

How Local Policies Shape Game Production: A Nordic Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Until very recently, games scholarship has directed little attention to the local game development scenes and their interrelations with regional and global production networks. Although the logic of globalization continues to erode cultural differences, regional aspects still importantly contribute to the forms of game development, producing characteristically glocal (global + local) assemblages of work and play. In this paper, we explore the different policies around national game industries, putting the focus on Nordic countries and especially Finland, Norway and Sweden. We believe that this work will be relevant for anyone who wants to understand cultural and creative industries in general, and the framings and contexts that shape the forms of game making in particular.

As argued by Kerr & Cawley (2012), the spatial distribution of the games industry is importantly connected to the local histories and networks, as well as financial, cultural and labour markets. Nieborg & de Kloet (2016) point out significant differences in national game related policy initiatives (e.g. tax incentives, subsidies, industry regulations) within Europe and indicate that the vastly different levels of maturity national game industries demonstrate are closely tied to these creative industry policies. They also argue that Northern European countries are leading in research and development expenditures and game-related public research investments.

Historically, the Nordic region is not a central node in the international circuits of game production. Still, global hits like Clash of Clans (Supercell) or Minecraft (Mojang) have recently transformed Nordic countries into a globally acknowledged start-up hub. While popular explanations for the success of the Nordic industry range from lively hobbyist scene, technological expertise and low workplace hierarchies, local support initiatives are also often mentioned (de Prato et al. 2010, Nieborg & de Kloet 2016). In this study, we

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want to put these claims under critical examination. What concrete evidence do we actually have about the role of local support structures and policies around game funding? How can we address the glocal nature of game production characterized by the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies? How can we conduct comparative research on game production cultures and associated policies across national borders?

The paper will first outline the societal context behind the individual support structures. The Nordic countries are small open democracies known for a welfare state system that not only provides tax-financed educational systems and wage synchronization but also active political incentives towards the media and cultural sphere (Syvertsen et al. 2014). As discussed in our prior study (Jørgensen, Sandqvist & Sotamaa 2017), it is reasonable to assume that the Nordic model, characterized e.g. by relatively high average income, open economy, developed information technology infrastructures and highly ranked work-life balance, have positively affected the evolution of the Nordic game industry. While the comparative part of this study focuses on the national level game funding policies, we will also discuss the role of such shared initiatives as the Nordic Game Program funded by the Nordic council (2006-2015). Furthermore, we agree with Kerr (2013, p. 220) who has pointed out, that "any analysis of games production in Europe needs to attend to the varying national and local cultures of production as well as the larger European legal, economic, political and cultural context".

Our preliminary understanding indicates that there are significant differences that seem to have affected the development of national game making scenes. In Norway, game developers can get support especially for game projects that foster Norwegian cultural heritage. This funding is coordinated by the Norwegian Film Institute. In Finland, most funding for game companies has historically been channeled through Tekes, The national technology and innovation fund, putting more focus on technological and economical aspects. In Sweden, there have not been any coherent policy related to supporting domestic game development but in recent years there has been a movement towards a similar system as in Finland. We will discuss the consequences of these different approaches and show how policy-level labelling of games as cultural artifacts/technology projects/business proposals can have implications for their regulation and funding and thereby for the very making of games (see also de Prato 2010).

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