Party, but for whom?
Accessibility, inclusivity and equity
in Finnish game industry events

Taina Myöhänen
Tampere University
taina.myohanen@tuni.fi

ABSTRACT

Game industry events are key venues for networking, career advancement and information exchange for industry members. However, these events are not always accessible, inclusive or equally available to all participants. This research examines barriers to attendance through an inclusion framework that emphasises individuals' needs for both belonging and uniqueness. Moments of exclusion, differentiation, and assimilation are analysed using survey data and interviews collected from members of the Finnish game industry in 2023, alongside an exploration of how class relations become visible through event experiences. Moving beyond the documented issues of gender-based exclusion, the study expands the discourse by identifying additional forms of marginalisation affecting participation in industry events, such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, disability, sobriety, social discomfort, and professional seniority. The findings contribute to academic discussions on local game production and offer recommendations for fostering more inclusive industry events.

Keywords

diversity, inclusion, events, DEI, game industry, game production, disability, alcohol usage, gender, social networks, social discomfort

INTRODUCTION

For people working in the game industry, industry events offer places to find new career and business opportunities, build networks, and find work-related information and peer support (Browne and Whitson 2020; Butt 2022; Cohendet et al. 2021; Harviainen et al. 2021; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020; O'Donnell 2014). Attending industry events demonstrates a game worker's commitment to the industry and expresses their identity (Butt 2022). Additionally, networks created at industry events provide security for precarious game development work, and an inability to network can potentially have an adverse impact on an individual's career in games (Browne and Whitson 2020).

Even though vital for career development, events are not always accessible, inclusive or equally available to all game industry members. This paper discusses the obstacles game industry community members face in attending professional gatherings. Previous research on inclusion in game industry events has shown that women and people of diverse genders encounter devaluation, trivialisation and sexual

harassment, making event participation more difficult for them (Butt 2022; Fisher 2023; Fisher and Harvey 2013; Ochsner 2019; Taylor 2024). This study is motivated by the need to complement existing gender-focused analyses with a broader examination of exclusion affecting diverse game industry community members. Earlier, Browne and Whitson (2020) have observed that not every game developer can afford to travel to events, even when such participation is essential for their career or business development. Research on game jams have similarly identified institutional and physical barriers in attendance, such as event timing, location, transportation, and venue (Kerr 2020; Meriläinen and Aurava 2018; Preston et al. 2012; Wearn et al. 2014). Meriläinen and Aurava (2018) have also noted internal barriers stemming from personal characteristics, expectations, and social support. Based on these findings I explore how structural and personal barriers shape access to game industry events, where participation plays a pivotal role in professional growth and career development.

The study has been conducted within the Finnish game industry community in 2023 through online surveys and interviews. The Finnish game industry provides a suitable context for the study due to its small but vibrant ecosystem, known for its unity and community spirit (EGDF, 2022; Harviainen et al. 2021; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020; Kultima 2018; Lehtonen et al. 2022). The local scene offers a rich set of events for its members, including monthly gatherings in various hub cities across the country, game jams, events arranged for underrepresented industry members, several smaller conferences, and various special interest group gatherings. Similar to the global context, local industry events provide opportunities for employment and professional development (Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020). This context is further shaped by efforts within the local ecosystem to improve event inclusion, like the joint development of an industry-wide Code of Conduct by leading game development organisations (Neogames, 2022), which is now widely adopted at local industry events and copied abroad. In this article, event experiences of industry members are examined through the inclusion framework developed by Shore et al. (2011) with additional insights on class relations contributed by van Eck et al. (2024).

The study contributes to the academic discussion on local game production studies and offers insight into one local game development culture (Kerr 2021; Sotamaa 2021; Sotamaa and Švelch 2021; Young et al. 2025). Game production methods vary by region, reflecting local culture, identity, laws and language. By concentrating on industry events arranged in one regional game production area, the heterogeneity of game industry practices can be revealed and local nuances discovered. This paper also provides information for game industry event organisers to arrange even more inclusive events.

THEORETICAL STANDPOINT: INCLUSION FRAMEWORK

Emphasising the work-related nature of industry events, the theoretical framework of this article originates from workplace inclusion studies. I have utilised here the inclusion framework established by Shore et al. (2011). Building on Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory, this framework is constructed on the degree of belongingness and uniqueness an individual experiences as a part of the group. Shore et al. (2011) argue that for an individual to experience inclusion in a certain environment, their needs for both belongingness and uniqueness must be fulfilled.

When included, the individual experiences that they are accepted as a member of the group, and the group values their unique skills, knowledge or characteristics. Exclusion, on the other hand, is formed from a low sense of belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al. 2011). As the authors define, "the individual is not treated as an organizational insider with unique value in the work group" (Shore et al. 2011, 1266). The third aspect of their framework is differentiation, which forms when an individual feels a high value of uniqueness but low belongingness: in this case, the individual is not treated as part of the community, even though their uniqueness is valued by that community. The fourth combination, where an individual experiences a low value of uniqueness but high belongingness, causes assimilation. In this case, the individual can only belong to the community when they follow norms and downplay their unique features.

There have been additions and comments to this framework to make it fit better with different kinds of organisations (e.g. Korkmaz et al. 2022; van Eck et al. 2021; van Eck et al. 2024). Relevant to this article, van Eck, Dobusch and van den Brink (2021, 2024) have shown how inclusion studies typically overlook class relations. They argue that that the role of employment conditions is a significant factor for creating inclusion. Furthermore, most of the inclusion research is conducted, and inclusion models created, among knowledge sector workers who typically enjoy a higher level of job security, such as permanent contracts, steady work hours and good salaries, and can take issues like time autonomy or physical integrity for granted. This is what the authors call as "the silent foundation" of inclusion. For example service sector workers, whose contracts are often temporary and whose teams and working hours are changing constantly, lack "the silent foundation", and have to take the longer path to experience inclusion. In this study, the interest is not only on socioeconomic class relations, but more broadly on the power imbalance between different groups in the industry, noted earlier, for example, by O'Donnell (2014).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study utilises material from an online survey of 130 respondents from the Finnish game industry, and interviews of 34 diverse industry members. Both datasets were collected in the spring of 2023.

The survey gathered experiences and opinions on topics related to equity and inclusion. It was the second experience survey conducted by We in Games Finland (WiGFi), a Finnish non-profit, member-based organisation advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in the game industry. This time, the survey was made in a collaboration with Better Games Together, a collective of Finnish game studios Supercell, Rovio, Metacore, and Netflix studio Next Games, who share goal of making the game industry safer and more accepting for LGBTQIA+ individuals and their identities. I provided advisory support for the survey and have the contractual right to use the anonymised survey material for research.

The survey aimed for broad coverage, so the call was shared on social media channels and groups targeted at Finnish game developers, along with collaborators' newsletters and channels. Of the respondents, 116 (89%) were currently working or had previously worked in the Finnish game industry. To contextualise this figure, the Finnish game industry employed an estimated 4,100 individuals at the end of 2022 (Neogames, 2023). Game students covered 7% of survey respondents, and the

remainder responses were people from industries connected to games, for example, service providers.

Women were overrepresented in the survey data at 53%, compared to their reported 22% share of the Finnish game industry workforce (Neogames 2023). Men comprised 37% of the respondents, and 7% belonged to the diverse genders including non-binary, agender and gender-fluid identities. 3% preferred not to disclose their gender. 38% of respondents identified with the LGBTQIA+ community, which is a more than reported in the global IGDA survey, where 28% of respondents identified as non-straight (Weststar and Lentini 2024). Within the context of this study, the overrepresentation of underrepresented groups in data is not a concern, as underrepresented groups are often those who experience challenges in inclusion (see, e.g., Taylor 2024; Butt 2022; Ochsner 2019).

The interview data consists of 33 person-to-person online interviews and one email interview. I was solely responsible of conducting the interviews. Interviews were sourced though open calls on social media channels followed by Finnish game industry members, and as I have worked in the local game industry, through my own network. Interviewees' game career experience ranged from four months to 23 years in areas of management, programming, art, narrative design, QA, PR, and marketing. 19 were Finnish and 15 were from abroad, reflecting that 30% of those working in the Finnish game industry come from abroad (Neogames 2023). Although most of the game companies are in the capital area (Neogames 2023), nearly half of the interviewees lived elsewhere. Four interviewees mentioned having a physical disability, and eight neurodiversity. Twelve interviewees belonged to sexual minorities. Six interviewees used they/them pronouns, twelve used she/her, and five used he/him. The rest used several pronouns, with the majority preferring she/they. All interviewees had more than one identity trait that defined them as underrepresented persons in the industry. This is also why a more detailed breakdown of interviewees is not provided, as this could compromise the interviewees' privacy in the small local game development community.

The data analysis started from the responses to the survey question: "If you don't attend events at all or often, why not?". The question had 12 pre-defined options and the possibility to add one's own reasons, which was used by 22 respondents. Additions were grouped or combined with existing groups for analysis. Responses were then compared to respondents' gender, LGBTQIA+ community status, and years in the industry and possible open comments included. Survey questions about unwanted event experiences and non-alcohol events were also analysed similarly.

As the survey results were analysed prior to the interviews, the interview questions related to events formed from the survey results. Questions explored the interviewee's event activity, their reasons for attending or not attending events, and the belongingness and safety they experienced at events. For interviewees living outside the capital area, a question related to event travel was added. The interviews were transcribed by a service contractor and pseudonymised by me before the analysis.

Qualitative content analysis was used for interview analysis, following Nicmanis (2024) reflexive content analysis approach. Reflexivity provided the possibility to evaluate my impact on the data collected and my role as part of the community studied. On the other hand, my knowledge of the local game industry helped me to

situate the experiences of the interviewees and provided background knowledge on discussed subjects, but not in all matters: for example, as a Finnish citizen by birth, I have no experience of the customs and obligations set for people arriving from abroad. The coding focused on recognising the experiences of not feeling included, which were then placed on the inclusion framework by Shore et al. (2011). Different class and power relations were analysed in relation to categories created, which will be presented in following sections.

All citations are from the interviews. Some quotes were originally in Finnish and have been translated into English by me. Fillers, repetitions and false starts have been removed to make the quotes easier to read. At cases where the interview was conducted in English, the quotes are presented without grammatical corrections. Each cited quote reflects the voice of a distinct interviewee, so no individual is cited more than once. To provide context for the citation and support the reader's interpretation, a brief description of each interviewee is included alongside their quote, providing relevant context for the topic being discussed.

EXCLUDED, DIFFERENTIATED, ASSIMILATED

In following sections, I examine the data through moments of exclusion, differentiation and assimilation using the inclusion framework developed by Shore et al. (2011). Building on the addition proposed by van Eck et al. (2021), I also focus on instances where class and power relations become visible in game industry events.

Events Are Far Away

Finland is a sparsely populated country, so travelling can set barriers for people living outside the capital area or far from development hubs. Although distance to events was not included in the predefined options for the survey question on reasons for non-participation, it emerged from open comments. Respondents described how events were mainly organised in the capital area, and travelling, especially to evening events, was a hassle: public transport was horrible, getting home late night was complicated, and car parks near the event space were not available. These challenges echo those previously identified in studies on game jams (Kerr 2020; Meriläinen and Aurava 2018; Preston et al. 2012).

In their study of U.S. indie developers, Browne and Whitson (2020) found that developers living in cities with existing developer communities had stronger networks, which provided more resources for surviving in the industry. Developers living further away lacked these resources, and for them, industry events provided ideal places to network. However, not all developers could afford to travel to events, which created structural disparities of who could build a successful career in games (see also Wearn et al. 2014). The same phenomenon exists in Finland: industry members residing in the capital area seldomly need to travel far to events, whereas members from other parts of the country are forced to assimilate to the situation and travel to participate.

Of survey respondents, 6% reported that financial constraints affected their non-participation. Since many game industry events in Finland are free to attend, these constraints could be related to the entry fees of larger conferences, or to the travel and accommodation expenses of those living further from hubs. Costs could also be indirect. One expatriate with a background of several short-term contracts told that since her current company did not support her event attendance, she had used her

holiday allowance to volunteer at an industry event to get the opportunity to attend. She expressed a desire to attend events more often, but only *"if there are means to get tickets without having to sell a kidney"*.

Game companies typically cover event expenses for their employees, but freelance workers, unemployed people, students and individuals aspiring to join the industry do not get this benefit. This is an example of "the silent foundation" van Eck et al. (2024) mention, which is enjoyed by employed individuals in the game industry. Ease of participation emphasises the division between these classes and creates unequal opportunities to build the network important for career advancement. The act of some event organisers offering free tickets to game students for paid conferences is a great gesture towards more equal opportunities. However, if travel and accommodation needs are overlooked, this opportunity primarily benefits students living near the event location. Additionally, other groups, such as unemployed people and graduated students, remain excluded.

Expenses were not the only barrier related to travel. Equal barriers were the time and energy required for travel and organising the trip. An unemployed industry member living outside the capital area described the situation as follows:

"I would love to also be on-site again. It's a bit more of a challenge of course, because again, I have struggled a lot with anxiety. So, it's not just the social aspect, but travelling can be very stressful, even if it's not a big deal to travel somewhere. It's like I just get so, oh, I can't do anything today, because tomorrow I'm going somewhere. So, it kind of stops me from doing anything productive, if I just keep preparing myself to do that…"

Existing networks seemed to lower the social distress. "*It is easy to arrive on train or bus, or if we have bigger crew, we use a car*" explained a game company CEO living in a city two hours away from the capital, to whom their network offered the opportunity for carsharing. Similar, organised support was available for a game student who disclosed that their school supported industry-related trips, so they often shared a car with fellow students to get to events. To conclude, support from one's personal network or organisers helped overcome barriers related to location and financial constraints, and at the same time, contributed to softening class relations.

Accessibility Issues Ignored

The Covid-19 pandemic forced everyone to stay home and moved all events online, which caused many able-bodied individuals to express their discomfort with online attendance. The experience was quite the opposite for people with disabilities: they could join events that had previously been inaccessible, and most importantly, they could attend on equal terms with others.

After the Covid-19 restrictions were removed, several event organisers withdrew their online participation options. Their decisions caused a feeling of exclusion among disabled game community members, and people publicly pointed out that it was not only disabled people who suffered from this decision, but also individuals whose values, family situation or financial circumstances restricted their attendance (see, for example, Porkka-Kontturi 2023; Ismail 2023).

In the survey, 4% of respondents reported that events were typically inaccessible to them or that accessibility information was unclear. Furthermore, 1.5% mentioned that their disability had been trivialised, mocked or ignored by other participants or event staff at game industry events. Mentioned problems included hard-to-reach event locations, bathrooms only suitable for able-bodied people, inadequate lighting, steep stairs, a lack of elevators, and insufficient accessibility information provided in advance (for similarities, see Zahand and Patel 2022). Some disabled people regularly attended events, but their participation often required additional planning and motivation. Some disabled interviewees also disclosed that when accessibility information was not provided in advance by event organisers, then self-regulation in the form of not attending the event was typical, as it would be humiliating to reveal intimate issues and medical records to event organisers or other participants when onsite assistance was needed. An interviewee who had organised several events highlighted the dangerous cycle caused by neglecting accessibility issues and information: when the difficulties of disabled people were overlooked, it made their participation complicated, and then their absence from events fostered the organiser's perception that accommodating disabled people's needs is unnecessary.

A good example of causes of ignoring accessibility needs is the benevolent gesture of inviting a disabled person to an event. The act may celebrate their uniqueness, but lead to differentiation and even exclusion if accessibility issues are not taken into account. One interviewee described an awkward situation caused by an event organiser who offered them a free ticket to their event, but failed to meet their accessibility needs:

"*And then somehow explaining it to everybody why I was not [attending]. I got a flood of requests for meetings and… I was going through them, and then considering how I wanted to explain this situation.*"

On a personal level, the feeling of exclusion due to disability can be devastating, impacting both work motivation and mental health. One disabled interviewee described how sad it made them feel that no matter how hard they tried to be part of the industry and the game development community, they would never be 'in' like others since they were unable to attend live events, dine together, or meet face-to-face with other developers.

Forcing disabled people to assimilate to the standards of able-bodied individuals not only neglects an inclusive and accepting ecosystem culture, but is also discriminative. Many countries, including Finland, have signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which defines the right for disabled persons to access cultural events and work on an equal basis. Practical instructions on how to make events physically more accessible are available (e.g. Invalidiliitto 2019; Prehn 2022; Zahand and Patel 2022). Arranging events in a hybrid format not only serves people with disabilities, but also provides a cost-effective option for those living far from the event location, unable to travel, or those restricted by their country's political affairs. Online options also hold power to nurture wider diversity: Skiles et al. (2022) found that when conferences went online during the pandemic, the participation of women in science and engineering meetings increased by 253%, and genderqueer scientist participation increased by 700%.

Too Much Alcohol

Many game industry events in Finland are organized at bars and nightclubs, which are typical spaces for game industry events globally (Butt, 2022; Taylor, 2024). Building on Butt's (2022) discussion of gendered codes related to different venues, I next examine how spatial connotations influence the dynamics of industry events.

While some survey respondent found bars and nightclubs too loud and crowded for networking and information sharing important for industry events, the most frequently mentioned characteristic of these venues was that they served alcohol. Alcohol-related events made non-consumers feel out of place and uneasy. This was supported by a survey question about event attendance, in which 16% of respondents indicated that they did not attend industry events as there was too much focus on alcohol. Some interviewees described how their sober industry friends did not want to attend events organised in bars and nightclubs, and if they attended, they often felt completely left out (see also, Komulainen 2019). Safety precautions were in some cases connected to alcohol use (see Butt, 2022; Taylor, 2024), but, for example, a senior producer considered alcohol-focused events simply boring:

"I don't drink alcohol myself and we have quite an alcohol-centered culture in Finland. Quite often at company events, alcohol is king. They don't necessarily have any other activities than drinking... maybe sometimes there could be some other activities too?"

Slightly more worrying was that some individuals felt pressured to buy and consume alcohol at industry events because the event was happening in a space dedicated for drinking, or because everyone else was drinking. A little under 10% of the survey respondents reported feeling pressured to drink alcohol at game industry events. Butt (2022) argues that a party culture including heavy drinking is characteristic of new creative industries, including the game industry, and concludes: *"Drinking together can foster a sense of togetherness, unity, shared experience in ways which can feel indescribable. At the same time, those assemblies points to those who aren't included, who don't feel sense a belonging, and also who don't attend."* (Butt 2022, 216). Drinking alcohol together at events supports inclusion, but excludes those who prefer not to drink, or forces them to assimilate: individuals will only feel included if they drink alcohol. If they choose not to, following to Shore et al. (2011) they do not belong, nor is their uniqueness valued.

Industry's cultural practices can have a strong impact on what kinds of people succeed in the industry, and in the long run, on industry diversity. An executive level manager described how it was part of her job to offer shots for clients, even though she was not into drinking alcohol. She also tried to leave parties before attendees became too intoxicated, as she felt unsafe and saw no reason to remain among people who were drunk. At the time of the interview, she was considering a career change, one of the reasons being that she felt she had no other option than to either assimilate to the alcohol-filled culture in the industry or to exclude herself by leaving.

However, attitudes toward alcohol-free events suggest that such gatherings would be well received. In the survey, 37% of respondents expressed their desire for more non-alcohol industry events, 21% selected maybe and 33% said they didn't mind whether alcohol was served or not. Only 9% opposed non-alcohol events, while just 6% mentioned that they would avoid events where alcohol was served. Butt (2022) argues that the problem is not alcohol itself, but rather the unwanted behaviour that

it may encourage, further suggesting that event organisers focus on alternative spaces instead of eliminating alcohol. Similar suggestions were presented by Komulainen in his 2019 study of IGDA Finland's events. These ideas were echoed by survey respondents and interviewees in this study, who recommended relocating industry events to less crowded and noisy places like cafeterias.

Shared Social Awkwardness

"*I'm a bit introvert, so I'm not really hyper comfortable when I'm in a public place with thousands of people*" confided a CEO actively participating in events due to his position. He was not alone in his feelings. In response to the question on non-participation, over 25% of respondents felt uncomfortable in social situations. In open comments, they described how they felt outside their comfort zone, or lost and overwhelmed in large gatherings. Some identified as introverts or neurodivergent, and others described how social interactions required too much energy after a working day.

Despite finding event settings uncomfortable, several respondents expressed an aim to at least sometimes attend. Behind this could be the perceived value that event participation may bring for career and professional identity, or the need demonstrate the commitment to the industry (Browne and Whitson 2020; Butt 2022; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020; O'Donnell 2014). The desire to attend might be also connect to need of belonging, and fears of exclusion and differentiation as defined by Shore et al. (2011).

Noteworthy, several interviewees shared the assumption that people in the game industry are more likely to be introverted or have neurodivergence. Some interviewees even suspected high levels of neurodiversity in the industry. This is supported by the global IGDA survey conducted in 2023 reporting that 24% of respondents identifying as neurodiverse, that number being higher than seen in the global population (Weststar and Lentini 2024). This kind of environment can provide socially talented individuals with an opportunity to shine, and some interviewees admitted having received more opportunities in their career due to their heightened social abilities compared to many colleagues.

However, a higher incidence of socially likeminded people in the industry provided comfort for some members. A person with over a ten-year career in games reflected on their career choice:

"*I honestly strongly believe that the reason I ended up in this field is that there are so many more peculiar people here. I feel home a lot more here.*"

At events, discovering that others shared similar feelings of social uneasiness helped foster a sense of belonging. This recognition can also support the feeling that one's individuality is accepted, which is an essential component of inclusion identified by Shore et al. (2011). This was reflected by an industry newcomer from abroad who shared her recent experience of attending a local IGDA meeting:

"*At first you think everyone here is outgoing. It's just you yourself are trying to pretend that you're an outgoing person. But then you realise, oh, 80–90 % of the people here, they're pretending too.*"

Outside the Circles

Studies of the Finnish game industry have highlighted the local community's strong sense of unity (Harviainen et al. 2021; Komulainen and Sotamaa 2020; Kultima 2018; Lehtonen et al. 2022). A great community spirit was also frequently mentioned in the study material. However, this spirit did not reach everyone, and 12% of survey respondents felt that industry events were not inclusive. Responses from people with less than five years of experience accounted for nearly three-quarters of the answers, and although there were newcomers who felt that the Finnish game industry community was welcoming, there were also those who found events less welcoming to new faces (see also, Myöhänen 2023). To support this notion, some senior interviewees still remembered how scary it was when they joined the industry and started networking. One nowadays well-known developer recalled:

"Certainly when you're a shy Finn, you don't really know how to talk to strangers – because you just don't do it, because what if no one dares to talk back? As soon as you get to know one person and then another and get to know a third and so on... It gets easier the more people you get to know."

The flipside of a strongly united community is experienced by those newly entering it. Close relationships have already been established, and these newcomers described how hard it was to approach people at events unless they were known beforehand. O'Donnell has discussed about closed networks in the US game industry already in 2014, noting how game workers need to negotiate access to these networks. In the Finnish context, this tendency has been explained by Komulainen (2019, 30) who writes: "attendees to the IGDA events have the tendency of gathering into groups as developers from a certain company or as students. This can lead the entire gathering look like small, tight groups of people that can seem hard to get into." This phenomenon can lead newcomers outside of these circles to feel excluded.

Different expectations can also widen the gap between senior members and newcomers. Senior members mentioned participating in industry events to meet friends, have meaningful conversations, and relax. Newcomers typically wanted to network and find a job, and their aims made some senior community members uncomfortable. These seniors described how students and people looking to break into the industry were only talking to them to get a job, internship or advice, sometimes approaching them in very clingy and aggressive ways. In these situations, class relations become clearly visible. Those with "the silent foundation" established, having permanent contacts, good salaries and existing networks, may find it hard to relate to the needs of individuals whose livelihoods might depend on job opportunities. These situations might especially be crucial for unemployed people from outside the EU, who might be deported if they do not find the work within a particular time (Qiao 2024). For people with their "silent foundation" established, such perspectives might be incomprehensible.

To ease networking, smaller gatherings involving both seniors and newcomers were seen as helpful, such as pre-IGDA gatherings organised by WiGFi or Chat Corner by Helsinki IGDA, both open for all. One interviewee explained: *"You can then meet and get to know new people in a smaller group and make it easier for you to meet complete strangers. I've gotten a lot from participating in them, it's helped me with networking and somehow it's such a good feeling to go to a bigger event when you've already made it with a smaller intogroup"*. Having friends along also made attendance easier.

In the interviews, a younger woman with a few years of work in the industry described a recent event experience: "*I had some acquaintances there, so I dared to go, but if I went alone and didn't know if I knew anyone, it might be so distressing that I wouldn't know if I would go.*" This sentiment was fairly common, as 23% of survey respondents said they did not attend events when their friends weren't going. This phenomenon somewhat conflicts with the marketed image of many gatherings as being open and welcoming to all.

Only One in the Room

While explanation for feeling outsider may be in social discomfort rooted in personal traits or already existing closed circles that are hard to get into, there seem to be a slight correlation between belonging an underrepresented group in the game industry and reporting feeling uncomfortable in social situations. According the survey data, women reported social uncomfortableness in 28%, compared to 17% of men. Among diverse genders, the number was even higher, at 44%, although any generalisation is not reliable due to the lower number of total responses from diverse genders. 29% of LGBTQIA+ community members reported feeling uncomfortable in social situations compared to 19% of non-LGBTQIA+ members. These numbers could indicate that underrepresented groups feel social discomfort at industry events more often, which could hint that it is not only about personal characteristics, but also about how underrepresented groups are met at industry events.

As mentioned in the beginning, women's exclusion and treatment in game industry events has already been studied (Butt 2022; Fisher 2023; Fisher and Harvey 2013; Ochsner 2019; Taylor 2024). The trivialisation and sexual harassment women have been reported to face were also present in this study. The most frequently experienced unwanted incident reported by 19% of survey respondents was that someone underestimated their professionalism at events. None of these reports came from men. However, this seems to be a broader experience in the fields of technology, at least in Finland. In their study of engineers working in Finland, Bairoh and Putila (2021) also noted that challenges to creditability as an expert were reported only by women, and never by men. Another tightly gendered experience in the survey data was sexual harassment, with unwanted experiences of sexual teasing (9%), sexual comments related to appearance (7%), unwanted messaging, phone calls, or pressure for non-work-related dates and chat (3%), and unwanted deliberate touching such as leaning over, cornering, hugging or pinching (3%) reported by women respondents with only one exception. In the interviews, women and individuals preferring feminine style shared personal stories of sexual harassment. These incidents were often traumatic, undermined a sense of safety and personal space, and influenced decisions related to the career path.

The previously mentioned fear that no one would dare to talk back at industry events was experienced by several senior women in their early careers. They shared memories of how they were often the only woman in the room, and how hard it was to have natural conversations with their male colleagues. Although also these incidents can be attributed to the issues of social distress discussed earlier, the stories were only shared by women, suggesting that it was related to their gender. Younger women interviewees no longer stood out as the only ones in the room as no such a stories were shared; now it was LGBTQIA+ community members who held these concerns. A queer person visible showing their identity described their feelings when attending events they had not visited before:

"Sometimes if you go to other game events, it can for a moment be a bit of an orphan feeling because there are not so many other visibly diverse people. It feels for a moment always like okay, can I come to this space?"

Concerns like this connect to the worry that an individual's uniqueness would not be valued, and that assimilation is required to be part of the community. Self-exclusion also happened, as described by a well-connected industry member:

"If I feel like it's just going to be specific kind of people that are going to be there, if I feel like as a queer person it's not gonna be something that's fun for me, then it might be something that I just skip."

Women continued to experience exclusion in executive spaces. A woman CEO told how she attracted attention at game industry executive events and investor meetings since there were usually only men present, and she felt annoyed when her presence was widely acknowledged by event organisers or other participants. What she experienced was differentiation; her uniqueness was celebrated, but she did not feel as if she belonged to the group.

Butt (2022) remarks that by participating in industry events, women are forced to accept unwanted behaviour and develop individual coping strategies. I'd like to extend this notion and argue that for people belonging underrepresented groups in the industry, assimilation requires extra work and is often emotionally laborious, which can affect their willingness to participate in events. This creates a divide between the individuals representing majority and those underrepresented, where the majority is free from these kinds of negative experiences. As highlighted by interviewees, individual coping mechanisms are not the solution to structural problems, and issues should be addressed through more communal procedures like event codes of conduct, creating processes to intervene in unwanted situations, and providing more education about acceptable behaviour at work-related events.

Not Everyone Wants to Party

The discussion so far has been constructed on the necessity of attending industry events, but that does not imply that all participants are interested in socialising or partying. There are people who rather spend time with their family (29% of survey respondents), or on their hobbies or work (32%). Also, 25% of survey respondents mentioned that they did not find events useful.

Some mentioned explanation for non-participation were related to age: these respondents felt too old for parties. For some, priorities had shifted after having a family. Others had meaningful hobbies they wanted to invest their time in, and some claimed that it took extra effort to leave the house after learning to stay home during the COVID-19 pandemic. A person with 11-15 years of experience in the industry said that they no longer needed to network, so there was no point in attending events. This raised the interest of whether responses of non-participation varied according to years of experience in the industry. When analysing the correlation between responses on non-participation and years in industry, results revealed that more senior members were more likely to be absent from industry events due to the reasons presented above. Of respondents with 11-15 years' experience, 63% preferred work or hobbies over industry events, and 75% preferred to spend time with their families than attended events. Of respondents with under two years of industry

experience, only 14% preferred family time over events, and 28% prioritised their work or hobbies. Interestingly, respondents with more than 15 years of industry experience did not prioritise family or hobbies, correlating with those having 2-5 years of experience.

There is nothing wrong with prioritising family or hobbies over the industry events, and it is natural that more senior people have families. However, the possibility to ignore industry events seems to build on to having a secure position in the industry and community. Members with an extensive background in the industry usually have their networks and professional reputation established, in other words their "silent foundation" settled. There is no need for them to attend events to find new career opportunities, demonstrate commitment, or build networks, as their established reputation and connections would help them find a new job should they need one. Their non-participation at industry events is a privilege which is not experienced by more junior members in the industry.

This setup clearly highlights the class divide between senior members having the "silent foundation" compared to those such as newcomers, unemployed people, and those working on temporary contracts. This not only affects the need to attend events, but also how freely people behave at events. As one person searching for work described:

"I think if I had a secured workplace, then I would feel safer. But because I don't, I'm in a very precarious position where I don't want to piss off anyone, in case they do something."

This citation also hints that individuals having their "silent foundation" established do not need to control their opinions or behaviour in the same way than people lacking this foundation. While this material does not allow for an in-depth study of how free individuals feel to express their opinions, this imbalance could be explored further in future research.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined barriers to event participation in the Finnish game industry using Shore et al.'s (2011) framework of belongingness and uniqueness, expanded by van Eck et al. (2024) notions for class and power dynamics. This research broadens the knowledge of the game industry event exclusion by identifying a range of intersecting factors such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, disability, social discomfort, sobriety, professional seniority, social networks, belonging an underrepresent group, and employment status that may affect the event inclusion.

The findings show that inclusion is not simply about access, but about the feeling welcomed and accepted. Many industry members described moments of exclusion, differentiation, or assimilation that often intersected with their social identities and employment conditions. For example, those living outside the capital area faced logistical and financial burdens in attending events, especially if they lack the "silent foundation" like stable employment. Similarly, disabled participants encountered inaccessible venues and a lack of advance accessibility information, often leading to self-exclusion.

Cultural norms further shape event experiences. Alcohol-centred events, while supporting the sociability of some, excluded or pressured others, particularly sober individuals. Several individuals found social events overwhelming, though shared social awkwardness sometimes fostered a sense of belonging. These findings underscore the need for more diverse event formats that accommodate a wider range of needs and preferences. The exclusion and marginalisation of people belonging to underrepresented groups reflect not only a lack of inclusion but also a lack of recognition. The emotional labour required to navigate these spaces was often invisible to those in majority, who typically benefit from cultural familiarity.

A notable finding was the privilege of opting out. Not all non-participation stems from exclusion. Some individuals simply preferred to spend their time elsewhere. However, the ability to make that choice without professional risk is itself a form of privilege, which is not equally available to all. Senior professionals with established networks and reputations could afford to skip events without professional consequence. In contrast, newcomers, freelancers, and job seekers often felt compelled to attend, sometimes at personal burden or financial cost, to demonstrate commitment or secure opportunities. This divide highlights how inclusion is shaped not only by identity but also by one's position within the industry.

Further reseach should be concluded to understand how studied identities and power dynamics operate in different cultural contexts. Comparative studies across local game industry cultures would also be valuable in developing a more nuanced understanding of these phenomena.

Event organisers should pay attention to groups that are underrepresented or face difficulties in attending, and strive to create practices that support their participation. There are already proven solutions, such as offering online options for attendance, which benefit individuals living further away, disabled people, and the participation of underrepresented groups. Smaller, structured networking opportunities can help bridge the gap between newcomers and senior professionals, also when incorporated into bigger events. However, vigorous attempts to increase the attendance of specific underrepresented groups may not always produce the desired outcome, if the actions are not aligned with the actual needs of those individuals.

It can be argued that the results presented here focus only on underrepresented groups' opinions and needs, but this is precisely why these voices should be heard. If only the existent majority's needs are catered for, the contributions of underrepresented groups for the industry will be overlooked, which might lead to less inclusive and less innovative industry culture. In this context, game industry event organisers stand at a crossroads. By embracing the potential of underrepresented groups and designing events that foster both belonging and uniqueness, they can help shape the future for the industry.

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