# GAME-DEV SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE.
# IS CSR IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY MORE THAN
# IMAGE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES? ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION
# ON THE EXAMPLE OF SELECTED INDUSTRY PLAYERS

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**Purpose:** The study's primary purpose was to identify CSR activities performed by key players in the game-dev sector in the context of the brand's overall activities and the consistency of their cases. The specific objectives were to define CSR areas and isolate activities in these areas of selected game-dev industry entities - and then compare them with each other to determine whether, in their case, corporate social responsibility is an image-building tool or actual activities that build the image of a responsible brand.

**Design/methodology/approach**: The authors highlighted the CSR practices used by game developers and producers, their characteristics and their juxtaposition with other areas of these companies' operations. Then, using desk research analysis, the effects of such strategies on game-dev companies, such as Techland, Electronic Arts or Ubisoft, were studied, as well as the identified potential risks for gamers resulting from these practices - the problem of game jams and unclear copyright rules for ongoing projects, among others, was addressed.

**Findings:** Game developers can implement CSR activities through their products (by addressing social issues in the game's content and mechanics) and around them - by undertaking various projects that demonstrate social responsibility. While necessary and often valuable, CSR activities build a positive brand image, drawing attention away from unethical or questionable business practices, such as micropayment mechanisms that use gambling patterns.

**Social implications:** As a result of applying corporate social responsibility measures, game-dev companies are gaining trust from gamers, who view the gaming reality as more secure and comfortable, thus being more exposed to the risks of mechanisms such as lootboxes or vaguely designed game business models.

**Originality/value:** The article is primarily addressed to researchers and scholars dealing with the field of CSR in the context of its consistency with the main objects of companies. The work may also interest students in marketing, psychology, culture, and game studies. In addition, the article is also valuable for parents and guardians of those particularly vulnerable to abuse by game developers and producers - minors.

**Keywords:** game-dev, corporate social responsibility, CSR, game jam, video games.

**Category of the paper:** General review.

## 1. Introduction

Game-dev (video game development) is one of the key and fastest-growing industries in the creative sector, which includes companies that create, produce, distribute and disseminate creative goods and services (Kamiński, 2019). According to the report 'Perspectives from the Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2017-2021: Curtain up! User experience takes centre stage; the games market is a key growth driver for the overall media and entertainment market (PwC, 2017).

The video game industry, the rapid growth of which is the aftermath of the digital technological revolution of the 20th century, represents a market evolving at a high rate. The pace of change in the game environment is becoming a severe challenge for game developers in the context of legal regulations, new channels of communication with audiences and the blurring of the traditional division between players and viewers (Sosnowski, 2017). Among the reasons for the growing interest in the video game industry tend to be the following (Krok, 2016):

    a.  changing the perception of e-entertainment as an integral part of everyday life,
    b.  the development of innovative technologies to modify and make games more attractive,
    c.  popularisation of mobile platforms and devices,
    d.  using exciting marketing messages, including the popularisation of non-standard forms of promotion,
    e.  using appropriate distribution channels, allowing the message to reach the target group,
    f.  organizing events dedicated to virtual entertainment.

Nowadays, many leading video game companies publicly report and provide information on the impact of their operations on the market, workplace, environment and communities in which they operate. However, according to (Jones et al., 2013), the CSR reports and information published by these companies do not highlight concerns about the need for greater regulation and statutory enforcement in the industry. Indeed, existing regulations, through which the controversies that video games stir up are mitigated, can create a negative image of the industry. Hence, many game-dev companies are trying to prevent this situation by implementing diverse CSR activities, and the differences in terms of their scale are mainly due to the will and commitment of the managers rather than the size of the company itself (Sobociński, Strzelczyk, 2019).

The article's main objective is to identify the issues available in the academic and professional literature regarding CSR activities by key game-dev sector players in the context of the overall brand activities and the consistency of the actions undertaken. The specific objectives were to define the areas of CSR activities of selected game-dev industry entities, to identify activities that may or may not contradict the idea of CSR, and to juxtapose them with

each other in order to determine whether CSR in their case, is a tool for simple brand development, or actual activities that build the image of a responsible brand.

The authors used a desk research method to review social responsibility in the video game industry. The following research hypotheses were adopted and verified in the course of literature analysis:

1. CSR in the video game industry is mainly a tool for creating a positive corporate image rather than an actual concern for the environment and society.
2. CSR in the video game industry is partly a way to divert attention from unethical activities the company undertakes for its benefit.

## 2. Research Methodology

The review of literature treating social responsibility in the video game industry was conducted using a desk research method. The bibliography includes 33 items, mainly from 2019-2023, including academic articles, books, monograph chapters, industry reports and electronic sources. The following databases were used to collect scientific literature: Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Taylor and Francis Online, ScienceDirect. The following combination of words using Boolean operators (AND, OR) was used in the literature search in the databases above: ('game dev' OR 'game development' OR 'game developer') AND ('video game industry' OR gaming) AND (CSR OR 'Corporate Social Responsibility'). Searches in the databases above complemented the literature collected for the following keywords: game jam, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, Techland.

## 3. Corporate social responsibility in the games industry - limitations, benefits and directions for change

Carroll (1991) defines corporate social responsibility (CSR) in four dimensions: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (Figure 1). The economic dimension is related to providing a return on investment to owners, creating employment opportunities, reasonably compensating employees, finding new resources, encouraging technical/technological improvements and the development of innovative products/services. The legal dimension of CSR includes stakeholder expectations of legal compliance. The third dimension, ethical, is about morality and the prevention of social harm, while the philanthropic dimension is characterized by the most comprehensive range of discretion and choice in making charitable contributions to society (Jamali, Mirshak, 2007).
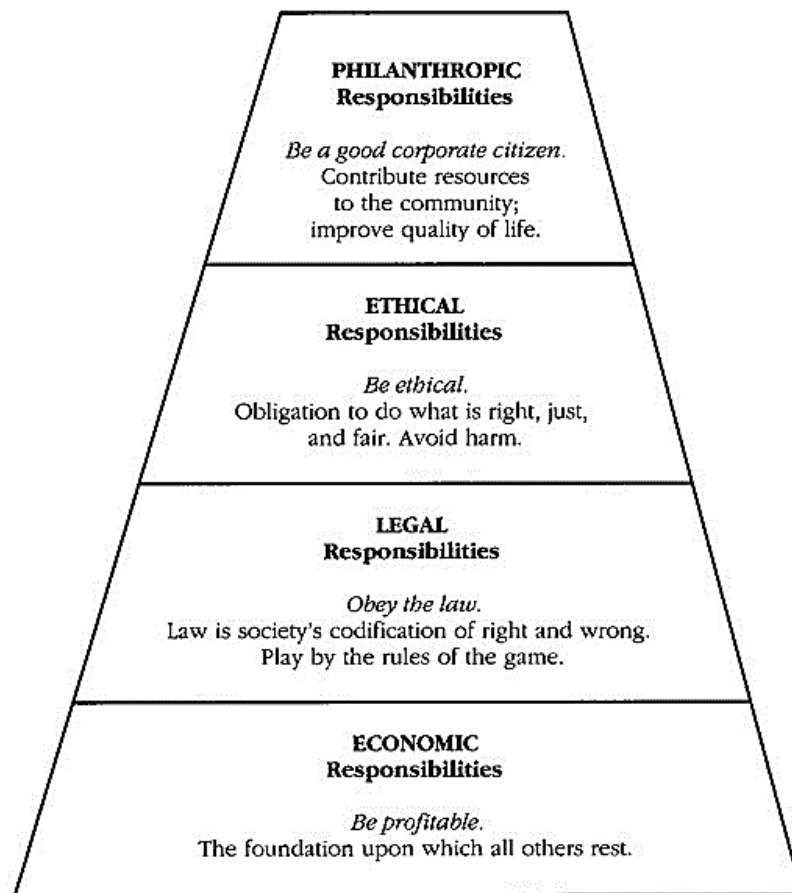
**Figure 1.** The four dimensions of the corporate social responsibility pyramid.
Source: Carroll, 1991.

According to Luo et al. (2019), corporate social responsibility is an essential tool to reduce the negative impact of the games industry on stakeholders, and the main barriers to implementing CSR were cognitive dissonance, management dilemma, resource constraints, negative image, unclear regulations and unsustainable impulse. The study's results (Kim, Lee, 2019) indicate that CSR's economic and philanthropic dimensions have the most substantial positive impact on perceived benefits in the gamedev industry, while the legal dimension proved to be an insignificant determinant.

A 2019 report prepared by the United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation proves that gaming companies that commit capacity and resources to corporate social responsibility activities enjoy greater employee engagement as long as these activities are directly linked to elements of the company culture. Effective and consistent actions also significantly improve brand recognition, especially among younger users - it is estimated that up to three-quarters of millennials will take a job for a lower wage if the values promoted by the company are in line with theirs (United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2019).

According to the study (Bae et al., 2019), game companies can increase the purchase intentions of game users by investing in CSR initiatives - given that it is a crucial area of their value and profitability. The study also shows that engagement in CSR activities increases

consumer self-esteem and generates sympathy for game developers, which can be helpful to in-game executives and managers in developing CSR-based business strategies.

Therefore, how do we show that game developers are serious about corporate social responsibility and care about more than just revenue? According to (Griffiths, 2014), this is possible after implementing the following changes in games: shortening long quests, lowering the amount of experience points needed to reach the next level, more frequent rebirths to increase the chance of obtaining specifically sought-after items, speeding up the processes of challenging quests in the context of leaving the game earlier after completing their tasks. In addition, the most visible CSR action of video game publishers in the area of excessive game use is the initiation of warning messages and the possibility of setting a parental mode, allowing parents to limit their children's gaming time.

Further directions of change in the context of social responsibility of the game-dev industry are (Sosnowski, 2023):

a.  providing accurate, clear, simple and understandable information by games on monetization methods and the business model adopted,

b.  posting information about the actual value of purchasing the game,

c.  marking the presence of loot boxes,

d.  explaining the chance of obtaining the desired item in the game,

e.  planning at the design stage of the game to include by default mechanisms to help parents control the content, timing and purchases made by their children,

f.  informing the consumer of all purchases made by them or their children,

g.  obtaining the consumer's consent to make a payment,

h.  providing a variety of player experiences rather than favouring those experiences on which the user has spent the most time,

i.  designing games that are divided into shorter levels,

j.  introducing frequent opportunities to save the game state to break away from the game.

It is also worth mentioning that at companies affiliated with the American Gaming Association, more than half of the employees are women, and as many as 57% are from ethnic minorities, as shown in Figure 2. The gaming industry is also very diverse in terms of the age of the workforce, with as many as 28% of the workforce being Baby Boomers, i.e. people aged 53 and over, as shown in Figure 3. The industry places a high value on promoting diversity among the workforce, which, in addition to a sense of security and unity, also generates the benefit of a plurality of perspectives and attitudes towards the market and meeting its needs (United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2019).
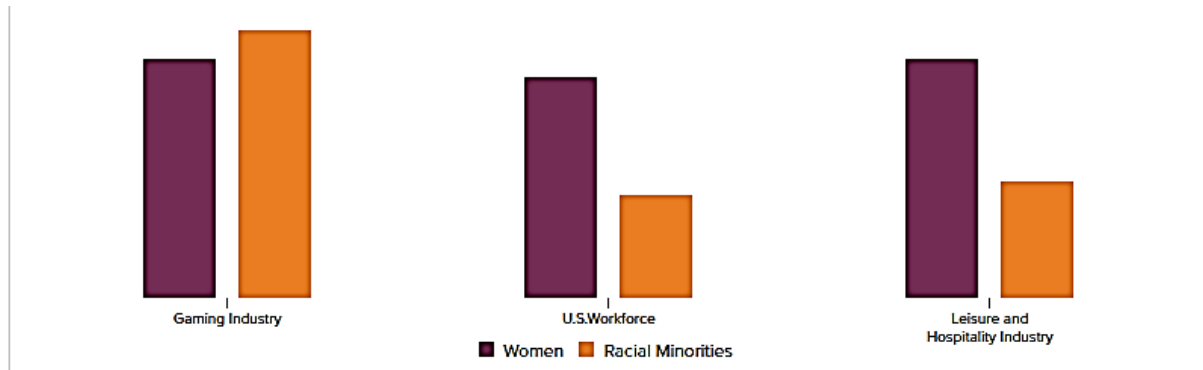
**Figure 2.** Participation of women and ethnic minorities in the games industry workforce compared to the total US workforce and Leisure and Hospitality industry.

Source: (United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2019).
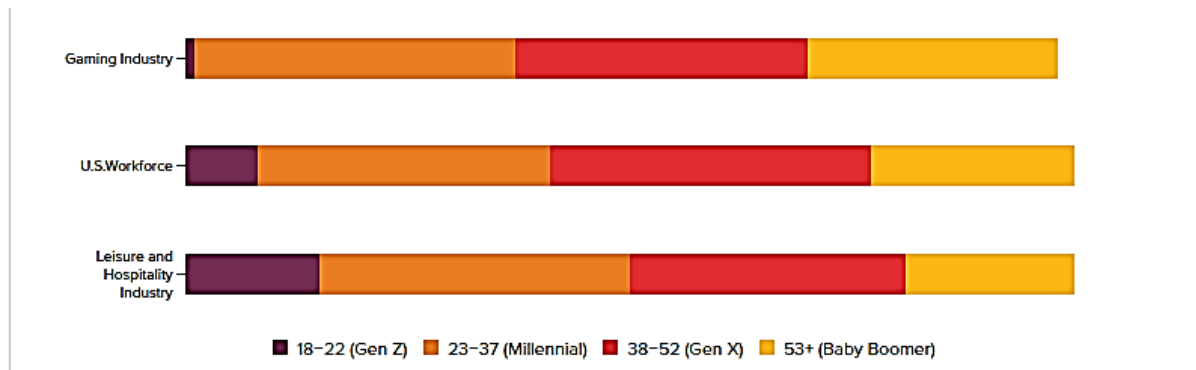


**Figure 3.** Generational diversity of workers in the games industry compared to the overall US workforce and Leisure and Hospitality industry.

Source: (United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2019).

## 4. Models of ethical attitude in the game-dev Industry

According to SRT (Social Responsibility Theory), media behaviour can be characterized using four ethical attitude models: social resistance, social obligation, social responsiveness and social contribution (Nowakowski, 2008). Similarly, (Griffin, 2022) suggests four attitudes characterizing contemporary corporations: resistance to social responsibility, demonstrating fulfilment of social obligation, reactive attitude, and contributing to solving social problems. According to the authors of this article, the process of increasing social responsibility can also be applied to the behaviour of game developers.

In the case of social resistance, game developers are only oriented toward making profits by increasing the sales of their products regardless of the degree of harmfulness of the content conveyed through games. The second model of game developers' behaviour is adopting the principle of fulfilling social obligations imposed by legislative bodies. As part of the implementation of CSR activities, the following can be mentioned here: labelling games in the context of their intended use for specific age groups; respecting regulations prohibiting the

advertising of harmful content in games and hidden advertising; taking care of the proper physical and mental development of game users. These aspects are fundamental in the case of underage players who are gullible and submissive to persuasion and manipulation in advertising.

Under the third model, the reactive attitude, game developers should react to problems in games and actively seek possible solutions to any shortcomings perceived and reported by users. For the fourth model of ethical stance, the video game industry should highlight and publicize its social contribution to solving social problems that are important from the perspective of its stakeholders.

To summarise, game developers' whole process of increasing social responsibility can be depicted in Figure 4.
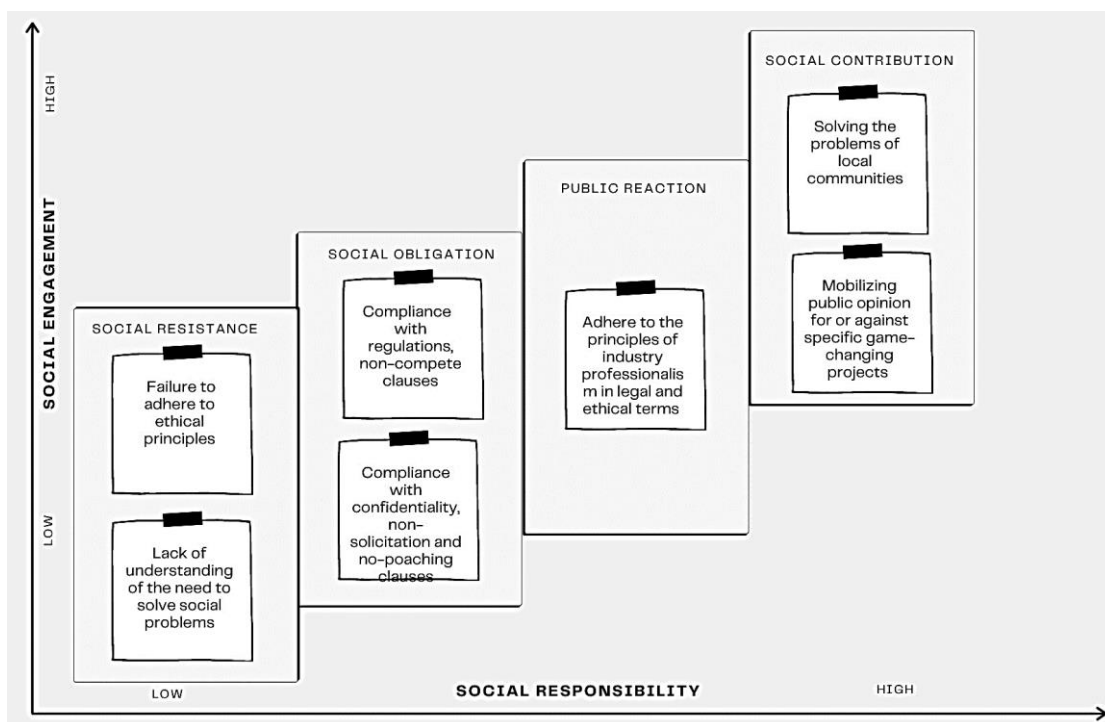


**Figure 4.** The process of increasing social responsibility by game developers.

Source: own study based on: (Nowakowski, 2008; Staniszewski, 2022).

## 5. Indications of social responsibility in the activities of selected players in the game development industry and their coherence with other related actions

Video game companies are paying increasing attention to CSR. It is worth observing that the game-dev industry has an additional, rather specific area called *responsible gaming*. Responsible gaming is primarily a concern for:

    a. protecting vulnerable players,

    b. stopping underage gambling activities,

    c. policing the use of illegal mechanisms,

    d. securing online payments,

    e. protection of sensitive data,

    f. secure virtual environment,

    g. ethical and responsible marketing.

Both law and custom regulate responsible gaming policies. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider the CSR activities of key players in the industry and to assess some deviations and inconsistencies from the companies' declared values (United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2019).

CSR plays a crucial role in multiplayer games - game developers and community managers are responsible for ensuring a safe and friendly gaming community. However, in many games, players display toxic behaviour towards each other, offensive messages and rudeness - this can be seen in games such as League of Legends and War of Warcraft, where the system for reporting inappropriate behaviour is still only marginally eliminating them (Yousafzai et al., 2013).

One of the most influential brands for Polish game development is Techland - founded by Paweł Marchewka in 1991; over the years, it has gained immense popularity thanks to, among others, productions such as *Dead Island* and *Dying Light* (Techland, n.d.). Although it is difficult to find specific information about the brand's CSR activities in the company's publications, Techland representatives are guests at various industry events, offering internships and junior positions to the youngest participants in the labour market. In 2022, Techland joined the initiative of the Polish Humanitarian Action, donating 1 million zlotys to help the citizens of Ukraine regarding the war crisis (*Techland – Milion Złotych Na Rzecz Polskiej Akcji Humanitarnej*, 2022). In the summer of 2023, it became official that Techland had been acquired by the Chinese company Tencent, becoming its majority shareholder. The political issues were particularly controversial about the whole situation, as China remains an ally of Russia, which has remained the aggressor and has been in an armed conflict with Ukraine since February 2022. In the context of previous pro-social activities on the part of Techland, the current situation, in addition to the general fear of the prevailing Chinese capital, has aroused numerous discussions and high-profile criticism of the Polish company (Luc-Lepianka, 2023).

Electronic Arts has spoken openly about its efforts towards corporate social responsibility. EA has several brands, including sports game developer EA Sports (*FIFA* series and the new *EA Sports FC* series) or RPG/action developer BioWare (*Dragon Age* series, *Mass Effect* series), and is also responsible for the popular life simulator series, *The Sims*. According to its declarations, the Canadian game-dev company in 2022, the company contributed $9.5 million in sponsorships, grants and employee benefits, devoted 6428 hours to volunteer work,

supported 4359 non-profit organizations and donated 3764 free game codes (Electronic Arts, n.d.).

Electronic Arts has been paying particular attention to issues of diversity and tolerance in its productions. One of the most critical manifestations of this activity is the implementation of co-educational football teams in the new *EA Sports FC* series, which was met with massive criticism from players. However, the company's stance, despite customer resistance, remained unchanged and supported by the thesis that the *Ultimate Team* mode is *fantasy football*, i.e. it should guarantee unlimited possibilities of creating teams and uniting the world around football regardless of gender and origin while building a positive image of women in football, who not only do not enjoy as much popularity as male players but also achieve much lower salaries (Yin-Poole, 2023).

In opposition to the concern for diversity and a safe space for gamers, however, is the use of micropayments, specifically lootboxes, which bring EA more and more revenue annually (Clement, 2022). Lootboxes pose a particular threat as the game is dedicated to age, exposing minors to direct contact with gambling-like mechanisms (Zendle et al., 2020). Therefore, the game's developers' practices may call into question statements of concern for underprivileged young people.

Another company with a considerable reputation is the creators of the *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry* series - Ubisoft. Their corporate social responsibility materials are published about making a long-lasting positive impact on players, teams, communities and the planet. Ubisoft declares that they work with and for the players, helping to create original and memorable gaming experiences. Regarding team members, the conglomerate reports providing a safe, inclusive working environment for its employees (*Corporate Social Responsibility*, n.d.).

In light of the high-profile discussion of 2021, the veracity of the information regarding employees is worrying - as Ubisoft has faced numerous accusations of bullying and a toxic workplace atmosphere. Despite firm denials from the authorities, the situation has left many scars on the company's image (Madsen, 2021).

CSR activities, although constantly present in the strategies of game-dev companies, are regularly controversial due to the scandals and ethically questionable practices that occur within the companies' actions. They are, however, an essential part of building a positive image for companies while partly masking those movements that are met with criticism.

## 6. Game Jam and its CSR dimension

A game jam is an intensive event focusing on the creation process and is now increasingly seen as a place for learning. Game jams include activities to develop the technical skills needed to create digital games. In addition, soft skills such as collaboration and communication skills

are developed. A game jam is also considered a way to teach and learn skills in science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics (Meriläinen et al., 2020). The largest such event in the world is the Global Game Jam (GGJ), which since 2009 has brought together thousands of video game enthusiasts each year to participate in this forty-eight-hour event to create games with the same theme (Fowler et al., 2013).

GGJ includes meetings (game jams) of participants in more than 60 countries and over 300 locations (game sites). This global event is organized and managed by the Global Game Jam Committee, while volunteers organize local events. During the event, participants gain valuable skills in prototyping, collaboration, creativity, learning and creating a space to support an independent game development ecosystem. The principles specific to game jams are (Fowler et al., 2013):

a. The event aims to create small, experimental and innovative games within a limited timeframe - for example, 24 or 48 hours over a weekend, usually online (Preston et al., 2012).

b. All games created during the game jam must have a common theme - previously unknown to the participants.

c. Game jams are usually open to anyone who can contribute to game development. However, some have age restrictions or school membership requirements.

d. Team formation before the event is discouraged, and team size is usually limited to less than five people.

e. Game development for any device is encouraged, and teams can choose their development platforms.

f. In some locations, there is a final presentation where other participants, the audience or the jury select the best games.

As a general rule, game jam organizers offer material prizes for the best participants, and games are judged on the originality and innovation of the solutions used, level of sophistication, playability, functionality, design, and relevance to the theme.

A critical issue during the game jam is that the preparation of works starts at the moment of the event - previously prepared assets, code fragments and other elements that could cause a breach of fair-play rules must not be used. The prepared games must also not contain illegal content, content commonly regarded as offensive (such as vulgarism, erotic and pornographic content, discriminatory content, drugs), malicious software, viruses, or anything related (PolskiGamedev.pl, 2021).

While community-organized game jams do not generate much controversy, there is the issue of jams organized directly by game developers. An example of such an event was the 2015 event of the Polish game-dev company Techland, which involved developing a mod for *Dying Light*. The developers provided participants with the development tools used to produce the game and used their own devices.

Involving the gaming community in the creation and development of a product certainly has a very positive effect on brand perception - the event reduces the distance between the brand and the player, making them prosumers and showing that their participation in the creation of the game is essential - such activities effectively support the building of relationships with players, providing them with the opportunity to participate in the development of the production, as well as to present their skills in front of an expert jury with the possibility of placing the project in the portfolio.

Doubts arise when analyzing the project in the context of intellectual property - the form of publication of the finished work of the participants of the event does not allow them to derive any financial benefit - the mods are placed on the Steam platform in a workshop dedicated to the *Dying Light* production, so it is not clear to whom the copyrights to the project belong and whether the creator of the parent game can freely use it for their needs. The competition rules also do not clearly explain the ownership rights to the project (Regulamin - Techland Game Jam, 2015).

As a particular risk in the case of game jam projects - especially those organized not by the gaming community but by game developers - we can therefore consider the potential possibility of not entirely ethical use of participants' ideas to achieve benefits such as, for example, development of a game at low cost. However, based on the available data, it is difficult to clearly state whether studios use the projects of event participants, although participation in an event does raise some risks in this matter.

## 7. Conclusions

The article's main objective was to identify the issues available in the academic and industry literature regarding corporate social responsibility activities by key players in the game-dev sector in the context of overall brand activities and consistency in the issues addressed and the specific objectives.

Achieving a competitive advantage for game-dev companies is the ultimate goal of implementing corporate social responsibility. In addition, stakeholders' expectations are changing and pushing companies to be more sustainable. Indeed, by communicating sustainability through games, environmental awareness can also be raised among gamers (Lin, 2022).

Regarding the conclusions resulting from the research, the Authors proved the validity of the following hypotheses:

   1. CSR in the video game industry is mainly a tool for creating a positive corporate image rather than an actual concern for the environment and society.
   2. CSR in the video game industry is partly a way to divert attention from unethical activities the company undertakes for its benefit.

An analysis of the CSR activities of selected video game industry players shows the novelty of the results in this regard. These companies strive to implement diverse CSR activities, which vary in scale. These differences are due to the will and commitment of game developers rather than the sheer size of a given company. Nevertheless, the CSR actions implemented by the game-dev companies benefit gamers, and they should be intensified to bring more advantages to society, especially those underprivileged and most vulnerable.

Several theoretical and practical implications were developed based on the analyzed academic and industry literature content. Firstly, game developers should be able to participate in philanthropic CSR activities, strengthening their position in the market and further binding them to the company. Secondly, game company executives should communicate the company's mission and vision and its commitment to the community, highlighting the benefits of this involvement. Third, besides publishing CSR documents and reports to communicate with stakeholders, game companies could communicate sustainability through their games by integrating sustainability into the game mechanics or as an additional feature. Finally, companies should be more consistent with their stated values and be wary of making moves that contradict them, as this reflects significantly on players' trust in the brand. Companies should also reduce the risks associated with the exposure of minors to gambling-like mechanisms.

This article has several limitations. Firstly, the literature review was based only on four selected scientific databases: Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Taylor and Francis Online, and ScienceDirect, which may have limited the number and value of search results for relevant items. Secondly, literature searches used a specific combination of keywords using Boolean operators, which may have omitted other scientific items in a given database. Selected industry reports and electronic sources were used in the subject matter covered to supplement the analysis.

Despite the identified limitations of the study, this paper may provide a basis for broadening the issues treating the social responsibility of the video game industry in the future. Furthermore, this paper may begin a series of articles on the game-dev industry regarding corporate social responsibility.

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