Shifting The Meta: Bridging The Gap Between Scholar and Developer Perspectives of the Post-Pandemic Game Industry

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ABSTRACT

With mass layoffs in 2023 and 2024 (20,000 jobs in 18 months), job insecurity is a critical concern for game developers. Given this heightened precarity, investigations into developer working conditions reveal a multitude of issues. These challenges span the areas of industry preparation, employment stability, information sharing, and sources of support. Meanwhile, game journalists insufficiently cover developer concerns. Our proposed study aims to overcome current limitations and provide a deeper understanding of the perspectives and backgrounds of developers pursuing a career in the post-pandemic industry. Our focus will be on how and when game developers learn to craft a career despite difficult working conditions and inform game studies scholarship in a rapidly shifting industry. Conducting formal interviews with participant anonymity will help circumvent the culture of secrecy in the industry, as developers can safely divulge information about their work experiences without fear of jeopardizing future career opportunities.

Keywords

Game Industry, Production Studies, Social Capital, Qualitative Methods

INTRODUCTION

The game industry struggled to bounce back from the comparatively diminished player base after the COVID-19 pandemic (Vuorre et al. 2021), when gaming's boom (Şener et al. 2021) led to high economic projections, over-hiring (Needleman 2024), and ultimately layoffs to recover profits. By June 2024, more industry layoffs had occurred than in the entirety of 2023 (Carpenter 2024), but these were merely an added layer to ongoing systemic issues. These issues (including extensive crunch and poor communication within studios (Brogan 2022; Whitson 2020)) may be topically covered by institutional and enthusiast media, but due in-part to concurrent losses from that industry post-pandemic, they are not covered in a worker-informed or investigative manner. Thus, in the proposed work, we explore how US-based game developers support themselves despite the challenges of the post-pandemic industry. We structure our work upon four themes delineated in related literature: 1) industry preparation, 2) employment stability, 3) information sharing, and 4) sources of support.

RATIONALE

Game Developer Onboarding

New game developer applicants and trainees must accommodate a number of unique cultural norms that are native to the games industry. For instance, while higher education game development programs harness students' passion for playing games to fuel game development learning (Ashton 2010; Keogh and Hardwick 2024), institutional curricula emphasize building employable skills. As such, the games industry presents employability as a "technical problem" that is resolved by students individually fulfilling employer skill requirements (Ashton 2009; Harvey 2019). Ultimately, an emphasis on "superior" skill-set may elicit a false belief in students' capacity to surpass obstacles in industry (Keogh and Hardwick 2024; Harvey 2019).

Outside of institutional learning environments, the cultural norms within cultural or hobbyist game production can reinforce unhealthy work practices, namely *crunch*, which refers to overtime without compensation (Cote and Harris 2021). Passion-driven commitment often encourages crunch for developers who strive for perfection in the work they love. What is more, community events like game jams normalize crunch as a necessary part of the creative process (Borg et al. 2020).

Employment Stability

In addition to cultural norms and expectations for newly onboarding game developers, professional game developers within the industry experience employment instability. Specifically, the focus on creativity and passion (i.e., "doing what you love") among game developer circles may lead to an exploitative "ludic authoritarianism," wherein corporate authorities can constantly shift expectations and craft an environment that exploits a developer's dedication (Bulut 2023). For instance, extensive work due to external factors is seen as "bad" crunch, but forms of intrinsic motivation are interpreted as "good" crunch (Cote and Harris 2023). This rationalization of crunch is reinforced by the notion of a "work family," where developers feel obligated to prioritize their project to satisfy a personal in-group (Peticca-Harris et al. 2015).

This idea of the "work family" does not reflect the high mobility of the US game industry (Peticca-Harris et al. 2015), which demands a heavy reliance on reputation and connections for job placements (LaLonde 2020), and contains scarce union representation. Currently, industry practices align with a "gig economy," focused on temporary roles or skill development over prolonged job security, ultimately adversely impacting employment stability (Peetz 2019). As such, game developers operate as entrepreneurs (Weststar and Legault 2017), advocating for themselves instead of engaging in industry-critical dialogues out of fear of negative repercussions (Ruffino and Woodcock 2021).

Information Sharing

Another area of challenges experienced by game developers in the industry is in a lack of information sharing and transparency. For instance, many studio work practices remain obfuscated due to corporate intervention that disrupts discussions of best practices, such as non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) (O'Donnell 2014). Game developers tend to focus

on technical issues or structural problems when describing their frustrations, to preserve reputation and future opportunities (Whitson 2020).

Beyond inter-developer communication, information can be shared via media. Within "games journalism," there are generally accepted demarcations of institutional journalists, game reviewers, and game critics (Nieborg and Foxman 2023). Across these demarcations, the conflict of interest between some journalists and sponsors discourages critical or realistic coverage of events (Carlson 2009; Perreault and Vos 2020; Prax and Soler 2016). Shutdowns of major institutional games journalism outlets erase credibility and safety in journalism for developers (Stanton and Johnson 2024). As such, maintaining anonymity while remaining investigative through academia may encourage reform.

Community Support

Related to the limitations in information sharing from the industry, game developers face challenges in internal community support. While developers support each other through social media, in-person events, and developer organizations, there are constraints to the effectiveness of these community efforts. In the struggle to maintain financial stability, indie developers seek out offline events to strengthen community and social capital (Freeman et al. 2020). For example, the Game Developers Conference (GDC) serves as both a venue for professional development and community-building, and notably, the 2025 GDC was chosen by the Communication Workers of America as the venue to announce the landmark establishment of the first industry-wide video game union in North America (America 2025).

Despite such instances of developer advocacy, previous work suggests a gap in collective action leadership (Weststar and Legault 2019; Kelly 1998). Specifically, organizations such as the International Game Developers Association hold a conflict of interest of supporting both employers and developers, thus potentially undermining industry reform (Weststar and Legault 2019). The sheer diversity within the "game industry" (Keogh 2023) also can lead to difficulties in jump-starting collective action and advocacy to resolve issues in industry working conditions. For instance, the over-emphasis on a skill-building meritocracy in the games industry may ultimately obfuscate potential issues of mistreatment or even dialogue about such mistreatment. In other words, skill development may be prioritized over discourse about industry working conditions. In fact, mass layoffs are perceived as uncontrollable forces that ultimately undermine collective action (Weststar 2018), further widening the misalignment between developer professional goals and industry targets.

Method

We will conduct 45-minute, semi-structured interviews with 20 American game developers spanning a variety of roles in the industry. Participants will be over 18, currently or recently in the industry, across various spheres of the industry (including indie, AAA, AA, and freelance), working in hybrid, remote, or in-person settings. Developers will be recruited using online game developer groups and existing contacts. Snowball sampling will then increase the participant pool (Cote and Raz 2015). Potential participants will be contacted via email and/or Discord and, after providing informed consent and background information, will be scheduled for interviews. Interviews will be conducted remotely and audio will be recorded and transcribed. Standard measures will be taken to ensure participant privacy and consent.

Researchers will utilize the principles of inductive thematic analysis to draw out themes from the content of the transcripts, focusing on the developer's experience in intersection with the external framework application (Terry et al. 2017).

Conclusion

The forthcoming work acts as a call to action for game studies scholarship. Even for research disengaged from production studies, discussions about games or their communities warrant nuanced understandings of the contexts in which game production occurs. This work will contribute to unpacking the mechanisms that drive unsustainable game industry labor practices following COVID-19 lockdowns, and clarify areas of improvement for future discussion. By focusing on developers' personal narratives, we can bring to light the details often obfuscated from public discourse. Ultimately, the work aims to foster engagement among game studies scholars to recognize and regulate the exploitative disturbances within the games industry.

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