

# Balancing In/formality within the Brno Video Game Industry

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Video game production brings together actors at different levels of formalization and professionalization – some of these actors are profit-driven corporations, while others might be hobbyists, volunteers, or cultural intermediaries not directly involved in making games like retailers or festival organizers. These different backgrounds, values, and modes of operation are bound to create frictions and power imbalances, in practice often benefiting the more unscrupulous entities (see Ruberg 2019; Srauy 2019). Following Brendan Keogh's (2019, 2023) work on in/formalization of video game production, this submission addresses how these various approaches to game development co-exist and interact with each other in real locations. Our goal is to unpack the conflicting values of hobbyist and professional communities and provide a grounded and nuanced empirical analysis based on a bigger ongoing research project (GAME-ER: Gaming Clusters Across Multiple European Regions) about the

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video game industry in Brno, Czechia's second largest city with a long industrial tradition. By combining approaches from the fields of economic geography (e.g. Darchen and Tremblay 2015; Johns 2006) and production studies (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021), the submission will connect the various actors (developers, educators, government officials, cultural intermediaries) with critical theory on creative labor.

The submission is based primarily on 32 semi-structured interviews that our team conducted between 2024 and 2025 with Brno-based developers, educators, government representatives, and community organizers and 6 mapping interview sessions. As a secondary, complementary source of data, we draw on a thematic analysis (Ayres 2008) of 89 publicly available documents, including official websites and government reports, about the Brno video game industry. The mapping sessions take inspiration from previous research about production and institutional networks in the Finnish video game industry (Lehtonen et al. 2020, 2022) by combining visualization exercises with ethnographic interviewing methods. The goal is to highlight the relationships between actors, as well as activities such as trade conferences, within a local space of video game production. For this particular submission, they serve to identify the connections between commercial companies, educational institutions, local government offices, cultural intermediaries, as well as individuals and to better understand the interconnectedness of these actors at various levels of formalization and institutionalization.

Previous research on indie and hobbyist video game development suggested that profitability is not a main priority for these game makers (Lipkin 2019; Swalwell 2021). Instead, independent developers often prioritize creative freedom, but passion for game development as a form of self-expression can lead to (self)exploitation and problematic compensatory logics in which wellbeing is sacrificed for an opportunity to "do what one loves" (Chia 2019, 2021; Keogh 2021). Games made under various conditions then often end up competing on the same digital distribution channels, contributing to overcrowded markets and devaluation of labor (Lipkin 2019).

Another layer to these intricate relationships between various modes of video game production, is the area of cultural intermediation, which has been identified as especially crucial for independent video game development, which might otherwise struggle with reaching traditional gatekeepers as well as audiences (Browne and Schram 2021; Cuthbert et al. 2024; Maiuga 2025; Whitson et al. 2021). This labor is often undervalued also due to being seen as feminized, further compounding the labor exploitation present in the video game industry. Whereas employees of video game studios might have a clearer understanding of their labor in relation to formalized job contracts even despite the long history of labor exploitation in the mainstream video game industry (Legault and Weststar 2024), grassroots community work is harder to gauge and quantify. While it might benefit individual developers, it can also help commercial companies, for example, by attracting talent to a location of such active volunteer communities. There is also an important gender dimension to this type of labor

Our findings from Brno highlight the complexity of these issues and dynamics. While local companies like Illusion Softworks produced international hits, e.g. *Hidden & Dangerous* (1999), and presented themselves as professional teams to their Western publishers, the inner workings of these studios were characterized by enthusiast labor, long working hours, and the lack of boundaries between work and private life. This arguably hard-earned tight-knit communal spirit survived further

professionalization throughout the 2000s and 2010s. However, the later community-building efforts, which eventually culminated in the foundation of a local developer association in 2020, came from relative outsiders to mainstream video game production.

The now institutionalized Brno game development community can be, on the one hand, considered formalized as it is officially tied to local companies, universities, high schools, municipal and regional government offices. At the same time, the local developer association's membership structure prioritizes individuals over organizations. Most activities of the association are carried out by individual volunteers and the association's funding comes largely from donations by both individuals and companies. Even at this stage of relative formalization, the representatives of the local community value the informal governance of the local developer association afforded by the lack of membership fees as well as the lack of monetary compensation for community work. For many, the voluntary nature of this labor signals its earnestness. This balancing act of in/formalization, however, often leads to self-exploitation. Furthermore, it also potentially problematizes access of new people to the association, which features many veterans of the 1990s and early 2000s and is dominantly male, as well as the association's sustainability (see Banks and Keogh 2021; Cote and Harris 2023; Whitson et al. 2021). Brno's video game industry thus displays the inherent contradictions between creative leisure and labor (Chia 2019; Keogh 2021), offering empirical evidence on how developer communities try to reconcile these opposing forces.

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