



Examining the Gaming Subcultures through the Lens of Finnish Game Journalism: From the 1980s to the 2010s

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Digital game culture is inherently “defined by a consumption of a particular medium” (Shaw 2010, 404). This notion does not only comprise games and gaming devices, but also includes other products and commodities that deal with the medium of digital games. Game magazines and other journalistic or edited publications are among them.

There is no overarching singular game culture, but a fragmented array of subcultures with multifaceted ideals, grand narratives, norms and practices. This tendency is evident in contemporary game journalism, which has fragmented to a plethora of publications. These publications consist of various contents, columns and reviews that can be aimed to special target groups. In addition to information distribution, these publications have shaped our general understanding of digital games and the cultures that surround it. Game journalism has influenced the evolution of gaming culture, for instance, by contributing to the creation and formation of gaming vocabulary, game genres, gamer identities and gaming communities (Consalvo 2007; Kirkpatrick 2012).

The present paper continues the contemporary trend of local game historiography (e.g. Swalwell 2005; Saarikoski & Suominen 2009; Kirkpatrick 2012; 2017; Saarikoski & Reunanen 2014; Swalwell & Davidson 2016; Švelch 2018; Pasanen & Suominen 2018). It outlines a macro-level overview on the sociocultural evolution of gaming subcultures through the lens of Finnish game journalism. The paper approaches its subject by focusing on the gamut of subcultures within Finnish gaming culture. These subcultures have formed around, for instance, general computer hobbyism, preferred computers/gaming platforms, programming, software piracy, specific game genres and/or particular games. However, some scholars have criticized the use of the concept of subculture in the context of computer hobbyist activities, because they do not fit into classic theoretical definitions of subcultures (Reunanen 2017, 39-44). Thus, the concept of “post-subcultural” (Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003) has been evoked to tackle the complex nuances of gaming-related subcultures (Carbone & Ruffino 2014).

The paper is divided into five sections, according to the developmental phases of Finnish game journalism. These journalistic waves are concurrent with the development of game technology and behavioral changes of gamers as consumers. They also highlight the appearance and prominence of various subcultural practices in a given time period.

The first phase consists of sporadic gaming-related news published in popular technology magazines and/or broadcasted by national public broadcasting company Yle from the 1970s onwards. The second phase commenced with the emergence of computer hobbyist magazines in the mid-1980s. These first publications appeared, when the domestication of affordable home computers was still an ongoing process. There was still general confusion about the primary usage of computers, and they were ambiguously marketed as business, education and entertainment machines (e.g. Haddon 1988; Selwyn 2002; Saarikoski 2004; Kirkpatrick 2017). During this period, gaming was a subculture within a subculture and gamers were perceived as a subset among other computer hobbyists (Saarikoski 2004; Suominen 2011). The second phase laid foundations for computer-driven Finnish gaming culture. The era was also saturated by widespread software piracy. Initially, the Finnish game magazines were unintentional co-creators of this problem, before adopting more critical stance towards it (Nikinmaa 2012).

The established readership of computer hobbyist publications and popularity of computer gaming carved a niche market for specialized game magazines in the early-1990s. The Finnish gamers had become a specific cultural group with their own practices. Furthermore, the domestic demoscene gained more significance. Its contribution to the establishment of Finnish game industry is considered crucial (Saarikoski & Suominen 2009). Digital games started to break away from the periphery during the fourth wave in the mid- and late-1990s, as mainstream media began to pay more attention on games and gaming. One prominent catalyst for this was the growth of Finnish game industry. Traditional media mainly handled gaming on a general level, but there were individual articles that covered more esoteric subcultural practices, such as competitive gaming. Gaming became more varied in terms of hardware, as the popularity of game consoles posed a challenge to the dominance of computers. As a result of this, consoles started to receive more exposure in the gaming press (Suominen 2015).

The current fifth wave of game journalism can be divided into two distinct sub-phases: 1) the transition from text- to web-based journalism in the mid-2000s; and 2) the era of online content creation in the mid-2010s. The online turn of the 2000s brought forth a historical change on the consumption, production and impact of Finnish game journalism. In the 1980s and the 1990s, game magazines and individual writers enjoyed more substantial authority in creating and directing narratives about gaming-related issues. Their role was significantly diminished with the paradigm shift foregrounded by online content creators and small press publications. Albeit the traditional game journalism has evidently suffered from this change, there have been an influx of new channels and venues for various gaming subcultures.

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