

7 From Videgame Field to Videgame Industries

In May 2021, as I was completing the first draft of this book, the Australian federal government announced a 30 percent refundable tax offset for videogame production businesses spending at least \$500,000 in Australia. The announcement was met with jubilation from Australian gamemakers and trade organizations, such as the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association (IGEA), who had lobbied for such an offset for years (Maxwell 2021; Walker 2021). As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, the independent teams that currently dominate the Australian field persist at a small scale in a sort of perpetual entrepreneurship that can't provide significant or stable career opportunities for many. The tax offset, for many Australian gamemakers, looks set to provide a missing piece of the puzzle required to stabilize and grow the Australian field. Local companies can risk growing and taking on more staff with the money no longer committed to taxes; international companies may decide Australia is now an affordable location to open a large studio, bringing with them crucial upskilling, stability, and graduate roles that the current small teams are unable to provide. Symbolically, for many Australian gamemakers, the announcement of the offset, providing videogame production a comparable level of support as other screen industries in the country, felt like long-awaited recognition from a federal government that for nearly a decade had shown no interest in the sector whatsoever.

Two months later, the IGEA and the federal government's Global Business and Talent Attraction Taskforce jointly released a showreel of Australian-made videogames, showcasing the talent and ability available in the country for foreign companies looking to take advantage of the tax offset. The showreel presented a vast range of titles, from triple-A projects predominately made overseas but in part by Australian contingencies such as *World of Tanks*

(Wargaming) and *Call of Duty: World War II* (Sledgehammer), high-fidelity sports games such as *AO Tennis 2* (Big Ant) and *Real Racing 3* (EA Firemonkeys), and several critically successful independent titles such as *Paperbark* (Paper House), *Florence* (Mountains), and *Dead Static Drive* (Reuben). For the showcased foreign-owned studios, the tax offset means potentially heightened job security, with their international owners now having one more reason to keep their Australian studios open, rather than closing them and opening a cheaper studio elsewhere. For the showcased larger Australian-owned studios, the tax offset means hiring more staff to undertake larger projects won't require quite as much of an up-front financial investment, and so more ambitious projects can be pursued with greater confidence. For the showcased smaller independent teams, however, the tax offset will have very little direct impact. Many of the teams responsible for the showcased games consist of very few workers (often fewer than five) with shoestring budgets well below the \$500,000 necessary to be eligible for the tax offset in the first place. Others will have spent the necessary amount but still only employed two to five gamemakers on short-term contracts—hardly the employment booster that either the Australian government or the IGEA is trying to encourage with the tax offset.

There is an irony here that some of the videogames used to advertise Australia as a great place to make videogames would not themselves have been eligible for the government support program striving to grow Australian videogame businesses. But, of course, assisting small independent studios—the “backbone of Australian game development” (Apperley and Golding 2015, 61)—is a distant secondary priority of the tax offset. While its existence could encourage local teams to scope more ambitiously and employ more people, its primary goal is to convince large multinationals to set up shop in Australia rather than somewhere else, and to hire dozens or even hundreds of Australian gamemakers. But tax breaks alone don't attract large studios: tax breaks *and* a local talent pool attract large studios. There's no value for Ubisoft or Activision to set up a studio on the opposite side of the world from the rest of their operations if there is no local labor to be recruited into that studio. As Jason Della Rocca (2013, 133) reminds us, even in triple-A hubs such as Montreal, complex videogame production ecosystems are a necessary precursor for the likes of Ubisoft and Activision to show interest in entering a local field in the first place. What is being advertised in this showreel is not the critically acclaimed videogames made

in Australia but the Australian videogame field itself—that is, the available labor-power that could now be exploited for a discount rate by a multinational company. In order to build videogame development jobs and companies in Australia—what we would typically call a videogame industry—there needs to already exist an active field of videogame production.

In this final chapter, I want to use the contested nature of the current moment to show how the dominant positions of “the videogame industry” don’t only obscure the rest of the videogame field but have in fact always relied on the positions they obscure for their dominance. One of the key takeaways from this book, I hope, will be that alternative and noncommercial modes of videogame production are not the fringe of the videogame field but its foundation. As the Global Business and Talent Attraction Taskforce’s showreel exemplifies, the broader, informal cultural activities of a videogame field is a required precursor for the growth of a videogame industry. The field produces the skills, the communities, the aesthetic and design innovations that videogame companies are then able to selectively privatize and commodify (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 8). If a cultural field is the uneven distribution of cultural, social, and economic value between the field’s differently positioned agents, how do the dominant positions ensure this value flows overwhelmingly toward them? And how might the field come to be distributed more equitably?

In the first section, I demonstrate how the broader field of videogame production is tapped as a resource through which the field’s dominant commercial positions are able to present themselves as sites of creative innovation and progressive politics. Drawing on Marxist theories of surplus-value and immaterial labor, here I argue that the field’s dominant commercial positions no longer simply disavow the broader videogame field but selectively legitimize it so as to exploit it to generate *surplus cultural value* to convert into their own economic capital, ensuring the field’s status quo is maintained even as its frontiers expand. In the second section, I consider the potential for radical interventions within this current arrangement. If the generation of the field’s cultural value increasingly, in the intensely informal paradigm, relies on autonomous, self-driven creators that are not formally employed by those in the dominant positions, then what alternative conduits of power and value could the broader field foster instead? What could a more egalitarian and collective videogame field look like? Here, I look particularly at the call for videogame makers to unionize that has been

building momentum globally to argue that this was only able to catalyze due to the increased autonomy of those at the field's periphery—those least likely to fit within traditional union structures, but also those least able to be punished for advocating for such structure. New sites of exploitation, I argue here, are also potentially new sites of resistance, and movements striving for worker agitation in the videogame field would do well to link to broader movements throughout the gig economy. Ultimately, a videogame industry—or perhaps videogame industries—can't exist without a broader videogame field to which it is not reducible.

Making Videogames Better

In their research on queer gamemakers, Bo Ruberg (2019, 779) details the ways in which the responsibility falls on marginal, precarious, often poor independent gamemakers to make videogames better. "Better" here stands in for a range of social and cultural values: making videogames more diverse, more creative, more accessible, more artistic, more vibrant, more mature, more progressive, cooler. Ruberg shows how the rise in visibility and critical acclaim of creators such as Porpentine, Liz Ryerson, Robert Yang, Natalie Lawhead, Anna Anthropy, and others have provided inspiration and ideas for less marginal videogame makers, and how they are often held up by trade discourses as evidence of the growing creative potential of the videogame medium. By recognizing and legitimizing such gamemakers with awards, talk invites, namedrops, and imitations, the peripheral work of these gamemakers allows those in the dominant positions of the field to make claims to the field's diversity, artistic merit, and cultural significance without having to invest labor or resources toward these accomplishments themselves. As Ruberg (2019, 786) argues, this is effectively an exploitation of queer independent gamemaking labor for the benefit of industrial stakeholders: "Queer indie games are seen as *adding value* to video games—as a medium, an industry, and a culture—by making them more 'diverse.' This, in turn, brings financial rewards to stakeholders other than queer indie game-makers" (emphasis added). The queer independent gamemakers themselves see little financial return for this value they create, continuing to live in highly precarious circumstances reliant on platform visibility, personal networks, and hustling hobbies to scrape out a living.

Ruberg's observations among queer independent gamemakers and the Australian government's showreel I detail above are each emblematic of the ways in which the dominant positions of the videogame field extract social and cultural value from the broader field they simultaneously obscure. We can expand Ruberg's question of who is responsible for making videogames better and who benefits from this betterment to ask, more broadly, who generates the social and cultural value that circulates in the videogame field (constituting its autonomy), and who is most able to accrue and convert these symbolic capitals into economic capital (which then provides material advantages in the field of power).

In trying to answer these questions, some of the limits of Bourdieu's theorizations of field of cultural production come to the fore. As David Hesmondhalgh (2006) notes, Bourdieu builds his theory of cultural fields by focusing almost exclusively on the more autonomous cultural fields of literature, art, and theater while paying only passing attention to more industrialized fields of popular culture such as cinema or journalism. This allows Bourdieu to focus predominately on questions of how social and cultural value are generated and circulated in autonomous cultural fields, but it means we require other lenses to make sense of the currently asymmetric situation facing videogame producers. In Bourdieu's work, the relationship between a field's avant-garde "newcomers" and its "established figures" is primarily formulated as one of direct antagonism where each works to legitimize their own taken position as they (directly or indirectly) disavow all existing position-takings. In such a configuration, a field becomes the struggle between two parties: "those who cannot make their mark without pushing into the past those who have an interest in stopping the clock, eternizing the present stage of things" (Bourdieu 1993, 60). But what we see in the videogame field, and in industrialized cultural fields more broadly, are newcomers making a mark at the field's fringes—winning awards, attracting audiences, appearing in headlines—even as the dominant, most industrialized positions seemingly *do* eternize the present state of things. Despite the rise in legitimacy of more autonomous positions at the videogame field's periphery, heteronomous values that align with larger economic forces persist. The rise of experimental gamemakers using Twine or Bitsy has not dethroned the popularity of first-person shooters or open-world role-playing games. The rise of small independent videogame studios has not weakened the profits of EA,

Activision, or Ubisoft—indeed, a growing independent studio is more likely to be bought by a larger company than they are to dethrone them.

Crucial to transferring symbolic capital into economic capital in industrialized cultural fields, and only passingly considered by Bourdieu (1986, 247), is who owns the means of cultural production and, perhaps more importantly, the means of cultural circulation. Record labels, book publishers, film distributors, and, in the case of videogame production, publishers, platforms, and console manufacturers control access to the field's dominant positions for autonomous and heteronomous creators alike. Fringe videogame makers rely on platforms like Steam and the App Store for circulation (or sacrifice access to audiences by refusing such platforms); they rely on software tools such as Unity and Unreal and GameMaker for production (or sacrifice the ability to make games of a certain scale by refusing such tools). Under the context collapse of intense in/formalization, fringe and dominant videogame makers alike rely on the same discourses, events, and spaces on social media, at conferences and festivals, and in their local communities. They compete for the same government funding programs. We have already seen examples of this throughout this book, such as chapter 3's detailing of how platforms like Steam operate on a model of maximum royalty capture where the more independent developers release their games on the platform, and the more successful they collectively are, the more revenue Steam is able to make. Or, in chapter 6, we saw the anxieties expressed by peripheral gamemakers in terms of the rise of commercial studios working on more "artistic" titles to appeal to government funding programs. We could also consider the "Made with Unity" branding used by Unity where any innovative or experimental videogame created with the Unity game engine can become marketing fodder for Unity to enroll even more producers to its platform ecosystem, further solidifying its position as a central tool in the field (Nicoll and Keogh 2019).¹

Newcomers to the videogame field today typically depend on means of production and circulation they themselves do not own, and so they are unable to push the established positions into obscurity as they claim their own legitimate positions. Instead, their position-taking further enhances the autonomy of the whole field and generates cultural capital not just for themselves but for the dominant positions who are then most able to exchange that cultural capital for economic capital. The newcomers still innovate by necessity of taking a new position, but the position-takings of

the established positions remains undisturbed—indeed they become further entrenched. The newcomers' innovations, their new positions, are by necessity in relation to and reliant on the dominant positions and are thus then exploited by the incumbents of the field for their own capital generation. And so the broader videogame field is tasked with making the videogame industry better while reaping few of the economic rewards themselves. In the videogame field, autonomous producers don't simply produce symbolic capital for themselves but are also exploited for symbolic capital by the dominant in order to sustain the dominants' dominance. Their autonomy remains a circumscribed one.

This situation is similar to how the labor of consumers is exploited by brands to increase their own value. Adam Arvidsson (2005) demonstrates how "the meaning-making activity of consumers [forms] the basis of brand value" (2005, 237). Brands like Coca-Cola, Nintendo, Nike, and Apple are valuable—that is, can generate capital—not just because of the use-values of the commodities they represent but because of the emotions, tastes, aesthetics, and contexts associated with them through the social discourses and activities of consumers. In other words, it is consumers themselves who generate the value of brands. Arvidsson shows how this is a form of surplus-value, the key Marxist concept of how capitalism extracts more value from workers' labor than it pays the worker in return. In Marxist theory, capital is produced, essentially, by paying the worker for less time than the worker spends transferring value from their own embodied labor-power into the commodities that the capitalist then sells on the market. Put differently, the worker's work is split between a period of paid labor (for themselves) and a period of unpaid labor (for the employer) (Marx 2011 [1867], 585). It's this period of unpaid labor that produces the surplus-value that capitalism relies on, and capitalism sustains and grows itself by intensifying and expanding the period of unpaid labor while decreasing the period of paid labor. The unpaid work of consumers in producing "a social relation, a shared meaning, an emotional involvement that was not there before [that] can be understood as the direct basis of [a brand's] economic value" (Arvidsson 2005, 237) thus generates surplus-value for the brand owners—what Arvidsson calls an "ethical surplus" or a "surplus community"—which the brand owners can then translate into economic profit.

For Arvidsson, that the value of brands is produced in part by consumers means that the act of consumption is itself a form of immaterial labor,

Maurizio Lazzarato's (1996, 142) term for how the forms and conditions of communication are continually created and modified, "which in turn acts as the interface that negotiates the relationship between production and consumption":

the "raw material" of immaterial labor is subjectivity and the "ideological" environment in which this subjectivity lives and reproduces. The production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control (for the reproduction of mercantile relationships) and becomes directly productive, because the goal of our postindustrial society is to construct the consumer/communicator—and to construct it as "active." . . . The fact that immaterial labor produces subjectivity and economic value at the same time demonstrates how capitalist production has invaded our lives and has broken down all the oppositions among economy, power, and knowledge. The process of social communication (and its principal content, the production of subjectivity) becomes here directly productive because in a certain way it "produces" production.

The ways in which the unpaid labor of *players* contributes surplus-value to videogame companies has been extensively researched through similar frameworks (Kücklich 2005; Banks and Humphreys 2008; Stanfill 2019). Players that create and distribute mods of popular games (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009), user-generated content makers for games such as *Dreams* or *Mario Maker* (Brock and Johnson 2021), fan activities such as producing walk-throughs or streaming videos or cosplaying at conventions (Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Chia 2019), angry gamer mobs that attack any dissenting voice critiquing the industry (Polansky 2018) are all examples of consumers producing a surplus of symbolic value for commercial videogame companies through unpaid immaterial labor.

Just as commercial videogame companies and platforms have long intermediated and profited from the immaterial labor of their audiences, translating their informal and productive play activities into economic value, they now similarly exploit the labor of the broader range of videogame makers positioned throughout the field. Just as a *Half-Life* modder adds value to *Valve* by producing a mod, a *Roblox* player adds value to *Roblox* Corporation by producing a new game for other *Roblox* players,² or an *Overwatch* fan adds value to Blizzard by cosplaying as their favorite character, independent gamemakers add value to Unity by using the game engine for their next game, to Steam or the App Store by using it as their distribution platform, to the Game Developer Conference (GDC) by presenting a postmortem, to the Independent Games Festival (IGF) awards by being nominated (and perhaps by judging

other nominees), to local governments by applying for a funding program, to large conventions by holding satellite parties or events, to other game studios by experimenting with new ideas that prove to be financially viable (or not) and which can then be imitated (or avoided).³ Throughout this book we've seen concrete examples. In chapters 2 and 3, the Australian field's recovery following the crash in the early 2010s was driven by communities and scenes of noncommercial gamemakers, whose artistic and entrepreneurial work provided a pathway forward for an industry of gamemakers now required to "go indie." In chapter 4, the vast range of reasons students undertake videogame production education are filtered, ultimately, into an enlarged talent pool to be tapped as required by the needs of commercial companies. In chapter 5, embedded gamemakers selectively relied on the creative and artistic reputation of videogames as an autonomous field to pitch their skills for marketing and education firms. In chapter 6, most literally, we saw how the growth of local companies are built on and formalized through the collective skills and knowledge of local communities and scenes.

Importantly, this isn't just causal cases of one subjugated position producing surplus economic value for one dominant position, such as when Steam directly accumulates 30 percent of a gamemaker's every sale through the platform. Rather, more nebulously, gamemakers throughout the field, paid or unpaid, through their gamemaking labor, enhance the value of the brand—the autonomy—of the videogame field as a whole. They ensure particular emotions, tastes, aesthetics, and contexts are associated with videogames generally and with the dominant positions directly (such as Unity, Unreal, Steam, the IGF, the Australian videogame industry). In other words, they increase the total amount of cultural and social value generated by and circulating around the videogame field. As the autonomy of the field is increased by those who have no choice but to strive for autonomy, the fact that they remain tied to the dominant positions through the means of cultural production and circulation means those dominant positions aren't disavowed by this rise in autonomy. Instead they are themselves buoyed and able to exploit the associated cultural capital without having to show a disinterest in economic interests themselves.

Gamemakers in marginal positions produce surplus cultural value for the dominant agents in the field who are then able to turn that cultural value into more cultural value (that is, use it as cultural capital) and then to exchange that cultural capital for their own economic capital. For instance,

Unity strives to make a profit but provides access to its game engine for free. It makes surplus economic value in royalties of successful projects and sales on its asset store, and through the collection and commodification of user data. By also allowing all sorts of gamemakers to use the engine for free, Unity is then able to boast about what Unity is capable of producing, and of its ubiquity in the field broadly, to then enroll even more users and increases its centralization even further. The marginal newcomers change the shape of the field (i.e., what capitals are flowing, where, and how). But this doesn't push the existing positions back in history because they continue to control the means of cultural production and distribution that the new positions are subservient to. The autonomous gamemaking activity of the fringes produces a resource the dominant positions extract to reproduce their dominance of the field in its new shape—to make videogames “better” for themselves.

Organizing the Disorganized

In *Developer's Dilemma* (2014), Casey O'Donnell outlines the aggressive methods of surveillance and control that dominant videogame companies have long used to sustain their own dominance and to police the borders of legitimate videogame production. O'Donnell describes legal, material, and discursive strategies taken by companies since the 1980s to control the means of videogame production, including expansive patents, lock-and-key hardware systems, nondisclosure agreements, geographically distributed teams unsure of who has access to what information, and an enthusiast press functioning first and foremost as a branch of the marketing department—sometimes literally. For O'Donnell, this system of control and the secrecy it enforces creates the titular developer's dilemma that, just like the prisoner's dilemma that it draws influence from, is an atmosphere where individual gamemakers are encouraged to keep their head down and look out for themselves and, consequentially, are less likely to work collectively toward fairer work conditions. It's these same conditions that I've argued contributed to the aggressive formalization of videogame production, and which narrowed how the videogame field has been imagined as a space of possibles to only those positions that are economically productive.

The system of control that O'Donnell maps is the one by which, in a Bourdieusian framing, the dominant positions of the videogame field sustain their dominance by striving to present themselves as the full extent of the

field, delegitimizing any position they are unable to directly control or exploit. But the systems of control have transformed in the years since O'Donnell undertook his study. The period of aggressive formalization has given way to a period of intense in/formalization as platform logics of both distribution (Steam, the App Store, the PlayStation Store) and production (Unity, Unreal, Roblox) have restructured videogame production labor. As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, and as is increasingly prevalent throughout a number of gified sectors, the workers that videogame companies rely on to generate their profit are increasingly not employees. Platform holders, publishers, and toolmakers no longer need to provide the obligations of employment—a minimum wage, paid leave, superannuation, and, in the United States, health insurance—to those whose labor generate their value. Increasingly, they don't even have to provide the resources required to produce the videogames they will eventually publish, with independents increasingly funding themselves until near completion before a publisher shows any attention at all. The largest videogame companies increasingly instead provide the platforms through which gamemakers are expected to be self-driven while the company still takes their cut for providing the opportunity. This enrolls videogame makers as active participants in their own heightened exploitation as they take on the lion's share of the creative and financial risks that were once shouldered by an employer or publisher.

As the previous section detailed, this new arrangement of platform-facilitated entrepreneurship where gamemakers are (seemingly) more autonomous and independent does not necessarily actually liberate gamemakers from the control of those in the dominant positions of the field. Rather, it expands the breadth of positions from which those in the dominant positions are able to extract value to anyone enrolled in the network effects (Srnicek 2017) of particular platforms, participating in particular communities, or involved in particular discourses. Mark Banks (2007, 130) builds off Michael Wayne (2003) to understand this business model, rife throughout the cultural industries, as one of “decentralized accumulation”: “whereby large firms may adopt an apparently ‘disintegrated’ and flexible corporate structure, so creating a space for the ‘indies’ and localized subcontracting, but still ultimately [ensuring] (through an elaborate system of relationships, partnerships and contractual arrangements) that profits and power remain firmly in their grasp.” Such decentralized accumulation underpins the intense in/formalization of videogame production and has “disorganized” (Lazzarato 1996)

the labor-power that those who control the means of cultural production and circulation rely on. By opening to new sites of exploitation and capital generation without organizing them, deploying them without employing them, the dominant positions of the videogame field have allowed—have required—the broader videogame field to legitimize, for the field itself to be reshaped and made more autonomous through the consecration of new positions and new tensions. Those the dominant positions previously worked to delegitimize through aggressive formalization now must be legitimized as videogame producers so that their surplus-value can be extracted.

As chapter 3 explored in depth, this provides an alternative, far less optimistic assessment of the seemingly growing ability of videogame makers to obtain autonomy or independence in their work. Decentralized and localized cultural production in the current age remains a “strongly corporate-controlled and conglomerated regime” where “workers are now inveigled into an internationalized division of labor where they can expect to be further exposed to precarious work regimes that suppress wages, disavow unionization and compromise ‘local powers’” (Banks 2007, 130–131). Consequentially, however, as gamemakers move beyond formal employment into more ambiguous and informal relationships with the platforms, publishers, and investors of commercial game production, they gain through the modes of entrepreneurship and independence forced upon them a limited and circumscribed autonomy that was previously unavailable. Whereas the developer’s dilemma of employment in the aggressively formalized videogame field prevented collaboration and communication, and consecrated commercial videogame production as the only legitimate form of videogame production, the disorganized and in/formalized videogame field depends on such activities. The “industry,” the field’s dominant positions, rely on the labor of the rest of the field to generate the cultural capital that secures their dominance. As Banks (2007, 166; original emphasis) notes, this comes with new opportunities as “one of the ‘unintended consequences’ . . . of neo-liberal globalization, with its credo of rationalization, a rolling back of institutions and the promotion of ‘choice’ is to facilitate conditions under which individuals may actually *choose to reject* those individualizing systems that place them at the capricious mercy of the market.” The broader field of gamemaking positions is exploited for their ability to make videogames better, but in their disorganization the potential exists, too, for gamemakers to create a videogame field that looks radically different.

Tentative optimism that the capitalist disorganization of the videogame field could be co-opted into a more equitably structured videogame field is warranted. It's hard to deny that throughout the 2010s, largely thanks to the work and risks taken by its most marginal and precarious positions, the field of videogame production greatly increased in its autonomy, and a broader, more diverse range of dispositions were able to take a legitimate position within the field. The transition from a period of aggressive formalization to one of intense in/formalization allowed a wider range of creators, from a wider range of backgrounds, to produce a wider range of videogames for a wider range of audiences. As the discursive, technological, and legal bottlenecks O'Donnell details became increasingly ineffectual against the growing pervasiveness of high-speed Internet, gamemakers were able to take advantage of digital distribution channels, open-access tools, social media platforms, and alternative media outlets to create alternative spaces of videogame production and circulation to change the space of possibles. The 2010s saw the rise of a range of alternative genres and aesthetics, such as Twine games (Harvey 2014) and walking simulators (Muscat 2018) that directly challenged the field's most hegemonic genres and aesthetics, and led to long overdue debates over what a legitimate or "real" videogame even is (Consalvo and Paul 2019). This decade saw a great increase of feminist and queer game criticism, as well as the violent backlash against it that laid bare videogame culture's misogynistic foundations. We saw the rise of casual and mobile videogame formats, with radically different notions of audience and aesthetics that cared little for the dominant "gamer" aesthetics of the field—formats that are overwhelmingly responsible for the field's dramatic economic growth over the past decade. We have seen, and continue to see, topics of sexuality, gender, race, and ability take an increasingly prevalent position in videogame discourses and research and in videogames themselves.

Most importantly of all, the later years of the 2010s saw for the first time the notorious labor conditions through which the videogame field operates seriously and collectively challenged by gamemakers themselves. Agitation for gameworker unions has persisted since at least 2004 with EA Spouse's public letter decrying conditions at the major publisher. While only 35 percent of game developers were in favor of unionization in 2009 (Legault and Weststar 2015), Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault (2017, 316) analyze data from IGDA's Developer Satisfaction Survey to estimate that in 2017 "66 percent of [game developers] would vote for a union at their studio." Then,

as Weststar and Legault (2019, 851) themselves identify, 2018 became a watershed year for gamework unionization movements. In early 2018, as I was first commencing the interviews for this book, a small group of game-makers (mostly North American) were coming together on a Discord server to strategize ways to disrupt a panel at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) hosted by the explicitly nonunion International Game Developers Association (IGDA) called “Pros, Cons, and Consequences of Unionization for Game Devs.” This grassroots community rapidly became Game Workers Unite (GWU), growing over the following years to become a beacon for gameworker rights across the globe. Responding to GWU’s sudden visibility and prominence at the 2018 GDC conference, GDC added an explicit question to their 2019 State of the Industry survey, asking respondents if they thought workers in the videogame industry should unionize (GDC 2019, 7). The results were striking: 47 percent of respondents replying in the affirmative, another 26 percent saying maybe, and only 16 percent saying they shouldn’t (11 percent were not sure). In the following years, GWU chapters and similar organizations set up around the world. Typically, they start informally but are increasingly formalizing into legally recognized unions, such as GWU Ireland (a branch of the Financial Services Union), IWGB Game Workers in the UK (a branch of the Independent Workers Union), Vodeo Workers United in the US, or, in Australia in early 2022, Game Workers Australia (a division of Professionals Australia).

The story of GWU’s grassroots origins, rapid growth, and occasional failings has been detailed extensively in the journalistic press and, increasingly, by game production scholars (Weststar and Legault 2019; Bulut 2020; Ruffino and Woodcock 2020; Ruffino 2022; Keogh and Abraham 2022). What’s worth reiterating, though, is how GWU emerged out of the activities of marginal gamemaker communities and occupations. Two of GWU’s founders, Emma Kinema and Liz Ryerson, both held peripheral positions in the videogame field—the former a quality assurance tester, the latter an independent writer and artist. Ryerson had long been an outspoken critic of gendered harassment in the industry (see, for example, Ryerson 2014), and Kinema in 2019 organized a walkout at Riot Games over that studio’s response to sexual harassment allegations (Klepek 2019). The current push toward unionization among videogame makers—alongside growing critiques of videogame production labor conditions from journalists and players—not only coincides with but has been instigated by a diversification of just who

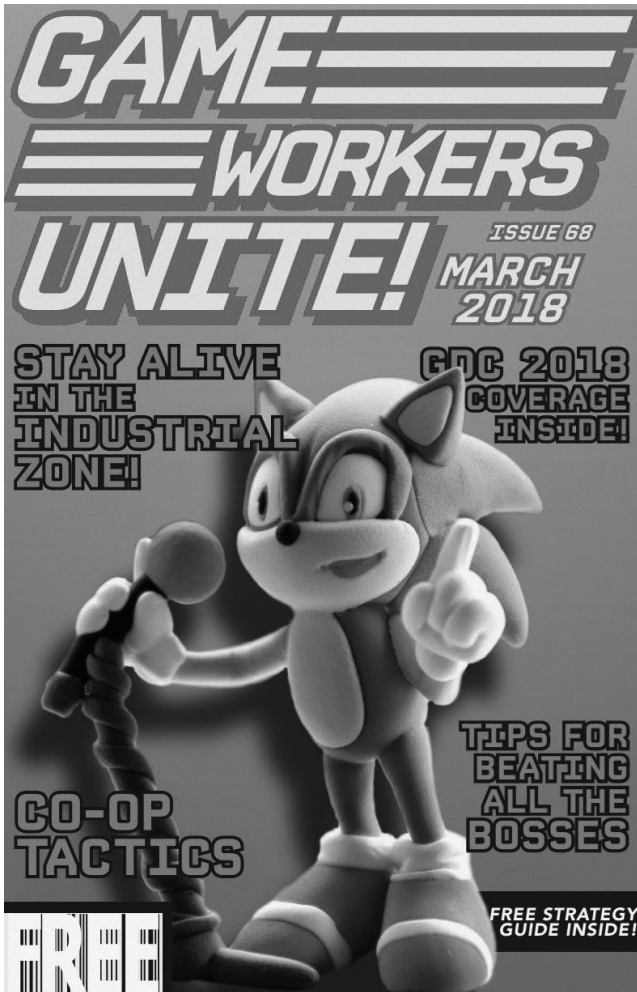


Figure 7.1

The cover of the GWU *Game Workers Unite* zine distributed at GDC 2018.

is visible and has the authority to speak as a legitimate gamemaker positioned within the field. While the young middle-class men who have long dominated videogame production have been extensively critiqued for being highly apolitical about their work, considering it an individual passion rather than collective labor (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Peticca-Harris, Weststar, and McKenna 2015), the growing number of visible feminist and queer gamemakers, such as those that cofounded GWU, are particularly

outspoken about videogame production working conditions and the need for unionization. Once again, just as was the case when EA Spouse and the subsequent letters from spouses of gameworkers at other studios exposed poor conditions across videogame companies in the mid-2000s, it is those outside the dominant positions of the field, those who are increasingly legitimized by the field's decentralized accumulation, that are most vocally agitating and advocating for alternative approaches to videogame production work. The rise in gameworkers agitating for better conditions and pay at the same time as a broader range of gamemakers are legitimized in the field points to how the shifting business models that strive to exploit those disorganized, unemployed, entrepreneurial, informal videogame makers for the generation of surplus-value (both economic and cultural) also provide those gamemakers, in acknowledging them, a radical potential to influence and alter the shape of the field.

While I never explicitly asked the gamemakers I interviewed for their views on unionization and collective action more broadly, its ubiquity in videogame production discourses at the time of my interviews from 2018 to 2020 means gamemakers regularly brought it up themselves, most often in the context of the daily challenges of gamemaking and future career prospects. Cheese, a 36-year-old solo developer in Launceston, Tasmania, bluntly claimed that “if we could find a way to have some kind of French Revolution where we got rid of those people at the top and then more equally distributed [the resources of videogame production] around, then I think maybe that would be better.” In the previous chapter we heard from Ben Kerslake, who worked in a two-person remote team in Melbourne. Kerslake identifies himself as “aggressively anti-crunch” and “very much a proponent of unionization” because of his previous experiences working in both large game and tech companies. Kerslake was skeptical that a “traditional union” for gamemakers would ever be formed in Australia but nonetheless insists that “corporate has a lot of power” and that gamemakers need to be educated “as to their value and their negotiating power.” Leena van Deventer, also in Melbourne, when discussing the ways in which videogame production culture is “hostile to women, hostile to mothers, and to carers and parents in general” insisted that “we’ve got to unionize, collectively organize against this bullshit.” Other developers directly lay the blame for the challenges of their current situation at the feet of capitalism. Tania Walker, a contract artist in Hobart, noted that her work is precarious and unpredictable, and that

“obviously capitalism is to blame. If we had universal basic income where at least no matter what else was happening I’d know I can pay my rent, I can buy some food this week, that would be a game changer. You could do your passionate work and you know you’re not going to starve.” Likewise, we can think back to Leigh Harris in chapter 3 referencing Marx when he noted the importance of gamemakers owning the means of production.

There is a paradox here that those disorganized videogame makers who are most exploited by the decentralized accumulation model of platformized videogame production are also those who can most confidently and vocally decry work conditions and power imbalances in the field and be most explicitly pro-unionization. As they are not employees, they have no boss who can punish them for advocating for unionization. However, they are also those for whom formal workplace unionization and traditional shopfloor organizing is least likely to improve conditions. After all, as they are not employees, they have no boss to unionize *against*. Tanya X. Short, in Montreal, articulated this contradiction explicitly. Short is the cofounder and codirector of commercial indie game studio Kitfox. During an extensive discussion on endemic crunch and burnout among gamemakers, Short insisted that “I very strongly think people need to unionize as soon as possible” but also added the caveat that “I can’t do that because I’m a business owner.” Further into the discussion, Short complicated the situation even further:

Honestly, unions will never be very effective in the indie space. It’s too ragtag. There’ll never be a fist of unionists crushing [our studio]. So it’s a safe place for me to be like, “Oh, yeah, unions are great.” But I feel if you have the privilege to be able to say that . . . because I feel safe saying things that [people who work in triple-A studios] don’t feel safe saying, I feel like I have to. I have to be pro-union loudly.

Thus, many “disorganized” independent gamemakers feel it is their responsibility to be vocal about unionization explicitly because they can afford to be. They have no employers threatening to fire them if they discuss collective action or speak out publicly about work conditions. Yet, the same lack of large-scale formal employers means that the traditional union structures independent gamemakers are so vocal about are unlikely to improve their own conditions—indeed, their own mode of entrepreneurial and platform-dependent work has been directly shaped by capitalism as a means of destroying traditional collective power.

Those precarious gamemakers that are the majority of positions in the field and who are most capable of being vocal for unionization have

little sense of how their desire for political change can be translated into meaningful collective power. The interviewees and survey respondents who brought up the importance of unionization or collective power more generally struggled to articulate how it could become a reality, especially for those working in small teams or as contractors. Cheese caveated his revolutionary calls by noting that “I don’t know what I can do as an independent developer who does freelance contract work. I have no skin in that game, but I’m very happy to cheer from the sidelines.” Van Deventer, despite her insistence of the importance of unionization, acknowledges that actually unionizing independent gamemakers is challenging when “there’s no one to unionize against, when there’s no bosses.” On the other hand, Ian MacLarty, a solo developer in Melbourne, despite being “kind of curious to see what happens with the union stuff,” was not sure where he would fit in such a union himself as he sometimes hires contractors on his games and is thus, technically, an employer. Likewise, Paolo Ruffino and Jamie Woodcock’s (2020; see also Ruffino 2022) research with IWGB Game Workers in the UK details the challenges that union had with a rule that only employees, not employers, could become union members. This failed to account for the realities of intensely in/formal gamework where the same gamemaker may simultaneously be both an employer and a contract employee at the same time. It’s hard to unionize when there are no bosses, and it’s harder still to unionize when *everyone* might be a boss for a time.

The individualizing and competitive nature of contemporary, platform-dependent videogame work, in its exploitation and disorganization, has dormant within it the possibility of becoming differently organized gamework, but it requires gameworkers to imagine alternative modes of collective action that can complement and enhance the traditional shopfloor organizing of single workplaces. Gamemakers themselves had a few suggestions for how a more equitable videogame field could be achieved for its workers. Most suggestions relied on the idea of grassroots change. For instance, one gamemaker I’ve decided to keep anonymous lives in regional Australia and works remotely into a large North American triple-A studio. For this gamemaker, the fact that videogame production is a cultural field in which producers are primarily motivated “because they love making games,” rather than solely a desire to make money, means it is easier to imagine scenarios where commercially successful gamemakers use their resources to help bring up others:

I think the best hope is that someone is feeling grateful and generous enough that they incorporate it into their studio and they say, “Well, my studio is going to create open-source software. We’re going to have this crib and it’s going to form the basis of a game developers union.”

Originally, this gamemaker admits, they thought disruptive Silicon Valley start-ups would achieve such a situation, “but Silicon Valley is so capitalist.” Yet, they remain optimistic that the noneconomic drivers of autonomous gamemakers may allow such a situation to emerge. Some scholars might cautiously agree. Mark Banks (2007, 124), for instance, argues that while decentralized accumulation accelerates individualization and precarity, for autonomy-desiring cultural workers it “can also lead to enhanced opportunities for reflexive critical judgement, and the development of alternative forms of economizing. When coupled to deep-rooted aesthetic impulses and hard-to-destroy (moral) desires for social re-embedding, this can prove a powerful impetus toward economic diversity and remoralization.”

Some commercial independent gamemakers are already making inroads in this area. In late 2021, the workers of Vodeo Workers United became the first certified game developers union in North America with explicit and voluntary support from the studio’s founder, Asher Vollmer, himself an independent gamemaker (Kilkenny 2021). Short, in Montreal, details how her studio at the time of our interview paid all workers the same rate, and that while this was likely to change in the near future once they release their next game, begin generating more revenue, and hiring more juniors, Short wanted to introduce “a cap that’s like ‘nobody can be paid more than five times more than anyone else’. . . . So we’re in the process of figuring out how to determine all that.” Short’s studio Kitfox shares an office space with another independent studio, KO_OP, which true to their name experiments with a cooperative studio structure. As KO_OP co-founder Saleem Dabbous explained to *Games Industry*:

In our studio, our business decisions are a flat hierarchy. We’re fully transparent with all of our decision making; people vote about what we do. But we also have systems and rules in place that prioritize people’s experience and reaching consensus. It’s not unanimous; it’s about consensus. There are rules requiring a quorum in meetings to decide on studio business, rules about what percentage of a quorum needs to agree for motions to be passed, and importantly, rules to ensure meetings don’t stretch on endlessly. There are designated project leads and they ultimately get to make the final calls in their discipline. (Quoted in Sinclair 2020)

KO_OP is not the only videogame studio cooperative, and the idea is being experimented with by several small-scale teams, such as the Glory Society in the US, and Motion Twin in France (Grayson 2018; McCarthy 2019). While precarity and exploitation remain as rife at the independent scale of videogame production as at the blockbuster scale, now that those that would have formally been employees are now developing their own teams and businesses, they have the opportunity to build those businesses in more equitable ways.

While such experiments within discrete workspaces are constructive pushbacks to videogame production work's endemic labor issues, they remain too concentrated to demand field-wide change or any sort of meaningful resistance to the dominant positions of the field. Indeed, worker co-operatives have faced criticism for accepting, rather than challenging, the normative logic of the market (Sandoval 2019). Field-wide change would require a more radical and unified approach—one that neither gamemakers, unionists, nor researchers are yet to fully formalize. Ultimately, a collective response that organizes the videogame field's disorganized workers would have to identify and target the field's dominant exploiters, which increasingly are not the individual gamemaker's employer but the digital platforms that hobbyists, indies, employees, and employers alike depend on and produce value for. As argued by MacLarty explicitly, in lieu of formal employers it is the platform holders who control the means of production and circulation of videogame products that collective energy ought to be directed at:

The platform holders have so much power. It's almost like they're our employers, right? . . . They're the ones that run it [the videogame field] in a sense. But I don't know how you'd get any power over them because they're global. There is no way I can make a living just selling my games on my website. I need a platform that's kind of like a storefront.

In this sense, and as Jamie Woodcock has argued (2021), gamemakers and their allies would do well to look toward alternative, nascent modes of collective action taking place elsewhere in the gig economy, such as among delivery drivers (Cant 2019) and temp workers in the software industries (Brophy 2006), where capital has also successfully disconnected itself from the traditional employment contract.

Ian Thomas MacDonald (2018, 18) goes so far as to argue that “the prevailing model of firm-centered collective bargaining is a dead letter when lead firms which derive most of the profits of production have separated themselves institutionally from the firms that actually oversee the labor

process” and insists we need “more ambitious labor strategies.” It is too late, MacDonald argues, for unions to simply “put the genie back in the bottle” and “re-create the standard employment relation.” Indeed, returning to “how things used to be” under the traditional wage contract should probably not be the goal of precarious workers generally when one remembers that such a contract only ever benefited narrow demographics of workers anyway. This is especially true for videogame workers that, despite the broad range of endemic problems and widespread capitalist exploitation, have also arguably never been as organized as they are now. As Greig de Peuter (2014, 276) argues, precarious labor politics, especially among cultural workers, needs to “go beyond opposing precarity . . . to go a step further to propose and experiment with political-economic infrastructures of cultural creativity that produce an alternative to the dominant social relations of production.” This would require not an obliteration of the platform models that underpin contemporary capitalism and which empower a broader range of videogame producers than ever before (so as to better exploit them), but broader social changes such as a universal basic income, accessible health care and education, *and* adequate regulation of platform business models that increase the profit share and protections of those who generate the value.

Of course, addressing the videogame field’s power imbalances and inequalities still requires the workers of the largest companies to organize their labor-power through the modes that have traditionally worked for such large workplaces. But unionization of the largest companies alone is insufficient without strategies that address precarity and exploitation across the entire field—and, indeed, had previously failed to emerge *until* the broader field began taking action. Perhaps what is most exciting about the current state of the intensely in/formalized videogame field is that through a growing awareness and articulation of the labor issues and power imbalances of the field, videogame makers are increasingly discussing and beginning to consider alternatives to the dominant models of both exploitation and resistance. While we have yet to see any one strategy emerge to successfully challenge the dominance of the videogame field’s major employers and platform capitalists, that videogame makers with legitimized positions in the field feel increasingly empowered to explicitly discuss unionism, capitalism, labor, neoliberalism, exploitation, and Marxism among their peers, in the press, and at the field’s most prestigious events justifies a cautious optimism for even the most critical cultural theorists.

Conclusion

The videogame industry as it is popularly imagined—as the discrete, exclusive site where legitimate videogames are produced—cannot exist without the labor of a broader field of disavowed producers and the cultural, symbolic, and economic value they generate. Those companies, platforms, and employers that situate themselves as the entire field of videogame production are but its most dominant, most consecrated positions. Videogames are made *beyond* these positions by artists, by amateurs, by students, by hobbyists, by independents, by contractors. Videogames are made *before* these positions secure their dominance in specific local contexts, commercializing and industrializing years after hobbyists and designers and players first began producing videogames as culturally and socially meaningful artifacts. And, as this final chapter has strived to show, videogames are made *beneath* these positions as the foundations, as the raw materials of skill, taste, and innovation that the dominant positions rely on for their ongoing dominance, extracting economic and cultural value from the risks, innovations, experimentations, and advocacy of the field's multitudes. The dominant positions of the videogame field no longer merely obscure and delegitimize all other positions in the field. Through the rise of platformization and independent modes of production, the multitudes of the field are increasingly recognized and legitimized by the dominant positions of the field—but currently only in a circumscribed manner that reinforces rather than challenges the status quo of the field.

But with this peripheral legitimization and disorganizing of labor that are prerequisites of platform capitalism's distributed accumulation, new, slim opportunities exist for imagining alternative models and more equitable structures of videogame production. While traditional worker solidarity methods have historically been dead in the water among gameworkers, the current moment is as exciting as it is dire. It is no coincidence that a growing push for unionization; the experimentation with alternative modes and hierarchies of gamework; and the more vocal debates of labor, diversity, inclusion, and inequality happening within gamemaking discourses has grown alongside this disorganization. While workplace fragmentation, precarization, and individualization have been extensively critiqued for weakening traditional labor power's ability to unionize and demand better conditions and pay, for gameworkers it has also weakened the ability of

managers to stop gameworkers from discussing collective issues and imagining alternative arrangements. While the situation remains grim for most gamemakers, that many are developing a collective political consciousness and beginning to conceptualize potential alternative modes of resisting platform power is worthy of hope and, more importantly, support.

Ultimately, however, effective resistance won't occur in the videogame field alone. Rather, gameworkers and those who research them need to connect and build solidarity with broader movements across society that are working to resist the worst excesses of neoliberalism and precaritization. Broader, more equitable societal changes such as a universal basic income, housing rights, and accessible health care will do more to alleviate the precarious conditions of most gamemakers than any field-specific changes could hope to achieve.

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The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist

Why We Should Think Beyond Commercial Game Production

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