My Game History: Teaching Against Hegemonic Game History

Annakaisa Kultima
Aalto University
Annakaisa.Kultima@aalto.fi

Jaakko Stenros
Tampere University
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
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 15m², 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.

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**


