



# Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings

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## Introduction: All Your Base Are Belong to Us

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They are suddenly everywhere. Games. There used to be a time when games were isolated into particular, small enclaves like video game parlours or kids bedrooms where early electronic games beeped and were easily lost among other toys. Of course, one could be a game hobbyist, but that would mean something like belonging to a chess club, or gathering together with friends to play some boardgame or for a session of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Today digital games are over a twenty billion dollar industry worldwide. Not only are games driving the development of ever more powerful PC technology, there are now several competing game console systems and a variety of other platforms are at rise. People are not only playing alone with their consoles and computers, but over local area networks with friends and strangers, and even organising themselves into online clans and guilds in the Internet. In the words of (now notorious) *Zero Wing*: "All Your Base Are Belong to Us".

Games have also broken the boundaries of specific places. Mobile gaming is still at its infancy, but it has potential of giving birth to completely new game genres that combine location information and messaging into an augmented reality where fictional, game-related content is laid over the real world. Currently, though, restrictions of handheld devices and such network services as SMS or WAP compose bottlenecks for wireless multiplayer gaming.

Simultaneously, there are signs that games are becoming more ambitious in artistic terms. This is by no means a given; it is a long-term impossibility to develop games into a direction where is no market, no gaming community's





sensibility to support it. Games have established themselves as a traditional “low” cultural form with self-adopted anarchic freedom to explore bad taste, sexual stereotypes and simple competitive or violent confrontations without the restraints of established culture. The counter-cultural attitude is perhaps one reason for games’ popularity; like rock music, comics and other originally youth-cultural phenomena, games can signify a symbolic break with the dominant cultural order and worldview. Nevertheless, the first generations of game players have grown up, and the expectations of are getting higher. Can games develop into new forms of art and entertainment that can both inspire, challenge *and* offer escape and multiform relaxation for their increasingly diverse audiences?

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Despite the direction that development of games may take in the future, the fact is, that for a long time now games already have established themselves as a cultural form. They are played by a wide variety of different people, from different age groups and with different backgrounds, all over the world. They are discussed, debated and sometimes condemned. New games are eagerly expected and reviewed in press and on WWW pages dedicated to game criticism. Games offer pleasure, suspense and various aesthetic experiences and challenges for an increasing portion of population.

There is probably no way that a single game can please everyone (even if some companies seem to be trying, as the increasing popularity of genre crossovers proves). The most likely scenario is that the fragmentation and development of different game genres and gaming subcultures continues. But games are also becoming an increasingly flexible medium: it is possible to play many popular games in different ways (*Deus Ex* as perhaps the most famous example), suiting the preferences of different gamers. Large online games are in a similar way attempting to support both conflict-driven (PvP battles) and collaborative, explorative or social gaming behaviours. It is becoming increasingly complex to say what exactly we are talking about, as we are discussing games. To quickly list some of major dimensions, firstly (1) the game product with its programming code and subsequent features (the “potentials”), (2) the experiences of particular gamers (competent or not) playing this game (the “actualization”), and (3) the interpretations and discourses produced in the community that give significance to the gameplaying – these are all important, but different aspects of the phenomena.

The many dimensions of games as an object of research partially explain the multiplicity of approaches in contemporary game studies. Another reason for this variety is the recent origin of game studies as an academic research field. There has been lively discussion on the definition of disciplinary identity for game studies: what is proper research of games and what is not. There are certainly questions that are at the formal “core” of games, but the gamers experience on games and the larger cultural issues that contribute to games’ meaning to us, are important research areas, as well. The *Computer Games and Digital Cultures* conference recognizes in its title the need for dialogue, or dialectic, of these dimensions that will hopefully inspire and stimulate the game studies.



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Interdisciplinarity of game studies is obvious and it goes beyond the borders of academia. Art and media scholars are looking into games, but so are researchers and developers with technical background, or with training in multimedia, computer sciences, fine arts, cinema, theatre, music or even architecture. Where theories of interactive narratives long dominated the research field unaccompanied, there are now a plethora of possible approaches where new combinations of methods are created as new research problems present themselves. Even if game studies as an academic discipline is still in the making, some of the basic tools and approaches for games research have already entered the critical discourse. There are the first steps to form a formal and aesthetic nucleus of game studies, or *ludology*. The cultural studies or media studies angle to games brings with it a considerable tradition of research dealing with issues like audiovisual language, gamers' identity, or their sources of pleasure in games and the social and cultural phenomena framing them. And the results of both approaches can be put into use in *applied game studies*, as design tools or methods that inform development of new, artistically interesting and hopefully also economically viable gaming concepts.

The dedicated study programmes that train game developers and researchers are also beginning to emerge. It is possible to attain BA or MA (or BSc/MSc) in computer animation, visualisation and various games technologies in numerous universities. The more general and theoretically oriented researcher training is connected to the advance of learning in this area. Many young scholars, as well as MA and PhD students are currently at the forefront of academic games research. Previously, the low intellectual and cultural status of games has led to academic neglect and underdevelopment of models that would meet the demands of this extremely rich and multiform area of culture. It should be remembered that games belonging to different genres can be analysed under same conceptual and theoretical framework only to a certain degree. *Colin McRae Rally*, *Tetris*, *EverQuest* and *Max Payne* all have their distinctive features and offer considerably different experience of gameplay. A new generation of scholars, immersed in popular culture and games since childhood, has the sensitivity necessary to perceive and recognize such distinctions, also in their academic work.

The paper proposals submitted for the CGDC conference were an interesting cross-section of the current state in the game studies. The geographical reach of academic interest in games, first of all, is delightfully broad. We received submissions from most parts of the world: Europe, North and South America, Australia and Asia. Even if the games and game cultures are limited by the access to high technology, they are quickly spreading as a part of globalizing consumer culture.

Another gratifying fact to note was the extensive range of approaches and topics represented by the paper proposals. A diverse group of people with expertise in many different disciplines is turning their attention to games. The categorisation and session titles of CGDC reflect many of the most popular subjects: the aesthetic, narrative and other game theory issues, the research of different games, as well as the meanings attached to game playing





in social and cultural terms. Particularly massively multiplayer online games emerged as a popular subject. Other important subject groups were those investigating the new platforms and gaming concepts, the possibilities of games in education and economic questions of games production.

The specific goal and emphasis of the CGDC conference is to bring together three groups of people: the academic research community, the game developers and the general audience interested in (or worried by) games. We recognize the difficulty of making one event serve all these groups' needs, so there are three conference sub-sections that have a different emphasis: the first conference day has a workshop programme that has a focus on design issues (even while maintaining analytical frame of mind), as well as an extensive Finnish-language programme targeted to the general audience. The aim of this latter programme section is to educate and inform, as well as to offer a possibility for public discussion. This event is organised in cooperation with *Aamulehti*, a daily newspaper, and *eTampere*, the local information society initiative. The last two days are dedicated to the academic papers and to the keynote lectures delivered by some of the most innovative and analytically minded researchers and game designers in the world.

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The pages of this *CGDC Conference Proceedings* document a certain phase in the evolution of game studies, and we hope that it is of use and has some enduring value for the research community.

We are grateful to the Academy of Finland and the Nordic Cultural Fund for supporting the event. The Nordic cooperation has been the key element in the creation of the conference, and we at the University of Tampere want to thank all the members of the board, and particularly the Department of Digital Aesthetics and Communication at the IT University of Copenhagen, who organised the preceding *Computer Games and Digital Textualities* conference and collaborated closely on CGDC. We also want to thank our corporate sponsors and collaborators. An international games conference has been welcomed enthusiastically to Finland, proving once again the open-minded attitude and zest for innovation in this country.

Frans Mäyrä

*Professor, CGDC Conference Chair*