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Conference Paper · July 2022

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# Game Development Studies: Illuminating National Video Game Industries

## TOPIC

The video game industry has grown from manufacturers of coin operated arcade machines in dedicated spaces, to producers of mass media and omnipresent software as “constantly updated media services” (Sotamaa & Svelch, 2021, p. 9). News and financial statements are often dominated by major blockbusters (e.g. *Call of Duty* series (Activision, 2003 - ) or *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017)). Yet, the games industry also consists of a large number of smaller professional and unprofessional game makers (Young 2018; Keogh 2019). Furthermore, in trying to pinpoint the major actors of the global games industry (Kerr, 2017), it is likewise important to identify the local and regional conditions of national game industries (Liboriussen & Martin, 2016), such as Scandinavia, Canada, or Brazil. To understand the industry and best practices within, it is therefore important to shed light on small-scale game development and its regional idiosyncrasies.

With its 12-minute presentations and following 30 minutes of discussion and questions, the panel’s aim is to illuminate these idiosyncrasies from two perspectives: First, the panelists were chosen to reflect an internationally diverse group of people with knowledge about regional game industries. By having these local, but international perspectives, we start a comparative study and knowledge exchange of game industries. Second, we invited researchers who study the games industry and their practices, but also professionals from game incubators. This diversity in backgrounds enables an additional comparative perspective not between regions, but epistemes. The incubator experts complement the researchers’ outside perspective by sharing their hands-on experience of what problems and challenges their incubees encounter. Thus, Game Development Studies seeks to foster discussion and exchange on these two levels: internationally and inter-professionally.

## BENEFIT FOR ATTENDEES

The panel’s benefits for DiGRA attendees are twofold. First, the panel expands the already ongoing research of game production studies (e.g. Kerr, 2006; Kline et al. 2003; O’Donnell, 2014; Sotamaa & Svelch, 2021) into a comparative discussion, including the national idiosyncrasies of game companies as situated in bigger, economical systems, by inviting researchers and experts alike. Second, the attendees of DiGRA, while researchers, are also educators who train the next generation of game developers. Most of these future graduates will not (directly) enter the AAA games industry but work their way through the ranks of startups and small-scale companies or found their own. Game Development Studies’ will offer insights into multifaceted problems games industries around the globe face to help create curricula and programs at universities that prepare students for the reality of the games industry.

## PANELISTS

### **Annakaisa Kultima** (Aalto University, Finland)

The history of digital games in Finland is well archived into the Finnish Museum of Games, founded in 2016. The museum presents the long history of Finnish games instead of the general, pseudo-global game industry narratives that many repeat. While the early days of the Finnish game industry is influenced by the technical mastery born on the bosom of the demo-scene, the current industry is tied to various trajectories, including game jam cultures. The studios are multinational and hiring talent from around the globe: 28% of Finnish game staff consists of immigrants. Finnish Game industry has a wide impact on a country as small as Finland. Out of the small population of 5,5 million, 3000 are working in game companies.

### **Christopher J. Young** (University of Toronto, Canada)

Canada is a significant node in the global game industry, particularly in game development through provincial government policy and tax credits. According to a Nordicity (2021) report funded by the Entertainment Software Association of Canada, there are 937 game companies in Canada: 54 percent are micro enterprises with no more than 4 staff; 39 percent are small operations and medium-sized firms with fewer than 100 staff; and 6 percent are vast entities, most of which are satellites of developer-publisher behemoths, such as Ubisoft, which employs approximately 5,700 people in Canada. Even though there is a large pool of game companies in Canada, a small fraction of them account for a disproportionate share of the revenue and jobs. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork with game workers and the political economy of game production, I examine Canada's relationship with the global industry as a significant outsourcing hub to produce foreign intellectual properties and its role as a "net exporter" reliant on foreign sales to generate revenue (Consalvo 2013, Nieborg *et al* 2020).

### **Michael S. Debus** (The Royal Danish Academy, Denmark)

Michael Debus is a researcher based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Over the years he has built and maintained a close relationship to the industry. For example, he supported projects such as *Broken Lines* (Portaplay, 2020) or *Posthuman 2* (Mighty Box, unreleased) in different positions, and founded *Better Games Copenhagen*, a player research company. Currently, he participates in a research project of the Royal Danish Academy. The Game Hub Scandinavia financed project gathers qualitative data on 39 Danish game companies to evaluate incubator activities and startup survival methods. This includes interviews with higher level management, and analyses of products, monetization models, etc.

### **Peter Lübeck** (Game Habitat, Sweden)

Peter Lübeck games industry advocate who's spent the past years developing the games industry cluster and community in Malmö and southern Sweden. With a background in game design and production, he now navigates the political and industrial landscape, to create an fertile environment for game development. Peter has been part of founding and building one of the more established game cluster organizations and hubs in Europe - Game Habitat. Game Habitat operates one of the biggest game development hubs in Europe, housing 25 game companies, from indie to AAA, in Malmö. Peter brings practical experience from game development, uniting different stakeholders under a

common goal, public and private fundraising as well as building physical meeting places for the games industry.

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Annakaisa Kultima**

Annakaisa Kultima is a postdoctoral researcher at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture. She has been teaching and studying game design and development since 2006 in universities in Finland and Sweden as well as travelled as a visiting lecturer around the world. Her research is concentrating on game development cultures, creativity, game industry trends, and game jams. Kultima's PhD dissertation "Game Design Praxiology" examined the multitude of issues of understanding 'games as created' spanning a period of 2006-2016 with an ethnography of hundreds of game professionals. Kultima is also an active member of the Finnish game ecosystem as a designer, consultant and in other roles.

### **Christopher J. Young**

Chris J. Young (Ph.D., University of Toronto) is a librarian and sessional instructor at the University of Toronto Mississauga where he curates the Syd Bolton game collection. His research examines the cultural production of games through ethnographic fieldwork of contemporary cultural workers and bibliographical analyses of media artifacts. His writing has appeared in *Social Media + Society*, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, and the edited volume *Game Production Studies*. He also coedited the special issue "Contested Formations of Digital Game Labor" for the journal *Television and New Media*.

### **Michael S. Debus**

Michael S. Debus holds a PhD and MSc in game studies from the IT University of Copenhagen, and a BA in media studies from the University of Siegen, Germany. He is the co-founder of the Young Academics Workshop (YAW) and a co-editor of both the published (2019) and forthcoming (2022) YAW proceedings. His main research focus is the ontology of games, their constitutive elements, and classifications thereof. His collaboration on goals in games, with researchers from the University of Utah, has produced four papers and multiple conference presentations. Most recently, his research interest shifted towards game production studies and local industries.

### **Peter Lübeck**

Peter has a BSc in game design and a background as a producer on the *LittleBigPlanet*<sup>™</sup> franchise and COO at Tarsier Studios, creators of *Little Nightmares*. He has coached game startups as an independent consultant and as a business developer at Malmö-based startup incubator Minc. He co-founded and is now the CEO of Game Habitat – an NGO devoted to creating the best environment for game development in southern Sweden, as well as DevHub - the biggest game development hub in Europe, housing 25 game companies from indie to AAA.

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