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**Title:** Digital Games as a Source of English Vocabulary for Finnish Writers

**Year:** 2021

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

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**Please cite the original version:**

Tissari, H., Koskela, O., Tuuri, K., & Vahlo, J. (2021). Digital Games as a Source of English Vocabulary for Finnish Writers. In G. Kristiansen, K. Franco, S. De Pascale, L. Rosseel, & W. Zhang (Eds.), *Cognitive Sociolinguistics Revisited* (pp. 69-80). Mouton De Gruyter. *Applications of Cognitive Linguistics*, 48. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110733945-006>

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Digital games as a source of English vocabulary for Finnish writers

The material for this paper comes from Finnish people who wrote about their experiences of the music of digital games. We collected 184 texts, all but one written in Finnish. There is relatively little code-switching into English at the clause level, but the vocabulary of the texts is influenced by English on a continuum from clearly English words such as *comfy* to established loanwords such as *uniikki* ('unique'). We will consider how the influence of the English language used both in the games and in discussions about them characterizes the vocabulary of these texts and how the English language enables the authors to enter the game world.

Keywords: digital games, the English language, experience, the Finnish language, music

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## 1. Introduction

This paper describes the usage of English within the discourse of gameplay experience. The basis of the article is data collected in the Game Music Everyday Memories project,<sup>1</sup> which aimed at investigating people's relationship to the music of digital games. We asked Finnish people to write about their experiences of the music of digital games and received 184 texts,

amounting to 43,258 words. The writers comprised 144 men, 33 women, 5 other, and 2 who did not want to reveal their gender, their ages ranging from 11 to 59. The focus was on memories that people cherish. Cherishing a piece of music refers to different activities intended to preserve and keep in contact with the fond memory. For example, it may mean that you like to recursively listen to it in your mind (Huovinen and Tuuri 2019). The earliest memories date back to the 1980s.

The core of our article consists of scrutiny of English words in the Finnish texts. However, we also wanted to acknowledge the player perspective by incorporating ideas from theoretical frameworks that stress the experiential dimensions, as well as the bodily and (inter-)active roots of language, thought and art (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Maturana and Varela 1998; Nöe 2015). It is this emphasis that connects this article to cognitive sociolinguistics.

In the following, we first define what we mean by English words and how our research perspective relates to the embodied experience of games. We then discuss the English words and their usage in the data.

The data attests two different clines. One is from established loan words to less established loan words to code-switching. The other is from discussing features that are particular to digital games to features that games share with other things (such as music) to discussing everyday life.

## 2. Method and theoretical background

Our data can be considered as a sample of a discourse specific to a subculture, in this case game-experience discourse related to a video gaming subculture characterised by an abundance of English words and phrases. This has historical roots. While state support for digitalization in the early 1980s made computers relatively widespread in Finland, gaming was not seen as a relevant part of the computer hobby. Therefore, active hobbyists needed a new kind of language for talking about games (see. e.g.. Nylund 2016). Since the games, technologies and discussions were global and mainly in English, the Finnish gaming discourse was populated by English words from the outset. Indeed, the two early gaming Finnish fanzines, *Micropost* and *Floppy Magazine*, both received an English title despite being otherwise written in Finnish (Nylund

2016). New media and games have even been recognized as sources of English influence on Finnish public discourse (Taavitsainen and Pahta 2008).

Our definition of an *English word* here is one whose spelling resembles that of its English counterpart or is the same. If code-switching is defined as the “use of more than one language in the course of a single communicative episode” (Heller 1988: 1), many of the words that we here call English words can be understood in terms of code-switching. However, a number of them are established loan words and the rest are somewhere in between.

In the following quote from our data, the English word *volume* is inflected like Finnish and appears as the object of the clause. We can assume that the entire word is pronounced “in Finnish”, as it is written [*volumea*]:

(1) Esimerkiksi taistelumusiikit olivat hyvin mahtipontisia jotka saattoivat jopa parantaa omaa pelisuoritusta jos *volumea* nosti hieman tarpeellista korkeammaksi.

[For example, the music that accompanied fighting was very bombastic and could even improve my score in the game if I increased the volume a little above what was actually necessary.]

Finnish actually has an established loanword for the same concept, that is, *volyymi*, borrowed from Swedish (Koukkunen 1990: 617). That the word *volume* is used in this way suggests that the player is used to seeing this word while playing the game. This is likely to be the case on many occasions where the writers in our data borrow from English. Similarly, they hear English words while playing and begin to use them (Leppänen 2007). From the perspective of the game-experience discourse, this can be considered as an appropriation of English words into specific discourse, which serves to establish a community with its shared linguistic conventions. For an individual writer, the use of such words is a way of indicating identification and belonging to the game-playing community.

Seen through the theories that stress the bodily and active roots of language, the use of English words within a Finnish discussion can be thought of as an example of how the meaning of a word is primarily “the experiences that it in some way calls up or enacts for us” (Johnson

2018: 88). We may consider such words as affordances that the authors can use to access and evoke experiences, as if to enter the game world.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Proper names: Devices and games

Presumably, reminiscing about the purchase of the device, mentioning its parts and the usage of brand names allows our writers to return to what happened and how they felt when they were playing the games. In other words, their use affords the writers a return to embodied memories of gameplay, such as using the joystick and pressing various buttons. Since using plenty of specific vocabulary can also be understood as a sign of expertise, some of our authors are likely to be showing off (Lønsmann 2009: 1143–1145).

The brand names in the data include *Amiga* (60 occurrences) and *Commodore* (43 occurrences). *Amstrad* is rarer with 7 occurrences. Brand names are often represented by acronyms such as *C64* (60 occurrences). Interestingly, the word *Playstation* occurs 28 times, and its Finnish equivalent *pleikkari* only 5 times. The acronym *PC* occurs 65 times. Words such as *YouTube* and *Spotify* could also be considered brand names. A related compound is *iTunes-kirjasto* ‘iTunes library’. Words like *PC* and *pleikkari* are now so common that they can be considered established loanwords. Their denotation has broadened from a brand to certain types of gadgets. Commodore 64 has also received a Finnish “nickname”, *kuusnepa* (colloquial for ‘sixty-four’).

Parts of computers include, for example, *modeemi* ‘modem’ and *monitori* ‘monitor’. *Joystick* is written in two ways: *joystick* and *joystik*. The latter shows that there is adaptation to Finnish, *stik* being spelled phonetically.

Sometimes compounds have a Finnish and an English part, one such compound being *käsikonsoli* ‘handheld console’. Several compounds include acronyms such as *pc-pelaaminen* ‘pc playing’ and *BNC-kaapeli* ‘BNC cable’.

Many of the English words in the text represent names and titles of games and game series. Table 1 presents the most frequently mentioned of such titles. Words representing games can also represent categories or types of games, such as *indiepeleli* ‘indie game’ or *retropeleli* ‘retro game’.

Table 1. The most frequently mentioned titles of games or game franchises/series.

<b>Titles</b>	<b>Mentions</b>
Final Fantasy	67
Mario	60
Super Mario	39
Pokémon	33
FF (= Final Fantasy)	32
Doom	23
Zelda (The Legend of)	19
Last Ninja	18
Mega Man	17
Warcraft	16
Commando	14
Halo	14
Tetris	14
Morrowind	14
Kingdom Hearts	13

Brand names can be seen as affordances that allow the writers to mentally return to the rooms and situations where they played the games. It is noteworthy that although the names of the games are English, they are inflected in the Finnish way. An example is the plural form *Monkey Islandit* in the following excerpt:

(2) Mm. LucasArtsin Monkey Islandit ja Zak McKrakken on tullut pelattua läpi uudelleen lasten kanssa myös musiikista nauttien.

[Among other things, I have played LucasArts' Monkey Island series and Zak McKrakken again with my children, enjoying the music as well.]

#### 4. Clauses in English

At times the authors wrote entire clauses in English. These clauses create bridges between the game world and the rest of the world. For example, in one text the author introduces every new piece of music with the phrase “Now playing”, familiar from song charts:

(3) Now Playing: Naughty by Nature – Pin the tail on the donkey

In another text, the writer quotes the clause “War, never been so much fun”:

(4) Sokerina pohjalla : Amiga 500 ja Cannon Fodder – “War, never been so much fun”.

[Last but not least: Amiga 500 and Cannon Fodder – “War, never been so much fun.”]

Other writers also tell us it is fun to repeat phrases from the games:

(5) Esimerkiksi kun käyn töissä ja teen jotain monotonista työtä saatan itsekseni puhua Warcraft 3-pelistä tutulla orcin äänellä “work work” tai “ready to work”, jotka ovat unittien huudahdukset.

[For example, when I work and do something monotonous I sometimes talk to myself in a voice familiar from Warcraft 3. I speak like the orc and say “work” or “ready to work”. These are the exclamations of the units.]

The clause-length borrowings provide an example of a playful attitude to using language. The writers seemingly “spice up” their story with English phrases derived from either the conventions of internet-speak or messaging (“Now Playing”), or from the game they are talking about (“War, never been so much fun”), which gives a lighthearted or casual tone to the writing. This signals that the writer is fluent in the discourse and can therefore have a stress-free attitude when discussing games.

Secondly, references may be considered as an example of interaction between the writer and the gameplay discourse. In this case, the writer relates the story to the discourse by using references that are common and understandable within the discourse, and positions themselves within the discourse by showing fluency in it. More generally, the references may function as “inside-jokes”, creating solidarity, integration and identification. Finally, these references show

how something of the gameplay experience is transferred by language use from the game to everyday life.

## 5. A look at dictionaries of loan words

We used two dictionaries to check whether the “English” words in the data were already established in Finnish (Koukkunen 1990; Pulkkinen 1984).<sup>3</sup> These dictionaries listed only some of the words that we identified as loans. Table 2 gives examples of words that had already made their way into Pulkkinen’s (1984) dictionary of English loan words.

Table 2. Examples of established loanwords from English.

<b>Finnish</b>	<b>English</b>
bitti	bit
eskapismi	escapism
fan, fani	fan
fiilis	feeling
hitti	hit, popular song
in	in, fashionable
klassikko	classic
konsoli	console
live	as in: live broadcast
media	media
ok	ok
psykedeelinen	psychedelic
setti	set
saundi, soundi	sound
traileri	trailer

Koukkunen (1990) traces many words to Swedish rather than English (table 3). These are mostly not Germanic, their elements being traced further back to Latin and Greek. An example is the adjective *eppinen*, ‘epic’. Although it was already used in Swedish in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its popularity nowadays is likely to go together with English. Consider the meme *epic failure*.

Table 3. Finnish loanwords from Swedish with their English counterparts.

<b>Swedish</b>	<b>Finnish</b>	<b>English</b>
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aggressiv, aktiv, intensiv. negativ, positiv	aggressiivinen, aktiivinen, intensiivinen, negatiivinen, positiivinen	aggressive, active, intensive, negative, positive
dramatisk, episk, eksotisk, elektronisk, fysisk, grafisk, magisk, sympatisk, teknisk	dramaattinen, eepinen, eksoottinen, elektroninen, fyysinen, graafinen, maaginen, sympaattinen, tekninen	dramatic, epic, exotic, electronic, physical, graphic, magical, sympathetic, technical
fantasi	fantasia	fantasy
integrera, motivera	integroida, motivoida	integrate, motivate
inspiration	inspiraatio	inspiration
kassett	kasetti	cassette
maskulin	maskuliininen	masculine
musik	musiikki	music
mysterium	mysteeri	mystery
nostalgi	nostalgia	nostalgia
tema	teema	theme
universum	universumi	universe
virtuos	virtuoosi	virtuoso
visuell	visuaalinen	visual

The authors often use compounds which include elements that are defined in the loan word dictionaries, such as *disco* or *video* (in the next sentence these are in bold). Such words include *alkuvideo* ‘intro video’, *discopop*, *fantasiamaailma* ‘fantasy world’, *fantasiaroolipeli* ‘fantasy role playing game’, *klubimusa* ‘club music’, *matkatelkkari* ‘portable television’, *nostalgiapeli* ‘nostalgia game’, *nostalgia-trippi* ‘nostalgia trip’, *pelikonsoli* ‘game console’, *pseudosinfoniahuttu* ‘pseudo symphony porridge’, *strategiapeli* ‘strategy game’, and *teemabiisi* ‘theme song’. Sometimes compounds consist of two words, both of which can be found in a dictionary of loan words. An example is *musiikkialbumi* ‘music album’. That *postapolyptinen* is spelled with a C suggests that it is conceptualized in the English way, because the correct Finnish spelling is with a K. We can see similar variation in the expressions *crackeri* ‘cracker’ and *crack-ryhmä* ‘crack group’ versus *kräkätä* ‘to crack’.

Clearly, sometimes both words in a compound are of English origin regardless of what the dictionaries say. To give an example, the word *pokeri-tune*, *pokeri* ‘poker’ can be found in Pulkkinen (1984), but *tune* cannot. A further example is *arcade-klassikko* ‘arcade classic’, where the word *arcade* represents a new element that cannot be found in the dictionaries. The writers also create *arcademainen* ‘like an arcade’ and *arcade-tyylinen* ‘in arcade style’. This suggests that there is something in the word *arcade* that cannot be precisely expressed in Finnish and that calls for the adoption of a new word into Finnish discourse. There could be an

economical explanation since saying the same thing in Finnish would probably require several words.

## 6. Words not attested in dictionaries

Newer words that cannot be found in the dictionaries but are spelled in the Finnish way include *skipata* ‘skip’, *fläsäri* ‘flashback’, and *striimaaja* ‘streamer’. The first two of these even attest Finnish morphology.<sup>4</sup> However, the writers also use words with English spelling such as *comfy*. They are sometimes inflected like Finnish, for example, *edgympää* ‘more edgy’ – note also the use of *mainstream*:

(6) musiikki oli täysin samaa tyyliä, mutta parempaa, ajankohtaisempaa, ja edgympää kun saman ajan nouseva mainstream teknomusiikki.

[The music was of exactly the same style, but better, more contemporary and edgier than its contemporary mainstream techno.]

Here we might ask if the adjectives *comfy* and *edgy* allow the writer to express something that could not be expressed in Finnish. Perhaps lexical borrowing occurs because there is a gap in the language (Holmes and Wilson 2017: 44). Perhaps it is a case of pragmatic code-switching in a situation where Finnish words would not have precisely the same impact.<sup>5</sup>

To continue with compounds, there are entirely English and half-Finnish compounds. A very popular, wholly English word in the data is *soundtrack*, which occurs 100 times. It even occurs in the more phonetic form *sound träk*. Half-Finnish words include *alkuintro* ‘beginning intro, the intro at the beginning’ versus *loppuintro* ‘final intro’, and *pikselihahmo* ‘pixel character’.

*Ambient* is a popular word. It is used in the expressions *ambient*, *ambientmainen* ‘ambient like’, *ambient raita* ‘ambient track’ and *ambient ääni* ‘ambient sound’. It is used like a noun in:

(7) Musiikki ja ambient ovat luonnollisesti merkittävä osa pelejä ja allekirjoittanutta nämä stimuloivat suuresti.

[Music and ambience naturally play an important role in the games, and they very much stimulate me.]

In compounds consisting of three parts, there is variation in which parts are English and which are Finnish. There are words with two English parts that end in Finnish: *introvideopätkä* ‘intro video clip’ and *open world –peli* ‘open world game’. In *retropelikauppa* ‘retro game store’, we have one English word combined with two Finnish words. The English part can also occur in the middle, as in *ääniefektipimputus* ‘sound effect jingle’. A word with four parts is *sandbox-roolipelaaminen* ‘sandbox role playing’.

That there are so many words and parts of compounds which can be considered borrowings from English or code-switches suggests the influential presence of English in the game-players’ lives. They, or at least many of them, are used to discussing their experiences in partly English terminology. To an outsider, some of the language they use may seem strange, but being an insider means that one knows which words to use and how to play with different elements.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

We have discussed English words that occur in the data on cherished memories of the music of digital games. The aim has been to sketch how texts about digital games seem to provide a window or interface through which new English words can enter the Finnish language. They are interesting because they function as a key to being able to understand and play the games, thus affording people access to the games. The language produced by the Finnish authors of the data is, in a sense, indicative of the experience of playing games in English in Finland.

The music of the games often allows the authors to connect with their memories as well. Thus, we should also discuss such music, including its lyrics, as an affordance. Several of the authors mention specifically that they listen to game music on purpose because it reminds them of good gaming moments. Furthermore, the lyrics of a piece of music or the words of a character in a game may allow the writer to return to a gaming experience.

While some of the examples above may be considered as deriving from “serious” conventions of the gameplay discourse, some may also be seen as related to a playful attitude

towards language. Their point is not so much to convey information as to play with the interaction between Finnish and English. This may serve several functions: for example, the writer might want to give a nonchalant or laid-back impression or demonstrate mastery of the conventions of the discourse, or simply want to “have fun” with the language just as they have fun when playing games.

It is noteworthy that the meaning of the English words in our data is sometimes not so much their formal meaning (some of which may actually be meaningless in the formal sense) but about the act of using them playfully. As Johnson (2018: 93) writes: “...words, phrases, and sentences do not have meaning in themselves! They have meaning for someone who has developed linguistic capacities and is currently enacting meanings within some language community.” It has been noted that code-switching can convey humour and emotions (Lantto 2014: 646).

Another crucial aspect of bodily oriented views about language is the focus on the activity of using language. Indeed, if we consider language as deeply entangled with the dynamics of life and experience, as continuous with our other active ways of being in and making sense of the world, we could speak of language as a continuous process of languaging (Maturana and Varela 1998). In this sense, the word choices of writers in the stories we have collected can be considered in terms of interaction, that is, how the writer participates in the gameplay discourse and how, through the active sense-making of the writer, the Finnish and English languages interact with each other in this process.

There is also a further way in which embodied perspectives on language are relevant to this study, which is the idea of deep continuity between life and language. While its basis is the view of language as ultimately related to our biological being, how thought and language are based on our bodily ways of understanding the world (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Johnson 2007), the more “applied” proposals of Noë (2015) are especially important for the scope of this article. Noë (2015) emphasizes how the experience of art should not be considered as limited to only to the actual encounter with the artwork but rather constituted by all the activities we do before and after the encounter as well: we create our experience of art not only by engaging with the artwork but also by, for example, following criticism and promotion beforehand and participating in discussions afterwards. Moreover, art is not restricted to an isolated aesthetic realm of its own. Instead, as Noë (2015) suggests, art is about understanding life and through discussing art, we can all participate in art and understand more about life. Discussing digital games thus serves an important function in our writers’ lives.

## Footnotes

1. This work is funded by Kone Foundation (grant number 201908388).
2. The Oxford English Dictionary defines affordance as follows (s.v. noun 2): “A property of an object or an aspect of the environment, esp. relating to its potential utility, which can be inferred from visual or other perceptual signals; (more generally) a quality or utility which is readily apparent or available”.
3. We thank Mari Siirainen for suggesting these dictionaries to us.
4. We thank Roderick McConchie for this observation.
5. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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