

# My Game History: Teaching Against Hegemonic Game History

**Annakaisa Kultima**

Aalto University  
[Annakaisa.Kultima@aalto.fi](mailto:Annakaisa.Kultima@aalto.fi)

**Jaakko Stenros**

Tampere University  
[Jaakko.Stenros@tuni.fi](mailto:Jaakko.Stenros@tuni.fi)

## Keywords

game history, hegemony of play, play history, game education, play, toy, games

## INTRODUCTION

When we tell the history of our playing, we tell our life story. Yet the popular histories of games (e.g. Kent 2001, Kohler 2016, Donovan 2010, Schreier 2017; see also Suominen 2017) tend to foreground specific products, technologies, or designers. While everyone has different experiences with games, not all of those experiences are represented in the written histories or game heritage work (cf. Nylund 2020). Public narratives simplify or even disregard experiences that are not easily digestible or seem too unusual. Over time, these hegemonic histories (cf. Fron et al. 2007, Harrer et al. 2019) will impact the valuation of even private experiences.

To challenge and diversify understandings of game and play histories, we conducted a pilot course *My Game History*, where 26 students of shared, discussed, and reflected on their personal play histories, and then developed these into a touring museum exhibition in two iterations between 2016 and 2018 (Kultima & Stenros 2018). The work emphasized how it feels to play games, what kind of actions are meaningful, social aspects of play, and how play affects our lives from childhood to adulthood.

In this abstract, we reflect on this pilot project and invite peer scholars to battle against hegemonic game histories with us. We argue that our course format works in challenging the student's views on the historical value of games and play. In addition, the reflective work done by the students strengthens their self-understanding of personal play – and its role in becoming game experts. We claim that this course format could be more widely adopted to challenge hegemonic understanding of game history in game education.

## THE PROJECT SETUP

*My Game History* ran as an optional university course twice with thirteen (game education) students from the University of Tampere in 2016-2017 and another thirteen in 2017-2018. The course was designed to build students' project work skills (creating a museum exhibition) through learning-by-doing.

The course format emphasized writing about personal play experiences, week after week, punctuated with group discussions and peer-feedback. In the discussion students identified what was unique and what was common. Students also selected their key play objects and photographs related to their personal histories to feature in

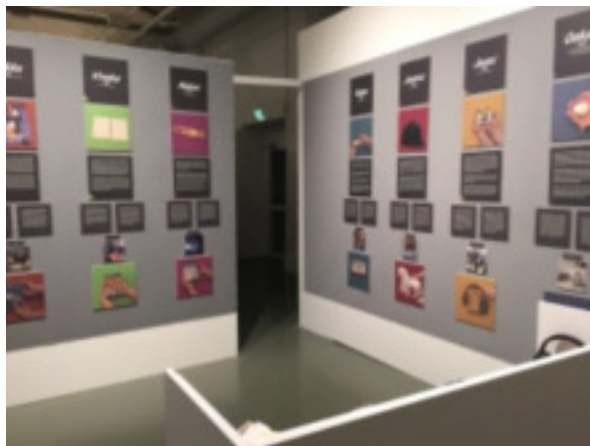
Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

the exhibition. Focus was on telling about specific personal experiences, and explicitly not on how such experiences would be representative of popular narratives on game histories.

The experiences selected for the museum by the peer group were stories about games and playing that were recognizable or resonant, yet rarely described. They were unique stories striking in their emotional honesty, discussing e.g. what gaming - or its denial - feels like.

The resulting exhibitions showcased (and preserved) plural play histories, including ones that are ignored by official narrativizations, museum exhibitions centered on game products, and even academic histories. The both exhibitions were originally open for two months in a small studio space (approximately 15m<sup>2</sup>, See Fig 1) at the The Finnish Museum of Games (see, Kultima & Peltokangas 2019). The presentation format (word count, style of image, graphic design) was set before the exhibition work by the teachers. As one of the perks of the project, the play implements selected by the students were photographed by a professional (Fig 2). On top of that, the students also selected photos from their family albums.



**Figure 1:** The final layout of the first exhibition.

The 26 main stories produced ended up telling how parents set constraints, what access to technology meant, and reflect on social pressures. They also mediated on moments of joy, favorite games, the formation of friendships, gaps between generations, play between siblings, disappointments, and passions.

## **REFLECTION**

Already on the first iteration of the course, the teachers were surprised how intimate and personal experiences the students were willing to share – and how deeply human and personal play histories are. The discussions among the students were open, supportive, and insightful; reflecting together created a communal feel. This atmosphere was successfully reproduced on the second iteration.

Interestingly, many students initially thought that their experiences were unique. However, even deeply private play experiences can be recognizable to others since shared toys or games were used. Furthermore, it turned out that many common and shared play experiences are not accounted for in current histories or representation of the past. The course seemed to help with countering the alienation of not seeing one's play patterns reflected anywhere. As an example, one student shared a story where an

egg timer was used in their household to limit playing time - only to find out that there were other students that had exactly that same experience.



**Figure 2:** Collection of images of personal play items of students.

We were successful in moving beyond the narratives relating to “gamer identity” and providing a significantly more varied and natural continuum in their everyday lives’ play experiences between toys and games, digital and analog. As a result, we believe that the students also felt more encouraged to represent their actual gaming histories instead of censoring their stories to fit the hegemonic historical narratives that their course readings on game history books were providing. The exhibition was also popular - it has toured around Finland and is one of the most popular ones at the museum.

Finally, this course format shows a great potential for resisting the hegemony of game histories - providing a space to work on the quotidian yet meaningful play experiences beyond the hegemonic. And to avoid the biased view of otherness that the game students might experience when reflecting their experiences on game history books and publicly reinforced written narratives. Thus we are currently working on packaging the course materials for any school to reproduce this course setup in their local curricula and we invite everyone to help in spreading this format around.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Donovan, Tristan. 2010. *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Yellow Ant.

Fron, Janine; Fullerton, Tracy; Morie, Jacquelyn Ford and Pearce, Celia (2007). “The Hegemony of Play”. In *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. DiGRA Digital Library.

Harrer, Sabine; Nielsen, Simon and Jarnfelt, Patrick. 2019. “Of Mice and Pants: Queering the Conventional Gamer Mouse for Cooperative Play”. In *Extended Abstracts of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI EA '19)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, USA.

- Kent, Steven, L. 2001. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon--The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*. Crown.
- Kohler, Chris (2016). *Power-Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*. Dover Publications (October 21, 2016).
- Kultima, A., & Peltokangas, J. (2019, web version). *The Praised, The Loved, The Frowned-upon, The Forgotten. A View into the wide history of Finnish Games*. Rupriikki Media Museum Publications 6. Tampere Museums Publications 145. Available at: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-1546-7>
- Kultima, Annakaisa & Stenros, Jaakko (eds.) (2018): *Minun pelihistoriani. Henkilökohtaisia tarinoita suomalaisten pelaamisesta ja leikkimisestä*. TRIM Research Reports. University of Tampere.
- Nylund, Niklas (2020): *Game Heritage: Digital Games in Museum Collections and Exhibitions*. Doctoral dissertation. Tampere University.
- Schreier, Jason (2017). *Blood, sweat, and pixels : the triumphant, turbulent stories behind how video games are made*. Harper, New York, 2017.
- Suominen, Jaakko (2017). "How to Present the History of Digital Games: Enthusiast, Emancipatory, Genealogical, and Pathological Approaches". *Games and Culture*, 12(6), 544–562.