Svenska Spelforskarrådet - Programförklaring

The Council of Swedish Games Researchers Program Statement

Svenska Spelforskarrådet (The Council of Swedish Games Researchers) was inaugurated on August 18, 2022, during a workshop with participants from 10 Swedish universities and research institutes. This document summarizes the workshop participants' collective view of the state and needs of Swedish games research.

Games are amazing. Play and games precede human culture. Games are diverse, ranging from digital to analog, from solitary to social, and from gameplay driven to free-form and centered around imagination and creation. Games can engage people, bring them together, and help people create culture with and for each other. Games are also horrible. They are arenas for toxic behavior and bullying, exploitation of vulnerable people, and a driver for unsustainable economic models.

In fact, games are all these things at the same time, and Swedish game research is bridging technological innovation and social consciousness around this complexity in a unique way. Games are a central aspect of the everyday lives of not only young people, but a large part of our society as a whole. With games, we have the opportunity to harness our potential to improve the lives of people and build a better society. We also need to meet the challenges games are posing so that we actively develop their potential for good while managing their risks and negative impacts. This intersection is where we as researchers want to offer our competence to make sure that games are becoming the best they can be and enrich the lives of all. However, the challenge is to communicate the importance of games research among different sectors of society such as public discourse, policy making, public sector, players, the games industry, and games education.

The diversity of games research touches on many disciplines, which is a strength, but leads to complexity in understanding what games research is, and in some cases, its relevance to society and industry. Games research is truly interdisciplinary, spanning academic fields from arts and humanities, to the social sciences, to information technology. Many relevant research problems reside in the intersections between traditional academic disciplines. This constitutes several challenges. Examples include: lack of understanding of what the body of research consists of; challenges with policy making on different levels; communication gaps between researchers and other stakeholders; and limited access to funding for dedicated games research.

Concerning the body of research

Games research can encompass many diverse areas such as game studies, game design, game production and games' impact on society. This is a challenge due to the variety of research traditions and approaches. We argue that games research cannot unify or resolve all approaches, but in the short run we can achieve two improvements:

1) Develop a meeting place to exchange ideas and knowledge.
2) Develop a united front for communication of what we do and why game research matters.

Games researchers need each other for a fuller picture across disciplinary boundaries and should strive to improve understanding and to work together. This will benefit research and education within the field. The downside of interdisciplinary collaboration is that it does not adhere to traditional academic department and subject divisions which means that games research may appear to lack cohesion from an organizational perspective. This diffusion can be alleviated with things like publication channels, a national conference, PhD schools and joint research efforts which can lead to a more unified view of the field in the long run.

Concerning the communication gaps

There are structural differences in how academia and the games industry do their work (e.g., different time frames and production cycles), which can hinder exchanges and collaborations. There are also mis-alignments in values and goals which can hinder communication on both sides.

In order to conduct research, games researchers need to have access to the needs and experiences of the industry, as well as the ability to disseminate our results in a way that can further games and game development. Currently, this is not possible due to several challenges including the time-frame of academic research versus the short iteration cycles of game companies, as well as issues relating to disclosure and funding.

There is a bias in academia towards working with large game companies, but there are actually a lot of small companies which should be considered. In fact, small companies make up 80% of the games industry in Sweden. If academics do not reach these companies and shift our thinking away from "bigger is better," we are missing out on opportunities to conduct relevant games research both in terms of understanding the broader industry, different contexts of development, and understanding the unique ways in which smaller companies are pushing the boundaries of games.

Of course, not all academic research must directly address industry, however there are important opportunities to be aware of, which can be opened up if academic research is more effectively linked with the games industry. Continued separation between academia and the games industry could also hinder the development of games as a medium, as well as lessen the positive impact games could have on society in general. In addition, without closer collaboration between industry and academia, it is harder to bring relevant insights to education programs. Finally, games education cannot help advance the industry and society without close collaboration between academia and industry.

Concerning infrastructures and funding

Digital games have grown to be a dominant aspect of culture and an important industry for Sweden. Sweden also has a large number of academic game programs. Still, research funding available for studies of game development, games, and their impact on society is limited and fragmented. Furthermore, research funding is not well adapted to research in creative industries. There is a significant difference in growth: the games industry in Sweden (and worldwide) has been growing for more than 17 years. According to the annual report Swedish Game Developer Index 2021, the annual turnover in the Swedish games industry has increased from 1 billion to 35 billion SEK in the last decade. The growth in funding for games research should follow a similar curve.

There is a general lack of understanding from policy makers, funding agencies and grant reviewers about the games field and its relevance economically and socially. A consequence of this is that there is a lack of targeted funding, causing games research to be addressed in relation to other areas, such as healthcare, technology, psychology et cetera.

The lack of collaboration infrastructure makes our research opaque and inaccessible to the public, policy makers and industry. By collaborative infrastructure we mean an organizational structure that enables joint efforts in the field of game research. A lack of targeted funding also lessens the impact of our research, constraining it in scope and reach.

Targeted funding will help to create a strong infrastructure which will make game research sustainable. It can increase both visibility and impact, as well as clarify the relevance of games in Swedish society, both culturally and commercially. It will also bring the different areas of games research into harmony, and also strengthen connections to other disciplines. Furthermore, increased games research funding will have a direct impact on state-of-art games education in Sweden.

Concerning policy recommendations and public discourse

Games researchers can offer support for policy makers with a perspective that is based on research and the democratic and participatory ideals of Swedish culture, as well as being a voice in the public discourse available to educators and journalists. We will also aim to offer a nuanced approach that is based in an understanding of the social and cultural value of games and gaming, but also is not bound to the game industry, commercial actors, or other interests.

Call for action

The goal of the Council of Swedish Games Researchers is to facilitate a call for action to address the above issues, among others, with the goal of strengthening and promoting Swedish games research and education. We will reach out to industry and society stakeholders to create a more nuanced debate about games and the need for more targeted research. We will reach out to the games industry to identify methods for long term cooperation. We will work within academia to create visibility for the field and highlight the specific need for games research to be developed as an important discipline in its own right. We will approach funding agencies to argue for the need of specific funding streams for games research.

Are you a researcher who wants to be a part of this movement? Please sign up to become a member of Svenska Spelforskarrådet (The Council of Swedish Games Researchers).

Contact information: Per Backlund (per.backlund@his.se) Chair of the Svenska Spelforskarrådet interim board.