

If You Don't Like the Game, Change the Rules: Unions and Co-operatives in the Canadian Game Industry

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Keywords

game industry, labour, unions, worker co-operatives, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The game industry has become infamous for enforcing untenable hours (i.e. crunch), relentlessly churning through employees, and fostering toxic work cultures that are particularly damaging to marginalised creators. Despite these well-known concerns, game developers are often hesitant to form unions or experiment with alternative labour structures such as worker co-operatives¹. In this presentation for the Digital Games Research Conference 2023, we will discuss the preliminary findings from our research project: *If You Don't Like the Game, Change the Rules: Alternative Modes of Videogame Production*. This study explores the current state of unions and worker co-operatives in the Canadian game industry while dissecting the systemic and attitudinal factors that encourage (or discourage) the pursuit of these labour structures. Our presentation will synthesise 25 interviews with co-operative worker-owners, union members, and labour experts and surveys completed by 50 employees at Canadian game studios. Our results point to an ongoing dispositional shift in which game workers have become increasingly aware of industry labour issues and more open to forming unions and co-operatives.

Videogame labour issues have long been a part of informal discussions among industry professionals but have only recently received sustained journalistic and scholarly attention. Accounts from popular media outlets ranging from Polygon (Good 2018) to Time Magazine (Semuels 2019) have brought a number of controversies to the forefront—predominantly crunch time and hostile work conditions for marginalised creators—but have typically characterised such scandals as isolated incidents by bad actors. Similarly, early academic studies about games labour predominantly focused on documenting labour practices (O'Donnell 2012) and categorising detrimental trends (Dyer-Witford and Peuter 2006). More recently, however, there has been a growing focus on analysing local efforts and strategies to shift existing labour paradigms: Ruffino and Woodcock outline the efforts of Game Workers Unite in establishing unions across the United Kingdom (2021), highlighting the lack of solidarity between highly individualised game workers. Keogh and

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

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Abraham analyse the challenges inherent to organising labour in the fragmented Australian game industry (2022), providing an invaluable prelude to the industry's unionisation late in 2022. Finally, Cote and Harris analyse the possibility of disrupting industry discourses that normalise the idea of crunch time (2021), pointing toward the tacit acceptance of poor working practices in the industry. All these scholars both investigate discrete organisational efforts and speculate on the future of games labour.

While labour-focused academic studies are growing in prevalence, there is a dearth of research grounded in the Canadian context. Although many of the biggest game employers in the country are American firms, they cannot be simply reduced to satellite offices or extensions of international entities. After collecting our interview and survey data from Canadian game developers, we coded our findings using a variation of grounded theory analysis (Charmaz 2001). Leveraging our interview questions as a thematic starting point, we sorted participant answers into overarching categories that summarise common sentiments and offer insight on union organisation and worker co-operative formation in Canada. First, while there have been a few unionisation success stories among small-to-mid-sized studios, many AAA workers believe that unionisation efforts are out of reach due to a lack of solidarity within their enormous workforce. As Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault (2019) have previously documented, although union enthusiasm has grown in recent decades many workers are still reluctant to form a union, and we posit that the stratification of roles within game companies and the transience of labour contribute greatly to this. Well-paid developers may not empathise with the needs of precarious QA workers or, alternatively, would rather take up new jobs than try to reform their current workplaces. Second, while worker co-operatives are growing more appealing to game industry workers, there are still many challenges related to funding and administration. Many of these challenges are inherent to any small business, but our participants expressed that accessing provincial and federal grants was extremely difficult due to their failure to include co-operatives as a viable applicant category. The worker-owner structure also proves antithetical to the interests of private investors who desire a controlling stake in a company, cutting off another common source of funding for game start-ups. Finally, hearkening back to Angela McRobbie's call for "a renewal of radical social enterprise and co-operatives" (2011, 3), many of our participants are well-educated and vocal about the pratfalls of the creative industry, and view co-operatives as a potential method of fostering inclusion, creativity, and sustainability within the game industry at-large. Emerging from freelance, indie, and AAA spaces, co-operative founders are painfully aware of the difficulties in reconciling sustainable production practices with industry realities (Whitson 2018). While it is still early days for such initiatives, our research points toward an increased momentum towards both unions and worker co-operatives, despite the aforementioned setbacks.

While by no means a comprehensive chronicling of labour in the Canadian game industry, our presentation provides a snapshot of union mobilisation and worker co-operatives at a pivotal juncture. With two studios unionising this calendar year, and more than half a dozen co-operatives incorporating (or working towards incorporation), these labour structures may soon rise to greater prominence in the Canadian game industry.

ENDNOTES

¹Worker co-operatives are businesses that are owned and democratically controlled by all their members. They are designed to provide benefits not just to the founding members but also to all future worker-owners. Although co-operatives differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, they are typically focused on sustainability for all members rather than creating profit for a small group of owners and/or investors.

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