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How to Beat the Boss: Game Workers Unite in the UK

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How to beat the boss: Game Workers Unite in Britain

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Abstract
This article provides an overview of the growth of game worker organising in Britain. These workers have not previously been organised in a trade union, but over the last 2 years, they have developed a campaign to unionise their sector and launched a legal trade union branch. This is a powerful example of so-called 'greenfield' organising, beyond the reach of existing trade unions and with workers who have not previously been members. The article provides an outline of the industry, the launch of the Game Workers Unite international network, the growth of the division in Britain as well as their formation as a branch of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain. The aim is to draw out lessons for both the videogames industry, as well as other non-unionised industries, showing how the traditions of trade unionism can be translated and developed in new contexts.

Introduction

In 2018, workers in the videogames industry tried to host a panel on unions at the Game Developers' Conference (GDC), the largest industry conference in the United States. After the discussion was shut down, it sparked the rapid growth of an international network, the Game Workers Unite (GWU). The national branches are working towards unionising videogame workers, each with different constraints in their respective contexts. While the French Union STJV (*Le Syndicat des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo*) had existed before GDC, the British section of GWU will be the first to

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establish a union branch from this wave of organising. This article discusses the growth of GWU in Britain, drawing on ethnographic and interview data over the past year. I first came into contact with GWU after GDC in 2018. Having followed the events at the conference, I was then introduced to the emergent branch in Britain when it had just one member. Since then, I have engaged with GWU through the 'workers' inquiry' method (Woodcock 2014, 2017). This has entailed an active engagement with this new organising project, attending meetings and providing support. Throughout this process, I taken notes as well as formal and informal interviewing. This research forms part of a larger project (see Woodcock 2019a). The aim of this article is to reflect upon the experience of these previously unorganised workers and their experiments with unionising in Britain.

The videogames industry

The videogames industry has been growing in Britain, although its significance can be harder to see. In 2016, the games industry 'provided 47,620 FTE jobs and contributed £2.87bn in GVA to Britain economy' (UK Interactive Entertainment Association (Ukie) 2019). This means workers who are directly involved in the production of videogames, including developers, programmers, artists, designers, sound, testers and so on. In addition to this, it also includes the publishers and publicity – increasingly important for a videogame to maximise its profits. Britain has produced many world-leading titles, including *Batman: Arkham Knight, Monument Valley, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Grand Theft Auto V* – this latter being the 'most financially successful media product of all time, selling over 95 million units worldwide and over $6bn in global revenue' (Ukie 2019). So, the videogames industry is incredibly profitable, but this comes with the complexity of managing the production of complex cultural commodities. The history of the videogames industry, like the film industry, is littered with very expensive mistakes, as well as huge successes. Part of the difficulty comes from the unpredictability (at least on the part of management) of software development. This has meant a reliance on a process called 'crunch' in which workers are expected to work very long hours of unpaid overtime towards the end of a development cycle.

In 2016, I published what could be considered a pre-inquiry into the videogames industry (Woodcock 2016). This sketched out some of the dynamics of the industry and began looking for some issues around which organising could develop. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter (2009) argued, there is a long history of struggle within the videogames industry that can be traced back to the hacker origins of the medium. I argued that there were 'two points of contestation' that could be identified. The first was crunch time, which can be understood as a struggle over the length of the working day – something that Marx discussed at length. The existence of crunch shows how important labour is for successful videogames. This combines with the second point of contestation: institutional sexism within the industry. While this is linked to crunch – it is easier for men who do not have caring responsibilities, or who can shift them onto someone else – it also combines with dynamics of videogame culture beyond the workplace too (see Woodcock 2019a). At the time, I argued these 'two could be converted into organisable demands in a workplace, yet the lack of traditions and

rejection of collective organisation remains significant obstacles to doing this' (Woodcock 2016). However, much changed in the 2 years that followed. The lack of a workers' organisation or unions does not mean that nothing was happening in these workplaces. As Braverman (1999) argued, while on the surface there may be an 'apparent habituation', the

> hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit, or when the capitalist driver for greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity. (p. 104)

The events over the last year have shown that there was clearly latent frustration, anger and desire to do things differently hidden just below the surface.

GDC 2018

The first moment the stream spilled over publicly was at GDC in March 2019. There had been a series of scandals around working conditions and it appeared that things were beginning to shift. Software developers had begun to publicly organise in the Tech Workers Coalition in the United States (Prado 2018). A group of workers began organising for a roundtable at GDC, titled: 'Union Now? Pros, Cons, and Consequences of Unionization for Game Devs'. Game workers started discussing plans on social media channels, growing in size until a plan for direct action was decided. The name GWU was chosen, and a whole range of materials prepared – including the logo with a raised first holding a game controller. The event itself was a disaster of mismanagement by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), itself widely considered anti-union. As Ehrhardt (2018) reported, the IGDA tried to 'misrepresent what unions do and prevent any organizing that had been taking place that day from taking root' and that The IGDA's executive director, 'MacLean's tactics of silencing, leading and derailing just as speakers were about to discuss organizing could be seen as purposeful union-busting'.

There have been a range of responses to technology workers starting to unionise so far. For example, early in 2019, workers at the US software company Lanetix were fired after filing papers to unionise (Tiku 2019). More recently, workers at Kickstarter started organising and were met with a memo from senior staff members that they 'we're concerned with the misappropriation of unions for use by privileged workers' (Menegus 2019). The attempts at 'union-busting' at GDC did not result in firings, but they tended towards a logic also expressed by Kickstarter: either unions are bad or inappropriate. However, the heavy-handed nature of the GDC response meant the GWU was able to gain an international audience via social media and the videogames media, with the message spreading out from the failed roundtable. Some of this can be explained as a result of tapping into the latent potential of the pre-existing networks of game developers. The workforce is well connected through regular turnover and freelance contracts, as well as on social media channels. The push by journalists was likely facilitated by the fact they had been unionising themselves too (see 'editor's note' in Shuler 2019), so were prepared

to cover these stories in a positive tone. Within weeks, national GWU branches began to sprint up across the world.

Two dynamics in organising were involved: most workers had never been involved in collective workplace organising, and most workers were aware and supportive of something like that happening. For example, at GDC 2019, the State of the Industry Survey included some new questions for its 4,000 respondents. The first asked whether the games industry should unionise: 47% of respondents said 'Yes', with 26% 'Maybe' and just 16% 'No'. Although this is not a single workplace, but rather a particular selection of developers, it nevertheless shows that the idea of a union is widely accepted. The second asked whether they thought it would succeed: 21% thought the industry would unionise and 39% said 'Maybe' (Conditt 2019). One possible reason for this difference could be down to confidence – or not knowing what this process could involve. Nevertheless, this represents fertile terrain to organise on.

GWU in Britain

In Britain, it has been notable that the GWU organising began as a push from people who wanted a union, but did not really know what organising a union would involve. This situation resulted from being in a sector without any history of organising in Britain where workers came forward from their own workplaces and began to build a network. To many unions, this may well have looked like a flash in the pan and, therefore, not worth investing organising resources in. However, over a year of patient organising, these workers grew in confidence and developed organising skills that could be effective in their own workplaces. Indeed, the GWU provides a particularly interesting example of the issues facing non-union workers. One of the questions that was regularly asked by workers at GWU meetings was whether they would have to immediately declare to their managers that they had joined a union. There was a widespread belief that the act of joining a union would mean that workers immediately had to enter into a kind of open conflict in the workplace. This is interesting for two reasons: first, despite this belief, many workers were prepared to do this after hearing about GWU. Second, it hints at the possibility many workers in different sectors are scared out of organising at work on this basis. For example, one worker wanted to know whether joining a union would then mean he would have to recruit other people at work (Woodcock 2019b). When I answered that it would be good if he did, he replied that it was a 'scary' prospect, but that he would work up to it. A few months later, he had already begun recruiting a layer of workers around him at the studio.

This shows the dynamic that unfolded when a group of unorganised workers begin organising. Without prior experience they had many questions about what to do, but they also started with a fresh slate to organise from. What these discussions also show is that the network of workers that was solidifying in Britain was already oriented towards organising. Developing the workers' inquiry method in this context, I provided support to this early organising – while finding there was, of course, a huge amount to be learned from these workers. As Austin Kelmore (2019), the British GWU branch chair has explained, reflecting on this process: 'It's been less than a year since Game Workers Unite was founded at the Game Developers Conference and it's amazing how much has

changed in that small amount of time. As of 14 December [2018] . . . there's a full, legal game workers union in the United Kingdom as a branch of the Independent Workers of Great Britain. If you had asked me at the beginning of this year whether I thought we'd have a union, I would have laughed at the absurdity of it, yet here we are'.

For many of the workers I spoke to the idea of the union meant many different things. However, for most it was about trying to transform the industry they love, having experienced or seen the damage of crunch or other management practices. The decision to join the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) was one of three options considered by the early group of organisers. The other two were either joining a large Trades Union Congress (TUC) affiliated union, or starting their own union from scratch. The encounters with TUC-affiliated unions were focused on recruitment and services. After spending time discussing what a union in the videogames sector would involve, these encounters lacked the features of 'unionateness' that Blackburn (1967: 19) has previously discussed. One union was not keen on the workers keeping the GWU branding, while another offered membership discounts if they joined quickly. This left an impression not of an organisation that had 'professional activities or welfare schemes', rather than 'collective bargaining and the protection of the interests of members, as employees, as its main function', let alone 'prepared to be militant, using all forms of industrial action which may be effective'. However, one of these unions, Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU), has gone on to organ- ise a small number of workers in Scotland separately.

Forming their own union was considered a logistical, legal and administrative task beyond what the initial group of organisers wanted – or needed – to do. This is where the decision to join the IWGB as an autonomous branch began to make sense. It pro- vided the infrastructure and support that could allow the nascent organisation to begin forming into a union structure. The IWGB is an example of 'new unionism' that Ness (2014: 269) identified. This involves autonomy from the state and management, as well as grassroots and democratic structures that help to facilitate 'self-ownership' from the members. While the reputation of the IWGB has been built on organising outsourced migrant cleaners, for example, during the '3 Cosas' campaign (Alberti 2016), it has now grown to include a wider range of precarious workers including couriers, private hire and Uber drivers and foster care workers.

What be learnt from GWU?

The first lesson is a simple but an important one, namely, just because workers are not organised does not mean there is not any resistance and this does not preclude them becoming organised. The dynamics of organising often mean that events unfold with dif- ferent intensities: sometimes it takes a long while for things to develop, at other points things move quickly. The speed with which GWU has grown shows that below the surface these tensions have been developing for quite some time. The second concerns the signifi- cance of interventions at GDC. The development of the international networks, as well as the publicity within the industry, would have taken much longer without this. This is not to say that other industries could simply pick an industry conference and cause a scandal over a roundtable (although that would undoubtedly be good in some cases), but rather

that initial attempts at organising need to think about how to effectively leverage the existing networks that exist. This may mean targeted events like this, but it also extends to using popular social media channels to organise – *Discord* a videogame orientated app has become a popular organising tool in Britain, much like *WhatsApp* among Deliveroo or Uber drivers. The third is new groups of workers like GWU provide an important testing ground for what trade unionism means today. Workers without previous experience of it are untrammelled by the defeats, sectionalism and bureaucratisation of existing unions. This 'fresh start' organising shows what workplace organising can look like in these new sectors like videogames or technology. Existing unions need to be prepared to learn from the experiences of these workers, adapting their methods and organisational forms to meet new requirements. In turn, the best traditions of existing unions, methods, organising strategies and so on can be exchanged and developed.

The mainstream unions in Britain have been slow to reach out to these workers. However, in the United States, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) union confederation approached the popular videogames news website, Kotaku, to publish an open letter to the GWU. It is worth noting here, to refer back to a point made earlier, that Kotaku staff are members of the Writers Guild of America which is a part of the AFL-CIO. The open letter was signed by the secretary-treasurer, Liz Shuler (2019), and read like the author understood the industry and its workers' concerns. She ended by arguing: 'What's more, you have millions of brothers and sisters across the country standing with you. Your fight is our fight, and we look forward to welcoming you into our union family. Whether we're mainlining caffeine in Santa Monica, clearing tables in Chicago or mining coal in West Virginia, we deserve to collect nothing less than the full value of our work'. This was a powerful signal from an existing workers' organisation – here posed as both industrial and services – to support and welcome a new section. It also shows an awareness of the industry, reaching out through their own communication channels.

Whether the AFL-CIO or TUC in Britain choose to support these new workers, the point to be cognised is that these workers are now organising. As the British GWU builds its branch of the IWGB, it also puts these workers into a conversation with migrant cleaners fighting outsourcing, bicycle couriers, Deliveroo riders and Uber drivers fighting against bogus self-employment, and foster care workers also struggling to be recognised workers – all united by their precariousness and often having been labelled as 'unorganisable' by mainstream unions. Through these encounters, many new ways to 'beat the boss' are being discussed, experimented with and tested. At the time of writing, the GWU branch of IWGB is now fighting against the victimisation of their branch chair, Austin Kelmore, providing a concrete test of how to do this in practice.

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