Funding and supporting games as culture

"I think any entertainment game can be defined an applied or serious game the moment they can touch somebody's feeling, so, I don't know, I feel [...] that there should not be that much separation between entertainment games and serious games, to be honest" – *quote from an interview with a developer. LSD2879*

Keywords: cultural value, dialogue, institutional funding, serious games

Who will find this scenario particularly interesting? Policy makers

Description

Who decides what is serious and what isn't? Nowhere more than in the gaming industry does this question cause frustration and confusion. The contested and arbitrary nature of such a label has bee
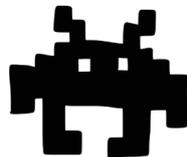
n noted by others before. Gaming Horizons simply confirmed it. It is perhaps understandable that, when it comes to taxpayer money, many worry that funding should be highly selective and not go to projects that may be perceived by the general public to be frivolous.

At the same time, our research on European funding highlighted some unclear strategies in relation to serious and applied gaming. It was difficult to tell if Europe wants to support serious gaming because it is right and ethically justified (according to

criteria of social value), or because it is viewed as a promising sector that will contribute to economic growth and more jobs.

The contradiction at the heart of this tension should not be underestimated. Some argue that criteria of social utility, value and worth are best negotiated in the context of citizenship and democratic dialogue, while prioritising the market and economic benefits over everything else will ultimately lead to cultural impoverishment and trivialisation.

Meet Sanna, an EU Policy Advisor and Kim, a game critic
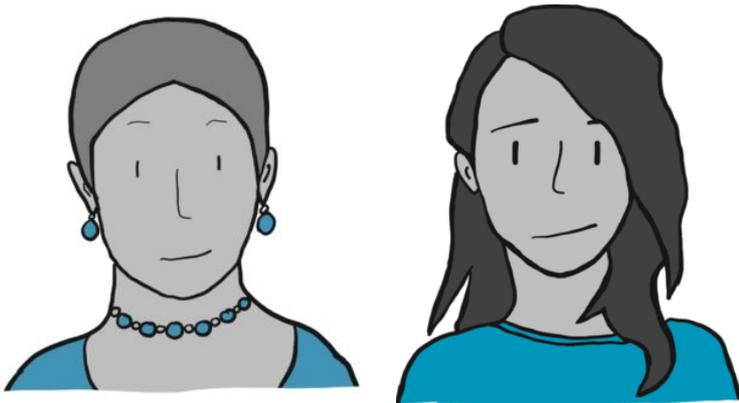
Sanna is a policy advisor who has been working with the EU for more than 10 years trying to bring a multidisciplinary perspective into the EU Research & Development (R&D) agenda. Such multidisciplinarity is reflected in her own background in philosophy and engineering. Sanna is very much interested in matters of social responsibility and ethical design – she has focused on the grand socio-technical challenges such as AI, big data and automation. Recently, she was assigned to a working group who will help shape the European agenda on serious gaming and gamification. The overarching objective of all R&D strategies in Europe is to create favourable conditions for innovation, market growth and employment, and this applies also to serious gaming. Quickly, however, Sanna becomes aware of a contradiction: while market growth and a self-sustaining business model may be the aspiration, the European serious games sector relies heavily on public funding. Sanna is struck by the contrast between the dynamism of the 'entertainment' gaming industry, in touch with the trends, debates and the cultural tastes of modern society, and a serious games industry that exists in a rather insulated space, where academic research and small or medium-sized companies depend on institutional support to survive. As part of her new role, she organises a consultation workshop to gather views from a wide range of stakeholders, beyond the traditional EU-funded networks. Participants include independent game developers, representatives from game publishing companies, and a video game critic called Kim. Kim is an outspoken advocate of independent games and digital arts, and quickly makes a thought-provoking observation about cultural value, commercial viability and 'seriousness'. She claims it is possible to create games which wouldn't necessarily be called 'serious', but which nonetheless are important and have cultural, artistic and societal relevance. Most importantly, she suggests that cultural and artistic

relevance are not commercial constraints, but can in fact ensure forms of market viability which are perfectly suited to small and medium sized companies. Kim proceeds to illustrate several examples of small, culturally important games that managed to be profitable. She also emphasises the importance to engage with those mediation and curation channels (online communities, digital distribution platforms, games journalists, YouTube content creators) who can enhance the visibility of games and, thus, their commercial success.


In a nutshell

Criteria of social, artistic and cultural value can be part of an effective business model for games 'with a conscience', beyond restrictive labels such as 'serious' or 'recreational'.

Artistic and cultural relevance are not barriers to commercial viability but can in fact enhance market appeal in some cases. Public funding is still needed to support game developers or researchers that seek not only commercial success but also positive social impacts. However, criteria of social, artistic and cultural value should have more weight than they currently do in funding strategies. These criteria should not be viewed as fixed but can be negotiated through regular consultations with relevant stakeholders.

Resources
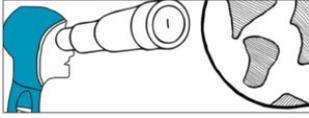
- [Hellblade, Senua's Sacrifice](#) is a successful 'independent AAA' games released in 2017. The game deals with difficult themes of mental health, while still being a compelling and artistically accomplished gaming experience. The game was [developed by a core team of around 20 people](#).
- Cultural value may appear like a slippery term, but there is a body of knowledge that examines its definition and a multidisciplinary approach to measurement. Funding strategies about gaming (a cultural medium, not just a collection of technologies) could take this knowledge into account. Take, for instance, [this recently concluded project funded by the UK' Arts and Humanities Research Council](#)
- [Henrike Lode, an indie game developer, talks about the challenges of getting funding to make 'alternative' educational games](#).

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