IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE GAME CHANGE THE RULES



ALTERNATIVE MODES OF VIDEOGAME PRODUCTION

Authorship

Authors
Michael Iantorno and Marie LeBlanc Flanagan

Illustrator
Marie LeBlanc Flanagan

Layout Designers
Mutual Design and Dubal Gráfico

Project Lead
Marie LeBlanc Flanagan

Project Management and Dissemination Support
Jim Munroe

Consultants
Saleem Dabbous and Jess Marcotte

Research Support
Hanine El Mir, christian scott, and Irmak Tanner

French Translation
Justin Leduc-Frenette

Special Thanks
Mia Consalvo, Osama Dorias, Rami Ismail, and Felan Parker

Project Facilitation
This project was facilitated by Game Arts International Network (GAIN), a registered not-for-profit focused on interconnecting existing game arts organisations and nurturing new structures in emerging regions.

Funding Statement
If You Don't Like The Game, Change The Rules was made with the financial support of the Canada Media Fund, Ontario Creates, and Mitacs Accelerate. Additional funding was provided by the Technoculture, Art and Games (TAG) Research Centre at Concordia University.

Disclaimer
The opinions, observations, conclusions, and recommendations contained in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Ontario Creates, the Government of Ontario, the Canada Media Fund, the Technoculture, Art, and Games Research Centre, or any of the individuals thanked. The aforementioned institutions, agencies, and individuals are in no way bound by the recommendations contained in this document.

Publication Date
September 2023

CONTENT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

2 **1.1** White Paper at a Glance
5 **1.2** Key Definitions
8 **1.3** Research Participants

2.0 GAME LABOUR IN CANADA EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES

12 **2.1** What labour issues have you experienced working in the game industry?
15 **2.2** What new working arrangements, changes, or initiatives are you most excited about?

3.0 THE STATE OF VIDEOGAME WORKER CO-OPERATIVES IN CANADA

18 **3.1** What do game developers know about worker co-operatives?
19 **3.2** What pushes people toward (or away) from co-operatives?
22 **3.3** What do co-operatives stand for?
23 **3.4** What is it like being a part of a worker-owned game studio?
26 **3.5** Co-op myths versus realities
27 **3.6** What are the advantages of running a worker co-operative game studio?
30 **3.7** What challenges are inherent to starting and running a co-operative?
33 **3.8** How do I get started?

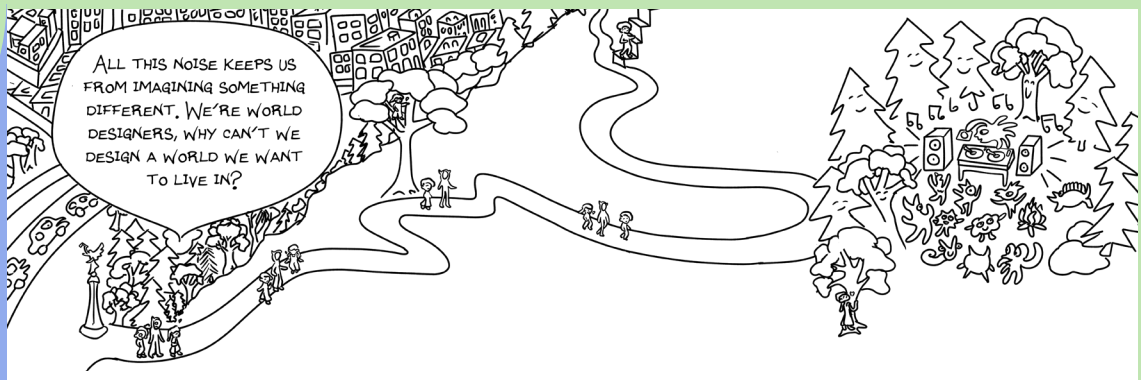
4.0 THE STATE OF VIDEOGAME UNIONS IN CANADA

37 **4.1** What do game developers know about unions?
38 **4.2** Union myths versus realities
39 **4.3** What pushes people toward (or away) from unions?
42 **4.4** Co-ops or unions?
43 **4.5** What are unions aiming to achieve?
45 **4.6** What challenges are inherent to starting a union?
48 **4.7** How do I get started?

5.0 CLOSING NOTES

52 **5.1** Appendix A: Bibliography
55 **5.2** Appendix B: Methodological Overview
56 **5.3** Appendix C: Survey Sample
58 **5.4** Appendix D: Worker Co-operative Resources
60 **5.6** Appendix E: Union Resources

1.0 INTRODUCTION



The videogame industry has become infamous for enforcing unsustainably long hours (commonly known as crunch), relentlessly churning through employees, and fostering toxic work cultures that are particularly damaging to marginalised creators. Despite being system designers and world builders by trade—spending their careers coding intricate economies and rendering sprawling fantasy landscapes—game developers are often reluctant to rethink existing labour paradigms. Even when striking out on their own after leaving a hostile studio environment, game workers tend to recreate traditional, hierarchical employment structures rather than conceiving better employment futures for themselves and their colleagues.

If You Don't Like The Game, Change The Rules: Alternative Modes of Videogame Production explores and documents the possibility space for Canadian game creators who are interested in structuring their labour in new ways. The heightened presence of game developer unions and union-centric organisations, the recent emergence of worker co-operatives, and a push toward new labour initiatives, such as 4-day work weeks, all suggest that curiosity is slowly transitioning to action for those interested in reconfiguring the game industry. Through long-form interviews with worker co-operative and union members, conversations with labour experts, and surveys completed by game developers of all walks, we have identified numerous structural and attitudinal factors that encourage, or discourage, game creators to consider alternative working arrangements.

While by no means a comprehensive chronicling of labour in the Canadian game industry, this white paper provides a snapshot of union mobilisation, worker co-operative formation, and emerging labour configurations at a critical moment. With two studios unionising and more than half a dozen co-operatives forming (or working towards formation) over the past few years, these labour structures may soon rise to greater prominence in the Canadian game industry. Our objective with this white paper is to provide a resource for Canadian game developers that describes alternatives to traditional employment, details the challenges and benefits involved in adopting them, and speaks to the lived experiences of worker-owners and union members.

This white paper is divided into five major sections. Following this introduction, we provide an executive summary, flesh out a number of key definitions, and outline the demographics of survey participants and interviewees. In the central three sections we share the perspectives of participants and interviewees regarding current (and prospective) working conditions, worker co-operatives, and unions in the Canadian game industry. Finally, we conclude with closing thoughts about our findings and appendices that provide further context and resources for the study.

1.1

White Paper at a Glance

Methodology

We conducted the research for *If You Don't Like the Game, Change the Rules: Alternative Modes of Videogame Production* from June 2022 to January 2023. The primary methods used for this project were:

1. A Microsoft Forms survey (52 participants) distributed to Canadian game developers.

2. Online video interviews (36 participants) with members of worker co-operatives, game developers in the process of starting a worker co-operative, traditional game studios that explicitly followed co-operative values, game union organisers, industry labour experts, and developer swith unique insights on labour.

All surveys and interviews were conducted in English. We supplemented surveys and interviews with the analysis of news articles, academic papers, and industry resources.

Game Labour in Canada - Experiences and Attitudes

Current Labour Issues

In our survey of 52 Canadian game developers, the most common labour issues mentioned were: crunch (60%), a lack of creative freedom (46%), salaries below living wage (44%), employment loss and precarity (35%), harassment and bias based on identity (27%), and harassment based on hierarchy (21%).

New Working Arrangements

Our survey participants also expressed excitement about emerging labour arrangements, changes, and initiatives. The most commonly mentioned of these were: 4-day work weeks (50%), remote or hybrid working arrangements (21%), improved wages and benefits (19%), and structural changes to the game industry at-large (13%).

The State of Videogame Worker Co-operatives in Canada

Awareness

60% of our survey participants stated that they had a strong awareness of what a worker co-operative is. Interviewees highlighted the importance of online resources, regional organisations (such as the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation and Réseau COOP), and informal connections in learning more about them. They also lamented that information about worker co-operatives (and unions) is currently absent in college and university game design programs and industry resources.

Motivations & Hesitations

Sustainability, equity, structural change (i.e., transforming harmful management structures), and greater creative freedom were mentioned as the key motivators for game developers to seek out the worker co-operative structure. Fears of increased bureaucracy, an inability to find the right group of collaborators, and financial risk were the most common hesitations for prospective and current worker-owners.

Worker Co-operative Values

The most commonly stated worker co-operative values focused on equity and empowerment, productive conflict and inclusive decision-making, slow growth and sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and the production of games that depart from industry design norms. Co-op values are codified in mission statements and official bylaws. Many interviewees felt that these values are not present in the mainstream game industry.

Day-to-Day Operations

While every worker-owner has a vote, many co-op game studios mentioned that they had implemented hierarchies—such as a board of directors or a creative lead—to take care of certain projects and decisions. Unlike traditional studios, these hierarchies were developed and continue to be iterated upon by all members, requiring constant maintenance.

Currently, it appears that worker-owners at smaller co-operatives are unable to offer full-time salaries and benefits and, instead, distribute earnings based on hours-worked or projects-completed. Larger worker co-operatives are able to provide some benefits and often embrace flat salary structures, typically within the range of $50,000 to $80,000.

Co-op Advantages

The most common advantages cited by worker-owners were: increased buy-in and worker retention, a recognition of individual needs and circumstances, and creative empowerment. As a result of collectively owning their studio, worker-owners felt a greater level of personal accountability toward its success. They also emphasised the importance of being able to democratically shape working arrangements to meet their personal and creative needs.

Co-op Challenges

The most common challenges cited by worker-owners were: registering a co-operative in the game industry, keeping up with administrative tasks on a day-to-day basis, and gaining access to funding (particularly grants). Interviewees expressed ongoing challenges in finding professionals (accountants and lawyers), funding agencies, and training programs that understand the intricacies of both the game industry and the worker co-operative model.

The State of Videogame Unions in Canada

Awareness

92% of our survey participants believed they had a strong idea of what a union is. Interviewees and participants first learned about unions through organisations such as Game Workers Unite (GWU); existing unions and their official resources; or popular media such as news stories, memes, and social media. Many survey participants also mentioned they had first- or second-hand experience with unions.

Motivations and Hesitations

When describing motivations, interviewees recalled that union interest had typically been spurred on by deteriorating working conditions at a game studio. Media coverage of successful unionisation efforts were also vital in motivating game developers, in both affirming the viability of unions and the systemic nature of labour issues. The most common hesitation among survey participants was the feeling that, while unions are necessary, their current workplace did not require them. Labour organisers also mentioned that harmful tropes (for example, unions as an outside force) remain difficult to dispel.

Unionisation Goals

After union formation, collective bargaining begins, where unions negotiate contracts with their employers to determine their terms of employment. While no Canadian game industry union has completed bargaining at this time, interviewees listed these key objectives: increased wages, work-from-home arrangements, proper sick leave, employee recall (i.e., first right of refusal for future contracts), increased benefits (e.g. healthcare), less micromanagement, and a standardisation of roles. At a broader level, interviewees also wanted to push back against harmful capitalist structures and to inspire future unionisation efforts across the industry.

Unionisation Challenges

Union organisers described a number of key challenges facing their efforts: a fear of being laid-off or fired during organising efforts, co-worker ambivalence toward labour organisation efforts, and blowback (i.e., union busting) from game studio owners and management. Game developers also emphasised that they were not only afraid of losing their current job, but also of being blacklisted across the industry, with some reporting that they faced reprisal even after the union was formed.

1.2

Key Definitions

Worker Co-operative

Worker co-operatives are businesses owned and democratically controlled by their members. Comprehensively defining a worker co-operative can be difficult, as the definition can vary between countries, even from province-to-province within Canada. However, the main purpose of a worker co-operative is to provide sustainable employment for all its members by operating according to co-operative principles and embodying the values of its worker-owners.

A traditional business is owned by an individual, partners, or a larger group of stakeholders, who make all high-level decisions and benefit the most from its profits. A worker co-operative serves its employees and its community rather than an owner or ownership group. The co-op's assets are collectively owned, and surplus earnings are shared according to the bylaws and policies that are written and agreed-upon by the worker-owners. The worker co-operative, in principle, is designed to benefit not just the founding employees/members but also all future employees/members. When new employees join the co-op, after a successful probationary period, they are, in principle, encouraged to apply for membership.

Worker co-operatives are only one of several types of co-operatives, and the distinction is important. Many co-operatives are not owned by their workers. As examples: consumer co-operatives offer high-quality goods and services to its members at the lowest price possible, while producer co-operatives allow members within an industry to cooperatively sell and market their goods. For brevity's sake, we use the terms "worker co-operative," "co-operative," and "co-op" interchangeably throughout this white paper. Most commonly, we will refer to those who are part of a worker co-operative as "worker-owners" or "members."

This definition is condensed and summarised from the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation (CWCF) website: https://canadianworker.coop

Union

A workplace union is an organisation made up of employees who are dedicated to improving their wages, hours, benefits, and working conditions—solidified through a union contract known as a "collective agreement." A union often has staff that deal directly with a company to negotiate better rights and ensure the company is fulfilling the collective agreement. This staff is funded by union dues and fees paid by its members. When discussions and bargaining do not work, union members can vote to "strike"— collectively withholding their labour as a negotiation tactic.

Unionisation processes differ between jurisdictions but typically require a significant number of employees within a workplace (between 40% and 60% in Canada, depending on the province) to sign a union card. Once this threshold is met, the corporation may choose to voluntarily recognise the union, otherwise an anonymous unionisation vote is held. If a majority of employees vote "yes," the union is formed, and the employer and union begin negotiating a collective agreement.

In addition to workplace unions, there are "craft unions" and "trade unions." Craft unions organise all workers who are part of a specific craft or trade, regardless of industry, such as the SAG-AFTRA (which represents actors, announcers, broadcast journalists, and more). Industrial unions organise all workers within an industry, regardless of craft or trade, such as the United Auto Workers (UAW).

This definition is condensed and summarised from the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) website: https://www.ufcw.ca

Game Developer

Game developers encompass anyone involved with the creation, maintenance, and release of a game. Programmers, producers, artists, writers, game designers, sound designers, QA testers, and community managers are all examples of game developers (although this is certainly not a comprehensive list). Game developers are also commonly referred to as game workers or game professionals.

Marginalised

People who are marginalised are relegated to powerless or unimportant positions within a society, group, or organisation. This marginalisation is usually systemic, and people are typically targeted based on their identity. Many game developers, for example, report that they have been subjected to harm or denied opportunities due to their ability, culture, socioeconomic status, race or ethnic origin, sexuality, age, body type, gender, trauma history, marital status, religion, or nationality.

According to the 2021 IGDA survey, the "typical" game developer identified as white or multiracial with white (78%), male (61%), straight (70%), married or partnered (65%), did not have children (76%), did not have a disability (68%), and had a university or post-graduate degree (68%). 74% of the IGDA survey participants believed that the game industry did not offer equal treatment and opportunity for all of its employees, particularly those that fall outside these criteria. As will become evident throughout this white paper, marginalised game developers are key drivers in movements toward alternative labour models.

Crunch

Crunch is a practice in which game developers are forced to work large amounts of overtime for weeks, months, or even years on end, often without overtime pay. The most serious accounts of crunch describe employees working 65-100 hour work a week, sleeping at work, and experiencing serious physical and mental trauma. According to the 2021 IGDA survey, 47% of game developers believe that crunch is expected to be a normal part of their job.

Burnout

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion, usually caused by extreme and prolonged stress. Although not exclusive to the game industry, burnout is common at game studios due to the prevalence of crunch and other systemic factors.

1.3

Research Participants

We conducted the research for *If You Don't Like the Game, Change the Rules: Alternative Modes of Videogame Production* from June 2022 to January 2023. The primary methods used for this project were a Microsoft Forms survey (52 participants) and online video interviews (36 participants), supplemented by the analysis of news articles, academic papers, and industry resources. All surveys and interviews were conducted in English.

In this section, we provide a short demographic overview of our survey participants and interviewees. Additional notes about our research methods can be found in Appendix B.

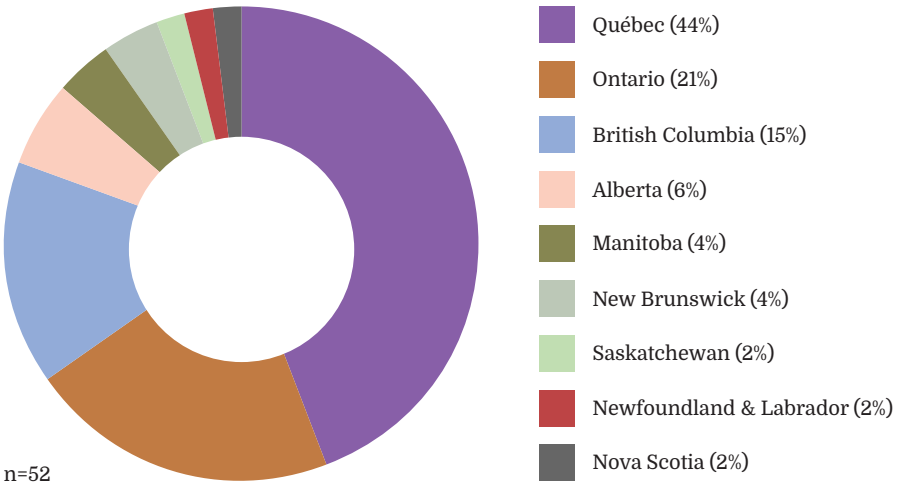
Survey Participant Demographics

Regionality

Our goal for these surveys was to include participants from across the entire country, not just within the three major industry hubs of Ontario, Québec, and British Columbia.

However, participants from these provinces still dominated our sample (81%) with a particularly large representation from Québec (44%). This is likely due to the prevalence of game studios in these jurisdictions and the location of GAIN's pre-existing network of contacts.

While we managed to recruit at least one person from each province, we were unable to find participants from Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, or the Yukon.



n=52

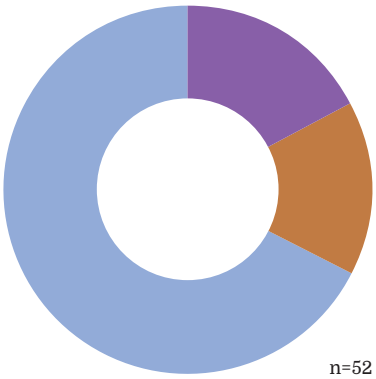
Employment Status

Although not the primary focus of our research, we included three questions addressing the employment status of our participants. We felt it was important to have some idea of who we were speaking with to better interpret the survey results.

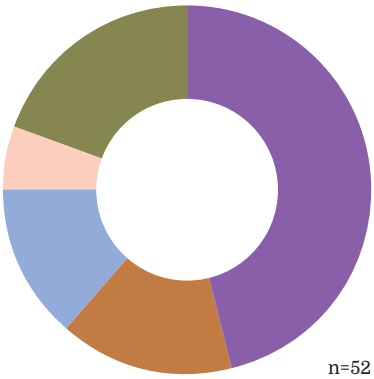
We were somewhat surprised to see that the majority of our participants (62%) were game industry veterans with 6 or more years of experience. This runs counter to IGDA's 2021 Developer Satisfaction Survey, which reported that most game developers (66%) have 6 or

less years of experience, suggesting that our research skews toward senior developers. The remainder of our participants were split almost evenly between 1-2 years of experience (17%) and 3-5 years of experience (15%).

Developers from indie studios were far-and-away our most common type of participant (46%), likely due to the flourishing indie scene in Québec, the tendency of smaller studios to be active on social media (and more likely to see our call for participants), and the well-documented prevalence of NDAs at larger game studios (O'Donnell, 2014, p. 205).

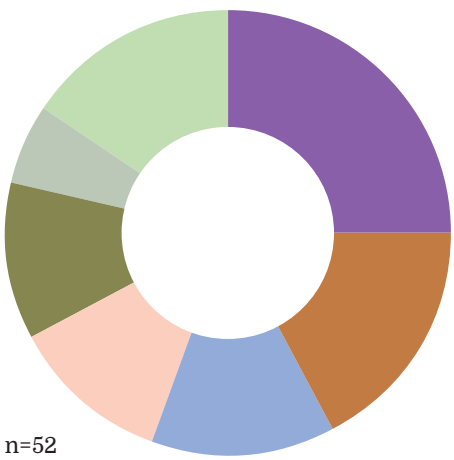


- 1-2 Years (17%)
- 3-5 Years (15%)
- 6+ Years (67%)



- Indie Studio (46%)
- AAA Studio (15%)
- Freelancer or Self-Employed (14%)
- Not Currently Employed (6%)
- Other (19%)

AAA developers (15%) and freelancers (14%) were strongly represented as well, with the remainder of participants being unemployed (6%) or possessing an undefined employment status (19%). No developers from worker co-operatives participated in the survey, most likely because we had already interviewed them at the time of survey circulation.



- Management (25%)
  incl. producers + team leads
- Programming/Engineering (17%)
- Quality Assurance (14%)
- Design (12%)
  incl. writing + UX/UI design
- Art (12%)
  incl. technical artists
- Admin/Support/Monetisation (6%)
  incl. marketing + community
- Other (15%)

Management (25%) was the dominant role of our participants, under which we included producers and team leads. Programming and engineering came in second place (17%), followed by an even split between design, art, and quality assurance (12% each). Admin and support (6%) was, by far, the least represented role. Quite a large number of participants noted their role was not present in our list (15%), suggesting that these categories should be revised for future surveys. We also did not allow participants to select multiple roles, which we learned is a very common arrangement at indie game studios.

Interviewee Demographics

Our Canadian interviewees consisted of:

• 7 worker-owners from 4 provincially registered game worker co-operatives.

• 7 game developers who are working toward establishing a worker co-operative (and/or operate their studios with co-operative values).

• 3 union members who helped organise unionisation efforts at their company.

• 6 industry experts focused on organising, funding, and advocating for worker co-operatives and unions.

• 2 game developers who shared their experiences working at AAA game studios.

We also conducted interviews with a number of worker co-operative members and industry experts from other countries to better gauge jurisdictional specificities and shared struggles. These interviewees were from Australia, Europe, North America, and South America and consisted of:

• 10 worker-owners from 7 game worker co-operatives.

• 2 industry experts.

As the Canadian game industry is the primary focus of this research project, we consider international interview data to be supplementary. In our findings, we directly identify any data that is sourced from non-Canadian jurisdictions.

We chose not to collect detailed demographic data from interviewees as several of them wished to remain anonymous. Due to the small number of worker co-operatives and unions in the game industry, even scant demographic data risks identifying participants indirectly. Any individuals identified in this white paper have consented to their name being shared and have reviewed direct quotes sourced from their interviews.

2.0 GAME LABOUR IN CANADA - EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES



Labour issues have long been a hot topic among game workers but have only recently received sustained attention from the media. Investigations into toxic work environments have popularised terms such as "burnout" and "crunch," while a number of high-profile scandals have exposed the prevalence of harassment and discrimination in the game industry, particularly directed toward marginalised game developers.

While historically dismissed as publicity outlets for media companies, games journalists have increasingly been chronicling game labour controversies. Polygon's investigation into alleged 100-hour work weeks at Rockstar Games during the production of Red Dead Redemption 2 (Good, 2018) and Kotaku's coverage of harassment and abuse at Activision Blizzard (Zwiezen, 2021) are high-profile examples, having brought game industry labour concerns to broader audiences. While many reports still frame labour problems as scandals, crunch and workplace toxicity are increasingly being recognised as systemic issues. Over the past half decade, even mainstream media outlets have begun to seriously engage with topics such as game industry labour exploitation (Semuels, 2019), the psychological toll that toxic work environments take on employees (Glasner, 2019), and predatory practices embedded within games themselves (Bedingfield, 2022).

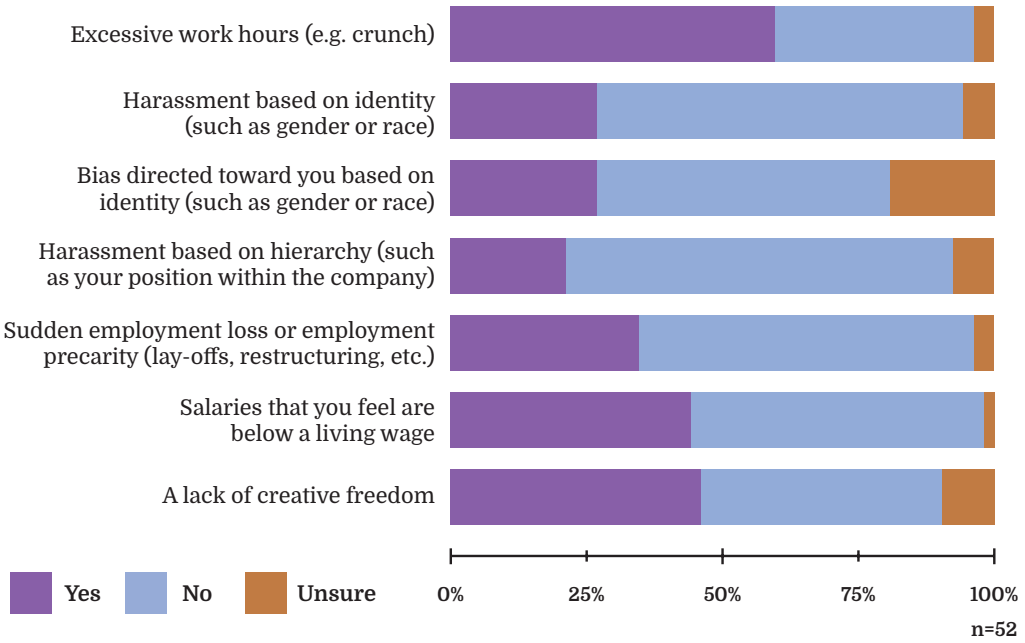
Painting a full picture of games labour is difficult due to the slim number of studies documenting working conditions. One useful initiative is the bi-annual Developer Satisfaction Survey sponsored by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) and conducted by academic researchers, which polls hundreds of game developers to discern trends in employment status, demographics, working conditions, and more. While fully summarising the IGDA's efforts is beyond the scope of this document, the 2021 edition of the survey (Weststar et al., 2021) verifies the prevalence of crunch (33% of participants) and workplace discrimination (over 50% of participants) among active game developers.

These numbers paint a bleak picture, but there are some glimmers of hope. A number of game studios have begun experimenting with four-day work weeks (Gordon, 2022) or hybrid working arrangements (Dealessandri, 2022) in an effort to cut down on burnout and better recognize the needs of their employees. While such top-down solutions should be met with some scepticism as they do not fully address systemic issues, they suggest that previously immovable labour paradigms are beginning to shift.

In this section, we summarise the sentiments of our survey participants about current labour issues and emerging working arrangements in the Canadian game industry.

2.1

What labour issues have you experienced working in the game industry?



In addition to asking survey participants to answer the multiple-choice question above, we asked for their "#1 concern about working in the game industry." Below, we have summarised their answers.

Excessive Hours

Crunch was by far the most cited labour problem, with 60% of our participants sharing that a workplace had pressured them into excessive, unpaid overtime and that these practices were normalised at many game studios. A recurring sentiment was that participants felt it would be difficult to find employment at a studio where crunch did not occur, with one respondent noting that avoiding crunch was their "number one criteria" when considering what studio to work at. Importantly, concerns about crunch were often broadened to include burnout, mental health, and work-life balance.

Creative Freedom

The second most common issue among participants was a lack of creative freedom (46% of participants), which was somewhat surprising considering the scarcity of discussion on this topic in games journalism. Participants lamented how little control they had over their ideas and how commercial processes often pushed back against diverse voices and viewpoints. Two participants criticised the intellectual property arrangements they worked under, which ensured that they did not maintain ownership of the work they created.

Creative struggles were also entwined with ethical ones, with several survey participants mentioning that the games they worked on were becoming hyper-monetised and steeped in predatory mechanics. They felt that their labour was being leveraged to "make vulnerable people spend extra [money] in games" or "make time-wasting software to occupy the minds of bored people."

Salaries Below Living Wage

It is no surprise that, in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022), 44% of survey participants identified compensation as a major concern. Participants reported that their salaries lagged behind living wages and that their pay and benefits pale in comparison to what is available in other technological fields. Several game developers believed they could find a job outside the game industry that aligned with their qualifications but offered better compensation.

Two participants mentioned that there is a "large gap between have and have-nots" within the game industry, pointing toward a wage (and prestige) disparity between different roles. Unsurprisingly, quality assurance team members were identified as being particularly overworked and underpaid—aligning with previous research on this commonly undervalued role (Bulut, 2015). Building on discussions of crunch, participants also mentioned that not being properly compensated for overtime further reduced the value of their labour.

Employment Loss and Precarity

Job sustainability weighs heavily on the minds of game developers, as 35% of survey participants had experienced sudden employment loss or employment precarity in the past. These worries were expressed by game developers across all our categorisations: AAA, indie, and freelancers. One freelancer mentioned that maintaining a living wage was a struggle for them and studio employees typically pointed toward the volatility of the industry in general.

Studio survival was the primary concern of nearly 15% of survey participants. These sentiments typically fell into two camps. First, many described the precarity of independent game development, with fears that their studio would be unable to sustain cash flow, fail to turn a profit, or fall into obscurity. Participants noted that the expectations placed on indie studios in terms of quality and scope were ever-increasing, pushing them toward the precipice of failure. Second, employees at larger studios expressed concern at the sustainability of the AAA production model, speculating that it may be reaching a tipping point due to increased resource demands, over-expansion, and the incoming recession.

Harassment and Bias Based on Identity

Both harassment and bias based on identity were reported by 27% of survey participants, signalling that marginalised developers face greater risks due to entrenched prejudices in the game industry. Participants pointed toward gender, race, and age as key reasons for being subjected to harm or being denied opportunities.

Marginalised participants shared that abuse and harassment were commonplace and a frequent motivator for folks leaving the industry entirely. They also summarised a number of ongoing issues that prevent them from receiving the same respect and opportunities as

their peers: their experiences and expertise are often dismissed or ignored, their abilities are underestimated or downplayed, their concerns do not hold as much weight as other employees, and their salaries are typically lower than folks working in similar positions.

Harassment Based on Hierarchy

While hierarchical harassment (21%) was less commonly mentioned than harassment based on identity, it was still a widespread concern among our participants—tying into broader sentiments concerning toxic work culture. Participants described demeaning remarks, aggressive behaviour, and impossible deadlines from managers. Studio "higher ups" normalised pressure-driven approaches where poor treatment was "not to be taken personally" and was simply "part of the business." Concerningly, one survey participant noted that studio managers had created a blacklist of people who spoke up about labour issues, which was then shared with management at multiple game studios.

Other Concerns

A few survey participants brought up concerns that were not part of our initial question list but merit attention. Three survey participants mentioned that poor labour policies (at both provincial and federal levels) and the lack of unions made it impossible for game developers to have any say over their working conditions. Other concerns included: a fear of AI taking over jobs, an inability to secure funding for projects, a wariness toward mandatory online working arrangements, and a difficulty staying connected and relevant as a freelancer.

2.2

What new working arrangements, changes, or initiatives are you most excited about?

We questioned game developers about what changes they were most excited about seeing in the Canadian game industry. Here, we summarise the employment changes most commonly-cited changes by developers, who either experienced them firsthand or wished to see them implemented at their current workplace.

4-Day Work Weeks

The 4-day work week is a reduction in the standard work week from 40 hours to 32 hours, for the same pay and benefits. 50% of our participants expressed that this was the change that they would most like to see implemented at their workplace—by far the most repeated and enthusiastic response. Additionally, 21% of participants mentioned that their studio had already implemented 4-day work weeks, showing that the arrangement is gaining momentum across the Canadian game industry.

Those excited about 4-day work weeks generally felt that the working arrangement would help them maintain a better work-life balance, get sufficient rest, and grant them additional flexibility in their schedules. Some survey participants did express concerns about reduced wages or longer hours (i.e., "stuffing a 5-day work week into 4 days"). However, for the most part, those who were already working 4-days a week did not report negative side effects. While one survey participant mentioned that employees would "crunch ourselves bad from Monday through Thursday," the rest stated that 4-day work weeks allowed them greater downtime and more time to pursue personal projects, hobbies, and networking among other game developers.

These attitudes are consistent with a recent pilot project out of the UK (Lewis et al., 2023), in which 4-day work weeks were implemented across a range of industries. Additionally, the pilot project found that 4-day work weeks had gained favour with employers as well as employees, with 56 of the 61 companies involved choosing to continue the arrangement after the pilot project concluded (Lewis et al., 2023, p. 6).

Remote or Hybrid Working Arrangements

Remote and hybrid working arrangements enable game developers to work-from-home (or from an alternative space) for one or more days of the week. 21% of survey participants were excited about remote or hybrid labour, with many of them already working remotely in some capacity.

Commonly, participants expressed that remote labour was a game changer for them due to its ability to eliminate commute times, provide greater schedule flexibility, and evade some toxic aspects of office culture. That final point may be tough to circumscribe, but one participant mentioned that "so much abuse within the office evaporates in a 100% work from home environment," such as inappropriate comments on appearance/attire, subtler forms of harassment and abuse, and impromptu meetings (which are instead formally scheduled online).

While participants who mentioned remote or hybrid working arrangements generally framed them in a positive light, many expressed that such arrangements work best when they are flexible (hybrid or remote-by-choice). One participant said that work-from-home did not appeal to them as they preferred "a separate work environment from my home."

A recent study by the Entertainment Software Association of Canada found that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote and hybrid working arrangements in the game industry. 42% of small studios, 62% of medium studios, and 88% of large studios expect to use a hybrid model going forward (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2021).

Wages and Benefits

As mentioned earlier, wages and benefits are a key concern for game developers. 19% of our survey participants wanted to see changes in compensation and benefit structures, citing past employment experiences or offerings at other types of companies.

In terms of compensation, participants desired: better salaries to combat growing inflation, fully paid overtime, profit sharing and equity initiatives, and residual compensation (revenue sharing) for contributors. The most commonly listed benefits that participants sought were: greater awareness and support for mental health, more vacation days, increased or unlimited sick days, parental leave, retirement funds, and generally better healthcare plans.

Structural Changes

Structural change is a broad umbrella encompassing numerous transformations that our survey participants suggested could fundamentally alter how game studios operate. 13% of survey participants said they would like to see structural changes, with the most common sentiment being that game industry working standards need to match norms from other industries or, at the bare minimum, respect existing labour laws.

Three participants mentioned that they would like to see studios fully abide by provincial labour laws, such as compensating overtime labour (i.e., paying a higher hourly rate) and correctly classifying employees (i.e., not miscategorising employees as "freelancers" to evade labour rights). Two participants noted that they would like to see an overhaul to the crediting and intellectual property regimes at studios, so game developers would be properly credited for their work and could retain some control of their intellectual property. Finally, one participant felt that there should be some sort of guaranteed minimum outcome in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion within game studios.

3.0 THE STATE OF VIDEOGAME WORKER CO-OPERATIVES IN CANADA



Worker co-operatives have only recently emerged in the Canadian game industry but are not a new concept in other industries. The Mondragon Corporation in Spain (established in 1956) and Pascual Boing in Mexico (established in 1940) are venerable examples, and Canada is home to numerous worker co-operatives ranging from cafes (Durling, 2018) to renewable energy projects (Blackwell, 2014). A report by the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation (CWCF) determined that, as of 2006, there were 346 worker co-operatives in Canada employing 13,209 people, with revenues of $470 million and assets of $326 million (Hough et al., 2021). Recent numbers indicate that number has increased to 400 (Statistics Canada, 2021), with the majority situated in Québec.

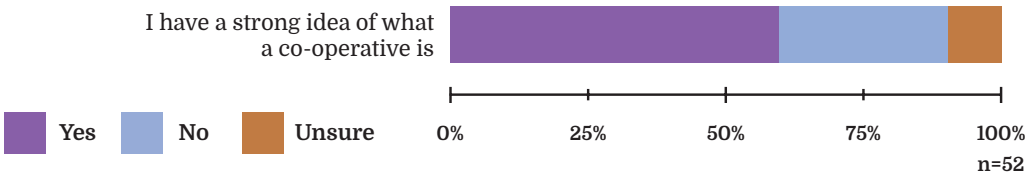
Despite these reports, it is difficult to observe how commonplace worker co-operatives are in the game industry. Most studies track the existence of game studios or worker co-operatives, but not the intersection between the two. To add another wrinkle, there are many game studios that identify as worker co-operatives but are not registered as such, creating a blurry line between "official co-ops" and "co-ops in spirit." The landscape is muddied, but there does appear to be a growing momentum behind worker co-operatives in the Canadian game industry. Lucid Tales and Soft Chaos are a pair of frequently mentioned examples, with seemingly new co-ops popping up every month in Canada and abroad (Klepek, 2020; Walker-Emig, 2019; Wilde, 2020).

This leads us to the question: "why a worker co-operative?" No single business structure can solve systemic labour issues, but there is a growing belief among game developers that worker co-operatives can be part of the solution to reforming games labour. Worker co-operatives are entwined with long-standing discussions about radical social enterprise in the creative industry (McRobbie, 2011) and co-op values often resist exploitative industry norms (Weststar & Legault, 2019). In the wake of high-profile incidents of crunch, burnout, and abuse in the game industry, could the time be ripe for a new labour structure to flourish?

In this section, we summarise the sentiments of survey participants and interviewees regarding worker co-operatives in the Canadian game industry. Our goal is to provide insight into the current state of game studio worker co-operatives, summarise the motivations of developers to form co-ops, and highlight the challenges folks have encountered while starting and maintaining them. Additionally, we pass on advice from both Canadian and international game developers who have successfully started their own worker co-operatives.

3.1

What do game developers know about worker co-operatives?



60% of our survey participants stated they had a strong idea of what a worker co-operative is, suggesting that awareness of the labour structure is becoming more common across the game industry. While we did not ask survey participants to share exactly what their knowledge entailed, our interviewees described what they knew, and where they turned to for information, when first starting out.

Oftentimes, our interviewees first learned about co-operatives online. This usually followed a trajectory of: being dissatisfied with current labour and creative standards in the game industry, hearing about a worker co-operative studio through the news or social media, joining a communication channel (such as a Discord channel) focused on the topic, then reaching out to official agencies to help move the worker co-operative registration process forward. Informal networking, in particular, was central in learning about worker co-operatives, with many interviewees contacting existing co-ops for assistance with bylaws and legal paperwork. Worker-owners stressed that engaging with established co-operatives was important for knowledge-sharing, but also as proof that the business model could be viable. Some existing game studios, such as Montréal's KO_OP, were repeatedly cited as sources of inspiration and advice. Established game co-ops, as well as ones that were in the later stages of formation, considered aiding aspiring co-operatives to be part of their mandate, paralleling values found in many broader co-op mission statements (Cooperative Identity, Values & Principles, n.d.).

"They don't teach co-operatives in business school."

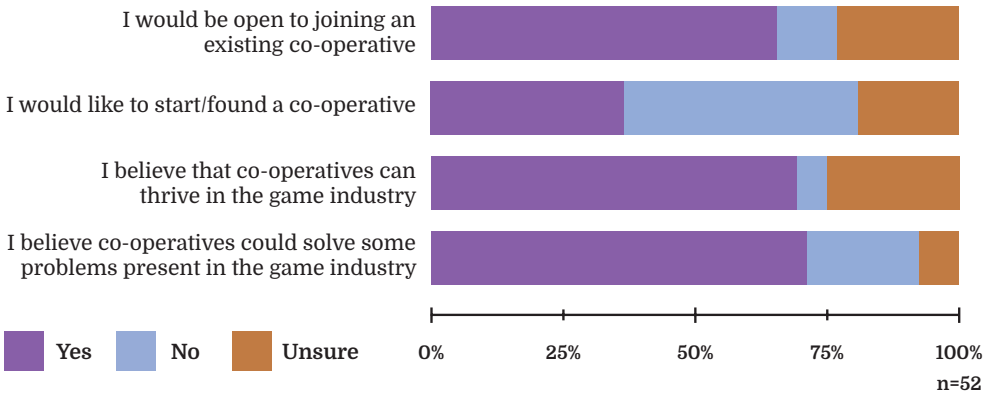
Kaye Grant, Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation

Both labour experts and worker-owners were quick to point out the shortage of co-op and union knowledge shared in educational institutions, particularly in programs focused on game design. While there is free training available from the CWCF and provincial agencies such as Réseau COOP—which a great deal of our participants lauded for their seminars, programs, and funding opportunities—university and college programs were heavily criticised for not mentioning worker co-operatives or unions in their discussions of possible career paths. Instead, these institutions frame the AAA and indie employment pipelines (along with all of their toxic practices) as the default pathway (Harvey, 2019).

Overall, it appears that worker co-operative knowledge is shared informally between game professionals or provided by co-operative-focused organisations, requiring game developers to look outside of traditional educational and industry channels to build their expertise.

3.2

What pushes people toward (or away) from co-operatives?



There seems to be a general optimism toward worker co-operatives within the game industry. 69% of survey participants were confident that worker co-operatives could thrive and 71% believed that they could help solve some current industry problems. While only 37% of participants desired starting a co-op of their own, 65% would be open to joining an existing worker co-operative.

Enthusiasm toward starting or joining a worker co-operative

Sustainability and equity were widely touted as the key motivations for wanting to start or join a worker co-operative. Survey participants were optimistic that the co-op structure could help foster more democratic decision-making, less exploitation, more equal sharing of profits, and better long-term job stability. Many saw worker co-operatives as a possible avenue of escape from crunch and burnout or, at the very least, a way to address these problems on their own terms.

> **"We really liked the fact that a co-op cannot be appropriated and cannot be bought—it's made for the workers by the workers. If you're a toxic element, you can just be kicked out."**
>
> ***Émile Brodeur, Lucid Tales***

Both survey participants and interviewees believed that the worker co-operative model could be helpful in addressing harmful management structures, as co-op members are provided with an equal vote and bylaws enable the democratic addition and removal of members. Many of our interviewees had experienced abusive owners, bosses, and managers at both AAA and indie studios, and felt that problematic power structures were so entrenched that real change was impossible within the current paradigm. A desire for accountability (the ability to remove problematic actors, regardless of role) and control (having a say in a studio's fortunes) were repeated throughout responses. Current worker-owners recounted that a key motivation for starting a co-op was wanting to be accountable to each other rather than toward a boss that may not have their best interests at heart.

> **"One thing that we've heard from a lot of game studios is that a lot of developers who leave AAA are just destroyed by the experience... They've just had a horrible, horrible time."**
>
> ***Eileen Holowka, Weird Ghosts***

A few survey participants were hopeful that the worker co-operative structure would allow them to contribute to creative decision-making, which they felt excluded from in their current or past roles. While this is a sentiment shared among many game developers who strike out on their own—indie developers often start a new studio with a personal project in mind—interviewees specifically noted that the games they wanted to make would not be feasible within a hyper-capitalist studio environment. Interviewees derided extensive monetisation (DLCs and microtransactions), predatory game design practices (loot boxes), and having to "make the same game" over and over (sequels and remakes).

Hesitations toward starting or joining a worker co-operative

Despite an overall enthusiasm toward the worker co-operative model, survey participants were still worried about how a co-op might function in practice. At the top of this list was a fear of bureaucracy, particularly in regard to flatter hierarchies. Quite a few participants worried that decision-making would be slow and painful, and that reacting nimbly to new problems or issues would be difficult. There was also some scepticism that truly democratic decision making was even possible, with folks mentioning that strong personalities and cliques could easily dominate ostensibly democratic processes.

> **"My biggest fear was that it would ruin our friendship in some way, due to the pressure of running a co-operative. I consider this to be my chosen family, and I wondered if bringing business into it would destroy it."**
>
> ***Allison Kyran Cole, Soft Chaos***

Building off these concerns, both survey participants and interviewees worried it would be difficult to find the right group of people to start a co-operative—often wondering if even they themselves would be able to adapt to the co-op structure after prolonged stints at AAA studios, indies, or as freelancers. Although our interviewees also shared concerns about finding the right people—especially as they began to bring on new members—many were more concerned about how starting a worker co-operative could impact their relationships.

Terms such as "marriage" and "family" were often used to describe the co-op structure, alluding to the commitment and passion required to start a co-op and the tensions that arise due to personal and production challenges.

> **"Videogames are the riskiest industry and the riskiest art form in terms of financial success."**
>
> ***Anonymous Game Developer***

Like with any new business, many prospective worker-owners were concerned about the financial risks in starting a worker co-operative, which helps explain the large gulf in our survey results between those who aspire to start a co-op versus those who wish to join an existing one. Worker co-operatives are fundamentally not capable of addressing one of the biggest issues in the game industry: in order to start a studio, the founders generally need capital to carry them through a period in which they are making a game but not earning a living wage. In addition to the normal financial stressors that all game studios face, survey participants believed that it would be much more difficult to obtain funding as a worker co-operative—a point that we will discuss in more depth later on.

To summarise a few final sentiments from our survey results: a large number of participants simply did not know enough about worker co-operatives to fully form an opinion on them; several expressed that they were content at their current indie or AAA job and felt no need to try something new; and a couple outliers were vehemently opposed to the idea, seeing labour issues as solely "people problems" rather than structural ones.

3.3

What do co-operatives stand for?

It is not uncommon for a business to have a set of core values: creative and ethical principles that guide how they operate. While corporate values are often criticised for being lip-service, co-ops codify them in their bylaws—a document that defines the rights, values, and obligations of each co-operative member. Below, we have summarised the values expressed by worker-owners during interviews or mentioned in their bylaws and mission statements.

Equal Ownership and Empowerment

All worker-owners have a say in the business direction and creative decisions at co-operative, through day-to-day conversations and votes.

Adaptable Structures

Toxic hierarchies are discarded in favour of democratic decision-making processes. These processes are constantly updated, to foster engagement and be inclusive of all members.

Slow Growth

Slow and stable business development is prioritised over exponential growth and the rapid pursuit of profit. The co-op cannot be "cashed out" or taken over by outside investors.

Ethical Game Design

Ethics are interwoven throughout the entire game design process to avoid exploitative labour practices (e.g. crunch) and predatory game mechanics (e.g. loot boxes).

Sustainability and Self-care

The worker co-operative will strive toward providing living wages and benefits, a good work-life balance, and working conditions that meet the needs of all members.

Skill-sharing and Mentorship

Worker-owners are encouraged to develop new skills, try out new roles, and share knowledge with others in the game industry (particularly other worker co-operatives).

Diversity and Inclusion

Marginalised game developers are given equal opportunity to join the worker co-operative, equal say in creative and administrative decisions, and are provided with the support they need to thrive.

Self-Awareness and Introspection

Worker co-operatives are not a panacea to labour woes in-and-of themselves and require constant iteration and vigilance from worker-owners.

Departing from Industry Design Norms

Games can be playful, personal, unpolished, small, sincere, weird, cringey, meaningful, awkward, queer, optimistic, non-violent, and whimsical.

3.4

What is it like being a part of a worker-owned game studio?

While enthusiasm about worker co-operatives is growing in the game industry, there is still some mystery about how decision-making, salaries, and benefits work within co-ops. In this section, we offer some insight into how Canadian worker co-operatives run on a day-to-day basis.

Decision-making and Hierarchies

Being in a worker co-operative means that each worker-owner has a vote when it comes to important decisions that impact the direction of the enterprise. However, according to our interviewees, this did not mean that every decision went to vote or that employment structures were entirely flat.

Many interviewees described how their studio still had defined positions for creative and administrative roles, which took a variety of forms. One worker co-operative had implemented an elected board of directors, voted in yearly, who determined the direction of the business from day-to-day. Another assigned studio management duties to working groups focused on topics such as finance and human resources. In terms of creative work, it was common (especially among international worker co-operatives) for traditional game studio roles to be present. Interviewees noted that having a creative lead or producer for a project—someone who had the final say on direction—helped keep things moving along, despite concerns of replicating harmful hierarchies from the game industry.

> **"Maybe you want to start with something that's a bit more typical, even hierarchical in some ways, where you give specific roles to people. Not necessarily power, but the power to decide what's needed for the health of the coop."**
>
> ***Erika Gaudreault, Réseau COOP***

Flexibility and iteration were generally the central tenets of worker co-operative hierarchies. Worker-owners noted that, while they were required to take on administrative roles, there was space for them to find tasks that suited them best. Furthermore, interviewees highly valued structures that allowed them to gauge whether folks' skill sets, bandwidth, and current level of burnout would allow them to take on additional creative and administrative tasks. One worker co-operative outlined a plan to have two people trained for each major position on their board—president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer—to better share skills and avoid overwork.

"I imagine what would be most important is that the community remains in conversation and can iterate on the structures that they create. As I understand it, it isn't a situation where someone is the boss forever just because they had a bunch of money to create the company; members can vote to decide leadership. And if someone discovers they don't like leading and prefer to code all day or something, they can do that instead—and that's okay."

Leanne (Lan) Roed, Less Than Three Interactive

Worker-owners facilitated meetings and votes in a number of ways. Most commonly, worker co-operatives shared informal communications (casual check-ins, creative brainstorming, etc) on a shared communication platform or in-person. Meetings were held on a regular basis, especially for those currently involved with administrative tasks, to discuss operations or pose new decisions that required a member vote. Interestingly, while unanimous vote results are not strictly required for a worker co-operative, interviewees seemed intent on having "everyone on board" for major decisions and implemented structures to better facilitate this. These ranged from vote delays, which allow worker-owners to contemplate and discuss a topic for a few days before casting their vote, to alternative methods of debate, such as allowing members to submit written statements in lieu of verbal exchanges. Almost every interviewee stressed that these efforts were important to keep the most charismatic voices from dominating decision-making.

Finally, interviewees mentioned that new co-operative members were generally not allowed to take up administrative positions or vote until after they completed a probationary period lasting 6-12 months. After probation, they were either granted the status of a worker-owner or, in uncommon situations where they were deemed to be a poor fit, were asked to leave the co-op. Interviewees stressed the importance of a probationary period to determine whether or not someone meshed with the rest of the team—usually citing creative fit and a willingness to take on the administrative aspects of the co-operative—but typically paid probationary employees the same as worker-owners.

Salaries and Benefits

In terms of salaries and benefits, our interviewees fell into two camps: small worker co-operatives that generally did not earn enough to support full-time salaries or larger worker co-operatives that supported multiple salaried employees.

Smaller worker co-operatives—usually studios with 3-5 members—were generally unable to offer regular compensation or full benefits and, instead, distributed wages based on hours worked or projects completed. Members often took on side gigs, or worked full- or part-time at another company, to supplement their income. It is rare for any type of game company to be profitable right out of the gate, but smaller worker co-operatives deliberately took a

slower approach to growth in an effort to avoid replicating harmful employment structures. Worker-owners were extremely self-conscious about burnout due to the piecemeal nature of their work and highly valued the creative freedom that the co-op model provided them. While not yet capable of providing sustainable full-time employment, many of these co-ops had prospective revenue sharing codified in their bylaws: either as stipends paid out when there was enough excess or as banked hours that would be redeemed if and when the worker co-operative turned a profit.

> **"We pay ourselves hourly for work on projects that generate revenue, but we also keep track of the hours we volunteer beyond that. We're going to use these logs to pay ourselves back once the co-operative has a profit. It's a mechanism in our bylaws for profit sharing."**
>
> ***Anonymous Co-op Member***

More established worker co-operatives provided more stable incomes and could keep numerous game developers (5 or more) employed with salary and some benefits. Our interviewees embraced flat salary structures, ranging from approximately $50,000 to $80,000 (CAD) yearly, that were unchanged across all roles but sometimes included bonuses based on responsibilities. While this salary range is fairly good for independent studios in the game industry, it was below what some roles (engineers and programmers) earned at other game studios or tech companies. One worker-owner reported that this disparity had made it difficult to attract engineering or programming talent, but that co-op members were reluctant to dole out perks or higher salaries for in-demand positions. While non-Canadian worker co-operatives, especially larger ones, were more open to implementing tiered salaries based on seniority or responsibilities, our interviewees preferred to raise salaries equally across the board.

Benefits varied greatly between worker co-operatives. Smaller worker co-operatives commonly offered remote working arrangements and flexible hours to recognise the needs of members who were beholden to other jobs and to meet the needs of neuro-divergent worker-owners. Larger worker co-operatives adopted initiatives such as 4-day work weeks and unlimited paid time off in addition to flexible hours. At all scales, there was a widespread sentiment that in-person 9-5 working arrangements were antiquated, unnecessary, and not beneficial.

3.5

5 co-op myths versus realities

Co-op hierarchies are completely flat.	Hierarchies, such as senior roles and a board of directors, can still exist with a co-operative, but they are established democratically and open to iteration.
Decision-making is slow and co-operatives introduce new bureaucracy.	While slower than top-down decision-making, co-operative structures can be tweaked to avoid bureaucratic log jams. Every single decision does not necessarily require a full co-op vote. Additionally, traditional business structures are not immune to bureaucracy either.
Co-operatives, in and of themselves, can fix labour issues in the game industry.	While the co-operative structure legally prevents some types of labour exploitation, co-ops embody the values of their worker-owners and are only as transformational as their members desire.
It is difficult to acquire funding as a worker co-operative in the game industry.	Some types of funding are less accessible to worker co-operatives. Venture capitalist funding typically relies on buying a stake in a company, which is not possible with most co-op structures, and there is some ambiguity as to which federal and provincial grants worker co-ops are eligible to apply for. Publisher deals are typically still available, as they are project based. New funds are increasingly available to co-ops, including social finance grants.
Wages are flat (i.e. all workers earn the same salary) in a worker co-operative.	Co-operative members collectively decide how wages are dispensed. Some of the structures include: completely flat salaries, tiered wages based on seniority or responsibilities, and payment based on hours worked or projects completed.

3.6

What are the advantages of running a worker co-operative game studio?

In the earlier parts of this section, we outlined some of the hopes and aspirations of survey participants and interviews associated with worker co-operatives in the game industry. Here, we summarise the benefits and rewards interviewees have experienced as worker-owners.

Buy-In and Retention

One of the most common sentiments expressed by our interviewees was the ability of worker co-operatives to foster greater buy-in from everyone within a game studio. Changing the structures and hierarchies often required a shift in mindset from those coming from traditional game studios, but accountability rarely emerged as an issue. Worker-owners felt more invested in the success of the enterprise and described a strong collectivity among members. As successes and failures are shared by every member, worker-owners felt more driven toward collaborative goals.

> **"Knowing that other people care is really valuable. It's really meaningful for me to know that I was involved in a thing that other people really, really care about, really love, and really feel is important to their lives."**
>
> ***Saleem Dabbous, KO_OP***

It is difficult to track retention in worker co-operative game studios, as most of them are still quite new, but interviewees felt that the co-operative model generally led to less turnover. Part of this is due to the fact that smaller co-ops are typically founded by groups of closely-knit individuals, many of whom described the enterprise as something akin to marriage in terms of commitment. However, worker-owners also mentioned that buy-in and retention were fostered by the ability to adjust their own working conditions. In the industry at-large, it is common for game developers to switch jobs frequently to escape bad studio environments, but worker-owners noted they could change co-op working conditions to better suit their needs and desires.

Recognition of Individual Needs and Circumstances

With this increased accountability and commitment came an acknowledgment of the dangers of self-exploitation and a recognition that co-op structures did not solve labour issues simply by existing. Worker-owners had to intentionally prevent themselves from pushing themselves too hard to ensure the success of a project, taking steps to evade common game industry issues such as burnout. No worker-owner claimed to have fostered a perfect environment at their studio, but this awareness led them toward initiatives such as mental health days, workplace therapy, and flexible working structures. Collective care was commonly mentioned as a central value among worker co-operatives.

> **"I feel like adding marginalised folks as owners is the best way to address labour problems, because they know best what is best for themselves and their community."**
>
> ***Émile Brodeur, Lucid Tales***

While many game studios, particularly in the AAA environment, take a one-size-fits-all approach to benefits and working arrangements, there is a greater recognition among worker-owners that each member has different needs and desires. Worker-owners mentioned that benefits and working arrangements at co-ops tended to be more malleable than those found at traditional game studios, for the simple reason that they were self-determined. Folks who were marginalised in other workplaces due to neurodivergence, ADHD, or their level of ability put themselves in a position where they had input on how labour was arranged. Rather than having working conditions imposed from above, they were collectively determined by worker-owners, allowing them to seek out ways of working that were productive and enjoyable for them.

Creative Empowerment

In addition to being able to self-determine employment arrangements, worker-owners felt an increased agency over the creative direction of the games they were working on. As outlined in earlier sections, many co-op members had departed studios where they had little control over the tasks they were given and sometimes outright disliked the projects they worked on, characterising them as exploitative, repetitive, or bland. This sentiment is certainly not unique to worker co-operatives—indie developers striking out on their own in pursuit of creative freedom is a common story—but worker-owners expressed that they were not just pursuing new creative directions but also fundamentally changing the types of games they made.

> **"There's a lot of vulnerability, awkwardness, weirdness, queerness, and sincerity—sincerity to the point of cringe—in our work. I really value that it's very much about that vulnerability and interpersonal connection. I think that's a hallmark of how we make our creative decisions."**
>
> ***Jess Marcotte, Soft Chaos***

Smaller worker co-operatives expressed excitement at being able to make games that were not viable or valued within AAA and indie studios. Many of these projects were small enough to produce without enormous financial overhead and were monetised by posting them to creator-friendly platforms, such as itch.io, or by repurposing them for future contract work. Worker-owners often adopted a value-driven approach to game design, with their sentiments falling into two basic categories. First, they expressed a desire to push back against mainstream trends such as hyper-monetisation, violence, and graphical realism in favour of smaller, inexpensive titles with whimsical themes and varied styles. Second, they moved away from game design paradigms that focused on white heteronormative audiences, placing greater value on the experiences and viewpoints of marginalised creators, and striving toward games that were "meaningful," "sincere," and "empowering."

While it would be presumptuous to claim that worker co-operatives naturally lead to the production of new types of games, it appears that the type of people interested in forming (and joining) co-ops tend to rebuff or reimagine dominant game design trends.

3.7

What challenges are inherent to starting and running a co-operative?

In addition to hopes and aspirations, many prospective worker-owners expressed fears and anxieties about entering the co-operative world. To help validate or dispel these apprehensions, we have summarised the concrete challenges that our interviewees faced when starting and building their worker co-operatives—some of which overlap with the game industry at-large and others that are unique to the labour structure.

Administration

Worker-owners frequently mentioned the administrative challenges of starting a co-op, with two key themes emerging. First, registering as a worker co-operative was viewed as an arduous process even with support from federal and provincial organisations. Specifically, while worker-owners recounted that organisations such as the CWCF and Réseau COOP were enormously helpful, there was generally a shortage of knowledge of how worker co-operatives functioned within the game industry. Worker-owners had to alternate between resources geared toward traditional game studios and generalised resources about worker co-operatives. Second, worker-owners often experienced a difficult adjustment period when learning how to wear multiple hats; that is, simultaneously keeping up with the creative and administrative demands of a co-op. This is a common sentiment among game developers launching new businesses, who struggle to maintain sustainable production practices (Whitson et al., 2021). Many found themselves putting in unpaid labour to keep up with day-to-day operations, especially early in the co-op's lifespan.

> **"The most contentious situation, for us, has been trying to figure out exactly how we're going to incorporate. It's a lot of paperwork, it's definitely a pain, but it's really important."**
>
> ***Anonymous Co-op Member***

Worker co-operative bylaws were consistently described as challenging, yet rewarding, to develop. Both a legal and personal endeavour, co-op members found it difficult to craft a set of bylaws that both met provincial regulations and embodied the values of all worker-owners. Even with bylaw templates provided by other game studios, it took worker-owners a long time—some recounted it had taken a year to finalise them—to achieve consensus among all members. It is worth mentioning that bylaws, and perhaps co-op structures in general, are not static and require sustained attention and maintenance. More than one of our interviewees updated their bylaws multiple times, either to address unforeseen conflicts or concerns among membership or to simply reflect the changing realities of a growing game studio.

> **"The act of co-op is very intentional and very purposeful. It's something that you have to constantly engage with throughout the lifecycle of the studio."**
>
> ***Saleem Dabbous, KO_OP***

Finally, several interviewees described difficulties in finding lawyers, accountants, and other professionals who are familiar with the inner workings of both game studios and worker co-operatives. This led to delays in starting or changing aspects of the co-operative, with worker-owners having to spend additional time and energy seeking out professionals or taking on duties themselves. This proved to be a herculean task for one game studio, which has spent years seeking out legal and professional advice as part of an ongoing effort to convert their existing business into a worker co-operative. The studio noted that finding a lawyer who was willing and able to convert their business has been a long-standing challenge and that, even when their ownership status finally changes, they will likely have to renegotiate a few previously signed contracts and agreements.

Funding Opportunities

The game industry is heavily dependent on outside funding and the main type that is generally not available to worker co-operatives is venture capitalist (VC) investment. VCs take equity in a game studio in hopes that its projects will be successful and that they can extract a profit at a later date, often when the studio is sold. As worker co-operatives generally do not allow for this type of outside ownership—although some co-ops do allow for privilege shares—most of our interviewees wrote off the possibility of VC funding entirely (or described long, frustrating conversations with investors who did not fully understand the co-op model). Publisher deals, while often being described as extractive by our interviewees, are still available to worker co-operatives as they are project-based rather than studio-based. Publishers invest in a specific game and recoup from its sales, with most of them relatively indifferent to a studio's structure.

> **"Co-ops are this weird middle area that nobody knows what to do with."**
>
> ***D. Squinkifer, Soft Chaos***

One of the most repeated funding issues expressed by our interviewees was that worker co-operatives are not well understood by funding agencies, making it difficult (or impossible) to take advantage of their grants and programs. After initial misunderstandings, we have confirmed with the Canada Media Fund (CMF) that worker co-operatives have always been eligible for its programs as incorporated businesses (as long as they are not a not-for-profit). Inversely, arts councils commonly rule out worker co-ops for their funding programs

specifically because of their for-profit status. While these organisations appear receptive to feedback, worker co-operatives still often find themselves putting in extra labour to determine their eligibility.

Despite these challenges, there was excitement among interviewees about new and emerging opportunities for game studio worker co-operatives. Weird Ghosts, one of the few organisations that explicitly appeals to worker co-operatives, was mentioned as a source of current (or possibly future) support by multiple participants. Additionally, there was a great deal of anticipation for the Government of Canada's Social Finance Fund, which aims to support charities, non-profits, social enterprises, co-operatives and other social purpose organisations (SPOs) in accessing financing (About the Social Finance Fund, 2021).

Other Challenges

- All the risks inherent to small businesses and game studios apply to worker co-operatives. Projects generally take a long time to complete, for example, and are often shaped by publisher demands.

- Some businesses are hesitant (or unable) to give contracts to entities that are not corporations or freelancers, excluding worker co-operatives from valuable sources of work.

- Democratic decision-making can be difficult to adjust to for folks who are not accustomed to the worker co-operative environment.

3.8

How do I get started?

"Talk with your collaborators and figure out exactly what you want to accomplish with your studio: what types of games you want to make, what your mission will be, and what social impact you want your studio to have. Make sure that you actually want the same things as your collaborators."

Émile Brodeur, Lucid Tales

"Do some research into company structures and how they work in whatever part of the world you're in—it can vary from country-to-country. You also probably want to find a lawyer who can help you with some of the legal stuff and I always advise that people get an accountant as well."

Chris Tihor, Talespinners

"Start with your values and with the relationship that you have with your co-founders. Make sure you're on the same page when it comes to roles and responsibilities, but also values, how you see the world, how you view games as something that can foster change."

Jennie Faber, Weird Ghosts

"Really dig deep and ask hard questions. Think of nightmare scenarios that may never happen and how you would handle them. What if someone sexually assaults someone at work? How would you handle that? It's great when things are going well and everyone's happy, but if you don't have processes for dealing with problems, it makes things really complicated."

Francesca Esquenazi, Future Club

"Have an understanding of what your mission is and what you hope to achieve. If you start with people on the same page then it's a lot easier to keep it together. Make sure that you also build in ways to deal with disagreement from the very beginning to help minimise conflict and make it easier to actually get the projects done."

Anonymous Co-op Member

"A piece of advice that we got early on was to consider your other members as a kind of marriage. It's a big deal and it shouldn't be taken lightly! Everyone should have the same level of investment and the desire to see things through. That's true for any sort of business endeavour with partners, but especially true for co-ops."

Anonymous Co-op Member

"Keep it small. Every other person adds an exponentially larger amount of lines in the diagram. We have semi-joked about being basically married through the co-operative."

D. Squinkifer, Soft Chaos

"Find your allies, including us. Because there are lots of people who support co-ops and lots of ways to get started and find support."

Jess Marcotte, Soft Chaos

"Right out of the gate, people need to get their goals and values in alignment with each other. When they hear the words 'co-op', what does that mean to them?"

Henry Faber, Gamma Space

"Building a co-op is about building community. If you're starting a worker co-op, and you just think that it's about work and not about life, you're sorely mistaken."

datejie cheko green, Gamma Space

"A lot of people put the cart before the horse—they're interested in starting a co-op, but they don't understand the business landscape, the funding opportunities, and how to survive making games. They are a lot more interested in the structure of their company, which is important, but I don't want there to be a bunch of coops that start and then shut down in their first year."

Saleem Dabbous, KO_OP

"If you don't have a feasible business idea then it's not going to matter what structure you have. The thrust behind a worker co-operative is employment for its members. Try to find a good marriage between the ideology of a co-op, while also remembering that it has to be a productive business that can sustain itself in the future."

Kaye Grant, Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation

"It might dampen what people think co-ops are, but they're not a magic solution. It's just a way of organising things, which enables you to do much better things."

Cailín Grace Brown, Unseelie Collective

"There's a bit of a dangerous thought that co-ops are good and other systems are bad; any organisation is only as good as the people involved with it. If all of the people involved in co-op don't believe in accessibility, just to choose something as an example, then you're not going to end up with a co-op that has that as a value."

Leanne (Lan) Roed, Less Than Three Interactive

4.0 THE STATE OF VIDEOGAME UNIONS IN CANADA



Over the past half-decade, unions have become the standard-bearers for game industry labour reform. While we are focused on videogame studio unions in this white paper, it is important to mention that two of the earliest game labour success stories are Paizo Workers United (Hall, 2021) and Cards Against Humanity Workers United (Carpenter, 2020)—unions that formed at tabletop gaming companies. In 2021, Vodeo Games became the first unionised digital game studio in North America (Carpenter, 2021). The union proved to be short-lived, however, as Vodeo Games closed the following year due to an inability to secure funding for their next project (Williams, 2022). Since then, quality assurance testers at Activision Blizzard's Raven Software (Paul, 2022) and the Microsoft subsidiary ZeniMax Studios (O'Brien, 2023) have also unionised, showing an increasing appetite for labour organisation in the game industry.

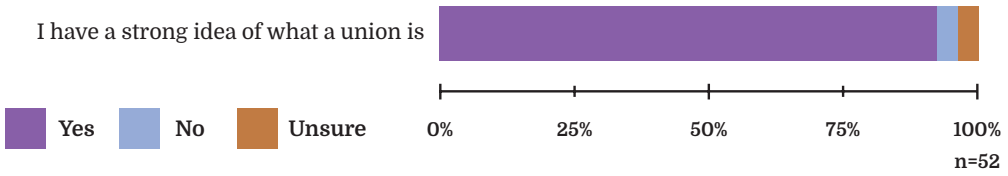
In Canada, 2022 brought about two successful unionisation efforts. The quality assurance team at Keywords Studios in Edmonton, which works with the industry giant Bioware, voted unanimously to unionise in order to preserve remote working arrangements and address poor compensation (Cook, 2022). Anemone Hug Interactive—a Vancouver game studio that offers support services and is currently developing its own intellectual property—unionised to address a number of alleged workplace labour concerns (Rousseau, 2022). As both studios are still in collective bargaining, it remains to be seen what tangible outcomes the unionisation process will bring about. However, their emergence is an indicator of union momentum that is growing within the Canadian game industry and beyond.

This union enthusiasm has been confirmed by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) in the 2021 iteration of their Developer Satisfaction Survey. The report noted that game industry workers are strongly in favour of a workplace union (58%), an occupation-based union (60%), a national industry union (78%), or an international union encompassing all game developers (62%). Academic studies have touched upon this trend as well, documenting Game Workers Unite's efforts in establishing unions across the United Kingdom (Ruffino & Woodcock, 2021) and building toward the national unionisation of game developers in Australia (Keogh & Abraham, 2022). In short, game developers are increasingly viewing unions as more viable, and perhaps necessary, to address labour problems in the game industry.

In this section, we summarise the sentiments of survey participants and interviewees in regard to worker unions in the Canadian game industry. Our goal is to provide insight into the current state of unions, summarise the challenges faced by union organisers, and discuss some of the tropes that have slowed their acceptance in the game industry. Additionally, we pass on advice from both Canadian and International union organisers.

4.1

What do game developers know about unions?



92% of our survey participants believed they had a strong idea of what a union was, indicating that union awareness is almost ubiquitous across the Canadian game industry. While we did not ask survey participants to share exactly what their knowledge entailed, our interviewees described what they knew, and where they turned to for information, when first starting out.

Like those seeking out information about worker co-operatives, game developers typically went online to learn more about unions. Organisations such as Game Workers Unite (GWU) and existing unions such as International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) were praised by interviewees for their online guides that outline what a union is, how it can benefit employees, and what steps are necessary to form one. Many interviewees reported that existing unions were very supportive of efforts to reform labour in the game industry and were quick to provide resources or have informal discussions.

> **"It is so much easier to convince people that unions are viable now than it was a few years ago, because there have been success stories."**
>
> ***Daniel Korn, Game Workers Unite Toronto***

Interviewees mentioned that "lighter" materials also played an important role in mobilising workers—union-busting bingo cards and anti-capitalist memes helped educate them about the unionisation process and provided levity during tense periods during organisational efforts. News stories, memes, and guides were often distributed on shared communication platforms, which helped foster union sentiment and provided accessible resources for those interested in the topic.

Additionally, it was very common for our interviewees to be from union families, to know people who had been involved with unions outside of the game industry, or to have been a part of a union in a previous occupation. This suggests that knowledge of unions is more normalised than that of worker co-operatives due to their prevalence in other commercial sectors. This is unsurprising, as even with a steep decline in unions over the past 40 years, 29% of Canadian workers are still employed at a union of some type (Morissette, 2022).

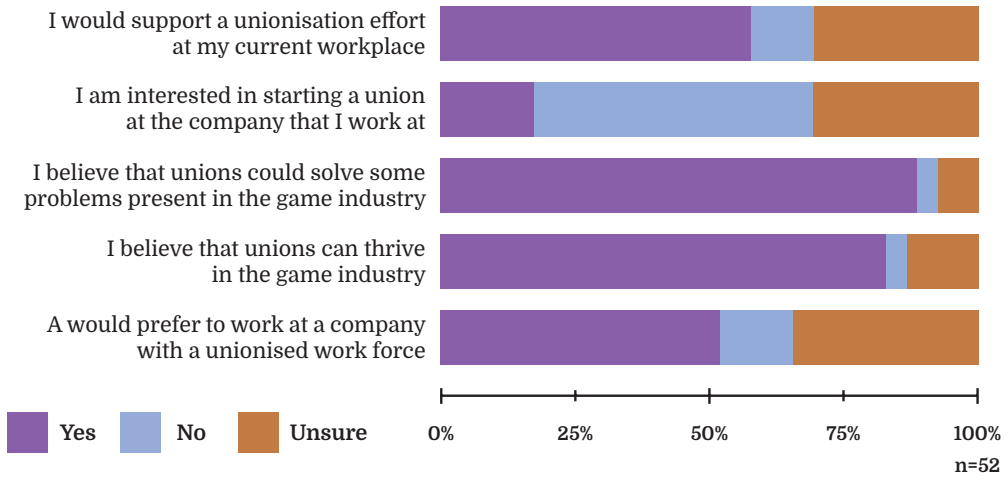
4.2

5 union myths versus realities

Unions are an outside entity or organisation.	Unions are made up of their workers. Workplaces often organise in tandem with a parent union, with their own structures and protocols, but union formation and key issues are voted on by all members.
Unions simply want to extract profit from their member's union dues.	In Canada, unions are non-profit entities. Union dues are deducted from member pay, but are typically offset by increased wages—union members typically earn $5/hour more than non-unionised workers (Labour Force Survey, 2023).
Forming a union is impossible in the game industry as not enough people believe in them.	Several game studios have unionised in the past few years, including Keywords Studios, Anemone Hug, and Raven Software. According to surveys, most game developers have a generally positive attitude toward unions (Weststar et al., 2021).
Unions are only useful for large businesses as smaller game studios do not have the same labour issues.	It is up to workers to decide whether or not a union will be useful for them. Smaller game studios share many of the same labour issues as larger ones and are not immune to problems such as crunch. No matter the size of a business or good intentions of owners, there are still power imbalances between workers and owners.
Unions protect lazy or unproductive workers.	Unproductive workers exist in all sorts of businesses, unionised or not. Unions do not fully prevent firings but ensure that workers do not get dismissed without due process.

4.3

What pushes people toward (or away) from unions?



While survey participants were quite knowledgeable about unions, their attitude toward implementing them was decidedly mixed. Overwhelmingly, participants felt that unions could solve problems present in the game industry (89%) and thrive while doing so (83%). However, only a small majority of game developers (58%) said they would support a unionisation effort at their current workplace and a scant 17% were interested in starting a union. Finally, 52% of game developers said they would prefer to work for a company with a unionised workforce.

Enthusiasm toward starting or joining a union

For our survey participants, the dominant reason for starting a union was to reduce exploitation and improve working conditions for game developers. While these aspirations were usually somewhat vague—likely due to the limited space of the survey form—they revolved around issues such as precarious employment, excessive overtime hours, and wage inequities. "Solidarity" and "worker power" were commonly referenced terms, pointing to a general enthusiasm toward collectivity in the workplace.

> **"None of the many issues with the game industry will ever be addressed in a meaningful way until we have the worker power to enforce these changes."**
>
> ***Anonymous Game Developer***

Among our interviewees, unionisation interest was often triggered by declining working conditions or harmful managerial decisions at their game studio. Questionable lay-offs and contract terminations were a central concern, as they exposed the precarity of their positions, the power imbalance between employers and employees, and the absence of effective processes to challenge perceived injustices. Another key motivator was pandemic-related, as a number of interviewees had lost work-from-home or hybrid arrangements when studios began to force employees to return to the office. When paired with other stressors such as long commutes and declining wages, interviewees noted that union sentiment suddenly became easier to cultivate, creating momentum at their workplace to organise.

> **"Whatever the intentions of our employer or how good the conditions might be for the moment, we are in an industry that functions in a particular way—to extract as much profit as possible from people."**
>
> ***Carolyn Jong, Game Workers Unite Montréal and Vodeo Games***

Finally, media coverage about successful organisation efforts—Activision Blizzard's Raven Software union being a frequently referenced example—was consistently cited as a motivator, with interviewees emphasising the importance of success stories in proving that game studio unionisation was possible. Newspaper and magazine articles were also important in convincing game developers that game industry problems were systemic and not just an issue of isolated "bad actors" or "bad workplaces"—labour issues such as crunch and harassment could not be evaded simply by finding work elsewhere in the industry.

Hesitations toward starting or joining a union

Survey participants often expressed that, while unions were important and certainly necessary at other game studios, their current workplace would not benefit from unionisation. This sentiment is likely attributed to the fact that 25% of our survey participants identified as managers and 46% hailed from indie studios, with many commenting that unions were simply "not appropriate" for their scale of production (which they generally described as less than 30 employees). A recurring sentiment from indie developers across all job roles was that AAA game studios viewed employees as replaceable cogs while indie studios placed more value on individual talent and creativity; the former being viewed as cold and corporate and the latter as more familial. Whether or not these claims are true is open to debate, but the rhetoric appears persistent enough to dissuade unionisation efforts at smaller studios.

"I've worked in a lot of indie studios, where there's this idea that unions are only for, like, big evil corporations. They're in a place where they feel that conditions are not so bad compared to other places; that they don't need a union."

Carolyn Jong, Game Workers Unite Montréal and Vodeo Games

There were only a few survey participants who outright disliked the idea of unionisation, mainly citing concerns that unions could introduce more problems than they solved. Participants cited toxic power structures, the over-protection for underperforming employees, problematic seniority systems, favouritism, and abuse from the union itself. While many of these sentiments were sourced from personal experience, others echoed long-standing negative tropes leveraged against unions. Labour experts and union members frequently mentioned that it was difficult to push back against stereotypes that frame unions as an "outside force" intent on collecting union dues and introducing unwanted bureaucracy into workplaces.

4.4 Co-ops or unions?

Worker co-operatives and unions are not opposed in terms of values, but there are many differences in the ways they are structured and how they benefit their members. Labour experts, worker-owners, and union organisers elaborated that, while they believed both are capable of fostering positive change, each has their own unique affordances and long-term outlooks.

A recurring sentiment among labour organisers is that unions can benefit a greater number of people than worker co-operatives. Historically, this is an easy case to make: hundreds of thousands of Canadians are currently union members (Morissette, 2022) compared to roughly 13,000 worker co-operative members (Hough et al., 2021). In the game industry, unionisation is viewed as one of the few methods of stopping labour exploitation at studios—especially entrenched medium-to-large sized studios—as owners otherwise have no incentive to change their structures or improve working conditions for their employees. Although unionisation efforts are certainly not without their own risks, starting a worker co-operative (or any small business) requires financial resources that not everyone has access to. For those who do not have a financial safety net or an entrepreneurial mindset unionisation can be a more viable, although certainly not easy, method of gaining additional benefits and leverage within a workplace.

> **"A union doesn't necessarily change how businesses function or how society thinks, it's more about protecting the employees. It doesn't necessarily cause people to change their minds about how the world works."**
>
> ***Erika Gaudreault, Réseau COOP***

Although unions have a long history of benefiting employees, many worker-owners point out that they reinforce traditional power relations between owners and workers. One of the aspirations of worker co-operatives is to create structures that push back against the foundations of exploitative capitalist dynamics, opening the door for more democratic decision-making and ethical game design processes. Several worker-owners viewed their co-operatives as small pockets of resistance within the game industry, allowing them to produce creative work without fully surrendering to existing labour paradigms. Part of their mission statement was to foster the growth of other co-operatives to fundamentally transform the make-up of the game industry. This is a slow process that envisions a future where worker co-operatives, and perhaps other alternative labour structures, become a widespread alternative to traditional studio models.

Importantly, none of our interviewees felt that unions and worker co-operatives are oppositional. Rather, they were commonly framed as different approaches to the same underlying problem, each of which can benefit certain game developers depending on their aspirations and lived realities.

4.5

What are unions aiming to achieve?

Collective Bargaining Goals

With no Canadian studio having yet completed a collective agreement, it is hard to say what the results of unionisation efforts will be. Below, we have summarised some of the goals of collective bargaining efforts currently underway in the Canadian game industry.

Increased Wages
Wages that are above minimum wage and acknowledge the ever-growing cost of living in Canada.

Work-from-Home or Hybrid Work
Flexible working arrangements that do not force employees to commute to an office unless it is necessary for their job.

Proper Sick Leave
Sick days for all employees and the ability to work-from-home when potentially contagious, to avoid workplace transmission of COVID-19 and other illnesses.

Employee Recall
When employees get laid off at the end of a project cycle, they should have the first right of refusal when new positions open in the same department.

Increased Benefits
Improvements to (or the introduction of) benefits such as healthcare, vacation days, and paid sick days

Less Micromanagement
More trust from management to let employees complete work on their own terms.

Equitable Treatment
Marginalised employees should not be harassed or diminished and should have access to working arrangements that meet their needs and desires.

Standardisation of Roles
Employees should have defined tasks within their roles, instead of being given work that may-or-may not match their job description and abilities.

Worker Solidarity

While interviewees were clear that the main goal of unionisation in the game industry is to secure tangible improvements to working conditions, they also listed a range of emotional benefits. Interviewees reported greater solidarity and camaraderie in their workplace because of their unionisation efforts. Labour issues that they had once kept to themselves, or had only quietly communicated across backchannels, became shared concerns. Once out in the open, employees were more able to identify systemic issues and problematic individuals in their workplaces and realised that what they once believed to be singular incidents were, in fact, widespread across the game studio.

> **"I helped form a union because I wanted people to have better lives. But also, I guess, it was just part of the millennial urge to stab capitalism in the face as often as possible."**
>
> ***Kelly Wright, Anemone Hug***

Furthermore, unionisation was often viewed as one aspect of broader pro-worker and anti-capitalist sentiments. Interviewees mentioned that it allowed them to better understand power imbalances between employers and employees and the general disposability of labour—not just in the game industry but across the entire economy. Interviewees expressed that being able to push back against this paradigm and chip away at hegemonic capitalist ideas was both an aspiration and accomplishment. They took pride in their achievements and desired to share their knowledge with others to create more union momentum. While perhaps not the initial thrust behind unionisation, successful union organisers emphasised the importance of setting precedents for future labour action.

"We wanted to help set precedents for the industry. We were working toward things that other game studios didn't have, and by putting those things into a collective agreement, we could become a model for other studios in the industry. We wanted to show what was possible by unionising."

Carolyn Jong, Game Workers Unite Montréal and Vodeo Games

4.6

What challenges are inherent to starting a union?

While we have discussed many of the perceived hurdles to starting a union in the game industry, in this section we summarise the concrete challenges encountered by those going through the unionisation process. Much of this information is sourced from interviewees who had successfully unionised their workplaces, but we also spoke with game developers who had gauged the viability and interest of unions at their workplace and labour experts who were familiar with overarching industry trends.

Fears and Reluctance

While our interviewees were extremely motivated to start a union at their workplace, and to contribute to a growing labour movement in the game industry, there were several barriers that cast doubts in their minds and made it difficult to get other employees on board. Chief among these were: a fear of being blacklisted in the game industry and a tacit acceptance of the status quo.

> **"There's a lot of pressure being this early in the games industry unionising. Some of us were worried: are we gonna get blown up and not be able to get jobs at other game studios?"**
>
> ***Kelly Wright, Anemone Hug***

Among our interviewees, especially those who had already gone through the unionisation process, career risk was the biggest fear they had contended with, both for themselves and their co-workers. This fear manifested at varying scales: getting fired or laid off before the formal unionisation process began, having the studio shut down completely instead of recognising the union, or being blacklisted in the industry for being a pro-labour voice. In addition to job loss and long-term employment prospects, interviewees mentioned that workers who relied on their occupation for immigration status were in especially precarious positions. Sudden termination could result in them being deported from the country.

> **"The gaming industry is attractive because it is perceived to be 'cool' and 'fun.' It's a lot more appealing than working on banking software, for example, but historically that perception has been leveraged to keep wages down."**
>
> ***Anonymous Game Developer***

Interviewees who currently, or previously, worked at AAA studios expressed pessimism that union efforts could take hold, as many of their co-workers felt that conditions were "good enough" at their workplace or, if they were dissatisfied, believed they could take their talents elsewhere. Senior programmers and engineers, in particular, were less open to union overtures as they were relatively well-compensated and comfortable in their positions—their skill-sets were viewed as higher-value which granted them greater job mobility. Entry-level developers often accepted poor working conditions as part of the entrenched industry "grindset" that normalises crunch and other labour tribulations (Bulut, 2020). With many employees having dreamed of working in the game industry for years, passion labour commonly overshadowed labour concerns.

As a final note, it was not uncommon for union sympathisers to burn out of the industry or switch jobs before unionisation efforts could gain momentum, making it difficult to sustain a union campaign.

Union Busting and Fallout

All our interviewees expressed the importance of secrecy during the unionisation process and feared reprisal from studio management if their efforts were exposed. While members of organising committees were successful at keeping their efforts underground, this need for stealth created a number of challenges. Union organisers found that they had to approach people cautiously, subtly gauging their interest and values, before letting them enter their circle of trust and asking them to sign a union card. Interviewees worried that speaking to the wrong person would result in them revealing hidden unionisation processes to management or, alternatively, that excluding certain employees from union discussions (based on perceived politics) might later create rifts within the workplace. Paranoia, mistrust, and secrecy were all difficult to manage, especially since unionisation efforts often take months to complete.

> **"I found one website that had a great bingo card that listed all the things your employer is going to try to do to union bust. We took that and we put it in the Discord, and then every single time something like that happened, we crossed it off."**
>
> ***James Russwurm, Keywords Studios***

Some interviewees reported that retaliation from studio management began immediately after the union application was submitted to the labour board. In one instance, management delayed responding to labour board communications and handed out sudden disciplinary notices, warnings, and demotions—ostensibly before they had been notified that unionisation was underway. This practice is slippery, at best, as altering working conditions is forbidden during the bargaining process. In addition to immediate blowback,

it was not uncommon for employees to be let go during bargaining and for union organisers (perceived or actual) to be excluded from meetings or shifted into roles that separated them from other employees. Studio management framed these changes as being related to performance or budgetary concerns, but interviewees claimed they were a thinly veiled reprisal against unionisation efforts.

Other Challenges

- In addition to studio reprisal, interviewees mentioned that the intermediary period—after the union vote but before a collective agreement was reached—brought with it a sense of isolation. Bargaining was often a prolonged process facilitated by a parent union and they found themselves wishing for more regular communications and updates.

- At larger studios, interviewees worried that unionisation would be difficult due to the sheer number of employees. A union requires 40-60% support from employees (depending on province) and secrecy is of utmost importance during the process. If a studio has 500+ members, slowly expanding a circle of trust without tipping off management is a long and arduous process.

4.7

How do I get started?

"Talk to a union rep almost immediately, especially in the early stages. We were given helpful documents, such as a pre-generated Excel document for tracking safe people and figuring out what percentage of the workplace was on board."

Kelly Wright, Anemone Hug

"Everybody knows who the malcontents are at work—the people who complain about the job and criticise management. Find those people and have a conversation with them about unionisation. It'll probably take you further than you think."

James Russwurm, Keywords Studios

"Peoples' stated politics aren't necessarily an indication of how willing they are to organise their workplace. You can have very pro-union or 'left' people who, for one reason or another, might not feel they need a union at their workplace. A lot of labour organising is about building trust, planting seeds, and getting people to reconsider things that they may have taken for granted or hadn't thought about that much."

Carolyn Jong, Game Workers Unite Montréal and Vodeo Games

"The hardest part is building an organising committee. Part of the reason why we build an organising committee is to spread the work around because it's really easy to get burnt out of organising."

Daniel Korn, Game Workers Unite Toronto

"Commonly, people were not really educated on what unions were. They'd been raised in a society where, for decades, anti-union sentiment has been on the rise. More often than not, my conversations would have to start from the place of very gently warming folks up to the idea, dispelling myths, and educating them on union realities."

Anonymous Game Developer

"Seek out like-minded people in the studio carefully. The larger the studio the more likely you'll encounter someone that will run to the boss when they hear the word 'union.' Find your comrades carefully."

Kelly Wright, Anemone Hug

"Union votes are a bit like a game mechanic where people are trying to min/max and win that game. As game designers, we should try to figure out how to use that system to get the outcomes we want."

Anonymous Game Developer

5.0 CLOSING NOTES



Despite occupying much of our time for the past year, we understand that *If You Don't Like the Game, Change the Rules: Alternative Modes of Videogame Production* offers only an initial foray into worker co-operatives, unions, and emerging labour structures in the Canadian game industry. The game industry is sprawling, diverse, and constantly in flux, making it difficult to offer anything beyond a snapshot of the people and structures that constitute it. However, we strongly believe that this project both builds upon existing research and offers a unique perspective into an understudied industry locale and topic.

We are proud of this white paper and its equally important comic counterpart, and we are extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to speak with so many creative, passionate, and dedicated people.

Future Research Threads

Like so many researchers, we found ourselves left with many questions as we wrapped up this study. Below, we have summarised some intriguing loose ends that we hope, one day, are further explored by journalists, academics, and industry researchers:

- What challenges and growing pains will game studio worker co-operatives encounter over the long term? As a recently emerging phenomenon, there is very little data about the tribulations facing worker co-operatives that are more than a few years old.
- How approachable will social finance funding be to worker co-operatives in the game industry? While worker co-operatives are eligible for social finance funding, it is still not clear what the application process will entail.
- What is the "tipping point" for widespread union action in the Canadian game industry? While many of our survey participants mentioned they were pro-union, we wonder what it would take for them to start a union at their workplace.
- What conditions would lead to a union at a larger game studio (100+ members), particularly a AAA developer? Interviewees repeatedly expressed that it was important to unionise these studios but doubted that such efforts would be successful.

How To Foster Worker Co-operative and Union Growth

While not designed to be a prescriptive document, we close this white paper with four recommendations for furthering the growth of worker co-operatives and unions in the Canadian game industry. These recommendations are synthesised from conversations with union organisers, worker co-operative members, and labour experts, as well as our own research and analysis.

- Make it easier for worker co-operatives to apply for federal and provincial funding by explicitly listing them as eligible in relevant grant descriptions. Co-ops often find themselves questioning their eligibility, discouraging them from applying.

- Develop approachable training programs that offer information about worker co-operatives in the game industry. While there are numerous resources for worker co-operatives and game studios independently, there are few that acknowledge the intersections between the two, forcing prospective worker-owners to piece together information on their own.

- Introduce educational initiatives within college and university game design programs that teach students about labour rights, worker co-operatives, and unions. Recent graduates from game design programs lack this knowledge and tacitly accept crunch and other poor working conditions due to entrenched ideologies regarding passion labour and self-exploitation.

- Provide anonymous venues for game industry employees to report labour issues at their workplace. Many game developers work under conditions that circumvent provincial labour laws, but felt uncomfortable formally bringing attention to such issues (or engaging in pro-labour action) due to a fear of reprisal.

Appendix A: Bibliography

About the Social Finance Fund. (2021, August 12). Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/social-innovation-social-finance/social-finance-fund.html

Bedingfield, W. (2022, July 20). It's Not Just Loot Boxes: Predatory Monetization Is Everywhere. *Wired UK.* https://www.wired.co.uk/article/loot-boxes-predatory-monetization-games

Blackwell, R. (2014, September 14). SolarShare grows as 'green bonds' heat up. *The Globe and Mail.* https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/industry-news/energy-and-resources/solarshare-grows-as-green-bonds-heat-up/article20594840/

Bulut, E. (2015). Playboring in the Tester Pit: The Convergence of Precarity and the Degradation of Fun in Video Game Testing. *Television & New Media*, 16(3), 240–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414525241

Bulut, E. (2020). *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry.* ILR Press.

Carpenter, N. (2020, June 30). Cards Against Humanity workers are unionizing following allegations of toxic culture. *Polygon.* https://www.polygon.com/2020/6/30/21308708/cards-against-humanity-unionization-toxic-culture-chicago

Carpenter, N. (2021, December 15). North America has its first video game union at Vodeo Games. *Polygon.* https://www.polygon.com/22834924/vodeo-games-first-video-game-union-north-america-code-cwa

Charmaz, K., & Belgrave, L. (2012). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Cook, S. (2022, June 6). Edmonton video game workers vote to unionize, an industry first for Canada | CBC News. *CBC.* https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/video-game-workers-unionize-edmonton-1.6479284

Cooperative Identity, Values & Principles. (n.d.). International Cooperative Alliance. Retrieved February 13, 2023, from https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity

Dealessandri, M. (2022, January 7). *BioWare adopts hybrid remote/office model.* GamesIndustry.Biz. https://www.gamesindustry.biz/bioware-adopts-hybrid-remote-office-model

Durling, J. (2018, June 23). *Former Smiling Goat workers are opening Glitter Bean Cafe.* The Coast Halifax. https://www.thecoast.ca/halifax/former-smiling-goat-workers-are-opening-glitter-bean-cafe/Content?oid=15562105

Entertainment Software Association of Canada. (2021). *The Canadian Video Game Industry 2021*. Nordicity.

Glasner, E. (2019, April 26). "I just broke down crying": Canadian video game creators face gruelling "crunch" hours | CBC News. CBC. https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/burnout-crunch-canada-1.5109599

Good, O. S. (2018, October 18). Red Dead Redemption 2 developers open up about work conditions at Rockstar Games. *Polygon*. https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/18/17994068/red-dead-redemption-2-crunch-rockstar-games

Gordon, L. (2022, January 14). These are the video game studios leading the charge for a four-day workweek. *The Verge*. https://www.theverge.com/2022/1/14/22882669/video-game-studios-four-day-workweek

Hall, C. (2021, October 14). Workers at Paizo unionize, a first for the tabletop role-playing game industry. *Polygon*. https://www.polygon.com/tabletop-games/22726765/paizo-workers-form-union-demands-cwa-pathfinder-starfinder

Harvey, A. (2019). Becoming Gamesworkers: Diversity, Higher Education, and the Future of the Game Industry. *Television & New Media*, 20(8), 756–766. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851080

Hough, P., Wilson, D., & Corcoran, H. (2021). *The Worker Co-op Sector in Canada: Success Factors, and Planning for Growth*. 20.

Keogh, B., & Abraham, B. (2022). Challenges and opportunities for collective action and unionization in local games industries. *Organization*, 13505084221082268. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084221082269

Klepek, P. (2020, September 21). A Worker-Owned Game Studio Rises From the Wreckage of "Skullgirls" Developer. *Vice*. https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kpymg/a-worker-owned-game-studio-rises-from-the-wreckage-of-skullgirls-developer

Labour Force Survey. (2023). Statistics Canada. https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=3701

Lewis, K., Stronge, W., Kikuchi, L., Kellam, J., Schor, J., Fan, W., Kelly, O., Gu, G., Frayne, D., Burchell, B., Hubbard, N. B., White, J., Kamarāde, D., & Mullens, F. (2023). *The Results Are In: The UK'S Four-Day Week Pilot*. Autonomy.

McRobbie, A. (2011). Re-thinking creative economy as radical social enterprise. *Variant, 41*(Spring).

Morissette, R. (2022). *Unionization in Canada, 1981 to 2022* [Data set]. Statistics Canada. https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202201100001-ENG

O'Brien, M. (2023, January 3). Video game testers form Microsoft's 1st U.S. labor union. *PBS NewsHour*. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/video-game-testers-form-microsofts-first-u-s-labor-union

O'Donnell, C. (2014). *Developer's dilemma: The secret world of videogame creators*. The MIT Press.

Paul, K. (2022, May 23). Activision Blizzard's Raven Software workers vote to form industry's first union. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/may/23/activision-blizzard-raven-software-union-vote

Rousseau, J. (2022, September 21). Anemone Hug Interactive forms the first Canadian video game union. *GamesIndustry.Biz*. https://www.gamesindustry.biz/anemone-hug-interactive-form-the-first-canadian-video-game-union

Ruffino, P., & Woodcock, J. (2021). Game Workers and the Empire: Unionisation in the UK Video Game Industry. *Games and Culture*, 16(3), 317–328. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020947096

Semuels, A. (2019, June 11). Video Game Creators Are Burned Out and Desperate for Change. *Time*. https://time.com/5603329/e3-video-game-creators-union/

Statistics Canada. (2021). *Study: Co-operatives in Canada. 11.*

Statistics Canada. (2022, June 9). Rising prices are affecting the ability to meet day-to-day expenses for most Canadians. *The Daily*. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220609/dq220609a-eng.htm

Walker-Emig, P. (2019). A world without bosses? The rise of the worker co-op. *Wireframe.* https://whynowgaming.com/a-world-without-bosses-the-rise-of-the-worker-co-op

Weststar, J., & Legault, M.-J. (2019). Building Momentum for Collectivity in the Digital Game Community. *Television & New Media*, 20(8), 848–861. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851087

Weststar, J., Shruti, K., Coppins, T., Kwan, E., & Inceefe, E. (2021). *Developer Satisfaction Survey 2021.* International Game Developers Association. https://igda-website.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/18113901/IGDA-DSS-2021_SummaryReport_2021.pdf

Whitson, J. R., Simon, B., & Parker, F. (2021). The Missing Producer: Rethinking indie cultural production in terms of entrepreneurship, relational labour, and sustainability. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(2), 606–627. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418810082

Wilde, R. (2020, July 21). The world's largest creative industry is ready for a new model of ownership. *Co-Operative Party.* https://party.coop/2020/07/21/the-worlds-largest-creative-industry-is-ready-for-a-new-model-of-ownership/

Williams, L. J. (2022, September 8). Vodeo Games, the first unionised game studio, is shutting down. *GamesHub.* https://www.gameshub.com/news/news/vodeo-games-union-shutting-down-28770/

Zwiezen, Z. (2021, December 26). Everything That Has Happened Since The Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Was Filed. *Kotaku*. https://kotaku.com/everything-that-has-happened-since-the-activision-blizz-1847401161

Appendix B: Methodological Overview

We conducted the research for *If You Don't Like the Game, Change the Rules: Alternative Modes of Videogame Production* from June 2022 to January 2023. The primary methods used for this project were a Microsoft Forms survey (52 participants) and Zoom interviews (36 participants), supplemented by the analysis of news articles, academic papers, and industry resources. All surveys and interviews were conducted in English.

Surveys

From October to December 2022, we solicited a Microsoft Forms survey to Canadian game developers. We recruited participants through known channels (across GAIN's existing communication networks), on Twitter (with a manual verification process to filter out bots), and by contacting game studios directly. The survey took participants approximately 5-10 minutes to complete and they were offered a $15 gift card as compensation. In total, 52 game developers participated.

Survey participants were asked to contribute their thoughts and experiences on labour practices in the game industry, particularly their attitudes towards worker co-operatives, unions, and new labour developments. A full list of survey questions can be found in Appendix C.

Interviews

From August 2022 to December 2023, we conducted interviews with members of worker co-operatives, game developers in the process of starting a worker co-operative, traditional game studios that explicitly followed co-operative values, game union organisers, industry labour experts, and developers with unique insights on labour. We conducted interviews predominantly through Zoom (with one interview completed using Discord) and each interview typically took 45-75 minutes to complete. Participants were offered a $50 gift card as compensation.

We asked interviewees to answer numerous questions related to worker co-operatives, unions, and other labour configurations in the Canadian game industry, but also invited them to bring other related topics to the discussion.

We recruited our initial interviewees directly through public-facing contact information sourced from websites and social media accounts, identifying worker co-operative and union members using news articles, search engine queries, and by speaking with industry contacts. We also solicited interviewees through email, social media, and a blog post published to GAIN's website. Many of our initial interviewees also put us in touch with developers and game studios, resulting in some snowball recruitment.

Analysis of Findings

We collected the quantifiable outcomes of the surveys—such as the demographic data presented above—directly from Microsoft Forms. We removed no data during our analysis as we verified all participants before allowing them to participate. Upon carefully reviewing our results, we did not feel that any type of data cleaning was necessary.

Both surveys and interviews were studied using grounded theory analysis (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012), in which responses were coded and sorted to establish overarching themes. After this initial categorisation, we then organised survey and interview results under interrogative headings, to reflect the questions asked in the survey and during interviews. When appropriate, we include pull quotes that we believe reflect sentiments that were consistently expressed by survey participants and interviewees.

Appendix C: Survey Sample

Where in Canada are you currently located?

- Alberta
- British Columbia
- Manitoba
- New Brunswick
- Newfoundland and Labrador
- Northwest Territories
- Nova Scotia
- Nunavut
- Ontario
- Prince Edward Island
- Québec
- Saskatchewan
- Yukon Territory

How many years have you worked in the game industry?

- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6 or more

What is your current work situation?

- I work at a AAA studio
- I work at an indie studio
- I work as part of a registered co-operative
- I am a freelancer or self-employed
- I am not currently employed (on leave, in between jobs, etc.)
- Other

What is your primary role?

- Management (incl. producers and team leads)
- Programming/Engineering
- Design (incl. writing and UX/UI design)
- Art (incl. technical artists)
- QA
- Admin, Support, Monetization (incl. marketing and community management)

Have you experienced the following while working in the game industry? (yes/no/unsure)

- Excessive work hours (e.g., crunch)
- Harassment based on identity (such as gender or race)
- Bias directed toward you based on identity (such as gender or race).
- Harassment based on hierarchy (such as your position within the company)
- Sudden employment loss or employment precarity (lay-offs, restructuring, etc.)
- Salaries that you feel are below a living wage
- A lack of creative freedom

What is your #1 concern about working in the game industry? This can be one of the issues listed above or something else entirely.

Tell us a little bit about your knowledge and experience with co-operatives. (yes/no/other)

- I have a strong idea of what a co-operative is.
- I would be open to joining an existing co-operative.
- I would like to start/found a co-operative.
- I believe that co-operatives can thrive in the game industry.
- I believe co-operatives could solve some problems present in the game industry.

Are there any specific reasons you are interested, or not interested, in joining or forming a game co-operative?

- Tell us a little bit about your knowledge and experience with unions. (yes/no/other)
- I have a strong idea of what a union is.
- I would support a unionisation effort at my current workplace.
- I am interested in starting a union at the company that I work at.
- I believe unions could solve some problems present in the game industry.
- I believe that unions can thrive in the game industry.
- I would prefer to work at a company with a unionised workforce.

Are there any specific reasons you are interested, or not interested, in joining or forming a union in the game industry?

Appendix D: Worker Co-operative Resources

FEDERAL RESOURCES

The Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation
https://canadianworker.coop

The Government of Canada: Co-operatives in Canada
https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/cooperatives-canada/en

PROVINCIAL RESOURCES

Alberta Community & Co-operative Association
https://www.acca.coop

BC Coop Association
https://bcca.coop

Co-operative Enterprise Council of New Brunswick
https://cecnb.ca

Government of Prince Edward Island - Register a Co-operative
https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/service/register-a-business-co-operative

La fédération des coopératives du Nouveau-Québec
http://www.fcnq.ca/en/qui-nous-sommes

Manitoba Cooperative Association Inc.
https://manitoba.coop

Newfoundland-Labrador Federation of Co-operatives
https://nlfc.coop

Nova Scotia Co-operative Council
http://www.novascotia.coop

Ontario Co-operative Association
https://ontario.coop

Réseau COOP
https://reseau.coop

Saskatchewan Co-operative Association
https://sask.coop

TERRITORIAL RESOURCES

Arctic Co-operatives Limited
https://arctic-coop.com/index.php/about-arctic-co-ops/about-arctic-co-ops-mission-objectives

Government of Northwest Territories - Co-operative associations
https://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/en/cooperative-associations

Government of Yukon - Cooperative Associations
https://yukon.ca/en/doing-business/businesses-societies-and-securities/find-fees-cooperative-associations

OTHER RESOURCES

Canadian Co-operative Investment Fund
https://ccif.coop
A fund that strengthens Canadian communities by filling a financing gap for co-operatives.

Game Developers Conference 2019 - Embracing the Co-Op Studio Model in Indie Games
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zxNfHl-xmM
A panel discussion in which Scott Benson, Ted Anderson, Steve Filby, Ian Thomas and Bethany Hockenberry share their experiences forming workers co-ops and talk about the benefits of the co-op model for small and midsize studios.

Game Workers Unite - Worker Co-op Resource
https://www.gameworkersunite.org/worker-co-op-resource
A guide from Game Workers Unite that outlines what worker co-operatives are and how they fit into the game industry.

Government of Canada - Social Finance Fund
https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/social-innovation-social-finance/social-finance-fund.html
An initiative that seeks to accelerate the growth of Canada's social finance market by supporting charities, non-profits, social enterprises, co-operatives and other social purpose organisations (SPOs).

Weird Ghosts
https://weirdghosts.ca
An impact fund for studios led by underrepresented founders in Canada, with specific mechanisms for co-operative investment.

Appendix E: Union Resources

Game Worker Solidarity Project
https://gameworkersolidarity.com
A website that maps and documents collective movements by game workers striving to improve their working conditions.

Game Workers Unite Montréal
https://gwumtl.com/en
A worker-run, labour rights group seeking to organise the videogame industry.

International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees
https://canada.iatse.net
The parent union of Anemone Hug, who recently unionised under the Canadian Animation Guild (IATSE Local 938).

The Rise of the Video Game Union - Nicole Carpenter
https://www.polygon.com/23485977/video-game-unions-guide-explainer
An all-in-one explainer on why game workers are unionising and the specific steps that future organisers may take.

Now You're Working With Power - Ian Williams
https://www.giantbomb.com/articles/guest-column-now-youre-working-with-power/1100-5422
A guest column for Giant Bomb, in which Ian Williams explains what a union is and why you might want one.

Kickstarter Union: Oral History - Clarissa Redwine
https://engelberg-center-live.simplecast.com/episodes/chapter-1-fertile-ground
An oral history of the Kickstarter Union drive.

Secrets of a Successful Organiser - Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, and Jane Slaughter
https://labornotes.org/secrets
A commonly recommended resource designed to help folks organise unions in their workplace.

United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW Canada)
https://www.ufcw.ca
The parent union of Keywords Studios, who recently unionised under UFCW Local 401


GAMEDEV
CRUNCH
CHANGE
CREATIVE CONTROL
WE'RE WORLD DESIGNERS, WHY CAN'T WE DESIGN A WORLD WE WANT TO LIVE IN?
$
$
HI
AAA
FREELANCE
SOLO DEV
UNION?
WORK WORK WORK
HELP
CO-OP
INDIE
SO TIRED
BURNOUT
FOUR-DAY WORK WEEK