

# Assessment of the Master Programme in Game Design, Uppsala University, Campus Gotland 2022

## Evaluators' report

### Introduction

This report concerns the assessment of the self-evaluation of the Master Programme in Game Design (MPGD) at the Department of Game Design, Uppsala University Campus Gotland (UUCG). The evaluation panel (EP) was given the assignment to evaluate the courses and programmes offered by the department, according to established principles of peer reviewing and guided by the *Model for course evaluations at the Faculty of Arts, Uppsala University 2018–2022* and the *System of Qualifications (The Higher Education Ordinance, Annex 2)*. The EP was presented with an extensive self-evaluation which was followed up by a visit to Campus Gotland on the 5th and 6th of October of 2022. Follow-up interviews with staff were also conducted after the visit. The self-evaluation and the visit was concerned with all the game related educations at the Department of Game Design at UUCG, four bachelor programmes and one master programme. Some information about general structures may therefore be shared between this report, concerning the master programme, and an additional report concerning the bachelor programmes. In the EP's evaluation presented here, the following eleven aspects presented in the *Model for course evaluations at the Faculty of Arts, Uppsala University 2018–2022*, and in *Riktlinjer för Uppsala universitets modell för utbildningsutvärderingar*, have been taken into account:

1. that on completing the education a student should reach the goals set in the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance as well as goals specific to the education, i.e. that the actual results of the education correspond to expected ones.
2. that the content and form of the education have a disciplinary foundation and are based on proven experience
3. that the education centres around student learning
4. that the learning goals are examined in a way that is both suitable and follows legal practices, and that progression through the cycles is ensured
5. that teachers have up-to-date knowledge of both the subject matter and pedagogy/didactics, and that the department has enough teachers to ensure quality in their education

6. that the education furthers internationalisation and international perspectives as well as sustainability
7. that gender equality is an integrated part of the education
8. that the education meets the needs of both the individual and society with regard to bildung and professional training, and prepares the students for their future careers.
9. that the students/Ph.D. students can influence their education, with regard to planning, implementation and follow-up.
10. that all students have access to a study environment suitable to their needs, and
11. that the education is assessed and developed continuously.

## About the visit

During the 5th and 6th of October 2022 the EP met with staff and students during sessions concerning different topics, such as staff at certain programmes, leadership, administration, and student representatives of the education. The approach of the EP was to systematically invite the staff and the students to present what in their view was the strongest points of their work, and to reason about what improvements could be made.

## Evaluation Panel

Alma Jonasson: Second year student at the Bachelor's Programme in Objects Conservation at UUCG. Student representative.

Martin Pichlmair: Associate Professor and Co-Head of the Games Programme at IT University of Copenhagen. Experienced game developer with a PhD in Computer Science.

Mirjam Palosaari Eladhari: Associate Professor (Docent) at the Department of Computer and System Sciences at Stockholm University in Sweden. Taught game design since 2004 at various universities. PhD in Computing Science. Research areas include AI based game design and interactive narratives.

Ylva Ekström: Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication Studies at the Department of Informatics and Media (IM), Uppsala University. Former Pedagogical Director of Studies at IM and Educational Developer at UU.

## Evaluation

The Master Programme in Game Design (MPGD) is young in comparison to the four different Bachelor programmes in game design given by the same department. The first cohort of the MPGD started their classes in the fall of 2019. Hence the programme is still in a formative state. The faculty have however provided ample material that makes it possible to assess the programme. The material consists of syllabi, student evaluations of the courses given, the text in the self-evaluation and the interviews the EP conducted with the staff and students of the programme.

Structurally, as seen in the provided **syllabi**, the MPGD executes cycles of theory, practice, and reflection in its first year. Theoretical courses and tasks are followed by practical

implementation, which in turn is followed by reflection. The second year offers possibilities to branch out to other areas of interest in a liberal education framework, utilizing the strength of being part of Uppsala University that has a wide breadth of specialization courses. These specializations are then possible to use fruitfully in the final master's thesis work at the end of the education. We assess this structure to be sound, and aligned with aspects 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8.

The language of instruction on all courses on the programme is English, and international perspectives are certainly an integral part of the programme. A large amount of students on the programme as well as teachers are internationally recruited which further strengthens internationalisation (aspect 6). Also sustainability issues and gender dimensions are integrated into the critical and reflexive approach of several of the courses' syllabi (aspect 7), and is also confirmed by the students.

The material provided by the faculty with **students'** evaluations of the given courses, and the protocols from meetings where student representatives have partaken gives the impression that students give their education a high rating, and that they are actively involved in shaping their education (in line with aspect 9). This impression was corroborated when we interviewed the students of the education when visiting the campus, where they also expressed they were pretty happy with their study environment (aspect 10).

**The scientific quality** of the masters is according to our assessment high (aspect 2), especially in the light of the challenges that comes with working in a comparatively young field, where structures and processes have few precedents and hence cannot be taken for granted. The scholars teaching at the MPGD are in parallel with their pedagogical work developing methods and sharing them with the research field in international conferences, indicating that they have "up-to-date knowledge of both the subject matter and pedagogy/didactics" (aspect 5). For example, Patrick Prax presented methods of how to teach critical game making in 2020<sup>1</sup>, and Ida Toft and Sabine Harrer presented methods on how game design can be approached in affirming communities in 2021<sup>2</sup>. We highly condone this approach.

**In a national and international comparison**, the masters programme at UUCG is part of an expanding network of masters' programmes that in different ways are concerned with game design of games and experience design. As such UUCG is carving out its niche successfully as an institution offering cutting edge educational content in the area of critical game design. For context, on a national level it can be mentioned that the University of Skövde (HiS) offers masters experience since 2020 geared towards either Serious Games, Digital Narration, or Game User Experience. Södertörn University offers a masters that is concerned with games but in the larger frame of media technologies. Stockholm University is currently in the process of developing a strand on their computing science masters that will be concerned with AI for game design as well as computational methods for accessibility for people with function variations. The staff of UUCA are an active part of the research community, and together with their colleagues at other universities' masters education programmes can complement each other

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<sup>1</sup> Prax, Patrick. (2020). Boal on a Boat – Teaching Critical Game Making. [http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA\\_2020\\_paper\\_33.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2020_paper_33.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Toft, Ida, and Sabine Harrer. (2020). "Design Bleed: A Community Affirming Game Design Methodology." Paper presented at QGCon: The Queerness and Games Conference, May 14, 2021.

(rather than competing) on a national level. On an international level the MPGD are most closely related to equivalent educations at Tampere University in Finland, at Malta University in Malta, at IT University of Copenhagen in Denmark, and University of California Santa Cruz in USA. The EP would like to encourage the university to keep supporting their staff with means to continue their systematic work on developing design educations while documenting and publishing about their processes and findings in order to enrich the field.

**Our overall assessment** of the MPGD is that the work is excellent. A primary strength of the Department and MPGP is the ethos to combine critical theoretical approaches with practical implications that in turn may have valuable societal impact. The programme is of high standing both nationally and internationally, and the scientific quality is of high standard. The department's already well-developed system for continuous assessment and development (in accordance with aspect 11) makes the plans for expansion of the MPGD appear to be viable, and the process of working towards creating two additional masters strands is already under way, where future courses are developed and evaluated. Our foremost recommendation is for the faculty to continue working as they do with the master programme, as the results are good and have promise of growth for the future.

## Recommendations

In terms of improvements it is at this time not possible to give clear pragmatic advice regarding the syllabi since the program is still young and in a formative state, except for, as stated, encouraging the faculty to continue working in the same vein.

Our recommendations are concerned with how the university can support the staff at the department in continuing to improve their work, which we see is of high value to Uppsala University. Our recommendations also involve the bachelors programmes. The reason is that it is the same department and staff teaching in all the programmes, changes in one program affects the other. We suggest:

- **Increasing the number of students taken in on masters level and decreasing the number of students admitted to the Bachelor Programmes.** This could potentially create an improved balance of workload, allowing the staff to reiterate and develop the bachelors programme, and scaling up the masters programme. If this is implemented it might also solve the issues of the university not having large enough lecture rooms for the bachelors students.
- **Take temporary measures to ease the process of hiring immediately necessary staff.** It appears it is difficult to recruit staff for two reasons. First, it was reported that it is difficult to recruit people to move to Gotland. Second, there is a scarcity of people that match both having the practical expertise required for game development, and the academic requirement of a doctorate degree. Therefore we suggest that the UU makes an exception in their recruitment policy for a small number of recruitments (3 - 5) over a set period of time (5 years) in order to solve the immediate staffing problems. For positions at the MPGD exceptions might be made for hires who have a master of fine arts. For hiring to the bachelor programmes, it appears of paramount and immediate importance to hire staff with industrial expertise of game development and education in computer

science (but not necessarily a doctorate degree) to the Bachelor Programme in Game Design and Programming. The department has an excellent track record in encouraging and making it possible for existing staff to further their academic credentials, a recent example being that of Dr Nataska Statham succeeding in acquiring a doctorate degree. Hence we assess that an endeavor with hiring exceptions as outlined below does not pose a risk for lowering the formal academic credentials of the department as a whole.

- **Increase the accessibility of teacher training for the staff located on Campus Gotland.** Some general pedagogical training courses are only available at the Uppsala Campus. It would benefit the staff to have equivalent education available at the Campus Gotland. For more specialized, area specific training, we recommend that the faculty actively supports their staff with time and costs needed for training.