

# Strategies of anonymity in Game Workers Unite UK

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## Keywords

Labour union; production studies; anonymity; individualization; videogame industry

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings and observations collected while researching the nascent labour union Game Workers Unite UK (GWU UK). GWU UK was officially founded in January 2019 and is the first official national branch of the global group Game Workers Unite. GWU UK presents itself as ‘a worker-led, democratic organisation that represents and advocates for UK game workers' rights’ (GWU UK 2019). The investigator has participated at the regional meetings of the union in the London area in 2018 and 2019, and engaged with 5 key members of the board throughout the same period by carrying a series of unstructured interviews. The analysis has also included the official documentation produced by GWU UK, their social media online presence, and the material published on internal channels of communication such as Discord and the management tool Trello.

The paper articulates and contextualizes the key findings of this initial period of research. It argues that one of the major novelties of the organization consists in the techniques provided to guarantee the opacity of the worker’s identity, from the moment they join the union and during negotiations with employers. The invisibility of the member’s identity determines the online communication of the union, its references to success case studies and use of photographic material: those involved in the union are kept anonymous to the public, and their names are never mentioned or represented in social media communication. The total number of members is also kept secret from public scrutiny, as it could be used to delegitimize the union and its organized actions.

On the other hand, members of the board at GWU UK keep a position of visibility on social media and in representing the union and its participants in public venues. This is necessary to ‘normalise’, as one interviewee said, the promotion the union in public contexts and negotiate with legal representatives during disputes. As one of the interviewees described it, GWU UK acts as a ‘cover’ or ‘mask’ for the game worker, bargaining the visibility of the board member for the protection of its members. Such a strategy brings high risks for those who are involved in the organization. A risk that has materialized in October 2019 when GWU UK leading organizer Austin Kelmore was fired from the independent game company ustwo.

The choice of keeping workers invisible is pragmatic and consistent with the laws that regulate labour unions in the United Kingdom. However, they also require *ad hoc* preparation. More importantly, these strategies highlight a significant shift in the perception of the game worker. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) welcomed the possibilities offered by online distribution channels and freely available game

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development software as potentially liberating tools of expression. More than a decade after the publication of *Games of Empire*, these technological and social changes have brought game developers to continuously appear in first person and be overtly-visible at the numerous contexts of promotion of their work, such as festivals and workshops (Parker et al. 2017). The emergence of social media has incentivized practices of self-promotion and self-branding across all creative sectors (Gregg 2011), and the game industry has been at the forefront of these changes. In the UK context, a growing majority of projects are self-funded and independent of a publisher (UKIE 2018). Such a condition brings many to expose their work in progress on crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter, where they are often incentivized to present their project as the outcome of their personal creativity. Throughout the funding process the game maker is expected to promote his or her work through social media such as Twitter, and continuously confront the crowd of potential consumers and funders (Tyni 2017). Such a hyper-individualised dynamic of production has eroded the possibility of presenting oneself as a company or collective, as developers are often expected to appear with their real name (Ruffino 2015). The expectation to appear in first person has brought many game developers to high levels of social and psychological pressure, that becomes even more significant when being self-employed and the sole responsible for the success or failure of a project. These conditions of labour are suffered mostly by those belonging to groups that are more frequently marginalized in the videogame industry (Harvey and Fisher 2014; Kerr 2017; Quinn 2017).

Moreover, the current dynamics have eroded the possibility of denouncing unfair and exploitative conditions of labour when employed in larger companies. Ustwo, for instance, still includes Austin Kelmore in their ‘Staff’ page (ustwo 2019) and, in line with the expectation of knowing who is involved in the making of an independent game, the webpage still includes his profile picture. The attention towards game workers’ identity has a long tradition and was epitomized in 1983 by the ‘We see farther’ campaign by Electronic Arts, which displayed names and photos of the leading game ‘artists’ working at the company. In 2004, the ‘EA Spouse’ blog post denounced the exploitative regimes of labour at Electronic Arts by regaining a position of partial opacity and anonymity. GWU UK can be seen as re-establishing those conditions in a context dominated by online communication, where the visibility and profiling of users is entangled with the social and technical functioning of the new platform economy (Lovink 2011; Srnicek 2017).

The paper concludes that GWU UK represents a significant change in how game workers perceive their own role within the game industry. It is symptomatic of a renewed attention towards the dynamics of inclusivity that are inherent in what was previously perceived as a ‘passion-driven’ industry, and of a growing skepticism towards the individualism that is often predicated as being a requirement of creative expression (O’Donnell 2014; McRobbie 2016; Harvey and Shepherd 2017). It also contributes to ongoing debates around creative labour in the contemporary digital industries by introducing novel strategies of collective organization (Woodcock 2019; Weststar and Legault 2019).

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