2019

Contested Formations of Digital Game Labor

Greig de Peuter and Chris J. Young

The Accepted Manuscript (AM), the final draft of this author manuscript, is licensed under Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view the details of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Permanent link of this paper: http://hdl.handle.net/

Important Notes

Always cite the Version of Record (VoR: final publisher’s version) so that the author(s) will receive recognition through services that track citation counts, e.g., Scopus. When you are unable to access the VoR, the citation needs to include the word, Postprint (Accepted Manuscript).

Visit Publisher’s Site for the VoR: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1527476419851089
Contested Formations of Digital Game Labor

Greig de Peuter¹ and Chris J. Young²

¹ Associate Professor of Communication Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, ON, Canada. Email: gdepeuter@wlu.ca
² Digital Scholarship Librarian at the University of Toronto Mississauga Library, ON, Canada. Email: christopher.young@utoronto.ca

ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue critically investigating contemporary formations of digital game labor, with a focus on the political-economic forces, social inequalities, and technological dynamics mutually shaping these formations. Accounts of game industry practices have been at the forefront of efforts within media studies to document and theorize conditions and transformations of labor under digital capitalism. The study of digital game labor has tended to cluster around four areas of inquiry: below-the-line labor, the creative labor of game development, player-production, and game labor politics. Providing empirically informed portraits of diverse contexts and experiences of gamework, this issue interrogates multiple dimensions of precarious work and social exclusion within an industry whose playful self-image can make it a resistant object of labor-centered analysis. The contributors to this issue promote a research orientation that is attentive to how work in the digital game industry might be made more accessible and sustainable.

KEYWORDS
digital games, labor, video game industry, media work

Since the early 2000s, accounts of game industry practices—from the framing of “work as play,” to the harnessing of player-produced content as a wellspring of “free labor,” to the rote ludic labor of “gold farming”—have been at the forefront of efforts within media studies to document and theorize conditions and transformations of labor under digital capitalism. This special issue builds upon and updates this tradition by critically investigating contemporary formations of digital game labor, with a focus on the political-economic forces, social inequalities, and technological dynamics mutually shaping these formations. Providing empirically textured portraits of diverse contexts and experiences of “gamework” (Kerr 2010; McAllister 2003; Ruggill, McAllister and Menchaca 2004), the articles in this issue interrogate multiple dimensions of precarious work and social exclusion within an industry whose playful self-image can make it resistant to labor-centered analysis. The issue’s contributors reveal continuity and change in the power relations that overlay the performance, mediation, and circulation of digital game labor, in settings ranging from professional education programs to external testing facilities, from data-driven game design to live-streaming platforms. In the process, however, the issue also demonstrates that enduring
and emergent modalities of exploitation and oppression in the digital game industry do not go uncontested.

Digital game labor is a formidable source of financial value generation in contemporary capitalism. Proliferating game platforms, expanding player populations, and enlarging geographic reach have enabled the digital play market to grow to nearly one hundred and forty billion dollars globally, according to one recent estimate (Wijman 2018). Established console titans (the Microsoft-Nintendo-Sony triad) and publishing giants (e.g., Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, Nexon, Tencent, Ubisoft) remain fixtures of a game industry oligopoly. But new economic actors, particularly within the ambit of mobile and casual gaming, are ascendant, currently capturing approximately fifty percent of the industry’s worldwide revenue (Wijman 2018). Social and technical transformations of the internet have altered how digital games are produced, distributed, and played. “Indie” developers not only compete with established “AAA” hegemons but also converge with the latter in hybrid configurations and reciprocal dependencies. Globalized connectivity and new gaming platforms provide game-makers with access to a variety of free game engines and tools that simplify processes of production. Diversifying distribution and pay models broaden publisher content and user portfolios across platforms. And social media and live-streaming services amplify players’ presence and discourse throughout the game media system (Taylor 2018). This landscape engenders new formations of labor across a game industry that embeds difficult working conditions, differential manifestations of which include stress, punishing hours, sexism, burnout, unstable livelihoods, and work-life balance challenges—conditions that are perpetuated and concealed by intensely competitive labor markets, normative notions of play, and the ambivalent injunction to “do what you love.”

In the research economy of game studies, labor analysis has a relatively marginal profile as compared to the analysis of individual games, for example. Nonetheless, the past two decades have seen the advance of digital game labor scholarship across a variety of fields, including communication, cultural studies, geography, organization studies, and beyond. Although this literature defies simple summary, a fragmentary survey indicates that game labor research was an early site of not only the “turn to labour” (Gill and Pratt 2008, 17) in media and cultural studies generally but also of the “digital labour debate” specifically (Huws 2014, 160).

Schematically, the study of digital game labor has tended to cluster around four areas of inquiry. The first is below-the-line labor. In the late 1990s, some of the initial academic accounts of labor in the game industry countered the then ascendant rhetoric celebrating the democratizing promise of new information technologies with critical political-economic analysis of the international, gendered division of labor underpinning console-based video game production (Dyer-Witheford 1999). Research also examines such below-the-line labor as the employment precarity of game testers, the affective labor of community managers of online games, and the gendered work of game promotion (e.g., Bulut 2015; deWinter, Kocurek, and Vie 2016; Huntemann 2013; Kerr and Kelleher 2015; Taylor, Jensen, and de Castell 2009). A second area of inquiry is the creative labor of game development (Ruggill et al. 2017). Focused on the AAA sector, research on digital game development spans the labor process (Kerr 2006; Nichols 2014; O'Donnell 2014), work organization (Hodgson and Briand 2013), professional identities (Deuze, Bowen Martin, and Allen 2007; Weststar 2015), and studio working conditions, with an emphasis on work intensity and hegemonic masculinity (Consalvo 2008; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2006, 2009; Johnson 2014). This area of inquiry is gradually widening beyond the AAA sector to investigate cultures of production within indie game development milieus specifically (Martin and Deuze 2009; Ruffino 2013).
A third area of digital game labor studies is player-production (see deWinter and Kocurek 2014). In part a rebuttal to the uncritical elevation of participatory culture, an influential contribution to this stream of game labor research is the concept “playbour” (Kücklich 2005), which, analogous to the “free labor” idea (Terranova 2000), highlights the blurring of work and play and the mobilization of gamer-generated content as a lucrative source of game industry productivity. Research on player-production is vast, covering studies of “modding” commercially released games and hardware (Postigo 2007; Sotomaa 2007), the sale of user-generated games within in-game marketplaces (Grimes 2015), gold farming for in-game currency to sell in exchange for national currency (Goggin 2011; Jin and Herold 2014), the metaplayers that create community resources such as walkthroughs and Let’s Play videos (Consalvo 2003; Postigo 2016), and the “co-creative labour” of amateur game-makers and commercial studios (Banks and Humphreys 2008). The fourth, and the least developed, area of inquiry, assesses game labor politics, including, for example, autonomous game production (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005), alternative game-making spaces such as women-run game incubators (Fisher and Harvey 2013) and coworking spaces and collaborative studios (Young 2018), and the prospect of the unionization of game developers (Legault, Weststar, and Tô 2018).

This special issue argues for the significance of labor as an entry point to the analysis of digital game media. While the contributors examine a variety of sites in the contemporary landscape of digital game labor, there are several cross-cutting themes in the issue. For one, the issue prioritizes social groups that have been historically marginalized in game production and studies of game labor. Addressing social inequalities in the game workforce that are rooted in gender, race, sexuality, and class, the issue troubles discourses of democratization and diversity in independent game production contexts, and considers how criticisms of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity in game culture are voiced, contained, or co-opted. Second, the issue attends to patterns of exploitation and enlistment within a sphere of media work that is strongly marked by aspiration, steeply stratified, and rigorously managed. In the process, contributors apply to the study of game labor a variety of key concepts from emerging currents of scholarship on cultural work, contemporary capitalism, and digital labor. Third, the issue emphasizes contestation, with contributors identifying and assessing strategies for mitigating exploitation and exclusion in an industry where sustained labor resistance is often thwarted by high employee and company turnover and by the silencing of workers through non-disclosure agreements and public shaming.

Rather than a generic figure of game labor, the contributors to this issue engage specific formations of digital game labor. Comprised of nine articles, the issue offers empirically informed analyses of select moments on the circuit of digital game labor—from training game developers to collectively organizing them. The issue begins by addressing the educational formation of aspiring professional game developers. Alison Harvey assesses the efficacy of higher-education game programs in the United Kingdom as a means to make the game workforce more inclusive. Harvey reveals that the pedagogical cultures within such programs can function to normalize exploitative industry labor practices, uphold a masculinist ethos of “labor bravado,” and foreclose a social-justice case for expanding access to gamework. Next, Aleena Chia, based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork on digital game hobbyists, theorizes the moral calculus that justifies unremunerated passionate work and rationalizes vocational compromise. Tracing this calculus to industrialization’s separation of work from recreation and to the positioning of hobbies as a form of productive leisure, Chia urges us to challenge the prevailing “do what you love” credo by rethinking collective narratives of purposeful livelihoods.
The following three articles investigate game labor formations within the “indie” sector. These contributions critically question the utopian claims surrounding the independent game development scene, which are encapsulated in the slogan “anyone can make games.” While technical barriers to enter game development have lowered, many familiar social obstacles remain intact, and new barriers have arisen. These articles confront sexuality-, gender-, race-, and class-based inequities in independent game production, and emphasize the challenges in creating sustainable livelihoods and navigating market risk in the indie context. Bonnie Ruberg makes visible the heightened economic precarity of LGBTQ indie game-makers—even as commentators and developers in the mainstream game industry laud and profit from queer indie designers’ innovative contributions to game culture. Next, Jennifer Whitson considers developers’ critiques of the AAA sector and the emergence of new game development practices, namely small teams and data-driven design, in relation to the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Notwithstanding the promise of enhanced creative autonomy, Whitson’s research suggests that data-driven design neither translates into secure livelihoods for gameworkers nor generates an alternative to risk-averse AAA studios. Sam Srauy goes on to investigate how AAA developers imagine the indie sector as vital to the amelioration of hegemonic representations of race in digital games, a perspective based on the assumption that indie developers are not burdened by the risk-aversion that contributes to the recycling of dominant patterns of racial representation within the AAA sector’s output. Challenging the burdening of racialized indie developers with the responsibility to “fix” racism in games, Srauy contends that indie developers operate within structural conditions—commercial risk and labor precarity in particular—which may lead indie developers to replicate rather than disrupt AAA norms.

The next three articles explore platform-based, geographic, and discursive formations of digital game labor performance. Reporting on international fieldwork, Jamie Woodcock and Mark Johnson take a labor perspective on the predominant live-streaming platform, Twitch.tv. Woodcock and Johnson approach the work of gaming commentators through the conceptual lens of affective labor, detailing the time-intensive, emotionally demanding, and frequently unpaid labor of performance involved in establishing personal brands and sustaining viewership on Twitch. Reflecting the geographic diffusion of game production networks, Anna Ozimek investigates the conditions and experiences of digital game testers working in Polish external quality assurance service companies that specialize in outsourcing contracts from international developers and publishers. Ozimek’s interviews with external game testers about their work, which she interprets as a form of “hope labor,” reveals the prevalence of self-exploitation and precarious working conditions but also periodic expressions of resistance in the workplace. Next, Suzanne de Castell and Karen Skardzius critically examine a discursive formation of game labor: public speech by women about their experiences working in the digital game industry. de Castell and Skardzius provide a discourse analysis of public interviews with and comments by women about working in the male-dominated game industry. In addition to identifying recurrent themes in these narratives about women in games, they consider the rhetorical constraints that public speech imposes upon women speaking about gender inequality in digital game development.

In the face of persistent grievances about social inequalities and strained labor conditions within the digital game industry, how are game workers responding collectively? This special issue concludes with Joanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault’s survey of key moments of public resistance and collective action by digital game workers. Weststar and Legault document
the role of professional associations, exposés of working conditions, gender equity struggles, and collective organizing efforts, including the recent emergence of the activist group Game Workers Unite. Suggesting that the overwhelmingly unorganized game industry is at a decisive political juncture, Weststar and Legault use the framework of mobilization theory to evaluate the prospect of unionization in the game industry.

This special issue reaffirms the analytical value and ethical urgency of taking labor as an entry point into the study of digital game media. Ultimately, the contributors to this issue promote a research orientation that would be attentive to how work in the digital game industry might be made more accessible and sustainable. In addition, however, the perspectives that are advanced in this issue point toward a media studies optic that is alert to the ways in which conditions of media work impinge upon the production of media content. The labor conditions and transformations detailed in this issue are not, of course, wholly unique to the digital game industry. The project-based organization of work, data-driven content production, deeply gendered cultures of production, the mobilization of media audiences as a source of promotional energy, the emergence of subsectors codified as “independent,” the glamorization of work, and the normalization of precarity are apparent across a variety of media industries. Our understanding of the distinctiveness of these processes within the digital game industry could be deepened through comparative media labor research. Such an approach has contemporary political relevance in the context of growing public discussion of game labor issues. In addition to looking back at the lineage of worker resistance within the digital game industry, insight into game labour politics might be gained by exploring adjacent industrial contexts, such as histories of worker organizing in the tech sector, the experience of film and television unions, and, recently, journalists’ successful campaigns to unionize several digital newsrooms in the US and Canada in an effort to mitigate precarity and enhance social equity.

Finally, while this issue illuminates specific formations of digital game labor, another direction for future labor research is the game industry’s role in shaping work outside its bounds. While gamification is a clear example in this regard, new paths of study are suggested by two contemporary examples. Slack, originally built as an in-house collaboration tool for developers at the studio Slack Technologies (originally Tiny Speck), has become a go-to solution for the management of communication within teams in business, government, and academia. And the Unity3D game engine, a game production pipeline, is now implemented across film and television, architecture, construction, and automotive industries for real-time 3D visualization. These are just two examples of how game labor contributes to digital transformations of work and production well beyond the scope of the game industry per se. Tracking how the socio-technical innovations of digital game labor are diffused and, in the process, contribute to the mutation of a variety of sites of labor and industry in a digital age, is an area ripe for investigation.
References


doi:10.1177%2F0950017012460315

In _Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place_, edited by Nina Beth Huntemann and Ben Aslinger, 


Jin, Ge, and David Kurt Herold. 2014. “Gold Farmers and Water Army: Digital Playbour with Chinese 
Characteristics.” In _China Online: Locating Society in Online Spaces_, edited by Peter Marolt and David 

Johnson, Robin. 2014. “Hiding in Plain Sight: Reproducing Masculine Culture at a Video Game Studio.” 


of Capital: Community Managers in the Digital Games Industry.” _Critical Studies in Media 

games-industry/.

Legault, Marie-Josée, Johanna Weststar, and Laurenc Tô. 2018. “A Union for Video Game Developers?” _First 


of Alabama Press.


Press.

Postigo, Hector. 2007. “Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-Based Digital Game 


