

# From Game Studies to Studies of Play in Society: A Panel

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## ABSTRACT

“From Game Studies to Studies of Play in Society” panel discusses the changes in the focus areas of academic game studies and the possible ongoing transformations in how play informs and shapes culture and society.

## Keywords

Game studies, play studies, playfulness, play research, diversity, ludification, gamification

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## **RATIONALE FOR THE PANEL**

Recent years have been a period of changes both in the game cultures as well as in the study of games and play. While there has been notable interest in how the demographics of game players have changed, or on how new, casual forms of games have been introduced to the market, less attention has been directed to how game studies as a field has been changing. Such changes may include transfer of focus in the subject matters, methodologies, theory frameworks as well as in the institutional placement and allegiances of game studies.

This panel will bring together several leading researchers of games and play to present how they perceive the role of games, play and playfulness for game studies, and also the role of game studies for surrounding society and culture. One line of argumentation has maintained that the culture and society itself has become more open to play, that engaging in game play has become a more viable option for non-stereotypical game player demographics, and that the importance of game studies for other fields of learning is therefore rising. A contrary argument would claim that straying to non-games research areas, game studies is in danger of losing its distinctiveness and will become merged with other areas such as work and leisure studies, innovation research, human-computer interaction research, or other areas of social or technical research.

## **INDIVIDUAL PANEL PRESENTATIONS**

The following position statements will be discussed in the panel. The panelists will also engage in discussion that will be driven by questions related to the focus and direction of games and play studies.

*Frans Mäyrä, University of Tampere, SIS/Game Research Lab (panel chair):*

### **From Games to Play - And Back Again?**

The original starting points of the research work in the UTA Gamelab have been dual at least. On the one hand, our work has been rooted in the desire to understand the distinctive characteristics of different kinds of games and what is involved in playing them (the “basic research” component). On the other hand, Gamelab has carried out collaborative work that involves future oriented research into emerging areas such as mobile games, location-based and pervasive games, social media games, free-to-play, and gamification (the “applied research” areas; cf. also Mäyrä 2009). Rather than competing, these two strands or dimensions of research have been mutually complementing and inspiring. The experiments and data of applied research projects have, for example, been used to prove or refute theories, test methodologies or drive new conceptual work. Said that, the expanding scope of research topics and areas has been an observable trend. Our team still works with established and more experimental entertainment or artistic games and game genres every day, but our voices are also heard in studies that deal with learning, working, health, planning,

archiving, and the design of applications, services, processes and environments of many kinds, just to give a few examples. It is clear that no single theoretical basis is sufficient for all that applied work. At the same time, for game studies to provide distinctive contributions of its own to such collaborations, it is essential that the basic research regarding the essence of games, play and playfulness is carried out in the “home ground” of game studies. A recent research project, *Ludification and Emergence of Playful Culture* will be discussed to provide an example of such dialectic in action.

*Sebastian Deterding, Northeastern University, Playable Innovative Technologies Lab:*

### **Game Studies, Meet Convergence Culture**

A major contemporary challenge to media theory is *convergence*: constructs like digital information, computing, and networking are decoupling the dispositives formerly known as “the media” into their requisite components, and reassemble them into ever-new, ever-more-fleeting constellations of content genres and storage forms, distribution networks and end devices, producing and consuming roles (Jenkins 2006; Storsul & Fagerjord 2008). One would assume that game studies, traditionally dealing with digital, computational, often networked games, would be spared from this challenge. Yet on closer look, contemporary game studies like other media studies before enshrined a historical state of affairs as a canonical ideal type – the leisure-time play, single home screen, digital entertainment game – whose theoretical abstractions are less and less able to account for the many emergent game and play phenomena spurred by convergence: the extension of gameplay through networked, persistent, pervasive, and cross-media games; the ludification of culture, as forms and practices of gameplay travel into other parts of culture; and the cultivation of *ludus*, as games and play get enrolled by other cultural actors and contexts (Deterding 2015). This talk will show how game convergence opens new research and application areas for game studies, and argue that its challenges can be fruitfully answered by socio-material approaches and methods.

*Mia Consalvo, Concordia University, mLab:*

### **Choice + Play**

Playing games has seemingly become a way to offer us more choices than ever before in how we might want to be, appear, or act: what political alignment or world faction to side with, whether to fight openly or be stealthy in our actions, which particular decision to make within a short timeframe, and of course what to look like, down to our eyebrows and earlobes. And we – players, reviewers, critics, academics- often

embrace those choices, which give us opportunities to control and extend our agency –via play- in ways daily life doesn't allow.

But such choice comes with a price – and we pay in different ways. Sometimes it is via fatigue, when we are provided with too many choices, or irrelevancy, when we find out that our choices that don't really matter that much in a particular game narrative, or when we determine that our choices actually sidestep morality and instead reward gaming the system.

This talk is framed by recent game releases (including *Dragon Age: Inquisition*; *Bioshock: Infinite* and *Papers, Please*) that offer players different types of choices, and examines how they present choice via play, questioning how choice itself has become constructed, and how playing with choice can often feel like being played by choice. Finally, choice and play are posed in opposition to one another, and investigated as both deviations and extensions of daily life.

*Joost Raessens, Utrecht University, Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play:*

### **The ludic turn in media and culture studies**

At the Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play (GAP, [www.gamesandplay.org](http://www.gamesandplay.org)) we do not limit ourselves to games and their surrounding culture as such, but also want to view games and play from the larger viewpoint of cultural transformation. We are witnessing a “ludification of culture” (Raessens 2006, 2014) in which our (social) identities and media use have become progressively more playful (Frissen et al 2015). Games and play increasingly saturate other cultural practices, both in terms of content and use. Playful and gaming perspectives can be found everywhere from traditional media like film and television to new media like mobile technologies and social network sites. The study of digital games and play is not only becoming an integral part of media and culture studies, it is also increasingly seen as a tool for the analysis of a broad range of media experiences.

These cultural and medial changes form the focal points of this presentation. Such developments call for a re-evaluation of the manner in which we study media and culture. The notion of play as a conceptual framework for the analysis of media use, and the question whether the “ludification of culture” refers to, or is meant to be interpreted as, an ontological or an epistemological claim will be discussed. The study of digital games and play enables us to address fundamental changes in the way we create, use and study media (Raessens 2012).

*Sybille Lammes, University of Warwick, Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies:*

### **Play-studies: Power, play and interfaces in the digital age**

In this contribution I will discuss the relation between play, digital media technologies and power. By doing so I wish to actively incorporate play-studies as a valuable theoretical and methodological perspective in game-studies. As cultural studies scholars have argued before, media technologies have always enticed users to play as a way to gain power over the production of meaning. Yet digital technologies and a simultaneous “ludification of culture” (Raessens 2006; 2014) mark a shift in how we play and how we engage with power relations through media (Lammes 2015 *fc.*). Obviously we can no longer speak of audiences or of spectators. Also the notion of higher echelons or systems of surveillance that attempt to control media users and to influence their ideological views in covert ways, becomes at least problematic. We have moved from systems that can be described as apparatuses of control to what Galloway called after Deleuze ‘networks of control’ (Galloway 2004) that are far more dynamic and distribute power in a different way. Nowadays play refers far more to interactions within fluid networks of media technologies in which users are embedded as participants. We play with and within these changeable networks (Lammes 2008). Such networks are ‘navigated’ by the user via the interface, which I will discuss as a highly important mediator for understanding the relation between power, play and the digital.

*Seth Giddings, University of Southampton, Winchester School of Art:*

### **The past and future of players: Ecological and ethological studies of children’s play**

Children were the first mainstream audience for digital games and continue to be a significant if amorphous group of players – both of games targeted at them, and of ‘adult’ games (played with varying degrees of parental and societal approval). This presentation will set out key concepts and methods from a diverse array of twentieth century studies of pre-digital children’s play, from anthropology and folklore studies to ecological models of child psychology. Taken together, and recast in the era of virtual and networked media, these studies undermine familiar distinctions between child and adult, play and work, play and game, the material and the immaterial, virtual and actual, reality and fantasy, human and nonhuman (animal, technological, environmental). I will suggest that these resources should inform and develop game studies’ attention not only to children as players, but also to the ethology of games and players more generally in contemporary technoculture.

*Torill Elvira Mortensen, IT University of Copenhagen, Culture and Games research group:*

### **Painful Play – when fun isn't enough**

In game studies we have seen and discussed transgressive games and game strategies (Mortensen, Linderoth & Brown 2015), and looked at practices such as “griefing,” “ninjaing” and “trolling.” However, this is clearly something, which happens outside of games, and is, perhaps, rather an aspect of playfulness than of gaming. This presentation will focus on the connection between play and pain, particularly the power to hurt others. The fun of dominance, one-upmanship and pure destruction is also at some level satisfying, and it appears to follow digital playful practices in much the same manner as it appears offline.

After exploring the concept of deviance in a game context (Mortensen 2008), this will be a more in-depth discussion of the problematic and often destructive behaviours connected to playfulness. In order to find examples beyond the more recent online antagonistic concerted arguments, this case will focus on correlations between different fan-groups that turn destructive, looking mainly at hooligans and gamers, discussing the pleasure of destructive, asocial practices based on literature, previous research and recent examples of fandom turned aggressive.

*Kristine Jørgensen, University of Bergen, Department of Information Science and Media Studies:*

### **Game studies: two steps forward and one step back?**

Ever since Janet Murray published *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), there have been debates about the ontology of games. Today, 18 years later, Murray's argument stressing games as the future narrative medium, may not seem as radical. Games indeed are positioning themselves as an important medium for storytelling, but they are also increasingly being debated as a medium of expression. At the same time, however, they are approached through playfulness and a lusus attitude.

Today games are a more mature medium and have a different position in society and the public debate. While making game studies more relevant for a broader part of society, this may also have negative consequences. Without revisiting the ludology-narratology debate, I will argue that while the strengthened position of games may be beneficial for the growth of game research, it may also pose a potential threat towards game studies as a field. I will present challenges of this new situation, ranging from new funding options, and the establishment of new game studies research centers, to an increased pressure on free research, and the possible invasion by other fields.

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