

Understanding Video Game Developers as an Occupational Community

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Abstract

The video game industry is highly lucrative and has rapidly expanded over the last four decades. However there is limited academic research about the people who actually make the video games. This article provides an in-depth look into the culture of the video game workforce. Using ethnography and discourse analysis, this article seeks to identify and understand video game developers as a unique social group called an occupational community (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). Understanding video game developers as an occupational community is important to further study of this group because it lays a foundational framework from which to understand their actions and responses to various environmental forces. The concept of occupational community situates meaning within the workers and can be used to understand both alignment with and deviations from supposed organizational, industry, and societal norms.

Keywords

occupational community, video game industry, occupational identity, work-life boundary, high-tech, cultural labour, control

Introduction

The making of video games is a highly lucrative industry that has rapidly expanded over the last four decades. Games have evolved from ‘Pong’ to highly interactive and complex epics with near life-like computer graphics that take years and millions to produce. The global game market revenue is about \$65 billion and is larger than the film and music industries combined (Reuters, 2011). Given this rise and the nature of the content of most video games, it is not surprising that a significant number of popular articles and academic research have focused on the cultural and communicative impacts of the content of video games (i.e., sex and violence in particular). Two formative works have also been written which discuss the video game industry more broadly in terms of global capitalism (Kline, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2003; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2009). Aside from some discussion of the workforce in these texts; however, research about the individuals who actually make video games remains limited (see Cohendet and Simon, 2007; de Peuter and Dyer-Witthford, 2005; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2006; Author A, 2010).

In 2004, a high profile internet scandal (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2006; EA Spouse, 2004) and a subsequent research report by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA, 2004) revealed an industry replete with poor working conditions, physical and mental

stress, and high turnover. This countered the dot-com era image of bohemian workspaces (Ross, 2003) that was and still remains a prevailing stereotype for video game studios. Young, hip, men wear ironic t-shirts and stare at large screens with game controllers in their hands and earphones on their heads. Studios often boast lounge spaces, game tables, and other accessories connotative of youthful fun and leisure. In these places and spaces, work is framed as play (Kline, Dyer-Witford and de Peuter, 2003; Simon, 2005).

This research provides an in-depth look into the culture of the video game workforce. It focuses on video game developers – those individuals who are engaged in the core tasks of designing video games for computer, console and mobile devices. Using the approach of ethnography and discourse analysis, this article seeks to identify and understand video game developers as a unique social group called an occupational community (Salaman, 1971a; 1971b; 1974; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). The article begins with a conceptual framework for understanding occupational community. It then provides a detailed overview of the video game industry. Following a discussion of the data and methods, the article presents a narrative of the work-life of video game developers that exemplifies the characteristics of an occupational community. The conclusion discusses implications, limitations and future research directions.

Occupational Community

“My work is my life” is not a statement that all workers would make, but it is very likely to be made by someone who belongs to an occupational community. The sociological origins of the term occupational community are summarized in a review by Salaman (1971a). It denotes a group of workers who, through their identification with their occupation, share a common set of norms and values. It is important to note, however that the shared culture of occupational communities is not akin to the organizational culture commonly discussed in human resources or organizational behaviour literature. The study of occupational communities explicitly takes the work and the worker as a point of reference (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). As such, occupational communities often exist beyond the boundaries of individual workplaces, organizations or geographical locations. The analysis is then approached from the perspective of the members of the occupation and the community is shaped by, but is separate from, organizational goals.

An exploration of this distinction can be seen in the work of Riley, Lockwood, Powell-Perry and Baker (1998). They concluded that pub workers in the UK display a strong commitment to the industry as opposed to a commitment to any particular organization or pub. When faced with a challenging job that garners low wages and high employment insecurity, “what holds everything together [for a pub worker] is an appreciation of ‘pub life’ as a cultural norm.” (Riley, Lockwood, Powell-Perry and Baker, 1998: 167) This sharing of norms contributes to the development of an occupational community of pub workers across organizational boundaries. Therefore, a group of workers at the same company, in the same geographical region, or of the same demographic characteristics is not an occupational community by default. As an example, the term occupational community has been used in labour relations literature to denote relationships among union members or residents in one-company towns (Hill, 1981). Though miners in mining towns and other such groups may in fact be occupational communities, geographic proximity, shared struggle, or common class consciousness are not sufficient, nor even necessary characteristics. As outlined by Van Maanen and Barley (1984: 295), “more crucial parameters for identifying communities are the social dimensions used by members

themselves for recognizing one another, the social limits of such bonds, and situational factors which amplify or diminish the perceived common identity.”

Gertzl (1961: 38) labeled as occupational community the “pervasiveness of occupational identification and the convergence of informal friendship patterns and colleague relationships.” Salaman (1974) identified three inter-related elements common to occupational communities: self-image or identity, values, and relationships. Building on this previous work, Van Maanen and Barley (1984) shaped their definition around four elements: 1) boundaries, 2) social identity, 3) reference group, and 4) social relations. These four elements will be used as the primary theoretical basis for this article, although supporting reference will also be made to the expanded list of seven ‘social forces’ present in occupational communities developed by Trice and Beyer (1993: 26-39; see also Marschall, 2012). First, *boundaries* are the metaphorical wall that surrounds the members of the community and separates them from non-members. The presence of these boundaries is observed in the social dimensions that the community members use to recognize each other. They are the parameters of inclusion. Boundaries are created through internally constructed connotative notions of belonging that are socially meaningful to the insiders of that group. Though they may not be readily seen or understood by casual observers or outsiders, the boundaries of an occupational community communicate and reinforce the appropriate, required and/or expected actions and interactions of group members. In this way members are deemed “to be” part of the community through demonstrated behavioural enactment rather than through denotative labeling due to geographical proximity, shared employer, or shared occupational title (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984; 295).

Second, members of an occupational community share a *social identity* that is drawn from their occupational role. This identity or self-image is highly valued and is a defining feature in the presentation of the self to others. This is most commonly evidenced through particular accoutrements, jargon, dress, or “tie-signs” (Goffman, 1971, 194-5). Identity codes can also take the form of inside jokes or stories and the common conversational reference points created through shared experiences. In his exploration of funeral directors, Barley (1983) noted that occupational communities with particularly arcane and prevalent codes derive a heightened sense of identity from their use and display. The use and display of such codes is central to the interpretation of day to day occupational events such that unenlightened bystanders are often unable to understand or arrive at similar interpretations. Social identity is also seen through an absorption in the work that goes well beyond traditional notions of job satisfaction. Occupational community members have such high involvement with the symbolic nature of the work itself, that those who do not do that kind of work are perceived as being fundamentally different. This is reinforced through the sense of having specialized skills or abilities, of having a sense of responsibility to others through the work, and/or of having a sense of danger or extreme conditions (Trice and Beyer, 1993; Marschall, 2012).

Third, the concept of a *reference group* means that members of an occupational community take each other as their primary point of comparison when engaged in self-reflection. In particular work and non-work situations, the meta-cognitive process would direct an individual to think about what other members in her community would do in that scenario, or how the community would judge her actions. This referencing is reinforced when the occupational community is marginalized, if the occupation penetrates multiple aspects of life, and if there is a rigorous socialization process as part of being inducted into the occupation.

Fourth and last, an occupational community shares *social relations*. This refers to a blurring of work and leisure whereby members hold as their closest friends other members of their

occupation. It is important to note that the conjunction of work and leisure does not necessarily imply work-like hobbies, though this is a common manifestation. For example, Salaman (1974) described railroaders who built model trains and displayed them to each other, while Braverman (1974) gave an historical account of loomweavers who engaged together in botany and entomology and formed a number of societies to that effect. As exemplified by Lee-Ross’ (1998; 2004) accounts of seasonal hotel workers, the social relations of an occupational community are reinforced by geographical proximity and work characteristics that place particular constraints on the times and modes of recreation. Lee-Ross’s (2006) work on the occupational community of cruise ship workers also highlights these constraints as the workers can only socialize with other workers on-board the ship. Marschall (2012) also noted the importance of work hours in dictating leisure choices as the hours worked by his internet technologists put them out of sync with the normal 9-5 routine of the world around them.

In addition to providing a definitional framework, Van Maanen and Barley (1984) introduce the connection between occupational self control and the formation of occupational communities. This is an important piece for the discussion of video game developers that will follow. According to Van Maanen and Barley (1984) occupational communities can represent the tension and competition between rational and administrative control (i.e. from employers or managers) and forms of communal control. This communal control is exerted within the occupational community through the above noted social relations. As a result, the norms and behaviours of an occupational community are informal and are themselves contested and shifting through the collective sensemaking (Weick, 1995) of its members. Occupational communities are living entities that can be continuously reconfigured (Marschall, 2012: 31). Therefore, occupational communities do not necessarily present a unified face or voice and the face and voice that is presented by the occupational community does not always represent that of employing organizations. Indeed, as Van Maanen and Barley (1984) noted, the concept of deviance could have quite a different moral and ethical interpretation when viewed through the lens of the organizational versus the occupational community.

There is a growing literature that uses ethnography or intensive field work to surface and understand the intricacies of particular organizational groups (Bruno, 1999; Campbell, 2011; Lee-Ross, 1998, 2004, 2006; Riley, Lockwood, Powell-Perry and Baker, 1998; Sandiford and Seymour, 2007). A number of these studies have focused specifically on technical or high-tech workers (Bechky, 2003; Kunda, 1992; Marschall, 2002; 2012; Orr, 1996; Perlow, 1999; Zabusky, 1997). This paper adds to the body of work on occupational community in high-tech occupations by taking as its subject the workers who create video games. Though much has been written about the social and cultural implications of video games, very little academic research examines the people who actually produce those games.

Overview of the Video Game Industry

Broadly defined, video game developers are the people who contribute to the making of video games either for use on a personal computer, game console, or mobile device. However, the complexity of modern video games requires a broad range of contributions from workers with varied skill sets. Therefore, the industry employs computer programmers, visual and audio artists, animators, game designers, writers, and testers or quality assurance. Each project team also has a producer or team lead and depending on their size and organizational structure, studios have a range of upper managers and administrative personnel such as marketing and human

resource departments. The industry also employs models and voice actors. This study will include artists, designers, programmers, testers and producers as those engaged in the core work of video game development.

These workers are emblematic of the rising actors on the contemporary labour scene as they are highly skilled, mobile, non-unionized knowledge workers who are members of a project team. The industry has maintained the non-conformist feel of the dotcom era and created an image of a hip, fun, and free culture where you can get paid to play games (Ross, 2003; de Peuter and Dyer-Witthford, 2005; Deuze, Martin and Allen, 2007). The reality is somewhat different. The industry is highly secretive, competitive and largely risk-averse. Top tier console games can cost over \$30 million to produce, yet due to extreme competition during prime selling seasons, less than 10% of video games shipped break even (IGDA, 2004: 42). That said, successful games are highly lucrative; Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 grossed more than \$775 million in its first week on the market (Rose, 2011). The industry is dominated by a few major publishing studios such as Nintendo, Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft (Sheffield, 2010), but also consists of smaller third party studios (who often take contracts from publishers) and independent development studios (Gouglas et al. 2010).

Work is organized under the project management regime where the *iron triangle* of constraints (budget, schedule and scope), are paramount drivers in the lives of project team members (Chasserio and Legault, 2009; Legault and Bellemare, 2008). Each game must be completed on time, within budget, and have sufficient attributes to be popular among customers, because pre-release marketing and the date of product release are decisive factors of success (Deuze, Martin and Allen, 2007; Kline, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2003). As a result, video game developers experience a host of employment risks: sustained long working hours (‘crunch’), unlimited and unpaid overtime, poor work-life balance, musculoskeletal disorders, burnout, unacknowledged intellectual property rights, limited crediting standards, non-compete and non-disclosure agreements, and limited or unsupported training opportunities (see Batt, Christopherson, Rightor, and van Jaarsveld, 2001; Ross, 2003, 2009; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2006; Deuze, 2007; Deuze, Martin and Allen, 2007; Author A, 2010).

Data and Methodology

The primary source of data and the resulting analysis for this paper is rooted in ethnography (Orr, 1996; Van Maanen, 1998) and discourse analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Rather than interview or survey video game developers directly about their work culture, I have gathered a corpus, or large sample, of naturally occurring linguistic sources that let the workers showcase their occupational community without interference or direct observation. Given the nature of their work, their aptitudes and their interests, video game developers have created a very strong online presence and this social space can act as a research site (Kollock and Smith, 1999). There are a host of game industry websites that report recent developments, interview key industry players, and facilitate open debate and dialogue (for example Gamasutra and Joystiq). Many game studios host their own websites, discussion boards, and forums. The industry has an overarching association called the International Game Developers Association which posts news, hosts forums, contains special interest group (SIG) newsletters and meetings, and also engages in general advocacy activities where they publish reports and facilitate discussion in key areas (i.e., quality of life, diversity, business, and legal issues). On top of this, many individual game

developers maintain their own blogs about the industry as do ‘hard core’ fans and industry critics.

This online activity produces an incredibly rich self-reflective and completely member-generated account of the industry’s norms, behaviours, challenges, successes, and expectations. The act of writing is socially purposeful; therefore, discourse analysis applied to these online texts is an ideal means to understand the values and social practices of the occupational community that lies behind it (Crystal, 1987; van Dijk, 1997). These data were collected over a roughly four year span (2008-2012) and imported into the QSR NVivo qualitative software analysis package. While regarding the sources as whole texts, complete sources and individual components of articles or discussions were coded on nodes that corresponded to the four characteristics of occupational community. This social media data has been supplemented by informal conversations with senior members of the games community.

Each of the four elements of occupational community is closely tied to the others to create a reinforcing circle of affirmation for members of an occupational community. Therefore, the following discussion will present a narrative about video game developers and their work through which particularly emblematic examples of the dimensions of occupational community will variously flow. Though not employed in the computational manner of corpus linguistics (Baker, 2006), this large sampling allows for collocation and saturation of various perspectives to help to ensure the validity of the examples put forward.

Video Game Developers as an Occupational Community

The majority of video game developers come to the industry because they were and are avid gamers; they have a self-professed passion for games and wish to make this their life work. Though credentialing agencies are cropping up in the form of degree and diploma programs in game design and game development, a key to employment is showcasing that you have made and can make fun games. In this way different members of a project team have specific skill sets – programmers write code, visual artists draw and model, designers conceptualize the overall flow and game play – but the shared ability is to find the fun, the novelty, and the wow-factor. Therefore, the heart of being a good game developer remains rooted in the idea of being self-taught and following one’s instincts. This acts to maintain a certain mystique around the occupation that elevates legendary designers and achieves a degree of informal occupational closure (Parkin, 1979) that is counter to traditional forms. Entry is not restricted through rigidly enforced educational requirements; entry is deterred because the path is often vague and speaks more of time, effort, and a certain calling, than training that can be acquired. The recurring question of “What should I do to get into the game industry?” is not answered with a list of educational programs. Would-be game developers are more often counseled by veterans to make games and practice their craft in their spare time:

If you’re an animator, animate. If you’re a modeler, model...If you’re a writer, write...If you’re a programmer, program...If you’re a designer...*Make* board games and tabletop role playing games. Make design documents, plan out paper prototypes of all those complex digital game you *want* to make, and *analyze* games like a Literature major analyzes a piece of writing...Build levels in Unreal 3, Hammer, Crysis, or any other major engine, organize modding groups, make flash games, and develop ideas for user interfaces into prototypes that you can test... (Prinkle, 2010)

As alluded to above, avid fans and industry hopefuls spend many hours ‘modding’ games (modifying the software to create something new). The popularity of this has caused some games to include built-in modding tools and for game studios and publishers to hold contests for new features that have been created or modded by fans (Scacchi, 2010). Fans also come to the industry early as volunteer beta game testers or interns. As such, individuals are exposed to the occupational community of video game development well before their first job in the industry. Indeed, most job advertisements make it a requirement to be fully indoctrinated in game culture in order to land a job. Common language in the ads on Gamasutra’s job board variously read, “Must love to play games”, “Must be an avid gamer, of course.”, or more specifically to a particular game, “...a passion for games, Halo, and trying new things...Rabid Halo fan - be prepared to demonstrate that you've played and thought a lot about the game.”

This early socialization to and self-selection into the occupational community continues on the social web where hopeful or new inductees to the industry interact with more experienced developers. The following is a particularly emblematic example of how newer members of the community are brought to the common norms. To set up this exchange, John was thinking about a career in the industry and he wrote an open post on Gamasutra Blogs wondering if it was possible to have a lifelong career in the industry (Hahn, 2009). He cited some readily discussed concerns such as crunch, little glamour and recognition, and relatively low pay (in his view, to other opportunities for programmers or to the entertainment industry). The following is a parsed account of the discussion that followed in the comments to the original post:

Mac Senour: ...I just can’t imagine doing anything else! And I think there in [sic] lies the difference, games are my life and have been since I was 19.

Jason Weesner: ...Everybody I work with loves what they do and that’s precisely why they do it! ...If you’re looking for a return on your personal investment that is substantially more than just the opportunity to make games, this industry is not for you

Ted Brown: ...Paid overtime is virtually unheard of...So why am I still here? It’s because I can’t imagine a career doing anything else. I work with smart people. We tackle interesting problems. I’m paid enough to support a family. And I could work almost anywhere in the world. It is hard? Sure. Is there crunch? Sometimes... Is it worth it? Definitely.

John goes on to question these responders and asks again why there is so much crunch time and why video game developers don’t make more money or become famous like in the movie or music industries:

Ted Brown: When people play a game they are the focus. They are the actor. Does that make sense? There is no “artist” that people associate with a game...Shigeru Miyamoto will never be as famous as Mario. Or Link. Or any of his myriad creations. But among his peers, there are few equals.

Alan Jack: ...game developers are never going to be famous, and that – in my opinion – makes this the most honest medium out there.... Games are the most honest medium because there’s no hiding the fact that everyone in a team, be it 10 or 1000 people, contributed to the finished product. Even then, the experience of play is shared between the games [sic] ‘authors’ and the player. If you want to be famous, be a rock star. If you want to be less famous, but honest, be an author. If you don’t care about that, but want to work at the cutting edge of current thinking on entertainment, work in games...knowing I helped contribute to something that entertained thousands is an incredible rush....stop comparing games to other media. We’re not like them, we’re our own thing.

Throughout the conversation John often interjects to accept or further question the responses of his ‘elders’. It is clear that he is deeply considering their messages before he responds. The end of his final post shows his need to legitimize himself as a member of their group, as one who holds the act of making games as a higher ideal, even if he may not end up in the industry:

John: I want to make it clear that I’m not some greedy snot nosed kid who only cares about money. It’s very important for me to actually enjoy what I do for a living. I’m just curious and trying to learn more from people in the know.

In addition to showing the socialization of newcomers to the industry, this exchange highlights other core aspects of occupational community. The boundary of the community is defined here as being different than other media or entertainment industries. Many workers in the video game industry could be programmers in more typical IT roles, or artists or animators for film or television, but they have chosen to work in games. This establishes a boundary and reinforces the social identity of the ‘in’ group.

The values around fame and fortune in this discussion are downplayed in preference for the honesty of making a good game, the rush in entertaining others, the joy of being on the team, the stimulation of the creative process. Ted Brown’s remarks about Mario Bros designer Shigeru Miyamoto show that the industry is highly self-referential and that status is earned through exemplary work. Across the social web it is immediately apparent that game developers study the work of others and revere particular game developers, particular games, and particular studio teams. Poor work is equally visible and particular producers, designers and studios are often ‘called out’ online for failing to make the grade or treating their teams badly. Such acclamations and critiques serve to signal the expected standards to the community and push all members toward better and more innovative work. In a recent exchange on the list-serve used by the International Game Developers Association Producers Special Interest Group (SIG), one producer asked the list members to share the name of a particular title that each had recently released and which made them proud. The contributing members to this discussion made comments showing that they had played the games listed, and a deconstruction and celebration of the game’s features often followed.

The small excerpt of John above also shows how much the personal and social identity of the game developers is tied up in their work. The last person to comment on this forum, Alan Jack, says that “technically, games are the oldest and most primal of communicative media” and he references ancient Mayan and Egyptian games. Computer games, for him, are part of this legacy. Van Maanen and Barley’s (1984) responsibility to others is here manifest in a commitment to the

symbolic nature of games as central to human civilization and in repeated reference to the ‘art of making games’. Added to this is the perceived responsibility to the end-users of the games. This is magnified and made complicated for game developers because they are both the avid producers and the highly critical avid consumers of each other’s work. Game developers feel an immense sense of pride in their work and the responsibility to make a good product. This sentiment runs throughout the community discourse, but is particularly captured in response to the case of Rockstar San Diego in 2010. Similar to the EA Spouse affair (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2006; Hoffman, 2004), a group of developers’ wives wrote a blog decrying terrible working conditions for the team making Red Dead Redemption. When a few shocked consumers posted the idea of a boycott, a developer on the team responded:

I believe many of us at the studio are putting a massive amount of love into the game we are creating, despite the often questionable working environment, in the hopes that massive sales of such a well-made product will give us all more leverage to exact a positive change in overall quality of life at the jobs we still love...When it’s all said and done, I love my studio, I love my game, and I love my team, and I wouldn’t give this up for the world. I just would like to see things improve for all of us, including our management (Code Monkey, 2010).

A cursory glance at any article or discussion about the industry shows the degree to which specialized language has been adopted. This is another signal of occupational community in terms of boundary setting and self-referencing. It is similar to the adoption of arcane professional language by other groups such as doctors, lawyers, or engineers, but particularly manifests among more marginalized or threatened groups. Games, segments of games, and game genres are referenced and their mention signals a wealth of information and back story to those ‘in the know’. This specialized language and internal referencing gives the members of the community status that they hold against a society that can trivialize and be critical of their work. Regular in-depth game critiques appear and act to validate and elevate the art-form of game design. Excerpts from two game critiques by a regular Gamasutra contributor are illustrative:

The gameplay of Xenoblade in many ways feels like the next step up from Final Fantasy 12’s design...Xenoblade’s combat leans more towards the MMO side of things compared to JRPG design and this could rub fans of the genre the wrong way... (Bycer, 2012b)

The problems with loot could also be seen in Torchlight 1, where the player was bombarded with so much loot that the player couldn’t use it or didn’t want that is made the search for loot more of a chore. The difference is that Torchlight did it due to not properly curving up the equipment attributes. While Diablo 3 is due to limiting what attributes work for each class and gating the access of more varied gear behind the difficulty settings (Bycer, 2012a).

The boundary of the occupational community, and the corresponding sense of belongingness, is reinforced by the social relations of the group. Gamers form online communities as they play MMOGs (massively multi-player online games) such as World of Warcraft. Developers, hopefuls, and fans attend networking sessions organized by local chapters of the IGDA, and they

interact at conferences such as the Game Developers Conference (GDC) or E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo). More locally, developers eat out together and gather in off-work times to play video games or engage in other activities such as sports. Workers from one studio have basketball on Tuesdays and soccer on Thursdays. A restaurateur near a game studio made the anecdotal remark that the restaurant could never predict whether they would have no business or sell-out of everything at lunch time. If you had one person from the studio, you had them all. Some companies also organize specific extra-curricular activities. A highly regarded independent studio called thatgamecompany hosts a ‘24 hour Game Jam’:

Hello, I'm Kellee Santiago from thatgamecompany, creators of fIOW, and currently in development on Flower. The fine people at Playstation.Blog are good enough to allow me to use my first post here to let you all in on a little thing we have going on here at thatgamecompany call the 24hr Game Jam.

Championed by our lead engineer John Edwards, the 24hr Game Jam was created as a way for us to do something quick, dirty, and fun ... and maybe let out a little steam in the process. The goal is always to make a game, from start to finish, on the PS3 in 24hrs. We go from 10am Saturday to 10am Sunday, and then whatever we have, we lock it up. Future Game Jams might have more specific goals, but for this first one, we just wanted to see how much fun we could make in a day. Oh, and our game designer Nick Clark wanted something that was multiplayer that we could enjoy in the office. (Santiago, 2008)

What better way for people who makes games all week under tight budget and time constraints to spend their weekend than doing that exact same thing? However, the reality for many studios is that with excessive crunch, video game developers do not have much spare time at all. While touring HB studios in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, I was proudly shown the games room and then told in only a semi-joking manner, “Of course, no one has time to use it.” As this comment suggests, video game developers face leisure/social constraints based on their work conditions. Similar to other high-tech workers (i.e., Marschall, 2012) there is ample evidence about the long, extended crunch times which would inhibit socialization with members outside of the particular project team or outside of online contact. This is exacerbated by the confidentiality and secrecy of studios that does not allow video game developers to work from home. In some studios crunch time is followed by extended compensatory time off which, since it is shared by other developers on the team, also encourage team members to spend that time together.

The above mentioned discussion and accompanying examples serves to illustrate the binding factors of the video game developer occupational community. Yet these examples should not suggest that the community has only once face or an unchanging face. The opinions offered online by members of the video game industry represent numerous contested perspectives, particularly on ‘sensitive’ topics. Members of the occupational community are engaged in sensemaking activities (Weick, 1995) as they define who they are within the administrative or rational control structures of their own studios, within the game industry, and within the broader societal context of their work (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). This shifting ground is apparent as the community discusses occupational self-control and issues of poor working conditions, the necessity of crunch in game development, and the possibility of unionization. It is also apparent as video game developers grapple with the common societal critique of video games – that they

are violent, hypersexualized, promote rape culture, and are linked to conditions such as childhood obesity, aggression, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. There is also lively online debate about game genres where casual games and the studios (but interestingly not the developers) that make them are derided by hard core gamers. In the online spaces of these discussions the norms and values of the occupational community become convoluted because the voice of the game developer is often subsumed or lost in the voice of gamers. From my analysis it is clear that particular game developers have chosen to avoid certain genres of games or to speak out about particular issues (i.e., the characterization of women in games), but these are not universal sentiments. For example, one well known individual in the video game community commented that she is a “veteran of the game industry’s culture wars.” (Hoffman, 2012)

These internal schisms do not detract from the argument of the occupational community for video game developers, rather they act to illustrate the boundaries of the community and the factors that reaffirm belonging or signal otherness. As with other socially constructed groupings, the boundaries of this occupational community are permeable and members can be transient. It also shows that members of the occupational community can resist and shape particular norms from within as they strive for occupational self-control. One issue that faces video game developers is achieving credit for their individual contributions to games. As the games and the project teams required to make them get larger, the efforts of any one developer become less identifiable. The long list of credits that are commonplace in the film and television industries do not exist in game development. Only studio names are listed on the box and title screens, except when a particular name will aid in marketing (i.e. Sid Meier’s Civilization). In response to this crediting deficit a grassroots movement began among video game developers to embed “Easter Eggs” in their games. Easter Eggs are objects or words that are often tangential to the immediate game play, but can be used to make reference to the work of a particular developer, other games, inside jokes within studios, teams, or game series (Author A, 2010). A website that documents the Easter Eggs found in the game Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim mentions the non-player character M’aiq the Liar, who is an “Easter Egg Basket of sorts for developers to comment on some of the game features that were removed, added, or were/are planned for the series as well as other RPG gaming community related remarks.” (Elder Scrolls, nd) These Easter Eggs began as a form of occupational deviance by the video game developers against the crediting system established by their employers and industry. Their presence is now somewhat expected and hard-core fans revel in locating them and distilling their meaning as this affords further status within the fan community.

Conclusions

Despite the industry’s growing success and significant cultural commentary on the content of video games, academic research on the individual workers who make video games has been more limited. A number of high profile ‘whistleblowing’ episodes have occurred online and in the popular press which indicate that the work of making video games has unique features and important challenges (i.e. the stories of EA Spouse, Rockstar Spouse, LA Noire, 38 Studios Spouse). This article is an attempt to begin to understand those features and challenges by first examining the occupational culture of video game developers. This was accomplished through an examination of their online discourse through the lens of occupational community.

As Van Maanen and Barley (1984: 291) stated, “Although a position is organizationally created and sanctioned, the work that comprises such a position often has a history of its own and

therefore a context that is not organizationally limited.” These positions offer “identity-bestowing characteristics” that are much more than a job. This is true of the occupation of video game developers where the commitment to the product, its users, and to the cultural and social genre of video games is of a higher order than commitment to the organization. This commitment is built out of a shared pleasure in and passion for video game play that has a longer history than organizational or industry tenure. Based on ethnographic discourse analysis, the findings indicate that video game developers meet the four characteristics of occupational community as defined by Van Maanen and Barley (1984) and utilized throughout the occupational community literature. They have a clear set of social boundaries which define insider status, they take their identities from and are highly involved in the work of making games, they internally self-reference, and their work and leisure time is blurred through their hobbies of video gaming and the constraints of their working hours.

This research is valuable in a number of respects. It strengthens the theory of occupational community by extending it to an under-studied group. It also provides a rare example of an occupational community that extends beyond geographical boundaries; most studies of occupational communities have been geographically bound. Marschall (2012) gives the label of the networked occupational community for connections made in this new virtual space (see also Kollok and Smith, 1999). The findings presented in this research also begin to showcase the quest for self-control through examples of contested ground within the occupational community and also between the community and the managers/employers of the industry. Understanding video game developers as an occupational community is also important to further study of this group because it lays a foundational framework from which to understand their actions and responses to various environmental forces. The concept of occupational community situates meaning within the workers and can be used to understand both alignment with and deviations from supposed organizational, industry, and societal norms.

The method employed in this research is unique and well-suited to the research question, but it has limitations. While a discourse analysis of online material allows for an unadulterated view into the community, it remains subjective. Efforts were made to locate corroborating sentiments on specific issues or topics, but ultimately there was no opportunity for direct questioning or challenging of certain statements. The data may suffer from self-selection bias where only those with extreme viewpoints take the time to speak out. Also it is often impossible to categorically determine whether an author is a video game developer or is instead an industry critic, a gamer, or someone less connected to the industry. However, in understanding video game developers as an occupational community, the extended community of the gamers/fans and industry critics (also fans) is very closely connected to the developers themselves. More research is needed to tease out the boundary lines among these groups and to synthesize the values and norms of video game developers versus the values and norms of ‘hard core gamers’. This is relevant to the discussions of whether it is developers or game players who are promoting particular game genres (i.e. first person shooters). More research is also needed to investigate the potential sub-groups that may exist within a larger occupational community. As identified by Cohendet and Simon (2007), the workers who contribute to a video game project represent individual “communities of specialists” (i.e., software programmers, 2D and 3D animators, script writers, artists, game designers). In the current research there was limited attempt to disentangle the norms or ideologies of these particular sub-groups, though there was evidence of hierarchical and social divides particularly between artists and programmers and between core developer roles

and roles in quality assurance and testing. Additional work is needed to better understand these divisions and their implications for occupational community and workplace dynamics.

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