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Organizing in the Game Industry: The Story of Game Workers Unite U.K.

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Part of a poster for Game Workers Unite publicity.

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The videogames industry is often talked about as a “new” or “young” industry. Compared to many existing industries it is, of course, comparatively new. However, the first videogame—the *Nimatron*—was made in 1940 and briefly featured at the World’s Fair. Programmers working for the military were hacking games onto computers in the 1950s; *Spacewar!*, made by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) student Steve Russell, was being distributed across a predecessor of the internet in the 1960s, and arcade games were being launched by companies like Atari in the 1970s. Even if the latter date is the point from which videogames were really commercialized, the earlier examples demonstrate that the industry originated almost half a century ago. Following a brief overview of the videogames industry, this article focuses on workplace issues that have spurred organizing efforts among some workers in the industry.

In 2018, the global videogames market value was \$134.9 billion, an increase of +10 percent from the previous year. One of the big game releases in 2018, *Red Dead Redemption II*, made \$725 million in sales revenue in the first three days after its launch.¹ Rockstar, the company behind that game, also made *Grand Theft Auto 5*, which has sold 110 million copies and made over \$6 billion in revenue.² Videogames are clearly now a mainstream cultural phenomenon, making huge profits. Nevertheless, the processes of production remain relatively hidden. In part, this is due to the global scope of production, taking place across many sites. There is also widespread use of Non-Disclosure

Agreements (NDAs) that workers sign so companies can control information ahead of game launches.

... [M]any countries have attempted to create favorable environments for videogame manufacturers, including ... tax breaks, specialized visa rules, and funding for independent studios.

The videogames industry has become the subject of much attention from both capital and governments, particularly as a sector that is growing year-on-year, unlike many others that have declined since the 2008 financial crisis. As a result, many countries have attempted to create favorable environments for videogame manufacturers, including offering tax breaks, specialized visa rules, and funding for independent studios. Rockstar, for example, was able to take advantage of significant tax breaks in the United Kingdom for its Edinburgh-based Rockstar North studio. It received £42 million in tax credits, while paying no corporation tax between 2009 and 2018, with an estimated operating profit of £4 billion between 2013 and 2019.³

As documented in *Marx at the Arcade*,⁴ the videogames industry represents many larger trends that are taking place in contemporary capitalism across different countries. This

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includes shifts in production across national borders, divisions between digital and material work, and the blurring of boundaries between work and play.

A global North-South divide in the nature of production—a trend that cuts across industrial sectors—is a primary characteristic of the videogames industry. Behind the screen, videogames rely upon what can be called the “immaterial labor” of workers in the Global North—that is work that relies upon creative and mental, rather than manual, labor.⁵ In development studios, this involves the work of programmers, designers, artists, sound engineers, and others to make the games. It also involves the low-paid quality assurance (QA) testers, community managers, and marketers to ensure a polished game that gets to consumers.⁶ All of this “immaterial work,” however, relies upon material labor, predominantly in the factories of the Global South, that produce the hardware as well as the logistics chains to ship products across the world. This material labor also provides the infrastructural work that the internet relies upon, including the laying and maintenance of fiber optic cables.

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Within the games industry, there are long-running workplace issues. Here, I focus on the work of videogame studios in the Global North—specifically in the United Kingdom—where the digital game is made, the typical video-game worker in the Global North would be a white, straight, non-disabled man, around the age of thirty five according to a recent survey.⁷ In the United Kingdom, 80 percent were under twenty five, with only 4.7 percent identifying as Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and 14 percent identifying as women.⁸ For some game workers, including programmers, salaries and benefits are comparatively good—particularly when compared to far-lower wages in the Global South. However, roles like quality and assurance testing are often poorly paid and

highly precarious. For these studio workers, the two main concerns are “crunch” and diversity, particularly relating to sexism.⁹ Crunch is the process of overwork that often accompanies the later stages of videogame development cycles. Much like Hollywood blockbusters, videogames have tight release schedules tied to expensive and time-sensitive marketing plans. Workers are often expected to work unpaid overtime as the release date approaches, ensuring that a game is ready to launch. While this could be blamed on mismanagement, given how hard it is for managers to predict how long software development will take, the widespread incidents of crunch demonstrate that many managers are likely budgeting the additional hours of crunch into the development cycle.

Overcoming the Challenges of Organizing

When I first wrote about unions in the game industry, I noted that both institutional sexism and crunch “could be converted into organisable demands in a workplace, yet the lack of traditions and rejection of collective organisation were significant obstacles to doing this.”¹⁰ Moreover, the establishment trade union movement had shown little or no interest in organizing videogame workers, whose profile did not match that of traditional union members. These workers are predominantly young, likely to have no history of trade unionism, and are engaged in (and often passionate about) the production of a cultural activity that many existing trade unionists may struggle to relate to.

By 2018, however, workers in the industry began taking things into their own hands, embarking on a wave of organizing. As in other “new” industries, game workers experimented with ways to shape their own work and came into conflict with managers.

Before exploring this wave of organizing, however, it is important to stress that, while it represents a watershed moment, there is a long history of resistance in the videogames industry. Failure to note this would give the false impression that these workplaces were placid, without workers resisting in different ways.

The early videogames, including *Spacewar!* and others, were often acts of resistance themselves. Military workers made the games while they should have been programming missile trajectories and other logistical tools for the military. This form of creative workplace resistance tied in with the early hacker cultures that provided the basis for the videogames industry.¹¹ There have also been strikes in parts of the videogames industry in the past. For example, in 2016, voice actors went on strike in the United States. They were represented by the SAG-AFTRA union and took strike action at eleven major videogame companies. Similarly, in France, there was a strike at Eugen Systems, supported by *Le Syndicat des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo* (STJV, the Videogame Workers Union).

... [T]here is a long history of resistance in the videogames industry ... Military workers made the games while they should have been programming missile trajectories ...

There are no doubt countless stories of individual resistance from workers in the industry or of nascent attempts to bring people together that did not quite make it. There are many challenges to organizing in the videogames industry, and they are not necessarily unique to that sector. As in the tech industry, for example, there are few links with existing union organizations and no traditions of organizing in the industry. And, as in so many industries with creative or intellectual workers, companies try to mobilize the passion their employees have for their work, convincing them that their job is not a typical job but a highly desirable one, given the surplus of people wanting to work in the industry. There are similarities across the media industries, as well as in universities, which have seen waves of graduate student organizing in recent years. An elite vision of the videogames industry became more pronounced after universities began cashing in by offering specialized videogames production courses, often with the promise of a career route. But, as

the late political economist Harry Braverman has argued, resistance at work can exist as a “subterranean stream” particularly within conditions like overwork and increased division of labor found within large videogames studios. As Braverman pointed out, resistance can make “its way to the surface when employment conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity.”¹²

What started with a small Facebook group became a bigger one on Twitter, which then became an even bigger movement across multiple channels ... and suddenly a direct action was in place.

Resistance broke the surface at The Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco, in March 2018. At this industry conference, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) proposed a roundtable discussion on “Union Now? Pros, Cons, and Consequences of Unionization for Game Devs.” It was to be chaired by the executive director of the IGDA, which, despite its name, is a group that is hostile to any kind of worker organizing in the industry. In response to IGDA’s proposal, a group of videogame workers started planning an intervention. What started with a “small Facebook group became a bigger one on Twitter, which then became an even bigger movement across multiple channels ... and suddenly a direct action was in place.”¹³ The IGDA roundtable became a confrontation between pro- and anti-union voices. An attempt to shut down the discussion about unions—led by the IGDA—had the opposite effect. Suddenly, a network emerged. It had a name—Game Workers Unite (GWU)—and a logo—a raised fist holding a game controller—and also plenty of publicity. News of GWU traveled quickly through the social media network of videogame workers. It spread like a global social movement, including videogame workers who had been sent to the conference from companies across the world. GDC delegates (both those who had witnessed the

roundtable and those who had just heard about it) went back to their respective cities and countries, sowing the seeds of unionization. A zine designed for the GDC spelled out the objectives of GWU:

Game Workers Unite is a broad-reaching organization that seeks to connect pro-union activists, exploited workers, and allies across borders and across ideologies in the name of building a unionized game industry. We are building pro-union solidarity across disciplines, classes, and countries. The organization is run exclusively by workers (non-employers), but we actively encourage employers, academics, and others to engage in the community and help support the organization's direct-action efforts both materially and through their visibility.¹⁴

The Birth of a New Trade Union

I had heard about the events at GDC through a friend involved in the industry, who suggested that I reach out to the workers involved. My intention was to provide material support to workers in the United Kingdom, following the method of workers' inquiry.¹⁵ This method involves a process of co-research between academics and workers that is directly connected to organizing, as well as to the production of knowledge. In my case, it meant providing resources and advice to the workers who were starting to organize, as well as conducting interviews and encouraging workers to write and talk about their own experiences. (I am therefore writing here both as an academic and organizer.)

I was quickly introduced to Declan, the first videogame worker in the United Kingdom to start organizing. In an interview, Declan explained,

I think someone finally just took the initiative. As soon as someone did, everyone jumped on it, because I think everyone who is involved right now has just been expecting some people to start it, and then they can jump on it, I know I was. It reached that critical point.¹⁶

I supported Declan in organizing the first meeting in Manchester, which had five people attend. From this, a U.K. website and a social media platform was established, along with a Discord server (an instant message and voice communication platform popular in the videogames community). As news of GDC spread, so did interest in the union. We organized more meetings in London which grew in size. While these started as organizing meetings, they tended to focus on establishing common ground on what being in a trade union would involve, as well as legal rights in the workplace. At first, many workers would not say their names or where they worked, preferring instead to test the waters anonymously. These early meetings were part of a process of collectively working through what trade unionism would mean in the videogames industry in the United Kingdom, with help from organizers like myself.

These meetings established the basic principles of organizing, including that any organization should be democratic, participatory, and led by workers. In the U.K. context, this left three options for formally unionizing: first, joining a mainstream trade union affiliated with the Trades Union Congress (TUC); second, joining an independent union; or third, forming a new trade union by registering with the certification officer. The first option was briefly explored, with one mainstream trade union attempting to recruit the videogame workers. However, this effort failed, as the union official told the workers they would lose their GWU branding (which made them feel like they were cutting themselves off from a growing global network). The union then proceeded to pressure sell them—if they did not make a decision rapidly, they would have to pay a higher union dues. The third option—starting a new union—was deemed to be too much of an administrative burden, particularly for a group of workers who had only recently started learning what trade unionism involved.

The GWU branch in the United Kingdom therefore entered into discussions with the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB). This union started as a breakaway from the mainstream public-sector union Unison, organizing mainly Spanish-speaking

Latin American cleaners in universities. The union now organizes a range of precarious workers, including security guards, bicycle couriers, foster-care workers, electricians, Uber and other app-based transport workers, and workers at Deliveroo (a food platform). Unlike the mainstream TUC-affiliated unions, IWGB is growing quickly among workers who are either new to organizing or have been badly organized in other unions. The IWGB has won a series of high-profile campaigns and become known as a union that readily takes action, including lively strikes, protests, and boycotts. Each IWGB branch is autonomous from the central union and some, like the branch of Uber drivers, keep their existing name.

In under a year, many videogame workers had gone from not knowing what a union was—but knowing that managers did not want them to join one—to forming their own union.

By the end of 2018, the U.K. branch of GWU had established a network across the country and formed a branch of the IWGB. This affiliation provided GWU with the structural legal protections of a union, access to case work and legal support, and experienced organizers to advise on campaigns. Through the national network, a committee was elected, and the network began to develop formal regional sections that meet regularly. In under a year, many videogame workers had gone from not knowing what a union was—but knowing that managers did not want them to join one—to forming their own union. Joining the IWGB provided the opportunity for them to preserve aspects of their own organization and the branding they had developed, while establishing a legal trade union structure.

Learning Lessons from GWU

There are three main lessons that can be drawn out of the experience of GWU organizing in the United Kingdom. The first is the importance of different approaches to building forms of worker

power in new ways. The GWU network was established in a different way than that of mainstream trade union organizing. It started outside of the workplace, albeit at a work-related conference. This provided the opportunity to build a network outside of the control of managers in the workplace, opening up a space where workers could discuss, plan, and begin organizing. This is particularly important for workers who are new to organizing. However, this does mean that GWU is a network outside of the workplace. Workers who have joined GWU have a common connection through the industry they are working in, but many have not yet joined because they do not have a shared experience in a particular workplace. This means that the GWU network is one of potential for building workplace power, but it needs to be translated into workplace organizing to develop that. This means taking the network of GWU back into workplaces and recruiting colleagues.

This different starting point for organizing draws out an important lesson for the mainstream trade union movement. In the U.K. context, the overwhelming majority of workers are not members of trade unions, and many young workers may never have been in a union or know anyone who has been. This creates significant cultural barriers to building connections with trade unions, as workers may not understand the terminology, processes, or expectations of existing unions. However, as GWU shows, there are shared workplace concerns that are expressed in different forms. For example, many workers (both in the videogames industry and more broadly) have concerns or come into conflict over issues of control at work. Too often, trade unions are seen as fighting only on economic issues—pay and pensions, for example. The second lesson is that the possibility of contesting control at work—whether “crunch” and how long to work, what kind of videogames to make, diversity and sexism within the industry, its impact on culture and so on—are powerful motivators for organizing.

The third lesson is the importance of relating to workers where they already are. The growth of GWU has relied on online communication tools like Discord. While online communication has its limitations, this medium was a tool for

making the first steps toward getting organized. Without it, many of the workers would likely not have developed the confidence to come to face-to-face meetings. However, many existing trade unions would not have thought to utilize these tools. Similarly, workers in GWU have developed their own ways of talking about unions—for example, framing organizing in gameplay terms and using creative propaganda, like the GWU zine about organizing in the style of a videogame magazine¹⁷—which may appear as unusual to those outside the industry. However, these have provided powerful ways to translate organizing strategies to videogame workers.

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The game workers' experience of organizing in the United Kingdom provides another powerful example of why no workers are "unorganizable"—just "yet-to-organize." There are many similarities (and indeed connections) between the game workers and software developers, workers in a relatively new industry who are beginning to organize with the U.S.-based Tech Workers Coalition. Like the game workers, these workers were generally assumed to be disinterested in unionizing. Yet, they and other new workers are finding new routes to organizing. If the established trade union movement wants to engage with new workers who want to build power at work, unions will have to develop a capacity for communicating with these workers and supporting them on their own terms. While these workers have much to learn from the experience of established unions, the union movement, in turn, has much to learn from these workers, especially if working-class power is to be built today.

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