

global network player authority Power Die Pie guilt god Let's Play anael lindex wti authentic mt.riatize on Skill dungton contest
game rule system avatar WoW blessing noob kulls memor face body fight pop spe lgame PST PVI digital
religion game analysis representation healing lore relig o-scaps soul diablo class tradition experience with rebirth discussion wedding
simulation ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral runes immersion community symbol salvation image Xbox 360PVE
narrative

Issue 16 (2022)

articles

Ludic Prognostication. Games as Sites for Simulating the Future

by Aditya Deshbandhu, 1

“War never changes.” Gender Roles and the Transformative Potential for Role Reversal in Roleplay Games with Post-Apocalyptic Settings

by Marie-Luise Meier, 33

“It's so normal, and ... meaningful.” Playing with Narrative, Artifacts, and Cultural Difference in *Florence*

by Dheepa Sundaram and Owen Gottlieb, 68

reports

No One Tells You How to Build a Holy Game. An Effort to Build Readings in Theory and Praxis

by Jason Anthony, 100

“I Left Valheim For This?” The Gaming Cultures of *Valheim*. A Conference Report

by Sophia Rosenberg, 126

interviews

Interview with Chris *Bani* Benell, Professional Esports Player

by Joey R. Fanfarelli, 145

The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies. An Interview with Frans Mäyrä and Usva Friman

by gamevironments, 158

reviews

History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past (2020) edited by Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann. A Book Review

by Robert Houghton, 167

Game Development Research by Henrik Engström (2020). A Book Review

by Xenia Zeiler, 172

Interview

The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies. An Interview with Frans Mäyrä and Usva Friman

by gameenvironments

Abstract

Interview with the Director, Prof. Frans Mäyrä, and the Main Research Coordinator, Usva Friman, from the *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*.

Keywords: Game Studies, Centre of Excellence, Education, Research, Game Culture, Tampere, Finland, gameenvironments

To cite this article: The *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*. An interview with Frans Mäyrä and Usva Friman. *gameenvironments* 15, 158-166. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

158

There is much exploratory work necessary to establish a Centre of Excellence like yours. Can you tell us more about the origin story of the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE GameCult)?

How did it come about?

Frans Mäyrä: In Tampere, we established the research group on digital culture studies already in the late 1990s. Studies of games did not initially gain a lot of understanding from grant organisations or elsewhere, but we continued to work on the area, and gradually became increasingly established, with more publications, expertise and some minor externally funded projects under our belt. The Game Research Lab was established in 2002, and we gained more critical mass by starting to offer a Master's Degree in Game Studies. The collaboration with the digital culture

and game studies teams in the universities of Jyväskylä and Turku led to establishing several key research themes, and a series of Academy of Finland funded projects, which then formed the foundation for achieving the *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*. One could say that the Centre required two decades of sustained work in cultural game studies.

Researchers at the CoE GameCult focus on meaning-making processes and cultural agency in games and play especially in four research areas. Can you tell us more about these research foci?

Frans Mäyrä: Through our research, we had learned that game cultures are highly interconnected, complex, and situated phenomena, so we designed a theoretical model and methodology where its four key dimensions are analysed in connection to all the others: games, game production, players, and their societal framings are approached as an interrelated whole.

As a joint project between Tampere University, the University of Turku, and the University of Jyväskylä, the coordination of the CoE GameCult surely is complex. How does the cooperation between the different locations work in everyday academic life?

Frans Mäyrä: We are constantly testing out different ways of communicating, organising events and collaborating. We have both smaller, sub-topic focused teams, local research groups and then general meetings where everyone meets all the

others. We also use multiple different means of communication, and utilize tools such as shared calendars, mailing lists, shared document repositories and hybrid meeting setups to keep everyone informed and on the same page.



Figure 1. CoE General Meeting in 2020. Photo by Frans Mäyrä.

Usva Friman: Each CoE GameCult university team has their own local coordinator, and I am leading the coordinator team as the CoE’s Main Research Coordinator. We have regular coordinator team meetings and our own communication channels to ensure that we’re keeping up with what’s happening where and when, and to promote activities and collaboration opportunities across university teams. Importantly, we meet with the entire team online once a month to hear everyone’s personal updates and to discuss the current CoE topics, and we organise face-to-face meetings for the entire research group twice a year. We also have online events for community building, such as online game nights. This way, we try to make everyone feel included in the Centre.

Interdisciplinarity is definitely a big topic at the CoE, with more than 30 researchers from different disciplines being engaged with it. Can you tell us more about the importance and/or challenges of interdisciplinary research at the CoE?

Frans Mäyrä: Actually, there were more like 45 researchers collaborating within the *Centre of Excellence*, when we last checked the numbers. The disciplinary and methodological range is indeed very broad, ranging from several humanities and social sciences based game studies subfields to design research, human-computer interaction, data sciences and behavioural sciences. All these fields and their related methodologies are important for producing the multidimensional knowledge and understanding the *CoE-GameCult* is aiming at. There are certainly challenges in interdisciplinary collaboration like this, but everyone does not need to collaborate with everyone else, on everything. There are always some people who have enough overlapping expertise and knowledge interest so that they can build bridges and collaborate, and when you have 45 people who are open to collaborations like this – and multiple times as many in our extended international collaborations – you will gain the benefits of powerful network effects.

161

Usva Friman: This wide range of expertise within the *CoE* is a great opportunity for us to widen our perspectives, learn from each other, and create interesting new collaborations! We also aim to encourage this through our *CoE* coordination work. For example, as a part of our spring general meeting this year, we organised a *methods carnival*, where our researchers would give short presentations about a method or a methodological perspective they have utilised in their own game research, and then discussed these together. The presentation topics varied between embodied digital autoethnography and computational text analysis, and we all learned a lot!

Research in games and gaming is still quite new and young people are interested in pursuing a career in that academic field. What role does the support of young researchers play at the CoE?

Frans Mäyrä: We have thematic sessions in our general meetings that are focused on various research methodologies. In our weekly newsletters we also provide information about multiple funding opportunities: in Finland, there are 2700 different foundations that offer grants for research. Learning about those opportunities and developing skills for grant application writing and communication are in today's academia as important as the actual, fundamental skills in science and scholarship. We also provide a lot of opportunities for peer-support and informal learning, as well as access to advanced courses and training events in all our three universities. The seminars, symposia and conferences that we and our network of collaborators organise are also important researcher training grounds.

162

Usva Friman: We also organise researcher training specifically tailored for our researchers, and things like peer-support groups for applying research funding. In my perspective, the most important thing for young researchers is, in addition to providing the resources to support their research, providing a community where they can receive peer-support from others at the same career stage and mentoring from those with more experience.

From creating opportunities for inclusive game creation to the Pori Laboratory of Play (PLoP): When reading about *the CoE* it becomes clear that communication and interaction with society is an

important aspect in the centre’s work. Can you tell us more about projects that engage with that aspect?

Frans Mäyrä: The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies is doing engaged research that aims to be intimately connected and collaborating with various stakeholders in the culture and society. We have multiple lines of action that have made progress in this regard: e.g., advancing ludic literacy and empowering different kinds of people to be game creators, getting early demoscene (the precursor of game development scene) recognition as a digital cultural heritage in UNESCO’s list, promoting and researching play in public spaces, promoting wellbeing in eSports, among others.

The CoE also wants to strengthen the dialogue between researchers and other societal actors. How are you trying to reach your goals in that area?

Frans Mäyrä: We regularly collaborate with the schools and museums (the Finnish Museum of Games, in particular), in finding ways how research can be translated into concrete and innovative practices (such as game jams in schools, or special game culture exhibitions in museums). We have also joined forces with organisations like We in Games in organising events and dialogue around diversity in game development. Several of our researchers are also serving as experts in policy creation and regulation related to gaming and gambling.

Last year the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies was awarded with the Advancers of Open Science (Avoimuuden

edistäjät) 2021 award by the National Open Science and Research Steering Group in Finland. Congratulations! Open science is obviously a big topic in academia, with aspects such as open access or citizen science. How are you trying to implement that in the CoE’s research? What are the challenges/opportunities?

Frans Mäyrä: Open Science is an essential and natural element in the operation of the *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*. We want to open our work both while it is in-progress, and when we publish it – we are trying to be as informed as possible, as inclusive as possible, and as capable of communicating across various boundaries as possible. We definitely do not want to lock our research (paid by taxpayers) behind commercial paywalls. There are multiple ways for doing Open Science, and prioritising Open Access publication venues is just one of them. We also want to contribute to *bibliodiversity* – encouragement and promotion of diversity in academic publishing cultures and related value criteria, including also publishing in multiple (also non-English) languages. There are some challenges e.g., in not being able to make all research data openly available as there are also important privacy and confidentiality issues that need to be taken into account when working with rich data. One also need to be ready to set aside part of operational budget for open access fees.

Usva Friman: For us, Open Science is about doing better research – and doing research better. By following the principles and practices of Open Science, we are making our research processes and their outcomes transparent, inclusive, and accessible. It is also a part of our ethos of promoting collaboration rather than competition in the academia.

Since three universities and many scholars engage with research at the CoE we are sure that there are a lot of interesting research projects. Can you highlight some past, recent or future projects?

Frans Mäyrä: Just to mention a few, there is e.g., the *Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture (IDA)* (2002) project where our researchers study game industry work practices, and *Growing Mind* (2022) where our game researchers collaborate with researchers from education, psychology and neurosciences. A major ERC (European Research Council) funded project, headed by PI Veli-Matti Karhulahti, is about to start, with an aim for reassessing gaming disorders (University of Jyväskylä, 2022).

How are your plans for the future? Can you tell us something about what we might expect from the CoE in the next years?

Frans Mäyrä: Our fundamental, integrated and interdisciplinary approach has proved to be highly valuable, so we'll continue to explore the agency and meaning-making processes within the four overarching themes that are the foundation for our CoE. We'll continue to study emerging game cultural phenomena, diverse types of games and players and the extension of gaming into other areas of socio-cultural practices, in multiple areas of life and society.

Is there anything you want to add? Please feel free to do so if that is the case.

Frans Mäyrä: Thank you for your interest in the *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies!* We hope that everyone in this field keeps an eye on our website where we'll keep on regularly posting new research publications, news and advance notices

about the events we'll organize (Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies 2022). You can also follow us on Facebook (CoEGameCult 2022a) and Twitter (CoEGameCult 2022b).

References

Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies, 2022. *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*. Available at <https://coe-gamecult.org>, accessed 26 May 2022.

CoEGameCult, 2022a. *The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*, [Facebook] 26 May 2022. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/CoEGameCult>, accessed 26 May 2022.

CoEGameCult, 2022b. *The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*, [Twitter] 26 May 2022. Available at <https://twitter.com/CoEGameCult>, accessed 26 May 2022.

166

Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture (IDA), 2022. *IDA. Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture*. Available at <https://www.dataintimacy.fi/en/>, accessed 20 July 2022.

Growing Mind, 2022. Growing Mind. Research Hub. Available at <https://growingmind.fi/>, accessed 20 July 2022.

University of Jyväskylä, 2022. Project to reassess gaming disorder receives €2m in funding. Available at <https://www.jyu.fi/en/current/archive/2022/01/project-to-reassess-gaming-disorder-receives-20ac2m-in-funding>, accessed 20 July 2022.