

# Desired but Also Undesired: Immigrant Game Workers in Between the Discourse of Labour Shortage and Anti-Immigration in Finland

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## ABSTRACT

This abstract presents work-in-progress research regarding migrant workers within the Finnish game industry during a pivotal period of immigration policy reform in 2025-2026. In doing so, it reveals the precarious conditions migrant game developers face amid a contradictory political discourse: simultaneously framed as a highly sought-after, specialised workforce while also treated as a replaceable human resource within the production pipeline that increasingly demands precarious labour.

The Finnish game industry has been recording the global success of made-in-Finland game entrepreneurs and studios (e.g., Supercell, Remedy Entertainment). The Finnish game industry is notably multicultural, with English as the industry-wide language. Recent survey data indicates that nearly one-third of the workforce possesses a migrant background (Neogames Finland, 2025); the majority of these individuals are highly skilled senior developers with specialised expertise in game design, programming, arts, and related technical fields. Many also have multiple relocation experiences before arriving in Finland (Park, 2024).

Migrant game industry workers are frequently characterised in political and economic discourse as a highly sought-after, elite workforce (see also Koskela, 2014). Finland's immigration framework until 2025, specifically its open work permit policy, has significantly bolstered the job mobility of game industry workers. This policy has historically enhanced their creative autonomy, as developers could engage in high-risk creative production without jeopardising their own or their family's residency status (for a contrast with closed permit policies, see Rocha et al., 2025). Furthermore, game workers in Finland have generally been shielded by robust labour regulations and the advocacy of professional unions, such as the Game

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Makers of Finland, which claims to be the world's first trade union for people who work in the game industry (Game Makers Finland, 2023). But prior research has revealed that the Finnish game industry's heavy reliance on senior-driven hiring and cultural gatekeeping poses a significant barrier to entry for junior developers, gender minorities, and cultural minorities, thereby hindering their work and social integration (Park, 2024).

In 2025, the Finnish government and its conservative coalition lawmakers enacted a new law to regulate work-based migration to the country. Also known as the "3/6 Month Unemployment Rule", the regulation gave authorities the right to cancel a migrant worker's residence permit, hence a risk of deportation, if they fail to secure new employment within three to six months after becoming unemployed (Ministry of the Interior in Finland, 2025). This is a reversal of Finland's long-established open permit policy, which previously allowed migrant workers to seek new employment until their residence permit expires.

This new immigration law raises concerns across various industry sectors in Finland, particularly those that depend on specialised foreign workers – including the game industry (Keskuskaupakamari, 2024; Neogames Finland, 2023). Industry representatives claimed that three to six months is an extremely short period of time to find a new job in Finland, even for natives, due to the lengthy and complex hiring process in the specialised sectors in Finland (see also Foster et al., 2011; Hora, 2020; Park, 2023). Local game company executives also expressed concern that the new law might harm their businesses, with the potential loss of competitiveness in the highly contested tech labour market in Europe (Morris 2023, Neogames Finland 2023).

In this pivotal moment of immigration reform, it is critical to assess the shifting status of migrant game workers and the resulting impact on their work and lives in Finland. Such an assessment will provide valuable insight into how public policy changes influence game development practices, given the inherently interdisciplinary and precarious nature of digital game production (see also Legault & Weststar, 2024).

From there, this research aims to expand the scholarly understanding of labour within the digital games industry amidst the rise of restrictive immigration policies in developed nations. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: *How is Finland's shifting immigration regulatory landscape impacting the experiences of migrant game industry workers?*

The research is currently in the data collection phase, utilising semi-structured interviews with game developers with migrant backgrounds based in Finland. As of this presentation at DiGRA 2026, 14 interviews have been conducted, each lasting approximately 1 hour. These interviews were conducted in English and Korean and transcribed verbatim by the author with the assistance of automated transcription software<sup>1</sup>.

Initial observations suggest an increase in emotional burden and stress among migrant game workers, both among those affected by the new law (e.g., work permit holders) and those not affected (e.g., permanent residence permit holders). There was also a general consensus among the interviewees that Finland's former immigration policy offered significantly more creative autonomy than those in other

major game industry countries with closed permit policies, such as the USA and Singapore. This sentiment was pronounced among senior developers, whose prior migration experiences enabled them to compare Finnish policies with those of other countries.

Consequently, the recent immigration reform was perceived as a fundamental breakdown of trust in the Finnish authorities, who had once been viewed as a counterforce capable of protecting workers from multinational gaming corporations and their exploitative labour practices. Respondents also expressed deepening concerns that Finland is witnessing a political polarisation. There was also a pervasive anxiety that further restrictive measures remain undisclosed—a sense that ‘we might be next’.

A gap between senior and junior developers was also observed. Senior migrant game developers frequently compared Finnish game industry practices with those of other countries, arguing that Finland’s primary strength lay in its robust public labour policies (e.g., workers’ union, paid leaves). Therefore, they were concerned that dismantling these essential protections could risk eroding Finland’s competitive advantage. Many of them also noted that they would not have relocated to Finland under labour security, given that the Finnish game industry’s expected salaries are often lower than those in other established game industry hubs (e.g., the USA) (see also Game Makers of Finland, 2023). This indicates that the high level of social security served as the primary motivational factor for individuals’ migration to Finland.

Conversely, less-experienced junior developers lacked this comparative perspective, tending instead to focus on immediate domestic concerns, such as Finland’s rising unemployment rate and lack of traineeship opportunities. This is perhaps a result of limited international exposure against which to benchmark the Finnish context. Amidst these challenges, many juniors were working on their indie projects as a tactical means of maintaining their technical skill sets and portfolios.

Senior game developers exhibited greater optimism about international relocation (i.e., exit Finland), given their prior experience with work-based migration and their confidence in their competitive standing in the global job market. However, junior developers were likely to have more concrete ideas about relocation, such as specific wishlists of destinations and timelines. This is likely because their precarious employment conditions make them more vulnerable to the immediate impacts of the new immigration rule, necessitating a more proactive approach to risk mitigation. Furthermore, juniors were typically less tethered to social or familial obligations in Finland—such as a spouse or children—thereby granting them greater flexibility than their senior counterparts.

At DiGRA 2026, I look forward to sharing the initial findings of the research and discussing methodological considerations with our audiences. And potentially seek future collaboration, for example, on cases involving other countries’ immigration rule changes and their impact on the livelihoods and work practices of game development workers, and on the games they create.

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## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> To ensure research integrity and data privacy, the workstation remained disconnected from the internet and all third-party cloud services throughout the transcription process.