Södertörn University

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Introduction to special issue: experiencing games: games, play and players

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In August 2010, the first Nordic DiGRA conference was held in Stockholm. The theme of the conference was player experiences and player studies in digital games; a theme very much in line with the Scandinavian tradition of user-centred design. The need for a conference in the field of game research was obvious due to the sheer amount of academics in Scandinavia working in the field of digital games. The conference attracted participants from all over Scandinavia.

DiGRA is an international association of scholars within the field of game research. The first international DiGRA conference was organized in 2003 and attracted a broad range of scholars from all over the world. In 2010, DiGRA introduced the regional conference Nordic DiGRA. Introducing a Nordic branch calls out for some reflection regarding the specific characteristics of Nordic game research. Did the conference programme indeed reflect a particular Nordic approach to game research and, if so, what kinds of subject matters or methodologies are characteristic of this approach?

In this special issue we have collected five articles, all dealing in different manners with the issue of player experience. Apart from this themed focus, which might be one important characteristic of Nordic game research, the articles also share a common approach: the researchers base their research on empirical studies of players, rather than on analyzing and interpreting the games as such. This empirical emphasis may indeed be rooted in the Scandinavian tradition of user-centred design, as the task of engaging with and understanding users lies at the core of such

approaches. However, game research and user-centred design differ considerably as well. In user-centred design, the empirical study is part of a larger design process, and the study of users serves as a guiding principle in the construction of software. In game research, empirical studies uncover game properties that may – or may not – have been intended by the designers. The games are usually a given; the focus is mainly on the experience of the players rather than how this may inform the design process. Hence, the Scandinavian focus on empirical research highlights games as played, rather than games as designed artefacts.

The articles included in this special issue cover a wide range of approaches to empirical studies, ranging from large-scale quantitative studies (Kivikangas et al.) over interview and survey studies (Hagen, Montola and Waern) to the sudden observation and insight that inspires a whole new direction of research (Toft Nørgård).

J. Matias Kivikangas et al.'s review of psychophysiological methods in game research belongs to the experimental tradition within empirical research. The ultimate goal of such methods is to measure player experience rather than interviewing players about it. Accordingly, the relevant data of this type of studies include pulse, perspiration, eye movement and similar physical indications. This experimental approach to game research is a huge undertaking from a technical as well as theoretical perspective. Kivikangas et al. point out that, in the context of games, psychophysiological research still suffers from lack of commonly accepted theoretical approaches and methods for studying the playing experience – not least with regard to the game-specific challenges. For example, the physical act of using a game controller may influence what is measured as experience. The review article offers a wide and accessible view to the research in the area and, hence, may be useful to students or scholars addressing the field, designing studies or using findings from such studies.

In 'The corporeal-locomotive craftsman: gaming in *World of Warcraft*', Rikke Toft Nørgård introduces an alternative theoretical conception of the player experience, including the physical efforts of the player as an integral rather that a peripheral aspect of the gameplay experience. With the emergence of movement-based controllers such as *Nintendo Wii* bodily involvement with games has become a prime focus of attention in game research (Simon 2009) as well as in human–computer interaction (Jarnfelt et al. 2009). Jonas Linderoth (2010) looks at computer games from the perspective of ecological psychology (see Gibson 1986 [1979]) and argues that

all computer games involve perception–action cycles where physical action possibilities and perception are tightly coupled. However, the current studies of corporeality tend to be limited: in her critical review of previous literature, Toft Nørgård shows how the corporeal activity and experience have been treated as being either peripheral to gameplay or being an exclusive feature of certain designs. However, she argues that the corporeal aspect is central to all kinds of computer gaming, and that the playing experience cannot be fully understood without taking into account how gameplay is bodily manifested. Accordingly, Toft Nørgård emphasizes the tapping of buttons, the maintenance of rhythm, and the way the body needs to be understood as part of the gameplay experience of any kind of computer game.

Markus Montola, in 'The painful art of extreme role-playing', addresses two non-digital live-action role-playing games that aim for extremely negative emotional experiences. The concept of 'bleed' was first used by a group of the Nordic role-playing designers (Jeeps community 2010) to describe the situation when a player cannot fully distinguish her own emotions from those of the character he or she is trying to portray. The designers of the Jeeps community deliberately aim to achieve this effect with their designs. Montola interviews the players of two Jeep community games in order to describe what they actually experience. He reports on very strong negative emotional and even physical reactions to the game content, but also how players appreciate these experiences, leading to the somewhat contradictory term of 'positive negative' experience. Montola addresses an apparent paradox of role-playing and playing in general; that is, how the experience of feelings that commonly are considered undesirable still can lead to a positive gameplay experience. The game examples (that Montola bases his analysis on) are extreme and to some extent even offensive, but they are in no way unique. Horror games can be scary and disturbing in a very similar way (see Perron 2009). In sexually themed MMOs such as *Sociolotron* (Sociolotronics LLC 2005), previously studied by Brathwaite (2007), players explore themes such as sexually transmitted deceases, demons and bondage sex and slavery. Montola's notion of a 'positive negative experience' provides a partial answer as to why people engage in such experiences.

In '"I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist!!" Bleed in the context of a computer game', Annika Waern analyzes the experience of falling in love with the game characters in *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009). Like Montola, Waern uses the concept of bleed to describe how the storyline of the game sometimes emotionally affects players, ending up sharing some of the

romantic emotions that the played characters exhibit. In the philosophy of fiction, an important theoretical issue has been the apparent paradox of readers or viewers being deeply moved by fates and characters that are obviously fictional (e.g., Radford 2004 [1975]; Lamarque 1981; Walton 2004 [1978]). In the context of game research, different solutions for this issue have been proposed (e.g. Tavinor 2010; Lankoski 2010), but these accounts are theory-driven. Montola's and Waern's data-driven qualitative approaches offer a complement to pure theory-driven takes on understanding these kinds of experiences. In addition, they provide some insights as to why some people choose to play games that offer strong emotional experiences, be it negative emotions or emotional attachment to fictional characters.

In 'Designing for player experience' by Ulf Hagen, game developers become the subject matter of empirical study. On the basis of informant interviews, he describes the design process and how this is directed toward the player experience as seen from the point of view of the designer. The study shows that the user-centric approach to design which largely originated in the Nordic countries has had little impact on Swedish commercial game designers. Player-centric design is not used in the companies studied. In the film industry, autobiographical design is pervasive: typically producers or director select a screenplay on the basis of their personal experiences and what they think will appeal the audiences (see Berman 1997; Bone and Fernandez 2004). A similar model has, by and large, been adopted by the game development industry. Consequently, Hagen shows how game companies emphasize maintaining and communicating an experiential vision for a game in design to the crew producing it. Typical methods for this communication are mood boards, concept art and vertical slices (very small prototypes) as well as rather *ad hoc* terminology. Hagen's article illustrates the potential conflict between an auteur-driven artistic development process and the very concept and goal of user-centered design.

Altogether, these contributions may indeed reflect a special Nordic style of research. The focus on empirical studies is combined with a focus on the player's emotional and corporeal experience, and a focus on the game as play activity rather than as a design construct. Even Hagen reflects this focus in their seeming disappointment of the lack of importance that game designers place on user-centric studies. This disjunction may be the critical issue that Nordic game scholars need to address: we may be excellent at studying the already designed games, but how can we make these studies matter in design, and also be applied during design? As the articles in this issue show, there are important and surprising insights to be acquired from the

empirical study of game play, findings that may feed directly back into design. It remains an open question how to close the loop.

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