



CFA: Intersection in Games

Ropecon 2018 Academic Track, July 27th, Helsinki, Finland

According to Johan Huizinga, play “promotes the formation of social groupings, which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.” The traditions, genres, conventions, and norms established in play – and encoded in games through design – are multiple and varied. The diversity of play practices is something to celebrate. When these ludic traditions encounter others, cross with different forms of media culture or push against the expectations of everyday life, tension and friction is created. These intersections are sites of creativity and innovation, blends of various experiences or explore new combinations. But they are also contested sites, where conflicts emerge.

The seminar topic, intersection in games, is one interpretation and elaboration of the theme of Ropecon this year, “life and community”. However, the seminar has a broader scope, looking at Huizinga’s secret societies and the border traffic between the ludic and the quotidian, but also at intersection in games and between them. Indeed, the list of possible topics includes but is not limited to:

- Hybridization (physical/digital, game/art, leisure/work, amateur/professional)
- Tensions between different gaming cultures
- Negotiations between the ludic and the quotidian
- Players and intersectionality
- Games as media, games and other media
- Digital culture, analog games
- Convergence culture
- Design as a bridge between traditions
- New combination in relation to form, genre, tradition or games or play
- Theoretical approaches to delimiting games, play, puzzles and toys

The emphasis of the seminar is on multiplayer games that players engage in while being physically co-located as that is also the focus of Ropecon. Ropecon is a large, independent, convention devoted to role-playing games, larps, board games, miniature wargames, collectible card games, cosplay, and the like. The convention has been running annually since 1994. The seminar is organized together with the University of Tampere Game Research Lab. *Intersection in Games* is the inaugural academic seminar hosted by the Ropecon.



The seminar presentations should encourage discussion. Every paper will be presented for 20 minutes and discussed for 10 minutes. The sessions will be open for all Ropecon ticket holders, but the presentations should be drafted with an academic audience in mind. We warmly welcome submissions from younger scholars and PhD candidates, as well as from more established researchers.

The papers to be presented will be chosen based on extended abstract review. The abstracts should be 500–1000 words (plus references). Abstracts should be delivered in PDF format. Please use 12 pt Times New Roman, double-spaced, for your text. The seminar is looking into partnering with a journal so that the best papers would be invited to be further developed for publication in a special journal issue. Aside from this, full papers will not be required.

Submissions should be sent to: academic.program@ropecon.fi

Important dates

Abstract deadline: April 8, 2018
Notification of acceptance: April 30, 2018
Seminar date: July 27, 2018

Organizers

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Trans media games as tools and subject for learning processes

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INTRODUCTION

In the last paragraph of *Understanding Media's* chapter 24, Marshall McLuhan asked “Are games mass media?” for a positive answer, as he has already stated: “That games are extensions, not of our private but of our social selves, and that they are media of communication, should now be plain” (2003, 275). Numerous ontological and epistemological questions emerge as we try to associate the concept of gaming experience with communicational values – i.e., how do we stipulate meaning to something that involves so many different activities as playing with computers, children’s play, or sports?

The concept of play outlined by Johan Huizinga gives us some clues of what we are dealing with: “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but

absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’” (2004, 33). Observing game sessions we notice that ludic activities must always be in action – games only exist when players operate in it, accepting the rules and acting on them. Therefore, gaming experiences assume that: 1) play is always in movement; 2) play depends on information that is presented externally for the actions, like rules. These external information are what Gregory Bateson called *some degree of metacommunication*, “(...) i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message ‘this is play’” (BATESON, 2006, 316). Thus we may infer that ludic action needs several external elements to happen. These elements may be physical, like graphical interfaces (digital games), equipment (sports), or toys (child’s play); they may be also immaterial, since as an element of culture (cf. HUIZINGA, 2004) play is influenced by human society. Bateson states “(...) play is a phenomenon in which the actions of ‘play’ are related to, or denote, other actions of ‘not play’. We therefore meet in play with an instance of signals standing for other events...” (BATESON, 2006, 317).

In *An Introduction to Game Studies* (2008), Frans Mäyrä offers a threefold division for these studies as: 1) researching games themselves; 2) researching the players; 3) researching contexts of game-players interactions. He points out the importance of elements of culture in play stating “A concept of games culture can help to bring into light the mostly unspoken backdrop against which games make sense for their players” (MÄYRÄ, 2008, 14). Espen Aarseth (2003) proposes three dimensions that characterize games: *gameplay* (player’s actions, motivations

etc.), *game structure* (rules), and *game world* (fictional elements, game levels etc.). From game design research, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) want to understand how games develop a unique language, defining a *primary schema*: rules, play, and culture.

From these perspectives we may state that gaming experience is defined not only by the relationship between players and the game itself, but also as a ludic activity dependent upon the communication process between players and the elements of a game. This communication process involves the immersion achieved through players' contact with gameplay, plus the production of meaning that happens during/from this activity.

From these discussions, we may define a framework inspired by Friedrich Kittler's media principles of *storage*, *transmission*, and *processing* (cf. 1999, 2010). We suggest a threefold principle for understanding communicational processes in gaming experiences:

- *Understanding*, as we must apprehend rules, gameplay, and contexts of play;
- *Applying*, as we must use this newfound knowledge to act upon the fictional world of the ludic activity;
- *Disseminating*, as we must communicate our findings, learnings, skills, and experiences within the game to other players, e.g. generating a *metagame*.

We have also this framework to elaborate an educational process for future game designers or teachers. The process uses ludonarratives as an object of research and production.

We understand ludonarrative as a dynamic through which a narrative is built in a gaming situation. Game here is understood in Huizinga's definition of play (2004) and narrative is seen as a process of poetic configuration of themes, characters, setting and events, into units of action, time and place, which are developed in a cause-effect relationship (Ricoeur, 1983; Barthes, 1977).

In the **Understanding** phase, we present concepts of Game Studies, Game Based Learning and Narrative. At this point we reinforce the narrative powers presented by Barthes (1977): *mathesis* (several kinds of knowledge intertwined) and *mimesis* (representation of reality).

We offer options of themes that are present in different settings of the "Incorporeal Platform" for ludonarratives. We consider each ludonarrative (gamebook; boardgame; cardgame; videogame; tabletop role-playing game (RPG) as a different media with a symbolic system (code and repertoire), technology (material support) and reception mode (conditions of fruition) in accordance with McLuhan and the Media Ecology.¹

¹ <http://www.media-ecology.org/>

After the students have chosen the themes and setting, based on their interests and learning needs, and the mechanics and gameplay are understood, we move to the **Applying** phase.

First the players create their characters playing a gamebook. Then they experience a ludonarrative with their characters: RPG, Larp, cardgame or boardgame. Afterwards they create a text in the language of their preference. The text is incorporated into the website thus expanding the setting. One example of this process is described in the paper “The Incorporeal Project: Teaching through Tabletop RPGs in Brazil.”²

At this phase we work with what we call *dynamis*: that which the gamer does independently of interface, graphics or story - the dynamics as the “forces or movements that characterize a system” (Morrison 1991: 2, Mäyrä, 2008:16-19).

In the **Disseminating** phase the apprentices must apply the ludonarratives experienced to some specific goal (educational, artistic etc) or create their own ludonarratives. In both cases, the products created must be tested: first within the group and, once developed into prototypes, with the users to whom they were designed. Through this process we have produced cardgames, a boardgames, gamebooks and videogames for educational purposes.

² <http://analoggamestudies.org/2016/11/the-incorporeal-project-teaching-through-tabletop-rpgs-in-brazil/>

The use of a communication theory perspective to game based learning so far has been very productive for our research group.

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