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Interview with Per Backlund, Professor of Informatics in the Division of Game Development at the University of Skövde, Sweden

Lissa Holloway-Attaway

Abstract

In this interview, Professor Per Backlund shares his experience working for more than 20 years as a researcher and teacher in videogames. He outlines his initial interest in games, in the early 2000s, while completing a Ph.D. at Stockholm University and teaching part-time at the University of Skövde in Sweden. He shares how he moved from more general research in computer science and IT to a more specific focus on games, particularly on serious games and game-based learning issues. He also discusses his role as a teacher and Program Director in the very large games education (600+ students) at the University of Skövde, sharing the challenges of supporting interdisciplinary research. As founder and chair of the new Council for Swedish Games Researchers, he also describes the aims of the organization: to bring greater understanding to the specific needs of creating a sustainable Swedish ecosystem for game development. He explains the primary objectives of the Sweden Game Arena consortium, meant to promote Swedish game development in Skövde and beyond, and its newest initiative, via the recently-funded Level Up Swedish Game Industry (or Level Up) project, where he serves as university coordinator in the project management team. Finally, he speculates about the future needs for games and game research in rapidly developing and shifting technological and socio-cultural contexts for game-making and game research.

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Keywords: Game Development, Serious Games, Game-Based Learning, Game Research, Game Education, Swedish Game Industry, gameenvironments

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support education and research about games in Sweden to support growth and development.^{iv} Several researchers in Sweden came together in meetings in August 2022, and before, to begin to formulate the idea for the council and articulate our interests and purposes. We know there are many researchers in Sweden interested in games, but there is no clear starting point to inform what we can and want to do. In fact, game research is scattered in so many places in Sweden, in sociology departments, in computer science departments, and in media departments, and more. Even though we are so dispersed, we know there is 'something' that unites us, and that core would be interesting to identify.



Figure 5. Materials developed by game writing students in a workshop at the University of Skövde. Photograph © Rebecka Thor.

Again, I think in our council we need to be inclusive, and we don't want to find one, single common goal, but it would be helpful to work together. The aim of the council is really to try to identify and collect all our researchers and start talking among ourselves as we try to find a common voice for games research. That might be further down the road, but it's our starting point: talking and sharing. Right now we have 50

members, but we are growing. We are trying to find a clearer picture of who does what and where – a mapping of game research in Sweden. And this is a good start to identify what might be our core. This will be of interest and value to all researchers, but possibly most particularly for Ph.D. students who may have similar interests, but come from different disciplines and departments. This may support them to not only target where games research is, but help them to approach games from other subject areas and to share insights and research as they develop their Ph.D. projects. That is what seems achievable in future.

Another aim, beyond the inventory and mapping, is to help support funding and contacting potential funders to help them to understand what research is possible. That is actually a very practical problem for us. Games can be in IT and informatics, but not only there. Games can include cultural and business issues, as we've discussed. Games is a huge business in Sweden, and a growing one as it is globally, yet we still struggle with where to find games funding because many people still don't understand where and how games research, not just development, is relevant. Games can and should be the actual core for research, not just as an add-on for other identified fields or subjects in a funding call, as is the situation now. We want games to be researched in their own right. For example, I am in an EU Horizon application now about *healthy living*, and they do mention games as a possibility to conduct research in the call, but it's not very clear how to identify and connect them, and not central to the call. These are typical challenges then when looking for funding. It would be much better to see games as the primary focus area, not a secondary interest in funding calls. We *deserve* research in Sweden on games as the primary field. And if we as the Council of Swedish Games Researchers can start to talk with funders, politicians and others, maybe we can achieve that future goal.

Do you think, then, that there are unique issues, problems, and challenges within the Swedish game development community, as opposed to other countries, for example? What makes it special, or not?

My impression is that in Sweden, and also globally, the game industry is very diverse. And that diversity is significant. So, we have very large studios with thousands of people employed around the world, as we do here in Sweden. But I think the bulk of the Swedish industry is composed of smaller studios with 10 to 40 people, for example, working. What has happened in Skövde is exceptional in that in 2002, when the first games study program began, there were no game studios in Skövde. But since the first one started in 2005, at least 20 to 30 studios are here now, and several more starting every year. Not all survive, of course, but that increase has created a rich and diverse local and regional eco-system here, definitely primarily composed of small studios. However, even then it is currently changing, most notably with Embracer Group coming in and buying many studios. But at the core, the ecosystem is still about small teams and about creativity and some sort of entrepreneurial success stories.

Importantly, the studios are dominated by Swedish developers, even if we have expanded in our international connections, sometimes through studio hires, but also because our own students start their studios here. And as they grow, they often recruit internationally, especially from Europe. So, in that way games in Skövde are international, which is quite remarkable, but the Swedish presence is strong. The big successes are those like Coffee Stain Studio, Iron Gate Studio, Stunlock Studios, which have been around for many years, but have had recent commercial successes. But even the smaller studios have successes in business here, as they make games on a regular basis and have stayed in business a long time, Flamebait Games, Pieces Interactive, Ludosity, Piktiv. They expand and hire people and many of them include

our students. Those who don't succeed with their own startups, often get involved in other constellations, through other studios.



Figure 6. Entrance to the Sweden Game Conference 2019, sponsored by Sweden Game Arena, held at a local sports arena, Arena Skövde. Photograph © Rebecka Thor.

So, in that way Skövde has also become a local safe space to fail. That's important. You can try to start a studio, but if it doesn't work, you can maybe succeed in another capacity with another studio. Skövde, then, is an open and safe context to try. There is a multi-tiered support system here, and by developing a real *community* around games, people are more aware about what can happen within game development contexts. Although we can't neglect the inspiration generated by the big success stories, you can be successful on many levels in game development, and we don't have to measure only multi-million-dollar success stories. I don't think everyone strives for that. You can come to Skövde and feel that if you are interested and interactive, there is a place for you, a community. We start that support when students begin to study when, for example, we form them into interdisciplinary teams for game development that simulate real teams in the commercial sphere. So, in the

beginning, they work to learn together about what it takes to be part of an inclusive community. There is a tradition that if you come to Skövde to study games, you will meet the people that you need to know.

One definite community constellation for support has been Sweden Game Arena (SGA) a consortium for game development and research among the University, a local science park and with regional and local authorities.^v You’ve been involved with SGA since it was established. Can you discuss its purpose? How has it changed or developed since inception and why was it founded?

There were several initiatives going on, but the actual foundation was with conversations on the management level at the university here and at Science Park Skövde (then called Gothia Science Park). But several others were involved in discussions too, and I was part of that. SGA started as a project with regional funding (from Västra Götalands region) to strategically build the community around game development and to create a consortium with the primary partners, along with the region, being the University of Skövde, the Science Park, and the local municipality (Skövde Municipality). But also, it was important to make sure the university prioritized games, as our educations were so successful. So even though occasionally we feel frustrated trying to incorporate academic interests in the work on game development at SGA, which is more business-oriented, overall, there has been much engagement from the university in the consortium. And also, the Skövde Municipality has been part of the funding. They even co-funded two of our Ph.D. students working on games and learning (Anna Sofia Alkind Taylor and Björn Berg Marklund) at the university. They probably understood very early on that games could be something special for Skövde, and now they even market Skövde as *Spelstaden* (“The Game City” in English). There is a sense of pride at the Municipality about the game studios that

have started here.

We hosted the first conference that would become the Sweden Game Conference (SGC) on a small scale in 2010. We had just a couple of invited speakers with a focus on educational games and SG, but 2015 was when there was a tipping point for the SGC. Then we arranged this conference and another international research conference (VS Games). At that time, we stayed on campus, but we co-organized the conferences. We had, for example, Raph Kostar, as the keynote speaker. But then we couldn't fit properly in our spaces on campus, and we made the decision to move to the local sports arena in Skövde for the conference space. In 2016, we held it at the sports arena and that was a huge expansion. That was a much, much larger space, and I worried that we wouldn't actually be able to fill it, but we did. We had 900+ attendees and that was true in the following years. We held it there consistently until the pandemic, and we are still considering options for new conferences in new spaces, but we've been very successful overall.



Figure 7. Overview of the Sweden Game Conference 2019 Expo. Photograph © Rebecka Thor.

I think one challenge for SGC though is how to incorporate academic perspectives. We've had academic tracks in all conferences, and some speakers on academic topics, but development and commercial and business spheres have definitely been the bigger focus. I think that's okay, but there are many academic conferences that focus on games, and instead, we should try to attract them here to Skövde, rather than trying to start our own academic tracks and incorporate them fully into SGC. We need to become better at organizing globally established game conferences, or related areas, and hosting them here. Last year, for example, we held a teacher symposium at SGC, sponsored by the Council of Swedish Game Researchers, with about 30 international attendees. So that was a start, and it shows we can still attract others and build expertise to consider academic topics and research more fully.

Recently, the Level Up project, a large project focused on games in Sweden, has been funded.^{vi} Can you discuss its aims and objectives and your role in the project?

This is a clear spin-off project from SGA. It moves beyond the initial aim of SGA to understand and build the local game community. With this new initiative now, we have really broadened our perspective from local games in Skövde to much more regional interests, but also, we now have additional funding from Tillväxtverket and so now we truly have a national goal. We really do need to strengthen our understanding of the game business and game research on a national level. In this way, with Level Up as an extension from SGA, maybe now it can become really a *Sweden Game Arena*. We have always really been focused on building a local environment even if we included Sweden in the name – this was partially because nobody can pronounce Skövde. But now we have a bigger national focus. The aim is to coordinate and strengthen the Swedish Game Business, as well as research and education to make a Swedish ecosystem visible. My role is as the university

And finally, just because it's the *buzzword* of the time, what do you think about artificial intelligence (AI) and its potential impact on games?

I definitely think a lot will happen there. I'm not well informed of all details as AI is not my area, but I can already see a growing interest in our student thesis projects. That's important as we are preparing future researchers. My master's students are asking many questions about how AI tools affect game development. We have several projects focused on understanding the role of AI for graphic artists in the future, for example. And I'm sure AI will drive tool development too. Studios, big ones, in particular, already use a lot of AI, for data mining and analysis of play behavior to name a few areas. They are very advanced, so possibly a context to study. One student that I am examining is making historical connections to other technological revolutions before AI, such as how photography revolutionized painting and other visual arts. But also, of course, we can think about how AI will change jobs and job markets. I don't think we have to worry about how AI tools will take over our jobs, but we need to consider how they may transform certain jobs and practices and create new jobs we didn't even know could exist. All new technologies create as many jobs as they eradicate. I don't think anyone was that concerned about how the job market for portrait painters was eliminated because of photographers, but it certainly changed many cultural practices, nonetheless. So, we can be forward-thinking in all of these considerations.

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ⁱ Henrik Engström was then a Senior Lecturer in Informatics working in games. He is currently a Professor of Informatics in the Division of Game Development at University of Skövde. Lars Niklasson was a Professor of Informatics. He went on to become vice-chancellor of the University of Skövde.

ⁱⁱ Ulf Wilhemsson was then a Senior Lecturer in games and is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Skövde in Media, Arts, Aesthetic and Narration teaching in games. He is also former head of the Division of Game Development.

ⁱⁱⁱ University of Skövde offers one of the largest educations for games in the world with over 600 students across 12 different programs at bachelor's and master's level. At the bachelor's level, educational programs include 2D Graphics, 3D Graphics, Animation, Design, Game Writing, Sound, Music, and Programming. At the master's level, 1-year programs are offered in Digital Narration: Cultural Heritage and Game Technology, Games User Experience, and Serious Games and there is a 2-year program in Game Development (University of Skövde, n.d.).

^{iv} The Council of Swedish Games Researchers (in Swedish named *Svenska Spelforskarrådet* or SSFR) was founded in August 2022 (The Council of Swedish Games Researchers, n.d.). The two primary aims as stated in the mission statement are to: "1) Develop a meeting place to exchange ideas and knowledge; and 2) Develop a united front for communication of what we do and why game research matters." Currently, Per Backlund is the chair of the Council Board.

^v Sweden Game Arena is a platform to support local and regional game development in Skövde and in Västra Götaland. It includes over 200 professional game developers and has released more than 100 games through 20+ teams in startup initiatives (Sweden Game Arena, n.d.).

^{vi} The Level Up Swedish Game Games Industry (Level Up) project runs from May 2023 to August 2026, with total funding of approximately SEK 27 million, including new funding of SEK 10.5 million and earlier funding of SEK 16.5 million. The funders for this project have strong local, regional and national interests and include Tillväxtverket (The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) Europeiska Regionalfonden Västsverige Sweden, Västra Götalandsregionen, Skövde Municipality, Lindholmen Science Park, and Science Park Skövde. The project partners include Science Park Skövde, together with the University of Skövde and RISE (The Research Institute of Sweden). The project is under the brand of the Sweden Game Arena.