

History and operational mechanisms in the video game industry: the case of the Turin cluster

Nicola Costalunga

Riccardo Fassone

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The video game industry is increasingly embedded in our societies, especially concerning its economic and cultural value. It is often the case that groups of companies, notably of a creative nature, come together within Local Production Systems (LPS), typically in urban contexts (Lazzerati et al. 2008), and favoured by several localisation externalities (Marshall 1920; De Vaan et al. 2012). In this way, it is easier to exploit their technological complementarities (De Propriis et al. 2009), regardless of the specific form taken by this aggregation of companies and institutions. This is even more evident – and necessary – for the video game sector, which highly depends on high-level technical and technological requirements (Aoyama, Izushi 2003). However, many established video game production and development clusters are understudied or virtually unrecognised, and their economic, cultural and historical significance is often ignored. In many cases, this lack of acknowledgement – both for the companies and the institutional and technological environment they exist in – seems to derive from the fact that the cluster is located in a city or area that is somewhat peripheral to the main global hubs of video game development.

The proposed presentation will be based on a study conducted in the city of Turin. In this large city in northwestern Italy, there is a de facto video game cluster composed of a series of actors particularly relevant to the subsistence and growth of the local and national industry. Turin has unique characteristics in the Italian scene: a strategic geographic location provided with the necessary infrastructures for the development of innovative areas of CCI sectors; a network of well-developed public and private training institutions, generating a substantial talent pool; a pre-existing group of small and medium-sized video games developers/companies ready to assist through their informal network; a business accelerator and some University spin-offs dedicated to this specific field. However, at the same time, other issues are present, such as Turin's limited urban size and the sector's narrow economic significance for the city (as is the

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case in the rest of the country, with the partial exception of Milan), or the substantial lack of public and private investors. Lastly, one of the biggest weaknesses is the lack of public recognition of the sector, as the city is still peculiarly tied to its past as the 'Italian city of the automobile' and its Fordist model (Bertacchini 2012).

Another relevant issue is network relations and how necessary they are for developing the Turin game sector. The sector's employees have historically been proactive in maintaining the social and professional networks that uphold the cluster. However, this may have limited the potential for external penetration from institutional and economic actors within and outside the city. This spatially well-defined network becomes fundamental to the existence of a collective creative process dominated by high-level interactions (Drake 2003), even if limited in the number of actors. In this way, sectoral agency and advocacy remain in the hands of a few technical actors, potentially unable to attract substantial external investment. Moreover, the historically relevant local film industry has not created any apparent positive externalities and no useful spill-over effect for any kind of inter-sectoral contamination (Crivello 2009), unlike other relevant cases on the international scene such as Montreal, Los Angeles, Melbourne, etc. (Britton et al. 2009; Darchen, Tremblay 2015; Pilon, Tremblay 2013).

What this work seeks to understand is what were the determining factors in the birth and development of the video games development cluster in Turin, and how the socio-economic-cultural characteristics already present in the city influenced the creation of the peculiarities of this ecosystem. Furthermore, the main functioning mechanisms, strengths and weaknesses will be highlighted with a view to the comparative reproducibility of the cluster, thus attempting to answer the following question: is this cluster such because it is located and has developed in Turin, or could it have developed elsewhere with the same characteristics?

The methodology of this work consists of the study and analysis of primary and secondary data. The direct sources are composed of a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with the main actors belonging to the Turin video game ecosystem (N=25)¹ and institutional documentation created ad-hoc within the cluster. The interview approach is that of 'responsive interviews', adopted to achieve a certain degree of flexibility in interview design by going into the details and direct experiences of the so-called 'conversational partners' (Rubin, Rubin 2012). The aim is to obtain a reconstruction that can reflect the interviewee's 'world' as much as possible, by modifying the question design based on the respondent and the course of the interview. The analysis of the data, on the other hand, adopts the thematic analysis approach (Braun, Clarke 2008), to balance an inductive method with a deductive one based on schemes and analytical grids devised and developed during the research.

This work is part of the Horizon research project "GAME-ER" (Gaming Clusters Across Multiple European Regions), whose goal is to research how video game clusters

¹ The subset of interviewees includes: CEOs of video game development companies of various sizes; employees of development companies in different roles; teachers of private professional schools; university professors; institutional representatives; members of the local acceleration programme committee; two game designers and an editorial producer who live in Turin but also work abroad; members of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA); people of historical relevance for the cluster; people who are mixed figures between the roles mentioned above. Only four women were interviewed (a managing director, a university professor, a founder/employee of a small company, and an executive of the local Chamber of Commerce).

emerge, develop and sustain themselves, with a focus on local and regional clusters located in five European countries (France, Czechia, Portugal, Italy and Scotland). This still work-in-progress study aims to reconstruct the history and dynamics underlying the operational mechanisms and growth factors of Turin's video game production cluster. The intent is also to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of this particular ecosystem, and thus understand the degree to which its competitive advantages can be reproduced. In this way, an attempt is also made to comprehend the clusters' functioning mechanisms and characteristics, which are useful to understand whether it succeeds in exhausting the needs of its workers (based on the so-called creative class and its specific needs (Florida 2022)) and in attracting additional human resources from outside.

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