

3 Getting by in the Videogame Gig Economy

In 2018, I spent several days interviewing employees at Brisbane studio Defiant Development. Defiant was one of Australia's post-GFC success stories. A start-up founded by former employees of defunct local studios Pandemic and Krome, following the success of *Ski Safari* in 2012 they were able to grow into one of Australia's largest independent studios, approximately 25 people, producing complex and highly polished 3D titles for PC and console, including *Hand of Fate* in 2015 and its sequel in 2017. A senior designer I spoke to was grateful that following the upheaval of the GFC described in the previous chapter he had landed at a (relatively) larger studio like Defiant as his personal interest was in 3D game design, and most of the smaller studios in Brisbane were focused on 2D genres for mobile platforms. When asked about his plans for the future, the senior designer was conscious that there were no other studio in Brisbane of comparable size or output to Defiant: "I couldn't tell you another studio I would want to be working at. That's not a good thing for [job] security." For this senior designer, this led to a much more ubiquitous sense of anxiety than before the GFC. Then, if you lost your job there was always one or two other studios of comparable size in town that might take you on. But today, most other teams in Brisbane are small groups of two to five friends, neither looking for nor able to afford more staff: "The *Assault Android Cactus* team [Witch Beam] can't hire anyone. The *Yonda* team [Prideful Sloth] can't hire anyone. Literally you are standing on your own two feet and if it goes belly up, I don't know what you can do." Eighteen months after our interview, and to the shock of the Australian gamemaking community, Defiant Development abruptly announced it would be letting go all of its development team and going into hibernation after failing to obtain external funding for a new project (Prescott 2019).

No question that I posed to gamemakers caused as much reflection, insight, or existential angst as “Where do you see yourself in five years?” This is unsurprising considering that in the 2019 International Game Developers Association (IGDA) Developer Satisfaction Survey, nearly two-thirds of respondents had worked in videogame development for less than ten years, and half of respondents for less than six (Weststar and Kumar 2020). No wonder gamemakers don’t know where they see themselves in five years when there’s a 50–50 chance they won’t even be making games anymore by then. What Ergin Bulut (2020, 166) calls a “governmental logic of precarization” haunts videogame production of all scales. Many videogame makers struggle to imagine or predict a future making videogames beyond their immediate circumstances. For those working in small teams or on subsequent short-term contracts or balancing personal projects alongside day jobs, the future is entirely contingent on the eventual unpredictable reception of the project they’re currently working on. Larger companies, at first glance, offer more security with clear promotion pathways such as junior designer, designer, senior designer, creative director on which to plan a career trajectory, but even gamemakers employed at such companies, such as the senior designer above, are conscious that no amount of critical or commercial success is sufficient to assuage the feeling that any studio could fold, or any developer could be made redundant, at any time.

As a passion- and lifestyle-driven vocation dependent on individualized skills and convictions, and taken up primarily and historically by young, middle-class men in the Global North, previous research has suggested that workers in formal videogame companies typically consider “game production as a neutral, meritocracy-based creative profession rather than concrete work defined by politics” (Bulut 2020, 167; see also O’Donnell 2014; de Peuter and Dyer-Witthford 2005). The insecurity and volatility become normalized as part of the adventure. Academic, journalistic, and gamemaker discourses have long documented the structurally poor working conditions that have scaffolded videogame production for decades, such as crunch, burnout, discrimination, unpaid overtime, individualization, uncredited labor, harassment and bullying, the possibility of being laid off even after releasing a successful title, and pervasive regimes of surveillances (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009; O’Donnell 2014; Peticca-Harris, Weststar, and McKenna 2015; Legault and Weststar 2017; Bulut 2020; Cote and Harris 2020). Foundational myths of creativity, entrepreneurship, and libertarianism have long

worked to normalize and naturalize videogame production's poor working conditions while, at the same time, make traditional collective responses to such conditions by workers seem unfeasible.

The volatility of pursuing a career in videogame production is felt acutely by those working at smaller, independent scales. As the previous chapters have already shown, most videogames are today produced by small independent teams or individuals in more autonomous yet even more precarious situations than their large studio counterparts. In many such cases, gamemakers aren't employees in the traditional sense at all. Despite popular claims of "going indie" as an escape from the worst corporate excesses of the studio-publisher model (Lipkin 2013), this broader, dispersed field of independent gamework is just as, if not more, susceptible to the range of issues plaguing the large studios (Whitson 2019). Yet it should hardly be a radical or shocking observation that the overwhelming majority of videogame production labor occurs locally, precariously, anonymously, at a small scale, and for a financial loss at least as often as for a profit; this reflects the very common and well-documented experiences of most cultural workers in most cultural fields. If I were to note that most musicians or painters or actors do not make enough money to live from their creative work, no reader would blink twice. Yet, in the cultural field of videogame production, the decades of aggressive formalization mean that the largest corporations and most successful (and lucky) indie millionaires cast long shadows that obscure the broader field of cultural activity where economic capital circulates in much smaller and unreliable quantities. The notion of "successfully" making videogames without it being your full-time job is a difficult thing to imagine.

In a 2017 blog post titled "lol we're all poor," independent gamemaker Robert Yang responded to the particular anxieties of independent videogame makers finding themselves increasingly unable to compete in crowded digital marketplaces—a phenomenon a number of indie developers and commentators labeled an "indie apocalypse." Whereas the videogame field, through the legacy of aggressive formalization, still holds economic success as the ultimately goal of videogame production, Yang argues that "most of us will always fall short of [astronomical blockbuster commercial success] in ways that often feel out of our control." Yang proposed a somewhat more radical approach to making videogame production less volatile and more sustainable, asking, "Why is it so important for us to make our living from selling our games? Why can't we make our living from doing something else?"

Here, Yang is proposing that perhaps the videogame field's dominant and economic-centric signifiers of success are better abandoned than pursued by most gamemakers. For Yang, sardonically, we can now tell videogames are definitely art since "there are so many of us [gamemakers] and we are all stressed-out and poor, and the world oppressively devalues our labor, just like all the other artists in other fields." Perhaps the most sustainable way to produce videogames isn't to pursue more stable employment but to reject turning it into a job at all—to become even more disinterested in economic interests.

These tensions in how gamemakers navigate the conditions and politics of gamework have not emerged in a vacuum; rather, the videogame field has found itself impacted by wider trends of middle-class precarization brought about by post-Fordism, neoliberalism, platform capitalism, and the gig economy. Game production researchers are increasingly identifying a fruitful overlap in game studies approaches to gamework labor issues and the literature and debates around the politics of cultural work in the so-called creative economy through authors such as Angela McRobbie, Susan Luckman, Mark Banks, David Hesmondhalgh, Kate Oakley, and Stuart Cunningham. As Greig de Peuter (2011, 421) notes of media and cultural workers more broadly, independent gamemakers as they have emerged since the late 2000s have been among the protagonists of "a laboratory of labor politics [that has led to the] de-standardization of employment, de-unionization of labor, dis-aggregation of production, [and] de-industrialization of economies [to undermine] workers' earlier sources of organizational power and economic security." For those striving to find ways to "be creative" (McRobbie 2016) through career aspirations that are more personally fulfilling than they are financially stable, just which activities are and are not *work* becomes increasingly blurred as creative work becomes defined less by occupation and more by a collection of personal skills, social networks, and dispositions that converge into a "portfolio career" across projects and side hustles. The growth of smaller-scale, independent, precarious creative production—including that within the videogame field—is effectively "labor reform by stealth, since the objective is to re-route young people into spheres that are unprotected in advance" (McRobbie 2016, 58). In this context, chapter 2's narrative of Australia's videogame makers adapting entrepreneurially to sector-wide collapse could be reframed as the local videogame field being

reconfigured so that the major firms of the field can still capture and commodify the aspirational labor of independent videogame creators (through platformization) while no longer needing to provide formal employment arrangements, offsetting production costs onto gamemakers themselves.

This chapter explores how gamemakers navigate the precarious and strenuous conditions of gamework within intensely in/formalized modes of videogame production. How are we to consider issues of crunch, burnout, discrimination, and unpaid work in a seemingly “democratized” field of self-driven independent creators? Are we to consider the unpaid work of a gamemaker who explicitly considers making games on the weekend around a full-time job to be a rejection of capitalist commodification or a self-exploiting “passionate play slave” (de Peuter and Dyer-Witford 2005)? The answer, inevitably, is not straightforward. The first section begins by introducing cultural studies critiques of how individualization and precarization under neoliberal post-Fordism are restructuring the nature of cultural work. Perhaps the most striking parallel between cultural studies critiques of the creative economy and the self-articulations of Australian gamemakers is the ways in which narratives of adventure and autonomy paint an attractive veneer over situations of extreme and externally enforced insecurity. The second section turns to the particular identity and brand of indie game development as it is deployed by Australian gamemakers to add a sense of countercultural edge to a precarious situation where *not* being independent is simply not an option. Here, parallels are traced with the use of “entrepreneurism” in creative economy discourses more broadly. Finally, the chapter turns its attention to those gamemakers who, like Yang, for one reason or another, explicitly claim to *not* want to be paid for their gamework. A tension exists here between, on the one hand, seriously and critically considering the external forces that exploit creators while also convincing them to work for free and, on the other hand, trusting and respecting gamemakers’ own articulations of how they wish to remove themselves from exploitative and alienating processes of capitalist commodification. This provides a significant and urgent challenge for game production researchers specifically and cultural industries researchers more generally: if the commercial companies of these fields are so exploitative of their workers, then is there an emancipatory potential in finding ways to opt out of economic ambitions either partially or entirely?

The Politics of Cultural Gamework

Economic capital has an ambivalent relationship with cultural work, and its accumulation is often a secondary consideration for cultural workers after the accumulation of the cultural and social capital recognized within the field. For many cultural workers, accruing economic capital is prioritized only insofar as it makes the accrual of other forms of capital more feasible—artists still have to eat and pay the rent! For Bourdieu, the strong influence of non-commercial markers of success within the field of cultural production leads him to call it “the economic world reversed” (1993, 29). The more autonomous a cultural field, the more the field adheres to its own “disinterested [symbolic] values which constitute the specific law of the field” and the more its “economy of practices” is based on “a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies” (Bourdieu 1993, 39). The tensions between making “art for art’s sake” (for intrinsic reasons determined by the field’s internal markers of success) and “selling out” (to make a living more reliably from commodified artistic practice in the economic world) is an everyday struggle for cultural practitioners striving to take legitimate or authentic positions, and one that has been extensively interrogated in other cultural fields (Thornton 1995; Banks 2007; McRobbie 2016).

In sharp contrast to perceptions of the videogame industry as a lucrative space of campus-sized studios and savvy entrepreneurs, gamemakers I spoke to were commonly frank about how monetary reward was a secondary ambition in their work and how this created difficulties in regard to still needing to sustain themselves. More often than not, it was a desire to express an idea or to be creative that they articulated as their main driver for making videogames. For instance, Jason Bakker, 31, left his relatively stable employment at a larger mobile studio in Melbourne to cofound his own small team, Ghost Pattern, to work on what he describes as his “dream game.” With piecemeal government grants and the savings accrued by himself and his cofounder through contract work at other studios, Bakker insists he is able to ensure his contractors get paid for the work they do. But at the time we spoke, Bakker and his cofounder had themselves spent almost two years on the project, unpaid. For Bakker, this was justifiable since:

I have limited time on earth, and I should try to do this thing so I can feel like I’ve done it. I’ve taken this thing that I’ve been thinking about for years and years and

actually, you know, given it a shot as opposed to thinking in ten or twenty years like, “Oh, what if I’d done that?” or whatever.

In addition to willingly going unpaid during the production process, many gamemakers had little hope of their products being economically successful even upon completion. Jake Strasser, 28, worked in the four-person team House House with several friends in Melbourne. Strasser explicitly attributed the financial unreliability of videogame production to its creative nature:

There’s no delusion in any other creative field, I don’t think. In every other field, making money is the amazing thing you aspire to eventually after making things for a long time. . . . If you’re doing any other creative field the baseline is that the thing you make won’t make you money. It’s built into the work.

Yet, the fact that financial gain wasn’t their main driver often jarred with how those external to the field understood the work of these gamemakers. Georgia Symons, 26, a writer hired on a contract basis on Bakker’s team, explained how:

When we talk to people about *Wayward Strand* [the game] . . . always the first question is “oh like who is the market for that, though?” These bizarrely market-driven questions. It’s actually quite degrading, really, the extent to which everyone in your whole life, from art professionals through to your own parents, the first thing they want to ask you about an artistic product has to do with the profit motive and the marketability. . . . People at the moment are quite limited in their thinking [of videogames as an art form], or at least mainstream games seem to be that way. More and more games are challenging that, and we want to contribute to that as well.

For Bakker, Strasser, and Symons, creative and cultural values motivate their work and their expectations, often in direct tension with external perceptions of the field as driven primarily by commercial imperatives.

Deprioritizing economic imperatives to prioritize cultural or creative ones is complicated when cultural practice *is work*—both a source of financial income for the individual and a means of accruing capital for the employer (or publisher or platform) through the surplus-value generated by the worker’s labor. For Mark Banks (2007, 12), cultural work—“the act of labor within the industrialized process of cultural production”—is “the very axis point of political struggle between the forces of art and commerce,” and the cultural worker is the embodiment of the art-commerce relation, “who must most evidently balance the desire to indulge in disinterested, creative self-expression against the necessity of accumulation” (2007, 8). If we are

to think of the site of videogame production as an industrialized cultural field, then this complicates how we are to understand and discuss the politics of undertaking and being compensated for gamework as itself cultural work. If videogame production is a cultural field, we must consider not only the distribution and imbalances of economic capital but also its disavowal and deferral alongside the striving for and accruing of cultural and social capital.

Such a task becomes more complicated still if we wish to balance a trust that interviewees are the best subjects for representing their own lifeworld with a more critical understanding of how a desire for disinterested, creative, and autonomous cultural work has been co-opted by a widening range of professional sectors to justify longer hours, lower pay, and individualized performance metrics. Angela McRobbie (2016, 15) has provided a searing assessment of how creativity is deployed under neoliberalism to mask worsening work conditions and a lack of opportunities, especially to younger workers, with “an invitation to discover one’s own capabilities, to embark on a voyage of self-discovery,” turning the insecurity of necessary self-employment into a seemingly self-chosen adventure. Here, the cultural producer’s ability to “turn necessity into a virtue” (Bourdieu 1993, 50) is exploited to particularly malicious ends by employers who are all too happy for workers to be motivated by other than economic means. While pursuing cultural autonomy can “progressively challenge or moderate the pursuit of market values,” the cultural worker’s desire for such autonomy is prone to exploitation by commercial concerns “safe in the knowledge that [cultural workers] will feel sufficiently ‘aesthetically motivated’ to tolerate even the most oppressive working conditions” (Banks 2007, 63). Today, to take advantage of such aesthetic motivations, a broader range of sectors have restructured work to no longer look like the collective activity of work at all, having instead shifted toward the highly individualized “auteur relation to creative work” (Banks 2007, 52) where individual workers are asked to be motivated by their *drive* and their *passion* for the task rather than an uncouth desire for adequate pay and entitlements. For McRobbie (2016, 34–35), this nascent governance system of workers is a *creativity dispositif* that now

oversees novel forms of job creation (in times of both unemployment and underemployment), the defining features of which are impermanent, short-term, project-based or temporary positions; it orchestrates an expansion of the middle classes in the light of the policies adopted by most national governments in

recent years to increase the number of students attending universities and art colleges and at the same time it supports the creative activities of this *arriviste* middle class, allowing them to act as guinea pigs for testing out the new world of work without the full raft of social security entitlements and welfare provision that have been associated with the post-Second World War period. . . . The seemingly exciting compensation for work without protection is the personal reward of “being creative.”

The creativity *dispositif* romanticizes precarity, individualizes struggle, and depoliticizes the site of work by making ambiguous just where autonomous creativity (for its own sake) ends and heteronomous work (for someone else) begins.

Along similar lines, game production researchers have examined the ambiguity between work and leisure, with a particular focus on the enjoyable, disciplining, and productive nature of play. Concepts such as playbour (Kücklich 2005), passionate play slaves (de Peuter and Dyer-Witthford 2005), and immaterial labor (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009; see also Lazzarato 1996) elucidate how commercial videogame firms capture and exploit the creative and passionate labor of both gameworkers and players (and successfully turn the latter into the former) so as to make gamemaking feel less like a job that deserves compensation for every hour worked and more like a lifestyle that is inherently rewarding. This, in turn, depoliticizes the sites of videogame production, individualizes labor issues, and facilitates the exploitation and underpayment of workers (Bulut 2020; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009).

Since the mid-2000s, the videogame field’s process of intense in/formalization has converged this preexisting ambiguity of play and labor with the broader art-commerce ambiguity of the creativity *dispositif* through the *platformization* of cultural production: “the penetration of digital platforms’ economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy around those platforms” (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 5; see also Helmond 2015). *Platforms* here refers to a wide and eclectic range of digital and online software services such as YouTube, Facebook, Uber, Amazon, and Google that situate themselves as a seemingly neutral middleman that allows “users” to interact: YouTube facilitates the relationship between video producer and audience, Facebook between the business owner and the potential customer, Uber between a driver and a prospective passenger. Of

course, platforms are anything but neutral and are instead highly political agents that drastically shape the very relationships they facilitate (Gillespie 2010; Matamoros-Fernández 2017; Srnicek 2017; Lorusso 2019; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022). Digital platforms play a fundamental part in the growth and ubiquity of the creativity *dispositif*, literally replacing firms' collective employees with individual, self-driven, seemingly autonomous users to whom they owe nothing. Uber's promises of autonomy and flexibility to drivers while refusing to recognize them as employees entitled to adequate legal protections until forced to by law has become a classic example.

In videogame production, platformization has made itself known most vividly through the rise of powerful, affordable production tools like the Unity and Unreal game engines, and ubiquitous distribution platforms like Valve's Steam and Apple's App Store. Both production and distribution platforms have facilitated and exploited the growth of independent videogame production since the mid-2000s (Boluk and LeMieux 2017; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Nicoll and Keogh 2019; Foxman 2019; Nieborg, Young, and Joseph 2020; Chia et al. 2020). Videogame platforms position themselves as facilitators of autonomous and independent videogame production, empowering a wider range of videogame makers to both create and distribute their work. In return, they take a cut of each sale.¹ It is no exaggeration to say that without access to such platforms, the Australian videogame field's transition to one dominated by independent studios and individuals following the collapse of the country's larger studios would not have been possible. Through the rise of indie modes of videogame production, the videogame field has been restructured so that North American companies can capture the value generated by aspirational and self-resourced gamemakers without needing to offer formal employment arrangements.

Gamemakers I spoke to, both in Australia and overseas, typically spoke positively of the ways in which platforms have empowered them to undertake more autonomous work. Yet questions about their working habits, financial security, and plans for the future highlighted extreme levels of precarity and volatility that gamemakers saw as the price of that autonomy. In Sydney, Flat Earth Games was a small videogame production company run by siblings Elissa and Leigh Harris—36 and 33, respectively—alongside several part-time collaborators. The team primarily worked out of a bedroom but sometimes used the available spare desks at another small Sydney studio. At the time of our interview, the team was nearing the end of

a years-long production process on *Objects in Space* and had been working particularly long and grueling hours. Leigh had explained to me how exhausting it was to work in such a small team with limited resources, but earlier in the interview had praised independent videogame production over working for larger studios due to how exploitative employers in the videogame field can be. I commented that this seemed like a contradiction. For Leigh, with a reference to Karl Marx, the difference “has to do with who owns the means of production”:

It’s difficult because I am very tired and I’ve been working six or seven days a week pretty much all year and, yes, it’s quite upsetting not being able to say yes to go to a friend’s wedding or not being able to save money or even think about [buying] a house or anything like that. The way I can justify it is that I’m still contributing to an IP and that IP is owned by the company that we own. So we’re still building something that has value. That’s the way I justify it in terms of commercial living expenses. I don’t know. I guess it’s just if I didn’t do this then *Objects in Space* wouldn’t exist, so I don’t have a choice.

This sense of ownership combined with a sense of having creative ideas that must be expressed regardless of the personal cost was common. Independent gamemakers typically felt like they had voluntarily opted in to their situation and, in doing so, were avoiding the externally enforced poor working conditions and stifled creativity of larger studios even as they worked long hours for little pay. While Leigh felt as though he owned the means of production (even as the team relied on platforms such as Steam for distribution), this “ownership” also meant the team was personally responsible for funding the project, where once such an investment would have been at least partially covered by a publisher. If the game ultimately fails to make a return matching its costs, Leigh and Elissa must shoulder those costs personally.

For Australian gamemakers, this choice between self-imposed economic sacrifice and externally imposed creative sacrifice was amplified by the specific, local history of the global financial crisis (GFC) detailed in the previous chapter. Matt Ditton, 40, worked at several larger studios in Brisbane before the GFC and, after several stints in teaching and freelancing, moved to Melbourne to cofound a collection of small companies with several other veteran gamemakers. Ditton directly contrasted the current work arrangements of small independent studios with the work that was conducted in the larger studios before the GFC: “From an on-the-ground perspective it was easier prior to the GFC . . . but it was all based on debt and just making

shovelware for American studios. . . . The money wasn't great, but the stress wasn't what it is now. But at the same time, I actually think the work is more interesting now." Here we see McRobbie's creativity *dispositif* clearly articulated: easier, more regular—but also more tedious and less fulfilling—work is currently unavailable and is anyways dismissed as less desirable than the unpredictable, inconsistently paid, but more creatively fulfilling work that is now the only option. This is not to suggest that gamemakers such as Leigh or Ditton are misguided for holding these preferences, but rather it shows how they make a virtue out of necessity when faced with particularly bleak economic conditions.

For all the willingness to make seemingly voluntary sacrifices in order to pursue creative fulfillment, the precarious situation in which Australian gamemakers work comes vividly to the fore in both how they talk about their current role and how they talk about their plans (or lack thereof) for the future. For many, what was intended as a straightforward introductory question—"What is your job title?"—proved very difficult to answer. For instance:

My current job title is—I guess I kind of—I'm most comfortable just calling myself a designer because I'm very cross-discipline but like in terms of a business title I'm a creative leader at a very tiny indie partnership. (Ben Kerslake, 39, Melbourne)

I'm a programmer. That's basically it. Programmer, slash, incidentally a designer, I guess. As often happens in small groups like this I'm wearing multiple hats. (Nick Rudzicz, 39, Montreal)

I—depending on—I don't know. It's a bit weird, my brother and I founded our company so we're both codirectors of the company and cofounders. Usually, the credit that I get is lead programmer, but it depends entirely on the context in which we're performing. For the most part we make a lot of high-level decisions together. (Elissa Harris, 36, Sydney)

My position is . . . I just make games and do whatever I can myself and ask other people's help for the things I cannot do. I don't know what kind of position that is! (Mohammed Fahmi, 30, Jakarta)

Rather than specialist or specific roles, gamemakers working independently in smaller teams take on a wide-reaching and ambiguous range of creative, technical, organizational, and managerial responsibilities that do not easily fit within the specialized role titles conventional in the field's traditional larger companies. As Jennifer Whitson, Bart Simon, and Felan Parker (2021) show of Canadian independent videogame makers, this ambiguity of responsibility

creates a situation ripe for self-exploitation as work comes to be defined less by concrete responsibilities or the amount of time worked, and more by the never-ending and vague list of tasks required to get the game done.

The future is often just as (if not more) unpredictable than the present for gamemakers. As with the senior designer at the start of this chapter, gamemakers rarely had a plan of where they expected to be five years from now or even where they would be once the current project wrapped up. Instead, answers to this question were presented as aspirations (“Hopefully, if this project does well . . .”) or, tellingly, were redirected toward a desire for individual improvement and fulfillment (“I just want to get better and make cool stuff”). Terry Burdak, 32, was a Melbourne-based independent developer who works in a team with two cofounders and several part-time collaborators. The trio began working together at university on a final-year student project, *Paperbark*, which they were, at the time of our interview, working to turn into a commercial release. When we talked, Burdak and the team had been under a prolonged period of self-imposed crunch as they neared their release deadline. For Burdak, the imminent completion of a title that had been his professional focus for years made the future impossible to think about:

Fucking no idea [where I will be in five years]. . . . Just so much is weighted on how well *Paperbark* goes. You know, if it tanks, if it goes well, if it goes really well, if it goes okay, if it doesn’t go at all . . . how well the game goes determines the next project. But ultimately, you’re hoping that everything you’ve been working toward pays off and you can just keep working on it and making it better. Realistically that’s all you can really ask for.

The ubiquity of this type of response—anchored more in the *hope* for stability than any ability to plan for it—demonstrates how in lieu of any career certainty or job stability, independent gamemakers are driven by the individualist and idealized notions of creative entrepreneurship where the future is always up for grabs.²

While the workers of triple-A game studios undeniably experience constant precarity as an “existential condition” (Bulut 2020, 71), where even creating a critical darling or commercial hit can’t ensure job security, those I spoke to at large studios nonetheless often had a clear sense of an at least hypothetical career trajectory and promotions ladder they could theoretically climb through planning with their supervisors and management. For instance, a junior designer might one day be promoted to a senior designer or a creative director. The portfolio careers of independent gameworkers

such as those that are the majority of the Australian field, on the other hand, are less frequently defined by a foreseeable career path and instead are only rendered legible *as* career trajectories post hoc, as gamemakers jump between projects and teams, hustling and cobbling together a career and an income from a range of gigs and projects, some of which pay, some of which don't. Much like the triple-A gamemaker compelled to work evenings or weekends, independent gamemakers are driven by passion, a sense of self-responsibility, and the task-oriented nature of videogame production work. But for independent gamemakers this takes place in a context of even greater volatility, unpredictability, and personal risk. While independent gamemakers have a greater appearance of autonomy, their work is shaped by the same blurring of play and labor that normalize overwork in the triple-A space, albeit now with the added risks associated with sinking personal resources and a lack of the benefits and protections a larger employer would be legally obliged to offer, such as a minimum wage and sick leave. As Leigh said to me, "Survival and success often look awfully similar when you're trying to run an indie games studio."

Indie Entrepreneurism or Bust

To seek work in the cultural industries is, increasingly, to be entrepreneurial: to identify a gap that one can fill with one's unique skillset, and to invest large amounts of "sweat equity" into such work in the hope it will one day pay off. But the attractive go-getter connotations of entrepreneurship seem far removed from independent gamemakers who are driven by a desire to be creative and autonomous but also face chronic job insecurity and a lack of basic work entitlements such as superannuation or maternity leave. Kate Oakley (2014, 149) disrupts the positive and exciting framing of the entrepreneur, for cultural workers, as instead a *forced* entrepreneurship: "the need for people in rapidly changing industries to adopt worsening working arrangements lies behind much of the growth in entrepreneurship in the cultural sectors." For Imre Szeman (2015, 474) the entrepreneur thus represents

the neoliberal subject *par excellence*—the perfect figure for a world in which the market has replaced society, and one whose idealization and legitimation in turn affirms the necessity and veracity of this epochal transition. The figure of the entrepreneur embodies the values and attributes that are celebrated as essential for the economy to operate smoothly *and* for the contemporary human being to flourish.

A normalization of entrepreneurship amplifies and reinforces the creativity *dispositif*, further dismantling the securities and assurances won by (some) workers in the postwar period as individual creative workers now embrace flexible work: jumping from one short-term gig to the next, setting up shop in cafés or bedrooms with their own computers running ostensibly free platformed software such as Unity, Photoshop, Garage Band, and Google Docs. This instills a culture of individualization that is about “new, more fluid, less permanent social relations seemingly marked by choice or options” (McRobbie 2002, 518). For Banks (2007, 43), much as we have already seen in the previous section, such “strong incitements to become more self-directed, self-resourcing, and entrepreneurial may enhance possibilities for workers’ self-exploitation and, relatedly, self-blaming.”

In the videogame field, the figure of the entrepreneur is most clearly manifest in the indie developer. Indie games rose in popularity through the 2000s, primarily through popular narratives of “self-made” white male auteur figures such as Jonathan Blow, Phil Fish, and Edmund McMillen working outside the then-dominant studio-publisher model. This was particularly popularized through the 2012 documentary film *Indie Game: The Movie*, which has become something of an easy punching bag for researchers and gamemakers alike wanting to highlight the hegemonic and narrow ways in which indie selectively represents only the most commercially viable subset of the diverse spectrum of independent videogame production. As digital distribution (and thus platformization) became the norm across the videogame field and the gatekeeping ability of the console manufacturers and publishers was weakened, smaller teams became able to distribute smaller-scale games. This was seen, much as indie is seen in other fields, as more autonomous and less restricted by commercial imperatives—more creative and less “selling out.” More cynically, as independent creators from marginalized backgrounds have frequently pointed out, the games produced by the first wave of commercially successful indie gamemakers kept to a limited range of tried-and-tested retro genres that the primary demographics of indie gamemakers had themselves grown up with, such as side-scrolling platformers and arcade shooters.

Indie as a culture, identity, genre, and business model has undergone extensive critique (Lipkin 2013; Simon 2013; Ruffino 2021; Clark and Wang 2020). The early entrepreneurial model of indie creative *and* commercial success as shown in the exclusively white, cisgender, and male auteur figures of *Indie Game: The Movie* has been shown to be only a small sliver of

the vast range of independent approaches to videogame production that have long existed beyond the triple-A industry (Anthropy 2012; Boluk and LeMieux 2017). Indie signifies the gentrification of independent gamemaking. Indie studios and individual gamemakers—and, paradoxically, the indie publishers that have emerged to support and be supported by them—are often romanticized as a countercultural movement, as having made a choice to refuse the conditions and stifled creativity of the mainstream industry, while simultaneously embracing a by-your-own-bootstraps individualized business philosophy that John Vanderhoef (2020, 17) has called an “antiestablishment neoliberalism.” As Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017, 33) note in their critique of *Indie Game: The Movie* and the limited conceptualization of independence it celebrates:

The term *indie game* [valorizes] only certain kinds of precarious labor practices—the ones that paid off. The very concept of indie games circulates as a form of cultural imperialism that both colonizes profitable forms of independent production and sanitizes them for mass consumption. Adopting the term indie games from the much wider spectrum of creative and experimental labor, then applying it as a general descriptor for a specific form of game making, reduces all independent development to this particular aesthetic and mechanic genre of videogames and also reduces all independent developers to those white, North American men able to make a living developing games in the wake of the global economic collapse beginning in 2008.

Whereas indie game production was originally conceptualized antagonistically and broadly as “not triple-A” in the North American context (Lipkin 2013), “independent” now feasibly describes the overwhelming majority of videogame production positions in the world working in piecemeal, self-resourced arrangements with a reliance on digital distribution. The indie identity, as a particular position-taking in the videogame field, claims autonomy from the economic field while also maintaining a heteronomous ability to nonetheless ensure one is identifiable to particular consumer audiences as existing as an entrepreneur within that same economic field.

As Oakley (2014, 145) says of entrepreneurial cultural workers, indie gamemakers are indeed independent “but not as they please and not under self-selected circumstances.” The forced entrepreneurship of creative workers exposes the autonomous myth and precarious reality of independent gamemaking. In the intensely in/formalized videogame field we see indie mobilized in much the same way as entrepreneurship is mobilized in the

broader cultural industries, where a sense of self-chosen adventure and excitement masks worsening working arrangements, deteriorating access to social welfare, extractive platformization, and an absence of stable employment opportunities.

Tellingly, indie was commonly used by Australian gamemakers to describe the mode of gamework they undertake. Of the 288 survey respondents, in response to a question asking which terms best describe the type of game-making activity they undertake, 201 (71 percent) checked “indie” and 153 (53 percent) checked “independent”; 226 (80 percent) checked at least one or the other.³ When interview participants described the strengths of the Australian field, the creativity allowed by the field’s independence (as opposed to when Australian gamemakers were required by overseas publishers to produce “shovelware”) was a common trend:

I think especially in Australia’s scene, given that the majority of game developers are indie developers, compared to the United States where developers are mostly working on big triple-A titles, we’re starting to see people flex their progressive muscles and say, “I want to make a game that I want to play!” And so you’re seeing all these games pop up that people do either on their spare time, or full-time because they’ve got funding, and it’s pushing the envelope on what we see games can achieve. (Kim Allom, 27, studio manager, Brisbane)

This was a common refrain, and one that it is interesting to consider in relation to the history of Australia’s videogame field where this transition to indie did not necessarily happen by choice but because it became the only feasible way to locally commodify videogame making practices in the absence of external employment opportunities.

The language of entrepreneurship reframes structural precarity as self-chosen adventure, obscuring both the conditions and motivations of gamework. For instance, in research with independent Canadian gamemaking teams, Whitson, Simon, and Parker (2021) note how gamemakers often used the language and posturing of tech industry entrepreneurship when talking about their ambitions or work practice to external parties such as publishers, investors, or government representatives, stressing a desire to expand, hire more staff, and generate more revenue. Yet, when asked to reflect directly on their craft or future ambitions as gamemakers, they instead articulate a desire to keep on keeping on at their current scale with their current colleagues. Or, rather, they wanted to continue to thrive at a particular, sustainable

scale; they did not necessarily want to grow into large triple-A studios. That was not their idea of success.

This need to “talk the talk” of entrepreneurship to be perceived as professional and to access funding options, in turn, both exceptionalizes and hides sites of extreme precarity, both from popular imaginings of what gamemaking success looks like but also from formal statistics and legal framings. For example, I spoke in Melbourne to one studio cofounder who was particularly exhausted and downtrodden at the time of our interview. He was working from the local coworking space, The Arcade, surrounded by game studios that he perceived as having achieved various kinds of success while his own studio had toiled on game after game in relative obscurity with little to show for it. When we spoke, this gamemaker and his two cofounders were all individually undertaking freelance or contract work for other teams on other projects,

just to pay bills and shit because our own IP that we’ve got is not generating enough revenue to pay wages. . . . So like it’s a bit tough because the other two guys in the team are sort of right now especially doing a lot of contract work and part-time jobs and keeping themselves afloat, and I’ve been keeping myself afloat on the side as well.

Some of the cash that each team member made from individual work on the side was then filtered back into the studio. Actual wages for working at the floundering studio, however, were “sporadic”:

Because we’re [company] directors we’re not under the same stringency from the ATO [Australian Tax Office]. They’re not like “you must be covering your employees’ wages” and stuff. So when we’re not doing [studio] work there’s not really an expectation to be paid from [the studio].

Similar situations where a studio looked much more formal on paper than in the lived experiences of their owners or workers were common in interviews. “Employees” were not being exploited, necessarily, but “company directors” (that is, independent gamemakers who set up a company to undertake their precarious work) substantially underpaid themselves, in the hope things would pay off eventually. This situation becomes a nasty cycle where teams hide the true extent of their own precarity so as to mimic the external markers of success and stability they perceive in other teams and in so doing further obscured just how precarious most independent teams truly were.

This is not to imply that most independent gamemakers have simply been duped into thinking financial return for their labor is unnecessary or unwarranted. Many clearly articulated the exploitative nature of their

current situation. Between her various roles, Leena van Deventer, whom we heard from in the previous chapter, noted that “the fundamental challenge of being a creative person is the neoliberal bullshit that’s stopping you from actually getting work done.” Like van Deventer, other gamemakers referenced neoliberalism and capitalism directly when discussing their work situation, or explicitly critiqued the labor practices of videogame companies they had worked at as exploiting gameworkers’ passion. When Leigh said above that “it has to do with who owns the means of production,” the reference to Marx’s labor theory of value was deliberate, and Leigh implies his own independent creativity possesses a potential path to social equity—even as his work remains mediated by numerous external companies and platforms. Thus, even as the rose-tinted glasses of indie entrepreneurship obscure the true extent of precarity of the field, the sincere desire to be independent, to have some autonomy in how one undertakes videogame production, was nonetheless a major driver for gamemakers conscious of their own precarious situation. Indie provides a veneer of autonomy that romanticizes and obscures the individualized precarity of creative entrepreneurship in the videogame field without necessarily resolving the entrenched labor issues that have long faced gamemakers. Nevertheless, it is still the case that these independent gamemakers have a level of autonomy detached from the governance of the big, dominant studios, and some are striving to imagine different ways of structuring gamework communally and collectively.

Opting Out

In his blog post cited in the introduction of this chapter, gamemaker Robert Yang saw, much as some of my participants, the inability to make independent videogames in a financially sustainable way to be just part and parcel of pursuing a cultural practice under capitalism. If one were to be driven by the field’s autonomous principles of hierarchization, by the desire to make art for art’s sake, a disinterest in economic interests was inevitable and necessary. The scholars cited throughout this chapter so far see this as both a fundamental tension in industrialized cultural fields, and as the insidious ability of the creativity *dispositif* to defang collective responses to extreme precarity in an increasing range of sectors through the language of “being creative.” Yet, it is insufficient to simply say that gamemakers such as Yang have been duped by a creativity *dispositif* into giving away their work for free.

Yang (2017; emphasis added) himself is articulate on his reasons for being economically defeatist:

I don't expect to make a living off of my games. I give away my gay sex games for free because (a) they're short-form games in a market that demands "replay value" even though people don't even touch most of their Steam libraries, (b) I don't want to invest all my time and hope into commercializing it, just to earn like \$5k a year if I'm lucky, which does not go far in NYC, (c) when an indie game has poor sales, then that often becomes the game's entire legacy forever. . . . To me, there's a certain peace of mind in not trying to make the next gay sex *Minecraft* blockbuster happen. . . . Why is it so important for us to make our living from selling our games? *Why can't we make our living from doing something else?*

As such, for Yang, choosing autonomy is a recognition, rather than a refusal, of the situations of extreme precarity and overwork outlined above that are required to make independent gamemaking a financially sustainable venture. Yang is not alone in this assessment, and other independent gamemakers also argue that the field's economic-centric markers of success do a disservice to gamemakers. In their own blog post, gamemaker thecatamites (n.d.) calls these market arrangements a sort of "business cosplay" and argues that:

If [these market arrangements] are not challenged, and remain the default even in the rinky-dink small-scale spaces we create for our hobbyist projects outside the shadow of big capital, they will continue to act as the implicit limit to our sense of what's possible; will continue to act as the rake that we step on, again and again.

While the critiques of the creativity *dispositif* made earlier in this chapter are vital for understanding the conditions of work in the twenty-first century—both cultural and otherwise—it's important we don't reduce the myriad of reasons for which people undertake cultural activity to purely economic ones. Doing so imposes a capitalist realist (Fisher 2009) lens instead of critiquing the arrangement of contemporary capitalism, and it risks perpetuating the very circumstances we strive to critique.

While many aspirational videogame makers willingly work for either below minimum wage or no wage at all in the hope that "one day" it will economically pay off, some gamemakers I interviewed expressed, like Yang and thecatamites, a disinterest in striving to make a living from their videogame production work. Samantha Schaffer, in Adelaide, identified their own game-making practice as a hobby with no aspirations to turn this practice into a job:

[When I was] employed, professionally I was a software developer and I have a degree in computer science so if I really wanted to, I could try to make games

professionally . . . , but I don't really connect with that side of it, so it's very much a hobby. I'm fortunate now to have the time to be not working and doing more creative stuff so I've been making a fair few games lately but generally speaking just every now and then. . . . Being able to churn out a Bitsy game⁴ and be like "Well, that's over now, I could leave forever if I wanted to" rather than spending years on something big, was really helpful.

Likewise, Melbourne-based game design student Zachariah Chandler, 21, is unfazed by the commercial challenges of gamemaking and is content to get an unrelated part-time job to support his practice, rather than monetize it directly:

The prospect of leaving university, going and getting some part-time retail job, setting up a Patreon, and churning out trash games that I enjoy myself does not seem like the end of the world or like some great hardship I have to fight through. It's almost gotten to the point now where it's like, oh, that's just the way it is. You're an independent developer. No one is a Notch [creator of *Minecraft*] anymore. You don't get to make billions of dollars off your videogame. You get to make \$50 a week on top of whatever it is you're earning and cool, that's sweet, it pays for your Adobe Suite subscription or whatever. I don't have a problem with that because I have no pretensions of fame and riches or whatever. Who cares? Work is a lot more interesting when it is driven by necessity!

Gamemakers like Schaffer and Chandler who expressed such sentiments were, in their own minds at least, not accepting a lack of reimbursement for the sake of creative fulfillment but rather deliberately keeping their creative practice separate from their means of sustenance so as to avoid the notorious exploitation, anxieties, and deprivations of formalized gamework.

Like Schaffer, many such gamemakers used the word "hobby" to differentiate their noncommercial videogame production. In his history of hobbies in North America, Steven Gelber (1999) identifies hobbies as emerging in another time when the relationship between work and leisure was drastically shifting: the industrial revolution. Industrialization "quarantined" work from leisure and replaced "the fluidity of preindustrial time" with "discrete blocks of commodified time that could be sold for work or withheld for leisure" (1999, 1). The hobby, Gelber argues, emerged as a form of *productive leisure* through which "the ideology of the workplace infiltrated the home" (1999, 2). Hobbies "provide the satisfactions of a 'career' and confirm the legitimacy of the [capitalist] work ethic even for people in unpleasant jobs" (1999, 11) and "confirm the verities of work and the free market inside the home *so long as remunerative employment has remained elsewhere*" (1999, 4; emphasis added).

When remunerated employment *doesn't* remain elsewhere, however, one can see how the productive leisure of hobbies throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries evolves into the creativity *dispositif* of the twenty-first century, where the capitalist work ethic of productivity encroaches the sphere of leisure to such an extent that any clear distinction between the two falls away and people strive to turn their passions into entrepreneurial business undertakings. The two now fuse together for many cultural workers in their constitution of personal and professional identities. McRobbie (2002, 520) makes this connection explicit: “The intoxicating pleasures of leisure culture have now . . . provided the template for managing an identity in the world of work.” Where once one undertook a hobby to be productive beyond their formal employment, in the precarious hustle of today’s portfolio careers, one more often than not strives to turn what would otherwise be a hobby *into* a form of employment in lieu of any other alternatives.

Nonetheless, as chapter 1 discussed briefly, and as videogame historians have extensively shown (Swalwell and Davidson 2016; Švelch 2018; Nicoll 2019; Reed 2020; Swalwell 2021), people have always made videogames in a hobbyist capacity beyond the most industrialized positions in the field, but the aggressive formalization of the 1990s obscured and delegitimized these positions. Hobbyist gamemakers did not stop existing through the 1990s, but they did become explicitly secondary to (and obscured by) the concerns and outputs of the field’s dominant positions. For instance, modding and user-generated content have received extensive scholarly attention (see Banks 2013; Kücklich 2005) but are largely framed in the literature as activities undertaken by *players*, not gamemakers (at least until their creators’ transition to commercialized modes of production). The extensive amateur communities that existed around tools such as Flash and RPG Maker in the late 1990s and early 2000s, meanwhile, are only recently beginning to receive the scholarly attention they deserve (Ito 2005; McCrea 2013b; Anthropy 2014; Salter and Murray 2014; Fiadotau 2020; Reed 2020). Following the videogame field’s aggressive formalization, “choosing” to be a videogame hobbyist—to make videogames without hustling toward commodification—is an almost radically political act that, as Gelber (1999, 156) says of craft hobbyists generally, “evokes the mythical purity of the preindustrial artisan,” as it requires a conscious rejection of trying to “make it” in the “videogame industry.”

It is not a coincidence that those gamemakers I spoke to who were most adamant that they were deliberately refusing to participate in the ruthless

hustle of indie entrepreneurship were often from those marginal demographics who typically feel most excluded from or alienated by commercial videogame firms of all scales. Schaffer was explicit in this reason to remain a hobbyist: “I like the low level of investment in it because the games industry can be quite hostile towards femme people and queer people and that kind of thing. So I didn’t really want to go all in on an industry that might get mad at me.” While queer, transgender, and gender-diverse folk have always been involved in the videogame field as creators, employees, critics, and players, they have been particularly visible in the in/formalized field since the early 2010s (Keogh 2013; Harvey 2014; Ruberg 2020b). On the one hand, this greater visibility has increased critical acclaim and recognition in terms of the aesthetic innovations and interventions their videogames have made in the field. On the other hand, visibility has intensified violence and harassment directed toward marginal gamemakers for producing videogames that the dominant positions in the field are incapable of perceiving as legitimate (Consalvo and Paul 2019). One catalyst of Gamergate, for instance, was when Zoë Quinn placed their free videogame *Depression Quest*—released months earlier on their own website—on Steam to reach a broader audience. That *Depression Quest* was made in Twine, was text-only, was made by a queer, femme-presenting nonbinary gamemaker, and was released for free infuriated a dominant gamer audience that saw this as a newcomer incursion on a dominant position in the field (the Steam marketplace). The subsequent harassment, abuse, and death threats of a diverse range of gamemakers, journalists, and researchers led many marginal gamemakers to decide commercial videogame production and distribution was no place for them—but they did not necessarily stop making videogames. Like Yang, many chose cultural autonomy and economic failure as an alternative path forward.

How, then, as Jack Halberstam (2011, 1) asks in the introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure*, do we find alternatives “to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other” when considering tactical responses to the ubiquity of capitalism such as those that define the noncommercial ambitions of hobbyist gamemakers? For Halberstam (2011, 2), “failure” as an alternative to too-straightforwardly economic “success” as determined by hegemonic, heteronormative, capitalist society “begs for a grammar of possibility . . . and expresses a basic desire to live life otherwise.” Failure becomes, in part, “a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic

discourse of losing” (2011, 11–12). Marigold Bartlett and Sam Crisp (2013), in the presentation at Freeplay Independent Games Festival cited in the previous chapter, connect Halberstam’s notion of capitalist failure with the then-recent expansion of the videogame field by marginal hobbyists:

By celebrating failure, we can shift our perception, and instead of looking at games which don’t sell or don’t get critical acclaim as games which must be doing something wrong, we can realize that these games are the only ones which can truly offer us emancipation. From a certain perspective, they’re the only games doing something right. . . . Voices that are queer, feminist, or trans, who are implicitly seen as failures by society’s notion of success, are on the forefront of transgressive game design and criticism. (Bartlett and Crisp, 2013)

For Gelber (1999, 19), the fact that some people willingly do in their spare time as hobbies what others do for a living points to hobbies not as an escape from work but as “a return to traditional nonalienated forms of labor” in which “participants determine the form, set the pace, and are the sole beneficiaries of the fruits of their labor.” Yet, Gelber is ultimately skeptical that this points to a “return to a golden age of labor” and instead sees such hobbyist activity as “exercises that serve to ideologically integrate work and leisure by permitting workers to engage in worklike behavior in a non-coercive environment.” We can think here, too, of McRobbie’s notion of the creativity *dispositif* as encouraging rather than coercive—reframing unpaid work and hardships as part of the adventure of creative expression. Similarly, Aleena Chia (2019) has shown how videogame businesses directly and deliberately benefit from the “vocational passion” of their hobbyist player-base, and Bo Ruberg (2019) has shown how the dominant positions in the videogame field directly benefit from and absorb the social and cultural capital of the newly legitimized but still marginalized queer videogame creators on whom the responsibility (but not the commercial benefit) falls to “make games better.” Hobbyist gamemakers might be conscious and articulate of the coercive and exploitative nature of commodified gamemaking work, but this does not necessarily mean they avoid exploitation by videogame studios and platforms that still benefit from their activity—a complex situation that will be explored further in chapter 7.

Yet I cannot help but think of the clear difference between those aspirational gamemakers I interviewed who were trying incredibly hard to make gamemaking their primary income—commonly stressed, overworked, exhausted, and pouring personal funds into uncertain ventures—and those

who had consciously opted out of that race, at least partially, to make videogames in their own time, around other work—content, curious, communal. To me, these were not exploited and downtrodden gameworkers, but game-makers who had explicitly and deliberately distanced themselves from an alienating system that would never work in their favor anyway. As Banks (2007, 165) says of “the efforts of thousands of artistic, community-oriented and socially motivated practitioners,” I feel it is to “disparage and, perhaps more importantly, to empirically misrepresent” the activities of videogame makers to suggest “that the fruits of their labor have served only the capitalist mode of accumulation which contains (and often constrains) their efforts.” Perhaps these hobbyists are then not escaping the nets of the creativity *dispositif* or neoliberal capitalism, but, as one of McRobbie’s (2016, 23) students justifies her own entrepreneurial activities, finding “a means of creating a space within a system that is so all-encompassing that it is difficult to imagine an alternative. To have seemingly circumvented unhappy work.” Or, as Jaroslav Švelch (2018, xxxiii) evaluates the videogame hobbyists of 1980s Czechoslovakia through Michel de Certeau, hobbyist game-makers are not finding top-down strategies to dismantle the systems that don’t work in their favor but bottom-up tactics as an “art of the weak” to find ways to “make do.” Or, in Halberstam’s sense, such gamemakers seem to be determining alternative measures of success beyond the economically rationalist measures historically dominant in the field.

Of course, even (especially) among marginal demographics, not everyone can afford to simply give up on commodifying their cultural activity. Chandler, after voicing his own noncommercial ambitions, was careful to stress that he was in a particularly privileged position to be so nonchalant: “I don’t have to worry about finances because my parents are doctors and live on a big farm. If everything goes to shit I’m not going to die, right? That’s not going to be the case for others. . . . So it’s like, I don’t have a solution to that.” This is a crucial reminder not to romanticize those who “choose” alternative, autonomy-driven forms of videogame creation as somehow purer or more legitimate than those who prioritize financial subsistence. We must be careful not to trivialize or downplay the situations of quite extreme poverty that many marginalized independent gamemakers work from, especially in countries like the United States that lack sufficient social safety nets. Chandler, for instance, in addition to being able to fall back on his parents for accommodation and food also does not have to worry about excessive

student debts or a health system that connects access to affordable care to employment contracts, as a hobbyist gamemaker would in the United States. With job shortages and flat social wages and increasing disparity between rich and poor, being able to not monetize your hobby into a hustle is increasingly a privilege few can afford. Such a position-taking is simply unavailable for many dispositions.

To be sure, almost every gamemaker quoted in this section would certainly choose to survive purely on their gamemaking craft if it were feasible to do so without accepting the precarity and exploitation that comes with the current structures of commercial videogame production. Instead, from their own disposition, the videogame field does not currently present positions in which it is possible to undertake the form of videogame production they wish to undertake and to also make an economic income. But neither would these gamemakers be served by, for instance, the return of large publisher-dependent studios to Australia that have historically been plagued by exactly the misogynistic and fraternal cultures of exclusion such gamemakers are striving to avoid. As Greig de Peuter (2014, 276) argues, opposing the neoliberal labor politics of the cultural industries requires us to go “beyond opposing precarity, and, indeed, beyond developing policy mechanisms enabling workers to better cope with flexible labor markets—to go a step further to propose and experiment with political-economic infrastructures of cultural creativity that provide an alternative to the dominant social relations of production.” To account for, and ultimately to support, the full spectrum of gamemaking practice in the videogame field is to account for the economic, cultural, and social values that motivate different people to make videogames in their full diversity and contradictions, neither reducing them purely to economic metrics nor romanticizing them as ever fully autonomous from the demands of survival under capitalism.

Conclusion

The precarious and piecemeal nature of contemporary gamework, driven by individual desires for fulfilling work and dependent on digital platforms, aligns with broader neoliberal trends across the cultural industries. But at the same time, the videogame field’s unique history of aggressive formalization complicates matters. Under capitalist industrialization, other cultural fields saw a previous dominance of autonomous principles

of hierarchization weakened by the rise and penetration of market forces, and this has been cultural studies' concern with the industrialization of culture since the discipline's origins. For the videogame field, however, first emerging alongside neoliberalism's rise to ubiquity, the current age of intense in/formalization is also the first time that principles of autonomous hierarchization have been strong enough for videogame production to be perceived as happening within an autonomous cultural field, and not just within a commercial industry, at all. It is insufficient to simply dismiss the articulations of gamemakers' creative and other noncommercial ambitions as having been duped by a creativity *dispositif*, even as such a *dispositif* has undeniably restructured what work looks like in the videogame field. Many of the gamemakers I spoke to, just like Yang, thecatamites, and Bartlett and Crisp cited above, were articulate on the capitalist systems and ideologies of passion and creativity that work to suppress the conditions and pay of gameworkers globally. For these gamemakers, this was more an argument for opting out of the hustle of making gamework economically feasible to, instead, try to take positions that were more autonomous from, more disinterested in, the need to make an income.

Crucially, and as will be expanded upon in chapter 7, it is alongside the partial legitimization of this broader diaspora of independent gamemakers, beyond the managerial surveillance and ruthless individualism of triple-A studio workers, that a nascent collective politics of gamework is beginning to emerge, and through which the structure and nature of the videogame field is being rapidly redetermined. As Anna Anthropy (2012, 18–20) argues in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, “carving new paths to game creation and distribution is valuable” because it undermines “the industry’s claim to being the only route to game creation” and forces “the industry to try to reconsider its totalitarian attitude toward the people it employs.” This was vividly demonstrated at the 2018 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco when a diverse collective of commercial and hobbyist, independent and employed gamemakers protested a talk given by the executive director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) that was largely perceived to be anti-union. This grassroots collective grew over the course of 2018 into Game Workers Unite (GWU)—not a union but a collection of communities advocating for unionization and collectivization throughout the game industry (Frank 2018). GWU’s growth and its ramifications will be considered in depth in chapter 7, but here it is worth noting that it is

no coincidence that the growing push toward unionization in the videogame field coincides with a diversification of just who is visible and has the authority to speak at videogame events as a perceived legitimate game developer. Detached from the surveillance culture of large studios, marginal gamemakers are reimagining what legitimate videogame work looks like, and are beginning to agitate for solidarity across the field in a way that an employee at a large studio, concerned about aggrieved managers, cannot. While de Peuter (2011, 421) rightly notes that workers' "earlier sources of organizational power and economic security" in a range of sectors are being undermined by the "de-standardization of employment, de-unionization of labor, dis-aggregation of production, [and] de-industrialization of economies," the situation is more complicated for gamemakers, who have historically never had *any* source of organizational power or economic security to be undermined in the first place. It is alongside the partial legitimization of this broader field of independent gamemakers, beyond the managerial surveillance and ruthless exploitation of triple-A studio workers, that the nascent collective politics of gamework is beginning to emerge, and through which the structure and nature of the videogame field is being rapidly redetermined.

Perhaps the politics of contemporary gamework is best viewed through Mark Bank's prediction over a decade ago that neoliberalism might facilitate "conditions under which individuals may actually choose to reject those individualizing systems that place them at the capricious mercy of the market" (2007, 166). Through the frequently articulated political consciousness of Australian gamemakers, their oft-expressed desire for stronger solidarity and better working conditions instead of a return to the traditional studio-publisher model that left the entire national field in the lurch following the GFC, I find, like Banks, that it is important not to "discount how, in myriad global contexts, cultural workers . . . are immensely valuable in keeping alive the possibilities of a life beyond total commodification—however partial and precarious that life may currently appear." It would be a mistake to completely discount the importance and value of the autonomy and creative freedom that many of these workers truly do enjoy, even while we acknowledge the contingencies these are based upon and the political-economic coordinates from which they arise.

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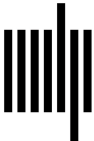
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