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Abstract

This commentary discusses the Game Worker Solidarity (GWS) Project. It documents instances of collective action in the games industry, presenting the data in a map and accompanying database. The aim of the project is to facilitate sharing information on the emergent movement for unionisation in the games industry after 2018, as well as archiving the longer history of worker resistance. We argue that understanding worker organisation—both the existing forms of collective action as well as the potential in the future—is vital for understanding the future of games and game production.

Keywords

Game worker; worker organising; trade unions; solidarity

In this commentary, we argue for the importance of worker organisation for a sustainable future of games and game production. We do this by introducing the Game Workers Solidarity (GWS) Project and website, launched in 2021. The website aims to map and document collective movements by game workers striving to improve their working conditions.¹ It details solidarity actions and an underlying database, a community on Slack that moderates and edits the actions, and an open submission process. Many of the contributions have been submitted by workers who were involved, while others have been added through personal networks or news articles. It started as a collaboration between the authors—one a game worker and the other a researcher. Although it received initial funding from the Open University, it is not a solely academic project, but instead a form of co-research. Following the

¹ The website can be accessed at <https://gameworkersolidarity.com/>.

birth of an international movement for unionisation in the videogame industry in 2018, there has been a surge of collective actions. At one stage, these were happening so quickly, that we thought there was a risk of this emerging history of game worker organising being lost. The project was directly inspired by Collective Action in Tech (Tan & Nedzhvetskaya, 2020), a website that documents collective actions taken by workers in the tech industry. They had decided to focus solely on the tech industry (which, while there is some overlap with the games industry, has important distinctions).

Game worker organising

To make sense of the data on collective action in the games industry collected for GWS, we have compared it to other recent movements for unionisation. Although not a collective mapping, a timeline of “Digital Media Unionization” has been produced as part of New Media Unions (Cohen & De Peuter, 2020). As noted elsewhere, this helped to encourage the unionisation in the games industry, as there was significant positive coverage from journalists who were either unionised or in the process of unionising themselves (Woodcock, 2020a).

It is worth noting that the games industry remains culturally distinct from the wider tech industry. As Graeme Kirkpatrick explains, “people who work in the games industry are, invariably, invested in gaming as a cultural practice ... games are made by gamers, with all that implies” (2013, p. 107). Indeed, game developers are part of a distinct group or “occupational community” (Weststar, 2015). There has, albeit in different ways in the games industry, been a longer history of struggle before unionisation (Woodcock, 2019). Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) trace this back to the games industry's hacker origins and the close connections with the military-industrial complex. There have long been issues with overwork—called “crunch” (Cote & Harris, 2021)—and gender discrimination and harassment in the industry. Neither of these interrelated phenomena are new but have long provided grievances that could be organised around (Woodcock, 2016).

One of the key questions is how and why workers move from these grievances to mobilising collectively or organising (Weststar & Legault, 2019). In a long-term study, the effects of financialisation on game workers were considered to be a challenge to effective organisation (Legault & Weststar, 2021). Similarly, issues around workers' visibility have been considered in the UK games industry (Ruffino, 2021), as well as how potential strategies for unionisation have had to adapt to this (Ruffino & Woodcock, 2021). This is related to the visibility above and below the line of game production, often with glamour above and precarious conditions below (Bulut, 2015), which challenges how different kinds of workers organise (de Peuter & Young, 2019).

Organising in the games industry took a critical turn in 2018. Although the French trade union STJV (*Le Syndicat des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo*) had existed

before, the establishment of Game Workers Unite (GWU) at the Game Developers' Conference (GDC) marked a significant development (Woodcock, 2020b). This was close on the heels of the public organising of software developers as part of the Tech Workers Coalition in the US (Prado, 2018). This has led to the growth of game worker unionisation movements (and/or their challenges) in countries like the US, UK, Poland (Ozimek, 2019), Ireland (Moody & Kerr, 2021), and South Korea (Chung & Kwon, 2020). In the UK, this has taken the direction of joining an independent union (Kelmore, 2019); an example of the recent wave of "new unionism" (Ness, 2014, p. 269) with a history of organising with precarious workers (Alberti, 2016). However, in the US, game workers organised with the more mainstream Communication Workers of America (CWA) as part of the Campaign for Digital Employees (CODE-CWA). Therefore, at this stage of unionisation, different kinds of union models and strategies are being experimented with. As one study found previously, there is also evidence that the type of union matters for the propensity of game workers to join and the kinds of organising tactics that unions use (Weststar & Legault, 2017). One part of mapping solidarity actions is understanding which of these models are proving successful and in what ways.

Building the game worker solidarity website

The idea for Game Worker Solidarity came from a conversation in September 2020 between Emma Kinema, Austin Kelmore, and Jamie Woodcock while preparing for a panel hosted by Haymarket Books called "The Work of Videogames: Reflections on Game Worker Organizing." At the time, an increasing number of solidarity actions were happening in the games industry, and we were concerned that the details could be lost. Many events were promoted on social media, and details were not recorded anywhere centrally. We define a solidarity action as any collective action (involving more than one person) taken by game workers (a broad category of any worker engaged in the production of games, videogames or otherwise) to improve their working conditions (in the broad sense, both direct and indirect working conditions, improvements from current conditions or against changes).

The process of collecting data for the project was driven by the aim to build a resource for game workers. As noted on the website:

The project is creating a website backed by a database of events that can be freely searched by location, type of action, and numbers involved for events like the creation of trade union branches, new contracts, strikes, protests, social media campaigns, etc. Where possible, we'll also interview and record oral histories with participants of these movements to produce a living resource that can help support and inspire more organising in the games industry.

This has involved various methods to populate and then update the database. First, we drew on the collective knowledge of the project participants; second, we had an

informal competition to find the earliest event in the history of game worker collective action (of which Austin is the current winner with the 1955 entry on the Nintendo workers hunger strike); third, we undertook a detailed search of news articles, both in general and in industry-specific publications; fourth, we contacted different groups of game workers, unions, and campaigns, requesting that they check the database and include any missing actions; and fifth, the website features an open submission process for solidarity actions.

As this is a crowdsourced database, there are issues with the scope of the data included. One of the main weaknesses of the data so far is that the team are primarily English speakers. Therefore, the data is skewed towards English-speaking countries, and solidarity actions are documented in English. For example, there has been an increase in events in Korea in recent years, but the actions recorded so far are likely only to represent the most visible instances. To address this, the aim is to expand the project team to include more languages and actively seek to redress this imbalance.

The data so far

As of 2023, the project has documented 155 unique solidarity actions in the games industry. These cover a period from 1955 to the present, including 19 countries. The US has by far the most documented solidarity actions on the website (76), followed by France (19), Canada (12), South Korea (10), and the UK (9). In part, this may be a reflection of the English-speaking biases of the project, as well as the relative size of the games industry in some countries and the current wave of organising.

The first documented solidarity action was in 1955 at Nintendo, an unusually early entry due the company previously manufacturing playing cards. There have been other examples of relatively isolated solidarity actions from the 1980s onwards, particularly at companies like Atari and later with voice actors. In 2017, the SAG-AFTRA voice actors' strike ended in a deal, and game workers started unions in France and Finland. However, there was a spike of 29 solidarity actions in 2018, with the launch of Game Workers Unite (and many local chapters), and unions in South Korea and the UK. This higher level of solidarity actions has continued in 2019 (20), 2020 (21), 2021 (24), and 2022 (24). The launch of Game Workers Unite has been seen by many as a pivotal moment in the history of game worker organising, in which the idea of unionisation became widely debated in the industry. However, this also means that it has received more news coverage, meaning it is still essential to inquire into instances that predate 2018. Even with the limitations discussed in the previous section, it is clear that there has been an increase in public-facing solidarity actions since 2018. However, a range of different activities can be included under this broad categorisation.

The most significant of these has been the emergence of ten new organising groups, most of which are in North America, except for STJV Plug In Digital in France. The

establishment of these groups has been part of the broader push by CODE-CWA in North America to form seven new unions. Significant differences exist between the industrial relations system in the US and other national contexts. The need for union cards and petitions for NLRB elections means there is a public company-by-company process for unionisation, something not required in other contexts with game worker unions like France and Britain.

There have also been some concrete wins for solidarity actions in recent years. For example, the union Novi Sindikat signed a collective bargaining agreement at Gamechuck in Croatia, with improvements including 6-hour working days. Dreamfeel signed a living wage campaign pledge as part of an ongoing GWU Ireland campaign. In the US, 1,100 Quality Assistance (QA) at Blizzard Activision were made permanent following a campaign, receiving higher wages with a new minimum of \$10 US dollars per hour and benefits. In 2023, there was the formation of the first union of game workers in Poland, unionisation in Sweden, further unionisation across North America, and strikes by SAG-AFTRA members over their interactive media contract.

Where next for game worker organising?

The GWS project has so far been a success. The website has a set of practices and processes for inviting, assessing, and uploading solidarity events to an accessible database. An increasing range of data is included on the website, although some notable areas require further coverage, particularly those not covered in English-language news. It has met the initial goals of ensuring that events following the 2018 wave of game worker unionisation were documented to ensure they remained available afterward. There are challenges for expanding the coverage beyond this, but many of those initial events are now recorded (including attachments with statements and other resources where possible) for future analysis.

It has also raised questions about what has happened in game worker organising. The key dynamic in recent years was the continuing push for unions in the US, led by CODE-CWA and union election votes. As noted, this is specific to the industrial relations system in the US and does not compare that effectively with other contexts. These are “public” moments of campaigns, that otherwise may not have been visible to people outside the organising groups in different industrial relations systems. For example, in Britain, union membership is protected and can be kept secret from employers.

The public union votes are a shift from the three emergent lessons from the 2018/2019 organising. As Woodcock (2020a) noted previously, the first lesson is that there are alternative approaches to building collective power that can be seen with the game worker unionisation wave. In particular, this involved a discussion of GWU, the now-defunct international network. Instead of building from a network outside

the workplace, many groups in different national contexts have been trying to develop workplace networks or unions, returning to international networks, like the UNI Global conference.

The second lesson was that contesting control over work, rather than pay, could be an important motivator for organising. There are various control-related issues, whether “crunch”, what kinds of videogames are made (and with what partners), and issues relating to diversity and gender oppression in the industry. However, there have been relatively few instances in which these questions have been taken up in organising campaigns. Other than the walkouts at Riot Games, the campaigns have primarily focused on the right to have a union (and then to be able to bargain collectively) and fighting for basic improvements, like the campaign for permanent contracts at Activision Blizzard. Notably, the driving force in organising campaigns in the US has been either lower-paid and more precarious QA workers or those at smaller, independent studios. There has yet to be a breakthrough with developers at a large company.

The third lesson remains important: that the development of game worker organising will need to meet game workers where they already are. At first, this meant developing things like the GWU zine and using Discord for communication. However, there is now an increasing production of material and resources of game workers that is developing a specific way of organising with these kinds of workers.

Finally, this feeds into an important issue to be explored further: the different and divergent forms of unions and models being experimented with in the games industry. In each country, game workers have taken different approaches to unionisation. In some cases, workers have joined larger established unions (US, Canada), including those closer to professional associations (Australia), founded new unions (France), joined independent unions (UK), or established enterprise-level unions (Korea). Each of these paths has benefits and constraints, including the different models of the unions (whether organising, servicing, or otherwise), tactics and strategies, levels of funding and resourcing, integration with other parts of the union, and so on. The continuing growth of the game workers movement highlights the importance of international solidarity. The games industry is becoming increasingly globally integrated, particularly through ownership relationships and the centralisation of capital. There is clear potential for greater cooperation between game workers internationally. Each of these questions is essential yet remains relatively unanswered so far.

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Conflicts of interest

Austin Kelmore and Jamie Woodcock are both members of the team that started and maintains the Game Worker Solidarity website. They are both members of unions that have been featured on the website.

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