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Project-Based Workplaces, and the New
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**by Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault
(Concordia University Press, 2024)**

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Abstract

A review of Johanna Weststar's and Marie-Josée Legault's book *Not All Fun and Games: Videogame Labour, Project-based Workplaces, and the New Citizenship at Work*. Published by Concordia University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-98811-149-0, 408 pages.

Keywords

Game production; game labour; game developers; project-based workplaces; work regulation; industrial citizenship

Video game developers (VGDs) are highly skilled and passion-driven workers who might enjoy workplaces full of creativity and playfulness, but their careers are also precarious and uncertain. It is estimated that about 25,000 people lost their jobs in game development due to the 2023 and 2024 wave of layoffs (Game Industry Layoffs, n.d.). VGDs further experience burnout and health problems due to unpaid overtime and are lacking in gender and ethnic diversity—those who do not fit the stereotypical game worker group of young White males (Ozimek, 2021) are often ostracised and harassed at workplaces. In a book poignantly called *Not All Fun and Games*, Marie-Josée Legault and Johanna Weststar address the abovementioned issues by asking: Can game workers even be regulating and democratising actors of their workplaces given the job instability and precarity? And given the diversity in their job roles and gender and ethnic homogeneity, are some of them second-class citizens, bereft of the benefits of regulating their workplaces?

To answer these questions, the authors use their insider status as administrators of International Game Developers Association (IGDA) surveys and as Canadian academics. They draw from IGDA surveys from 2004 to 2019, and two series of qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted with over a hundred game workers in Canada in 2008 and 2013–2014. Since the book focuses on employment relationships, it speaks mostly to the experiences of employees in bigger studios, excluding usually self-employed indies and hobbyists. The book is thus a useful addition to previous publications that were preoccupied with the experiences of the latter (Keogh, 2023).

Ten book chapters are divided into theoretical, contextual, and analytical parts. The book's theoretical framework needs explanation as it drives its structure and is based on North American literature. To study work regulation in game development, the authors use the concept of *industrial citizenship* distilled from the works of Marshall (1950) and Arthurs (1967) to describe workers' means of regulating or governing their workplaces. While Legault and Weststar previously used the framework of industrial citizenship, they did so in IGDA survey reports (e.g., Tô et al., 2016) rather than academic articles.

Born out of the 1950s and 1960s labour reforms applied to mass production in the United States, industrial citizenship provided many workers with four main gains: (1) protection against economic insecurity or the risks of lost income (in events of unemployment, the birth of a child or layoffs), (2) recourse against arbitrary decisions at work (i.e., remedies against certain managerial decisions), (3) workers' participation in the local regulation of labour regarding critical issues (such as overtime compensation or sexism and discrimination at workplaces), and (4) broader social regulation of work, industry, or sector (through supporting or opposing certain laws, forming collective bodies such as unions). That said, industrial citizenship takes two forms: *passive citizenship* as a stand-in before the universal laws provided by the state (as per Marshall, 1950) and *active citizenship* as workers' means to regulate labour in their workplaces through unionization (as per Arthurs, 1967).

Applying solely these four gains to analyse the experiences of game workers who resist "monotonous jobs in industrial plants and offices" (2024, p. xii) would be insufficient, and authors are well aware of that based on their long-standing experience in analysing other project-based workplaces such as IT companies. In Chapter 1, Legault and Weststar thus extend their analysis of four gains of industrial citizenship by paying attention to their subject, object and domain. Subjects are essentially individual participating actors; objects are the scope and range of participatory activities and domains are regulatory spaces. This is an important update to the industrial citizenship framework due to the "unequal status of citizens" (2024, p. 17) in game development. Take for example the experiences of BIPOC¹ expatriate game

¹ A commonly used abbreviation of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.

workers. As *subjects*, they are unequal just by standing out from the homogenous White majority, are less likely to be high-profile developers (having fewer *objects* at their disposal in the regulation of their workplaces), and as expatriates, they are disadvantaged before the common law in the *domain* of nation states compared to local workers. Not to mention that the domain that game workers are subjected to is inherently international due to the demands of mobility and transnational networking. Existing means of work regulation are thus no longer satisfactory as national laws are not always applicable to mobile VGDs who are further largely non-unionised since enterprise-based unionization is not suitable for intermittent workers. Employment risks are transferred to employees themselves, who are left to the discretion of managers and publishers as important actors who decide on distribution of compensations or working time among workers. Game development thus undermines all four gains of citizenship and authors use it “as a case study to reassess the four democratic benefits of industrial citizenship” (2024, p. 20) by reframing four gains as the substance of citizenship.

The book is thus structured deductively as the authors first unwrap their theoretical framework and bring it closer to the contemporary era in Chapter 1, outline general features of project-based workplaces that game development share in Chapter 2, and then present more specific features and employment risks of game labour in Chapter 3 and 4, respectively. The updated notion of four main gains of industrial citizenship is precisely the *normative lenses* that Chapters 5 to 8 apply to the analysis of the actual work practices and experiences of VGDs. Chapter 9 presents unpaid overtime or the so-called crunch as an employment risk that undermines all four employment gains. Chapter 10 addresses the experiences of female workers and ethnically othered workers who have minority status compared to white masculinity of majority VGDs.

Legault and Weststar frame the book as of interest to many fields, including “sociology, law, labour studies, industrial and employment relations, HRM, political economy, game studies, and communication and cultural studies” (2024, p. xv). While this is indeed a diverse interdisciplinary spread, such a wide theoretical stance is not a detriment to readers’ understanding, especially since authors made sure to properly contextualise and explain game production for non-game scholars or audiences. Readers who are unfamiliar with game production thus should not be lost, given that they plough through the first theoretical chapters and data-rich analytical chapters. In the latter parts, they might also learn about many issues of game labour.

Chapter 5 focuses on the limited protections of game workers against employment risks such as income loss or skill obsolescence. Efforts to mitigate such risks are transferred to employees, who must rely on networking, personal savings, and self-funded training. While networking “was seen as the surest protection against the risk of losing one’s job” (2024, p. 110) by game workers involved in the study, even bigger studios do not fund conference travels. While the game workers’ populace

grows older, there is an increasing need for parental leave and retirement plans and policies—that are scant across smaller and bigger studios. Most vulnerable VGDs such as female and older workers thus face additional challenges regarding their employment protection. Although Legault and Weststar briefly mention a lack of protection against employment risks even in remote work (see 2024, pp. 113–114), opinions on the matter differ. Jason Schreier (2021), for example, wrote that remote work can mitigate the impacts of layoffs on VGDs, while issues such as crunch might still prevail when working from home. Nevertheless, remote work still remains the topic of only a few academic contributions (e.g., Park et al., 2022).

Chapter 6 explores how decision processes in game development are “strongly biased in favour of efficiency over equity and voice” (2024, p. 166). This means that producer and publisher decisions regarding issues such as disciplinary action, crediting, evaluation, and compensation are individualised and follow informal practices rather than formal procedures or policies. Disputing arbitrary decisions in court can seriously tarnish a person’s reputation in such an interconnected industry. While the lack of direct engagement with the voices of HR personnel or executives is acknowledged by the authors as a book limitation, Chapter 6 perhaps misses the most their voices, containing one-sided perspectives of employees on HR management and disciplinary processes.

Chapter 7 discusses the challenges of VGDs in individual and collective workplace regulation. Various individual actions like exit (leaving the job), voice (expressing concerns), and neglect (withdrawing effort), are explored. Authors note, however, that these individual actions are not conducive to achieving meaningful workers’ participation or improving working conditions, especially on the collective scale. Collective actions through social media or unionisation efforts do exist in game development and have borne fruit in the formation of worker groups and legal actions. But issues remain with fragmentation into different unions or integration of game workers into existing ones. Ideally, unionisation should be sectoral and international—we are yet to see such a framework, however.

Chapter 8 explores the role of VGDs in the broader social regulation of work, through influencing the state regulation and also through self-regulation. The authors demonstrate a lack of employees’ voice regarding state lobbying, industry funding, or participation in industry associations. These areas and institutional actors are “driven by market interests or by corporate value-systems and in this, they might not be the ones that VGDs wish for” (2024, pp. 208–209). However, more informal actions through unionisation or informal organising shape and blur the boundaries between social and local regulation of work and thus “shape the actions of employers and regulators” (2024, p. 226). Nowadays, the chapter would be perhaps complemented by the discussion of distribution platforms or development platforms such as game engines that have a similar transnational influence on game content as content regulations that are discussed by authors (see 2024, pp. 205–209). Critique of platforms is on the rise both in game production studies and in

studies of creative workplaces in general (Poell et al., 2024), representing the current state of research that authors understandably did not have the opportunity and space to include.

Chapter 9 addresses unpaid overtime. Although extreme cases of crunch are becoming less common, the lack of compensation and formal regulations for overtime remain key issues. Regarding the former, bonuses for overtime are given in arbitrary ways, and are individualised. Regarding the latter, game workers might be exempt from overtime laws—and indeed are in the analysed case of Canada. The chapter also problematises the discursive label of self-imposed *good crunch* (cf. Cote & Harris, 2023). The authors show that overtime is often driven by peer pressure, being similarly externally imposed as conditions conducive to overtime, set by publishers. This is the idea that I particularly liked because peer pressure demonstrates to researchers involved in game production studies how problematic it is to think of overtime as an individually driven phenomenon in bigger studios with hundreds of employees anyway. Highlighting structural and collective reasons for overtime might also prevent judgmental views on individual game workers and show the barriers that they face in self-regulating their working time.

Chapter 10 thematises the lack of diversity and inclusion in game development and uses the framework of Diversity, Inclusivity, and Belonging (DIB) to assess the experiences of marginalized workers (i.e. racial minorities and women). Key issues discussed include pay inequity, workplace discrimination, sexism, and the impact of crunch on women and workers with caregiving responsibilities. Minority workers are less likely to feel like they belong to their companies or to the products they create, due to those being ‘White male fantasies’. While insightful, the chapter could have included education among the actions to ensure diverse workplaces that are proposed by the authors (2024, p. 290), since initiatives towards diversity in education were already discussed by previous research in game studies (Harvey, 2019).

Although Legault and Weststar address this wide array of issues, for game production studies scholars (especially those who are already aware of both authors’ work on project-based workplaces or IGDA survey data), the book might not offer a lot of new insights. But with its textbook-style writing and lots of visual materials such as tables and graphs, the book can easily work as a teaching material for video game production courses. The book is thus a great and needed addition to more diversely spread chapter anthologies on game production in different national contexts and across indie and AAA spheres (Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021), more popular style books presenting case-focused studio ethnographies (O’Donnell, 2014) and more critical works based on Marxist thought (Bulut, 2020; Keogh, 2023). *Not All Fun and Games* is a normative critique of the gaming industry. Rather than following established critical theory frameworks and showing how inherently skewed working conditions of VGDs are towards dominant capitalistic arrangements or patriarchy, Legault and Weststar address how things in game development should be but are not. While the

book deals with similar issues raised by critical theory, it mostly approaches them from a normative, and less speculative, standpoint.

Nevertheless, the normative approach has inherent loopholes. Normative critique is at risk of presenting the real state of the gaming industry as deficient and framing the norm from which this real state deviates as unproblematic, and even desirable, ruling out any form of critique of the norm. As outlined above, this is not the case of the authors' approach since the first pages. They show how the applied industrial citizenship framework is problematic, so they update it to fit the current working conditions of VGDs. Further, normative critique is too often just that—critique that does not offer any actionable solutions. Since a 'normative state' is apparently without flaws and worth striving for, the actions to attain this state should be crystal clear. Once again, the authors propose several solutions to attain better working conditions for VGDs. And even then, they are careful to frame existing means of industrial citizenship such as unionisation as a miracle cure to every issue in game development. They show how game workers are still trying to find the types of unions that would serve their needs the best. Also, as shown with the example of peer pressure in overtime above, authors are careful to pass quick judgments about individual game workers, trying to highlight structural reasons or barriers impacting their behaviour or contextualise their actions in a rich array of theoretical literature. While this approach might be hard to swallow for some readers, I see it as a particularly strong feature of the book.

What *Not All Fun and Games* misses in speculation, it makes up for in systematicity and compactness. Based on the great amount of qualitative data from Canadian-based game workers, it offers detailed insights into their local experiences. While hailing from, once again, the central context of game production (that the authors acknowledge several times as the book's limitation), the book is still a great addition to studies on local game productions that are emerging also on the periphery. As the authors acknowledge, what is local seems to matter less for intermittent workers than industrial and wider sectoral factors. It is therefore very plausible that scholars involved in game production research might find a lot of overlaps with their data in the book, especially regarding the grounded, everyday work experiences of VGDs that emerge from the authors' interview data.

Still, *Not All Fun and Games* leaves game scholars and wider audiences in an uneasy situation. Being mixed-methods research using qualitative and quantitative data, it represents a study that has been called for in game production studies circles (Sotamaa, 2021). However, it is not plausible that other game scholars will reuse the framework of industrial citizenship with all its features because of the scope of topics covered and, therefore, the scope of data needed. Because of its dense academic style, the book might not be very accessible to wider audiences, including game workers whose labour conditions it captures. At the same time, it is an ambitious interdisciplinary study that presents a lot of data in one condensed space

about many issues that affect game production and other project-based and creative industries. After all, Legault and Weststar delivered precisely what they promised—a detailed and analytically rich probe into labour relations and regulations in the video game industry to make future comparisons with studies on other creative fields possible. Legault and Weststar’s work is not a detached academic critique. By stripping away the illusion that making games is all ‘fun and games’, it serves as a wake-up call not just for the game scholars and game workers, but for anyone who is invested in the future of labour in creative fields.

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