Challenges and Opportunities for Collective Action in Local Games Industries

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INTRODUCTION

Following the highly publicised formation of Game Workers Unite (GWU) at the 2018 Game Developers Conference (GDC), 2018 is notable as the year in which the detrimental practices of the games industry (excessive crunch, fraternal studio cultures, uncredited work, etc.) that have long been recorded by academics (Kline et al 2003; Kücklich 2005; Legault and Oullet 2012; O'Donnell 2014; Legault and Weststar 2016) entered popular and professional games discourse. In the games press, attention is now focussed on the potential for collective activism in the industry (Colwill 2019) while high-profile stories of job losses and crunch conditions have seen journalists side, squarely, with the workers (Schreier 2018; Klepek 2018). One year after GWU's formation, the GDC 2019 "State of the Industry" report found that 47 percent of the 4000 gameworker respondents want to unionise, 26 percent said maybe, 16 percent said no, and 11 percent said they didn't know (Awawro 2019). GWU now boasts numerous regional chapters, a Discord channel with over 500 members, and, in the UK, its official incorporation as a branch of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain. This is occurring within a broader context of new union formation and increasing membership in certain sectors of Western economies, most notably in the case of new knowledge worker unions (e.g. the Digital Writers Union). The possibility for workers in the games industry to undertake collective action seems, finally, tantalisingly close to materialising.

However, in most regions of the world beyond the hubs of blockbuster Triple-A game development and campus-sized studios, gamework overwhelmingly happens in decentralised, project-based or contingently employed small teams. In Australia, for example, the average studio size is only nine people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017) with many others working solely on fix-term contracts or as solo developers. Complicating things further, these professional relationships are commonly formed off the back of pre-existing social relations, blurring power hierarchies between 'bosses' and 'workers'. Such a 'flexible', casual and decentralised workforce overwhelmingly populated with "involuntary entrepreneurs"

(Oakley 2014) provides distinct challenges for unionisation among gameworkers. As such, it is crucial that any critical account of gameworker collective action acknowledges the realities of countries in which the industry does not resemble the massive studio-based system of North America and parts of Europe.

In this paper we present the preliminary results of a multi-year study of the shape and nature of the Australian games industry and situate this within a discussion of labour organising principles, existing research, and emerging approaches to the challenges of organising in a highly globalized, fragmented, and contract-based economic system. We will not only detail the challenges faced by traditional unionisation efforts, but also highlight new potential sites of radical action. As several theorists argue (e.g. Banks 2007; de Peuter 2014; Gregg 2018), even as the atomization and specialisation of work functions to dismantle and disempower collective action (McRobbie 2016), new sites of potential resistance and solidarity emerge:

> Let us not discount how, in myriad global contexts, cultural workers are not only working to generate profit but also concrete political interventions and social benefits. Such work is immensely valuable in keeping alive the possibilities of a life beyond total commodification—however partial and precarious that life may currently appear. (Banks 2007, 164)

Lyons similarly points out in his recent analysis of the challenges facing the labour movement that "both the law and capital, everywhere and always, break workers down into smaller and smaller groups, where it's impossible to aggregate any real power. Growing new teeth will mean we have to do things differently to aggregate power and make gains" (2018, 10). In this paper we identify within the highly contingent workforce of the Australian games industries potential new sites and strategies where gameworkers might aggregate power and take new forms of collective action.

Our analysis points towards specific regional challenges to the organisation and formation of a game workers' union—specifically the project of building workers industrial muscle within an industry organised around creative project-based work (Legault and Oulett, 2012)—both in Australia and elsewhere outside of North America and Western Europe. There are real barriers to traditional workplace organising when your boss also happens to be your friend, for example, or when you work remotely on a small team distributed across cities, countries, or continents. At the same time, in our research with Australian gameworkers, opinions towards unionisation were generally positive, often passionate—albeit couched in reservations as to just how such a union would work for solo developers or small, informal teams. Increasingly, potentials sites of both formal and informal resistance emerge in response to technological and global political opportunities (Gregg, 2018). For many interviewees, just as important for them were other forms of grassroots collective action such as the sharing of skills, contacts, and knowledge between ostensibly 'competing' teams; the existence of non-profit co-working spaces; and the prioritising of non-corporate alternative platforms for distribution and development.

Insights arising from this research and observation of the local industry suggest several possible trajectories for collectivising gameworkers: traditional, formal unions, but also other organisations, other practices that take a different shape or

otherwise depart radically from the traditional organising of the shop floor. While "maybe there can be no workplace politics when there is no workplace" (McRobbie 2002, 522), we can also imagine new sites for locating, organising, and building worker power and extending notions of solidarity and collectives across several worksites, up and down supply chains, and even across national borders. Acknowledging the inherent challenges and new possibilities facing labour organisers among contingently employed gameworkers in "translocal" (Kerr 2017) game industries beyond the large studios of North America and Western Europe will be crucial for industry workers and organisers, and for scholars studying the organisational and productive institutions around the games industry. Ultimately, this paper argues that future research into labour conditions in the games industry must address the disparity, and differences in workforce structure that pertains across a highly diverse and widely dispersed games industry.

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