Developer dialogues: A study of videogame creators to understand the potential for industry self-regulation of monetization

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INTRODUCTION
Videogames have a history of being subject to moral criticism and regulatory scrutiny. Currently, debates on the ethicality and legality of videogames seem oriented towards microtransactions, and with that the so-called 'gamblification' of videogames (Brock & Johnson, 2020). Loot boxes – defined as virtual items containing randomized rewards that can be paid for with real money – are a prominent example of this. In an effort to protect (underage) players from harm, both academia and policymakers have argued for industry-led protections (King & Delfabbro, 2019; McCaffrey, 2019; Gov.uk, 2022; Lovells, 2022), mobilizing "the industry's creativity, innovation and technical expertise" (Gov.uk, 2022).

In mobilizing the industry's creativity, innovation and technical expertise to protect consumers from the potential harm caused by loot boxes, we argue that its moral sensitivity and capacity to reason on the impact of such mechanisms is equally mobilized. Broadly speaking, the shift away from state intervention to more de-centralized and consumer-oriented approaches to protecting players may be seen as a result of the privatization and globalization of media regulation (Azam, 2023). Arguably the most well-known examples of self-regulation in the games industry include the supranational PEGI and ESRB rating agencies, as well as company-level initiatives such as the disclosure of odds for loot boxes (McCaffrey, 2019).

So far, the emphasis has been on informing players and stimulating responsible play over far more restrictive approaches such as banning contested features in games or censoring games altogether. Games are not created in a social, moral or economic vacuum, however, nor are the self-regulatory measures to protect players from harm caused by games (van Roessel, 2022). If the onus is on the industry's many actors to regulate itself, including corporations and

regulatory bodies (see Perks, 2021), we argue that it is of the utmost importance to unpack what unethical means to game creators, as well as the extent of their capability to act on ethical considerations with regard to the monetisation of their work.

Following previous work in the realm of game production studies (e.g., O'Donnell, 2014; Kerr, 2017; Keogh, 2019), we aim to provide an empirical account of creators' viewpoints and experiences. Alha et al. (2014) found that creators of free-to-play games hold a generally favorable view of their products. Karlsen (2021) additionally points out that moral sensibilities as to what constitutes exploitative design are influenced by various contextual aspects, including: genre, the creators' perception of players, and their overall idea of responsibility. Creators of social casino games, for instance, may consider gamblified elements a "dirty secret" under existing gambling laws, allowing them to "do things that would be morally unacceptable" (Reynolds, 2021, p. 15). Conversely, other creators may show little evidence of "dark" intentions (Karlsen, 2021), or express a long-standing commitment to their player base (Dubois & Weststar, 2021).

Attitudes towards microtransactions, gamblification or predatory design cannot be considered as separate from the production context in which they are acted upon. This includes work on organizational culture and strategies, market considerations, and the platformization of videogames (Sotamaa, 2021; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The emergence of the often criticized free-to-play business model, for instance, runs parallel with the fragmentation of worker roles and identities in larger companies (Dubois & Weststar, 2021; Weststar & Dubois, 2022), the growing importance of analytics and data-driven design (Whitson, 2019), and the adoption of complex development software (Whitson, 2018). In light of such social, economic and technological forces, creative and moral agency are increasingly negotiated, making it "easy for best practices to erode" (Holmes et al., 2017).

From the conception of videogames as a product of creators' attitudes and practices, the following general research question (**RQ**) is put forward:

RQ: What are the attitudes and practices of videogame creators with regard to the monetization and self-regulation of their work?

METHODOLOGY
To answer this question, we draw from semi-structured in-depth interviews with videogame creators. To avoid selection bias (i.e., to avoid talking only to people who *want* to talk about what is arguably a sensitive topic), this method of data collection is supplemented by participant observation in which we participate in industry events. These include conferences featuring presentations and networking opportunities among peers, but also general exhibitions and festivals for players and media. Data collection – at the time of writing ongoing – will continue until a point of theoretical saturation is reached.

In-depth interviews enable us to adopt a subjective orientation with a clear focus on understanding human experiences, their circumstances and shared meanings (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Questions span personal values, work culture, business models, used terminology and the self-regulatory treatment of videogames (among others). In addition, we make use of speculative probes and materials (e.g., videogame screenshots or

newspaper articles) to elicit conversation and engage in dialogue about particular ethical implications (Bødker et al., 2022).

A purposive sampling approach was opted for, aiming towards symbolical representativeness using theoretically relevant selection criteria. To account for a variety of viewpoints and experiences, and because "the industry" cannot be understood as a monolithic entity, our sample will consist of current and former creators across a variety of countries, developer roles (design, data analysis, management…), and videogame genres and business models (pay-to-play, free-to-play, advergames…). We also strive to recruit an evenly balanced sample in terms of gender, to ensure the voices of female creators are equally heard in this research.

CONTRIBUTION
We aim to facilitate the development of industry-wide recommendations or design heuristics (e.g., https://ethicalgames.org/), as well as illuminate our understanding of so-called dark design on the basis of what creators consider morally questionable (Zagal et al., 2013; see also Deterding et al., 2020). Ultimately, we seek to move away from moral panics and towards a broader consideration of how various contexts, pressures and constraints may affect the monetization and self-regulation of video games.

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