

# **Workers' visibility and union organizing in the UK videogames industry**

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The article investigates how the union IWGB Game Workers has been introducing strategies that allow members to be more closely in control of their visibility with bosses and peers. The videogame sector has been traditionally averse to unionization. Its compulsory network sociality, and the belief that game-work should be passion-driven, limit the expression of discontent and proposals for structural change. Drawing on 2 years of participatory observation and interviews with board members, the article looks at how the union has been protecting members' anonymity and helping identify relations of power within the workplace while avoiding exposure. The strategies open new possibilities for workers' organizing and shed light on how labor is understood in a fundamental sector of the creative economy. The article analyses the implications currently affecting the union organizing project: board members become over-exposed, and internal policies protecting anonymity are challenged by the promotional cultures of social media.

Keywords: videogame industry; labor union; digital labor; creative industries; Game Workers Unite; IWGB Game Workers

### **Introduction**

Unionisation in the videogame industry is a relatively recent phenomenon, but it has deep historical roots in decades of workers' protests and negotiations. In March 2018 the international group Game Workers Unite (GWU) was established with the purpose of organizing localised unions (Woodcock, 2020). In December 2018, the UK has seen the first union of the network: Game Workers Unite UK (GWU UK), founded as part of the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB). IWGB was founded in 2012 as a grassroots unionisation project aimed at organising precarious workers. Alongside the Game Workers branch, IWGB currently represents a variety of highly precarious professions such as couriers, cleaners, drivers, foster carers and yoga teachers. In October 2020, GWU UK re-branded itself as IWGB Game Workers (IWGB\_GW), formalizing its connection with IWGB.

The visibility of the game worker has often been at the centre of conflicts and negotiations. On the one hand, being credited in the final product is vital for a worker's career. On the other, productions are often cancelled before being released, leaving employees with no evidence of the time spent on a project (Bulut, 2020). Workers are often out-sourced and sub-contracted and made partly invisible in the production process (Ozimek, 2019a). Employees are typically asked to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) that forbid to publicly talk about the project they have been hired to conduct, making the internal dynamics of the workplace opaque (O'Donnell, 2014). The job market largely depends on personal reputation and network sociality, while also subjecting both to scrutiny among peers and control from employers (Wittel, 2001; Browne and Whitson, 2021). Workers are brought to consider to what extent, and how, they become visible to employers, colleagues, and audiences, without ever being fully in control of these dynamics.

The novelty of the union, as this article argues, consists in the introduction of strategies that allow workers to be more closely in control of their visibility with bosses and peers. These strategies open opportunities for disclosing discontent about the workplace and facilitate collective organizing, without breaking the narrative of passion-driven labor that inspires the sector. At the same time, the union is confronting the problems deriving from the over-exposure of their board members, and from the necessity to keep disputes outside of the self-promotional economy of social media. The initial stages of IWGB\_GW bring us to better understand the opportunities and implications of union organizing in the digital and creative industries, and shed light on how game workers understand their occupation within the videogame industry.

### **Invisible Barriers: Historical Challenges to Unionization in the Videogame Industry**

IWGB\_GW is a novelty in the organisation of labor in the videogame industry, but its significance must be evaluated vis-a-vis the material and cultural barriers that have prevented

unionization so far, and the technological landscape that mediates the production, distribution and marketing of digital products (Weststar and Legault, 2017; 2019). These conditions have been historically difficult to scrutinise. Those working at unreleased products are legally bound not to reveal any details by signing NDAs. Secrecy makes workers feel like contributing to a cause that is much greater than their individual needs, and segregates those who are not fully committed. Secrecy has also normalised practices such as “crunch” (working long hours when close to the deadline of a project), issues of gender and race inclusivity, mental health and precariousness, by making these topics unspeakable (Vanderhoef and Curtin, 2015; Woodcock, 2019, pp. 61–90).

The detrimental effects of these social dynamics have been largely documented since the IGDA first Quality of Life report (IGDA, 2004), but collective solutions have rarely been received enthusiastically within the sector. Recent research projects have identified trends in how game workers perceive the establishment of a union: among other things, as inappropriate for a context of production where companies rapidly mobilise capitals and relocate production across the globe (Kerr, 2017); where most workers are independents or sub-contracted (Ozimek, 2019a; Woodcock, 2021); as an obstacle to creativity and passion (Bulut, 2020); as dangerous for careers and potentially exposing oppositional attitudes in the workplace (O'Donnell, 2014).

Jamie Woodcock (2016), who has been following the formation of IWGB\_GW since its launch, observes that game workers have for long been conscious of both the opportunities and risks offered by unionization. Unionization has been seen unfavourably in light of the prestige associated with working in an allegedly passion-driven sector. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argued, more than a decade ago, that game workers perceive their jobs as framed around “individual creativity, collective cooperation, and an aura of cool” (2009, p. 55), and conclude that these positions have been hiding the suffocating competitiveness that characterise the

digital entertainment industry. Since the authors called for an “exodus” towards independent labor, the sector has seen stronger corporate consolidation through the platformization of production, consumption and distribution (Nieborg, 2020; Tyni, 2020). The platformization of distribution and development has transformed the relation employer-employee in a deterritorialised network of mutual dependencies that requires workers to manage frequent changes in key aspects of production and commercialization (Foxman, 2019; Chia et al., 2020; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). The new dynamics tend to increase workers’ responsibilities, reducing opportunities for creative expression and for racial and gendered inclusivity (Whitson, 2019). A similar tendency is identified across the creative and gig economy in the UK and Europe where the rise of self-employment has restrained collective action (McRobbie, 2016; Razzolini, 2021). Narratives of self-achievement tend to hide the new relations of power within platform capitalism, and make workers appear more isolated than they have ever been.

Videogame companies, on the other hand, are often opaque to national legislators. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2006) have been arguing that videogame companies have adopted a “fight or flight” approach in relation to national labor laws, by isolating workers and undermining collective organizing, and eventually relocating or outsourcing when lawsuits put excessive pressure. As the industry becomes even more globalised, it relies on outsourcing companies and temporarily-contracted independents often operating in “grey areas” of legislation – a condition shared with the broader sector of the gig economy (Ozimek, 2019a, 2019b; Woodcock and Graham, 2019, pp. 93–112). Game workers tend to change employer at a rapid pace, forced by employers’ decisions, mental and physical exhaustion, and driven by hopes of better salaries or self-realization (Vanderhoef, 2016; Moody and Kerr, 2020). Moreover, labor negotiations and surveys often underestimate those working in quality assurance, localization, community management and network operation, and other less formalised types of employment (Bulut, 2015a; Kerr, 2017, p. 94; Keogh, 2019). Anxieties

about job security, the large use of sub-contractors, and dreams of becoming financially independent make game workers more prone to accept the current conditions rather than take risks.

However, when asked individually, game workers tend to reveal propensity towards unionization, as observed by Weststar and Legault (2017). Their research is based on data collected by the IGDA Developers Satisfaction Survey 2014, involving English-speaking developers working in North America (66%), Europe (20%), Latin America (6.7%) and Asia (5%). Results show that the majority would be keen to unionise in an industry-wide union. Authors also acknowledge that individual propensity changes accordingly to how co-workers are expected to react, and respondents tend to elevate “the value of merit above any egalitarian union ideology and seniority system” (Weststar and Legault, 2017, p. 317). The authors argue that a number of material and cultural conditions might be converging to facilitate the establishment of labor unions, such as the presence of organised leadership and bottom-up initiatives reaching an international audience through social media. These initiatives might catalyse already existing forms of mobilization, ranging from individual acts of resistance to collective actions affecting large companies, which have been emerging in recent history (Weststar and Legault, 2019; Ruffino and Woodcock, 2020).

I argue that, as one of these conditions, we should evaluate how IWGB\_GW has been introducing strategies that allow workers to be in control of their visibility as union members among employers and colleagues. In doing so, the union has made it possible to participate without breaking legal contracts, such as NDAs, the narratives of passion and merit, and the “aura of cool” that pervades the sector. At the same time, the union has reinforced the individual agency of members by becoming involved in organising activities, and facilitated initiatives that make power relations at the workplace more transparent.

## **Methods: Workers' Visibility as Research Question**

The article collects the results of two years (from January 2019 until the end of 2020) of participatory observation at the national and the London & South East of England branch meetings, and a series of semi-structured interviews with 5 participants who have been involved in the organization of the union in different capacities during the research period. I joined the meetings as observer and organised the interviews introducing myself as a researcher interested in the motivations surrounding the unionization project. After February 2020, due to COVID-19 restrictions, all meetings and interviews have continued online.

In the early stages of my research I realised that most of my questions could not receive an answer, and that most answers could not be made public. Participants could not disclose information regarding the number of members, their geographic distribution and across game companies, their type of employment, and how disputes with employers were proceeding. On some occasions, participants would be hesitant to tell me their name and the company they worked for. The initial stage brought me to investigate the difficulty of accessing data *per se*: the strategies adopted by participants to keep information secret, and how they would talk about what could or could not be disclosed. These topics became the main objective of my project. I focussed on how the union's activities were facilitating and enabling members by retaining information. Interviewees have been asked about the engagement of new members and their concerns regarding exposure to employers and co-workers; methods to identify areas of intervention at the workplace; strategies to differentiate between employers and employees; concerns about board members' exposure on social media. A total of five participants have been involved in the interviews over two years, with questions concerning their specific areas of competence and experience. For the reasons outlined above, participants are kept anonymous and referred to as I1, I2, I3, I4 and I5.

The article's hypothesis is that the notion of visibility could frame critical questions regarding game workers and their roles, demands, struggles, and relations of power in the videogame industry. Many of the oft-cited examples of workers' protesting in the digital entertainment sector are concerned with their visibility, for instance with gaining recognition and being credited in the final product, or keeping a position of anonymity when expressing discontent (Deuze, Martin and Allen, 2007). By putting the notion of visibility as a key methodological concern, the article contributes to a broader debate on (in)visibility and labor in the digital age (see Cherry, 2016; Gruszka and Bohm, 2020; Petre, Duffy and Hund, 2019; Whiting and Symon, 2020; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Uldam, 2017). The article builds from the questions raised by previous researchers and investigates a unique case study of workers' collective organizing and their counter-strategies to tackle the issues that affect their workplace, while dealing with varied approaches to the production, distribution and promotion of their work via platforms and social media. It maintains that visibility and invisibility can be both enabling and inhibiting workers' actions.

The analytical section is divided in three parts, each discussing a key area of investigation: (1) the strategies adopted by the union to keep members' anonymous and their implications for social media communication; (2) how the union trained members to engage with colleagues and identify their bosses without disclosing their membership; (3) how the union reacted to the over-exposure of board members on social and news media. The three areas identify sites of ongoing struggle and not yet resolved internal negotiations, and provide a reference for research and initiatives involving workers in the creative and gig economies.

### **Discussion 1. True Names: Keeping Members Anonymous**

Protecting the anonymity of new members has been one of the initial challenges faced by IWGB\_GW. In autumn 2018 the initial organisers gathered online before arranging face-to-



face meetings in the London area. Participants were afraid of disclosing their names and the company they worked for. I3 says: “I didn’t tell anyone where I worked when we first met. I was super friendly but I didn’t know what the consequences might be”. Many were concerned as to whether the other participants might have been connected to their employers and colleagues. The compulsory social networking of the sector, which encourages non-hostile relations with peers and bosses, undermined the union organizing project in its initial stages (Browne and Whitson, 2021).

Furthermore, interviewees remember that many participants were confused about their responsibilities towards employers. In the United Kingdom, since the consolidation of the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act of 1992, workers have the right to join or not to join a labor union. Unions can organise workers across open shops. Employers cannot force their employees to join a specific union, neither can they demand that their employees communicate their union membership status. Participants at the initial meetings believed instead that they had to inform their employers. IWGB\_GW included a note on the FAQ section of their website informing that employers have no right to question or fire their employees on the basis of their union membership, and that workers can join the union even if their company does not recognise it (GWU-UK.org, 2021). I4 recalls:

I remember a discussion where people said “I am scared of joining the union”, and a number of people wouldn’t tell us their names, and we discovered throughout the meeting that they thought they had to tell their boss, they had to go the next day and say I’m a union member now. I remember thinking that I didn’t realise how little people knew about unions, and being hugely relieved we had figured that out.

Despite the clarification, new members felt that employers could easily by-pass national laws. I1 says that “many were freelance, and while they believed they had more control they also

worked for employers abroad who don't know what's going on in the UK". Members' anonymity was perceived from the beginning as a necessary condition to join the union.

Early meetings took place online on the online platform Discord. Discord allows participants to remain anonymous. It keeps participants' IP inaccessible, and does not require an email address or profile picture to create a temporary username. For the same reasons, Discord is still used to communicate across local branches. It is also a favourite platform for communities of videogame players, which facilitated the adoption in the early stages. The interviewees remember being initially engaged through Discord before making the risky step of meeting others in person.

The knowledge of the IWGB group regarding local regulations and their experience with casual and precarious workers facilitated the transition towards membership. IWGB\_GW guaranteed to their members anonymity at all levels, from data recording and communications. Legal cases have been handled directly by IWGB and names are not shared with the IWGB\_GW board, which is mostly responsible for organising locally and attracting new memberships. I2 says that "if a member wants to remain anonymous we keep them anonymous", and explains:

The name will be recorded, but is kept as data protection requires under secure conditions and if they turn up for meetings in person and we are doing photography or even recording minutes we ask them if they want to stay anonymous, and by default we keep people anonymous, because it can be a really dangerous thing to announce that you are a member of the union.

Anonymity also countered the fear of being harassed at the workplace. I4 believes that "fear of exposure" is one of the major aspects that keeps diverse workers of the gig and creative economy united under IWGB in the first place. I2 comments on his own decision of becoming a member, before joining the board, and the harsh reactions of his colleagues: "I was always

proud about the union and vocal about it at my previous and current work. I remember colleagues telling me that it was dangerous being in a union, just the simple fact of being a member”.

The anonymity of members had repercussions on the promotional material shared on social media. IWGB\_GW is active on Twitter, which is typically used by game workers to make contacts and publicise their work. However, the union’s account can hardly be used to communicate success stories. Details such as the name of members involved in disputes, their company or union branch and the type of legal case would make workers identifiable. As I2 comments: “we had a long and careful discussion and we have often been unsure [about the use of names on social media]. We want to celebrate victories but never at the expense of any members and their personal information”.

On January 21<sup>st</sup> 2020 the union published a thread on Twitter summarising their success stories for the previous year (IWGB\_GW, 2020). The thread contains figures and statistics about the cases resolved in 2019, without releasing information that could expose any individual member. The thread includes two anonymised quotes from members. Both include a circled black silhouette of a human profile. Such a simple graphic solution is the result of a much more complex process to preserve members’ anonymity while complying with the promotional cultures of social media. As I3 recalls:

It has been extremely difficult to collect data about the union for that thread, because IWGB manages each case directly and without involving IWGB\_GW, which is instead responsible for organizing locally and find participants. Those tweets have been working really well but the numbers were not easily accessible to us and not easy to quantify.

IWGB\_GW aims to protect workers, but it is not immune from the conventions of a sector that largely relies on network sociality and social media visibility. I5 observes that “all our victories came from social media, we have never really done a real-life demonstration”,

noticing how the absence of a clear policy in the initial stages regarding the use of real names on Twitter created the conditions for “a social media popularity contest”. I5 recalls that tagging influencers and companies that were on the spotlight for bad behaviour gave the union popularity. However, the practice exposed members and gave more importance to the social media activity of some chapters of GWU rather than their local organizing. “Social media is where we fought fights and that’s where we got f\*\*\*\*d up”, I5 comments. Rebranding as IWGB\_GW in autumn 2020 reinforced the distinction between the UK branch (a legally recognised labor union) and other GWU groups that were mostly visible on Twitter, and further stressed the importance of a regulated use of social media. While organizing social media campaigns was seen as an effective promotion, the union realised that it could backfire if members involved were tagged in any re-tweet. This constitutes a major and not fully resolved implication for union organizing in a sector where social media are frequently used for self-promotion and to establish professional networks.

## **Discussion 2. Drawing Lines: Identifying Employers and Workplaces**

In its early days, the union needed a clear policy to separate those who could join as members from their employers. However, in the videogame industry employers are often difficult to identify. The informality of the workplace, the use of open spaces and remote working, outsourcing of labor and platformization, tend to hide the hierarchies of power. IWGB\_GW established early on that those who can take hiring or firing decisions at the workplace could not join the union (they could at best become supporters). The policy originated from the IWGB central group, which does not accept managers as members. The IWGB\_GW group soon realised that the title of “manager” could generate confusion as many in the videogame sector line-manage others, with or without having the title in their job descriptions. The newly formed union decided to draw the line and not accept membership from those responsible to make the

final decision to hire or fire a worker. The policy only marginally rephrases the pre-existing criteria of IWGB, but is a novelty for the sector. As I1 says: “this is to cover a grey area, which is not clear cut, so you can join if you are a manager but cannot hire or fire, and there is a lot of that”. I1 clarifies that “we want to avoid situation with two members making opposing contradictory claims”.

Such a distinction is complicated by the variety of types of employment available in the game sector. For instance, those owning small independent studios are theoretically ineligible. It often gets “muddy”, as one interviewee repeatedly says. Observing the structure of a workplace rarely reveals who takes hiring and firing decisions. I3 says:

Often times in the games industry, it depends on the size of the company. Some companies it's easy to say who the boss is: it's the owner, it's the executive, normally it's one or two people. But at Rockstar or EA you have levels of direction and micro-management. Are they bosses or not bosses? So we have hiring/firing power but it's odd because often during the interview process you have people, including junior, together in a room interviewing and then voting whether hiring or not hiring. People might feel they have hiring/firing power but often they don't. It's the director who signs, taking panel decision into account but they have the final say. The division we use in the branch, it's because often times people transition between micro-management and doing actual work, and with muddy responsibilities. As a branch we include them and we know there is a power dynamic.

Moreover, game workers are often hired at larger companies while also hiring others at their own independent company. Multiple hierarchies of power are co-present in the story of each individual. As the I3 maintains:

How do you handle the case when someone does contract work for a very large studio, and it's clearly a worker in that case, and maybe they also have a part-time business where they hire someone else? Are they a worker, are they a boss? Or both? Can they be in the union

for one aspect of their life? And it gets muddy because a lot of people have multiple things going on often times, it's not a clear distinction. If you were a factory worker you have one place to go to and it's a clear distinction. It's less clear with game workers.

To tackle workers' anxieties, the union has been arranging role-playing sessions where new members can draw a map of their workplace (an activity borrowed from LaborNotes, 2021). The map is then used to start a conversation about the various people involved at the workplace, their roles, interactions, and possible modes of engagement. By drawing the map and tracing movements, participants identify the invisible hierarchies of power of their workplace, and reflect on how to engage co-workers to talk about the union. In the role-playing sessions new members can simulate their conversations with co-workers, and alleviate the awkwardness associated with the experience.

The interviewees acknowledge that the activity brought to the fore how informal open workplaces of the game industry effectively undermine workers' organizing, as these make hierarchies less clear-cut and eliminate areas for informal conversations. I2 recalls how the role-playing sessions shed light on the challenges posed by the unpredictable architectures of the workplaces:

Of course we face some challenges. There are workplaces where you can't apply the same method so easily. Say for example you have freelance workers and people like me who work in a really small studio at the moment. It's not as useful at all to map your workplace especially if you work as freelance.

I2 then comments on how the board has been learning from new members:

We work with them to figure out the best solution. In these training sessions we have freelancers turning up, and information does not necessarily apply to their workplace. But

we'll discuss with them and find ways they can approach it. It's all part of the learning experience of the union. Not many of us who run the union have much experience.

The complexity and variability of the workplace further obfuscate its internal dynamics (O'Donnell, 2021).

Understanding the specificity of the workplace and identifying the employer has been a matter of “drawing lines”: lines were drawn to sketch the offices, in order to draw another line separating co-workers and bosses. However, these literal and metaphorical lines are highly unstable in the videogame industry. Bulut (2015b) argues that the precarity and co-dependence of jobs in the game industry is a matter of being “above or below the line”: the line which separates the glamorised artistic and creative labor and the precarious, often outsourced workers. The game industry tends to push workforce below the line by means of “deskilling, outsourcing and financialization” (Bulut, 2015b, p. 194), and by intensifying the exploitative nature of “playbour” (Kücklich, 2009). The line “draws blurry zigzags due to technology [...], the nature of immaterial labor [...], financialization [...], structural tendencies of capitalism [...], and cultural and ideological formations” (Bulut, 2015b, p. 196; see also O'Donnell, 2019). The role-playing exercise of IWGB\_GW is a hyper-local strategy to pin down a line that is mobilised by global forces of technological development and capitalistic accumulation, and which has made the sector historically difficult to unionise.

### **Discussion 3. A Mask, a Cover: The Exposure of Board Members**

In its early stages, the union needed to promote itself on social and news media, but the process exposed the organisers to the public. In December 2018, an article on GWU UK appeared on The Guardian (Quinn, 2018) featuring name and picture of the secretary (at the time) Karn Bianco. Quotes from workers were anonymised in the article, but the secretary's details were explicitly mentioned. A video featuring the founders and organisers was published on the social

media accounts of GWU UK (IWGB\_GW, 2018). At the Game Developers Conference of March 2019, representatives of both GWU and GWU UK appeared on stage at the panel session “Lessons from Labour Organizers” (GDC 2019). In 2019 workers involved in both GWU and GWU UK appeared at festivals and conventions and their talks were later uploaded on YouTube. They rapidly became the recognised faces of the union.

The dangers of over-exposure materialised in October 2019 when the chair Austin Kelmore was fired from the company Ustwo (Taylor, 2019). The HR department at Ustwo motivated the decision stating that Austin had been “putting leadership... on the spot” for about a year, and concluded that “the studio runs as a collective ‘we’ rather than leadership versus employees, which may have been Austin’s experience in the past” (IWGB, 2019).

The union soon realised that those taking leadership roles were putting their careers at risk. The IWGB\_GW committee is composed of 8 roles (Chair; Vice-Chair; Secretary; Vice-Secretary; Treasurer; Communication Officer; Women and Non-Binary Officers; BAME officer) and by a number of roles for the regional branches. Only the chair and secretary are responsible for updating and establishing contact with the IWGB central committee. I2 explains that, within such a complex structure, keeping board members anonymous would have been practically impossible: “even those in elected positions had the option to remain anonymous, but no one decided to do it so far. I don’t know how the logistics would work. I’m not sure how anyone would go about being anonymous and trying to organise meetings for members”.

I1 argues that showing the real names and faces of the board is a guarantee for new members: “some are publicly visible, we need to provide a mask, a cover for people. We put real faces, which helps when someone wants to join the union, but we also say don’t worry, you can remain anonymous”. I2 articulates the position arguing that exposure is necessary to gain credibility:



It's like when newspapers have anonymous sources. It loses credibility. In much the same way if we choose to be completely anonymous it would be logistical very difficult. We would give the impression that we are hiding, and making people interpret that we are not as truthful and just.

Retrospectively, the case of Austin Kelmore made many reconsider some of the early choices and how exposure might have been underestimated. I4 comments:

I spent a lot of time reflecting about what happened with Austin. I always say you cannot legally be fired from being in a union but that doesn't mean it won't happen. But some people became over-exposed and lost their jobs and I sometimes wonder if we should have been clearer about the risks, and I thought we were.

I5 argues that the topic had been the focus of heated debates across the local and international groups of GWU, and that many issues could have been prevented with a dedicated policy. On the other hand, many thought that media promotion was necessary and that it would have been impossible to avoid over-exposure. I5 recalls:

I asked the international group whether we should have guidelines for social media presence and they said no, because we are all peers and no one is paid, no one will be there to monitor, and no one is going to benefit from this.

The interviewees claim to be enthusiastic of their roles in the union, but that exposure has generated more problems than they originally expected. Most of them prefer not to disclose details, but their stories range from feelings of fear and anxiety, to stories of micro-aggression and sustained harassment. They believe that these effects would have been nearly impossible to prevent. First, because the industry's network sociality and the informality of professional connections will inevitably expose any significant aspect of their lives, such as being part of the organization of a labor union. Second, because the promotional cultures of social media,

that largely inform the production of videogames, require real names and faces to give credibility to the union.

Such an unresolved conflict has been at the centre of the early years of IWGB\_GW. As I3 states “there is a stigma about unions because they are new and unfamiliar”, and it is only a matter of time before employers might look at it less suspiciously. However, within the current conditions organisers tend to lose control of their visibility, with potential repercussions on their personal careers.

### **Conclusion: Workers’ Visibility and Future Research**

The emergence of independent workers, platformisation and outsourcing, make unionization difficult to organise in the UK videogame industry. It could be argued that IWGB\_GW is appearing at a historical moment when unions are less likely to be effective, considering the decreasing number of workers hired by an identifiable employer, and the increasing number of self-employed and micro-businesses (UKIE, 2018). IWGB\_GW must be analysed in its historical and geographic specificity, as a catalyst of pre-existing isolated protests and as embedded in the same technological and cultural environment that frames the lives and work of its members. From such a perspective, it can constitute a significant case study to understand labor in the videogame industry, and workers’ organizing across the creative industries and gig economy. It sheds light on the strategies required to protect workers in a sector that largely relies on network sociality, while showing the implications of social media visibility for those participating in the committee.

After 2 years of participatory observation and interviews with participants involved in the union organisation, I argue that their operations have been largely concerned with managing the visibility of members. The strategies adopted to keep members anonymous have made it possible for many to join the union without explicitly breaking the narrative of passion-driven

labor of the sector. Activities such as role-playing sessions have been used to engage with new members and help them identify the hierarchies of power at the workplace. These strategies have shed light on some of the implications of organizing in the sector. Anonymity is necessary to facilitate new memberships, but it is fragile in light of a culture where employers often bypass local laws, or where disputes might easily receive unwanted publicity through social media. The rules separating workers from employers are often “muddy”: the union accepts only those workers who do not take hiring and firing decisions at the workplace, but members might temporarily gain those powers as they frequently transition from employment to self-employment. Moreover, employers are not immediately identifiable, as outsourcing becomes predominant and informal open workspaces make hierarchies of power opaque. Last but not least, board members become hyper-visible as a result of the union organizing activities. The participants feel that exposure is unavoidable to gain credibility in a context that largely relies on self-branding and networking on social media, but the problem remains unresolved and has so far generated significant repercussions, such as in the case of Austin Kelmore.

Further research is needed to evaluate how similar strategies could influence workers’ organizing projects across other sectors. It becomes particularly important at a time when established unions are looking into opportunities to intervene in videogame and digital media production and new unions are emerging in the information technology sector. For instance, the Communication Workers of America union has launched the Campaign to Organize Digital Employees in January 2020, with a view on involving game workers into union organizing.

Furthermore, the specific geographical contexts in which union organising activities take place must be taken into account and evaluated in any future research project. The present study has focussed primarily on activities taking place in London. Participants reported that organizing in more confined urban areas brings to the fore the implications of a sector that largely relies on local professional networking. For instance, workers in the areas of the North

of England and the East Midlands reported that meeting union members in person in public spaces is discouraged, as it often brings to accidentally cross into non-unionised professional contacts. New strategies of (in)visibility might be needed in different geographical areas.

Finally, the effects of COVID-19 and remote working are still largely under-researched. While online communication might facilitate anonymity, it also undermines the workplace tactics and informal conversations that allow members to reach colleagues and enable local organizing. Further research is needed to understand the key aspects that will define game workers' struggles in a post-COVID19 society.

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