

Perceived Finnishness among four player groups through *UnReal World*

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This paper studies the perceived Finnishness among four player groups in the Finnish survival game *UnReal World* (Enormous Elk, 1992–, later *URW*). *URW* is a joint project of Sami Maaranen and Erkkä Lehmus, initially released in 1992 as a fantasy roguelike game, but soon after, in 1996, the game began to transform into a realistic open-world survival game. The game takes place in pseudorealistic Iron Age Finland (Unrealworld.fi 2021). The game map is procedurally generated and does not represent the realistic map of Finland. Instead, it remodels the characteristics of Finnish flora, fauna, and geographics. As *URW* has been continuously developed and updated for over three decades, *URW* has attracted a broad and active player base who value its realistic survival elements and authenticity. Analyzing the players' perception of Finnishness in the game provides insights into its cultural representation and how the players receive it. Using qualitative interviews (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015; Creswell and Creswell 2018; Creswell and Poth 2018), we explore the Finnishness concept represented in *URW*.

Preliminary interviews with the game developers indicate that Finnish players and those with Finnish heritage living abroad have found the game to be a significant way to reconnect with their Finnish culture (TKU/A/22/121 2019; Walliander 2022). Based on interviews with the creators of *URW*, we classify players into four groups: 1) Finnish players, 2) Finnish players from abroad, 3) players with links to Finland but whose connection to the Finnish language or culture has been cut off or fragmented (such as third- or fourth-generation American Finns), and 4) players with no prior exposure to Finnish culture.

While the Finnish culture represented in *URW* is portrayed similarly to all players, the interpretation of this representation may differ depending on the player's background. The concept of Finnishness is versatile and ambiguous, and its definitions vary depending on the study. This definition is often built on a shared history, but some scholars argue there is no Finnishness but only imagined reality (Taramaa 2009, 44). Nevertheless, we can find symbols of Finnishness, like *sisu* and *sauna* (Taramaa 2007, Chapter 5), representing the Finnish identity, of which both are gamified in the *URW* as well. National identity is constructed and repeated in history, art, media, and popular culture and video games do not make an exception and games replicate national tropes (Bijsterveld Muñoz 2022, 1321).

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In our preliminary research, it seems that *URW* repeats these same stereotypes and tropes of Finnishness in gamified format. *URW*'s representation of Finnishness can be divided into three primary themes: nature, harsh life, and locality.

Finnishness is frequently portrayed through Finland's nature and its seasonal variations. *URW*, a survival role-playing game, seasonally features nature, with each season affecting the player's survival. The seasonal variation creates a core gameplay loop, requiring players to prepare for the winter by stocking up on food and building shelters. This gameplay loop is the basis of *URW*'s interpretation of ancient Finnishness and nature. However, the game's depiction of harsh survival in Finnish nature partially violates the romanticized perception of Finland's nature. *URW*'s representation of Finnishness and nature aligns with Paatelainen-Nieminen et al.'s (2016) assertion that Finnish popular culture often portrays Finland's nature as a beautiful and romanticized place reflecting the established myths of Finnish culture's toughness and resilience.

Mental myths of Finnish are important in *URW*'s portrayal of Finnishness. The gameplay creates a perception of hard and harsh life combined with the Sisu attitude, and this stereotype is prevalent in Finnishness. Like nature, the mental strength aspects are used in commercials to represent Finnish willpower. This is used in commercials like the Oululainen commercial, where a child struggles to cut bread with a small knife. The boy cuts his finger but does not make a sound and looks shyly at his father. The father beside him watches judging and asks: "Well, are you hungry or not?" The boy continues to cut the hard bread. The commercial ends with the text "Hard as life".¹ *URW*'s gameplay represents and reproduces these myths of harsh survival in Finnish nature, which can be argued to be a part of Finnishness or at least part of the myth of Finnishness.

Finnishness is also linked to the locality and location (Taramaa 2009, 43). Finland's history is characterized as a region between East and West. Although *URW* is set in Iron Age Finland, the influence of Eastern and Western cultures can also be seen in the game world. In addition, there will be a northern dimension, when the game also indirectly models Sámi tribes. *URW* builds the diversity of these different cultures through material culture. At the same time, this repeats the concept of Finnishness between East and West as its distinctive region. In *URW*, this is reinforced by the aggressive Njerpez tribe coming from the east. Although *URW* is a realistic survival game, Finnish pre-Christian beliefs have been gamified, creating a new layer of Finnishness.

To ensure a diverse and comprehensive group of players, we have obtained permission from the game's creators to use the game's forums and Steam page. We have also collaborated with the designers to create a comprehensive questionnaire, which can provide researchers with interesting data to analyze. We have preliminarily examined the ethical issues of the research to ensure the anonymity of each interviewee when processing and using the data, acknowledging the size of the *URW* game community.

While our study examines Finnishness in the *URW*, we remain open to new research directions should significant findings emerge from the interview data. These interviews also collect oral information on specific player cultures and experiences. Overall, this paper analyzes the representation of Finnishness in *URW*, exploring how players perceive and interpret the game's cultural elements. Through our research, we aim to contribute to understanding how video games can influence the construction and reproduction of national identities, cultural stereotypes, and somethingness.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Salmenperä, Aleksi, dir. 2010. *OULULAINEN - Kova Kuin Elämä*. "Oululainen - Hard as Life." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smusX8AirYY>.