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The Illuminatus Space Game: From an April Fools' Joke to Digital Cultural Heritage

Petri Saarikoski, Antti Lindfors, Jaakko Suominen, and Markku Reunanen

INTRODUCTION

In April 1989, the leading Finnish computer hobbyist magazine *MikroBitti* published an exclusive preview of a massive space game called *Illuminatus* (Fig. 1). The magazine didn't exactly mention the genre of the game but described its epic space journeying, trading, combat and empire building elements. Therefore, we call it "space game" for short. *MikroBitti* solemnly described it as "not only a game, but a way of life", and interviewed its German creators. The article, probably written anonymously by the well-known editor Niko Nirvi, was, however, an April Fools' prank, a parody of the unrealistic expectations placed on games in the press and of the unfounded optimism concerning increasing computing power. Moreover, it mocked the ways in which actual games, such as space trading and combat game *Elite* (1984), were treated in reviews. *Illuminatus* started a long series of *MikroBitti* April Fools' pranks, which connected the magazine to a wider tradition of pranks in the press—even though their later attempts were neither as elaborate nor as influential as *Illuminatus*. Pranks were generally in line with the editorial policy of the magazine, which stood out from its competitors because of a sense of humour and playfulness that appealed to its audience (Saarikoski 2004; Saarikoski and Suominen 2009).

In this chapter, we discuss the humour present in *Illuminatus*, and examine why this imaginary game has become part of many Finnish computer hobbyists' shared cultural memory. As our main material, we use *MikroBitti* April Fool's pranks, other articles in the magazine, as well as *Illuminatus*'s later media appearances, all of which are subjected to close reading. In terms of theory, the chapter draws from game history and game culture studies, but also humour and parody research, particularly folkloristic studies on practical jokes and humorous performance.

Unlike this chapter, studies on the cultural history of digital gaming and digital game cultural heritage have usually focused on real artefacts, such as games, devices and related practices, instead of imaginary artefacts (Suominen 2017; Suominen et al. 2018). However, in addition to "real digital games", there are many imaginary artefacts: a plethora of games that were not finished or published, April Fools' pranks such as *Illuminatus*, urban legend games such as *Killswitch*, (see Švelch 2021) or games first introduced in books, for example the Glass Bead Game in Herman Hesse's famous book (1943), Quidditch in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books (1997–2007), Azad in Iain M. Banks' novel *The Player of Games* (1988) (see Gualeni, 2021), *Lucky Wander Boy* in the novel by D. B. Weiss (2003), or Armada and others in the novel of the same name by Ernest Cline (2015), not to forget games introduced in other media such as TV series (Domjot and dozens of other games in *Star Trek*, Bandersnatch in *Black Mirror* (2018) etc.) and movies. Stefano Gualeni (2021) has argued that many of these games "play ancillary roles in the fictional worlds of which they are part", but on the other hand, there are "cases of fictional games that hold a central narrative or philosophical significance within the fictional work of which they are part". And many of these imaginary games have had an influence that goes beyond just game cultures. Imaginary games have fostered stories, discussion, and speculation and even led to (re)constructions (Gualeni, 2021). Therefore we argue that there is a need for a scholarly approach to "imaginary game studies", and our chapter aims to offer one.

We approach *Illuminatus* as an extended practical joke, mediated through (and afforded by) written text, where the targets of the joke (readers of *MikroBitti*) are framed in a unilateral play-performance without their awareness (Marsh 2015). First, we investigate how practical jokes operate in written or digitally

mediated (compared to oral) communicative environments (see Buccitelli 2012) by tracing the dynamics, multiple mediations, and re-iterations of the prank performance over time. By doing so, we encourage further scholarly attention to mediated pranks (and April Fools' pranks in particular) at the little-investigated nexus of folklore, humour, and game studies.

ILLUMINATUS

-ei enää peli, vaan elämäntapa

●● Unohtakaa KAIKKI ennen julkaistut pelit! Illuminatus on tullut, ja ensi ajatus on: "Ei tälläistä voi ollakaan!" Lukekaa mahtavimmasta pelistä kautta aikojen ja itkekää itsenne uneen.

"Illuminatus? Mikä himskatin Illuminatus?" Näin ajatteli allekirjoittanut raukka ja erehtyi avaamaan tanakan paketin. Kun kannessa luki "Atari ST", ja paketista löytyi liki parisataa sivuinen "Guide of the Universe", valtava tähtikartta, neljä erilaista näppäinkaaviota ja viisi diskettiä, unohtuivat työt ja juoksu kotiin alkoi. Tämä maailma häipyi, uusi astui tilalle.

Illumi-Elitekö?

Alku tuntuu tutulta. Pelaaja saa heikon avaruusaluksen ja hiukan rahaa, minkä jälkeen edessä odottaa maailmankaikkeus. Tuntuu jo erittäin tutulta, mutta kun vähän aikaa pelailee, alkaa ihailu nostaa jaloa päätään. Näin hyvää peliä VOI olla olemassa!
Illuminatuksen lopullinen päämäärä on päästä vähintään tuhannen planeetan keisariksi. Valinnanvaraa riittää, sillä maailmankaikkeus koostuu 7 miljoonasta planeetasta, ja jokaisella voi käydä. Planeetoista noin tuhannella on eriasteista elämää, ja parilla sadalla sivilisaatio.

Pelaaja aloittaa Cod Mk.I-aluksella, joka on nippa nappa rahdinkuljetukseen sopiva kevyesti aseistettu ja suojattu alus. Tarpeeksi rahaa ja rassi muuttuu Constellation-luokan taisteluristeilijäksi, Khartan-kauppa-alukseksi tai muuksi noin kolmestakymmenestä vaihtoehdosta.

Laskeutumista ei suinkaan hoideta itse avaruusaluksella, vaan sitä varten on Galileo Mk.7 -sukkula. Planeettojen pinnat ovat niukimmillaan Virus-tyyppistä tasankoa, mutta fraktaalivuoristot antavat realismin luomisessa.

Illuminatuksen universumi toimii loogisesti. Koneen kontrolloimat alukset taistelevat toisiaankin vastaan, esimerkiksi kun pelaaja pakenee kahta poliisin Terminatoria ja yhtäkkiä yliavaruudesta pomppaa esiin viisi piraatti-Excaliburia. Ja muut alukset tosiaan tuntuvat älyllisen olennon ohjaamilta, varsinkin kun ne ymmärtävät ansibelilla lähetetyt "SURRENDER OR DIE" -viestit. Eipä ihme että Jurgen kehuskeli tekoälyrutiiniaan.

Niin itse alusta kuin sukkulaakin voi aseistaa kuin varustaa erilaisilla moottoreilla, aseilla, ja lisälaitteilla, joita löytyy vaatimattomat viisi ruudullista. Halvoista tutkaohjatuista Shark-ohjuksista voi rahavarojen salliessa edetä vaikka planeettoja tuhoaviin Shatter-ketjureaktiopommeihin tai Novageneraattoreihin, joilla kukistuu koko aurinkokunta. Partikkelitykit tulevat halvaksi, koska ne eivät käytä energiaa

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Fig. 1 The first page of the original "Illuminatus—not a game anymore but a way of life" article in *MikroBitti* 4/1989 illustrated the graphical design of the game and made comparisons between *Illuminatus* and *Elite*. (Courtesy of *MikroBitti*)

Second, the chapter dwells on the question of how (game hobbyist) folklore, or what might with some reservations be called cultural heritage, emerges through what was originally constituted by a written, commercially mediated practical joke. What has emerged, we suggest, is a *parodic heritage object*, which seems equally efficacious in functioning as an indexical anchor for emergent collectivities such as *Illuminatus* "fans" or later game designers. Not only does our analysis provide new insights into hobbyist identities, but it also introduces humour, parody, and the imaginary as potentially important aspects of traditionalisation and heritigisation processes (on emerging heritage and heritigisation processes, see Giaccardi 2012; Suominen et al. 2018; Smith 2020).

The chapter consists of four main sections. First, we introduce the *MikroBitti* magazine and its humoristic style, and then we describe *Illuminatus* in the context of space-themed games and contemporary technology. Next, we contextualise *MikroBitti*'s pranks in relation to a longer history of the tradition of April Fools and practical jokes in Finland and beyond, and analyse the dynamics of *Illuminatus* as an extended prank performance. Finally, we deal with the issues of re-invoking *Illuminatus* in the twenty-

first century. In the conclusion, we answer the question of how and why *Illuminatus* became a memorable case for the Finnish computer hobbyist and game cultures, and discuss how it can serve as an example when studying similar imaginary games.

MIKROBITTI AND HUMORISTIC COMPUTER HOBBYIST JOURNALISM

Home computer and game magazines have been used almost routinely as sources when studying home computer culture of the 1980s and 1990s (Kirkpatrick 2012, 2016), and this is also the case in Finland. Likewise, the use of humour in the context of game journalism has been somewhat, but not systematically, examined in Finland (Saarikoski 2004; Suominen 2010; Pasanen 2011; Saarikoski et al. 2017).

The history of the *Illuminatus* space flight simulator as an April Fools' joke is an important milestone in the development of the *MikroBitti* (1984–) home computer magazine. The influence of the magazine on the hobbyist computer cultures in Finland, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, is undeniable. *MikroBitti* was a commercial success and its circulation quickly surged to over 40,000. However, information technology was also featured in more professional—and less colourful—magazines (*Tietokone*, *Prosessori* and *Tietoviikko*), and, in addition, in short-lived hobbyist-published club magazines and fanzines. *MikroBitti*'s primary audience was teenage boys. Much of the magazine's content focused on industry news, programming, device testing, hardware, and software tuning, but *MikroBitti* is also known as a pioneer of early Finnish game journalism. Its game-related content was based on three main ingredients: regularly published game reviews, well-known journalists, and humour.[1]

The *Illuminatus* space flight simulator can thus be compared to other humorous content published by the magazine. In interviews with journalists who once worked for the magazine, there is evidence that the primary purpose of their humour was to entertain their young target audience. Their intention was to avoid the "unnecessary seriousness" previously associated with computer culture. The humorous writing style appealed to their readership, as evidenced by reader surveys commissioned by the magazine (Saarikoski 1999, 2004). In addition, *MikroBitti* sometimes published humorous content by hobbyists, such as computer-related jokes and stories (*MikroBitti* 5/1986, 66–67), as well as drawings and comic strips by Harri "Wallu" Vaalio. Similar humour can also be observed in popular publications elsewhere, in particular in the home computer and gaming magazines published in Britain during the 1980s, such as *Computer and Video Games* and *Commodore User* (Kirkpatrick 2012, 2016).

Starting in 1986, *MikroBitti* made use of the writing skills of young Niko Nirvi. His first game review was of the battle simulation game *Zoids: The Battle Begins* (Martech 1986). Eskoensio Pipatti, the-editor-in-chief who played a key role in recruiting journalists and assistant editors, later remembered that on the strength of the review Nirvi could have been offered a job almost immediately.[2] The review also attracted a lot of positive attention from readers. The humorous writing style he developed further over the following years was already evident in his first game review:

> You are given Zoidzilla, the greatest Zoid ever built, and ordered to destroy Redhorn... So easy. And you try, again and again, until the Sandman casts his sleep-dust and the joystick falls out of your numb hands. (*MikroBitti* 6–7/1986, 89)[3]

Nirvi's position as the magazine's top game journalist and the use of Mikrobitti's penchant for humour in *MikroBitti* partly explain why the editorial board decided to publish an exclusive preview of a massive space flight simulator called *Illuminatus* in April 1989 (see Fig. 1). According to the article, the game had arrived as a five-disk press release version, and included plenty of additional material. The magazine had supposedly been offered an "exclusive" opportunity to review the first edition of the title, which was supposed to be the "hottest game" in the world. The game featured seven million planets, with the goal of becoming the "emperor of at least a thousand planets". It supposedly included space and planetary battles, commerce, tactics, strategy, politics and diplomacy (*MikroBitti* 4/1989, 2, 36–37).

The origins of the *Illuminatus* article are still blurry—one reason for this is that no credits are present. No extra information is available in the table of contents either. Based on articles and interviews published later on, Niko Nirvi wrote the main body of the text, and Petri Teittinen was the graphic designer. However, the entire editorial team was responsible for the final text of the article (*MikroBitti* 9/1989, 48;

Skrolli 1/2019, 82; interview with Nirvi, August 27, 1998). Looking at the text, there are clear traces of Nirvi's writing style. The preview invites the audience to "read about the greatest game of all time and cry yourself to sleep" and claims that "the only downside to the game is that the other good games didn't feel like anything anymore". These sentences cemented *Illuminatus* as "larger than life", a game that was "simply perfect" (*MikroBitti* 4/1989, 2, 36–37). One more hint of Nirvi's involvement was that *Illuminatus* was first published for Atari ST computers only, which Nirvi had frequently defended against the more popular Commodore Amiga (see Saarikoski and Reunanen 2014).

The credibility of the prank was further improved by fake screenshots, created using the *Deluxe Paint II* program. The fake screenshots featured 3D vector graphics already used in some of the more advanced simulators of the late 1980s. Jurgen Stenreise, an unknown (and non-existent) German game designer and programmer, was interviewed for the article. Erik Dorf was mentioned as the main graphics designer and programmer (*MikroBitti* 4/1989, 37).

The prank worked—maybe even too well. Judging by reader feedback, a significant number of readers thought that the game actually existed. Later in September, the magazine was forced to publish an article discussing the controversy the preview had stirred up (*MikroBitti* 9/1989, 48). There had been a steady flow of telephone calls from subscribers to the *MikroBitti* office. In shops selling computer games, dumbfounded employees repeatedly informed young customers that they had no knowledge of the game in question. Bulletin board system (BBS) services maintained by computer hobbyists hosted lively discussions about the game, and, as a result, news of the game spread beyond the country's borders. According to *MikroBitti*, for example, the manager of the British game company CRL called the editorial office for more information. It is clear that word-of-mouth stories of the space game circulated for weeks and even months, and slowly died down only when it became obvious that the article was a prank. Some hobbyists were probably still surprised to finally read the true story of the game in the September issue (*MikroBitti* 9/1989, 48).

It is evident that some young readers did not recognise the article as a prank because they were already accustomed to Niko Nirvi's enthusiastic writing style. For example, the concept of a "larger-than-life game" was a familiar reference to the well-known review from December 1986 discussed above (*MikroBitti* 12/1986). In an interview in the late 1990s, Nirvi recalled that the editorial process had failed because the table of contents should have contained a clear hint that *Illuminatus* was an April Fools' prank. For one reason or another, this hint was omitted when the layout of the issue was completed. Even the name of the game was a hint, a reference to "illusion" or "delusion", yet young readers were not critical enough to connect the dots. Based on Nirvi's interview, it remains unclear if the game had any links to any of the real or fictitious Illuminati groups or the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* novel series, written by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, first published in 1975.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF *ILLUMINATUS* AS A SPACE GAME AND THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE PRANK

The plausibility of the prank was enhanced by the fact that simulator games, in particular, had become popular in the 1980s. Among them, space-themed games represented a new, emerging subgenre. In Finland, as in many other countries, the most famous space trade game of the time was *Elite* (Firebird 1984), created by David Braben and Ian Bell. Particularly well-known was the version that was available for the Commodore 64, which was the bestselling home computer in Finland (Saarikoski 2004, 247–248). *Elite* was one of the earliest space games using real-time 3D graphics. *MikroBitti* published an enthusiastic review of the game in November 1985, and the game quickly climbed to the top of the Finnish charts (*MikroBitti* 11/1985, 70). After this, references to the game were regularly published in the magazine. It was already mentioned as a "classic" game in the summer of 1986 (*MikroBitti* 8/1986, 72). According to studies and surveys, *Elite* was one of the best-known and most played computer games of the 1980s in Finland (Aaltonen 2004, 45; Naskali and Silvast 2014, 53; Saarikoski 2004, 247–248).

Elite represented a significant breakthrough in space-themed computer games. By then, space travel had already been a popular theme in science fiction titles. Most likely the earliest example of this is the classic *Space War!* space combat game (1962) and its variants, originally designed by Steve Russell for the PDP-1 minicomputer (Campbell-Kelly 2004, 272; Aarseth 2007, 155–156). Likewise, space was also widely

covered in other areas of popular culture. Important examples are the science fiction television series of the time, such as *Star Trek* (1966–1969) and *Battlestar Galactica* (1978), and film series, such as *Star Wars* (1977–). Games like *Elite* used this legacy of science fiction and allowed the players to "boldly go where no man has gone before". According to Alison Gazzard, who has explored the British computer game culture, players' personal experiences and the contemporary 1980s reception of *Elite* gave rise to later nostalgic stories on the game as well as to remake projects, sometimes forgotten in the early history of the game and the platforms for which it was developed (Gazzard 2013; see also Maher 2013).

Illuminatus was easily recognised by Finnish players as a follow-up to *Elite*. As one example of the allusive puns used to signal the connection, the player was to start their career with a "Cod Mk I" vessel, a clear reference to the Cobra Mk III seen in *Elite*. In addition, the enthusiasm of the readers can also be explained by the fact that this kind of epic space game could have been—at least borderline—possible using the home computer technology of its time. New 16-bit home computers, the Atari ST (1984) and the Commodore Amiga (1985) in particular, had raised hopes for a huge technical leap in game development in the late 1980s (Saarikoski 2004, 252–253). Game journalists likewise fuelled these speculations. *MikroBitti*'s April Fools' prank carefully mixed real technical concepts, such as fractal landscapes and online connectivity, with fantasy: to make the otherwise implausible 3D graphics more believable, the game supposedly offered the option to switch to computationally lighter line-based rendering when necessary (*MikroBitti* 4/1989).

The most notorious story surrounding hopes and dreams of new "Elite-killers" in Finnish game journalism was the case of *Federation of Free Traders* (Gremlin Graphics 1989), a space trading computer game created by Paul Blythe. According to a well-documented story, journalists Niko Nirvi and Petri Teittinen had seen the unfinished game at the PC Show in London in Autumn 1988. Nirvi subsequently reported that "FOFT is the dream of every Elite lover, and will surely cause them (us) different social problems" (*MikroBitti* 11/1988, 15). Both journalists also wrote an enthusiastic article for *C-lehti* computer magazine. The game was supposed to be in stores by the time the issue was published, so they told all players to "break their piggy bank and act fast" (*C-lehti* 5/1988, 13, 17). However, after several delays, the game was released in spring 1989, and the result was a huge disappointment. In May 1989, Niko Nirvi classified the game as a clear flop: "Everything is so difficult in the game, nothing works properly [...] In the version I received, it is not even possible to save the game... I could almost cry" (*MikroBitti* 5/1989, 47). According to Nirvi, the good visual design of the game had been sadly misleading, and the whole incident was embarrassing. The incident was a clear reason for self-criticism, and it was obvious that some of it was channelled, in an ironic and tongue-in-cheek way, into the *Illuminatus* article. "At that time, I received quite a lot of completely appropriate feedback about my over-enthusiastic writing style", he has reminisced (interview with Nirvi, August 27, 1998). "[Particularly the *FoFT* case] was a very harsh lesson for me and showed that there was a lot of room for improvement in my game journalism" (Nirvi 2014).

As mentioned above, the *Illuminatus* prank also attracted publicity in the sense that it was discussed on information networks like BBSs. Indeed, BBSs were slowly gaining popularity in the late 1980s (Hirvonen 2010; Saarikoski 2017). Computer hobbyist magazine *Skrolli* has recently called *Illuminatus* an early example of an online-based *meme,* which had emerged long before the concept of the Internet meme became widely known (*Skrolli* 1/2019, 82). However, if we refer to Limor Shifman's studies on Internet memes (Shifman 2014; Shifman and Blondheim 2010), *Illuminatus* was not a meme, because it did not have much variation and did not spread as extensively as many later Internet memes. In any case, the *Illuminatus* article was clearly a parodic story that was widely remembered among the Finnish computer hobbyist and player circles in the following decades, and retellings of its initial reception were constantly published on online discussion forums. Moreover, it is important to note that it was usually mentioned along with the *Federation of Free Traders* case (Rautiainen 2009).

ILLUMINATUS AS MEDIATED PRANK PERFORMANCE

In Finland, the tradition of journalistic April Fools' jokes goes back to the 1930s, and can be traced to the Swedish tradition of prank letters (Visakko and Voutilainen 2012, 266; see also Paakkinen 2006). While generally provocative or otherwise affectively stimulating—for instance, a later *MikroBitti* prank from 1998 reported on a home device that was allegedly able to print out money—an implicit rule of etiquette of April Fools' pranks implies that a prank should not cause any serious harm to its recipient, and a

newspaper or magazine should include no more than one prank per year (Visakko and Voutilainen 2012, 266). *MikroBitti*'s April Fools' pranks range from an introduction of a fridge that had an Internet connection—years before the idea of the Internet of things—to instructions on how to use mobile phones as walkie-talkies (2004), or the claim that the new iPhone 3G was launching on the market in Finland on April 1 (2008). Decades after the publication of these pranks, a historian might actually find it difficult to recognise them as pranks at all.

As pranks (often performed orally rather than textually), April Fools' pranks can be analysed in the more general framework of practical jokes, a broader genre of what folklore scholar Moira Marsh (2015, 1) describes as "transgressive vernacular art". Designating this subcategory of humour as "a scripted, unilateral play performance involving two opposed parties— trickster and target—with the goal of incorporating the target into play without their knowledge, permission, or both" (2015, 12), Marsh further classifies practical jokes into five categories based on the different roles of their targets and whether the effectiveness of the prank depends on deception or revelation. Considering the five categories of *put-ons*, *fool's errands*, *kick me's*, *booby traps*, and *stunts*, journalistic April Fools' pranks often straddle the line between *put-ons* and *fool's errands*. That is to say, while being basically imaginative fabrications that do not require active participation from their recipients (and thus *put-ons*), many of these pranks also function as *fool's errands* that potentially provoke their recipients to act on their belief that the fabrication is true. In this case, ample evidence of such performative uptake was provided by the commotion stirred up by the piece amongst game hobbyists, importers, and distributors in BBSs, mail-order catalogues, and beyond.

April Fools' pranks in print media typically play with genre-specific (journalistic) textual conventions and expectations, disguising one mode of discourse as another so as to parody these conventions or perhaps mock the pretensions of authoritative discourse (cf. Hutcheon 1985; Dentith 2000). In so doing, these texts operate on an impression of *intentional incoherence* that prompts the recipient to question the purposes of the text and ultimately reframe it as a prank or parody (see Visakko and Voutilainen 2012). This impression can be cued by various mutually reinforcing means, such as through (im)plausibility of content, style of presentation, and expression, or through (inappropriate) stances mobilised by the text. Each of these devices is relevant in the case of *Illuminatus*.

At first glance, the original *Illuminatus* article is a conventional game review, or more precisely a preview, written in the style of a personal report with a narrative structure that recounts the reviewer's experiences from the first impressions to becoming gradually acquainted (and increasingly impressed) with the game. While the premise of a Finnish computer hobbyist magazine having secured exclusive rights to publish a preliminary appraisal of "the greatest game that ever was" by an unknown German company, *Enterprise Games*, is perhaps enough to raise a few eyebrows, linguistically savvy readers are soon provided with further clues of incoherence. Sporting a name that is just a bit too fitting to the game's theme, the main developer and coder "Jurgen Sternreise" combines a generic German first name with a surname that translates as "Star Travel" ("John StarTrek" as the authors themselves later put it). The name of his partner Erik Dorf, on the other hand, was lifted from the 1978 American hit television mini-series *Holocaust* (*MikroBitti* 9/1989, 48).

While the above clues function as textually locatable or explicit shibboleths for cracking the prank "code", a subtler effect is produced by the textually diffuse or cumulative effect of the unrestrainedly positive tone of the review. Known for his light-hearted and enthusiastic style of writing (see above), Nirvi appropriates his trademark shtick and exaggerates it to the point of hypervisibility, ironically targeting his readers as much his own authorial persona and the genre of game reviews (and previews). Not that the game itself does not sound intriguing: boasting a procedural content-generation capable of managing up to seven million planets, each of which can be landed on and explored, *Illuminatus* starts out as a space combat simulator with seemingly endless possibilities—not to mention a multi- player mode that accommodates no fewer than four players. Moreover, once the player has attained enough money, power, and fame, the game transforms into an *Empire: Wargame of the Century*-esque strategic wargame where players compete for resources. This sort of hype and megalomania seem to be especially pertinent to space games, and descriptions of *Illuminatus* also resemble more recent hyped-up game projects such as *Star Citizen* (Cloud Imperium Games, developed since 2010, not yet published) and *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games 2016).

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April Fools' pranks, and practical jokes more generally, work by simultaneously constructing a double audience of those who get the joke (insiders) and those who fall victim to it (outsiders) (cf. Hutcheon 1994). In this case, the out-group of gullible game enthusiasts, importers, and distributors merely had their own enthusiasm reflected back at them, which rendered the prank's edge affectionate or at most gently satirical. As Marsh (2015, Chapter 5) notes, practical jokes tend to reflexively objectify their targets' (perhaps questionable or morally unsound) habits and foibles by reframing and highlighting them for active renegotiation. In a similar manner, integral to the success of *Illuminatus* was how ingeniously it fed on and played with the wishes and hopes of its readers to imaginatively re-create and conceptualise the game for themselves. As the authors of the prank themselves later pointed out, each aspect and gameplay mode of *Illuminatus* (as incorporating space combat with 3D fractal graphics, strategy game, etc.) could have been realistically executed with existing technology (*MikroBitti* 9/1989, 48). While perhaps "too good to be true", in the sense of smoothly bringing together several distinct modes within a single title, the game as a whole was nevertheless something one could have imagined as (potentially) actually real. Or rather, the prank seemed to suggest, it was something that ideally *should* have been attempted by game designers—another potential group targeted by the ambiguous prank.

THE LEGACY OF THE PRANK: TRADITIONALISING *ILLUMINATUS*

In the fashion of reflexively layered "metahumor" (Kelley 2016), another Finnish computer hobbyist magazine, *Skrolli*, re-invoked the prank in 2014 by publishing a follow-up a quarter of a century after the original article (Fig. 2). Penned by the editor-in-chief Ville-Matias Heikkilä, the second installment of the saga paid tribute to the 1989 prank, as well as upping the ante by further developing the fabricated story. The 2014 follow-up even featured a video with footage from the "original" game with appropriately pixellated graphics and rendering glitches reminiscent of the 1980s' actual 3D games.

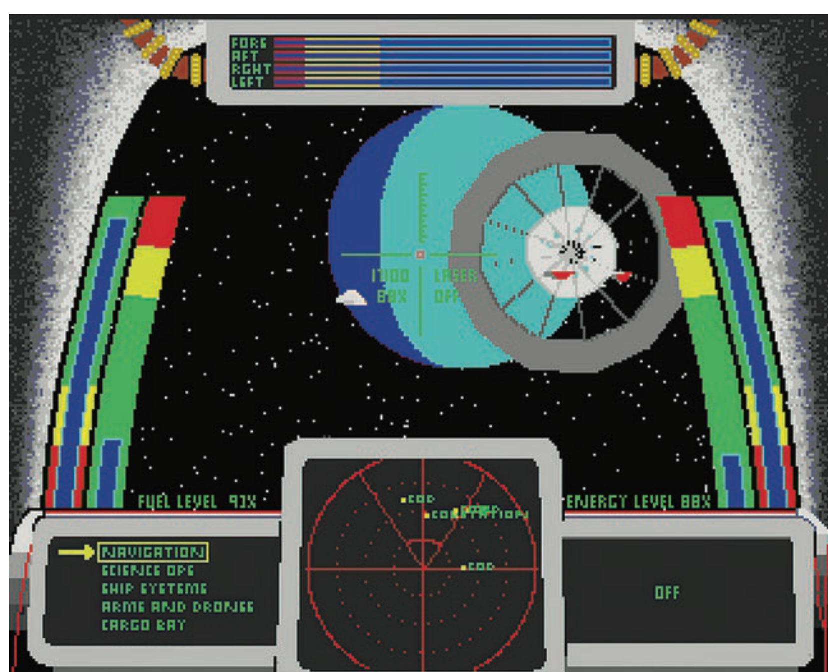

Fig. 2 The 2014 extension of the prank was bolstered by made-up video footage from the "original" game, appropriately reminiscent of the images published in the original review. (Courtesy of *Skrolli*, Ville-Matias Heikkilä and Susanna Viljanmaa 2014)

Addressing its readers as in-group members of the *Illuminatus* community by first inviting them to reminisce on the "hundreds of nights wasted on space battles and explorations of distant constellations", the text marvels at the realism provided by the famed procedural game mechanics, depicted as "unbelievable even by today's standards", before focusing on the afterlife of the game amongst its "religiously" devoted fan base. In particular, Heikkilä elaborates on the emergence of an open source project *FreeIlluminatus* and its competing offshoots, *FreeIll* and *OpenIll*, two "schools" of game designers in open conflict with each other over the diverging interpretations of the original game. The portrayal of

this conflict echoes many real community-based game-developing and fan remake projects that often splinter into separate factions. With the original developers of *Illuminatus* out of reach—Erik Dorf having died in a car crash and Jurgen Sternreise "relocated to Madagascar to escape his fans"— the altercation is described as unresolvable.

While seemingly developing the imaginary *Illuminatus* saga, the 2014 extension of the prank also functioned as a nostalgically tinged (re-)enactment of a shared history and identity—at least for those in the know. Reflecting the function of tributes and homages as intertextual devices that bridge spatiotemporal scales in order to forge sociohistorical continuities and traditions (Bauman 2004; cf. Dentith 2000), it extended the prank performance across generations by re-inserting it into circulation (see also Buccitelli 2012; Urban 2001, 4). In particular, the second installation brought into relief and further solidified the emblematic status of *Illuminatus* amongst Finnish computer game hobbyists as an esoteric tradition or (parodic) game cultural heritage object through which to celebrate their collective history and identity.

Indeed, five years later, *Skrolli* revisited the prank once more. This time merely reporting on the legendary prank rather than re-enacting it (albeit not unveiling the fabrication until halfway into the text), the piece refers to the prank as an important precursor to Internet memes, cementing its "cult reputation" amongst Finnish game cultures (*Skrolli 1/*2019). In relation to this, the online version of the 2014 instalment (Heikkilä 2014) was simultaneously appended with an acknowledgement of the original prank, which read: "This article is a tribute to the April fool's prank by Mikrobitti from 1989". By explicitly disclosing the prank, these instalments finally laid to rest the now 30-year-old prank performance and closed the gap between insiders and outsiders.

In this regard, one could foreground the moment of the original *Illuminatus* prank as indexing a time—and by extension, a stage in the formation of group identity—during which computer hobbyist communities and game cultures were taking shape in Finland.

CONCLUSION: BECOMING PARODIC HERITAGE OBJECT AND THE TOUCH OF INTANGIBLE

There are various reasons why the *Illuminatus* prank has remained a memorable event in the Finnish hobbyist computer and game cultures. *MikroBitti*'s April Fools article was well-written and illustrated, and reflected the wishes and expectations of emerging game culture communities, imagining a space game that could include almost everything aficionados dreamt of: combat, trade, and even intergalactic empire building. The article was published in a well-known, widely circulated magazine and it invoked and played with the typical game journalistic conventions of the late 1980s. It also cultivated humoristic representation and discourse typical of the particular magazine.

Likewise, the article contained several clues that hinted at the game's fictional nature. The reader could recognise these clues, provided they had enough game and media literacy. In addition, the article was connected to the widely known and acknowledged tradition of April Fools' jokes, introducing this tradition for the first time in the context of computer hobbyist press (as far as we know). These sorts of "firsts" are often discovered and remembered when constructing the history of a specific cultural phenomenon and when elevating it to the status of cultural heritage (Suominen and Sivula 2016). Moreover, the article had a contrafactual element that encouraged an imaginary reconstruction of the original game: What kind of game would *Illuminatus* have been, had it actually existed?

In this chapter, we have shown how an imaginary game can become a digital cultural heritage object, and suggested a potential emerging sub-field of *imaginary game studies*. Bridging the gap between folklore and digital games has proven fruitful and holds promise for new theoretical perspectives. The original April Fools' prank (the magazine article and the game it illustrated) itself is already a piece of cultural heritage among game and computer hobbyist communities. *Illuminatus* and its study have frequently been re-invoked in subsequent intertexts—both descriptive and parodic in themselves—that have metaculturally traditionalised its status as something valued and worth remembering within these communities (see Urban 2001; also Briggs 2020). As Linda Hutcheon (1985, 1994) and other theorists have emphasised, parody as a form of "allusive imitation" (Dentith 2000, 9) affords both polemical and

respectful-affectionate stances in relation to the text that is "quoted", the prevailing stance ultimately depending on the reception of parody in diverse contexts. Given that *Illuminatus* was an affectionate and largely self-directed parody of the optimism and expectations of game hobbyists on the one hand, but also of the authorial style of Niko Nirvi and the whole genre of game previews on the other, its affectionate aspects were quickly appropriated by the community of game hobbyists, reifying the prank into an object of their shared history.

Furthermore, we argue that both the non-existent and imaginary aspects of *Illuminatus* can and have been heritigised in a way that challenges the division between tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the first place. This would happen, for instance, if somebody started to develop and (re-)construct *Illuminatus* for real, based on its description in the April Fools article. Even though in 1989 the question of whether *Illuminatus* existed or not was highly relevant, from today's perspective it hardly seems to matter at all, as the fake game has become a piece of collective memory, enjoying an afterlife similar to that of its genuine contemporaries.

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NOTES

1. The publisher of *MikroBitti* (Tecnopress, owned by Sanoma) later continued to develop game journalism in *C-lehti* (1987–1992), which was a magazine for Commodore home computer users, and serial publications like *Tietokonepelien vuosikirja* (Yearbook of Computer Games, 1987–1991) and *PC-pelit* (PC Games, 1990–1991). The publisher also started the first Finnish computer game magazine called *Pelit* (Games, 1992–) (Saarikoski 2012, 2004).

2. Interview with Pipatti, June 6, 1998. All interviews conducted by Petri Saarikoski.

3. All the citations have been translated from Finnish by the authors of this chapter.

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