the Hypermedia Laboratory, and taking initiative, the Gamelab was a practical way for me and my colleagues to organize key areas of new media research into a more focused institutional entity. The study of games had been a growing part of Hyperlab work since the late 1990s, a point in time when Veikkaus played a role of particular importance to the development of games studies at UTA. Veikkaus is the state-owned company that operates lottery and betting games in Finland in accordance with their mandate to "offer high quality gaming entertainment reliably and responsibly. "The need to understand how games in general (not only gambling) were developing in the era of digital media and online connectivity spurred Veikkaus to provide support to early game research projects in Tampere and then to donate partial funding for a new professorship that was shared between UTA and TUT for four years (1999-2003). Partly with the help of this professorship, several new research projects were launched

with the expressed aim to bring humanities and human sciences-based approaches into close dialogue with the opportunities and socio-cultural developments associated with new digital technologies.

There were (and still continue to be) very limited resources in the university budget for new educational or research initiatives, so adopting an active and successful strategy to attract external funding was crucial for the UTA Game Research Lab to become a viable research initiative and to develop a knowledgeable staff available for developing the game studies curriculum. Partial funding for the early stages of this development was provided by the local Tampere development program that was implemented from 2001 to 2005. Called "eTampere", it directed the resources of Tampere city and various development funds into initiatives that aimed to bolster the role of the Tampere region in research, development and information society service development. An early game research project titled "Communication and Community in Digital Entertainment Services" received its crucial seed funding from the Information Society Institute, which operated under the eTampere program framework. After that, the necessary building blocks were in place for the game research team to expand their activities with a series of successful research and education project applications, bringing in funding from Tekes (the National Innovation and Technology Agency), the Academy of Finland, the European Union, as well as several additional foundations and ministries. From 2001 to 2016, the UTA Game Research Lab team has secured the funding for, and successfully carried out, 45 unique research and educational projects in total.

Revising, Restructuring – and Keeping True to the Vision

Receiving external funding and being able to do games research or game education on a project-by-project basis, however, is not the long term solution for the foundation of a scientific or scholarly field. Luckily, the popularity of games and Internet-related courses in Hypermedia grew among students and the university reacted by directing available resources to the new, growing program. The Hypermedia laboratory established a small number of more long-term education and research positions between 2002 and 2004, allowing for a new media education plan with an eye towards the future. It took five years, however, to open up the specialization of game studies as an official degree program. By joining forces with the Information Studies degree program, "Hypermedia" was at first provided as an additional study track for students pursuing the Information Studies degree, and finally, in 2009, a completely new, merged discipline of Information Studies and Interactive Media was established. The interactive media element in this degree program provided students with the option to specialize in either game studies or internet studies, and consequently opened up a full path to pursue a games-focused bachelor's degree, then continue to with a master's degree in game studies. The Information Studies and Interactive Media doctoral program with a games and internet studies track was also established at this time. The first master's degree from the new

program was completed in July 2010, and the first PhD defense took place in 2012. However, game-focused PhD projects were carried out prior to 2010, both at UTA as well as at other Finnish universities. From 1998 to 2012, at least 35 doctoral theses researching games, game design and game play from various perspectives were published in Finland (Sotamaa & Suominen 2013).

The profile and aims of game education have been analyzed and revised multiple times since the establishment of game studies at UTA. In 2004, for example, the core content analysis carried out on the UTA Hypermedia studies concluded that the strength and potential of these studies lie in the combination of perspectives that generates knowledge and understanding of the "use, fundamental character, and potentials" of new media. At this point we decided that the practical, interactive media courses would not be the first in the studies; the basic studies were re-organized to start from more general historical, conceptual and theoretical introductions, and the design and implementation-oriented studies were repositioned as intermediate level studies. As master's and doctoral studies were added to the curriculum in 2008-2009, new courses were designed to focus on multiple research approaches relevant for games and internet studies: research of use and users, research of design and more theoretical and methodological-focused studies (such as critical game analysis, game genre studies, game and player culture studies, analyses of the game industry and the study of games in media culture). In 2013, the revised master's degree program was opened as an English language course of study for international students and Finnish students alike.

After the international master's program had been operating for some time, our team carried out major curricula assessment and reorganization in 2015, which has led to a new course structure, to be implemented in the 2016-2018 period. The aims of internet and game studies education were clarified to primarily focus on educating academic experts in games and new media: Rather than focus on any particular game industry job, the aims of game studies education are anchored in building a comprehensive understanding of how games and earlier established play practices, as well as societal, cultural, technical, aesthetic and technological factors, all contribute to how games are used and produced. Students are expected to combine the skills and knowledge from their UTA game studies education with other academic and professional studies, as well as extra-curricular activities that all contribute to their professional placement. After earning a master's degree, some students will continue with doctoral studies in game-related research, and some of those students will pursue an academic career, while most will find employment in the private sector, in museums, libraries, schools and other public institutions, and yet another segment will find work in third sector expert positions (e.g. non-governmental organizations that contribute to game literacy education or to the prevention and treatment of game-related problems).

The key lessons from UTA game education relate in part to collaboration: it is important to explore opportunities for furthering the agenda of game studies together with other disciplines, as interdisciplinary cooperation increases the probability of including games in the institutional agenda to start with. The intimate link between game research and key areas of first-rate education is important, but it is also wise to see research and education as mutually complementary (e.g., the tendencies of research funding may tilt research activities this way or that – but the historical and theoretical backbone of education should not change according to the current trends in science funding). Also, the combination of game studies with studies in other fields, such as computer science, information and library studies, psychology, or journalism, will increase the employability of students as they graduate and enter the work force. Of course, maintaining and keeping true to the core identity of game studies as a study of games (and their 'gameness' – what is truly at the heart of their unique character as games) is also very important and the only way that the long-term vision and potential of game studies within the various fields of scholarship will thrive and reach academic maturity.

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