How to Play Academia: Conceptual and methodological observations

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INTRODUCTION

In the recent theorizations of higher education, contemporary universities are increasingly conceptualized as including various elements of game and play. Academic research is described as a "publication game," underlining the instrumental strategies for publishing in highly rated journals (Butler & Spoelstra 2020). Funding applications appear as a game in which the researcher must constantly adapt their approaches to the rules given from outside (Hokka et al. 2024). At the same time, academic productivity metrics have brought forth a diverse set of gaming practices that aim at artificially enhancing both individual and institutional reputation (Oravec 2019), which end up falling into Goodhart's law when metrics of performance become the goal (Fire and Guestrin 2019). While scholarly discussions concerning the gamelike elements of higher education take place in various fields, contributions from game studies scholars are rare.

What we propose in this paper is that, indeed, game scholars have good reasons to participate more actively in these discussions. We argue that academic playing should not be limited to career-focused resource management games of optimizing and maximizing. Instead, we support a more activism-based approach that puts the focus on identifying the different-level goals and rules of academia and negotiating the strategies and tactics used for navigating this terrain. The contributions of this paper are twofold. We begin by introducing the activities of a peer mentoring group for doctoral researchers that we organized to reflect on the various forms of academic games and play. After this we will move on to discuss the contributions games scholarship can have for contemporary higher education research and how providing some conceptual clarity can help these discussions gain even more significance and value.

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METHODOLOGY: THE POWER OF PEER MENTORING

How to Play Academia, organized during autumn 2025 in Tampere University, was a thematic doctoral course that relied primarily on peer mentoring and facilitated group discussions. Students were invited to critically discuss selected aspects of academic life with peers and to learn how others in a similar position navigate the academic world. Selected basic concepts familiar from games and game scholarship – including e.g. goals, rules, strategies, and tactics – were used as a basis for the session-specific discussion assignments. Associated readings highlighted various aspects of how current-day academia is played and how scholars can potentially deal with this.

While we represent two different ends of the academic career spectrum – most of us are doctoral researchers and one of us serves as a full professor – we had no problems finding shared issues to complain about. As much as the course was driven by identifying problems and challenges in academic game-playing, we were also inspired by resistant and alternative ways of playing together. It needs to be acknowledged that we all write from privileged positions afforded by whiteness and tolerant university culture (our institution allows us to conduct the described activities as part of the regular curriculum), among other factors. In this respect, we find it important to practice self-reflexivity towards our positions. While we feel that other scholars can potentially learn from our experiences, we are also aware that what works for one may not work, or even be available, for another.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS FROM GAME STUDIES

After discussing the practical arrangements of the course (that we hope others will copy and develop further) and some of the key findings from our discussions, we will move on to explicate the theoretical and practical contributions we feel the study of games and play can have for the study of higher education systems and politics on a more general level. Often studies of "gaming" in academia have focused on the negative consequences of this behavior: gaming is inappropriate and hurtful and should not be done. This sort of stance communicates a very limited perception of games. We feel that it is worth considering how our perceptions of university change if we, instead of focusing only on competition and optimization, define the game through creativity, cooperation, selflessness, empathetic role-taking, and playful attitude.

While selected classic concepts like the 'magic circle' or 'lusory attitude' have been recently applied to academic game-playing (e.g. Butler & Spoelstra 2020, Walker et al. 2024), more recent theorizations from game studies remain mostly untouched. We argue that for example studies on optimization (how players seek the most efficient ways to play and win), counterplay (how players modify and reconfigure games, creating spaces for creativity and political expression) and co-creation (how players create participatory and collaborative relationships with other stakeholders) can provide insightful starting points for studying contemporary academic life.

It is also clear that we need to be attentive about the games we play. While academic games of power can easily trick us into maintaining the status quo, "a different framing of play can allow us to pitch game-making, or playful scholarly activity, as sites of radical resistance and reimagining" (Walker et al. 2024, 9). We need to observe both the everyday tactics people use to play along in the neoliberal university, and the

more long-term strategies people have for changing the rules of the game. Scholars have also suggested that instead of focusing primarily on the "finite games" of career, optimizing, individual merits, and winning, activism-inspired approaches can help us better address "the infinite game" and promote inclusion, respect, and honesty (Harré et al. 2017, Elsom et al. 2024). What sort of university do we need if we, following DeKoven (1978), want to argue that the value of a game is not determined by its rules, structure or even outcome, but the ability to play together?

Finally, as argued by Tim Beasley-Murray (2021, 50), "academic activity in general, and more specifically as a set of sub-disciplines, bears salient similarities to Huizinga's conception of the game. Like a game, each academic discipline has its own demarcated territory and mode of demarcation; and like a game, each has its own rules that govern actions that are permitted or forbidden." The DiGRA 2026 conference provides a timely opportunity to examine our own increasingly institutionalized field of game studies, how it masters its players, and how we can keep on rewriting its rules.

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