

When Passion Isn't Enough: Gender, Affect, and Credibility in Digital Games

Design

Recent controversies around identity and diversity in digital games culture indicate the heightened affective terrain for participants within this creative industry. While work in digital games production has been characterized as a form of passionate, affective labour, this paper examines its specificities as a constraining and enabling force. Affect, particularly passion, serves to render forms of game development oriented toward professionalization and support of the existing industry norms as credible and legitimate, while relegating other types of participation, including that by women and other marginalized creators, to subordinate positions within hierarchies of production. Using the example of a women-in-games initiative in Montreal as a case study, we indicate how linkages between affect and competencies, specifically creativity and technical abilities, perpetuate a long-standing delegitimization of women's work in digital game design.

affect, gender, labour, credibility, passion, digital game design, creative industries,
cultural production

Perhaps we truly encounter the political only when we *feel*.

Staiger et. al., 2010: 4 (emphasis in original)

Introduction

The subject of gender-based discrimination, intimidation, and abuse in digital games culture has gained unprecedented mainstream public visibility with the #GamerGate campaign against those who purportedly engage in unethical behaviour within games journalism. Since August 2014, comments in a range of social media platforms, including Twitter, 4chan, Reddit, and YouTube, have expressed rage against the intrusion of feminism and political critique into the domain of digital games (Chess and Shaw, 2015). Those deemed responsible for this leakage of social justice into what are framed as sacrosanct realms of play include a range of vocal female designers, critics, journalists, academics, and celebrities. What these diverse targets share is that they do not align with the ideal subject-position of the gamer, both in terms of identity (primarily White, cisgendered, and male) and form of commitment to game culture, which is largely premised on unquestioning support of the underlying norms and values of the industry.

The attributes of the ideal gamer subject and what constitutes cultural capital in this domain have historically been constructed through trends in games marketing (Fron et. al., 2007; Consalvo, 2007), and have been widely adopted by its intended audience. Communities of anonymous gamers organizing under #GamerGate vigilantly and

violently police the boundaries of this media form and its fandom, leading to highly affective discourse on both ‘sides’ of the controversy. #GamerGate can be seen as a clash centered on loss – of the core gamer identity premised on exclusion – with some celebrating what this affords for diversity (Alexander, 2014; Johnston, 2014; Plunkett 2014), and others fighting to recoup what appears to have been taken from them. The resulting expressions of outrage, disgust, fear, and horror so prevalent across pro-#GamerGate and anti-#GamerGate statements indicate a deep entanglement between affect, gender-based discourse, and participation in digital games culture.

The rise of the #GamerGate hashtag as a forum for discussing the participation of women in digital games culture indicates the highly affective context for not only women’s visibility in games but of games culture’s relationship to identity, community, and belonging. This paper discusses the unique affective character of gendered labour in games culture through the example of an initiative to increase women’s representation in the industry. Digital games work, be it professional, independent, or in the form of player co-creation activities, has been conceptualized as a key example of passionate and affective labour (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Humphreys, 2005; Consalvo, 2008; Harvey and Fisher, 2013). Rather than focusing on the immaterial, precarious, playful, and exploitative dimensions of games labour, this analysis examines the role of affect in (re)entrenching exclusionary discourses and practices in game design related to identity. We draw on a study of the foundation of a community-based women-in-games group and the reception of initiatives of its kind to explore the framing and deployment of affective discourse as a means of dynamically constructing talent, merit, and credibility in

a uniquely gendered way. The differences between the articulations of passion by women making their first games and those mobilized within the games culture in which they are operating, we argue, demarcate boundaries that are used to normalize exclusion in digital games production and culture. As a force shaping social meaning and cultural boundaries (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012), affect supports and perpetuates a hegemonic notion of what constitutes legitimate, credible, and authentic participation in games, naturalizing the marginalization of women in this industry.

Passionate Labour: Gender, Games, Affect, and Work

Digital games as technologies of gender have been understood as multiply exclusionary of female subjects. Historically-informed approaches indicate that the gender-differentiated marketing of these consumer goods and the framing of digital games as ‘toys for boys’ can be linked to the conservatism of the North American industry after its near bankruptcy in the early 1980s (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009). A series of commercial, technological, and cultural decisions normalized within the industry have led to not only the construction of a narrow audience for digital games but also a culture of play premised on hypermasculine values and “a cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued” (Fron et. al., 2007: 1). The production of low-quality ‘girl’ games designed for stereotypically gendered preferences and the denigration of the most popular titles with mass audiences as ‘casual games’ indicate this cultural devaluation (Kafai et. al., 2008).

The games industry produces a narrowly-defined form of ‘gaming capital’ (Consalvo, 2007) valuing cultivated player knowledge, dedicated play experience, and consistent investment of time, money, and energy in digital games. The ideal game subject interpellated by the industry is a lifelong, passionate, and vociferous player of digital games and consumer of game-related technologies and paratexts, ensuring a steady market of reliable consumers that not only speak with their wallets but increasingly as vocal online fan communities. While some see the growth of a burgeoning independent digital games scene as a site that challenges hegemonic values (Anthropy, 2012; Westecott, 2013), it has itself been shown to entrench and perpetuate discourses of authenticity related to defining real games, real players, and real play (Harvey, 2014). Indeed, the use of common tropes related to casual and hardcore play has found its way into technology marketing,ⁱ indicating that the tendency to delegitimize women’s engagement in play is legible as a form of interpellation for masculine markets. The hierarchy of casual/hardcore and the use of discourses related to legitimacy, credibility, and authenticity can thus be seen to reify games as an inherently masculine domain (Vanderhoef, 2013).

The context of games production tends to be identified as the primary source of this narrow and exclusionary construction. Statistics from Western game production hubs indicate a paucity of diversity within the industry, with an overwhelmingly White male workforce constituting the creative elite across the industry (International Game Developers Association, 2005). More recent surveys indicate that the gender imbalance is improving but that women still only make up 22% of the digital games workforce

(International Game Developers Association, 2014). The industry can be seen as a key culprit in reproducing a masculine subject as the default player of games, for example through the relative absence of playable female characters and the notion that including such characters is not a priority (Huntemann, 2015). Within the industry, however, embedded cultural norms and values can be seen as further marginalizing the few women that do enter the precarious games workforce.

As a key exemplar of post-Fordist production (Kline et. al., 2003), the mainstream global games industry is characterized by highly flexible, transnational labour forces, project-based work, and production hinged on cycles of technological innovation (Deuze et. al., 2007). Within design contexts, these technological, economic, and social realities create significant boundaries shaping everyday work practices, including the privileging of a delimited range of technical skills, professional ideologies, and job roles, resulting in a network of inclusion and exclusion premised on seemingly neutral decisions related to work organization and teamwork (Johnson, 2013). These forms of structural exclusion contribute to the attrition of women in the industry. For instance, Consalvo (2008) found that the widespread and normalized working practice of crunch time (a reliance on uncompensated overtime prior to a game's launch deadline) was cited by female designers as ultimately incompatible with personal and family commitments. Given the gendered nature of childcare and reproduction duties, this structural norm within game work practices becomes a naturalized barrier to women's long-term participation in the games workforce. In addition to these still-significant forms of exclusion within professional game environments based on social, technological, and economic norms, we

seek to understand the ways in which affective relations and discourses shape the labouring body in digital games.

Digital games labour, as a paradigmatic form of information-based capitalism, is based on bodies whose productive activity is tied to the creation of sensations, emotions, feelings, and passions. As Adkins and Jokinen (2008) argue, while the labour of love and care has been traditionally linked to women's unpaid labour in the private sphere, the attributes of precarious and project-based work in the knowledge economy can be seen to feminize all labour, as traditionally "what constituted women as women was a lack of socio-political ownership of labour" (142). Regardless of gender, the labouring body in contemporary work is vulnerable, precarious, and exploited as a reserve labour force beyond the bounds of the work day, but as Haraway (1991) notes this does not mean that there are no gender- or class-based differences in the labour force. A focus on affect not as a descriptive characteristic of passionate labour but also as a shaping force in establishing and entrenching privilege in game production can provide insight into how inequalities persist in contemporary capitalism. Such an analysis of a growing creative and digital industry shows how, as feminist scholars have indicated (e.g., Hemmings 2005), affect can be a constraining social force rather than a source of freedom or autonomy. It provides empirical evidence of how affect is an important factor to consider in tandem with the ideological and discursive tactics for minimizing, denigrating, and dismissing women's participation reviewed above. An attunement to affect as a shaping force also illuminates significant ways in which digital labour is gendered, a necessary

intervention in a context where the masculine subjectivity of the creative worker is still assumed (Duffy, 2015).

In order to foreground the power of affect to delimit the legitimacy of digital game work, we consider one increasingly popular mode of increasing diversity in game design through the example of a community-based women-in-games initiative called Pixelles. Community interventions like this are lauded for shifting the hegemonic culture of games within mainstream production spheres through independent design. We examine the local context for Pixelles, the perspectives of the participants on gender diversity and their affective engagements with game-making, and the ways in which such independent forms of game-making are framed in relation to the mainstream industry. Such analysis is important because, if the #GamerGate controversy indicates anything about the contemporary context of games, and indeed of technological spheres of production generally, it is that the increased visibility of women is not necessarily welcome. Given the contestation of women's participation within digital games, it is important to consider how initiatives for diversity are understood and negotiated.

Co-Constructing Pixelles: A Feminist Participatory Action Research Approach

One prominent type of intervention has been attempted through the framework of 'women-in-games.' A range of industry, community, and educational initiatives oriented toward supporting, retaining, and mentoring women-in-games promise a solution to the creative and commercial monopoly over production in this field. Activities, groups,

events, and organizations aiming to increase the diversity of talent within this sphere of production are increasing, and one such recent initiative is the Montreal-based Pixelles.

Formed in 2012, and based on the example of the successful Toronto group Dames Making Games (Harvey and Fisher, 2014), Pixelles is led by two female game developers with the mission of supporting women who “for one reason or another have never managed to [make a game].” They see the role of the group as providing “motivation and the resources to help these women take the first big step and create their first game,” through incubators, game jams, socials, and a mentorship program. Pixelles is an example of a women-in-games group launched based on an academic-community partnership, and informed by a feminist participatory action research (F-PAR) framework. This refers to a participatory approach wherein community members collaborate in research design, execution, analysis, and/or dissemination activities, drawing on the insights of feminist theories to “think together about historically entrenched forms of gender inequality; the systems, ideas, and policies that reproduce them; the importance of individual choice and self determination; along with potential avenues for social justice” (Frisby et. al., 2009: 23). Pragmatically, this means that rather than approaching women in games as research subjects, F-PAR entails partnering with members of the community, “generating knowledge and planning actions in order to resist domination, oppression, surveillance, and inequality” (Krumer-Nevo, 2009: 281).

This hands-on collaboration with the community under study took various forms. Start-up costs for the initial six-week session for first-time female game designers were provided

by the Feminists in Games (FIG) research group, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded project distributing seed funding to game design interventionsⁱⁱ. Author 1 pitched the Montreal initiative at a May 2012 FIG workshop, and consulted with participants from a prior study on the Toronto game design scene. She collated guidance for running a community group for women starting in game design based on discussions with these collaborators, who reflected on their experiences in an initiative called the Difference Engine Initiative (Fisher and Harvey, 2013; Harvey and Fisher, 2013). Author 1 also consulted a range of stakeholders in the Montreal game design context in order to identify potential organizers, researchers, and mentors as well as venues for hosting the incubator sessions.

Based on these preliminary discussions with community members in Montreal, a former DEI alumnus and a local game designer were recruited to run the initiative, and author 2 was invited to support planning activities and research the initiative as a co-coordinator. This entailed assisting in the preparation and execution of this first incubator, observation at each weekly session, in-depth interviews with the participants as they created their games, and documentation of the Follow Along programme for participants who could not physically attend the weekly sessions. As another data point, author 1 was a participant in the Follow Along programme. Both authors attended and observed the final showcase in March 2013, where the participants' games were debuted to the public. As a complement to this participatory action research, the authors compiled and analyzed policy initiatives at the provincial level in support of digital games production in Quebec, tracked industry trends including mergers and closures of Montreal studios, and

documented responses to community and industry initiatives for greater participation in game design. These diverse forms of empirical, qualitative, and policy data allow us to set grounded activities such as the formation of the Pixelles community group in dialogue with broader political, economic, and cultural shifts within digital games production. As the rest of the paper will demonstrate, the contextualization of Pixelles – the first explicitly feminist intervention into game development in Montreal – within the discursive and practical norms of global game design labour highlights complex entanglements of affect, gender, credibility, and inclusion. In what follows we provide a brief portrait of Montreal as a game design hub in Canada as an exemplar of the realities of contemporary game production, and introduce Pixelles.

Pixelles within the Creative Cluster of Montreal

As the main game development hub in Canada, Montreal benefits from federal policy instruments including Digital Economy projects and the Canadian Media Fund. Such economic and cultural policy frameworks, combined with a highly skilled and well trained labour force and relatively low wages compared to other developed countries, have contributed to Canada's games industry's significant position among global games production (second behind the US in overall competitiveness) and proportionate contribution to the country's economic activity (Darchen and Tremblay, 2015).

In considering Montreal within this context, provincial policies have been especially important for game development: about half of Canada's games industry workers are

located in Quebec. This distribution is largely due to a series of tax breaks and subsidies offered to games companies by the Quebec government since the mid-1990s (Livermore, 2013). Along with the low commercial rent and corporate tax rates in the province, Quebec's aggressive policy instruments for luring large French firm Ubisoft in 1997 resulted in the development of Montreal as a 'creative cluster,' a centralized but dynamic community of talent and ideas (Darchen and Tremblay, 2015).

The game development scene in Montreal, while anchored by Ubisoft and its nearly 3000 employees, is a relatively diverse mix of firms, from the large 'AAA' studios to indie outfits made up of a few people, as well as companies producing middleware, sound, and other components. When Ubisoft first arrived in Montreal, the city had an existing small-scale game development scene (Della Rocca, 2013), which expanded initially somewhat as new smaller firms splintered off from Ubisoft. However, as de Peuter (2012) notes, what occurred in the intervening years has been more of a consolidation, with Ubisoft acquiring other studios. For example, the firm has bought up a variety of middleware studios to obtain their intellectual property, and more dramatically, in 2013, Ubisoft acquired the large firm THQ, both for its IP and its labour force.

Ubisoft's acquisition of THQ evidences recent shifts in policy where the formerly significant tax breaks have been reduced due to unsustainability, also causing studio closures such as the relocation of FunCom's Montreal office to North Carolina (where better tax breaks were offered) in early 2012, and EA Montreal's round of layoffs in 2013 that saw their workforce diminished by nearly two-thirds. At a more micro level, these

structural shifts confirm the precarity games workers experience in an industry predicated on crunch time and high turnover rates. As noted, these dynamics of game labour contribute to the overrepresentation of young, White, male workers in game design, drawn into exploitative working conditions through a work-as-play mythology that rests on ‘passion’ to elide exploitation (de Peuter and Dyer-Witford, 2005).

This context of games labour as precarious, even within a globally renowned creative cluster such as Montreal, formed the backdrop for Pixelles as an intervention into the masculinist culture of game development. The six-week workshop sessions took place in January and February 2013, with ten core participants meeting weekly in FunCom’s downtown Montreal office at exactly the time when it was announced that the company would be shutting down its Canadian operations and relocating only some of its hundreds of employees to North Carolina. The atmosphere of instability that this circumstance brought upon the initiative served to highlight the added tensions of gender within the industry that Pixelles was designed expressly to address.

The ten core participants (and two follow-along participants) of Pixelles were selected from over 60 applications based on their design concepts, diversity of skills within visual arts, programming, sound, and so on, and – importantly – expression of enthusiasm for games. The attention to gender issues among the group seemed to be an afterthought, as reflected in participants’ ambivalent responses to the initiative as women-only. While some took on the politics of the project, saying, “I think that since women are underrepresented in gaming, it only makes sense that there be a program that encourages

them to step into an industry that they are not necessarily encouraged to step into” (Jessica), others were noncommittal, for example saying, “I don’t know, it’s fun to see people helping each other out, in general” (Nicole), or, “I didn’t know if it’s the all-women thing or it’s just that they selected a good group” (Alex). And even in the coordinators’ statements, explicit mention of gender was often elided in favour of assertions such as Tanya’s that the aim of Pixelles was to “have the community of human beings who have made a game be larger.” As such, the context of worker precarity and participants’ hesitation to take on more political positions characterized Pixelles more generally as a supportive and casual rather than political or competitive context. Instead of trying to prepare participants for careers in game design, the atmosphere was directed more toward just being involved in games in some way. As Carolyn summarized, “the real value of having a welcoming environment is that you then get people that might feel excluded otherwise to show up and get involved. Because there’s definitely a lack of diversity at the moment.”

Creativity and Capability in Pixelles

Though participants and coordinators evidenced ambivalent orientations toward Pixelles as explicitly feminist, what was unique about participation in this supportive context for new designers was its expansive and affective conception of game-making talent. Within Pixelles, talent in game design was linked to the widening of possibilities and taking joy in the potentialities of game mechanics. This aligns with the common discourse that independent modes of production provide the opportunity for diverse forms of expression

in games and for resistance to the conservative dependence on sequels, franchise titles, and spin-offs largely cast in militaristic settings, sci-fi universes, or hyperviolent scenarios.

In the case of Pixelles, participants envisioned the possibilities of gameplay in diverse and creative ways, ranging from games premised on unexpectedness and humour to designs themed on nostalgia and silliness. Maria-Julia conceptualized a game through its mechanics, one “not completely based upon predictability. The glitch factor of physics is what I find interesting, because there are games that are so precise that there is no space for you to have fun, to laugh at things.” Jean’s game concept was premised on mechanics as well as thematics: “I take my inspiration from *Contra* for the NES and from *Mega Man*. And the concept of my game design is badass mixed with cuteness [...] something I found would be interesting would be having flying cats [laughter].”

As these examples indicate, while participants in Pixelles imagined games that innovated on expected dynamics, mechanics, and aesthetics in this domain, their visions for their games were based on knowledge of both an array of existing games (*Contra* and *Mega Man*) as well as on the underlying functionality of game design (level design and physics). These first-time designers, while not in alignment with the ideal game-player subject position’s identity, drew on the affective relationship players tend to have with games. Despite their pre-existing knowledge of the narrative and mechanic repertoires of digital games, they faced challenges in their ability to execute their visions in the process of game-making.

The Pixelles participants used a range of different tools to make their games, including Stencyl, Gamemaker: Studio, Unity, and Construct 2. These differ but are all oriented toward novice game-makers seeking intuitive design interfaces and a non-coding approach to development. While these software packages and game engines are more accessible than advanced software platforms, and are thus popular in first-time design initiatives, they can still be a source of frustration for participants. For instance, Yeti, who was using Stencyl, reported:

I've been trying to do the same thing for the past few weeks. And I really thought it was going to work this time and it didn't. So yeah, that's definitely not the fun kind of hard work. I like the fun kind of hard work where it feels like I'm progressing, but basically I'm stuck at this one part. That's where I'm getting really frustrated.

In addition to seeking assistance in the weekly sessions, participants searched for guidance online but found that their lack of experience limited their ability to mobilize help: "I've been searching online forums and all of that. But the few people who ask the same question that I'm asking – if there's an answer to it – I don't understand the answer" (Lauren). As this indicates, while do-it-yourself game tools can make game design more accessible to those without formal training in programming, they can present frustration and challenges for first-time users, even if they are drawing on knowledge of and experience in game play.

Furthermore, participants expressed a sense of the limitations of these tools beyond the first game. As Carolyn noted:

I feel like it's a really steep learning curve – if I want to be an expert game-maker, I've still got a long way to go. If I want to make relatively simple games I feel at this point I could do it. But the stuff that takes a little bit more than the drag-and-drop in GameMaker is complicated because I've never coded anything before.

Alex, who used Construct 2, echoed: “the absence of the ability to program at all really restricted what I could do.” In this way these first-time game-makers expressed that more advanced programming and coding skills would be required if they wanted to progress in their game design practice.

Despite fulfilling the criteria of passion for games, capability in using game design platforms was a frustrating obstacle for the Pixelles participants. And, while talent in this context was articulated in two distinctly affective modes – creativity and capability – it was the latter facet of game design, technical skill, that was seen as essential for progression to an ‘expert’ position. According to their relative importance, creative innovation and technical ability were affectively experienced in unique ways. Creative approaches to game design were expressed positively, pleasurably, joyfully, nostalgically, and humorously. Technical questions, on the other hand, were marked by

frustration. The differences between these affective experiences become important when we consider the distinction between how they are valued, and indeed how the framing of talent along the lines of technical ability in game design can serve to reaffirm exclusionary patterns of participation. As we will show, this occurs when talents and abilities become entangled with authenticity and credibility constructed through technical competencies, a normative valuation within both indie and mainstream game production.

Indie Cred: Authenticity and Ideology

The independence of community-based initiatives such as Pixelles from professional working practices that have been seen to function through structural exclusion promises the opportunity to engage in game-making in novel and potentially more equitable and inclusive ways. The collaborative, supportive, and open-minded environment we observed in the Pixelles sessions, along with the celebration of the diverse games demoed at Pixelles' final community showcase, is testament to the productive possibilities of these activities. At the same time, though, we must consider how such interventions are not only locally significant but also meaningful in terms of the broader exclusionary structures within digital games. Analysis of independent spheres of game production have indicated that what is indie in digital games is largely contested, framed in opposition to mainstream industry norms related to not only production and distribution but also in the prioritization of profit over artistry (Lipkin, 2013). For this reason, indie development is lauded within games culture as a potential route for the creation of innovative content and the cultivation of diverse workforces. These spaces of production are seen as havens for

creativity and experimentation, as they fall outside of the constraining risk-adverse environment created by big budgets and huge transnational teams requiring guaranteed blockbusters. This is also where inclusivity initiatives such as Pixelles develop with high energy and enthusiasm.

However, as Lipkin indicates, indie games are characterized not only by alternative aesthetics, modes of creation, work conditions, and systems of distribution but also by the adoption of familiar moralistic discourses from other independent spheres of media production. This includes the affective rhetoric of ‘honesty,’ ‘purity,’ ‘anti-authoritarianism,’ ‘goodness,’ and, of particular significance, ‘authenticity,’ ‘credibility,’ and ‘passion,’ which can serve to not only distinguish but also discipline what counts as an indie. Juul (2014) posits that such rhetoric contributes to a normative visual style within indie games based on “authenticity work” wherein:

[...] the signals of honesty and authenticity come from the materials represented by the visual style (large pixels, paper, crayons), while the representation of the same style may sometimes be technically challenging, and thus give developers a chance to demonstrate their skills while employing a visual style that suggests that little skill is necessary (n.p.).

In other words, the nostalgic retro pixel look of many of the International Game Festival-winning games Juul analyzes is a mediation of low-tech production through high-tech representation. What is significant here is the relationship between credibility and technical ability in indie quarters – what is authentic is designated as such through the

oppositional framing against mainstream products rather than against normative expectations related to the construction of a hierarchy of technical talents within game design. Indeed, as Jahn-Sundmann (2008) notes, indie development does not entail an oppositional logic to mainstream production per se, as many of the games celebrated in official indie sites offer only marginal cultural or political critique, if any. What remains unspoken in considerations of indie style and discourse in games, furthermore, is that indie's most visible proponents (such as the protagonists documented in *Indie Game: The Movie* and the winners of the IGF Grand Prix) are still, like the mainstream industry, predominantly White, male designers. In the next section, we consider how the construction of the game designer subject position in both indie and mainstream development mobilizes affective rhetoric to legitimize some forms of talent, passion, and capability over others.

Getting into Games: Passion, Professionalization, and Credibility

The ideal game-playing audience member, as we noted above, is interpellated in game design, marketing, and culture as a White, male, heterosexual subject as well as a lifelong and passionate gamer. In parallel, job descriptions in the industry often list a 'passion for games' as a prerequisite (Consalvo, 2008). This indicates the primacy of an affective relation with games in the cultivation and expression of game design talent, as well as the normalization of exclusionary criteria given the masculinist culture of games. As we saw with the Pixelles participants, those attracted to game-making are largely those who see themselves as 'gamers,' entailing lifelong consumption practices related to games

technologies, software, and paratexts, and a commitment to the industry providing these texts. This significantly impacts on the entryways into work in the game industry, with recruitment historically premised on paying your dues as a game tester, working in the modding community, and networking (Deuze et. al , 2007).

The construction of qualified games talent is thus hinged on disciplinary practices encouraging free labour and exploited work, including game modification, play testing, and participation in the many domains of games culture. Additionally, all of these routes require high degrees of self-directed technical skill development and a perception of one's belonging in both games culture and games production – an instantiation of 'gaming capital' that results in the construction of an ideal game-making subject. This tends to be expressed not only by employers but by game workers themselves, as reflected in the recent International Game Developers Association *Developer Satisfaction Survey* (2014), where an overwhelming majority of game designers articulated affective reasons for working in the industry, to either “earn a living doing what I enjoy” (41%) or “share my passion for games by working in the industry” (40%). At the same time, respondents indicated the toll taken by exploitative working conditions, leaving the industry for “a better quality of life” (39%).

According to Consalvo (2008), passion is the reason for not only pursuing games jobs but also why employees stay. As she says, this affective relationship to games and games work becomes “a unifying ideology from which development companies can draw in order to justify various practices that might be considered exploitative in other industries”

(185). When workers feel invested in their passions through the Do-What-You-Love discourse so common in creative labour (McRobbie, 1998; Tokumitsu, 2014), it allows for longer uncompensated work hours, defended through a sense of membership in the culture and individual creative fulfilment – or in other words, through a deeply affective relationship to one’s work.

In this way, games workers can be seen as enterprising subjects in a neoliberal labour force valuating an entrepreneurial spirit, always-working time, and self-management. Games labour, cultivated through passion and dedication to the media form and its culture, is as much the subject of affective discourse related to belonging and identity as game play. We can see how this becomes gendered, however, through the very diversity initiatives in indie production that may appear to afford opportunities for challenging the structural exclusions of the mainstream industry.

If the mainstream industry requires free labour simply to get one’s foot in the door, the independent context requires it throughout the entirety of the work process. Indie developers are required to be invested even more fully as passionate labourers as they must be self-disciplining. As entrepreneurial workers, indie developers engage in self-control over the work and funding process, self-commercialization in marketing their games, and self-rationalization as subjects constituted primarily by their work (Wright, 2015). This self-exploitation becomes particularly poignant as indie game projects are more likely to be a designer’s idea wholly or primarily, and thus framed as more meaningful and fulfilling. Similar to other design fields that glorify the talent of

individual creators – McRobbie’s (1998) analysis of independent fashion designers offers a paradigmatic example – not only does one’s individual passion act as a prerequisite for ability, but the products created also become objects by which to judge a designer’s credibility and belonging in the field. For game design, it is these judgements that pose the greatest challenge to new game-makers, particularly women, making their entry into the workforce through indie games. We argue that this occurs through the distinction between two groups engaging with the DIY mantra of indie games that “anyone can make games” (Allen, 2014). Gaming culture has discursively distinguished between two type of DIY game designer: 1) the legitimate, professionalized independent game developer; and 2) the amateur or hobbyist game-maker.

The first type – the professionalized indie – is exemplified by the previously-mentioned 2012 documentary *Indie Game: The Movie*, which showcases the young male creators of *Fez*, *Super Meat Boy*, and *Braid*. The indie labour portrayed in this film highlights how these designers mobilize a narrow set of technical skills and cultural capital within games, mirroring professionalized labour practices and the expectations about who has the talent to make games – predominantly young white males. Symptomatically, the only female characters depicted in the film are mothers and romantic partners.

The second type of making is more diverse, and facilitated by the growing number of accessible, non-coding tools available for game design, allowing for those whose skills are in other areas deemed less ‘technical’ – writing, animation, sound design, art – to create games. The resulting games have an array of names, including alt games, queer

games, experimental games, personal games, art games, and punk games. Their makers, however, are often dismissed as hobbyists or amateurs, and are more likely to include communities of female and LGBT game designers (Anthropy, 2012).

A number of clear distinctions between these two types of indie game production highlight the differential construction of credibility in this field, and their ties to particular forms of affective investment. Passion is framed here specifically in relation to more traditional modes of production; while indie development claims an oppositional stance to the production models of 'AAA' studios (Lipkin, 2013), in practice they share a basic production structure, with personnel often moving between indie and mainstream development sectors (Whitson, 2013). This contrasts with the amateur indie production context, where designers work on games in addition to their day jobs, using tools that do not allow for sophisticated graphics, complex artificial intelligence, or the mechanics that constitute a traditional game (Harvey, 2014). Underlying these pragmatic differences is an ideological distinction between passion in the professionalizing indies, where "most indies speak the language of traditional development sectors, sharing a love of games and many of the same values of console and PC developers" (Whitson, 2013, p. 125), and the non-professionalized indies that tend more towards innovative characters and stories and often subversive content (Anthropy, 2012).

Given the focus on the product – the game itself – that underpins prevalent meritocratic discourse in indie game development, it would seem as though more subversive indie games would support the notion that indie is something distinct from mainstream and

thus valuable, legitimate, and credible. In practice, as illustrated in *Indie Game: The Movie* and other official indie sites such as the IGF, the reverse tends to be the case, with the most celebrated indies being those professionalized developers who most closely mirror the aesthetics, mechanics, and priorities of the mainstream industry. The vast majority of women's investment and passion within this system is then framed as hobbyist dabbling rather than 'real' game design, serving to delegitimize both their participation in game design and the games they make as one step 'below' indie. As we found in Pixelles, this lack of credibility is ventriloquized by women themselves, as they articulate their entry into design as somehow less competent through a focus on the technical ability needed to make a game rather than the creativity they brought to their designs.

Conclusions

What this example from Pixelles indicates is that the marginalization of women in game development reflects the dynamic process by which the boundaries of credibility are policed through appeals to affective relations to games, particularly passion. Within digital games as in other realms, what affect offers is not freedom from social constraints but instead "a central mechanism of social reproduction in the most glaring ways" (Hemmings, 2005: 551). We can also see this in the origins of the #GamerGate controversy, which began as a backlash against Zoe Quinn's release of the game *Depression Quest*. *Depression Quest* epitomizes the second type of indie development – it was created using a free, open-source, text-based interactive fiction tool called Twine.

Depression Quest simulates the experience of depression, and is a primarily textual experience without a winning condition. It is free to play, with a donation to charity option available. In these ways, it poses a challenge to the narratives, aesthetics, mechanics, and play experiences of traditional games, as well as the economies of both creation and purchase and the very purposes of interactive play experiences. In response, its reviews have challenged the legitimacy of calling this a game, and #GamerGate activists have cited coverage of *Depression Quest* as evidence of corruption in games journalismⁱⁱⁱ.

The reception of *Depression Quest* illustrates how women's participation in games, including in indie production, becomes subject to stringent assessments of legitimacy and credibility that act as exclusionary mechanisms. Despite women being afforded increased opportunities to create games, their talent and merit is subject to intense critique and often dismissal because it does not fit into rigidly defined categories of games, gamers, and what real passion for digital games looks like – unquestioning and uncritical, expressing rather than challenging existing neoliberal corporate values and practice (Couldry and Littler, 2011) – as the backlash against feminist critique in games indicates.

This delegitimization becomes especially poignant when we consider the tremendous affective labour invested by women in games, such as the volunteer-based community organizing and mentoring we see in the case of Pixelles. This inclusivity initiative is and contributes to be underpinned by a vast amount of unpaid labour. While Feminists in Games funded the project and provided an outline for how to run it, the execution and

continued maintenance of the community group is supported by female volunteers. Mentors and playtesters were also not compensated, and participants were expected to travel to the sessions on their own. In fact, the total budget for the entire six-week incubator and final showcase (where games were demonstrated to an audience of over 100 people) was 739 Canadian dollars, which primarily covered the cost of food. Thus, the entirety of the extensive work undertaken to organize and run Pixelles rested on the unremunerated passionate labour of women, replicating the traditional exploitation, undervaluation, and invisibility of women's affective work, particularly in technology sectors (Balka, 2002).

Moving forward with inclusivity measures in exclusionary domains of creative work and technological production, we must interrogate the kinds of affective relations underlying credibility, and the forces determining the legitimacy of those pleasures and passions. In the contemporary context of digital game development, diverse participation sees both progressive and reactionary responses. At the same time as the harassment and abuse highlighted by #GamerGate, increasing numbers of new and experienced game designers collectively organize for inclusivity for not only women but other underrepresented people. These kinds of collectivist solutions, such as Zoe Quinn's gamesareforeveryone.com, are crucial for reconfiguring credibility in digital games labour beyond a masculine subjectivity or an unquestioning consumer mentality. Only when we begin to challenge the narrow range of technical abilities and professionalization activities required to claim legitimacy in digital games, and other

forms of tech and creative work, can we realize the productive power of diverse engagements with these interactive forms.

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ⁱ See Baker-Whitelaw (2014) for a discussion of a recent Asus UK ad based on this stereotype.

ⁱⁱ See Jenson and de Castell (2013) for more on Feminists in Games and equity-based interventions in games.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Metacritic's review of the game for examples of such comments and assessments (<http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/depression-quest/user-reviews>)