Creating video games in Barcelona: production field and belonging

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INTRODUCTION

In his book The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist (2023), Brendan Keogh invites us to transcend the idea of the "industry" as the only valid site of video game creation. Instead, he proposes that we think in terms of the *field of production*. This suggestion goes beyond a mere change of nomenclature; it implies understanding video game production with all the theoretical/methodological rigor of Pierre Bourdieu (1993). The advantages of this new perspective are clear: "The videogame field instead exposes a larger, more complex picture of numerous, diffuse sites of videogame production that are obscured when we only consider those positions that fit neatly within "the videogame industry"" (Keogh, 2023, p. 152).

This ongoing research project builds on Keogh's reflection and aims to explore the field of video game production in Barcelona. Specifically, it seeks to understand the meanings and experiences of belonging within an independent video game studio with significant participation from female creators.

VIDEO GAME PRODUCTION FIELD AND BELONGING

In broad terms, a field (champ) is a network of objective relations between agents who compete to acquire and accumulate forms of power—or capital. A defining characteristic of every field is the struggle to establish a dominant definition of an actor (Bourdieu, 1993). In the specific case of the video game production field, what is at stake is the definition of a video game developer or creator (Keogh, 2023). In this field, akin to the field of artistic production, the struggle to define the prototypical subject can be understood through two opposing hierarchical principles: the heteronomous principle (commercial success) and the autonomous principle ("art for art's sake"). Historically, the heteronomous principle has dominated the video game industry; however, in recent years, the emergence of more accessible programming tools, alternative distribution

platforms, and the relative reduction in the cost of creating a video game has led to a process of *in/formalization* within the field (Keogh, 2023).

Nira Yuval-Davis (2016), who introduces the concept of situated intersectionality, invites us to distinguish between the politics of belonging and belonging. The politics of belonging refer to political and/or social projects aimed at determining which individuals or collectives are considered part of a nation—or, in our case, a field. These politics align directly with what Bourdieu (1993) and Keogh (2023) describe as the dominant definition of an actor in a field. In contrast, belonging is linked to the emotions, meanings, and values that individuals experience when they are part of, or on the periphery of, a social space. In the field of video game production, the politics of belonging, alongside the principles of hierarchization, are structured around a prototypical subject with well-defined intersections: a middle-class Caucasian man with a deep passion for video games (Keogh, 2023). The sense of belonging is uniquely personal for each creator; however, queer developers and creators, in general, face limited legitimization within the field, which generates ambivalent emotions and meanings (Ruberg, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

We conducted ethnographic research with the indie production team Frog Studio[1] between May and October of this year. During this period, the first author accompanied the study as it participated in a video game incubator in Barcelona. He attended weekly sprint review meetings and incubator events where the studio showcased the latest iterations of its demo, as well as participating as part of the staff at international events such as Gamescom 2024 and national/local events like IndieDev Day 2024 in Barcelona. During this time, he wrote a field diary and conducted in-depth interviews with the studio's key members: Emma, artist/co-founder; Darren, programmer/co-founder; and Catherine, producer. As of the time of writing this extended summary, we are in the process of analyzing the data.

RESULTS

The video game production sector in Barcelona is *in/formal* (Keogh, 2023). According to the Generalitat de Catalunya (2024) major subsidiary companies such as Bandai Namco Europe, King, Larian Studios, and Ubisoft coexist in the city alongside over 200 independent studios, 92 of which do not meet the fiscal requirements to be recognized as formal companies. In economic terms, only 12% of these companies earn more than €2 million per year, while 60% earn no more than €200,000. As in the case of Australia (Keogh, 2023), the struggle within the sector revolves around the opposing heteronomous and autonomous principles. Independent studios, in particular, seek a balance between creative freedom and economic success. However, this struggle is uneven: the heteronomous principle continues to assert itself, even through state mechanisms. For instance, the opening sentence of the *Llibre Blanc del Video Joc* emphasizes economic factors as the central characteristic of video game creation: "El videojoc català és un motor de creixement economic…" (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2024, p.5) [Catalan video games are a driver of economic growth…]

In addition to these statistical and economic indicators, Keogh (2023) notes that one of the key characteristics of an informal/formalized production is the presence of video game creators who move beyond traditional training in technology and the arts. In our ethnographic study of Frog Studios, we found that the core team exemplifies this trend: Emma has a background as a nurse, Catherine was the owner of a travel agency, and Darren has the closest training to the field, being a computer technician. These "alternative" paths into the field, coupled with the fact that the team had not yet

released its first game under the traditional studio-publisher model, led all members to question their sense of belonging, sometimes expressing anxiety over this feeling of indeterminacy. During an interview, Darren articulated this directly, defining himself as being on the periphery of development. This feeling was shared by Emma and Catherine, with the latter expressing more frustration with the overtly masculinized nature of hegemonic video game production.

CONCLUSIONS.

Video game production in Barcelona is undergoing a process of *in/formalization*, enabling individuals with "non-traditional" backgrounds to enter the field. However, this also creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, where creators—such as Frog Studios—constantly negotiate their sense of belonging, often defining themselves on the periphery and experiencing anxiety.

ENDNOTES

1 Both the name of the study and the names of each participant are pseudonyms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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