

“Shut up and let us make the game”

Game developers, preserving games, and the dynamics of corporate governance

Will Butler

Bath Spa University
25C Hamlet Road
London, SE19 2AP
will.butler22@bathspa.ac.uk

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

My ongoing research project explores methods for which live-service videogames can be preserved in cooperation with game developers. The findings of this research will be used to advocate for further cultural inquiry into how live-service games can be preserved and by whom. Concerns around cultural memory and the change, exchange and loss of cultural artefacts is a widely discussed issue in game studies (Monnens et al, 2009; Navarro-Remesal, 2017; Swalwell et al, 2017). The loss of videogames and their history through obsolescence (Newman, 2012) is more critical with live-service videogames which are specifically designed to keep players engaged over the course of a lifecycle with new content and updates. This release cadence requires an appropriately equipped workforce of developers.

The project applies anthropological-adjacent methodologies as established by historical cultural studies practitioners (McAdams, 1996; Reinhartz, 1992) as well as more contemporary studio studies of videogame companies (Frenette et al, 2018). The fieldsite for this research is the live-service developer Jagex based in Cambridge in the UK, the creators of legacy fantasy-MMORPG *RuneScape* (Jagex, 2001) and the revived ‘classic’ version of the game, *Old School RuneScape* (Jagex, 2013). The fieldwork largely concerns interviews conducted with a range of developers ranging in role and seniority.

The interviews conducted with Jagex staffers (and surrounding practitioners such as archivists, Wiki editors and ex-developers) establish a basis for understanding the dynamics between creative professionals and the executive suite in the videogames industry. One of the key obstacles encountered throughout this study is the videogame industry’s secretive nature; a lot of which can be attributed to

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intellectual-property protection measures. Some of the key contexts for this study - for example, a participant's current work project - may be restricted by the non-disclosure agreement I have signed. This project sits at the intersection where a company's commercial interests clash with their willingness in participating in a study of this nature. From my findings, the soft and hard governance of game studios and the ways they impact and constrain game workers will emerge as tangible and documentable.

Workers within the commercial videogame industry have had to compete with "liminal and precarious" employment arrangements (Keogh, 2024:19). Despite the industry's massive growth in the last decade (Ball, 2025), even within larger game studios where stable career development is the established norm, mass redundancies are common and normalised means of consolidating capital for larger entities that own these development studios (Legault and Weststar, 2024). As such, game workers make concessions on their working conditions, pay, and cultural mobility in order to bolster their job security within these massively successful companies (O'Donnell, 2014).

This research project fills a gap in game labour studies by providing on-the-ground and first-hand accounts of how commercial videogame developers view their role within the game history ecosystem. Of those concessions that game workers make, systemic separation from the products of their labour is a key concern to preservationists and game documentarians since game workers are often the most reliable source for game history knowledge we have access to. My research shows the myriad ways game workers are disconnected from their own work: through legal governance such as NDAs, through monetisation models that produce constant updates for the game that superposes previous work, and through company cultures that discourages individual worker empowerment and suffuses credit and ownership toward the company. The reason these forms of disconnection are vital to game historians is that game workers are uniquely positioned to advocate for the preservation of games and the surrounding materials because these are products of their labour.

My initial findings across 15 interviews with members of the Jagex development team - with more interviews scheduled early next year - highlight the disconnect between the working developers and the governance structures of the company's executive class which this paper will explore. One of the more common refrains from developers of RuneScape in particular is that they're content to keep working on the game with as little contact with the executives of the company as possible. This is an interesting dynamic to explore when members of the executive team pull the company into controversy - such as this year's cancellation of Pride events in RuneScape (Mitchell, 2025). The developers position themselves within a field that represents the game and its constituents (its players) rather than representing the company itself. This is further complicated by Jagex's 'JMod' structure where members of staff are given monikers and encouraged to have online personas. This

creates a greater visibility for individual workers relative to other commercial game developments. There are interesting power dynamics at play between the developers as employees of Jagex and developers as lynchpins of the RuneScape community; the community who are ultimately the customers that the executive team answer to. These dynamics are explored within this paper as a means of sharing this pilot study for a new subset of methodology concerned with studio studies and the ways in which worker mobility can impact the preservation of game history.

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