Localized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Challenges and Solutions in Game Culture Environments

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ABSTRACT

Regional, cultural, and structural specificities across game cultural sectors are integral to impactful, intersectional initiatives. In our workshop-based participatory study, we invited diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) experts from key Finnish game cultural organizations to examine the state of DEI in digital game cultural environments. The data was collected from two online co-design workshops with eight participants and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. We noted that while Finnish DEI initiatives have developed significantly, diversity efforts are primarily focused on gender equality over other types of diversity. Organizations rely on collective action and sharing information on best practices through events, training, and game literacy education. Initiatives are heavily affected by the policies and subsidies of public agencies. Proposed solutions suggest increasing structured activity, pooling resources, and the creation of a national game cultural strategy supporting sustainable development across sector divides.

Keywords

game organizations, diversity, equity, inclusion, social sustainability, sustainability development

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INTRODUCTION

While games create profound experiences in diverse cultural contexts around the world, digital game cultures struggle with widely discussed and researched challenges around cultural and structural discrimination and harassment (Drenten et al. 2023; Harvey and Shepherd 2017), that create a hostile environment for participants who do not fit into the heterosexual, White, able-bodied, masculine stereotype (Crothers et al. 2024; Drenten et al. 2023; Gray 2020). When developing solutions, local cultural contexts may get overshadowed by commonly accepted and prevalent preconceptions of what issues to focus on. In this study, we emphasize a comprehensive approach to examining systemic structures affecting intersectional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in institutionalized game cultural environments. These environments, such as game events, esports clubs, and developer studios, are situated in and outside digital games and are directed by one or more organizations. We argue that stakeholder perceptions of issues along with regional and cultural contexts matter significantly when organizations build inclusive experiences in their game activities. Local policies, societal structures, national culture, the balance between the public and private sector, and the role of educational institutions, non-profits, and associations deeply affect how people interact with games and game culture, how they are perceived by mainstream society, and how DEI-related issues manifest and are solved (Kerr 2021; Perks and Whitson 2022; Szczepanska 2023).

Following this line of thought, our study maps current DEI successes, challenges, and solutions in Finnish digital game cultural environments, as understood by local key game culture stakeholders. We formulated the following research questions:

1) What central DEI challenges and successes are there in Finnish game culture, according to key game culture stakeholders?
2) What actionable solutions do they propose for the challenges?

Previous research has raised issues with e.g. gender equality in Finnish esports (Friman et al. 2023), inclusion of game industry employees migrating to Finland (Park 2023) and accessibility challenges in game industry events (Myöhänen 2025). We chose to do a study across several diverse gaming environments, such as game development, esports, public agencies, game events, and non-profit organizations, to better capture the commonalities and affordances of intersectional development without focusing on the quirks of one environment. We examine and reflect upon our findings in connection with prior research on multicultural diversity, equity, and inclusion in gaming. Despite being a relatively small country, Finland can rely on robust welfare policies and equality legislation (Markkola 2022) and a multifaceted, active digital game culture environment with a variety of companies, public agencies, associations and communities implementing DEI initiatives in their respective fields (Friman et al. 2025). At the same time, there is little research available on common DEI challenges, successes, and actionable solutions across these environments.

The data of this workshop-based participatory study was gathered from two workshops with eight stakeholder participants representing a variety of game cultural environments. All stakeholders developed DEI initiatives in their capacity as volunteers or employees. We pursue a contextualizing approach which aims to place the collaboratively identified categories into a wider cultural and regional context. We argue that DEI models that do not consider local and historical specificities of game

culture may fail to have a lasting effect, and that by researching local game cultural contexts we can construct new solutions to share and implement across environments.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN DIGITAL GAME CULTURE

The terms diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are used together to communicate the idea of creating environments, practices, and structures that are welcoming and fair to everyone regardless of their individual features or backgrounds. In our study, we used the Finnish Non-Discrimination Act (2014) and the Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986) as baselines for examining Finnish DEI. They prohibit discrimination due to gender, age, origin, nationality, language, religion or beliefs, opinion, political activity, trade union activity, family relationships, state of health, disability, sexual orientation, and other personal characteristics such as wealth, social status, appearance, and place of residence. DEI measures addressing discrimination in Nordic nations have become more pronounced in recent decades due to growing awareness and societal changes (Markkola 2022). There is a connection between digital games and other societal sectors: local equality and non-discrimination legislation and welfare policies affect how game organizations conduct their activities through structural affordances and existing attitudes (Kerr 2021; Piggott et al. 2022).

In game culture and game studies, analysis and documentation of organizational DEI struggles has generally focused on a single cultural environment at a time, such as the game industry (e.g. Ahmadi et al. 2020; Perks and Whitson 2022), esports (e.g. Darvin et al. 2021; Friman et al. 2023), events (e.g. Aurava 2024; Tyni and Sotamaa 2014), and player communities (e.g. Drenten et al. 2023; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020). They have documented how people not matching the stereotype of a White, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gendered man (Drenten et al. 2023; Gray 2020) experience various forms of discrimination, harassment, and even violence (Darvin et al. 2021; Harvey and Fisher 2015), and how the ensuing hypermasculine toxic culture creates boundaries for participation and professional development in game production and esports (Piggott et al. 2023; Johnson 2018). Many DEI related studies focus on gender equality, creating an abundance of research about women's participation in game culture, some about LGBTQIA+ inclusion, and much less about other marginalized groups, such as people with physical disabilities or neurodiversity, ethnic groups, religious groups, and socio-economic factors.

Several studies have examined DEI initiatives in various game cultural contexts and localities (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Amazan-Hall et al. 2018; Chee et al. 2022; Harvey and Fisher 2015). Based on this literature, it is crucial for organizations to acknowledge and address cultural challenges (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Chee et al. 2022) and how local systemic structures affect affordances (Kerr 2021). Long-term monitored development of DEI can be facilitated by an overseeing committee or a task force (Amazan-Hall et al. 2018; Myöhänen 2025). Organizations must define their values and strategies for DEI both internally and externally, using documents such as a value and mission statement, a code of conduct, and an action plan (Chee et al. 2022; Friman et al. 2025). In addition to communicating policies and standards for expected behavior, there must be clear processes for reporting and processing unwanted actions, active moderation of discussion platforms, and repercussions for breaking the rules (Crothers et al., 2024; Friman et al., 2023). Policies and standards should be supported by accessible information which is disseminated e.g. internally through training and consultations (Chee et al. 2022) or publicly through events, outreach

programs, and low-threshold activities (Amazan-Hall et al. 2018; Aurava 2024). Organizations should support marginalized employees, volunteers, and participants by offering mentoring opportunities and facilitating internal peer-support communities (Crothers et al. 2024). Role models are important in promoting diverse participation in all types of organizations (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Crothers et al. 2024). In this study, we will reflect the central DEI challenges and potential solutions within Finnish game cultural organizations, identified by our research participants, against these previous findings from international game cultural contexts.

FINNISH GAME CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

We use the term ‘game cultural environments' when referring to work and activity environments formed around digital games, such as esports clubs, game studios, municipal youth work services, schools, volunteer-based associations, and game events. The environment can be physical and/or digital – the only stipulation is that people gather there to take part in digital game-related activities. In this article, we focus on environments being managed by an institutionalized entity like a company, association, public agency, or non-profit organization, rather than free-form hobby groups with flexible governance.

Like other Nordic countries, Finland is known for its welfare society model which includes a broad social security policy, strong employee protections, and a relatively good track record in binary gender equity (Koivunen et al. 2021; Markkola 2022). Along with a high level of governmental influence, associations and other non-governmental organizations have a central role in local cultural environments. According to Byrkjeflot (2024, 44), the Nordic countries, including Finland, have for centuries displayed a strong capacity for self-organization through associations supported by local governments. In 2023, over half of Finnish salaried employees belonged to a union (Heikura 2025). As of 2024, there are over 100,000 registered associations in Finland for the country's 5.6 million citizens (PRH 2024). This conveys a remarkably close relationship between the state and civil society, resulting in continuous negotiation and balancing of power between them (Byrkjeflot 2024; Markkola 2022), but also offering efficient and low-threshold opportunities for people to get involved and create societal impact (Sotamaa et al. 2020).

Game culture in Finland has historically been reliant on enthusiastic hobbyists becoming organized, with the most famous example being the demoscene-based origins of the Finnish game industry (Tyni and Sotamaa 2014). These days there are several influential non-profit organizations creating community and working to develop and promote good industry practices. These include the International Game Developers’ Association’s (IGDA) Finnish chapter, Neogames Finland, Game Makers of Finland, We in Games Finland, and Finnish Game Jam. Other game cultural environments, such as esports, game events, and youth game activities, operate on a similar yet smaller spectrum, with a handful of small companies mixed with public agencies, associations, and non-profits serving more specific needs. In many environments, government and municipal agencies offer additional free or low-cost services including start-up incubators, game literacy education in schools, and youth work activities (Aurava 2024; Harviainen et al. 2015).

Out of the different environments in Finland, the game industry is the most studied, possibly due to it being the largest and most influential scene for decades with successful game companies significantly impacting the local economy (Neogames

2025). The industry's demoscene roots have been influential in the formation of other local cultural environments such as game events and esports (Tyni and Sotamaa 2014). The Finnish game industry has been described as showing communal spirit, with companies actively communicating with one another and openly sharing good practices such as sustainability development (Harviainen et al. 2022; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020; Suominen et al. 2023). While Finnish workplaces are often perceived to have generally flat hierarchies and shared authority (Harviainen et al. 2022) and many forms of discrimination are prohibited by law (Finnish Non-Discrimination Act 2014; the Act on Equality between Women and Men 1986), game environments in Finland struggle with DEI issues caused by long-standing societal norms and pervasive cultural stereotypes. For example, employees migrating to Finland face closed hiring practices which favor those who are a "cultural fit" for the game industry and which further disadvantage underrepresented groups (Park 2023), and Finnish esports organizations struggle with communicating and supporting a more diverse player base (Friman et al. 2023). Game industry events are not always accessible for those needing disability accommodations or who live further away, and cultural norms, such as the high prevalence of events with alcohol, can exclude participants (Myöhänen 2025). As has been noted in previous research on Nordic game environments, seemingly high levels of anti-discrimination legislation and social sustainability enthusiasm in society does not effortlessly translate into practice (Piggott et al. 2022; Szczepanska 2023). We propose that studying the intersectional, systemic similarities of DEI issues between these environments may lead to widely applicable solutions benefiting from unique local traits of culture and society.

METHODOLOGY

The research material for our study was collected from two online participatory co-design workshops held in April 2024 on Microsoft Teams. Participatory co-design tools, such as workshops, recognize participants as experts in their respective areas (Kulmala et al. 2023). They empower participants to reflect on, share and refine their own experiences and knowledge in a collaborative process which seeks to address raised issues and find practical solutions for creating change in participants' environments (Chee et al. 2022, Kulmala et al. 2023). Our objective was to gather data on the current DEI status in Finnish game cultural environments by facilitating discussion and cooperation between stakeholders from diverse environments.

As Finland is a relatively small country where initiatives are often collaborative projects between several organizations and shared openly through local networks, we were able to identify major Finnish game cultural associations, businesses, public agencies, educational institutions, and other organizations who had done groundbreaking, collaborative DEI work in one or more environments. In most cases, organization representatives could be contacted directly and when this was not possible, we asked organizations for interested participants. We also tried to avoid overrepresentation from any single environment by focusing on umbrella and pioneer organizations considered leading experts in their sectors. While the final participants are not representative of all possible DEI stakeholders, they offer insight into the leading operators' experiences. All participants spoke Finnish and majority were women. Table 1 shows a general breakdown of participants; a more detailed breakdown is not provided because it would compromise interviewee privacy.

Participant	Workshop #	Affiliation	Status
P1	1	Municipal service	Employee
P2	1	Municipal service	Employee
P3	1	Esports association	Employee
P4	1	Educational institution	Employee
P5	2	Game community non-profit	Volunteer
P6	2	Game industry company	Employee
P7	2	Game industry non-profit	Volunteer
P8	2	Game event	Volunteer

Table 1: Workshop participants and their affiliations.

The workshop was originally planned as a single event, but due to participant feedback about conflicting schedules it was organized twice: once during the afternoon and once during the evening. Participants could freely choose whichever suited their schedules. Both workshops lasted three hours, and each had four participants and three of this paper's authors present. During the workshops, the authors present took turns introducing tasks, facilitating discussion, and observing and documenting the workshop. The co-design portion of the workshop used a task structure designed to encourage empathic collaborative teamwork and sharing personal knowledge. First there was a warm-up exercise where participants shared their mindset with the group. Then they did a solo reflection task where they listed current DEI successes and challenges in their respective fields. They were paired up with another participant in a breakout room to compare lists and summarize their findings into an online whiteboard application. These findings were further examined through a series of tasks with changing pairs. For the last task, the results were summarized together. Collected workshop materials consisted of videos of the breakout rooms which were recorded using Teams' recording feature and transcribed, researchers' notes, and screenshots of the whiteboard application.

The qualitative data collected from the workshops was analyzed by the same three researchers (authors 1, 2 and 3) who organized the workshops, using qualitative content analysis. It is a method used to reduce and summarize data through categorization into a final coding frame (Schreier 2012). It is an interpretative method, where balancing the context and nuance of data with what is ultimately relevant is an integral part of the analysis. Our research team has diverse professional expertise in game research, industry, esports, events, and youth work, which enabled us to interpret data based on environment-specific nuances and discuss potential biases and conflicts.

Author 1 used the research questions to form three main categories for the coding frame: the successes, challenges, and actionable solutions of DEI in Finnish game culture. The subcategories were formed inductively during analysis with authors 2 and 3. After several iterations of adjusting, re-coding and re-formulating the coding frame, Author 1 did a last pass of the data using the final coding frame. All quotes are translated into English from the original Finnish, and the translations were approved by the quoted people. We edited translations for clarity while striving to preserve the

original meaning and added explanations in square brackets for additional context. In the following sections, we will describe the DEI successes, challenges, and actionable solutions presented by our workshop participants.

SUCCESSES

Workshop participants shared a positive outlook on the state of DEI in Finnish game cultural environments. During analysis, we noted that DEI successes occurred in three areas: individual, organizational, and societal. The successes regarding individuals were about empowering diverse individual backgrounds through positive representation. The organizational level was about the deliberate management of DEI initiatives inside organizations. Lastly, the societal level dealt with topics about societal change, such as society's perceptions of game culture and DEI (Table 2).

Positive Representation	Awareness of the diversity of game culture (e.g. diverse people and activities) has **expanded representation** in practice.
	Peer groups create community, learning opportunities, and safer spaces.
	Men actively supporting diversity initiatives.
Deliberate Guidance	**Structured activities** contribute to successful DEI.
	Increasingly **diverse backgrounds** (e.g. gender, migrant, neurodiverse) of participants, volunteers, and employees.
	Active **cultivation of safer spaces** using DEI tools (e.g. equality plan, moderation).
	Support for **individual needs**, such as pronouns and dietary accommodations.
	Policies are increasingly based on **researched data**.
	Access to **education and professional training** has increased.
	Finland has many individuals and organizations actively **sharing information**.
	Game industry's **enthusiastic community** openly fostering diverse networks.
Societal Change	While **change takes time**, DEI activity has steadily increased in the past decade.
	Public awareness has increased, especially regarding issues beyond gender equality.
	Events create change by increasing visibility and sharing best practices.

Table 2: DEI successes in Finnish game culture.

Our workshop participants remarked that huge societal changes in the past decade have contributed positively to the current state of game culture in Finland. This has shifted the public tone in a positive direction, and issues in game culture are talked about more constructively and comprehensively. Part of this change may be

attributed to the guides on accessible games and game activities released by organizations within the past decade (Friman et al. 2025), but also to the media presence and efforts of the Finnish game industry. Suominen et al. (2023, 149–150) noted that the game industry's public image has shifted in recent years from an economical innovator to a champion of socially sustainable development, and companies seem to be taking this role very seriously. Another reason could be that as game culture becomes increasingly organized and mainstream, issues blocking equal participation are identified and addressed.

Structured, low-threshold activities offered by organized game environments are a key element of change because they create space to disseminate good practices, reach new audiences, make space for focus groups, and build a stronger sense of community (Amazan-Hall et al. 2018; Kerr 2020). In our workshop the 'structured activities' mentioned by participants referred to institutionalized activity overseen by professionals or associations, such as public gaming spaces, activity groups, educational programs, and events. These activities enable controlled, collective action favored by the Nordics' style of associative democracy (Byrkjeflot 2024). As one participant commented:

> *I see game literacy and hobby activities becoming organized as somehow important. I don't want to demand becoming organized because it's not characteristic of the phenomenon but instead having something akin to organization. If you're faced with the unorganized phenomenon alone, such as the quaternary sector, then you can't demand anything from them: instead, you need to change how you participate with them*. (P2 – Municipal service)

Structured activities have increased diverse participation by cultivating safer spaces. Our participants mentioned utilizing tools and actions such as a Code of Conduct, harassment contact people, building accessible physical and digital spaces, offering individual support such as in-house mental health services, implementing equity and safety plans, communicating clear values, lowering threshold for contact, and offering targeted peer groups to increase safety and inclusion. Many are globally recognized practices which address common issues in groups of people (Amazan-Hall et al. 2018; Chee et al. 2022; Kerr 2020), and which have steadily gained a foothold in Finland in recent years. Cultivating safer spaces is not limited to insider communities or groups: Finnish organizations use events to openly draw attention to topical issues and to disseminate best practices (Harviainen et al. 2022; Myöhänen 2025). Events are also great for community outreach, talent acquisition, and teaching game cultural skills (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Aurava 2024; Kerr 2020). Our participants specifically mentioned the exhibits and events at the Finnish Museum of Games, Over the Barriers events held by Tampere University's Tampere Accessibility Unit TACCU, W Love Games conference, and open collaborative networking events in the Finnish game industry as examples of successful activities which share information across sectors. In the game industry, companies and enthusiastic employees organize open get-togethers and networking events both during work hours and in their free time, helping to foster diverse participation (Harviainen et al. 2022; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020). Communal initiatives are further supported by individuals and organizations actively co-developing and communicating about the state of the field through published guides, public speaking and collecting data (Friman et al. 2025; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020; Suominen et al. 2023).

Raising awareness and visibility of the scale of Finnish game culture and its people e.g. through events and community activity has contributed to increased diverse representation across game cultural environments. This links with previous research, which has noted that visible representation naturally increases diversity by showing what is possible to attain (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Crothers et al. 2024; Myöhänen 2025). According to P7, developers in the Finnish game industry are generally comfortable showing e.g. neurodiversity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religious background, and in many ways, diversity has become commonplace:

> *I brought an acquaintance from Britain to an IGDA meetup in Helsinki, and they were like, oh my god, there are so – well, they were surprised there weren't only people assumed to be men there. We explained that many are students, and because of the mobile industry, so it's a lot more even. I never noticed this myself, because for me it's the norm having all these types of people there.* (P7 – Game industry non-profit)

Showing diversity within men can also have an impact:

> *Even though 90% of [Elisa Masters Espoo, a Counter-Strike 2 on-site esports tournament] event visitors are men, the scale of men is very broad. There are people from very different backgrounds, from very different viewpoints… and it's made visible for example senior citizens, who are Counter-Strike fans, and that's brought up many interesting questions about gaming as a hobby. This is something that's created change, and the change has flowed outwards from a predominantly male hobby.* (P2 – Municipal service)

Some of the increased representation could be due to peer groups advocating for diversity, such as We in Games Finland (WiGFi) and Female Gaming Finland (FGF) mentioned by our participants. Peer groups help to increase representation by creating community, learning opportunities and safer spaces (Harvey and Fisher 2015; Kerr 2020). Underrepresented people have reported finding empowerment through shared game cultural identities and having a protective ring of peers surrounding them (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Harvey and Shepherd 2017), which may lead to further organization through an association, as is the case with WiGFi and FGF.

When discussing minimizing harmful behaviors in wider game culture, our study participants used the Finnish word 'pelikasvatus', which translates to 'game literacy education' as an example of successful educative measures. In this context, game literacy education means teaching people how to navigate digital and analog game environments, both in-game and outside of games, in an informed, healthy way (Harviainen et al. 2015). P3 mentioned that game literacy education has increased in higher education such as vocational institutions and universities, contributing to professionals being better prepared and informed about issues. Game literacy education is also increasingly used in general formal education, e.g. in events such as game jams (Aurava 2024), and in the professional training our participant organizations offer their target groups.

CHALLENGES

Workshop participants agreed that while a lot has changed over the years, there is still work to be done. This is reflected in our analysis of the workshops, which identified more challenges than successes in the workshop discussions. The identified

challenges were broken down into individual, organizational, and societal levels in accordance with their general sphere of influence (Table 3). On the individual level are persisting stereotypes about who plays games and how they play them. In the organizational level are administrative challenges related to implementing DEI in organizations. The last category concerns societal resistance, such as society's perception of DEI and harassment issues.

Persisting Stereotypes	**Limited representation** of diverse people in games, marketing, and professional roles.
	Assumed behavior of underrepresented groups obstructs equity.
	Segregated activities uphold harmful notions about participation.
Administrative Challenges	**Lack of strategy** affects public support and funding.
	Collaboration challenges between public, non-profit, and business sectors.
	Difficulties with attracting and **catering to a wider audience**.
	Access to safer spaces is dependent on location and available facilities.
	International and remote employees' **integration into local communities**.
	Difficulties in making relevant **information accessible**.
	Exploitative work culture in esports and game development.
	Poor equity planning loosely following directives and conventional needs.
	Counteracting **economic inequality** while needing to profit financially.
	Insufficient education leading to weak implementation of DEI practices.
Societal Resistance	DEI is **unpaid volunteer-based labor** done by those with a personal stake.
	Exploitation of power and status to gatekeep activities.
	Influential people having **dismissive attitudes** towards game cultural activities.
	Global practices clashing with local practices.
	An **illusion of an equal society** prevents recognition of discrimination.
	The presence of excessive **pressure and harassment** in wider game culture.

Table 3: DEI challenges in Finnish game culture.

Limited visible representation of people is prevalent across Finnish game cultural environments and online platforms. One significant issue is the general focus on binary gender identities over other forms of diversity such as non-binary genders, disabilities, or ethnicities. This inclination was also present in our workshop discussions and acknowledged briefly. For example, P2 pointed out that diversity is too often measured as the number of women in a space dominated by men, rather than considering diverse genders or diversity inside groups of men. According to Markkola (2021, 151), the Nordic countries have traditionally focused on gender equality rather than other forms of discrimination and didn't begin adjusting to wider anti-discrimination concepts until Finland and Sweden joined the European Union in the mid-1990s. This relatively late development of anti-discrimination legislation in society, along with global game culture's general focus on misogynistic norms (Drenten et al. 2023), could help to explain why gender representation remains the primary focus and why there is very little data available about other underrepresented groups.

Roles in the Finnish game industry are also gendered: P7 said they are typically the only woman in a developer group or a big project, and P6 pointed out that in contrast, many administrative and human resource roles are filled by women. This is not specific to Finland: previous studies suggest women are generally employed in project management, human resources, or journalism roles within the game industry (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Perks and Whitson 2022) and content-producing creative roles in esports (Assunção et al. 2024; Piggott et al. 2022), rather than traditionally masculine technical or game performance-related roles (Johnson 2018). Role access is influenced by ingrained cultural and societal norms such as misogyny (Drenten et al. 2023; Harvey and Shepherd 2017; Johnson 2018), which are present even in countries noted for exemplary gender equality (Szczepanska 2023). When diverse representation is scarce, assumptions about underrepresented groups may further obstruct equity. Our participants shared the following experiences about discrimination towards women and people who are disabled, many of which are corroborated by recent studies: traditionally feminine roles are expected from women, e.g. advocacy and emotional labor, even when employed in a traditionally masculine role (Drenten et al. 2023); women face harassment from other gamers if their gender is discovered (Assunção et al. 2024); antagonism between women to gain favor in a masculine space (Drenten et al. 2023); women's skills are dismissed or require extra proof (Darvin et al. 2021); men's assumed disinterest in games about women; women and people who are disabled face assumptions about what games they prefer; and people who are disabled are neglected in game activities because "*someone decides on behalf of the disabled… these people don't play games*" (P5). Finnish gaming activities use segregated activities to oppose discrimination and foster safer spaces for underrepresented groups, but they are not entirely free of issues:

> *It easily gives the men or boys who play the notion that they [women and gender diverse people] don't belong in our esports leagues, and they need their own. And it increases the toxicity around this topic because then men and boys think women shouldn't be playing with them. So, I'm afraid of doing them, even if they create safer spaces which are important.* (P4 – Educational institution)

Segregation in game culture is a popular tool used to prevent men's hostility towards other genders (Crothers et al. 2024), or to allow assistive technology for disabilities (Hassan et al. 2025). However, they also alienate other underrepresented groups and

force repercussions on other people instead of the men who behave badly (Assunção et al. 2024; Darvin et al. 2021; Harvey and Fisher 2015). P4 pointed out that because esports has no gendered skill requirements, gender-segregated activities are an artificial divide created by societal norms, further limiting the small pool of available players in Finland. In a country with a small population and a much smaller amount of esports enthusiasts, segregation based on assumed skills due to disabilities further risks alienating competent players (Hassan et al. 2025).

To be able to change harmful norms requires collective action. Finland is a Nordic country with a welfare state that is reliant on top-down public strategies to guide large-scale initiatives in society (Byrkjeflot 2024; Koivunen et al. 2021; Markkola 2021). Serving the public interest can increase societal legitimacy and funding, as the government favors direct financial support rather than methods such as tax reliefs (Sotamaa et al. 2020). Our participants identified issues in this system stemming from what they called 'a lack of shared game cultural strategy'. According to them, this causes discrepancies in how game cultural issues are approached in organizations, ministries, and municipal services, leading to ignorant decision-makers blocking initiatives and inequal access to resources and opportunities. While the Finnish game industry receives state support through public investments and start-up agencies such as Business Finland, our study participants mentioned other game activities, such as esports, youth work, game literacy, and gaming addiction services, struggling to access similar support. Esports activities were used as an example: they do not neatly fall under ministry sports or culture subsidies, so they are often financed through youth work subsidies, which causes issues when adults also participate.

Having discrepancies in game cultural support between agencies and regions leads to socio-economical and geographical inequality when it comes to accessible game activities. Our participants mentioned that better equipped municipalities have gaming facilities, diverse hobby groups, and game events available, while most of Finland has nothing. This is corroborated by Myöhänen's (2025, 5–6) study on Finnish game industry events, where they pointed out that game industry events are generally held in major hubs such as Tampere, Jyväskylä, or the capital region around Helsinki, and this can make them inaccessible to people outside of these regions. Complications with access can exacerbate existing group divides, such as those existing between cities and the countryside, senior and junior members, or socio-economic backgrounds (Myöhänen 2025).

Our workshops' game industry participants were also concerned with international and remote workers' integration into local communities. At the end of 2024, the Finnish game industry employed around 4300 industry employees, of which 37% were non-Finnish and an estimated 24% worked mostly remotely (Neogames 2025). Taking everyone's needs into account in a community simultaneously happening across several employment levels, physical sites, and different online platforms requires a lot of resources and effort, and it can be extra challenging for those navigating unfamiliar cultural expectations, seemingly meritocratic practices favoring men, and the intricacies of local networks and services (Park 2023; Piggott 2022; Szczepanska 2023). This tension between international and local practices is also present when Finnish individuals are employed by international companies. Our participants mentioned exploitative work culture practices, such as precarious employment status (e.g. temporary project-based employment, working as a private entrepreneur), excessive work schedules, and lack of access to healthcare being mainly faced by Finnish esports or game development employees working for international entities not under Finnish

labour legislation. Precarious practices in Finnish organizations were not specifically mentioned; however, this does not mean they are non-existent, as project-based work is universal, and self-employed individuals in Finland have weaker labor protections compared to company employees. P4 gave a general example from esports:

> *There's no such thing as sick leave in esports, for example due to burnout or mental health. If you're throwing up, you can still play on the computer. If you have a fever, you play while having a fever, and if you have burnout, you play while burnt out. Very rarely there's an opportunity for sick leave, and there's no doctor to write you a certificate for sick leave. Especially if you're self-employed, you'd basically need to get someone to play on your behalf and that's not possible.* (P4 – Educational institution)

In contrast to esports, the Finnish game industry has leveraged local welfare and labor legislation to promote healthier work-life balance and social sustainability goals in their brand communication, possibly to gain a competitive edge in a global industry rife with crunch-culture and poor employee protections (Friman et al. 2025; Suominen et al. 2023). Despite this communication, inadequate equity planning is still a widespread issue in individual organizations across sectors. According to our participants, prevailing Finnish accessibility and inclusion directives are only loosely followed in some organizations, focusing on conventional disability needs and consequences for bad behavior without reflection on actual deficiencies and preparedness. DEI work is too often unpaid, volunteer-based labor. This points to a reactive rather than a proactive attitude towards issues. As Friman et al. (2023, 10) noted in their study of Finnish esports organizations, their activities are generally open to everyone, and they aim to communicate in a gender neutral, non-discriminatory way, but there is little communication targeted specifically at underrepresented groups, and they focus on preventing discrimination rather than promoting equity. This neutral communication style is widely used to appeal to everyone while upholding the status quo by not actively seeking to change it (Ahmadi et al. 2020; Friman et al. 2023; Szczepanska 2023).

This is not uniquely a Finnish issue: studies point to other Nordic organizations being supportive of DEI in general, but implementation is hindered by a strong culture of thinking equality is already achieved or not worth the investment of resources, and problems are not an issue until someone points them out (Friman et al. 2023; Piggott et al. 2022; Szczepanska 2023). Piggott et al.'s (2022, 59) study on Norwegian esports organizations included participants who felt that there are no discriminatory barriers preventing gender equality in Norwegian esports, while the study itself raised several issues regarding women's participation. Szczepanska (2023, 856–858) examined how the Swedish game industry remains deeply gender-divided despite Sweden's reputation as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, highlighting how gender-neutral discourses shift the focus from structural inequalities to individual coping and responsibility. The inability to acknowledge DEI issues was also corroborated by several of our participants, who talked about an 'illusion of an equal society' blocking DEI in Finnish game organizations. This illusion is usually held by individuals in a position of authority who are convinced Finland is an equal society without racism or sexism, especially when compared to countries outside of Europe. Coupled with Piggott et al.'s (2022) and Szczepanska's (2023) similar findings from other Nordic countries, this problematic perception likely stems from the Nordic countries' image as world leaders in social security, gender equality and

comprehensive welfare policies and is the work of decades of careful policy collaboration and branding between the countries (Koivunen 2021; Markkola 2021). However, while they may be seemingly united on common issues, the Nordic countries can also have differences in their goals:

> *That [women's esports leagues] has differing opinions even between Nordic countries. We in Finland have been direct about agreeing to take part in them, but only if the end goal is a single league [open to all genders] rather than having two parallel leagues.* (P3 – Esports association)

When it comes to trying to find common ground in a global environment, our participants also noted the simple difficulty of keeping up with information and inclusive terminology in several languages at once. P6 mentioned gendered pronouns as an example: they do not exist in the Finnish language, so some Finnish speakers struggle to understand their significance in other languages. Participants also found it challenging not having a Finnish or English term for 'everyone except men' because sometimes 'female' or 'woman' is used as shorthand for diverse gender identities, such as groups consisting of women, trans, and non-binary people.

ACTIONABLE SOLUTIONS

During the workshops, participants were asked to suggest actionable solutions to the DEI challenges they had presented. We divided the suggestions into three subcategories based on their area of effect: 'Knowledge' includes solutions dealing with education and dissemination of information, 'Resources' includes solutions regarding resources, such as networks, physical spaces, and finances, and 'Organization' includes solutions related to strategy and management (Table 4).

Knowledge	Game literacy **education for the public**, to minimize harmful behaviors.
	Formal training for professionals on basic DEI skills.
	Creating **specialized DEI content**, such as informative websites and guides.
Resources	**Accessible data** to support decision-making.
	Public support for shared gaming spaces similar to libraries and sports facilities.
	Increased collaboration in DEI development across sectors.
Organization	**National game cultural strategy** supporting coordinated sustainable action.
	Minimum DEI requirements for organizations, events, and developed games.
	Support from people with power, such as politicians, executives, and men in male-dominated environments.
	Diversifying services to appeal to a wider audience.

Table 4: Actionable DEI solutions.

The solutions proposed by our participants heavily focused on collaborative efforts across sectors. A collaborative approach between game cultural communities can support DEI development by increasing available knowledge, awareness, and opportunities (Harvey and Fisher 2015; Harviainen et al. 2022; Kerr 2021). Participants called for people such as politicians, managers, and executives, along with men in male-dominated environments, to speak about issues and shape game cultural DEI together with underrepresented people, service users, gamers, research and development projects, businesses, local DEI organizations, and other game cultural organizations. Practical ways of doing this are to collaborate on a national game cultural strategy and co-design practical models, such as minimum DEI requirements. In the Finnish state model, public strategies are central in directing collective efforts in society by affecting the legitimacy and funding of cultural sectors and their organizations (Koivunen 2021; Sotamaa et al. 2020). While game cultural environments already receive support from the state through various means (Sotamaa et al. 2020; Neogames 2025), support is precarious due to the current government and political climate which increasingly cuts the budgets of public agencies and funding models. A ministerial-level or other higher strategy, created together with diverse game culture organizations, would clarify public funding structures, direct a distribution of responsibilities, and offer a common, politically supported base for resolving game cultural issues and developing sustainable practices:

> *Currently the responsibility is kind of on the central organizational level; the organization creates the direction and hopes that it aligns, for example, with the thoughts of the ministry. The ministry could instead have a direction and a strategy that they are implementing, and the central organizations could naturally just use that as a base to go from there*. (P3 – Esports association)

It is important to secure stable funding for DEI initiatives, or they risk becoming exploitative, uncoordinated, unpaid volunteer work (Harvey and Shepherd 2017). Our participants proposed changes to Finnish public subsidies: esports should be part of sports subsidies, hobby activities and game development under cultural subsidies, and junior activities in youth work subsidies. There could also be financial incentives, such as bonuses, for indie developers to make accessible games. Two of our participants also proposed open, shared gaming spaces for all ages that are funded similarly to the subsidies of public sports facilities and libraries. Some libraries and municipal youth work game centers such as the Oodi library in Helsinki and the Turku Game Academy under City of Turku's youth services already operate through municipal funding, but they do not generally share the space with businesses and limit their use to certain target groups only. Shared, free or low-cost public gaming spaces would make it easier and less financially risky to diversify game activities for a wider audience.

Decisions and justifications regarding any game cultural phenomena should be supported by accessible data, which needs to be collected, archived and readily available to researchers and decision-makers (Kerr 2021). P1 suggested collaborating with a museum, such as the Finnish Museum of Games, to collect historical data on game companies, subcultures, and activities across cultural environment divides. Participants also suggested including game literacy education into basic education for children and young people, along with also targeting adults wherever games are being made, played, and discussed in society. The benefits of game literacy education on diversity, personal skills, and well-being have already been explored in several Finnish environments, from using game jams to develop students' skills and competences in

formal education (Aurava 2024) to offering game literacy activities in youth work centers, elderly care, and libraries (Harviainen et al. 2015). Game literacy programs at events and communities, organized by professionals, can be used to normalize DEI and model positive behaviors. Events can be further leveraged as tools for positive change by diversifying their content with game-adjacent activities such as cosplay and music (Friman et al. 2023) and using event formats such as game jams to engage diverse people around a common goal (Aurava 2024; Kerr 2020).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study's participants were well-known professionals employed by or volunteering for influential game cultural organizations. As such, this study offers insight into how current influential stakeholder organizations, who are in leadership positions representing their respective fields, perceive DEI issues in Finnish game culture and how local structures affect them. Possibly due to their own roles, participants' discussion focused on institutionalized activities led by professionals rather than informal communities such as fan networks or loose social groups. Despite their different sectors, much of the discussion revolved around shared issues and insights, further solidifying the need for an intersectional, cross-sector perspective when designing DEI solutions.

Many of the DEI successes and challenges identified in our study are inherently societal in nature and reflect larger developments in local contexts. What particularly stood out from the Finnish context, both in existing issues and presented solutions, was the emphasis on collective action and the reliance on associations and public structures when designing measures for long-lasting impact. We consider one possible reason for this to be Finland's welfare society model, where legislation and public policies strongly guide societal sustainability, equity, and the well-being of people both in public and private sectors (Markkola 2022). Public policy and societal legitimacy have been shaped throughout history by a high level of associative governance and people's movements (Byrkjeflot 2024), which has enabled niche cultures to develop into successful industries (Tyni et al. 2014). This propensity for collective action is highly visible in present-day game culture. Many influential game organizations, including large-scale game events, esports activities, and advocacy groups, are non-profit associations run by volunteers. Their funding comes mainly from memberships, donations, ticket sales, or public subsidies, which makes them very reliant on the communities and support networks around them. Public support for game culture is not limited to associations and subsidies from ministries, as several municipalities also offer free or low-cost game culture-related services, such as start-up support for companies, game literacy education for schools, or accessible gaming activities for young people. There is a strong culture of volunteer work and cooperation between game organizations in sharing expertise (Harviainen et al. 2022); this was echoed in our workshops, which had no mention of non-disclosure agreements, proprietary practices, or otherwise withholding information for business advantage. Instead, heavy emphasis was placed on collective action across sectors, such as a ministry-level national game cultural strategy supporting the sustainable development of Finnish game culture.

The toxicity, pressure, and harassment prevalent in game cultural communities was brought up several times in our workshops. This topic was not tied to Finland in particular – instead, it was mainly talked about in a general context, with an undertone of global game culture instilling toxicity into local environments. It was also

noted in Friman et al.'s (2023, 9) study where Finnish esports organizations described toxicity, discrimination, and harassment as an outside threat for which they used rules, guidelines, and other measures to protect their participants from. As our participants put it, common DEI issues are difficult to solve because there is no unified global consensus about DEI practices: each country has their own political and cultural context, norms, and values to consider. This is also why it is important to examine game culture from an intersectional, systemic perspective spanning across different environments. This approach enabled us to see what commonalities and differences are present in a cultural field that simultaneously encompasses so many distinct environments but also struggles with interconnected DEI issues affected by, perhaps not an 'illusion of equal society' as our participants put it, but rather an illusion of global sameness. Further research is needed on how regional game cultures are built and shaped by local legislation, associations, political movements, and cultural norms especially regarding participation affordances. This will enable tailoring DEI solutions to better fit local systems and norms.

In this paper, we have shown how the local context of influential associations and public sector agencies in combination with the private sector have shaped how DEI issues are perceived in digital game culture in Finland. While the identified issues are relatable to other contexts as well, the local specificities, such as the suggestion of a shared game cultural strategy and stronger game literacy education, are typical Finnish solutions favoring collective, society-wide action. Despite what global polarized media discussion around game culture DEI would have us believe, game culture does not exist in a separate dimension from the wider society that created it: rather, it exists in a reciprocal relationship, each affecting the other, creating diverse pockets of local cultural expression.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Essi Taino: ideation, material production, analysis, writing, editing, reviewing, and revising; Kalle Laakso: ideation, material production, analysis, writing, editing, reviewing, and revising; Taina Myöhänen: ideation, material production, analysis, writing, editing, reviewing, and revising; Usva Friman: ideation, writing, editing, reviewing, and revising; Olli Sotamaa: ideation, writing, editing, and reviewing.

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