

Responsible play?

Marko Siitonen

Presentations:

1. The CSR Discourses of Listed Finnish Game Companies

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to a wide array of self-regulatory business initiatives that constitute the relationship between a company, its stakeholders and society. Among other things, CSR efforts lay foundations for brand management, convey the core values of a company or underline its civic role and responsibilities. CSR is regularly used interchangeably with similar concepts such as corporate responsibility (CR), corporate citizenship, sustainability and citizen brand.

In the context of game industry, the CSR themes revolve around, for instance, sustainable development practices, carbon emissions, workplace culture, diversity and safe gaming. This presentation will delve into the CSR discourses of listed Finnish game companies. These discourses are excavated from external business communication, such as official CSR reports, corporate website content and interviews, as well as from Finnish news media articles handling the subject.

The presentation will introduce the Finnish CSR discourses through five key themes: 1) tax payment; 2) charity and philanthropy; 3) environment; 4) responsibility; and 5) employees. These themes will be subsequently reflected on the economic, ecological, cultural and social pillars of sustainability.

In addition to the explicit CSR discourses, the presentation will also explore details and topics that are intentionally omitted from the official CSR documents, such as gaming addiction or monetisation strategies of free-to-play games. These unspoken themes reveal for their part the obvious disparities between branding/marketing efforts, actual business operations and business environment.

2. No Cyclones in Age of Empires: Colonization, Ecology and Responsibility in Video games

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This presentation aims to analyse games themed around exploration (such as Mass Effect: Andromeda, which has a shockingly colonial premise) and empire-building games that depict the exploitation of flora and fauna, particularly in settings of colonialism and empire. The discussion will also address other games where hunting is directly connected to the colonized landscape.

Following this, it will be necessary to examine the question of ecological responsibility in videogames particularly from the perspective of postcolonialism and the narratives of the marginal communities from the Global South that are often elided in the meliorist representations of ecological solutions from the Global North. The point here will be to

examine who is responsible and to what extent as both game developer and player (with varying levels of agency).

The talk will engage on the one hand with the extant ecocritical debates in Game Studies such as those initiated by Alenda Chang (2019), Darshana Jayemanne and Ben Abraham (2017) and Hans-Joachim Backe (2014) and on the other, with discussions of postcolonial ecocriticism such as made by Amitav Ghosh (2018), Timothy Clark (2015) and Dipesh Chakraborty (2012) regarding the disparity between the ecological solutions offered in global north versus the precarity of the poor and marginalised populations of the global south fighting to save their habitats. As such, the engagement of game studies with south-South positions will potentially add a new perspective for developers and players alike.

3. Who is the real culprit? Exploring how actors position themselves and others in games culture in relation to trolling and grieving

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From trolling to grieving to hateful speech, social interaction in and around games is not unknown to negative phenomena. In this presentation, I explore the issue of responsibility in relation to social interaction in games culture. Who is responsible for hate speech in and around games? What kind of responsibility do game developers and publishers carry, where do we see the responsibility laying directly on players? How does games media reflect upon and relate to the question of hate speech in games culture(s)?

I approach the topic from the viewpoint of case studies. The first one is an earlier study by Siitonen & Arjoranta that looked at negatively loaded interaction in the context of Hearthstone, a digital collectible card game. In this case, the focus was on the way players utilized the limited affordances of the game design to engage in self-labelled bad behavior, even when the designers of the game specifically had articulated against this possibility. The second case study looks at how international, English-language games media addresses and frames trolling, which refers to a variety of socially undesirable behaviors in online context, e.g. verbal abuse, bullying, and harassment, as well as behaving in a way that causes chaos or lack of trust in the surrounding social sphere. By looking at how different actors are represented in games media discourse, we can interpret various levels of responsibility being attached to those actors.

Both case studies highlight the complexity of assigning responsibility in contexts where multiple actors assert influence and negotiate for agency. Where does responsibility lie, and what kind of ethical stances do actors adopt? Are actors even on the same page when it comes to defining toxic or unwanted communication behavior?