

## IX. Employment Relations and Alternative Organizing Strategies for Workers in High-Tech Occupations

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# Occupational Community: Opportunity or Threat to Collective Action Among Video Game Developers?

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### Abstract

This paper examines the propensity of video game developers to engage in collective action as a response to their employment risks. Mobilization theory (Tilly 1978; Kelly 1998) states that workers will move toward collective action if they perceive employment conditions as an “injustice” and attribute that injustice to an external source (i.e., the employer or industry at large). This paper embeds the concept of occupational community (Salaman 1971a, 1971b) to highlight how the collective norms and values of the video game development occupational community can both help and hinder the perception of injustice and external attribution required for mobilization.

### Introduction

Ulrich Beck defined the “risk society” stating that “in the individualized society the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on” (1992:135). This concept of individualism, Beck’s “I am I,” has permeated the dominant societal discourse; it is reinforced by the neoliberal messages of conservative political elites and corporate industry and internalized by the citizenry. Despite critiques to the contrary (see Perelman 2005; Callero 2009), the rise in individualism is assumed to exist in a reciprocal relationship with a decline in collectivism. In the context of the workplace, this seems most apparent with the decline in union density across most of the industrialized world. It has been argued that overall worker solidarity and class consciousness have evaporated and workers are uninterested in solving workplace issues through collective means (Brown 1990; Bassett and Cave 1993). Yet others have argued that collectivism and a sense of collective interest can exist despite overt or necessarily measureable demonstrations (Kelly 1998) and that visible mobilization of collective interest requires particular supporting environments (Tilly 1978; Offe and Weisenthal 1985; Kelly 1998).

The present work explores these issues through an analysis of the propensity toward collective action among video game developers. They are commonly perceived as highly individualistic and emblematic of the rising “knowledge workers” on the contemporary labor scene; however, this paper will show that video game developers do share a collective consciousness that is developed and reinforced through their occupational community (Salaman 1971a, 1971b; Van Maanen and Barley 1984). Defined more broadly below, a group of workers is said to have an occupational community when their identities are shaped by their work, they share norms and values, and their work/leisure boundaries are blurred. Despite this sense of collective, video game developers have not mobilized lasting resistance against video game employers—even in the face of

considerable employment risks (i.e., unlimited and unpaid overtime). Some isolated cases of class action lawsuits and whistle blowing through the use of the social web have occurred, but these have largely been short-term disruptions (i.e., Hyman 2008; Schumacher 2006).

This paper frames the analysis of collective action among video game developers using mobilization theory (Tilly 1978; Kelly 1998). It embeds the concept of occupational community as a moderating variable to highlight how the norms and values of the occupational community influence whether workplace actions are perceived as injustices and whether sufficient external attribution of those injustices occurs to mobilize the group. The paper begins with conceptual overviews of mobilization theory, occupational community, and the video game industry before outlining how video game developers fit the definition of an occupational community. The remaining discussion examines how the norms and values of the video game developer occupational community can both help and hinder the formation of a strong perceived injustice by their employers and the embedded operational structures of the video game industry.

## Conceptual Framework

### *Mobilization Theory*

Kelly (1998) noted that there is no one universal theory of mobilization and provided an overview that blends the work of Tilly (1978), McAdam (1988), and Gamson (1992). Mobilization refers to the process by which individuals come to be collective actors (Tilly 1978:69). There are two steps at the heart of this process and most central to the arguments presented in this paper. First, individuals must begin to define their interests in group terms and then frame these interests against those of another. McAdam (1988) and other social movement theorists argue that this framing of interests manifests around a sense of injustice. As Kelly summarizes, it is not sufficient for workers to be merely dissatisfied; “the sine qua non for collective action is a sense of injustice, the conviction that an event, action, or situation is ‘wrong’ or ‘illegitimate’ ” (1998:27). Once the group has come to perceive an action as an injustice, a source for that injustice must be identified. The source cannot be an uncontrollable force and the source cannot be internally attributed; in the first case, the group will see no agency to bring change, and in the second, there will be a group tendency to normalize the injustice rather than face their own need to change. Therefore, the cause of the injustice must be attributed to an out-group to establish the classic “we” versus “them” of collective struggle (Gamson 1995; Kelly 1998).

Kelly (1998:29) outlined that injustice can arise when management violates established rules and also when the actions of the employer conflict with beliefs shared among the group members (i.e., the workers) and thought to be shared with management. It is this latter situation that invites the study of how the beliefs and value systems shared by an occupational community might influence the perception of workplace conditions as injustices and the subsequent external attribution of these injustices to management’s violation of shared values. The following section will define occupational community more closely.

### *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 origins of the term 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 behavior 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. 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, “occupational community” has been used in labor relations literature to denote relationships among union members or residents in one-company towns (Hill 1981); however, these are not sufficient, or 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: boundaries, social identity, reference group, and social relations. In essence, a group of workers can be described as an occupational community if they consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; if they have a high sense of personal involvement and absorption in their work such that they draw their identities from that; if they have a common set of values, norms, and perspectives that apply to, but extend beyond the work; and if their social relationships and activities blur work/leisure boundaries.

There is a growing body of literature that classifies specific groups of workers as occupational communities (Bruno 1999; Marschall 2002; Lee-Ross 1998, 2004; Sandiford and Seymour 2007), but research that applies the concept of occupational community to understand the actions of particular groups is less prevalent. In some instances, the literature makes reference to the implications of an occupational community for worker behavior in and out of work. For example, understanding an occupational community may provide a framework for understanding sense of belonging (Salaman 1974), coping (Sandiford and Seymour 2007), learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Bechky 2003), and job motivation (Fuller and Unwin 1999). In two known studies, occupational communities have been linked to worker mobilization.

In the first, Benner (2003) argued that “occupational communities” formed in the information technology landscape of Silicon Valley as a response to the increased job insecurity in the sector and the inability for traditional unions to gain a representational foothold. Here the occupational community is seen to provide organizational cohesion across specific types of workers across a variety of firms (i.e., web designers, system administrators, graphic artists). However, Benner uses the term occupational community synonymously with “occupational association” and “guild” and it is unclear whether the term holds a greater significance for the group. An occupational community is not necessarily an occupational association or guild, and it may not engage in any formalized advocacy or resistance. As such, the OC is interpreted in this case as a networking group that is an end state of the manifestation of the need for greater security. That said, as the source of organizational cohesion, they are the logical place to look for any coalescing of attitudes toward mobilization.

In the second relevant study, Campbell (2010) clearly defines the occupational community of crown prosecutors in Nova Scotia, Canada, in the vein of Salaman (1971a, 1971b), Van Maanen and Barley (1984), and the others outlined above. In her work, Campbell (2010) places the values of the occupational community in a dynamic role. Rather than turn to their professional association to address perceived workplace injustices, the specific values of the occupational community of this specialized group of lawyers led them to collective bargaining. This work will be discussed in more detail below, as it is particularly relevant to how the concept of occupational community can moderate the mobilization intentions of video game developers.

### *Overview of the Video Game Industry*

Video game developers are the graphic artists, animators, computer programmers, game designers, and producers who create video games. They are emblematic of the rising actors on the contemporary labor 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-Witthoford 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 more than \$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 it 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-Witthof, 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, burn-out, 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-Witthof and de Peuter 2006; Deuze 2007; Deuze, Martin, and Allen 2007; and Legault and Weststar 2010).

Despite these considerable issues, workers in the video game industry, like most high-tech knowledge workers, remain unorganized by trade unions. However, that is not to say that negotiation and resistance are not occurring. Indeed, as Haiven (2006:87) notes, “deployers [of labor] and their workers are negotiating all of the time, even in the absence of trade unions.” In related work, Legault and Weststar (2010) summarized the forms of individual and collective action in which video game developers engage to address workplace issues and assessed the ability of each to bring change (see also de Peuter and Dyer-Witthof 2005). This is important for the discussion of mobilization that is presented below as it shows the capacity for video game developers to act collectively should the necessary enabling conditions exist (Kelly 1998).

## Data and Methodology

The primary source of data and the resulting analysis for this paper borrows from discourse analysis methodology. Rather than interview or survey video game developers directly about their work culture, I have relied on naturally occurring linguistic sources that let the workers showcase their occupational community without outside interference or observation. Given the nature of their work, their aptitudes, and their interests, video game developers have created a very strong online presence. There are a host of game industry websites that report recent developments, interview key industry players, and facilitate open debate and dialogue (e.g., 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 that 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 game developers maintain their own blogs about the industry as do “hard core” fans. What this produces is an incredibly rich, self-reflective, and completely member-generated account of the industry’s norms, behaviors, challenges, successes, and expectations. Over the past four years, I have collected these online documents and imported them into the QSR NVivo qualitative software analysis package. I coded complete sources and individual components of articles or discussions on a range of nodes that included characteristics of occupational community as well as nodes pertaining to working conditions, work-life balance, industry news, the role of the IGDA, education and job search, as well as innovation and risk. This social media data has been supplemented with informal conversations with senior members of the games community.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Video Game Developers as an Occupational Community*

Van Maanen and Barley (1984) conceptualize occupational community as comprising four elements: boundaries, social identity, reference group, and social relations. Each of these elements is closely tied to the

others to create a reinforcing circle of affirmation for members of an occupational community. Members of an occupational community self-select into that group, they gain intrinsic satisfaction in and take their identity from their work, they have blurred lines between their work and their leisure activities, and they share norms, customs, and language that are unique to their group. The following snapshot of the industry showcases these aspects.

The majority of video game developers came 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 more 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. Would-be game developers are 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, organizing modding groups, make flash games, and develop ideas for user interfaces into prototypes that you can test.... (Prinkle 2010)

As the above quote notes, 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. The set-up for this exchange is that Hahn is thinking about a career in the industry and he wrote an open post on Gamasutra Blogs wondering if it is possible to have a lifelong career in the industry (Hahn 2009). He cites some readily discussed concerns such as crunch, little glamour and recognition, and relatively low pay (to other opportunities for programmers or 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.

Hahn 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, as 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: [G]ame 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 authors' [sic] 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, Hahn 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 Hahn: 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. The values around fame and fortune 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. 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. This small excerpt also shows how much of 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. All have a love affair with computer games; for many, to echo Mac Senour above, games are simply their life.

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 lawyers, but particularly manifests among more marginalized or threatened groups. Games and particular segments of games are referenced in passing, yet 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, a status that they hold against a society that can trivialize and be critical of their work. One can imagine the marginalizing stereotypical image of geeks and nerds; grown men playing games in their mothers' basements.

Boundaries do not constrain a group to a single geographical place or a specific occupational title; members of an occupational community internally see themselves "to be" members of that occupation rather than simply being a member by virtue of their occupational title (Van Maanen and Barley 1984:295). In this way, the occupational community of the video game industry extends around the world and includes past, present, and future employees. The plethora of blogs, forums, and websites devoted to internal reflection about the industry and the fact that they are frequented by avid fans, game developer hopefuls, students, current developers, and people who have left the industry are evidence of this broader community.

The boundary of the occupational community, and the corresponding sense of belongingness, is reinforced by social activities. 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. An anecdotal comment from a restaurateur near a game studio said that the restaurant could never predict whether they would have no business or sell out of everything at lunchtime. 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 thatgame company hosts a “24 hour Game Jam”:

Hello, I'm Kellee Santiago from thatgamecompany, creators of fLOW, 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 multi-player 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.”

To conclude this section, video game developers and the broader community of self-described “hard core” gamers constitute an occupational community. The remainder of this paper will examine how understanding the occupational community of video game developers within the framework of mobilization theory can partially explain their propensity toward collective action. On one hand, the occupational community hinders collective action because the norms of the community are mirrored very closely by the norms of the corporate industry itself. On the other, as the discussion below will show, the norms and values of the occupational community—what it means to be a game developer and make great games—could be harnessed as a rallying point when they are threatened.

#### *Occupational Community and Industry Culture Aligned: A Hindrance to Collective Action*

In their book *Games of Empire*, Dyer-Witford and de Peuter (2009) outlined that video games are emblematic of capitalism. They highlighted how video games were born from the military industrial complex of the Cold War Era—created by the same hackers who were programming the first computers. They argued that the content, themes, and characters of video games reinforce notions of individuality, competition, and consumerism, and have overt and covert militaristic and domination themes. The more extreme examples of this are the recruiting games used by the United States Army (Li 2003; Sasoon 2009) and the growing “gameification” of all aspects of business (Edery and Mollick 2008). Dyer-Witford and de Peuter (2009) argued that video games reinforce the hierarchical struggles of society, but also revere individualism in the lone hero who can overcome all odds. Through their gameplay, video games socialize players to individualistic environments that reflect broad-based capitalist values that are also deeply rooted in the structures and norms of the video game industry itself. As briefly outlined above, the industry values, norms and structures reflect secrecy and confidentiality, intense competition, extreme cost awareness, and a polarization of work with conglomeration and dominance of a few publisher-studios countered by a diaspora of small independents trying to live the dream. There is a vast global network of outsourcing (Dyer-Witford and de Peuter 2009) and downloading of risk to smaller studios, developers, and gamers through sub-contracting, the responsibilities of team autonomy, and user-generated content, respectively.

It is within this context that the norms and values of the occupational community and the culture of the industry and specific studios become aligned. Capitalist norms, values, and identities that are represented in video games are reinforced through the occupational community of the video game developers and through the organizational cultures of dominant studios and the industry as a whole. Where earlier job advertisements were used to show the messaging of occupational community, they also showcase the industry culture that is espoused by management and internalized by the occupational community. This culture supports a “work as play” model (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2004) and individualist and capitalist values. Job ads tell video game developers that they should value “innovation,” be “creative,” “work hard and play hard,” and they should want to be “part of something big and great.” In short, they should be driven, passionate, competitive, and try to achieve glory and perfection through their work. This discourse is echoed across the social web by developers themselves.

These assumed norms create an environment where self-exploitation is natural (McRobbie 2002). Despite a handful of outspoken developers, general disapproval of the IGDA and a few progressive studios, crunch and job insecurity is expected and rationalized. Particularly in the United States, many developers work under the often-erroneous assumption that they are exempt from overtime payment. Though they work almost exclusively in highly interdependent project teams, at the heart they are quite individualistic. They see mobility and fluidity of the industry as a gateway to flexibility and advancement rather than recognizing its inherent risk (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005; Neff 2007; Legault and Weststar 2010) or its purposive structural application that allows large studios to minimize labor overhead between production phases (Gouglas et al. 2010). This scenario is summarized well by a posting on a blog called Ubi Free 2.0 that was created in September 2010 about the Ubisoft Montreal studio:

The major problem in the video game industry is that the precarious working conditions are seen as the norm. Since then, scandals and other EA Spouse, Ubi Free (the original) including those conditions [are] known to the world and have the perverse effect of making believe that is it normal to work 70h-80h per week for the same salary, without any compensation. If you are not happy they should go work elsewhere, so developers got along with the idea of being exploited. This causes a vicious circle where new employees find it normal to work like slaves without any compensation or guarantee, after a while they just require the same for the next generation. (ubifree2 2010)

In line with a seeming acceptance and normalization of career “flexibility,” the dominant voices of the video game developer occupational community profess a high degree of disdain toward bureaucratic forms. This fits with the counter-culture nature of their work, the hacker mentality, and values personified in games by the lone hero or the group of intrepid adventurers. Like bohemian start-ups in the dotcom era (Ross 2003) and the popular mystique of companies like Google and Apple, video game developers want to believe the sensibility of a workplace unencumbered by the trappings of Weber’s iron cage, spurred only by creative autonomy, drive and passion (see also Deuze, Martin, and Allen 2007).

Despite the fact that the lived reality of video game development does not match these idealized forms, the guiding ethos remains and, when it is coupled with very real structural challenges of the industry (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005), it is a strong barrier to traditional forms of collective action like unionization. The industry does have a professional association in the form of the IGDA. However, as with many professional associations the IGDA’s main role is to support the maintenance of the competencies and networks of game developers. In recent years, the IGDA has developed a stance on what they term “quality of life.” To this end they have conducted two large surveys on working conditions, produced a number of reports, formed a third-party grievance process, and are working on Quality of Life certification and codes of practice (IGDA, no date; Legault and Weststar 2010). Despite this, stories of unsustainable working conditions at various studios abound and little real change seems to have taken place.

As responses to an article on quality of life indicate, the passion for the work and the fear of being denied the ability to do that work (through replacement or studio closure) always seems to overpower the voices in the occupational community that advocate for unions, guilds or other forms of lasting workplace/industry regulation. There is always “more blood oil for the machine” (Starkey 2008) in the form of new eager recruits and the industry is full of “guys [who] just like to work on games all hours of the day.



Even some of those guys complaining about the long hours ... then go home ... and work on their own games at home. Most people really enjoy working on games, so won't make a stink about it when asked to work late" (Hilliard 2008).

The online debates around unionization that are offered up by the game development community and the short life of even high profile outcries, show that poor working conditions are not a sufficient trigger for change. The values that perpetuate crunch (i.e., passion for the work and striving for the next best game) are legitimized by both the occupational community and the industry and therefore crunch is not perceived as a lasting injustice. As will be discussed more below, the incidents are also not wholly attributed to management (producers, senior managers or other industry players). However, more sustained mobilization might still be possible if management were perceived to be in violation of values that are more deeply rooted in the occupational community, or the contract of shared beliefs between the workers and management is more clearly broken (Kelly 1998).

*Occupational Community and Industry Culture Diverge: The Broken Promise of Creativity and Innovation*

It is important at this point to return to a discussion of Campbell's (2010) work on crown prosecutors. In this case, the crown prosecutors were classified as a specific occupational community that belonged to the larger profession of lawyers. Campbell (2010) showed how this group shares working conditions that are quite different from other lawyers because the specific nature of their job upholds very strong values of fairness, due process, and procedural justice. She documented how, from the viewpoint of crown prosecutors, specific working conditions (increased caseload, new managerial directives) threatened their ability to carry out justice and how the changes impacting their occupational community were perceived as unfair. As a result of this perceived breach of the core values of their occupational community and their inability to gain ground with past approaches (i.e., their professional association), the crown prosecutors turned to collective bargaining. It was their sense of fairness that brought them to this specialty of law and it was the sense of being treated unfairly themselves that directed them to collective bargaining as a remedial outlet. In this case, the values of the occupational community were aligned with the values of the work, which were embedded in the organizational culture of the employer. When the core values of the occupational community became unaligned with those of the employer (i.e., the working conditions and treatment became unfair), these actions were quickly perceived as injustices attributed to the employer and the occupational community took decisive action.

There are parallels with the case of video game developers. As identified above, there is a strong occupational community that holds values that usually mirror the broad norms and values of the industry and of the work. However, cases over the past 15 years have shown that parts of this alignment are becoming unhinged. EA Spouse (Hoffman 2004), the Rockstar Spouse (2010), the Ubifree movement (ubifree2 2010), recent scandal at Team Bondi (McMillen 2011a, 2011b), and the counter-examples of some progressive game studios show a multiplicity of voices in the occupational community. There is a growing sense that issues such as crunch, unlimited unpaid overtime, and the increased focus of risk-averse publishers on game franchises (instead of original intellectual property) threaten *the* core aspect of the occupational community—the drive to make amazing, innovative, and fun games.

Through the lens of mobilization theory, we can classify the periodic outcries over working conditions as a surface characteristic that quickly rises and is as quickly brushed aside. Disparaging comments about the whistle blowing of EA Spouse, the Rockstar Spouse, and Team Bondi, for example, show that the concern over working conditions is entirely dismissed by some members of the community. Electronic Arts settled some class action lawsuits out of court and reclassified some programmers to be non-exempt of overtime pay (Schumacher 2006). Rockstar San Diego received a stern letter from the IGDA stating that excessive crunch time was frowned upon in the industry (IGDA 2010; see also IGDA 2011), but essentially the issue blew over once Red Dead Redemption shipped to great acclaim. Similarly, L.A. Noire, the game that Team Bondi in Sydney, Australia (in partnership with Rockstar), struggled to make under alleged mismanagement shipped to huge success. The studio did subsequently close, but as an article on Joystiq assures us, "don't you worry, IP holder Take-Two Interactive (parent company of Rockstar) isn't about to let a new series—that shipped 4 million copies—just disappear" (Sliwinski 2011). This shows that there will be

no lasting impact of the negative production environment on the industry or the fans—just on the team who made the game and who are, at least temporarily, out of work.

Though they are often in the minority, some internet comments to these stories also show a lack of sympathy and alignment with neoclassical interpretations of the labor market and employment relations. Those speaking out against unjust working conditions are labeled as “whiners” and “pussies,” or, like the socialization of John Hahn above, they are more subtly reminded of the group norms. They are accused of not being able to take it and are told to put their heads down and get back to work or find a different (read “lesser”) career. Explicitly or implicitly delivered, the message is clear and has strong militaristic overtones that resonate with the occupational community; you earn your stripes in the trenches and wear your battle scars like a badge of honour and strength, or you are not cut out for this work. Even the posts that do sympathize with cases of extreme, uncompensated crunch do so in a resigned manner that still echoes a trial by fire and survivalist attitude—“Oh ya, I worked there once and barely got out.” What this rationalization, internalization, and justification of poor working conditions do not allow is an examination of the link between a sustainable labor process and the conditions required to make great games. This is the needed component of mobilization theory where the marginalized group manages to establish an “us” versus “them” discourse where the problematic aspects of the workplace are (a) recognized as illegitimate and (b) attributed to negative employer actions rather than lack of drive or will on the part of the workers (McAdam 1988; Kelly 1998).

There is some evidence that this alternative discourse and employer stereotyping is emerging from within the occupational community. It is taking the form of a debate about the centrality of crunch to great games. An example of this is Hank Howie’s Gamasutra Features article, “Making Great Games in 40 Hours per Week” (Howie 2005). He profiled the experience of his own relatively progressive company Blue Fang as they attempted to make Zoo Tycoon 2 without crunch time. Despite attention to the issue, the team did work 26 days straight at one point to make the game’s release date. This prompts consideration of the following comment found in a separate response thread to a later Gamasutra Features article on quality of life:

There is simply no ‘getting rid’ of crunch time, unless you want to just make product. Every seasoned professional in the gamed industry knows that the fun in a game comes out in the last few months, when everyone is crunching and working hard and playing the game and looking for the fun. This is a necessary part of any project about which you care .... People don’t revolt against overtime when they are working on something they care about. They revolt about it when they see what they do as a job, and the overtime a burdensome chore. (Anonymous 2008)

Herein is the opportunity for the occupational community of video game developers. If the focus remains simply on the surface-level working conditions, the argument too easily slips into the “you don’t care enough” mantra. Or, it falls prey to the manipulative line used by large studios that is highlighted in a comment to an Edge Magazine opinion piece called *Crunch is Avoidable*—“That it’s a ‘privilege’ to work on headline games, one that may require staff to accept worse conditions” (Wiltshire 2011). However, when the surface-level concerns (crunch, burnout, job insecurity, insufficient compensation, etc.) are rooted in the stronger value of making great games, the sense of injustice and external attribution may be greater. The focus shifts from the “complaining” developer’s personal characteristics and values (an individual lens) to an assessment of the systemic conditions that inhibit the making of an amazing product (a collective lens).

When the desire for creativity and innovation espoused by industry players is revealed as a platitude and the making of games is compromised by concept and schedule mismanagement, bad company policies, and structural inequities in the publisher-studio relationships, it becomes more natural that the occupational community would support and pursue an alternative discourse. As Campbell’s (2010) crown prosecutors united under the banner of fairness (rather than low pay or high workload), those interested in mobilization among video game developers might gain more traction by leveraging the occupational community’s values of creativity and innovation as the necessary pre-conditions for the cutting-edge video games they are so driven to make.

## Conclusion

The concept of occupational community (Van Maanen and Barley 1984) has been most often applied as a typology. This paper attempted to move from the concept of occupational community as a classifying device and to a more theoretical application where propensity toward collective action can be predicted by the degree of alignment or lack thereof between the values of the occupational community and the employer(s). This theoretical framing is situated in mobilization theory, which states that workers come to collective action when they perceive a workplace injustice that can be attributed to an external source (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1988; Gamson 1995). One area where a perception of injustice may arise is when the employer violates workplace rules. Another is when the employer is seen to violate shared beliefs or values (Kelly 1998). The concept of occupation community can add to our depth of understanding about what it takes for workers to perceive an injustice on the part of the employer either when rules or beliefs are violated.

In the case of video game developers, the presence of an occupational community shows the underlying collectivity of the group and signals at least the capacity for collective action (Offe and Weisenthal 1985; Kelly 1998). However, an occupational community is not synonymous with solidarity or class consciousness and its presence does not *de facto* make a group more ready or willing to mobilize. The question for long-term labor mobilization is how the collectivity of the occupational community can be framed to spark a discourse of injustice at the hands of the employer or industry at large. To date, the occupational community primarily acts to reduce mobilization by diffusing the sense of injustice directed toward the employer through a process of individual internalization and normalization. In this case, employer violations of workplace rules (i.e., uncompensated and excessive overtime) are not perceived as injustices. The values of the occupational community tolerate and sometimes glorify these conditions as part and parcel of the industry. On the face, the occupational community is a barrier to traditional forms of workplace representation such as unionization because the core values of the occupational community align very closely with the dominant capitalist norms of the industry.

However, the occupational community may be more likely to engage in mobilization should the occupational community more deeply perceive the injustices of poor working conditions as a violation to their core values and beliefs. In this case the alignment previously shared by the community of workers and the industry actors may be broken. Rather than accepting excessive and uncompensated crunch time (among other employment risks) as germane to the industry, the occupational community could coalesce around the idea that studio executives are responsible for fostering working conditions that inhibit the ability to make great games. This may spur the occupational community to consider representational options that could protect these values—the drive to create cutting-edge video game masterpieces.

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