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Introduction

Helsinki Game Research Collective (HeGRiC) is a network of scholars interested in game studies. Game studies refers to the scholarly pursuit of games, game cultures, players and play in and around board games, digital games, role-playing, LARP, and other related phenomena. Scholars combine both contemporary and historical perspectives when they seek to understand the development and state of this cultural, social and technological field.

HeGRiC was founded in 2019 by Ylva Grufstedt, Heidi Rautalahti and Lysiane Lasausse, whose scholarly interests fall on the intersection of game studies and tangent disciplines, such as study of religion, history, and Nordic studies. In this essay we describe the ideas and goals behind the HeGRiC network.

The collective originates from the university lecturer Dr Derek Fewster’s research seminar “Game Studies and Historical Culture”, at which scholars and students of games from any discipline have had a possibility to present and receive feedback on their work. The multidisciplinary environment at the seminar has been central in the recent development of game studies at the University of Helsinki even though it is small in comparison to all the game scholarship at the university.

The aim of the HeGRiC initiative is to provide students and researchers with an arena to engage in a fruitful cooperation with game studies related topics, develop new and innovative approaches, ensure sustainable research environments, and retention of scholars and students. The specific goal is to grow a network of game scholars into a *sustainable, collaborative initiative* and a *research hub*:

- 1) *To promote the current international scientific standard on games studies and make it locally accessible to students and researchers.*
- 2) *To perform collaborative research and produce multidisciplinary, co-authored research outputs.*

The growing field of game studies at the University of Helsinki does not have a disciplinary home but is characterized, above all, by its multidisciplinary nature. One of the most fundamental, yet elusive, parts of academic work is based on the social networks between scholars. Such networks are often situated around multidisciplinary research areas and they are hugely important to promoting expertise, visibility and collaboration. As we all are researchers in established disciplines, we recognized the positive impact that a research network would have on scholarly focus, collaboration and research ideation. The overarching aim in the founding of the HeGRiC was to promote and develop game study efforts by forming a local research collective.

The present essay will take a general look at the situation at the University of Helsinki and the possible implications of a collective for games research. Firstly, we examine the graduate theses on games completed at the University of Helsinki. Secondly, we describe the inception and formation of HeGRiC – the *Helsinki Game Research Collective*.

Strength in Collaboration

The University of Helsinki sports a rather large body of students and researchers who are engaged in games-related research. The research collective builds on this already existing foundation, taking advantage of the familiar grounds and people in the local university environment.

In Finland, several universities already have local game study departments. For example, the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at Tampere University is an internationally renowned research centre. Tampere University also offers a master's degree programme in game studies. The Turku Game Lab at the University of Turku offers seminars and courses on game development while the departments of Digital Culture and Future Technologies both do important game research and teaching. In the capital region, Aalto University offers a game production programme and a research environment on game design.

In addition, *Suomen Pelitutkimuksen Seura ry.* (The Finnish Society for Game Research) has gathered scholars and researchers of Finnish game studies since 2016. The association provides a network supporting a nation-wide game research community. Annually, the association holds a graduate-level competition to raise awareness of theses and dissertations related to game studies, spanning from works published in universities of applied sciences to universities. The association is a marvel example of how networks and collectives can bring scattered researchers together.

In the context of other successful Finnish game study departments and association, the University of Helsinki constitutes a gap that the research collective aims at filling.

With games and gaming permeating more and more aspects of society, *game studies* – the critical and scientific exploration of games – is becoming an increasingly relevant research topic for several fields. Game studies as its own discipline exists on several epistemic levels simultaneously. For example, historians, sociologists and computer scientists – to name a few – may all use games as the primary research material with their own methodologies and theories. Because game studies as a field enables research from multiple points of view, such as culture, technology, and design, it is inherently a multidisciplinary field.

In 2009, Frans Mäyrä argued that game studies would become a cohesive scholarly field with a strong disciplinary self-image. However, he also predicted that graduates in the field will continue to belong formally to other disciplines (Mäyrä 2009, 328). In 2018, Jaakko Stenros and Annakaisa Kultima argued that the state of the art of the game studies had in fact become increasingly pluralistic and grown into islands of research within established disciplines. Game studies as a field continued to be a multidisciplinary effort, struggling for cohesion. These fragmented, siloed research communities risk reinventing the wheel all over again (Stenros & Kultima 2018, 342; 350–351).

In 2020, we argue that the game study field at the University of Helsinki is rich but fragmented. HeGRiC calls for a local arena where game researchers from any discipline can come together. In part, the fragmentation of the field at the moment is inevitable and a

natural consequence of the lack of a department of the game studies, but also an echo of the siloed nature of game scholarship in general. In other words, while the formation of a cohesive game studies – as encouraged by Mäyrä in 2009 – is well under way, the discipline lacks a local anchor despite a significant interest in the topic.

Observations of Game Studies Theses at the University of Helsinki

To illustrate the current interest in game studies and to convey a general idea of its disciplinary nature at the University of Helsinki, we here present an overview of dissertations and Master's theses written within the university over the last two decades. Using the university's thesis database Helda, we performed keyword searches for titles related to game studies. Our remarks here should be interpreted as general observations, not definitive conclusions.

For our searches (executed on 22 April 2020), we used the following search words: “game studies” (55 hits), “pelitutkimus” (31 hits), “videopeli” (36 hits), and “video game” (211 hits). Many hits overlap – that is, they are labeled with more than one of the above keywords. The total number of unique theses was 89. The dissertations and the theses were originally labeled by their respective authors using relevant keywords.

The compilation selected for our list was then organized according to three characteristics: chronology, titles, and faculty and discipline.

The total number of master's theses in the entire survey was 78. There were 10 doctoral theses and one (1) licentiate thesis.

Our findings indicated a significant increase in the number of theses since the year 2000. Additionally, the variety of research topics has also increased as game studies have been integrated into new disciplines.

In the period from 2000 to 2010, there were a total of seven theses (five Master's theses and two doctoral thesis). All were from the faculties of social sciences and behavioral sciences, with the exception of a Master's thesis from the Faculty of Arts titled “Japanese Video Game Localization: A Case Study of Sony's Sairen Series” (Szurawitzki, 2010). Otherwise, the topics during this period focused mostly on communication and narratives, games for education, psychology, and the notion and definitions of play.

The first PhD thesis on games at the University of Helsinki – “*Virtuaalimaailmoja valtaamassa: verkko-opetusinnovaation leviäminen koulun maantieteeseen vuosituhannen vaihteessa*” (Kankaanrinta) – was completed in 2009 in educational sciences. Two more doctoral theses at the faculty of behavioral sciences were completed in 2010 and 2011. The next doctoral thesis related to game studies was completed in 2015, when “*Emotion and social context in a digital game experience*” (Kivikangas, 2015) was completed, again at the Faculty of Behavioral Sciences. After 2017, game studies-related dissertations become more common with 1-3 theses coming out each year. As before, most of the PhD theses have come from the faculties of social, educational and behavioral sciences, but there has also been a recent uptick for faculties such as Faculty of Arts since 2018.

After the year 2010, the number of theses related to game studies exploded. In the period from 2000 to 2009, the number of thesis were seven in total, but in the period from 2010 to 2020, there were 82 theses.

During this second period (2010–2020), the survey also shows an increase in the disciplinary diversity. In the earlier period, the game study theses concentrated on social

and behavioral sciences, but in the latter period, theses ranged from computer science to theology, to agriculture and forestry. During the years 2013–2015, roughly one third of the theses listed under the keyword “game studies” fall under computer science; five of them had been completed in 2013 alone. Even though the first dissertation published in the Faculty of Arts dated back to 2010, theses from the humanities become more common only after 2014.

During the latter period (2010–2020), games for learning and pedagogics constituted a stable category including titles such, “Lionhearts of the Playworld: An ethnographic case study of the development of agency in play pedagogy” (Rainio), a PhD thesis from 2010. During this same period, history, world cultures and religion entered the games research scene, producing titles such as “I en minnesrik, alternativ, postapokalyptisk värld: En granskning av historiebruket och historiekulturen i datorspelen Fallout 3 och Fallout New Vegas” (Lindell, 2014), “Pokémon-hahmojen japaninkielisten nimien semanttinen luokittelu” (Vainisto, 2017) and “Videopelien myyttinen maailma : the Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion ja antiikin kreikkalainen uskonto (Liljanto, 2019), respectively.

By 2017, the distribution of theses was relatively balanced between the faculty of educational sciences, faculty of social sciences and the faculty of arts. At the same time, it appears the field of modern languages takes an interest in games, producing titles such as “Homology between the Video Game *Never Alone* and the Alaskan Inupiaq Oral Story *Kunuksaayuka*” (Kauritsalo, 2017), or “Jos Tankki kuolee niin se on Hüilerin vika.”: English Elements in Finnish Gaming Discussions” (Siitonen, 2017). The same number of theses continue to come out in computer science, although proportionally to the total they now constitute a smaller segment than in previous periods.

Our search indicated diversification of the field from 2018 onwards. For example, our survey results started to include theses from the Faculty of Medicine, including at least two works on sleep patterns and sleep quality in relation to games and gaming. Another example of the diversification was the first thesis in law – “Creativity within a Virtual World: Copyright in Video Game-Related User-Generated Content” (Rantatulkila, 2019) – that delved into the ambiguous world of copyright across an international industry.

Importantly, the survey revealed that the field of digital games or online play largely outnumber hits on other game modes, for example board games. While studies on important genres such as table-top gaming, live-action role-playing and location-based gaming exist in the survey, they were only a few. This implied that the students and researchers study digital games more than analogue ones at the University of Helsinki. In that way this underscores a significant gap in methodological approaches to games as something more than just digital games.

Our overview managed only to scratch the surface of the game study related research conducted at the University of Helsinki. As already mentioned, to keep this general overview manageable, we included theses on “game studies”, “pelitutkimus”, “videopeli” and “video games” only. In other words, keywords such as “play”, “e-sports”, “gambling” and “game design” were not included in this survey. This was because our initial focus was to make observations simply to see how and where “game studies” affiliations lie. These additional keywords, of course, generate a significant amount of hits on their own. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that game studies and related topics at the University of Helsinki are in fact far more entangled, rich and varying than we first anticipated, and, ultimately, more complex than we can describe here. While these broad-stroke observations of our overview

still leave much to be explored on the history and development of games research at the University of Helsinki, the bottom line is that game studies at the University of Helsinki is a fast growing and vivid field. The volume and diversity of approaches really speaks for itself.

Declarations

HeGRiC is an effort to take advantage of this interest and achieve both short-term and long-term goals, facilitating a joint research effort on games, while also laying the groundwork for a multidisciplinary research community on games at the University of Helsinki.

The Helsinki Game Research Collective has two main aims: firstly, to make game study expertise locally accessible for researchers and students, and secondly, to produce original and relevant research that utilizes the added value of multidisciplinary collaboration. As outlined in the game studies overview above, the composition of researchers also highlights the multiplicity of fields and frameworks that intersect with games and gaming.

Visibility

HeGRiC wants to support awareness and engagement between game scholars within the University of Helsinki.

HeGRiC aims to play a role in bringing scholars together. In that sense, this essay is part of the efforts to be more visible. At the same time, we want to bring attention to local game studies. By making HeGRiC (and game studies) more visible we congregate our declarations, hoping to encourage collaboration and expertise as well.

Making local expertise visible within the university helps scholars to find each other. In our experience, supervisors who lack experience with game studies often look for help among peers to access dominating theories, methodologies and approaches to deciphering games *as games*. Consequently, game scholars in other fields are sometimes engaged as a resource to help students and supervisors outside of the formal supervision structure. HeGRiC can be a useful matchmaking resource in this context.

Similarly, HeGRiC wants to signal-boost game studies made locally and help disseminate and promote scholarly ventures and ideas from the University of Helsinki.

Collaboration

HeGRiC wants to be a resource and inspiration to form local game research groups that acquire funding and publish jointly.

Game scholars are often dual experts. Game scholarship relies heavily on other disciplines, but traditional disciplines need game studies – specifically – to study games. Individual members of multidisciplinary teams can bring complimentary skills and experiences to collaborative efforts. Game scholarship, then, benefits greatly from truly multidisciplinary team efforts where expertise is drawn from a breadth of disciplines and

faculties. HeGRiC aims to facilitate local research collaboration, as well as produce its own collaborative research outputs.

Expertise

HeGRiC wants to promote focus and expertise in game scholarship locally.

HeGRiC aims to solidify access to local expertise. In other words, a network like HeGRiC could potentially counteract any previous lack of contact between researchers in different fields, and thus help ensure that research islands share information with each other on game studies.

This ensures that the collective and its efforts remain relevant. As our observations from the survey suggested, games studies are here to stay. Similarly, HeGRiC wants to promote new research projects in game studies and distribute the results locally, for example through seminars or symposiums. This supports the network members in their efforts in developing expertise and conducting multidisciplinary research projects on games, and, potentially, has a positive impact on research quality.

Closing words. Building for the Future

In this essay, we have discussed the multi-faceted nature of game studies at the University of Helsinki, and the strength in local collaboration. As the survey of graduate theses showed, there is no lack of interest in the game-related topics and the interest keeps growing.

HeGRiC wants to continue working towards a disciplinary home that would facilitate collaboration and openness in the game research, by making the existing body of game researchers more accessible. HeGRiC aims to become a space for game scholars and students at the University of Helsinki. The participants in the HeGRiC project make every effort to network and collaborate with the important game research and learning centers within Finland, but there is a growing need for local and accessible communities on game studies approaches.

We want to bring attention to the sustainability and durability of game studies. It is not a passing trend; it reaches a global research community. Research communities can support and bring together multidisciplinary efforts and research with visibility, expertise and collaboration, and make game studies efforts known and heard. Ultimately, the idea of a *collective home* is related to the notion of scholarly identity. HeGRiC can help by providing a collaborative space for anyone interested in game studies.

We want to draw attention to the benefits and added value of doing multidisciplinary game research, as well as the future of sustainable game research at the University of Helsinki. In the spirit of collaboration, HeGRiC is currently working on organizing a symposium to gather game study researchers at the University of Helsinki to talk about the future of game studies locally, nationally and internationally.

As we observed in our small survey, game studies have developed in the University of Helsinki from the grassroots level up. Of course, a larger study could dig deeper into these developing processes and how games studies interest has in fact emerged into a substantial

body of graduate theses. The impact of supervising or ongoing lecture courses on the dissertations' themes would be an interesting topic to study with more details. Nevertheless, this underlines the importance of gathering a history of an emerging and establishing research interest to support the continuation of these efforts.

It is sometimes said that innovative scholarship needs to be something more than the same “old wine in new bottles.” Game studies tackles unprecedented questions and by building on the already existing legacy of game studies at the University of Helsinki, a network like HeGRiC could provide a new home. New wine in new bottles.

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