Seeking Deep Relations in a Precarious Industry: Addressing Mental Health through Independent Videogame Development

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Abstract

Anxiety, depression, burnout and impostor syndrome are frequently reported among those who work in the videogame industry, and are exacerbated among independents and freelancers. The article draws on interviews with four London-based independent videogame developers who have engaged with the production of videogames about mental health. The article argues that conceiving, producing and releasing these games is understood by their makers as a strategy to establish relations with consumers, participants and other developers that could break the invisible barriers that prevent dialogs around mental wellness. More than being concerned with the outcome of their work or its commercial success, developers seek relations with other game workers and players through the process of making, researching, testing, and showing their videogames. The development of videogames about mental health is interpreted by the participants as facilitating exchanges of autobiographical experiences that are otherwise regulated by the norms of professional networking.

Keywords

independent videogames, mental health, videogame development, videogame industry, deep games, network sociality

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Deep Relations in a Precarious Industry

As demonstrated in previous research and reports, workers of the videogame industry experience conditions of precariousness and competitiveness that often lead to or exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, burnout and impostor syndrome (Bulut 2020; Kerr 2017). The article looks into the current trend of making videogames *about* mental health and investigates, through interviews with four London-based independent developers, how this choice is motivated. It argues that developers identify in this strategy the potential to establish connections with other developers and players and open a dialog on their conditions of work. More than the commercial success of their game, they are interested in the conversations that happen while conducting research for their game, while talking with other developers in co-working spaces and with players at festivals and through the testing stage. While acknowledging that the efficacy of this strategy could hardly be evaluated in the short term, the article observes that game workers identify strategies to cope with and potentially resolve their conditions even when social barriers make them appear insurmountable and unspeakable. Listening to their motivations sheds light on the strategies adopted to tackle issues deriving from isolation, and from myths of meritocracy and entrepreneurship that pervade the videogame industry. The study also emphasizes the importance of spaces of physical co-presence as facilitating intimate dialogs: an opportunity that is currently affected by the social distancing measures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviewees refer to their projects as deep games, a categorization that is gaining popularity in videogame development. The term is used in this article to refer to a broad category of videogames that try to make sense of human experience, address the complexity of personal and social lives, aim to represent emotions, psychological traumas, abstract concepts and habits of thought, and make these playable (Freeplay Independent Games Festival 2019; Rusch 2017). The definition of a deep game is partial and limited, and this article is mostly concerned with the popularity and use of such a categorization, rather than its specificity. The label is used by a number of designers and authors and refers to interactive texts that draw on an established tradition of autobiographical game design, originating from independent videogame development and the "queer games avant-garde" (Anthropy 2012; Ruberg 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Recent productions and the introduction in 2017 of the BAFTA award category "Game Beyond Entertainment" demonstrate attention among videogame developers toward introspection, social relations, and the difficulties of understanding and speaking about one's own inner psychological states.

The research supporting this article started by exploring the motivations that bring independent developers to approach mental health as a theme in their videogames. It concludes that mental health is mobilized strategically by the interviewees to address the conditions of productions of independent videogames. In so doing, interviewees develop their autobiographical self-reflexivity by connecting their work with their personal life stories, and as part of the same gesture think of their work as instrumental to enable new and *deeper* relations with others.

The attention toward the representation of mental health in videogames is becoming prominent at a time when it is explicitly discussed among groups and associations representing workers of the videogame industry. At the Game Developers Conference 2020 the association Take This revealed that at least 50% of workers in the sector experience psychological burnout in their careers, according to their survey (Take This 2020). The UK Games Industry Census published in February 2020 discovered that 31% of respondents suffered anxiety and depression, compared to the national average of 17% (Taylor 2020, 48–52). The causes are identified in the instability of these professions, frequent forms of harassment and micro-aggression, and stories of unfair treatment on the workplace. The lack of diversity in the field (still predominantly white and male) causes those who do not belong to the dominant gender, race and class to keep silent about these issues, which further impacts on their mental wellness. The videogame industry has been traditionally adopting practices such as "crunching," working over sixty hours per week in the months preceding the release of a title: a result of poor management which is often interpreted as a rite of passage, a proof of being committed to the job (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Woodcock 2019). Take This (2020) reveal that, on average, an employee changes 2.2 employers every five years, a tendency that leads to the absence of mentoring for new hires, and makes it unlikely for a worker to stay long enough in the same company to change its internal social dynamics.

Interviewees involved in this article admit having switched to an independent career after experiencing forms of harassment and unfair treatment in a videogame company, and realizing it would have been easier to leave than to propose structural changes. Job insecurity brings to an ongoing process of self-branding and self-marketing on social media which, in its own turn, causes feelings of inadequacy and impostor syndrome when career updates are not as frequent as it would be expected (Arvidsson et al. 2016; Gregg 2011). Achievements and skills are constantly scrutinized, in a labor context where completed projects are "badges of honor" and inseparable from the worker's identity (Deuze et al. 2007). Those who are struggling psychologically feel that they must suffer in silence due to the social stigma that perceives disclosure of emotional difficulty or distress as a sign of weakness or inadequacy (O'Donnell 2014). The shame and fear of judgment isolates individuals who are suffering and prevents them from getting help when they need it most. This can further exacerbate the challenges facing the mental health and wellbeing of game workers. These conditions are thought to impact those working independently more than employed workers, due to the pressure to self-promote on social media and to network (Browne and Whitson 2021; Tyni 2020).

This article draws on the analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews with four independent London-based videogame developers who have been designing games about mental health. In the initial stage, in early 2020, the research was motivated by finding out more about the objectives and motivations of the developers and their interests toward deep games, at a time when discourses surrounding mental health were becoming prominent in the videogame industry and society at large. Interviewees have been asked about the reasons that brought them to develop a videogame on mental

health, their goals, and their perception of how mental health issues are treated in our contemporary society and in the industry. Each participant has been interviewed separately, and their answers were color-coded by the researcher to identity recurring topics, arguments, lexical choices. The first round of interviews highlighted three trends: (1) frequent references to the developers' biographical narratives; (2) comments on how videogame development could either enable or deny agency over one's own life; (3) motivation to establish meaningful relationships with other human beings through the development process. Other topics, such as the content of the games or their commercial feasibility, were less prominent than what was initially expected. Participants have been invited to a follow-up interview to expand the three main areas of analysis. The results feed into the findings of this article, organized around the three key areas: biographies, agency, and relations. Participants were also invited to comment on a draft of the article in a third and final stage, a process that gave them the opportunity to reflect on the argumentation, suggest changes, and read each other's comments. All interviewees have agreed to appear with their full names and including references to their work, personal life stories and connections with mental health. They have been made aware of the option to remain anonymous and of the potential risks involved, but have preferred to appear publicly. Their choice has not been further discussed, but it is likely to be due to the fact that their work and opinions on the subject have already been publicized through their accounts on social media or in other public contexts.

Research started at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been conducted mostly online. It has been facilitated by previous contacts established in the area of London, where the researcher is established. London is a geographic location with a significant presence of videogame companies and independents (UKIE 2017). The number of graduates who aspire to an independent gaming career grows year-on-year due to the high number of universities offering degrees in game development across the UK (Harvey 2019). Many of those graduates who drop out of roles in larger companies hope to take closer control of the content and pace of their work by becoming self-employed. The significant presence of independent creatives has traditionally made London a privileged case of study to evaluate the effects of the neoliberal politics of labor, where work is increasingly "impermanent, short-term, project-based," "passionate," and deprived of welfare and social security (McRobbie 2016, 33–59). Within these conditions, the union organizing project Game Workers Unite found a fertile ground in London and across the UK in 2018, demonstrating that interventions of collective solidarity and support among workers in the UK game industry might be gaining popularity (Ruffino and Woodcock 2020). The four interviewees involved in this study are enmeshed in the cultural and economic context of the UK capital, each showing a high level of awareness of the difficulty and competitiveness of their job, and being particularly receptive toward unionization and collective organizing.

The article concludes that working at deep videogames is seen by the interviewees as a strategy to establish new, different, and more meaningful relations, in an industry that has problematized relations in the first place. The hyper-individualism and competitiveness of this context turn both friends and colleagues into "contacts," toward which one needs to carefully consider whether to disclose feelings of mistrust and

uneasiness in relation to their careers (McRobbie 2016, 17–32; Wittel 2001). Designing deep games about mental health is seen as a strategy to bring into play an internal state that is made invisible by work relations, and legitimizing talking about mental health. The *deep relations* that the interviewees aim to establish through the development of their games are intended to reach consumers, other developers, and even those involved in the production process as co-workers and participants, with the objective of initiating a dialog that breaks the barrier of secrecy. From this perspective, the content of the games becomes less important. This becomes evident in the accounts of two interviewees who have been designing games on Alzheimer and Asperger syndromes, which are not directly caused by working conditions, but are discussed by the interviewees as enabling conversations about their own work.

Mental Health and Independence: An Industry of Biographies

The videogame industry and the culture surrounding it have often sought to imitate the focus of the film and music industries on the figure of the *auteur* (Caldwell 2008; Dovey and Kennedy 2006; Mayer et al. 2009). The notion of independent labor in videogame culture has been framed to a significant extent on the myth of the solitary author. There is a long history of self-releasing videogames without the backing of a publisher, producer or investor (Indiecade 2014; Nooney 2014). However, in the late 2000s and early 2010s the aspiration of working independently at a videogame became more prominent in Western economies, and intersected with the availability of online distribution platforms, crowdfunding, and freely available tools of production. In the United Kingdom the effects of this technological and social imaginary are particularly visible. According to the innovation agency NESTA (2014), up to 95% of the workforce in the videogame sector in the UK is employed in small or micro-companies, and is often self-funding their initiative (p. 16). Working individually at a videogame is not a new practice, but it is now becoming the standard for videogame developers, at least at some stage in their careers (Vanderhoef 2020).

Drawing on the vision that sees developers as *auteurs*, independents are expected to promote themselves on social media and are considered responsible for their attitudes toward the public, their choices in the production of games, and even in their habits of cultural consumption. Biographical reflexivity is brought forward in independent game development, and various strategies are enacted in the process of branding oneself as part of a design aesthetic. As already noted by Beck (1992) in his study of "risk societies," individuals "become the agents of their educational and market-mediated subsistence and the related life planning and organization. Biography itself is acquiring a reflexive project" (p. 90). Biographies are mobilized when justifying one's own presence in the industry and networking with potential collaborators and consumers. As a result, social media such as Twitter become the ideal context where to engage with audiences and collaborators while constructing a biographical narrative framed around passion toward videogames.

However, the narratives of individualization often overlook the standardization and adaptation that the independent developer must undergo in the process of becoming publicly visible. An aspiring independent developer must comply with the entrepreneurial and neoliberal practices that determine the existence and survival of their job. In this process, the independent videogame developer is expected to frame their passion toward work through a "moral calculus," where vocational and profit-driven labor must be rightly balanced (Chia 2019). The independent developer is dependent on the labor market, which, despite claims of it being unregulated and open to all, presents a certain set of rules of engagement: it becomes necessary to comply with the rules of the cultural intermediaries, of social media and other contexts of PR and marketing, and appear in first person at multiple publicity, promotion, and networking events (Parker et al. 2017). These tasks demand time and effort, especially since the support originally provided by the professional figure of the producer has been eliminated in independent careers (Whitson et al. 2018). The cultural labor of the independent developer is often invisible, deprived of mentoring schemes or clear patterns of progression, characterized by long working hours spent on networking and fundraising. Independent developers have marginal agency when it comes to deciding whether, and how, they are going to appear to players, other *indies*, and the general public. Yet, they need to be prepared to take all the responsibility for their products, public actions, and statements.

It is within this context that independent gaming and its failures are discussed as individual affairs. These failures typically give rise to social, psychological, and emotional crises, and frequently force independent developers to abandon their projects, social media presence, or, in some cases, even their careers. The dynamics of distribution and marketization of videogame products give rise to the praising and shaming of specific individuals, while treating each story as a separate case, attributable to the (successful or otherwise) life choices of a single person. Narratives of independent failures replicate the same terms and criteria that are used in instructing and directing developers toward a career in gaming. Learning to be a successful indie developer is often presented as a process of self-discovery and production of potential, consistently with the "turn to passion" of career guides and coaching in other creative sectors (Hong 2015; Mäkinen 2016). Contexts of mentoring and education—such as the workshops and how-to guides orientated to aspiring independent developers—are articulated as a series of practical suggestions as to how to change one's own life in order to make it as an independent developer. These suggestions often involve making the right life choices: how to manage one's personal and family finances; which habits of consumption to take or give up; who to talk to and meet up with to create a solid professional network; which costs and economic factors to consider when choosing a place to live, and so on. The road to success is allegedly made up of personal life choices, which implicitly suggest that failure is the result of not having managed to live well enough.

Similar trends are evident across the creative industries. Economies of precarious employment tend to celebrate stories of self-made success, especially on social media (Duffy et al. 2019). In these contexts mental health is often influenced by an

individualized and gendered narrative of competitiveness and meritocracy (Franssen 2019). Videogame culture has been adapting the concept of the ideal worker to that of the *gamer*: an obsessive, addicted, competitive consumer. An ideal consumer that has been, in its own turn, normalized by videogame press across the 1980s (Kirkpatrick 2014). These cultural imaginaries frame a context where syndromes and disorders might be seen favorably, as signs of dedication and commitment. A number of associations are campaigning for mental health awareness in the videogame industry. On top of the aforementioned Take This, the charity Safe in Our World was founded in the UK in 2019 to foster positive mental wellness for "players, developers, publishers and retailers" (Safe in Our World 2020). The UK charity GamesAid (2020) has organized special game jam events and published articles on mental health.

The dynamics surrounding the acts of blaming and praising a specific individual are specific to the contemporary modalities in which videogames are made, distributed, and consumed, and intersect with the economic and cultural promises that have been made regarding the emergence of independent forms of videogame development over the last ten to fifteen years (Crogan 2018; Martin et al. 2009). This modality of labor is characterized by systemic contradictions that promise personal emancipation, creative control, and economic success, while simultaneously rendering these almost entirely unachievable (Bulut 2020). In response to this new condition only biographical strategies appear to be possible: techniques of self-management, ways of relating to one's own friends, followers, and professional contacts. In this view, suffering from depression, anxiety and burnout become personal deficiencies, rather than embodied responses to the specific occupational stressors and systemic biases of the work environment and culture. At the same time, the pressures of creative labor are made to appear as transcendental obstacles to circumnavigate in isolation, rather than as the result of contingent choices that could be challenged by collective action.

Within this context, developers identify strategies to address a systemic and structural problem of their work. These strategies are not necessarily to be evaluated for what they are achieving, but as signs of what is interpreted as a viable response to an otherwise suffocating condition. Making deep games, as the following section will argue, is seen by the developers as a personal solution to tackle their anxieties and fears. Ultimately, the purpose of their project consists in establishing relations with others from where the (in)visibility of mental health can be addressed, and possibly dealt with, as a systemic issue of the videogame industry.

Interviewees

The research has involved four independent game developers. Marina Diez is CEO of Three of Cups, and at the time when she was interviewed she had released *I'm sorry* (2020), a game about over-apologizing, made for the GamesAid Mental Health Game Jam 2020. In 2019 she has designed and released *PTSD*, a game about post-traumatic stress disorder; *I'm New Here*, about introversion and learning how to take care of oneself; *Consent, Empathy* and *Intimacy*, each game addressing the implications of feelings and attitudes toward others. Federico Fasce is a game designer, lecturer at

Goldsmiths, University of London, and co-founder of Game Happens, an association that organizes events for independent developers in Italy. Federico had released *The Ballad of Past Lou* (2020) at the time of the interview, an autobiographical and playable reflection on emotional distress and forgiving. Xu He is a game designer with a record of academic publications in psychology. She has designed and developed *Happy Land* (2018), a VR game about the difficulty of communicating sadness, and *Disconnected* (2019), a game that makes players experience the life of an autistic girl, involving interviews with participants. Tim Kaufmann has been working at the game *Misfolded* as lead designer and developer. *Misfolded* is a game about melancholy and forgetting, based on Tim's research on Alzheimer as a neuro-scientist. Tim has also designed *Don't Blame Baby* (2017), a VR game about passive aggressive relations in domestic environments, and *The Prisoner* (2018), a game about the passing of time for a prisoner serving a life sentence.

Biographies

Each participant connects their work to their life experiences, finding in their personal biographies a justification for the videogames they are making. Marina recalls starting her career as designer with *Hey Dad* (2018), a game based on memories of her father at the time he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder: "I made my first game, *Hey Dad*, based on my experience. My father was diagnosed when I was a child." The design process "helped making connections and looking at things differently." The work prepared the ground for *PTSD* (2019). Marina admits suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She believes that making a game about her own life experience had a therapeutic effect on her: "it has been of great help, it was difficult because these are personal issues and are hard to think through the design of a game, but it helped me making new connections and made me think a lot." Federico looks at *The Ballad of Past Lou* as a reflection on his life around 2016, when he moved to London from Italy and started a new life having only a few contacts. Federico defines this process as a traumatic experience that involved his work and life to the same extent:

"I had to make decisions on how to present myself to game companies, and who I was as a person. What I want to do, what I want to talk about. I had never been in psychotherapy but I started, at that time, getting in touch with a professional through Skype. [. . .] At a point I decided I would make games in two to three weeks max. That would allow me to finish what I started and focus on a skill that I wanted to improve. It had a therapeutic effect on me."

The Ballad of Past Lou, a relatively short game, is seen by Federico as a result of such process of autobiographical reflection.

Xu He and Tim have a background in academic research around cognitive neuroscience. Xu He realized she had been suffering from Asperger syndrome while researching the subject. Such a realization, which "explains a lot about my life" as she says, is made playable through *Disconnected*. She observes: "I read articles on Asperger and realized that I am on the spectrum. I realized that there are a lot of people who never get diagnosed. And I thought I could make a game about it." Tim has been

researching Alzheimer as neuroscientist. He has looked into this syndrome because his grandfather suffered from it. Reading about Alzheimer and its effects helped him making sense of his memories and of the experiences of his parents while taking care of Tim's grandfather. Tim defines his decision to make a videogame about Alzheimer around the desire to make the syndrome playable and understandable to others, and as part of a process of self-discovery: "I first worried about how much research I could illustrate into the game [. . .] but talked with people who went through something similar and understood that the emotional journey and understanding the story behind is the most important part."

The motivations for each interviewee are presented as being deeply entangled with personal cases and memories of family members. Deep games are for them a way of processing their life stories and make them accessible to others, an aspiration to construct and re-embed their biographies within a network sociality. As argued by Wittel (2001), networking does not necessarily amount to the formation of social groupings, shared narratives, and values; rather, it is made up of a "multitude of experiences and biographies" (p. 65). However, on this occasion the connection between work and biography made by the interviewees is mobilized to create the conditions for mutual understanding and collective strategies. In this sense it has a double function: first, to re-claim a form of agency in a context of labor that has largely overlooked the psychological and physical needs of the individual and, secondly, establish relations with others where invisible mental states, such as mental disorders and syndromes, could be addressed.

Agency

The games made by the interviewees are presented through an autobiographical narrative which opens to a redefinition of their own agency on at least two levels and meanings. First, agency is re-claimed by the designers in relation to the problems of the videogame industry. Mental health in the industry is perceived as an issue by the participants, affecting those working at large companies as much as the independents. This is often reconnected to personal experiences and many "heard of" stories of colleagues being subject of abuse, unfair treatment, prolonged working sessions, eventually leading to stress, burnout, and impostor syndrome. Making deep games is a strategy to identify areas of intervention within the industry and to reclaim agency over a social and economic condition that has eroded the possibility for change.

Secondly, videogames are frequently defined by the participants as ideal tools for understanding psychological states. The interactive and iterative experience of playing a videogame requires one to perform similar actions over time and, according to the participants, be confronted with a simulation of the hurdles of those who are suffering from mental health issues. Making the player "step into the shoes" of the affected patient is a common approach in deep games, and is largely inspired by theories on the effects of representation and simulation that have been at foundation of the early studies on digital games (Frasca 2003). As the interviewees often put it, it is a strategy that

gives power to both the designer and player in a context, that of mental health, defined by powerlessness and difficulty of communication.

Marina identifies the four most common mental problems of the game industry in "anxiety, depression, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder." The same issues that brought her to make a game such as *PTSD*, and made her decide to work as an independent. Making interactive games can "show these personal experiences" in a unique and effective manner, she claims, and can be used to address issues that are frequently seen in the workplace. Videogame companies are defined by Marina as being over-competitive, and characterized by low levels of empathy and tolerance for those who claim to have mental or physical problems. Thus, making videogames *about* these issues is seen as the ideal strategy to "normalize mental health," as she says, and change the industry from within.

Federico explicitly connects the potential of videogames with the lack of control on mental safety in the workplace. He says that, at the time when the company he was working for gave him a temporary contract, he experienced anxieties that he would then communicate through his games: "I started using games as an expressive tool, a way of challenging my emotions and fears. Making videogames became for me a way to unpack certain feelings and think through them in a familiar language." Attending game industry events such as the Game Developers Conference, and engaging with other developers at the Game Happens festival in Italy, made him realize that many want to talk about these issues. There are structural problems in the industry that make these forms of intervention nearly impossible, Federico admits, saying that "it is certainly a cultural problem [and] a problem of management" and that there is a pressure to "sacrifice your private life to make games." Moreover, many cannot even recognize when they are experiencing mental health issues. Making deep games is then defined by Federico as "a therapeutic process, which takes out of you things that are deeply personal and makes you challenge them." He also says that "initially there is fear, it takes effort to make the first step. It took me three months to decide I really wanted to go through that path." The process then creates "a channel of communication with others because others have the same experiences, and the process gets you closer to them."

Tim's account maintains that mental health issues are often invisible, or made invisible, by those working in the videogame industry. He recognizes that in the development of *Misfolded* some of his collaborators started experiencing anxieties and stress as a consequence of the pressure to complete the whole project within eight months. Collaboration in the team was immediately affected, but Tim remembers being capable to identify these issues when they happened: "I've seen it before and I said I need to recover before it gets worse, I was lucky enough to spot it. A lot of people in the development team didn't spot it, and this led to burnout and physical problems, because they are connected." The invisibility of the degradation of mental health is perceived as a complex area where to intervene, or even talk about. It is also entangled with the myth that working in the game industry is "passion labor." As Tim says: "people are passionate about the work they are doing because it's part of themselves [. . .] and suddenly their self-worth is tied to the work they are doing and if that

is not good enough than it's them who are not good enough and that starts to spiral and it becomes all consuming."

At the same time, videogames are perceived as enabling that intervention. Xu He claims that in games "there is more control, it is more than just animation" and that "we can use the power of games to do positive things and make people understand mental illness better." Asperger is invisible, Xu He observes, and even "watching a film about it might not reveal its implications or enable spectators to recognize its effects." Videogames, instead, "drag the player into the characters [and] make people feel the frustration." However, to make those games is extremely demanding for a developer. "When I worked for a company I had no spare time to make (my) game" Xu He admits, and claims that to experiment she "needs funding, and I can't get funding easily." Marina further acknowledges that making deep games can, in its own turn, exacerbate stress and burnout as these productions are not at all deprived of deadlines or external pressures.

The accounts of the interviewees reflect on their practices and experiences by identifying two areas where control becomes problematic. It is difficult to understand, recognize, and talk about mental health issues, particularly within the videogame industry where labor is perceived as being purely driven by passion. Also, videogames make the player experience varied degrees of control over the simulation. Deep games are then seen as texts through which agency could be re-claimed, even if temporarily and partially, in a way that could enable both players and designers to understand those unspeakable, and unspoken, internal states.

Relations

Working with videogames often brings to physical and mental issues, but videogames are also seen as enabling a process of self-discovery that paves the way for a safer and healthier industry. For this purpose, participants find that it is fundamental to share deep games and talk about them with players, colleagues and collaborators. The most significant memories that the involved participants associate with their work are contextualized in face-to-face exchanges and dialogs. Festivals, cultural institutions and universities play in this respect a pivotal role in connecting developers with their audiences and with each other (Parker et al. 2017; Pearce 2021). Each participant is strongly convinced that their videogames must be "relatable" (a word that frequently appears in their interviews): they should be played on a common ground, where both players and designers can understand each other and share experiences that would otherwise remain invisible.

Knowing that others will find the videogame relatable is the principal reason to make the videogame in the first place. Making the videogame is "therapeutic"—something that each participant explicitly mentions. It is also defined as a "process of self-discovery," mostly because it opens to the possibility that others will relate to it. Marina says: "Showing your experience helps because you're probably not the only person who lived through it, and others out there feel the same. Thus, making this kind of games helps people building a community and feel less isolated. So you know

you've got to finish making the game because others will play it." Federico says that "making the game is therapeutic [and] it is a channel of communication with others, it gets you closer to others." Tim observes:

> "From the feedback we got people found it such an emotional rollercoaster because they could relate to it. They could relate personally through their own experiences of family members to what they were seeing in the games. Because the game was made from my own experience that made the game relatable on a personal level to the people playing it."

Those "relatable" experiences are enabled by institutions that facilitate contact between developers and consumers, testers and research participants. For instance, Xu He's game *Disconnected* is made as part of her degree at the National Film and Television School, and it is the result of engaging with four participants in the autism spectrum. One of the participants was a classmate of Xu He, who revealed to be autistic after knowing she was making a game about it. "No one knew she was autistic before, she is good at masking," Xu He says, acknowledging that the production process allowed both her and her classmate to confess to each other a condition they were keeping secret. The game has been shown at the EGX festival, and players have been asked to leave written feedback after playing the game. The feedback has then been shown on the Twitter account and webpage of the project, with a view of "exploring further relations," as Xu He comments.

Tim's game *Misfolded* has also been shown at EGX, and Tim remembers that the audience was "incredibly engaged and seemed to relate to it and become emotionally drawn into it." Marina recalls that, at the time when she made *Hey Dad*, she met a player of the game in Valencia, Spain during a game design workshop. The girl approached Marina saying that she traveled there to meet her, and that her father was bipolar and she always felt lonely until she played the game. "It's only when you meet people that you can see that it actually helps, even if it's only a little thing," says Marina.

Federico admits to have received support in the early days when he transitioned toward an independent career by the Hack Space in Hackney, London:

> "At the time there were 3 or 4 friends there and I would go there and this would make my work more real. Some of the things I was talking about felt strictly personal and I would feel ashamed sometimes. You feel like you're the only person in the world and by taking this out I will make myself ridiculous, and then you realize that others are going through the same, and living the same. And having this kind of relation. . .it's relatable!"

These accounts corroborate the fundamental role of cultural intermediators and contexts of networking in shaping the culture surrounding independent videogames (Browne and Whitson 2021; Parker et al. 2017). The interviews show that contexts of physical proximity could become places for the exchange of information that escapes the norms of professional networking. These are contexts that "make work real," as Federico says, and where unspoken opinions might be confidentially shared with

others. Working at a deep game is perceived as facilitating these less visible exchanges. The interviews also confirm the fundamental role played by research institutes and academia in facilitating experimental videogame development, a role often overlooked but essential, among other things, in establishing intimate connections and sharing of ideas (Pearce 2021). It should be noted, in this respect, that each participant is involved in either academic research (Xu He and Tim), teaching at higher education institutions (Federico), or regularly attending academic conferences on game design (Marina).

Conclusion

Workers in the videogame industry have started becoming vocal about the problems faced in their workplace. Working conditions are often excruciating, both physically and mentally, and end up marginalizing those who cannot, or do not want to, comply with them. The ways in which mental health is discussed (or not discussed) contribute to raise invisible barriers of inclusivity. Academic research, associations for mental health, and the union organizing project Game Workers Unite, are among those who are currently offering broader visions and structural solutions. The interviewees maintain that the dynamics of production of the videogame industry can be physically and mentally detrimental for game workers. They also elaborate strategies to address these issues and to enable new contexts of exchange and participation with others. Their responses reveal a high degree of self-reflexivity and willingness to discuss the problems affecting their professional sector. Their visions are not necessarily challenging the individualized narratives of independence and of auctorial control now popular within the videogame industry, but build on these pre-existing beliefs to articulate a potential response that could open to new forms of solidarity among workers.

Starting from the findings of previous research projects and associations, this article has looked at how individual strategies are brought forward by those who perceive to suffer from these conditions. Their responses have been evaluated not in their efficacy or internal consistency, but as personal coping mechanisms that might inspire new pathways for collective intervention. Engaging with a limited number of London-based independent game developers has shed light on a number of strategies that they put into practice. Participants make games about mental health to dig a tunnel under those invisible barriers that they have encountered in the past. They are not necessarily convinced that they will find someone along or at the end of the path, but they believe that this will certainly move the ground. Beyond a deterministic belief in the power of interactive texts, their accounts show that contexts of physical co-presence (such as festivals, game jams, research, and collaboration centers) are vital for enabling social connections. These places make work "real," in the words of Federico, as they make it immediately "relatable" to others and enable a dialog that would otherwise remain unspoken. Through these encounters along the way, participants feel that their internal feelings of dissatisfaction are shared by others, and could be challenged collectively.

The participants acknowledge that game-making has become more individualized as a result of the emergence of independent development and of the vision of the *auteur* in game design, and that these tendencies have been increasing individual

pressures and further exacerbating the mental distress of game workers. Their responses are articulated within an industry of biographies, and as part of a network sociality that keeps the individual at the center. At the same time, research participants have been seeking solutions by drawing on their autobiographical self-reflexivity. They believe that articulating personal life stories in their games, and in the ways they talk about and present their games, could enable new relations with others and bring to a better, fairer and more inclusive videogame industry. Their solutions are partly consistent with the vision of the *auteur*, but are orientated toward re-enabling their individual agency toward the creation of new contexts of intimate exchanges.

The present study contributes to existing scholarship on videogame development by providing an analysis of the accounts of workers involved in the game industry who have been addressing the problems deriving from mental distress. It shows how strategies are elaborated by the participants even in contexts that appear to provide structural and impassable barriers. The strategies might not necessarily lead to radical changes. Nonetheless, they demonstrate a fervent activity that is certainly worth of further investigation. The emphasis put on physical co-presence and proximity as enabling dialogs around mental health is a potential area of further research. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives and work of independent videogame developers might have serious repercussions not just on their mental health, but on the very possibility of discussing and addressing issues of mental distress. As festivals get cancelled, and offices and co-working spaces remain closed, there is a lack of availability of spaces where to engage in informal and "off the records" conversations about work. It is worth exploring whether, and how, game workers have been seeking alternative connections and contexts throughout the pandemic where to discuss issues related to their labor practices.

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