# VIDEOGAME WORK IN POLAND

## INVESTIGATING CREATIVE LABOUR IN A POST-SOCIALIST CULTURAL INDUSTRY

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# ABSTRACT

The Polish videogame industry has come a long way from its origins on the grey markets in the Polish People's Republic to its recognition as a national speciality. However, in this atmosphere of celebration, and in the promise of securing its bright future from the government, there is one element rarely present in these discussions – the industry's workforce. While video games that are developed, localised and tested in Poland are played by people all over the world, the working lives of the people who contribute to these games' development are under-explored. This research investigates Polish videogame practitioners' interpretations and negotiations of the risk associated with working in the Eastern European videogame industry. An investigation of working in the Polish videogame industry is not only a matter of discussing working practices and the unstable nature of being employed in videogame production but also about discussing the changes in approaches to work and cultural production in the context of a post-socialist country.

This research is inspired by autonomist Marxism and neo-Foucauldian theoretical frameworks widely used in studies about creative labour (Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016; Gill, 2011a; 2002; Scharff, 2018; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009). Videogame practitioners' approach to the risk associated with working in videogame production is conceptualised through a discussion of the construction and negotiation of entrepreneurial subjectivities. However, in this research, I acknowledge the limitations of these theoretical frameworks by addressing their deterministic stances in discussing creative workers' subjectivities (e.g. Scharff, 2018). This study overcomes this limitation by drawing on alternative approaches in discussing workers' subjective experiences of work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Banks et al. 2013; Taylor and Littleton, 2012).

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 RESEARCH PROJECT

> In Poland, we have one of the best videogame development companies. And this is so surprising and so strange because what we do not have is an innovative economy; we do not make cool things. We just put together foreign cars, foreign fridges, we grow apples, and suddenly we have videogames. (Karol, scriptwriter)

The above quote from Karol, one of the interviewees in this study, aptly sums up the unusual aspect of the videogame industry's development in Poland. Despite the country's turbulent past, Poland is becoming more and more famous for its videogame development companies. The foundations of the Polish videogame industry were established during the times of the Polish People's Republic, where the production and distribution of videogames existed primarily in what were known in Poland as 'grey' technology markets (Kosman, 2015; Kluska and Rozwadowski, 2011). The Polish videogame industry and videogame culture developed though informal distribution channels that provided local videogame hobbyists with hardware and software imported from Western countries. Well-known Polish companies originated from their initial operations as distributors and localisers of Western videogames before entering videogame development (Kosman, 2015). Contemporarily, the Polish videogame industry consists of around 400 videogame development studios, not including divisions of international publishers hosted in the country, such as EA, Ubisoft, Microsoft and Sony, and companies specialised in providing support services for videogame companies worldwide (such as testing, porting and localisation) (Bobrowski et al., 2017:68).

The Polish videogame industry is famous not only for the number of videogame studios and related companies based in the country, but also for the recognisable worldwide successes of Polish videogames. From the award-winning videogame series The Witcher (2007-2015), developed by the CD Projekt Red studio, which has to date sold 33 million copies worldwide (Kiciński and Nielubowicz, 2017), to the appreciation of the creativity of independent Polish videogame studios such as 11 bit studios (*This War of Mine* (2014), *Frostpunk* (2018)). In 2015, the successes of Polish videogame developers attracted the attention of the Polish government, as representatives including Jarosław Gowin, minister for higher education, proclaimed that 'If Poland is going to be a leader in Europe, it will be a leader in videogame development' (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2017a). Therefore, the Polish videogame industry was seen as a synonym of 'independence and modernity' (Filiciak, 2016:3) and started to be promoted as the next Polish speciality and an important export commodity.

The Polish videogame industry has come a long way since its origins in the grey markets of the Polish People's Republic, achieving recognition as a national speciality. However, in this atmosphere of celebration of the Polish videogame industry, and in the promise of securing its bright future from the government, there is one element rarely present in these discussions – the industry's workforce. While videogames that are developed, localised and tested in Poland are played by people all over the world, research and discussions into who works behind the scenes of the videogame industry are scarce. Therefore, this research project aims to address this gap in knowledge by investigating the working experience of Polish videogame practitioners.

Deuze et al. (2007:335-336) argued that the work of videogame practitioners is rarely explored in academic inquiry. However, since 2007 there has been a growing interest in researching videogame production including investigations into: the industry's workforce as 'immaterial labourers' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009); developers' working lives and practices (O'Donnell, 2014; Johnson, 2013; Bulut, 2015a/2015b); the support workforce (Bulut, 2015b; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015); independent videogame production (Martin and Deuze, 2009; Guevara-Villalobos, 2011; Lipkin, 2013; Ruffino, 2013); and the persistence of inequalities in the industry (Prescott and Bogg, 2013; 2011a/b; Consalvo, 2008; Harvey and Fisher, 2015; Harvey and Fisher 2013; Fisher and Harvey, 2013; Srauy, 2017).

An investigation into the working lives of Polish videogame practitioners presents a significant contribution to the growing body of research about videogame workers because of its focus on the development of national industry in different geographical locations and socio-economic environments, outside 'core' videogame development regions – North America and Asia-Pacific (Johns, 2006; Kerr, 2017:20). The majority of research about videogame practitioners is based on investigations into videogame development in North America (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006/2009; Bulut, 2015; O'Donnell, 2014; Johnson, 2013), whereas there is significantly less research interest in European videogame production (Kerr, 2017:20). This study addresses this gap in knowledge by investigating not only videogame production in the context of a post-socialist, Eastern European country but also in the context of Europe at large. This research aims to investigate working experiences of Polish videogame practitioners embedded in economic, political and socio-cultural environments that are different from their Western counterparts. The investigation of work in the Polish videogame industry is not only a matter of discussing working practices and the unstable nature of employment in videogame production, but also the changes in approaches to work and cultural production in the context of a post-socialist country.

In this research I focus on Polish videogame practitioners' subjective experiences of creative work and how the economic and socio-cultural context of the industry can influence their understanding of working in the videogame industry. To achieve my research aims I draw on studies from critical political economy of communication, creative labour and videogame production to provide insights into the lives of Polish videogame practitioners. Consequently, this study uses an eclectic approach to theoretical frameworks in discussing the interviewees' subjective experiences of videogame work, as this research is inspired by autonomist Marxism and neo-Foucauldian theoretical frameworks that have been widely used in studies about creative labour (Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016; Gill, 2011a; 2002; Scharff, 2018). This research addresses the limitations of post-structuralist approaches by drawing on alternative approaches in discussing workers' subjective experiences of work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Taylor and Littleton, 2012) and by focusing on and discussing the competing discourses and self-reflexivity of videogame practitioners.

## 1.2 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

This project aims to provide a theoretical and empirical contribution to studies about creative labour, especially to studies about critical political economy of communication, creative labour and videogame production studies.

This doctoral thesis contributes to the growing body of research about national and regional videogame production (Švelch, 2010/2013; Šisler et al., 2017; Jørgensen 2017; Jørgensen et al., 2017; Huntemann and Aslinger, 2013; Hjorth and Chan, 2009; Jin, 2010; Liboriussen and Martin, 2016). The focus on the Polish videogame industry presents an investigation of relations between national videogame production and its relation to the global videogame market. An investigation of local videogame production will demonstrate how local political, economic and socio-cultural forces shape this type of cultural production, which acknowledges the complexity of videogame production regarding its cultural flows and the economic interconnectedness of national and international production networks. This perspective on videogame production is informed by the acknowledgement that videogame production and cultures discussed in previous research tends to be presented in an 'ahistorical manner' (Nichols, 2014:10) or as a 'homogenous phenomenon hovering weightlessly in a culturally undefined space, independent of local contexts' (Švelch, 2013:163).

Therefore, this project explores the socio-historical development of the Polish videogame industry in order to discuss socio-economic and cultural forces that have shaped the current structure of the industry. The context of a particular national industry's development and its structure relates to the power relations within the industry and its labour conditions. The

differences in national videogame industries' development can be seen for instance in the Japanese industry, where game development has been influenced by the animation industry (Izushi and Aoyama, 2006:1847), or the Indian industry, which is based on the popularity of mobile gaming (Shaw, 2013:189). Arguably, the differences in the socio-historical development of a particular national industry may have an impact on the perception of videogame labour in a particular society and as a consequence of workers' experiences.

This research thesis also discusses broader national socio-economic and political forces that shape the work of videogame practitioners. This thesis presents the ongoing casualization of the Polish labour market and employment regulations, which consequently influence practitioners' approaches to their work, the risks involved in videogame production, and the precarity of their employment. Therefore, this investigation contributes to ongoing discussions in creative labour studies about the prevalence in the cultural industries of flexible, project-based and ambiguous employment relations, as well as creative workers' struggles and strategies in finding and maintaining employment in cultural industries (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Conor, 2014; Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2018; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This investigation is important from the perspective of the Polish labour market as it is one of the most segmented in the European Union (EU) (Eurostat, 2017), and in highlighting the prevalence of precarious employment relations in the Polish videogame industry (Draug, 2013; Bobrowski et al., 2017:72). Furthermore, the investigation of these changes presents discrepancies between videogame practitioners' precarious work environments and optimistic narratives included in industry reports and in the Polish government's proposed support programmes.

This investigation will therefore enrich understandings of cultural production and creative labour in the context of the Central and Eastern European region, which tends to focus on news media (such as Jakubowicz, 1995/2004), addressing cultural production and its workforce within celebratory debates about the strategic importance of the creative industries with regards to national economic development (such as Kotylak, 2015; Przygodzki, 2014). Therefore, an investigation of cultural production in Poland through critical approaches presents a more complex analysis and an in-depth understanding of creative workers' approaches to their working lives. A focus on cultural production in the context of post-socialist countries presents a further investigation into the heterogeneity of experiences of precarity in creative work (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008:54; Lobato and Thomas, 2015:79; Brophy and de Peuter, 2007:187-188).

From a theoretical perspective, this project positions the videogame workforce within studies about creative labour. Previous studies about videogame production that touched on the

videogame workforce have focused on: ethnographic investigations of videogame practitioners' working lives (O'Donnell, 2014; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Johnson, 2013); investigation of videogame workers through an Autonomist Marxist perspective (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009); investigation of various below and above the line occupations (Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; Bulut, 2015a); and an acknowledgment of persistent inequalities within the videogame workforce (Prescott and Bogg, 2014; Srauy, 2017). In this study, however, I combine theoretical approaches used in the context of creative labour (Autonomist Marxism, neo-Foucauldian and sociological theories) to focus on videogame practitioners' subjective experiences of working in the videogame industry, investigated through the construction of 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' (see Scharff, 2018). This project acknowledges that videogame production, as a high-risk economic endeavour, has consequences for its workforce, visible in the professionally precarious working lives they live. Therefore, it poses a question about how videogame practitioners approach the risk of videogame production and their employment in the context of a post-socialist country. This approach focuses on investigating workers' understandings of their motivations, career decisions and emotional attachment to their work by focusing on their self-reflection and an active construction of their interpretation of their working lives. This approach, therefore, through acknowledgment of the characteristic of national economic and socio-cultural contexts, will contribute to the investigation of the complexity of motives and career choices among videogame practitioners.

## 1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis' research questions emphasise the personal influences and external factors through which videogame practitioners approach their work, such as: work experience; the socio-historical development of videogame industry; its organisational structures; and nationally produced discourses about videogame work. Therefore, this thesis is governed by three research questions:

1. How is the discourse about videogame work socially and culturally constructed in Poland?
2. How do Polish videogame practitioners narrate their working lives?
3. What kind of strategies do Polish videogame practitioners use to address the uncertainty of their careers?

## 1.3.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on theoretical approaches from critical political economy of communication, creative labour studies and videogame production studies. Critical political economy of communication based on a cultural industries approach (Miège, 1989; Hesmondhalgh, 2013) has been used before in studies about videogame production (Kerr, 2006/2017; Jin, 2010; Nieborg, 2015; Nichols, 2013/2014). This approach allows us to discuss the structure of the industry and, as such, position videogame workers within the structure in which videogames are made. This approach is therefore invaluable in a study that aims to discuss the connection between a domestic videogame industry and the global videogame market. However, it is worth acknowledging that this approach has mostly been applied in core videogame production regions such as North America and Asia-Pacific (Nichols, 2014; Jin, 2010; Hjorth and Chen, 2009). Therefore, the use of this approach in the investigation of the Eastern Europe region can bring more insight into the dynamics of the industry in terms of researching industries with different stages of socio-economic development.

Although the cultural industries approach pays some attention to the position of workers in cultural productions, it does not investigate their working experiences in-depth. This limitation of the political economy approach is addressed through an engagement with literature about creative labour, which is inspired by such fields as cultural studies, sociology of work or organisational studies (such as Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Previously, cultural studies focused mostly on an analysis of media texts, and their audiences. In recent years there has been a proliferation of studies about cultural production (Ursell, 2000; Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Gill, 2002/2011a; Scharff, 2018; Connor, 2014). This scholarship spans neoliberal theories about cultural work (Florida, 2002); critical studies inspired by governmentality interpretation provided by Rose (1990/1992), such as McRobbie (2016), and increasing attempts to provide alternative theoretical frameworks by supplementing post-structuralist studies (those inspired mostly by Michel Foucault's writings) with additional theories from feminist studies (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), a 'social justice' approach (Banks, 2017), or sociology of work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This study draws on elements of post-structuralist theories (neo-Foucauldian) to acknowledge the power struggles in which creative workers are embedded. However, by acknowledging the criticism of post-structuralist studies, I have adapted a less deterministic position toward videogame workers (see Banks et al., 2013:7; Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Therefore, through a combination of the above-presented theories, the aim of this thesis is to position videogame practitioners within creative labour studies.

This research project also draws on studies about videogame production. Firstly, this body of research provides a theoretical but also comparative foundation in discussing videogame

practitioners' approaches to their work and working conditions (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006/2009; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Johnsons, 2013; O'Donnell, 2014). Secondly, this project is informed by a growing body of research interested in national videogame industries (such as Jørgensen et al., 2017; Wolf, 2015), and the histories of national videogame productions and cultures (including Šisler et al., 2017; Švelch, 2010/2013; Filiciak, 2016; Liboriussen and Martin, 2016).

### 1.3.3 EMPIRICAL STUDY

When I started this doctoral research project in 2014, I could not predict that my fieldwork would take place during a time of substantial changes for the Polish videogame industry. Initially this project was aimed at investigating occupational identities of Polish videogame practitioners and my preliminary project design put greater emphasis on the analysis of secondary, archival, sources. However, the research project changed its initial direction at the start of my fieldwork in its primary focus on interviews with videogame practitioners and in an attempt to grasp fast, ongoing changes in the Polish videogame industry.

The year 2015, when I started my fieldwork, could be considered as a 'break-though' year for the Polish industry. Not only did major Polish videogame developers achieve considerable international success after publishing their new and most anticipated games – *The Witcher 3* (2015) and *Dying Light* (2015) – but also the first Polish videogame developers associations were established (Polish Games Association, Indie Games Poland Foundation). The industry's expansion attracted the attention of the Polish government, which attempted to provide support to local videogame developers (like The National Centre for Research and Development, 2017).

Furthermore, the Polish videogame industry and its history has started to be promoted within and outside the country's boundaries not only by the government (Digital Dreamers exhibitions) but also through increasing numbers of articles in the foreign gaming press about the industry's successes (Crawley, 2014; Fontan, 2018), in documentary films about the origins of the Polish industry (Polygon, 2014) and Polish independent videogame developers (*We are alright*, 2017).

Nonetheless, the expansion of the industry should not be considered only within celebratory accounts that praise the resilience and talents of its workers, along with overly optimistic perspectives about the industry's future as presented by the media. During fieldwork, I observed the struggles of local videogame practitioners who, with limited resources (such as money, skills or knowledge about marketing), attempted to introduce their games on the volatile global videogame market. The unpredictability of the market and companies' struggles

in maintaining their financial sustainability was exemplified in employee lay-offs by the major Polish videogame developer CI Games (CI Games, 2018). The company, unable to maintain competitiveness on the global market after the poor sales of their last game release (*Sniper 3: Ghost Warrior* (2017)), re-focused their business model from Triple-A[1] productions to smaller games and used external contractors for support. The example of CI Games indicates not only the difficulties involved in achieving sustainability for videogame companies on the global videogame marketplace, but also the increasing importance of outsourcing for videogame production. The landscape of videogame production is rapidly changing, influencing work organisation and work experiences of videogame practitioners for both above and below the line workers (Mayer, 2011). Therefore, the aim of my empirical inquiry was to capture these ongoing changes in the Polish videogame industry by focusing on exploring the variety of working experiences.

This research is based on qualitative approaches that relied on semi-structured interviews and an analysis of secondary sources. The fieldwork was carried out between 2015 and 2017 in Poland, mostly with interviewees located in Warsaw. Overall, I conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with videogame practitioners from various occupational positions, and with a variety of work experiences. The interviewee sample was composed with the intention of collecting a variety of working experiences from practitioners of different genders, ages, occupations and types of videogame production. My approach to the interviewees encompassed an acknowledgement of their whole career biographies. Therefore, I acknowledged that the interviewees could share a variety of work experiences. Some of the interviewees, for instance, used to work in Triple-A companies and then decided to open their own videogame studios; some interviewees also had extensive experience in freelancing; others had started their careers as testers in outsourcing studios and then went on to work as game designers. I view these multiplicities of experiences as being valuable to this study, as they allowed me to present the interviewees' reflections on their career progressions and previous work-related experiences.

In addition, after the collection of videogame practitioners' accounts and analysis of the secondary data, I interviewed three representatives of videogame associations based in Poland to find out what kind of support they offer to the industry. These interviews were approached differently than the interviews with videogame practitioners as they played the role of providing context about working conditions in Poland and the plans of these organisations to support workers. I interviewed representatives of three organisations that corresponded to

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[1] Triple-A is a term which refers to videogame companies which specialise in production of big budget videogames (see O'Donnell, 2014:285; Keogh, 2015).

different sectors of the Polish videogame industry: producers and distributors (pl. *Stowarzyszenie Producentów i Dystrybutorów Oprogramowania Rozrywkowego* – Association of Producers and Distributors of Entertainment Software); major developers (pl. *Stowarzyszenie Polskie Gry* – Polish Games Associations); and independent developers (pl. *Fundacja Indie Games Polska* – Indie Games Poland Foundation).

Data collected via semi-structured interviews were further supplemented by additional information from the interviewees (for instance, some interviewees requested a second meeting with me, some sent additional thoughts about working in the industry) and secondary sources (such as videogame magazines and press information). The first set of secondary data sources were archival sources (such as videogame magazines dating from 1986 to 2000) and industry reports (from 2012-2017) which helped to trace the development of the industry and its workforce, as well as contextualising worker experiences. The second set of secondary data sources were online sources and those discussed by interviewees as being potentially important to them and, consequently, to the study. These sources encompassed materials from major videogame websites in Poland and development blogs. These materials allowed me to contextualise contemporary events in the industry with matters discussed by the interviewees.

## 1.4 THESIS OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE

The thesis consists of ten chapters, including six empirical chapters. The first empirical chapter (Chapter 4) consists of a macro perspective on the Polish videogame industry as it encompasses the contextual background of the industry's development enriched by empirical data. Empirical Chapters 5 – 9 are organised in a way that presents the interviewees' careers as journeys, from their motivations to join the industry, the attractiveness of this type of employment, and the challenging working conditions, to various discussions about their family lives and their possible exodus from the industry.

*Chapter 2* includes the literature review, which consists of four main sections. This study draws on research from the fields of critical political economy of communication, cultural studies (creative labour research) and videogame production studies. This chapter identifies three gaps in the academic literature that this thesis aims to address. Firstly, it addresses the problems of videogame work from the perspective of a post-socialist country (outside core videogame development regions). Secondly, it positions videogame work within research about creative labour. Thirdly, it focuses on investigating workers' subjective experiences of videogame work, which has been under-explored in previous studies about videogame work.

*Chapter 3* presents a discussion about my methodological stance and research design. This study is underpinned by a constructivist paradigm and more specifically constructionist analysis (Holestein, 2018). I chose this approach in order to reconcile the theoretical

framework of this study and my positionality towards the interviewees. This study is underpinned by the qualitative approach and uses three data collection methods to investigate videogame practitioners in Poland: 1) a review of previous literature about creative labour and videogame work; 2) 44 semi-structured interviews; and 3) an analysis of secondary sources. This chapter also outlines this researcher's reflexivity, as well as ethical challenges encountered during the fieldwork and the culture of secrecy associated with the industry (see O'Donnell, 2014:147-148).

*Chapter 4* engages in a discussion about the socio-historical development of the Polish videogame industry. The chapter's aims are three-fold. Firstly, it presents the development of the Polish videogame industry and videogame culture as a hybrid culture (Kraidy, 2005) that emerged through economic, political and cultural constraints during the times of the Polish People's Republic and the early 1990s. Secondly, it discusses how the structure of the videogame industry contributes to Polish videogame companies' precarious situation on the global videogame market. Thirdly, it discusses the Polish government's interest in the promotion of the Polish videogame industry and its interest in the construction of entrepreneurial discourse about Polish videogame creators, which also corresponds with the ongoing precarisation of employment in the country (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016; Hardy, 2009:115-126). After the presentation of a contextual background and contradictions within discourses about the Polish videogame industry produced by government initiated campaigns, I will move to Chapter 5, which investigates my interviewees' motivations to start working in the industry and their approaches to 'breaking into' the industry.

*Chapter 5* consists of two main sections that discuss the interviewees' motivations for joining the industry and their approaches to finding employment. This chapter engages with the concept of entrepreneurial subjectivity by discussing the variety of strategies and motivations behind the interviewees' decisions to start their careers in the videogame industry (Neff, 2012; Scharff, 2018). This chapter engages with the concept of 'informality' as a structuring principle through which creative workers tend to find jobs, acquire skills and operate outside established formal rules (Gill, 2013:256). The problem of informality is approached in this chapter through a discussion about skills acquisition and finding employment. This chapter discusses how a reliance on informal education and informal networks force practitioners into self-branding and entrepreneurship so as to find employment in the industry. Furthermore, this section also engages with the concept of 'hope labour' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013) in exploring the experiences of videogame testers in outsourcing studios.

*Chapter 6* continues a discussion about the interviewees' motivations for joining the videogame industry based on the possibility of acquiring greater workplace and creative

autonomy. This chapter, therefore, concerns a discussion about how the interviewees interpret and negotiate their autonomy about work in the videogame industry. Entrepreneurial subjectivity is discussed in the interviewees' acknowledgement of the importance of autonomy in their workplaces, even at the cost of accepting the higher risk of their work (Ursell, 2000; Ross, 2003). Furthermore, the interviewees approach workplace autonomy in a contextual and relational understanding of their work as being different than other forms of 'mundane' occupations (McRobbie, 2016). The interviewees associated workplace autonomy with the opportunity to organise their work time (flexibility) and work tasks (flat hierarchical structure) but also with work culture (sociality). Therefore, in this chapter, I present a discussion about the tensions in interviewees' understanding of their workplace autonomy. Interviewees' understanding of autonomy is presented as subjective, relational and constrained by external forces.

*Chapter 7* presents a discussion about videogame practitioners' understandings of persistent inequalities in the industry. After the discussion about 'informality' (Chapter 5) and 'sociality' (Chapter 6) in the industry, this chapter investigates the interviewees' understandings of inequality in videogame production, with a focus on gender inequality. This chapter engages in a discussion of the interviewees' understandings of inequality through individualised narratives that emphasise entrepreneurial values rather than discussions about their structural sources (Gill et al., 2017; Conor et al., 2015; O'Brien, 2014). This chapter consists of two main sections. The first section presents the interviewees' understandings of female under-representation in the industry. The second section discusses my female interviewees' understandings of their position in the industry by engaging with the concept of 'post-feminist sensibility'. In this chapter, I argue that 'post-feminist sensibility' in the industry should also be understood in a Polish socio-cultural context as well as through the context of videogame industry culture.

*Chapter 8* presents a discussion about working conditions in the Polish videogame industry that are approached through two inter-connected themes: employment contracts and working hours (crunch time). This chapter draws attention to normalisation of flexible contracts in the Polish videogame industry and to the polarised opinions about the usage of these types of contracts. The interviewees viewed them as a form of personal freedom in determining one's working conditions, but also drew attention to their abuse in the Polish videogame industry. As employment relations determine not only practitioners' rights but also working time, the second section consists of a discussion about 'crunch time' in the videogame industry. In this chapter, crunch time, following other scholars (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:59-67; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015) is approached as a form of neo-normative control in workplaces. However, it is also explored through the interviewees' differentiation between 'good' and 'bad'

crunch. This problem is approached through the videogame practitioners' self-realisation through work, their emotional attachment to created games and their responsibility toward videogame players.

*Chapter 9* discusses how videogame practitioners understand their work/life articulation regarding their private lives, family lives and future plans. This chapter continues the discussion about challenging working conditions in the industry by presenting interviewees' attempts to reconcile their work-life relations. In this chapter, I demonstrate that interviewees engaged in entrepreneurial discourse through discussions about their approaches to dealing with stress and anxiety associated with work in the videogame industry (Banks, 2007; Scharff, 2018). However, they also presented competing discourses that acknowledged the scope of personal sacrifice and struggles over maintaining their careers in the industry. This chapter also focuses on differences between genders in struggles over their establishment of family lives (see Adkins, 1999). Finally, I present interviewees' ideas about the directions of their career development, which includes not only plans for quitting the industry but also the possibility of finding employment in the industry outside Poland in the hope of obtaining better working conditions.

In *Chapter 10*, I demonstrate the importance of investigating the national videogame industry's economic and socio-cultural characteristics in order to understand videogame practitioners' approaches to the inherent risk associated with videogame employment. This thesis engages with a complex presentation of entrepreneurial subjectivity negotiated through socio-cultural and economic contexts in which Polish videogame practitioners are embedded. Furthermore, this research calls for (as in the investigation of creative workers) paying further attention to contradictions, self-reflection and competing discourses as presented in interviewees' narratives, through which workers are not disillusioned about their employment or blinded by passion for videogames but present constant struggles over understanding their careers, working conditions and future in the industry.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I present a discussion about previous theories and research focused on work and workers' experiences in cultural industries. The discussed approaches are based on a synthesis of studies from the political economy of culture, cultural studies, and sociology of work. The rationale behind discussing these particular approaches lies in an attempt to present the following: the embeddedness of the videogame industry in a specific socio-economic context and the characteristics of creative labour and their application on the grounds of videogame production. Furthermore, as this research concerns an investigation of subjective experiences of work, it presents a discussion about how workers approach and navigate their way through the uncertain landscape of creative work.

By using a synthesis of the proposed approaches, I aim to address the gaps in existing research about videogame production. Firstly, research within the tradition of the political economy of communication that discusses videogame production focuses mostly on investigating videogame production in the core development regions of North America and Asia-Pacific (see Dyer-Witheford and Sharman, 2005; Jin, 2010). Therefore, this approach, when applied to the context of the Eastern European region, will help to elaborate on relations between the global videogame market and local videogame production. Secondly, videogame labour is rarely discussed in creative labour studies, and this project contribution aims to position videogame work within this school of thought. Thirdly, in previous research about videogame labour, scholars did not pay particular attention to subjective experiences of work, and this project focuses on workers' self-reflexivity (see in O'Donnell, 2014). Therefore, the aims of this literature review are three-fold: to discuss videogame labour in relation to creative labour studies; acknowledge the importance of workers' self-reflexivity in understanding subjective experiences of work; and to position videogame production and its workforce within the socio-economic specificity of the Eastern European region.

The literature review consists of five sections. The first section discusses the importance of critical political economy in investigating videogame work, as it allows researchers to discuss the conditions under which videogames are made. The videogame industry's structure – and its dynamics – influence videogame practitioners' working conditions, but previous studies have rarely discussed the consequences of these influences on national videogame production. While a critical political economy approach allows researchers to contextualise the work of videogame practitioners, it does not, however, engage in in-depth discussions about their experiences. This gap is addressed in the second part of this chapter by discussing studies

about creative labour. In this section, I present the characteristics of creative labour: the oversupply of workforces, project-based and uncertain work and the associated inequality (see Gill and Pratt, 2008:14). The second section focuses on questions about how to conceptualise subjective experiences of creative work. Therefore, the third section presents an overview of theoretical approaches that touch upon this subject and include autonomist Marxism, neo-Foucauldian theories and eclectic approaches (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Taylor and Littleton, 2012). In this section, I also articulate my approach to understanding subjective experiences of work. The fourth section presents a discussion about strategies used by workers to navigate through the uncertain landscape of creative labour through discussion about entrepreneurial subjectivity. This section, in addition to discussing research within a cultural-studies tradition, is further supplemented by research which investigates labour in post-socialist countries. The last section discusses studies and theoretical approaches in the context of videogame production studies.

## 2.2 CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COMMUNICATION

Critical political economy analysis is invaluable in investigating the working lives of videogame producers, as it allows not only for the contextualisation of their work but also presents the dynamic development of the global videogame industry and associated occupations. This approach is especially important to the perspective that 'the digital games industry is an instructive, but under-examined, example of contemporary transnational informational capitalism' (Kerr, 2017:28). The political economy perspective is also valuable as the majority of research within this tradition rarely pays attention to the development of the videogame industry in political-economic terms (except for Kerr, 2006; 2017; Nichols, 2014; Jin, 2010; Dyer-Witheford and Sharman, 2005). Furthermore, the existing research focuses on videogame industry development in the context of the core production regions of Western Europe, North America and Asia-Pacific (see Jin, 2010; Dyer-Witheford and Sharman, 2005; Nichols, 2014; Zackariasson and Wilson, 2012). This focus of previous research also calls for greater attention to be paid to relations between the global videogame market and local videogame production. Therefore, by paying attention to the development and positioning of the Polish industry within the global videogame market, I aim to expand the regional scope of inquiry about videogame production networks.

Political economy is broadly defined as 'the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources' (Mosco, 1996:25). Contrary to neo-classical political economy, critical political economy of communication addresses questions of social and political influences, unequal distribution of

power and resources in societies, commodification and social class divisions (Hardy, 2014:5-6). Therefore, critical political economy, influenced by Marxist tradition (although not confined by it), concerns questions about connections between economic, political and social relations.

According to Golding and Murdock (1997:13-17), critical political economy approaches are different from neo-classical political economy in four ways: they are holistic, as they do not see economic entities separate from social, political and cultural relations; they are historical as they are interested in long-term changes and the development of cultural production; they are interested in the balance between private and public entities; and lastly they engage with questions about moral economy and social justice. Because of the above-presented characteristics, critical political economy approaches are discussed as being more valuable in discussing media industries than the media economics approach, as they focus mostly on neo-classical views of media organisation (Hesmondhalgh, 2013:42-47).

These characteristics of critical political economy are important in this study, as they allow me to position the development of the Polish videogame industry and its workforce within broader social, political and cultural changes. This is especially valuable when taking into account that the Polish industry was developed and shaped in particularly turbulent times of post-socialist transition, forming new social and cultural institutions, joining the European Union and consequently establishing an attempt to compete with other companies in the international videogame market. Furthermore, the industry cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its history both in terms of its technological (hardware and software production [infrastructure development]) as well as social, political and cultural changes. This situation is, for example, visible in challenges encountered in infrastructure and hardware development because of a Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (CoCom)[2] embargo and the development of informal distribution channels (grey technology markets), a lack of copyright law and the consequent barriers in establishing a videogame industry due to widespread software piracy (Kosman, 2015; Švelch, 2010/2013). Furthermore, as this study is concerned with videogame labour, it cannot be separated from discussions about social justice, inequalities in power balance and the distribution of resources.

The approach presented in this study is built on the 'cultural industries approach' developed in Europe (Miège, 1987/1989/2011; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This approach has two main points of origin: a critique of the cultural industry approach by Adorno and Horkheimer; and the political economy approach developed in North America by Schiller and Smythe (Miège,

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[2] The Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (1949-1995) was established by Western bloc countries to put an embargo on Eastern bloc countries (including technology transfer).

2011:83). The advantage of the cultural industries approach over critical political approaches developed in North America (see discussion in Mosco, 1996; Garnham, 1990) refers to an emphasis on contradictions and tensions within the cultural production systems, a focus on entertainment industries in contrast to the news media, and acknowledging the status, struggle and position of creative workers.

In terms of this study, the advantage of the cultural industries approach lies in its acknowledgement of the position of workers in the networks of cultural production. Undoubtedly, the structures and power-dynamics within videogame production shapes the conditions of workers' employment. This organisational structure has evolved from the historical development of videogame production from small, independent studios into the commercial entertainment industry in which many small videogame developers are dependent on a few major publishers (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Nichols, 2014:53). Industry consolidation introduced various managerial approaches to videogame labour, from attracting an appropriate workforce, to high employment insecurity and unrealistic game production schedules, which resulted in long working hours (Edwards et al., 2014:22). Therefore, the dynamic changes in the industry including the increasing cost of videogame production and the complexity of game development can be problematic as far as videogame practitioners' working conditions are concerned.

Nonetheless, an investigation of the videogame industry from a political economic perspective presents certain challenges. Firstly, in comparison to other cultural industries, the data about the videogame industry tends to be highly fragmented (see Kerr, 2017:35). Furthermore, in the case of less developed and researched national industries (such as Poland) the problem of reliable data availability is even more prominent. In terms of the Polish videogame industry, available reports only paint a fragmented picture of the industry because of their methodological and scope-based limitations (see Drough, 2013; Bobrowski, et al. 2015). Firstly, those reports do not always disclose their methodology which poses a difficulty in evaluating the data presented by them. Secondly, various reports tend to categorise videogame segments in a different manner which presents a problem in providing a comparative perspective on data (see Kerr, 2017:35). This problem is further exemplified by the use of different approaches to including and excluding certain companies from the analysis, for instance, videogame companies engaged in providing service-support for the industry (such as testing) or major Triple-A publishers excluded from data about the workforce in Poland (Bobrowski et al., 2017). Thirdly, data about the industry workforce has often come from self-reported surveys conducted by and within the industry rather than from national statistics (see discussion in Kerr, 2017:96). The fragmented information about the workforce was published

in 'The State of the Polish Videogame Industry' (Bobrowski et al., 2015/2017) reports. Those reports include some information about the local workforce demographic but they do not provide in-depth information about the working conditions such as salary division (for different occupational positions) or types of employment contracts. Consequently, an investigation of the industry-produced reports needs to be not only presented in the context of their production but also supplemented by the investigation of other data sources (such as socio-historical or economic context of the country) which I will also use to contextualise videogame practitioners' working experiences.

## 2.3 CREATIVE LABOUR STUDIES

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of studies into cultural and creative work from different sectors (Neff, 2012, Conor, 2014; Ursell, 2000), occupations (Conor, 2014; Bulut, 2015b; Gill, 2002) and geographical locations (Jin, 2010, Curtin and Sanson, 2016). This body of research discusses the characteristics of creative work both in terms of objective (job tenure, working hours) and subjective (emotional attachment to work) features.

Creative labour and cultural production have been studied from a variety of traditions; from critical political economy (Miège, 1989; Garnham, 1990), organisation studies (Weststar, 2015), cultural studies (Ross, 2003; McRobbie, 2016) to economic geography (Power and Scott, 2004). As Conor (2014:40) noted, in the USA and Europe these studies appeared under a variety of names, such as: critical production studies (Mayer et al., 2009); critical media industries studies (Gill, 2002); or creative industries studies (Hartley et al., 2015). They also draw on a variety of theoretical frameworks, from approaches inspired by autonomist Marxism (Bulut, 2015a/2015b), governmentality-inspired theories (McRobbie, 2016), and the psycho-narrative (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), to approaches inspired by sociology of work and philosophy of critical realism (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). However, there is not much research about the videogame labour that is positioned within this debate. Therefore, I aim to address this gap in knowledge by discussing the possible positioning of videogame labour within these debates.

While the above-presented approaches differ in terms of their conceptualisation of creative labour and focus of their inquiry, it is possible to present some common features of creative work, summarised by Gill and Pratt (2008:14) as:

> a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long working hours
> and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between
> work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work
> and to the identity of creative labourer (web designer, artist, fashion designer); an

attitudinal mind-set that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields.

This particular quote places emphasis on what McRobbie (2006) also discussed as 'the pleasure-pain' axis of work in cultural industries, as creative labour attracts the attention of young people who aim to find fulfilment through work while accepting the risk of uncertain career pathways and precariousness (Gill, 2002; Ross, 2003). Studies into videogame work have identified similar characteristics of work in videogame production from the attractiveness of the employment to the challenging working conditions (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Bulut, 2014; Johnson, 2013). Undoubtedly the characteristics laid forth, in the quote from Gill and Pratt's (2008) work, also apply to wider changes in adapting work to the requirements of advanced capitalism. The presented quote can be divided into two inter-related features: the changing organisation of work, and the shift in the work position in people's lives.

This situation can be connected to wider debates about the importance of post-industrial knowledge economy, the rise of new managerial techniques to control workers, the deterioration of work security and, as a result, the shift of risk and responsibility from employer to employee (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005:170-171). Increasing scholarly attention to working conditions in cultural industries has appeared as a response to neoliberal theorists (Florida, 2002) and governmental reports that celebrated the reorganisation of work toward more flexible, autonomous and individualised forms of employment. Furthermore, work organisation in cultural industries – and its project-based nature – was debated as a potential future for work at large (Oakley, 2006). Criticism of these celebratory approaches concerns discussions about the uncertain and insecure aspects of work in cultural industries. These difficulties are associated with irregular or 'bulimic' work patterns (Gill and Pratt, 2008:33), wherein a creative worker cannot be certain when they will find their next form of employment and for how long it might last. Project-based work and the idea of 'boundary-less' careers (Defilippi and Arthur, 1994), at least in theoretical discussions[3], have replaced previous generations' experiences of work stability (Lobato and Thomas, 2015:79). This increasing casualisation of employment is also perceived as a two-sided concept. On one hand, work flexibility and autonomy (in the workplace and creative dimension) are discussed as positive and attractive aspects of creative work. On the other hand, scholars have identified various negative aspects of informalisation, such as under-employment, self-exploitation, difficulties

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[3] I will return to this problem in a discussion about the concept of precarity (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.1).

in achieving a work-life balance, the persistence of inequality, and lack of unionisation (see Gill and Pratt, 2008; Lobato and Thomas, 2015:76).

These changes in the re-organisation of work, towards more casual and flexible employment, led to uncertain career futures and forced creative workers to adapt a variety of strategies to maintain their careers and secure future employment (Gill, 2011a; Scharff, 2018). These strategies encompass what can be termed 'entrepreneurial values', which signalled a shift in dealing with the uncertainty of employment from employer to employees by mobilising values and qualities not previously associated with non-entrepreneurial employees, such as the willingness to take risks, investment in skills development, resilience and self-branding activities (such as networking) (Gill, 2009; Wittel, 2001; Ross, 2003; Neff, 2012).

Furthermore, the changes in re-organisation of work and the ongoing informalisation of employment deepen the problem of inequality in cultural industries. It has been widely acknowledged in empirical research as well as in industry-supported reports that the 'majority of fields remain dominated by people who are white, middle class, young and predominantly male' (Gill, 2013:191). The persistence of inequalities in creative work have a paradoxical relationship to the self-presentation of work in cultural industries as 'cool, creative, egalitarian' (Gill, 2002:1).

Working conditions and socialisation patterns in cultural industries exclude certain demographics from these practices and impact on their employment prospects in relation to, for instance, gender, age, race or social class (McRobbie, 2016:24-25; Banks and Milestone, 2011:80-81; Nixon and Crewe, 2004:131; Wreyford, 2015). The above-mentioned changes on the creative labour market have had a different impact on men's working lives and women's working lives (McRobbie, 2002:527-528/2010; Banks and Milestone, 2011:80). Adkins (1999:121) indicates that in the new modes of organisation, changes associated with increased individualisation in the economic sphere can contribute to the re-traditionalisation of women's positions within the economy. These changes have had an influence on gender inequality within the industry as the demand for autonomous and flexible work can prevent women from entering cultural industries because of their parental and domestic obligations (Gill, 2002:84; Prescott and Bogg 2014:94; Perrons, 2003:72). Banks and Milestone (2011:74) argue that this situation refers to the paradox of creative labour and its association with equality.

In the previous paragraphs I focused on some of the challenges and paradoxes of creative labour. In light of discussions about the precariousness of videogame employment, and uncertain career development and persistent inequalities, I will now consider why young people are attracted to this type of work.

The desire to pursue creative careers contributes to the oversupply of 'the passionate', which further results in a deterioration of working conditions in cultural industries (Miège, 1989; Hesmondhalgh, 2013:254), but also raises questions about creative workers' motivations to pursue such careers. Menger (1999:554) discusses three possible explanations for the workforce oversupply, which concerns the possibility of obtaining intrinsic rewards through creative work. The first explanation draws on Freidson's (1990:151) 'labours of love' argument, which Freidson developed in opposition to Marx's concept of alienated labour. He defines this type of work as being that which is chosen freely, performed voluntarily, and which contributes to the sense of self-fulfilment, noting that this work is motivated by higher values than economic interest. The second explanation discusses the possibility of making career choices under the cloud of uncertainty. In this situation, creative workers are understood to be 'risk-lovers', who possibly miscalculate their chances to succeed on the creative labour market (Menger, 1999:555). Finally, the third, less-deterministic explanation presents creative labour as being attractive because of the possibility of obtaining psychological rewards through work, which Menger discusses as 'a high level of personal autonomy in using one's own initiative, the opportunities to use a wide range of abilities and to feel self-actualised at work, an idiosyncratic way of life, a strong sense of community, a low level of routine, and a high degree of social recognition for the successful artists' (1999:555).

The above-presented explanations conceptualise creative labour as different to 'ordinary' work, which allows people to achieve self-realisation[4]. The concept of self-realisation can be valuable in studies about creative labour because one of the characteristics of cultural labour is a greater emotional attachment between a worker and their work, supposedly embedded in romantic portrayals of artists and their approach to labour (Ross, 2008:39). Nonetheless, the concept has been widely debated (see discussion in Hesmondhalgh, 2010). For exponents of post-structuralist theories, self-realisation concerns the production of a particular discourse about labour, which enables an increase in worker productivity in neoliberal capitalism (McRobbie, 2016, Donzelot, 1991). From less pessimistic perspectives, however, it can be understood as a 'successful development of self through labour' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:42).

The investigation of various institutional discourses about creative labour has been presented in McRobbie's work (1998, 2002, 2016). McRobbie (2016) discusses how discourses about creativity and economic potential of creative labour has been shaped in the United Kingdom

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[4] In the discussion, Menger (1999) presents this aspect of creative work as 'self-actualisation'. However, in this study I prefer to use the term 'self-realisation' to avoid connotations with popular psychology literature.

(UK). She indicates a variety of strategies, from political activities toward the promotion of creative occupations, as a solution to various unemployment and economic problems (McRobbie, 2016:44). Furthermore, she indicates how these discourses influence the education system as well as public opinion. Based on her research about fashion industry workers (1998) she also argues that these activities and discourses have an impact on individuals' choices and work experiences. In her understanding, the idea of intrinsic rewards through cultural labour provides compensation for insecurity and precarious working conditions (McRobbie, 2016:35). An emotional attachment to work, presented by McRobbie (2016:38), is also associated with the refusal of standard employment and romanticising of creative labour as a 'desire to escape a lifetime of routine work'.

Furthermore, scholars argue that the attractiveness of creative work is culturally and socially constructed. Neff et al. (2005:310) argue that previous studies downplayed the role of cultural factors in shaping the idea of attractiveness of cultural employment, and, as a result, the normalisation of risk associated with this type of work. In their article, Neff et al. (2005:308) discuss 'the cultural attributes of 'cool'' presented in fashion and new media work. Their analysis relies on interviews with creative workers as well as an analysis of discourse that appears in advertisements and which promotes fashion modelling and new media work as glamorous forms of employment. According to their analysis, this 'industrialisation of bohemia' is used to increase profit. Neff et al.'s (2005) study presents a valuable overview of the culturally formed idea of attractive employment but it does not engage in an in-depth discussion about the socio-historical development of this type of discourse. Furthermore, Neff et al. (2005) focus on particular forms of cultural work, which are strongly related to the idea of cultural attributes of 'cool' because of their strong visual components, novelty and associations with particular lifestyles. However, these attributes of 'cool' vary in relation to other cultural producers as the work of DJs, painters or videogame producers could have different cultural and social connotations.

Cultural studies scholars inspired by a post-structuralist[5] framework argue that the idea of a 'dream job' or the need to pursue more 'attractive' careers contributes to young people's willingness to endure challenging working conditions in cultural production (Ross, 2003; McRobbie, 1998/2016; Gill, 2002). Through this understanding, the need for 'self-realisation' in work could be translated into self-blame in cases of failure to obtain a dream career or in self-exploitation (Banks, 2007:56-61; McRobbie, 2016). This therefore results in creative work associated with the achievement of self-realisation in work but is also marked by high

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[5] I will return to the discussion about post-structuralist influences in studies about creative work in the next section (see section 2.4).

levels of insecurity, difficulties in achieving a work-life balance and persistent inequalities (Gill, 2002; Ross, 2003; Ursell, 200).

In this section, I have briefly outlined the core themes in discussions about creative labour and its problems, notably the tensions between self-realisation and self-exploitation and structural challenges encountered by cultural workers. In the above discussion, I drew on a variety of studies about creative work underpinned by different theoretical approaches. The above-presented discussion presents the problem of how to understand and analyse subjective experiences of creative work.

## 2.4  SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF CREATIVE WORK

The development of theoretical frameworks that will allow one to discuss subjective experiences of work is often challenging and based on a synthesis of various theoretical approaches. Previous studies have drawn on approaches from the sociology of work, organisational studies or psychology (Taylor and Littleton, 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Banks, 2017). They also applied various understandings of the influence of social and cultural structures on workers' understandings of their occupations, from discussing the process of subjectification (neo-Foucauldians) to discussing workers as being more active subjects (reflexive modernisation theories). In this study, I attempt to synthesise different theoretical approaches in order to understand the work of Polish videogame practitioners.

Inevitably, discussions about subjective experiences of work touch upon a long-lasting debate about the understanding of relations between agency and structure (Taylor and Littleton, 2012:39-41). The above-mentioned theories aim to demonstrate the primacy of social and structural influences over human agency or place emphasis on the importance of human actions and self-reflexivity. As such, they also engage in a discussion about how workers internalise, negotiate and resist neoliberal values. While the primary aim of this thesis is not to reconcile the rich body of knowledge about human subjective experiences – this issue is undoubtedly beyond the scope of any doctoral dissertation – it is important to review the theoretical approaches used in previous studies about creative labour in order to articulate my position with the experiences of the interviewees in this study. This discussion is not only crucial from a theoretical perspective but also from methodological and ethical standpoints because it outlines my approach to the participants of this research (see Chapter 3).

This section consists of four parts that correspond to the main approaches used in discussions about the working lives of creative workers: autonomist Marxism; neo-Foucauldian approaches (governmentality-inspired approaches) and attempts to present alternative

conceptualisations of creative work inspired by a psycho-social approach and feminist theory (Taylor and Littleton, 2012); and questions about social justice and positioned within philosophy of critical realism (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Lastly, in the fourth section, I discuss my understanding of videogame workers' subjective experiences.

### 2.4.1 Autonomist Marxism – 'immaterial labour' and 'precarity'

Autonomist Marxism as a school of thought encompasses a variety of ideas and approaches, and to limit the scope of this inquiry I focus on the concepts of 'immaterial labour' and 'precarity' as discussed by Lazzarato (1996) and Hardt and Negri (2000/2005). These two concepts developed within the autonomist Marxism approach have been prominently used in discussing work in cultural industries (see discussion in Gill and Pratt, 2008) including the videogame industry (Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Peticca-Harris, et al., 2015). Approaches to cultural production based on classical Marxism do not pay specific attention to workers' subjective experiences. This is visible in theories based on the proponents of the Frankfurt School as well as in the labour-process theory (Banks, 2007:27). This problem of the missing worker is not surprising, as Marx's writings do not concern workers' experiences, with the exception of the alienated labour concept (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:26).

The attractiveness of these concepts in relation to discussions about creative labour are associated with the autonomist Marxism focus on workers as 'it is a Marxism centred not on the teleological advance of productive forces, but on conflict between those whose create and those who appropriate' (Witheford, 1994:88). Therefore, the main difference between classical and autonomist Marxism lies in their emphasis on the power of the workforce and not of capital (Gill and Pratt, 2008:5; Witheford, 1994:7). Workers are presented as not only being active but also as antagonistic subjects for whom the reorganisation of labour can be oppressive, although it can also contribute to workers' resistance (Lazzarato, 1996:140; Hardt and Negri, 2000:274-275). The autonomist Marxism approach not only positions workers in the centre of the debate about the changing landscape of work but also discusses a possibility of workers' resistance under a post-Fordism regime.

Proponents of autonomist Marxism are interested in the reorganisation of labour during 'post-Fordism' and the expansion of capitalism beyond factory walls: 'the era of the Fordist, industrial production was all but destroyed and the mass worker was replaced by the 'socialized worker', bringing into being a new epoch in which the factory is increasingly disseminated out into society as a whole' (Gill and Pratt, 2008:6). The reorganisation of labour processes has been correlated to increasing interest in new technologies and the knowledge

economy. The recognition of growing importance of labour based on production of knowledge, creativity, emotions and social cooperation to capital accumulation (Lazzarato, 1996; Brophy and de Peuter, 2007:179) was expressed through the concept of 'immaterial labour' (Hardt and Negri, 2000:290-291; Lazzarato, 1996).

Lazzarato (1996:133) defines 'immaterial labour' as 'the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity'. The informational content refers to the increasing importance of computer control and technological skills in the workplace, whereas the cultural content manifests itself as the product of the workers' activities (Lazzarato, 1996). Furthermore, Lazzarato (1996:133) argues that the cultural component refers to 'activities that are not normally recognised as 'work' and which are involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashion, tastes, consumer norms and, more strategically, public opinion'. Therefore, the definition of immaterial labour suppresses the traditional division between intellectual and manual labour as immaterial labour requires the combination of a variety of skills from the technical to the communicational (Lazzarato, 1996:136).

The definition of immaterial labour has been expanded by Hardt (1999:90) by indicating the affective component of immaterial labour. According to Hardt (1999:91), the variety of service work requires workers to incorporate emotions and affection in their work and argues that 'labour is immaterial, even if it is affective. Its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness and community'. The affective dimension of immaterial labour has been developed as a response to the criticism of Hardt and Negri's (2000) initial definition of the concept. The first conceptualisation of immaterial labour did not pay specific attention to the importance of the production of affects and emotions by immaterial labourers. The acknowledgement of affective components of immaterial labour is also important in recognising the gendered nature of immaterial labour, in that, for instance, affective labour is often performed by women (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008:98).

In Lazzarato's account (1996), the relevance of the immaterial labour concept to creative labour is assumed by characteristics prescribed to immaterial labour: cultural, informational and affective elements. However, these characteristics can be applied to a wide range of occupations, which betrays the ambiguity of the immaterial labour concept and its lack of specific attention to the characteristics of cultural production (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:156).

Furthermore, the main feature of immaterial labour lies in its influence on workers' lives, as it is defined as precarious labour (Brophy and de Peuter, 2007). The precariousness of immaterial labour lies in the characteristics of the reorganisation of work towards a more

flexible, autonomous and individualised form of employment (Gill and Pratt, 2008:9-10; de Peuter, 2011:419). Therefore, the definition of precarity expands beyond workplaces, and as Brophy and de Peuter (2007:180) observe, refers to the 'financial and existential insecurity arising from the flexibility of labour'. This understanding of 'precarity' includes not only the imposition of insecure labour conditions from 'above' but also the internalisation of certain characteristics of contemporary work (values of neoliberal capitalism), which encourage precariousness (Brophy and de Peuter, 2007:182). Similarly, Lazzarato (1996:137-138) argues that the discourse about immaterial labour is an authoritarian one, as it forces workers to share capitalist values: 'behind the label of the independent 'self-employed' worker, what we actually find is an intellectual proletarian, but who is recognized as such by the employers who exploit him or her'. Lazzarato (1999:134) is concerned about the subjectification of intellectual labour in the norms of capitalist production and in management techniques which aspire to change: 'the worker's soul to become part of the factory'.

This perspective on labour in a 'knowledge economy' resembles ideas discussed by Foucault-inspired theories (governmentality theories), however, autonomous Marxism more readily acknowledges the workers' likelihood of resistance. While immaterial labour and its precarious conditions contribute to the workers' oppression, they can also be potentially liberating in the sense of organising social and worker movements (Gill and Pratt, 2008:8). This aspect of Marx-inspired theories has been criticised by post-structuralists who argue that employment uncertainty can reinforce existing power relations but not undermine them (Knights and Willmott, 1989:542). Furthermore, autonomist Marxism 'optimism' has also been criticised for its resemblance to the celebratory approaches to post-Fordist labour presented in managerial literature (Dyer-Witheford, 2005 in Brophy and de Peuter, 2007:179).

The criticism of the precariousness of immaterial labour indicates a negligence of diversities within the experiences of working conditions. These diversities can vary from differences in political systems and means of production (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008:54; Lobato and Thomas, 2015:78-79) to differences between genders (McRobbie, 2010:62; Fantone, 2007). The two main criticisms lie firstly in the assumption that work precariousness is something new for late capitalism, while the stability of employment introduced by 'Fordism' is rather an exception than a natural state: 'if we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographical scope, it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008:54). This understanding of the concept has raised questions about its applicability in the socio-economic context of Central and Eastern European countries.

The concept of 'immaterial labour', although useful as a starting point for discussing the nature of labour in late capitalism, presents a significant shortcoming in discussing work in creative

and cultural industries because of its lack of 'empirical engagement with the specificity of culture, or of cultural production' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:99). Furthermore, the wide range of occupations within the context of immaterial labour also indicates the need to recognise the differences among them and the relationships between people from different precarious occupations. For instance, Brophy and de Peuter (2007:188) pose an important question about this issue: 'How does the fast food 'chainworker', who is compelled to be affective, compliant and routinized not assume such a role in relation to a software programming 'brain-worker', whose habitual forms of exploitation oblige opinion, innovation and self-management?'

In contrast, the concept of precarity can be seen as being more valuable in theorising creative labour, not only because of its empirical validation by previous studies but also because of its ideological implications and the politics behind the use of the word 'precarity' in different socio-economic contexts. Therefore, the above-mentioned limitations of this concept need to be addressed in order to understand the precariousness of creative work that is experienced by different workers – in different economic and cultural contexts.

### 2.4.2 GOVERNMENTALITY-INSPIRED APPROACHES

Governmentality-inspired approaches[6] focus on the mechanisms that influence workers in internalising the values of capitalism. In these approaches, the worker is presented as a subject, which, according to Foucault's idea, refers to one who is: 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to [our] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (2003b [1982]:130).

The importance of Foucault's idea about subjectivity lies in its focus on power relations in society, which enables proponents of the governmentality theory to scrutinise how subjectivity is shaped by social and institutional contexts. In contrast to Marx-inspired approaches, Foucault perceives power as an immanent entity in society, but not as a singular form of power of a dominant class (Foucault, 2003a [1984]:27). Therefore, subjectivity is a construct shaped by particular power influences and subject positions within them. Foucault (2003c [1988]:147) combines the tensions between the power exercised on the individual and individual responses to such actions in the term 'governmentality', which invokes varieties of multifarious and indirect power strategies (McNay, 1994:117-118). This concept presents a paradox between

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[6] In this section, I refer to studies based on Foucault's idea of 'governmentality'. However, it is worth acknowledging that these studies are sometimes addressed by other researchers as 'Foucauldians', 'neo-Foucauldians' or, in broader terms, 'post-structuralist' studies of creative labour (McRobbie, 2016; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011).

empowerment and subjugation in which 'the power of governing is not just exercised repressively from above. Instead, liberal governmental governing entails individuals having an acting influence on the actions of others, on the possibilities of conduct' (Lorey, 2015:34).

The usage of governmentality-inspired approaches to conceptualise creative workers is widely popular in cultural industries studies (McRobbie, 2002/2016; Ross, 2003; Ursell, 2000; Gill, 2002) and it has been introduced through the 'governmentality' interpretation presented by Rose (1990/1992) and his works written with Miller (2008). Governmentality theories about creative work have emerged as a critique of liberal theories (Florida, 2002) and propagation of creativity by national governments as possibility for economic growth (Garnham, 2005). The criticism of this approach through governmentality theories in cultural and sociological studies discusses how values promoted by exponents of a creative industries approach and policymakers (such as self-realisation through work, autonomy, flexible working hours and creativity) obscure the challenging working conditions of creative workers (McRobbie, 2016; Ursell, 2000). Governmentality-inspired studies focus on discussing institutional contexts, the production of specific discourses about creative labour (by policymakers and/or the media) and their influence on how individuals understand and manage their work. Scholars within this tradition discuss creative workers as self-governed subjects who adapt various strategies in order to navigate through the uncertainties of creative work (such as McRobbie, 2016:37).

To demonstrate how governmentality-inspired theories are used to approach relations between workers and socio-cultural influences, I will briefly consider their discussion about tensions between 'self-realisation' and 'self-exploitation' through creative work. The problem of self-exploitation is presented as a result of 'the self-realisation as systemic requirement' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:74). In studies about creative labour, scholars indicate the superficial nature of creative work attractiveness by discussing such characteristics of creative labour as employment insecurity (Gill, 2002:70-71; McRobbie, 2002:521), the impact of flexible working hours on the work-life balance, or shifting the responsibility of work-based success on the employee by expanding their responsibility and autonomy. This view of work is connected to the emergence of new managerial strategies in the workplace to influence workers' behaviour and to present work as being: 'reformed and managed so that it could become an element in a personal project of self-fulfilment and self-actualization' (Rose, 1999:104).

As presented in the above discussion, this approach to creative labour offers a powerful critique of contemporary workplaces and the idea of 'self-realisation as a requirement' in creative work. Therefore, this theoretical framework is widely used in studies about creative labour, especially in terms of discussing governing practices in workplaces. However, this

critical stance toward creative work in contemporary capitalism and its consequences for individual has been summarised by Taylor and Littleton (2012:33) as being 'essentially a situation of illusion or false consciousness (…)' which results in young people's willingness to self-exploit.

Taylor and Littleton's quote also presents a direction of criticism of governmentality-inspired approaches in terms of discussing relations between agency and social structure. I shall focus on two lines of criticism. Firstly, on the possible lack of acknowledgment of subject 'activeness' in governmentality-inspired theories, and secondly on the lack of engagement with questions about normativity – questions about what constitutes a positive characteristic of creative work under capitalism.

Couldry and Littler (2011) discuss that this specific conceptualisation of the subject is embedded in a particular reading of Foucault's works on subjectivity, mainly on the conceptualisation of governmentality based on Rose's (1999:118) interpretation that 'the government of work now passes through the psychological strivings of each and every individual for fulfilment'. According to Couldry and Littler (2011:275), Rose's understanding presents a limited engagement with Foucault's (2003b [1982]) ideas about power as inherently unstable and which requires people's participation. Couldry and Littler (2011:275) call for recognition of variety of power struggles and acknowledgment that the process of subjectification can be more complex and incomplete. Therefore, they discuss governmentality as:

> […] a *non-inevitable* process, and a process necessarily involving agency and participation, does not however mean that the actualities of 'resistance' to it have to be exaggerated or romanticised. On the contrary, its live instabilities and possibilities mean that we can view it as a zone of struggle in which agency is battled for; in which some forces are more dominant than others.

Couldry and Littler's (2011) argument raises an important issue about governmentality-inspired approaches that tend to focus on control and management of subjects and the internalisation of neoliberal values while not paying specific attention to the struggle with and negotiation and rejection of these values.

In a similar vein, Taylor and Littleton (2012:133) argue that accounts of creative labour presented through governmentality-inspired approaches are 'over-complete' as they assume a consistent and successful production of subjects. This problem is associated with the need for consistency in governmentality theories, and in their accounts of processes of subjectification are inescapable. To support their argument, Taylor and Littleton (2012) discuss discrepancies

between the coherence of theoretical stances and their empirical work, through which they identified a variety of complex responses from creative workers (see section 2.4.3.1).

The shortcomings of understanding workers' experiences through post-structuralist frameworks were also discussed by Hesmondhalgh (2010:240), who criticised this approach for interpreting possible positive aspects of creative labour as an 'illusion of freedom'. In doing so, post-structuralist theories display the 'seeming impossibility of any hope of good work in capitalist modernity'.

Unlike proponents of autonomist Marxism, neo-Foucauldians undoubtedly hold a more ambiguous stance toward the possibility of the subjects' resistance. However, it is worth mentioning that Foucault's ideas about subjectivity evolved throughout the course of his career and therefore they can present many ambiguities and possibilities of reinterpretation (Hall, 1996:11-13). Foucault's ideas about the subject and their possible autonomy developed during his career and are still widely debated by scholars (see discussion by Archer (1998) and Behrent (2016)).

Governmentality-inspired approaches provide an important critique of creative work in advanced capitalism. They present the influences of social institutions and public discourses which shape the subjects' understandings of their work. Therefore, these elements of governmentality theories will also be used in this study, especially in terms of discussions about 'the entrepreneurial subject' in section 2.5, given the prominence of governmentality theories in discussing the formation of subjectivities in post-socialist countries (Dunn 2004, Makovicky, 2014). However, in this study, I will approach workers' subjective understandings with greater emphasis on their self-reflexivity.

In the next section, I will develop some of the arguments presented above and focus on two studies that attempted to conceptualise the subjective working experiences of creative workers differently – while acknowledging the complexity of creative workers' experiences, their struggles and negotiation of social and cultural resources that shaped them.

### 2.4.3 ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF WORK – GOOD WORK AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

This section discusses two studies which approach the workers' understandings of their occupations via eclectic theoretical frameworks: Taylor and Littleton (2012); and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011). These two studies focus on discussing the workers' subjective experiences from different theoretical perspectives, from a psycho-social narrative-discursive approach (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), to presenting the model of good/bad work

(Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Although these studies are underpinned by different theoretical assumptions and combine different disciplines (from the sociology of work and organisational studies to a psycho-social approach), they share one characteristic: the conceptualisation of workers neither through essentialist nor Foucauldian studies, but rather through the acknowledgement of the possibility of self-reflexivity and constraints which influence an individual's meaning about his or her labour.

### 2.4.3.1 CONSTRUCTION OF CREATIVE IDENTITIES

Taylor and Littleton's research (2012) about the construction of creative identities focuses on creative workers at different stages of their careers, from postgraduate students at London art colleges to 'non-traditional' entrants. Taylor and Littleton's work aims to discuss the problematic relationship between agency and structure based on data from three different projects, mostly based on interviews and re-interviewing research participants.

Taylor and Littleton's perspective (2012), in contrast to neo-Foucauldian approaches, is focused on the cultural worker as an individual and on the complexity of relations between a narrative biography and its relation to discourse in society. This approach is not against the idea of socio-cultural influences, however they reject the neo-Foucauldian deterministic presentation (as does Ezzy, 1997) of a subject, and supplement it with a more psychosocial perspective on the workers' identities (Taylor and Littleton, 2012:40-41), inspired by a synthetic approach to discursive psychology proposed by Wetherell (1998:388).

In their theoretical framework, Taylor and Littleton endorse governmentality-inspired approaches as superior in terms of addressing the complexity of cultural work in comparison to Marxist-approaches (labour process theory, cultural industry) and reflexive modernisation theories (Beck, 2000; Giddens; 1991). According to them, proponents of reflexive modernisation theories present the subject as too voluntarist and, as a result, this conceptualisation obscures the power-dynamics of creative work. Instead, Taylor and Littleton (2012) propose focusing on theories of governmentality with an emphasis on the contribution of feminist theorists who also draw on Rose's works, such as McRobbie and Gill. This emphasis was dictated by the recognition of creative work as a gendered activity and of the under-representation of women in cultural and creative industries. This body of work questioned the idea of 'freedom' that women in modern societies achieve and also questioned their self-monitoring function, which is mostly associated with the consumption and problems of 'post-feminism'. However, in light of the studies inspired by feminist theory, they acknowledged the limitations of the theories of governmentality in terms of explaining women's choices and actions. Therefore, they focus also on the 'bottom-up' approach to

discussing ideological influences by mediation, negotiation, articulation and resistance. This problematic was acknowledged by Gill (2008) who turned to Stuart Hall's work to explain how ideology works from a psychosocial standpoint.

Through their empirical study, Taylor and Littleton (2012:133) discuss how workers participate in the active process of decision making and reflection and also discuss not only how cultural workers' identities reflect the complexity of emotions in relation to their everyday work, but also the multiple meanings that are positioned within and outside working-life discourse. Taylor and Littleton (2012) also observe how their participants adapted the idea of creative identities to their own lives and how their participants' approaches to creative labour developed over time, and how external resources, such as a particular discourse about an artistic lifestyle, are negotiated by personal experience. The strength of their approach lies in an empirical indication of how individuals understand their work as well as an attempt to combine psychosocial approaches with cultural studies.

Ultimately, Taylor and Littleton (2012) acknowledge that governmentality-inspired approaches (while persuasive) present limitations in terms of discrepancies between the 'over-completeness' of the theory and the creative workers' multiplicity of understandings found in their empirical research. Their research findings confirmed the challenges of creative work discussed by critical approaches, but they also presented instances of enjoyment and self-realisation through creative work, which, as they argue, critical approaches tend to neglect.

The strengths of Taylor and Littleton's (2012) work lies not only in their empirical investigation of the validity of critical approaches' conceptualisation of creative work, but also in their emphasis on creative work as gendered work and the possible contributions of feminist theories of subjectivity to this debate. This perspective is also invaluable for research presented in this thesis, as inequalities in videogame industries are part of ongoing academic and industry based debates (such as Harvey and Fisher, 2013/2015; Prescott and Bogg; 2013; Weststar et al., 2016). Furthermore, Taylor and Littleton's (2012) reconciliation of relations between 'agency' and social structures presents a more complex understanding of the politics behind creative work. According to their methodological standpoint, workers are approached as: 'a complex active subject in the making, simultaneously situated in multiple relationships and sites, constrained but also able to engage in reflective, aware decision-making' (Taylor and Littleton, 2012:133).

Taylor and Littleton's (2012) study, grounded in psychological studies, could be criticised for putting relatively little emphasis on the social and cultural context in which their participants are embedded, this being a similar criticism of Ezzy's work. Furthermore, their methodological approach needs to be considered more critically to understand its application

in the context of this research. Taylor and Littleton investigated a specific group of participants (postgraduate students, art college alumni and non-traditional university entrants) and furthermore their interviewees encompassed a variety of work experiences associated with creative work, from art and design to crafts. In the context of Taylor and Littleton's (2012) study, the narrative discursive methodology is valuable as it allows researchers to investigate the interviewees' life biographies. However, videogame companies are highly collaborative workplaces in relation to specific cultural and social connotations, therefore meaning that a narrative discursive approach might be limiting in addressing the power dynamics within the videogame industry.

### 2.4.3.2 THE MODEL OF GOOD AND BAD WORK

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) focus on an exploration of the subjective experiences of creative workers based on their research in three different cultural industries (music, television and magazine publishing). In their theoretical discussion, they also engage in a polemic with post-structuralist[7] approaches to defend certain features of creative work, such as 'autonomy' and 'self-realisation' as a possibly positive characteristic, instead of interpreting them as managerial strategies designed to control and exploit workers. They do not reject the validity of post-structuralist approaches since in their empirical studies they also found many similarities with these approaches. However, they do focus on questions about what characteristics of creative work could constitute 'good work'. In order to achieve this, they engage with political theories and ethical debates underpinned by the meta-philosophy of social realism.

The use of the term 'good work' instead of 'un-alienated', 'meaningful' or 'dignified' is applied to address the positive aspects of work beyond discussions about individual happiness or pleasure at work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This conceptualisation focuses attention on the complexity of working lives, which always combine positive and negative experiences. Therefore, the concept of 'good' work goes beyond discussions about creative work with regards to discussing it in terms of a passion or a 'dream job'. This is a potentially valuable conceptualisation as it is not dismissive of videogame workers' positive experiences at work.

Drawing and expanding on Blauner's (1964) sociological model of alienated labour, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:34) introduce the model of good/bad work, which expands the debate about creative workers' subjective experiences beyond the concept of alienation. According to Hesmondhalgh and Baker's model, good work is characterised by such qualities

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[7] McRobbie (2016) addressed them as 'neo-Foucauldians'.

as 'involving autonomy, interest and involvement, sociality, self-esteem, self-realisation, work-life balance and security' (2011:34). In this section, I focus on three characteristics discussed in-depth by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011): autonomy, self-realisation, and the idea of 'good product' as a feature of good work.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) use the concept of 'autonomy' to encompass two qualities of work discussed by Blauner (1964): 'freedom' and 'control'. The authors dedicate special attention to this concept by addressing it as being of a crucial normative importance for discussing work organisation and commerce-art relations in cultural industries. In their work, the concept of 'autonomy' is presented as a possibility of 'self-determination' and not as a simple freedom from social influences (2011:39). In contrast to Marxism-inspired approaches and post-structuralist approaches, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), do not interpret every form of workplace autonomy as a form of managerial control or workers' disillusion. Instead, drawing on Mike Sosteric's empirical research, they argue that workplace autonomy could be an experience of a genuinely positive aspect of their work. Furthermore, their understanding of the second type of autonomy – creative autonomy – is presented through the context of specific cultural organisation (a meso-level of analysis) and in the context of its historical development of the term and its relation to work in cultural industries. The value of Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) analysis lies in their understanding of creative autonomy beyond the polarised terms of 'commercial-art' relations, as they argue that 'conventional distinctions between 'commercial' and 'creative' or 'authentic' cultural forms are never adequate. They further distinguish between creative and professional autonomy – the latter category refers to creative workers who are not directly involved in the production of aesthetic or artistic content, such as journalists. I will not discuss this type of autonomy in greater depth here as this thesis is concerned primarily with autonomy in terms of the workplace and creative production.

'Self-realisation' refers to the 'successful development of self over time' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:43). Drawing on Ezzy's (1997) interpretation of Weil's sociological approach, their understanding of personal development entails 'work being part of a life narrative in which current activities promise to lead into a desired and valued future' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:43). Therefore, in contrast to neo-Foucauldian studies about creative labour, they do not interpret self-realisation as a form of institutional discourse which can lead to workers' self-exploitation.

The third feature of 'good work' discussed by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:31) refers to social and cultural values of products. This characteristic is divided into two parts, which can be discussed separately: focus on production of 'excellent' goods, and promoting aspects of

the common good. The discussion about the quality and value of creative products might not be seen as being directly related to discussions about subjective experiences of work, but, as the authors argue, 'creative workers tend to care greatly about their products and so without an understanding of good and bad work in the sense of good and bad products, we are unlikely to understand creative labour' (2011:179). Therefore, this characteristic requires paying close attention to how cultural workers discuss products of their work and their audiences.

It is not difficult to present a post-structuralist counter-argument for this feature of 'good work', which would address creative workers' motivations to produce 'excellent' products as simply being exploited by the industry. However, in their empirical inquiry – the pursuit of 'excellence' (or focus on work well-done) – is approached in a more complex manner which does not have to result in self-exploitation. Nonetheless, in empirical inquiry this characteristic should be approached with the acknowledgement that creative workers are still embedded in the structures of modern capitalism. Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) focus on 'good product' is an important contribution in understanding creative work, as it expands one's understanding of creative work beyond questions about the work process itself.

Strandvad (2010) addresses the primary focus of creative labour studies on workers' 'self-creation' as being inadequate in terms of investigating creative work. She argues that 'the dichotomous paradigm of good versus bad self-creation is a prevailing but reductionist way of approaching the issue of creative work' (Strandvad, 2010:19). Her criticism therefore prompts questions about the validity of investigating creative work in normative terms. Instead, she proposes focusing on a socio-material perspective of creative work, which pinpoints the attractiveness of creative work in 'working with materials and technologies which produce the magical aspect of artworks' (Strandvad, 2010:8).

I sympathise with Strandvad's argument on the importance of socio-material factors and investigation of creative work beyond 'self-creation' just as I perceive Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) focus on 'good process' and 'good product' as being valuable. However, I believe that their conceptualisation of 'good work' on the continuum 'good work — good process — good product' presents a more comprehensive understanding of creative work. In addition, in Strandvad's analysis of her interviewees' experiences of sociality and materiality in film production, she emphasises those workers' positive emotions such as the feeling of excitement in creating and collaborating. However, this perspective does not acknowledge the variety of struggles and emotions people can experience during the creative process such as frustration at and disappointment in the production process, an inability or inaccessibility to use certain tools or technology, or the lack of co-operation and exclusion during the creative

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process. This problem is, however, captured in Hesmondhalgh and Baker's research (2011:187).

Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) discussions about 'autonomy' and 'self-realisation' provide a valuable discussion about the positive characteristics of work in creative industries. It also presents a more balanced perspective on creative labour than critical approaches discussed in the previous section. The strength of their analysis also focuses on historical development and meso-level analysis in relation to discussions about subjectivity. Nonetheless, their studies harbour some limitations.

McRobbie (2016:79) argues that the authors pay insufficient attention to interviewee self-reflexivity and to the manner in which the interviewees are accommodated to discuss their work. Furthermore, she argues that Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) did not pay sufficient attention to the specificity of professional cultures (TV, music and magazine publishing) (McRobbie, 2016:78). While McRobbie's (2016:77-79) comments are valid, since different cultural industries have different patterns of socialisations in the industry and approaches to the  development of career prospects, the primary aim of Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) work was on the shared similarities and difficulties of creative work in different cultural industries.

### 2.4.3.3 THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY IN INVESTIGATING SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF CREATIVE WORKERS

Before I present my approach, I will briefly summarise the above-discussed theoretical frameworks and their possible contribution to this study.

The autonomist Marxist approach is one of the most prominent approaches in discussing work in the videogame industry (Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Bulut, 2015a/2015b). The importance and possible application of the autonomist Marxism concept in relation to videogame practitioners lies in positioning videogame labour within the characteristics of labour reorganisation and by indicating the practitioners' precarious working conditions. However, as discussed in section 2.2.1, because of the generally broad nature of this concept, which does not engage in investigating specifically with creative labour and possible diversities in experiencing precarious working conditions, I want to supplement it with other approaches used in discussing creative work, notably post-structuralist theories that focus on the problem of subjectivity creation.

Studies inspired by neo-Foucauldian approaches focus on the production of a particular discourse that shapes and influences people's behaviour and approaches to their labour. These

studies about creative labour offer a strong critique of celebratory approaches and policymaking discourses that emphasise self-realisation, autonomy and economic growth (see Oakley, 2006). On the contrary, these studies discuss labour in late capitalism as being marked by the need to find self-realisation and meaning through work which, however, can also be read as potentially harmful to workers (self-exploitation) (Banks, 2007:41-68). The discussion about this problem has been expressed in this chapter by indicating tensions between the need for self-realisation through creative labour and practices that can lead to self-exploitation. Neo-Foucauldian theoretical frameworks are significant in indicating various readings of human subjectivity in late capitalism, as well as being valuable in terms of providing criticism of celebratory approaches to creative labour. However, this approach can be problematic in theoretical terms as well as in ethical assumptions about workers' agency – as other scholars have discussed (Couldry and Littler, 2011; Taylor and Littleton, 2012).

To address this problem, I then moved to a discussion about creative labour studies that aim to expand theoretical assumptions of neo-Foucualdian frameworks by using a discursive narrative approach (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) and by paying attention to possible positive and moral aspects of cultural work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Banks, 2007/2017). Therefore, these perspectives rely on more of an eclectic approach in understanding work in creative industries by synthesising various theoretical frameworks – especially in understanding the role of human agency in the analysis of creative work. These works and their contributions are also important for this study, which relies on a synthesis of different theoretical positions and which aims to take a more humanistic perspective to discussing workers' agency. In this research, I take creative workers' experiences of work seriously, which does not fall into false dichotomous poles of interpreting workers either as rational actors or as disillusioned subjects of capitalist relations (Banks et al. 2013:7). Therefore, I recognise the autonomy and self-reflexivity of creative workers, albeit constrained by social and cultural factors[8].

## 2.5 NAVIGATING THROUGH THE UNCERTAIN LANDSCAPE OF WORK: ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'ENTREPRENEURIAL SUBJECTIVITIES'

In section 2.3 I discussed precariousness of creative labour and the workers' need to apply various strategies to find, maintain and advance their careers in this challenging work environment. Furthermore, in section 2.4, I outlined the major theoretical frameworks used in

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[8] My position toward creative workers is similar to those discussed by Gina Neff (2012) and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011).

debates about creative labour and their applications to this study. In this section, I continue a discussion about creative workers' strategies used to adapt to uncertain work environments with a focus on the concept of 'entrepreneurship'. The propagation of entrepreneurial values is understood as a result of historical socio-economic changes that removed previously known institutional and organisational buffers of economic risk (Neff, 2012:42). In a broad sense, these changes are associated with the rise of flexible work patterns (project-based employment, temporary work and self-employment) and the shift of responsibility from employer to employee.

I use the concept of 'entrepreneurship' to discuss behaviours, strategies and attributes which workers apply or possess to manage any uncertainties pertaining to their career prospects. From a theoretical perspective, this concept is discussed through neo-Foucauldian approaches and the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivities. Furthermore, the discussion below also draws on research about new media work because of their ideological connections to videogame industries (Gill, 2011a/2002; Neff, 2012; Ross, 2003). Discussion about 'entrepreneurial values' is also valuable from the perspective of videogame work, as videogame practitioners, similarly to other creative workers, need to adjust their behaviour to extremely competitive and insecure employment markets. Furthermore, this aspect of work in videogame industries has been under-researched (except for Wright, 2015). However, in contrast to Wright (2015), I apply a broader understanding in my discussion of 'entrepreneurship' that does not just focus on self-employed workers.

This section is divided into two sub-sections. The first discusses several characteristics of 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' from neo-Foucauldian approaches (Scharff, 2018; McRobbie, 2016; Gill et al., 2017), which present not only the re-organisation of workplaces in a post-industrial economy but also their relation to neoliberal art of government. The first section is further divided into three parts that discuss strategies used by workers to manoeuvre though the uncertain landscape of creative work and the entrepreneurial qualities workers should possess. The first section also engages in discussions about entrepreneurship and new media work through the concept of 'venture labour' (Neff, 2012). The second section deals with the application of this approach in the context of post-socialist countries (such as Dunn, 2004; Makovicky, 2014).

## 2.5.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF 'ENTREPRENEURIAL SUBJECTIVITY'

In previous research, creative workers are presented as ideal entrepreneurial subjects (McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2018). This presentation of creative workers is associated with neoliberal narratives visible in policy documents and in proponents of a creative industries'

approach in which creative workers are forerunners of economic change and future organisation of work (Gill, 2011a; Oakley, 2006). Through 'entrepreneurial ethos', the creative worker is associated with such values as resilience and the willingness to seek new opportunities and take risks (McRobbie, 2002/2016; Gill, 2002). The prevalence of entrepreneurial values among the creative workers has been discussed by McRobbie: (2016:74) 'The cheerful, upbeat, passionate, entrepreneurial person who is constantly vigilant in regard to opportunities for projects or contracts must display a persona that mobilizes the need to be at all times one's own press and publicity agent'.

The idea of 'enterprise' and its relation to new forms of workers' subjectivity has been derived from Foucault's (2008) lectures about the development of neoliberal art of government. Drawing on an investigation of the historical development of German neoliberalism (The Ordoliberals), Foucault discusses a re-organisation of society around the notion of 'enterprise'. His discussion encompasses not only an understanding of enterprise as a social institution but also its extension to human subjectivity, as Foucault (2008:226) argues: 'the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of homo *oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a homo *oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself' (italics in original).

Through this understanding, the notion of 'enterprise' is associated with neoliberal governing and its values (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1992; Scharff, 2015; Brown, 2003). Further interpretations and extensions of Foucault's ideas focus on a discussion about the implementation of neoliberal policies (Rose, 1990; 1992; Miller and Rose, 2008), and, as a result, the construction of a particular neoliberal subjectivity based on discourses produced by social institutions. Miller and Rose (2008:195) discuss the development of neoliberal governance in the context of Britain and the USA and the transformation of individuals into 'enterprising subjects', understood as 'an enterprising individual in search of meaning, responsibility and a sense of personal achievement in life, and hence in work' (Miller and Rose, 2008:195). Similarly, as mentioned in section 2.4.2, neo-Foucauldian analysis was used to discuss celebratory accounts of creative work introduced by policy-makers under the Labour government in the UK (McRobbie, 2016).

However, as Feher (2009:25) pointed out: 'While the history, structure and modes of exploitation specific to neoliberalism have been well documented […] the type of subject that is both constituted by this regime and tasked with upholding it has been rather less studied'. A similar gap in knowledge has been discussed by other scholars who have argued that discussions about neoliberalism and its influence on individual conduct are mostly theoretical rather than empirical (see discussion in Scharff 2015/2018). In the next three sections I discuss the characteristics of entrepreneurship in creative work by engaging with literature about

creative and new media labour. I focus on strategies used by workers as well as on qualities that, according to previous research, such individuals should possess.

### 2.5.2 DEFINING ONESELF AS ENTERPRISE

Scholars who investigate the working lives of creative workers and new media workers discuss how workers are embracing an 'entrepreneurial ethos' and apply a variety of strategies to adapt to the uncertain, precarious and informal environments of work (Gill, 2011a; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2018; Neff, 2012; Ross, 2003; Wright, 2015; Ursell, 2000).

Following McNay's (2009) argument, Scharff interprets entrepreneurial subjectivity as encompassing a discussion about oneself as a 'business'. Through this understanding, entrepreneurial subjectivity can be understood as a 'self-commodification processes through which an individual seeks to improve his/her chances for attractive employment' (Ursell, 2000:807). Within this interpretation, it is possible to discuss specific practices that enforce entrepreneurial behaviour through investment in self-development, compulsory networking and a reputation based on portfolios (Ursell, 2000; Neff et al., 2005; Gill, 2002/2011a; Blair, 2001).

Creative workers are required to constantly develop their skills and qualifications through additional training, which usually takes place outside their working hours and, in the case of self-employed workers, requires additional financial investment (Gill, 2011). In terms of new media work, in which technological changes happen very quickly, the requirement to 'keep-up' with technology has also been emphasised by creative workers (Gill, 2011a; Kotamraju, 2002).

Furthermore, the importance of networking has been emphasised in relation to various occupations in cultural industries (Blair, 2001; Coulson, 2012; Becker, 1991 [1963]:99; Nixon and Crewe, 2004). The need to establish and maintain social contacts with a huge number of workers within a particular occupational community is a form of investment in future employment security. For instance, Becker (1991 [1963]) comprehensively discusses the importance of social networks in dance musicians' career progressions. Becker (1991 [1963]:105) argues that the security of employment for freelancers is based on effective networking: 'to have a career one must work; to enjoy the security of steady work one must have many 'connections''. Similarly, McRobbie (2016:78) presents that the high mobility of creative workers recognised as 'professional routines of job changing' provide an ironical sense of security through the requirement of maintaining extensive professional networks. However, as Wittel (2001) points out in his study about networking in new media labour, this

practice has been responsible for the transformation of social relationships into commodification practices that are aimed at self-branding and maximisation of profit from maintained social relations. Furthermore, reliance on sociality and an increased need to network also contributes to the informalisation of creative work (Gill, 2013), as decisions about work (recruitment, finding work, clients) are taken outside formal work structures. Therefore, decisions about employment, as previous research has discussed, rely on 'who you know' and on your 'reputation based portfolio' (Gill, 2011a).

The reputation-based nature of work in a cultural industry is also connected with networking as well as self-branding. Personal investment in maintaining and branding workers' reputation is very high. Ursell (2000:818) describes this problem in the TV industry:

> Television workers are hired (substantially if not completely) on the basis of their reputation. That reputation is developed partly within the self-referential, partially closed, occupational communities of television workers, and partly by the consumers of television products, the achievements at the point of consumption feeding back to inform the judgement of the occupational communities.

Therefore, the idea of conducting oneself as a business is translated into a variety of strategies which creative workers adopt to maintain or find new employment. Or, to put it briefly, how workers manage themselves in conditions of radical uncertainty (see discussion in Gill, 2011a). The idea of presenting oneself in entrepreneurial categories also raises questions about the attributes that creative workers need to possess.

The idea of the 'entrepreneurial subject' is not only valuable from the perspective of how workers understand their work but also how they position themselves within given social structures and in opposition to 'others'. This is an important point in terms of discussing persistent inequalities in cultural industries, and to recognise that resources that allow workers to be entrepreneurial are unequally distributed. Scharff (2015:115) discusses this problem by showing that her interviewees rarely discussed inequalities in creative industries in relation to their structural factors. This finding echoes the results of previous studies about creative workers and inequalities (such as Conor et al., 2015; Gill et al., 2017), in which workers also discussed inequalities through individualised, self-entrepreneurial narratives. Gill (2011b:63), based on her research among creative and new media workers, addresses this problem as: ''unspeakable inequalities' — largely unnoticed and unspoken about even by those most adversely affected by them. For in these media workplaces rhetoric of the meritocracy prevails and 'not making it' is interpreted through a toxic discourse of individual failure (…)'.

A further example of the shift towards personal responsibility and disregard of structural inequalities is in relation to gender in cultural industries (see O'Brien, 2014; Scharff, 2018;

Gill et al., 2017). The creative workers' approach is interpreted through the concept of 'post-feminist sensibility' (Gill, 2002: 84-88; Gill, 2014; Gill, 2016; Gill et al., 2017; Lewis, 2014), which is not approached as a theoretical position but as an analytically useful tool in investigating producers' 'common-sense' contradictory ideas about gender inequalities in contemporary workplaces (Gill et al., 2016:5). Through the engagement with this analytical tool Gill et al. (2016:5) demonstrate that creative workers tend to disallow structural sources of inequality and instead focus on individual empowerment, gender 'fatigue' and repudiation of sexism.

### 2.5.3 THE CONCEPT OF 'VENTURE LABOUR'

The discussion above, about the strategies and attributes of entrepreneurial subjectivity among creative workers, echoes Neff's (2012) investigation into new media workers' understandings of economic uncertainty during the dot-com boom. According to Neff (2012), the shift towards flexible work patterns presented a new landscape of work in which taking risks and expressing entrepreneurial values were perceived as being socially and culturally accepted. In contrast to Beck's (2000) definition of risk as that of being increasingly more individualised and dis-embedded from traditional structures, Neff (2012:17) presents the workers' understanding of economic risk as also being a socio-culturally constructed one, arguing that 'those new ways of discussing risk led to new ways in which people managed, dealt with and experience risk'. Neff's (2012) conceptualisation of risk is valuable from the perspective of the present research, as it pays attention to its contextual character. This approach also links back to the argument about understandings of 'precarity' in relation to a specific socio-cultural context (see section 2.4.2.1).

Furthermore, this understanding of risk is linked to the specificity of new media industries and their occupational cultures. For example, historical and ideological ideas about 'risk' and 'taking opportunities' are culturally constructed in a different manner for new media workers, compared to, for example, classical musicians (Scharff, 2018). New media workers' understandings of risk can be linked to its ideological roots in the ideology of early cyber-cultures as a combination of libertarianism and counter-cultural movements (Borsook, 2000; Barbrook and Cameron, 1995). In this study I will further articulate the specificity of videogame occupational cultures in section 2.6.1.

The type of labour in which new media workers were engaged, termed 'venture labour' by Neff (2012:16), refers to the 'explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by non-entrepreneurs'. She notes further that 'venture labour is the investment of time, energy, human capital and other personal resources that ordinary employees make in the companies where they work' (Neff, 2012:16). Venture labour can encompass a variety of behaviours through

which employees accept the responsibility and risk associated with their work. For instance: investing in skills development, accepting work flexibility and using social connections to support their company (Neff, 2012). In her study, Neff distinguishes three strategies adopted by workers to deal with the risk of their employment: financial, creative and actuarial (2012:69). These strategies are based on the assumption that people discuss risk in personal terms rather than social and, as a consequence, the adoption of a particular strategy is based on the workers' priorities in their working lives (Neff, 2012:69).

Interviewees in Neff's (2012:73) study who followed financial strategies understood their economic risk through the financial potential of their companies. They were oriented towards a specific financial pay-off and expressed more attachment to their employer. Interviewees who adopted a creative strategy (Neff, 2012:83) understood risk as being an inseparable component of creative projects. They were more likely to express emotional attachment to their projects. It is not surprising, therefore, that this category mostly encompasses producers of content as this strategy resonates with results of other research about creative workers (McRobbie, 2002/2016; Gill, 2002/2010/2011a; Ursell, 2000). The creative strategy was also more explicitly linked with entrepreneurial values – interviewees expressed their concerns with creative portfolios and reputation management (see section 2.5.1). Within this category, Neff (2012:86) also discusses those workers who change their careers pathways to follow more creative occupations. As she admitted, their understanding did not mean that they did not take job security seriously, rather they had different work priorities. The last strategy – the actuarial one – encompassed those interviewees who aimed to minimise risk through planning and calculations. Therefore, their main focus was on maintaining the longevity of their careers. This group expressed a strong sense of personal responsibility over their own economic stability.

All the strategies presented by Neff (2012) discussed the different ways in which individuals respond to their uncertain employment. This understanding, however, is not presented through the workers' rational choice but rather through an expression of personal and cultural values, which the workers attributed to their employment. Nonetheless, the aforementioned strategies confirm that workers are willing to adapt to flexible work and accommodate the inherent risk associated with it.

Neff's (2012) concept of 'venture labour' presents not only a shift in the understanding of economic risk among workers in advanced capitalism but also in the strategies they adopt. The strength of this is in its acknowledgement that strategies not only encompass the desire to follow creative careers but also possible financial rewards and more 'calculative' approaches. Videogame practitioners as producers of content will more likely be motivated in their work

by the need for intrinsic rewards through their engagement with creative work (a creative strategy).

At this point, I would like to discuss the use of the concept of 'new media work', which, in a broad understanding, defines work in Internet-related industries and encompasses a variety of occupations (Gill, 2011a:252). I agree with Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), who point out that new media labour is sometimes unhelpfully merged with the concept of creative labour. However, in the context of videogame industries, these boundaries are further blurred because of the common origins of videogames and information and communication technology (ICT) structures. However, I approach videogame labour as creative labour because of its first and foremost symbol-and-meaning-creating function rather than a utilitarian one. This position was also discussed by O'Donnell (2012) who argued that the videogame industry differs significantly from other software production. Therefore, through the strategies presented by Neff (2012), it can be argued that videogame workers will fall more easily into the 'creative' category rather than a financial or 'calculative' one.

Furthermore, Neff's (2012) study focuses on the Internet industry and the entrepreneurship associated with it in the context of Silicon Alley, which is further positioned within the socio-economic changes of the USA's business culture. However, it is true to say that small videogame developers from Warsaw are not start-up companies from Silicon Alley in New York. Therefore, in the next section I will articulate how to position the idea of 'entrepreneurship' in the socio-cultural context of post-socialist countries.

### 2.5.4 ENTREPRENEURIAL SUBJECTIVITIES IN POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

To understand the complexity of entrepreneurial subjectivity, especially in relation to post-socialist countries, it is crucial to briefly outline socio-economic changes that have taken place in the Central and Eastern European region (CEE). Political-economic changes in the region occurred after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, and focused on the establishment of a market economy and the introduction of neoliberal policies, which entailed not only the establishment of new social institutions but also a reconsideration of citizens' positionality within new organisational structures, including workplaces (see Makovicky, 2014).

In contrast to systematic and incrementally introduced neoliberal reform in the USA and Britain, in Poland: 'shock therapy – a package of draconian deflationary policies and liberalisation – was introduced overnight in 1990. In this sense Poland's transformation was combined and uneven in that the process and outcomes of transformation have to be understood in the context of the dynamics and development of the global economy' (Hardy,

2009:5). The Balcerowicz Programme, introduced in January 1990 as a set of market-oriented reforms, was adopted in the hope that the temporary pain of privatisation would benefit the country's rapid adjustment to the global economy (Hardy, 2009:29). Sachs (1990), Harvard economist and a proponent of neoliberal reform, praised Poland as a pioneer of market-oriented reforms in Eastern Europe and envisioned a bright future for private companies in Poland, as well as the country's highly skilled workers. Despite some successes of the programme, the consequences of rapid reform were most visible in the fall of worker living standards (Hardy, 2009:115-126). Furthermore, the ongoing changes resulted in an increased polarisation of Polish society between the 'losers' and 'winners' in post-socialist transformation (Buchowski, 2006). The above overview of socio-economic changes in Poland presents an oversimplification. The acceleration of neoliberal reform by the Balcerowicz programme undoubtedly contributed to growing inequalities in Polish society but socio-economic changes toward neoliberal governance and entrepreneurship had started long before 1990.

Since the 1970s, and similarly to other countries around the world, Polish communist government started introducing a variety of economic changes which were more lax in their approach towards private ownerships and enterprises. Therefore, systemic change did not occur as a shift between an ideal socialist state and pure capitalism, as ''the market' was introduced in societies where there were already a variety of entrepreneurial and profit-oriented practices of one kind or another' (Humphrey and Mandel, 2002:2).

In the context of Eastern Europe, the idea of 'entrepreneurship' is also associated with the existence of the informal economy in Poland. The term 'informal economy' is defined here as economic activities that are carried out outside the official, registered, formal economy (Lobato and Thomas, 2015:8). The term itself presents many ambiguities, as it is relational and often applied in opposition to economic activities that are defined as formal (see discussion in Misztal, 2000:19). In the context of socialist countries, the term 'entrepreneurial values' refers to economic activities carried out on grey markets, sometimes called 'islands of capitalism' (Dunn, 2004:29), which allow citizens to obtain products restricted by or not provided by the socialist state. The existence of entrepreneurship in informal economy could be understood as a survival strategy in the context of the instability of the socialist state. These forms of entrepreneurial activities teetered on the boundaries between formal and informal economic activities. Informal channels of media distribution in post-socialist states were semi-legal as there was no system of copyright protection in socialist Poland until 1994. After 1989, many informal 'entrepreneurs' turned their businesses into media businesses, including videogame related companies. Furthermore, the existence of the informal economy and the

variety of entrepreneurial activities in the context of post-socialist countries raises questions about who could afford to be an entrepreneur.

In the previous section (2.5.1), 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' was linked with neoliberalism, however, the concept of 'neoliberalism' is contested, and as such requires investigation (Makovicky, 2014). According to the neo-Foucauldian understanding discussed above, neoliberalism gave rise to the technologies of governing populations through which people become self-governing subjects (Rose, 1999; Clarke, 2008). However, in anthropological studies, the idea of interpreting neoliberalism in a universal and monolithic form, as neo-Foucauldians did, has been widely debated (Kipinis, 2008; Clarke, 2008; Ong, 2007; Makovicky, 2014; Kingshifer and Maskovsky, 2008). John Clarke (2008:135) argues that neoliberalism 'is omnipotent and it is promiscuous', and while he recognises that 'neoliberalism is a political-cultural project that aims at transnational hegemony' (Clarke, 2008:137), he also calls for the recognition of each neoliberal transition as distinctive. Therefore, proponents of this approach called for greater attention to be paid to the contextualisation of neoliberalism and its translation into different socio-cultural contexts. This perspective was opposed by Gershon (2011:537), who argues that focusing on a local context of neoliberalism is an important but insufficient perspective. However, as presented in the discussion in section 2.4 and in the above-outlined complexities of understanding of neoliberal subjectivity in post-socialist countries, I argue that approaching the question of neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivity as being more fragmented and complex is to the benefit of this study. This complexity was further exemplified in Dunn's study (2004) about Polish workers. In her ethnographic research (also based on a neo-Foucauldian framework) about the Alima-Gerber factory, Dunn presents Polish workers' adaptation to the new style of management as an attempt of transforming workers into 'entrepreneurs of themselves':

> Persons who are 'entrepreneurs of themselves' flexibly alter their bundle of skills and manage their careers, but they also become the bearers of risk, thus shift the burden of risk from the state to individual… In Eastern Europe, transforming persons into choosers and risk-bearers soon becomes the project at the heart of the post-socialist transition. (Dunn, 2004:22)

Dunn's (2004) study, also inspired by the neo-Foucauldian framework, pays close attention to workers' understandings and possible socio-cultural influences on their behaviour. She argues that previous cultural and ideological resources on which workers drew – such as the experiences of the socialist period, the philosophy of the Catholic Church and the tradition of organised labour activism – played a role in how workers understood their work. In terms of personhood, she discussed how workers renegotiate their positions based on these resources.

For instance, workers have defined production as a relationship between people, and not between things and as such emphasising the social nature of capital. Furthermore, they stress the moral dimensions of work rather than financial ones. Dunn's (2004) interviewees expressed embedded personhood between neoliberal policies and 'personalist' philosophies, which, as she argues, are still visible in Poland.

Dunn's work presents limits in terms of applying it to this study. Not only was her ethnography carried out in the late 1990s, but it also focused on factory workers. However, her study places great emphasis on the importance of paying attention to 'local' discourse resources, history and culture in order to understand the workers' understandings of their occupations. A similar understanding of the changing landscape of work in the region was discussed by Makovicky (2014). However, while these studies emphasised and empirically proved the importance of investigating the locality of discourses and their various forms of renegotiation, they pose further questions about what they could say about creative work in 2018. This study aims to address this gap in knowledge.

Scholarly writing from Poland on creative labour and cultural industries is scarce and rarely pays sufficient attention to the problems of the workforce (with the exception of Ilczuk et al's research (2014)). Polish authors from fields such as cultural studies, economics and human geography tend to focus on the potential positive economic impact of creative industries (such as Kotylak, 2015; Przygodzki, 2014), which mostly encompasses analyses of policies implemented in other countries (UK, Australia) and statistical structural analyses of development of the Polish 'creative' sector. Furthermore, investigations into media and cultural industry transformation after 1989 focus mainly on the news media (see Jakubowicz, 1995/2004). This particular focus is unsurprising as it is related to the debates about establishing a democratic, civil society and the new role of the previously state-owned media – it is also important from the perspective of rapid privatisation, including the privatisation of media and expansion of foreign capital. Therefore, these discussions rarely pay attention to the videogame industry, which in the 1990s was still underdeveloped and perceived as being a part of the ICT industry. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap in research by focusing not only on videogame workers as an under-researched aspect of creative labour studies but also as an under-researched subject in research about work in post-socialist countries.

## 2.6 THE VIDEOGAME WORKFORCE AND PRODUCTION STUDIES

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in research into the videogame workforce from a variety of disciplines, from media to business and management studies (Deuze et al. 2007; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; O'Donnell, 2014; Johnson,

2013; Weststar, 2015). Since I started this research project in 2014, this body of literature has expanded significantly and includes discussions about independent videogame production, videogame education, an investigation of inequalities, creativity-management and an exploration of different occupational roles. However, research about videogame production and the videogame workforce are still scarce in comparison to research about videogame texts and audiences.

It could be argued that for years the subject of the videogame workforce was neglected in media studies and cultural studies. This negligence reflects a broader discussion of an imbalance between research about cultural production and analysis of media texts and audiences (see discussion in Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:54; Murdock, 2005; Maxwell, 2001). Similarly, studies about videogames tend to focus on videogame as text (such as Tavinor, 2009) or videogame players (such as Calleja, 2011; Thornham, 2011). The focus on players and increased digitalisation has placed scholarly attention to player productivity and co-production of games components (Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2007; Sotamaa, 2010). It could be argued that scholars within games studies paid more attention to studies about player productivity than the work of videogame workers.

This issue can also arise from the challenges in accessing field sites in terms of videogame production. This situation is especially difficult in terms of the videogame industry and its focus on data protection and non-disclosure agreements, which O'Donnell (2014:205-207) discussed as the culture of secrecy around videogame production. This problem is also reflected in many studies about the videogame workforce and industry that focus primarily on an analysis of secondary sources, such as trade press information or blog posts (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Briziarelli, 2016). These resources are undoubtedly useful in an analysis of the industry, and will be also used in this study. However, they present significant limitations in gaining a more in-depth understanding of worker experiences.

This gap in knowledge is getting narrower, with recent growing interest and research into the videogame workforce. Scholarly discussions include a variety of subjects ranging from the working lives of videogame developers (O'Donnell, 2014; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Johnson, 2013), and inequalities in the videogame workforce (Prescott and Bogg, 2011a/b; Consalvo, 2008; Harvey and Fisher, 2013/2015; Srauy, 2017), to an exploration of specific occupational cultures (Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; Bulut, 2015b).

There is also growing research interest in discussing local perspectives on videogame production; however, for now they are mostly focused on historical and descriptive accounts (Švelch, 2010; Jørgensen et al., 2017). This body of research, similar to research about creative labour, draws on a variety of fields and theoretical frameworks, from science communication,

the history of technology, management studies, communication studies, and cultural labour to organisational psychology.

In the following sections, I will discuss the characteristics and challenges of videogame work as identified by previous studies. The first sub-section identifies videogame work as a site of struggle between self-realisation and self-exploitation. This sub-section presents some already-mentioned characteristics of creative labour (section 2.3) and applies them in the context and specificity of videogame culture and videogame work. The second sub-section engages in a discussion about previous major research about videogame work and its theoretical frameworks. The third and final sub-section focuses specifically on research about the locality of videogame work and the industry itself, as well as their application in the context of the CEE region.

## 2.6.1 VIDEOGAME WORK AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE

Jobs in the videogame industry are described as 'dream jobs' for many videogame enthusiasts insofar as they are a form of employment which offers intrinsic rewards (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006:603). The discourse produced by the industry about its labour is often presented as 'work as play', which entails the supposedly pleasurable, cool and entertaining sides of videogame employment (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:55-56).

'Work-as-play' is embedded in the socio-historical development of the industry as a 'new', rebellious, entertainment business that purposefully rejects the hierarchical, corporate structures of other tech companies (Donovan, 2010:64-79). This presentation of videogame labour is also connected with the socio-historical development of the medium in the West, rooted in the combination of high-tech industries and bohemian entrepreneurialism of 'Californian Ideology' (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996). The initial autonomous, relaxed and flat organisational structure of the first videogame companies has been adopted by other companies in the industry to maintain their image as 'cool' workplaces (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006:604). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) discuss how Electronic Arts is creating a worker-friendly environment by promising flexible working hours, a relaxed dress code and fashionable interior designs of their offices. According to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's interviewees the most enjoyable aspects of their work refers to creativity, sociality and 'coolness' of their occupational culture (2009:603; see also Bulut, 2015a). Furthermore, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2006:604) argue that this occupational culture can disguise problems within the industry; most notably problems of exclusion and exploitation.

The industry's workforce is composed of young employees, for whom working in the industry represents the possibility of finding attractive employment (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006:603). This aspect of videogame labour resonates with McRobbie's (2016:79) argument about young people's socialisation into a particular occupational culture. This idea has also been supported by Dymek (2012) who discusses the subcultural component to the creation of a workforce in the videogame industry, wherein the industry is recruiting employees from fan bases that they have created. Furthermore, as research by Weststar (2015:8), Consalvo (2008:185) and Kerr and Kelleher (2015) observes, the requirement of passion is also seen as a crucial component of the recruitment process in the industry.

This emphasis on passion for videogames invites questions about the videogame practitioners' relationship to the videogame medium. Johnson (2013:148-149) argues that the questions about being an 'insider' or 'outsider' to this culture can have an effect on one's labour conditions, for example in relation to gender, age and the expertise of employees (technical or artistic). This aspect of videogame labour can be particularly interesting in relation to the gendered nature of videogame labour (Consalvo, 2008). Therefore, this situation poses questions about the women working in the industry, which is dominated by men in terms of core creative occupations (Ganguin and Hoblitz, 2014:26; Prescott and Bogg, 2011a).

The motivation to work in the videogame industry that has been expressed by young people could also be interpreted through the concept of 'hope labour' as defined by Kuehn and Corrigan (2013:9) as 'un- or undercompensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow'. While there are a growing number of educational programmes directed toward videogame development (Nichols, 2014:162-163), the idea of 'breaking into' the industry still relies on informal channels and a reliance on auto-didactics. This situation is further amplified by the scepticism concerning education oriented towards videogame development from the industry, and the industry's own emphasis on practical knowledge and experiential learning over university education[9]. Furthermore, as O'Donnell (2014) discusses, pervasive secrecy could also restrict further access to the industry. Therefore, it could be argued that the idea of 'breaking into' the industry relies on hope labour[10] – from accepting unpaid internships, and working as a videogame tester in an outsourcing company, to giving away free 3D models for free exposure only. The original contribution of the concept of hope labour lies in its emphasis on the assumed temporary nature of the difficulties that workers need to go through at the beginning of their careers. This approach can be further amplified by the socially and culturally

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[9] This situation also reflects other creative workers' approaches to higher education (see Gill, 2011a).

[10] The concept of 'hope labour' was applied in Kuhen and Corrigan's (2013:15) to online production, however, it could also be expanded in the context of cultural production (see Ursell, 2000; Bulut, 2015b).

constructed discourses about successes and failures in videogame industries[11]. Kuehn and Corrigan (2013:16-17) distinguish 'hope labour' from 'venture labour' (Neff, 2012) by emphasising its 'beyond-our-control' uncertainty in contrast to a more calculative approach to management of risk in the case of venture labour. However, these distinctions could be more blurry and inconclusive in both 'venture' as well as 'hope' labour because approaches to risk and possible future career direction encompass both planning and hoping for the best outcome.

In terms of neo-Foucauldian studies, a strong motivation to work in the videogame industry translates into a higher tolerance of poor working conditions and normalisation of abnormal working practices (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006:603-610). The difficult working conditions in the industry are acknowledged by International Game Developers Association (IGDA, 2004) as well as by workers and their family members (EA Spouse (2004); Rockstar Spouse (2010)). Arguably, long working hours have become a part of videogame industry culture, in which the requirement for hard work, flexibility and sacrifice is emphasised (Consalvo, 2008:184; Kline, et al., 2003:200-201).

One of the most widely debated characteristics of videogame labour refers to the long working hours presented during 'crunch time' (IGDA, 2004:6; Consalvo, 2008:182; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:59-65). Crunch time refers to 'an ostensibly unusual period of crisis in a production schedule, when hours intensify, often up to sixty-five to eighty hours a week' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:59). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2006:609) indicate that crunch time practice is imposed by publishers to avoid paying for overtime as well as to force development studios to finish software on time. According to an International Game Developers Association (IGDA) 2014 survey, difficult working conditions are not the result of the necessity of medium production but of the unrealistic expectations from publishers and poor managerial practice (Edwards et al., 2014:22). The difficulties experienced by videogame practitioners outlined above raise further questions about their strategies and adaptation to uncertain career prospects in the industry.

### 2.6.2 POSITIONING THE VIDEOGAME WORKER AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Research about videogame labour is often positioned within an autonomist Marxism perspective and focuses on characteristics of the medium as well as the precarity of videogame employment (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Weststar et al., 2015; Deuze et al., 2007). The popularity of this theoretical framework is a result of a series of

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[11] This idea links back to the concept of 'entrepreneurial ethos' as discussed in section 2.4.

influential studies into videogame production and videogame labour conducted by Kline et al. (2003) and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2006/2009). This body of research (although positioned within similar theoretical frameworks) is based on three different methodological approaches, from interviews with a focus on the videogame industry's expansion and production (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009), to ethnography in videogame studios (Bulut, 2015a/2015b) and an analysis of secondary sources (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015).

Through this perspective, videogame culture has been described as being embedded in the capitalist system: 'virtual games are media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hyper-capitalism' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:xxix) in which the productivity of programmers, artists, designers and videogame players is related. They argue that 'making and playing digital games involves combining technical, communicational and affective creativity to generate new, virtualized forms of subjectivity' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:582). Similarly, Bulut (2015a:197) argues that 'video games act as a laboratory for the materialization of immaterial labour that fuses play with work, hacking, rebellion, and creativity, which has then been financially reterritorialised'.

The workers' position in these relationships is discussed by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:36-37), following Vercellone's ideas (2007) about the concept of cognitive capitalism regarding the characteristics of immaterial labour, including videogame labour. The concept of cognitive capitalism was introduced to provide criticism of liberal theories about a knowledge-based economy (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:36). The concept refers to the 'dependence of corporate enterprises on the thinking – the cognition – of its workers' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:37). Inevitably, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) argue, employers were always dependent on their employees' knowledge and intellectual abilities. However, the concept of cognitive capitalism drew specific attention to industries for which mobilisation of employees' knowledge is foundational such as the biotechnology industry, the financial analysis sector and the entertainment sector, which includes the videogame industry (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:38). Following Vercellone's (2007) argument, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:38) discuss four characteristics of these industries. The first characteristic acknowledges that these industries engage with a development of software that aims to manage and stimulate cognitive activity. The second characteristic indicates that in these industries profit is obtained by securing revenues through intellectual property rights (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:38). The third characteristic indicates that these industries operate through extensive production networks, which span different geographical regions and often operate towards a 'world-market' scope. Lastly, these industries operate by organising, controlling and exploiting immaterial labourers. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:38) therefore argue that the videogame industry encompasses

all four characteristics through cognitive dimensions of produced videogame software, emphasis on intellectual property rights, operation in the global videogame market, and exploitation of the videogame workforce.

In terms of the concept's relationship to immaterial labour it poses questions about the control and exploitation of workers, whose position in this context has been named by Berardi (2007 in Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009:38) as 'cognitariat'. Following this concept Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:38-39) argue that videogame practitioners belong to the 'cognitariat' and their working experiences illustrate the struggles of an exploited immaterial workforce.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) present an in-depth discussion about the precarious position of videogame practitioners. They do so by discussing how, despite the attractive image of the industry and the jobs therein possibly being a 'dream job' for every videogame enthusiast, the industry's structure as well as companies' organisational practices contribute to the challenging working conditions in videogame development studios. However, as O'Donnell (2014:9) points out, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's (2009) research does not pay sufficient attention to the daily work of videogame developers. Therefore, the theoretical framework of autonomist Marxism allows the researcher to position the videogame workforce more broadly within the dynamic of the global videogame industry, but presents limited engagement in discussions about the subjective experiences of videogame work or its workers' adaptational strategies.

The idea of precarisation of immaterial labourers has also been presented in Bulut's (2015a/2015b) research based on ethnographic studies in one of the North American videogame development studios. He provides an in-depth discussion on the precariousness of working in the industry, which concerns both below- and above-the-line videogame workers. He argues, echoing McRobbie (2001), that 'precarity is relationally constituted through such processes as ownership of different levels of occupational skills, blurring of work and play, the size and availability of the reserve army of labour, the presence or lack of alternative workplaces, and swinging between pleasure and pain' (2015a:199). The strengths of Bulut's (2015a/2015b) research lie in the acknowledgement of the work of below-the-line workers (videogame testers), usually neglected in studies about videogame production [12], and acknowledgement of features which contribute to various precarious working conditions in the whole industry such as outsourcing, financialising and de-skilling.

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[12] The working experiences of 'below-the-line' workers in the videogame industry are underexplored in research about videogame practitioners (with the exceptions of Kerr and Kelleher (2015) and Briziarelli (2016)).

I found Bulut's research insightful, providing a rich overview of a videogame studio's daily work activities, but I would point out some limitations of his analysis. The experience of precarious working conditions is not limited to workers' positionality 'above' or 'below' the line, which, as Bulut acknowledges, is in itself a very blurry conceptualisation. The precariousness of work is also tied to structural inequalities present in videogame industries, and in other cultural industries, such as a worker's age, gender, race and social class[13], especially with the pervasive informality of videogame workplaces (see discussions in O'Donnell, 2014; Johnson, 2013). Therefore, 'configurations' and experiences of work precariousness are more complex and ambiguous, and I think that this complexity was not fully discussed in his work. Furthermore, the question about uncertainty of employment (or precariousness) of a particular worker's experience is only partially addressed in Bulut's research and he does not engage in an in-depth investigation about how his interviewees understand their precarity and what they do to minimise the risk of unemployment.

The presentation of precarious working conditions has been investigated through different methods by Peticca-Harris et al. (2015). Their research investigates videogame labour as a project-based form of employment based on two examples of blogs written by family members of videogame practitioners: EA Spouse (2004) and Rockstar Spouse (2010). The use of these blogs to illustrate poor working conditions in the industry has been also used by other scholars investigating the videogame industry (Deuze et al., 2007; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009/2006; O'Donnell, 2014). From my perspective, these materials provide access to videogame practitioners' opinions about their labour conditions, which they may not willingly share without the guarantee of remaining anonymous. This problem indicates important characteristics of the videogame industry, where the emphasis is on the protection of reputation (Kerr, 2011:225-226; O'Donnell, 2014).

The investigation of secondary sources such as blogs or comments presents an alternative way of accessing employee opinions about their labour, however, it is difficult to disagree with O'Donnell (2014:159) who argues that this type of evidence is overused in writings about videogame labour, especially in the case of the EA Spouse blog post (EA Spouse, 2004). Furthermore, the usage of secondary sources to discuss labour conditions has significant limitations in discussing subjective experiences of work. As a result a researcher confronts a particularly specific perspective on videogame labour without the ability to fully understand either its context or the authors of the posts. It is not to say that secondary sources are not

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[13] This problem was, for example, discussed further in ethnographic studies conducted by Robin S. Johnson (2013). The persistent inequality in the industry, for example in terms of gender inequality, has been acknowledged by a wide variety of authors (see Prescott and Bogg, 2014; Harvey and Fisher, 2015).

valuable in contextualising videogame labour and the industry itself, but their usage requires further acknowledgement of the difficulties in presenting and communicating information through secondary sources.

### 2.6.3 REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOGAME WORK: FOCUS ON EASTERN EUROPE

In their article 'Regional Game Studies', Liboriussen and Martin (2016) call for further attention to investigate the 'regionality' of videogames, in contrast to seeing them solely as transnational, 'glocal' or national phenomena. The motivation for this call was embedded in the growing number of scholarships, conferences and organisations focusing on the regional aspects of videogames. The article discusses the notion of 'regional', rather than focusing on 'national', which can be considered as too narrow (Liboriussen and Martin, 2016). It is difficult to disagree with this argument, as videogame value chains are constructed in dynamic and complex networks which have national, regional and transnational character. The comparative aspect of regional research about videogame industries and their game cultures is invaluable and the further need for such research needs to be acknowledged.

Nonetheless, paying attention to national characteristics has allowed researchers to gain necessary insights into a particular national industry, its workforce and culture for example, in terms of the specificity of national labour law or national cultures. This is especially important in acknowledging the differences between countries in given regions. What are often addressed as 'post-socialist countries' encompass a rich landscape of countries with different historical pasts and socio-economic developments. These differences are visible in the ICT infrastructure regulations, national policy and law development, socio-economic development (members of the EU or not) and links to other cultural industries. Therefore, the lack of rigour in investigating 'regional' in relation to national production can result in the omitting of important differences in the socio-historical and cultural development of videogame production and videogame cultures.

However, paying attention to national socio-economic contexts also requires an acknowledgement that the socio-historical development of the videogame culture and videogame production is an inherently hybrid cultural practice. In this thesis, I approach this problem through the concept of hybridity (Kraidy, 2005). Following other scholars (Consalvo, 2002; Kerr, 2017:139; Šisler et al., 2017), an investigation of the national videogame industry requires the recognition that videogame production and consumption is shaped by various cultural tensions, exchanges and flows. The concept of 'hybridity' approached by Kraidy (2005) is oriented towards the investigation of structural factors, as he draws attention to the importance of political and economic influences that contribute to cultural hybridity, instead

of focusing primarily on media texts. Undoubtedly, as other research has also indicated, the socio-historical development of videogame culture and production in the CEE region has been shaped by various cultural exchanges including migration, a reliance on informal distribution channels or on private import from Western bloc countries (Švelch 2010/2013; Šisler et al., 2017).

Research on the development of videogame industries in the Central and Eastern European region is scarce and consists of fragmented and mostly historical[14] investigations of national industries. The example of studies about the CEE region encompasses historical investigation of informal videogame distribution networks, hardware production or gaming cultures (Švelch 2010/2013; Wasiak, 2013). Overviews of the videogame industries in the region have also appeared in academic edited collections (Budziszewski, 2015), and there have also been some attempts to provide some comparative perspectives about industry development – Czech Republic and Iran (Šisler et al., 2017), Germany, Sweden and Poland (Teipen, 2008/2016) – and discussion about ideological narratives about the Polish industry's origins (Filiciak, 2016).

The majority of the research concerns an investigation of the historical development of videogame industries and game cultures in the CEE region. They mainly drew upon analyses of historical documents (videogame magazines) and other artefacts (games, hardware) and collecting interviews about previous experiences of gaming cultures (Švelch 2010/2013). Historical research about the development of game cultures in the region is invaluable as it allows us to significantly enrich our views on national and regional videogame cultures. In this study, I will also provide a historical perspective based on an analysis of secondary documents (videogame magazines) to provide a contextual background to the discussion about worker experiences.

Apart from academic writings, there are also journalistic books that concern discussions about the development of videogame industries behind the Iron Curtain (Kluska, 2008/2014; Kluska and Rozwadowski, 2011; Kosman, 2015). These sources are descriptive rather than analytical and, similarly to narratives known in Western Europe and North America, they focus on the pioneers of the new medium, their struggles and fights with the socialist system. Furthermore, even journalistic accounts do not engage in any discussions about the contemporary industry and its workforce in Poland, as most of the published books focus on industry development until approximately 2011 (Kosman, 2015).

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[14] Videogame industries from the CEE region are mostly discussed from the economic and socio-cultural perspective of Poland and the Czech Republic.

The discussed research does not pay sufficient attention to discussions about videogame labour. The studies that do present a (somewhat limited) engagement with the problem of work in the CEE region include Filiciak's (2016) discussion about the ideological narrative about the industry's development and Teipen's (2008/2016) comparative studies of the industries in Germany, Sweden and Poland. Filiciak (2016) discusses the ideological narrative attached to the presentation of videogame cultures in Poland. His article also briefly discusses the implications of this narrative for the videogame industry, which he addresses in broad terms as 'the history of the Polish videogame industry, therefore, is more than just a take on technology conveying with art. It's also the story of capitalism in Poland' (Filiciak, 2016:2). Filiciak (2016) discusses how the positive narratives about the origins of the videogame industry and videogame culture in Poland are presented within frameworks that stress the entrepreneurial values of the Polish citizens. Filiciak (2016) argues that entrepreneurial values are visible in discourses about individuals who 'created' and distributed videogames on grey markets and in the lack of discussion about the socialist state's support in the industry's development. Furthermore, he indicates that the international success of Polish videogames is presented in a form of 'pop-nationalism' but also as a success of neoliberal capitalism and entrepreneurial spirit.

While Filiciak's (2016) work does not concern an investigation of the daily lives of videogame practitioners, and also presents a limited analysis of discourse about the videogame industry, the analysis of this narrative is invaluable for several reasons. Firstly, it allows one to establish similarities in discussing videogame industries and their ideological backgrounds between Poland and Western countries. Here, it is notably about the perspective of the industry as being modern, independent, innovative and supporting of neoliberal reform. It also presents a strong belief and support for the 'entrepreneurial spirit' of videogame pioneers. Secondly, these narratives, which as Filiciak (2016) discusses, while having little grounding in the reality of the establishment of the Polish videogame industry, present ideological connotations of the videogame industry and videogame culture in Polish society.

Teipen's (2008/2016) research discusses the Polish videogame industry from a different perspective, which is grounded in business and management studies. Her comparative studies aimed to compare the development of videogame industries and their workforces in Germany, Sweden and Poland. Teipen's research was conducted in 2005 and was based on the case studies of 12 videogame companies (6 publishers, 6 developers) and 40 interviews with videogame industry representatives. In terms of Poland, she focused on one Polish publisher (CD Projekt) and one developer (Breakpoint). Teipen's work spans a variety of subjects from the industry's market competitiveness, employment relations, and unionisation to videogame-related education. According to her research, Poland is discussed as the least competitive

industry, among the three discussed, having problems with ICT infrastructure, skills (no specific courses about videogame labour) and flexibility of employment contracts.

Teipen's studies present an advantage in their comparative value and provide some historical perspective on the industry's development, as her research was conducted 13 years ago. Therefore, they have not captured the dynamic of the industry's development during the last 10 years. Furthermore, the article does not acknowledge the socio-economic differences between these three countries, Poland's socialist past, or the development of the welfare state in Sweden. The situation further underlines the need to investigate the social, cultural and economic specificity of particular countries as this sensitivity to national differences is important not only to contextualise worker experiences but also to provide an in-depth overview of the national industry's development.

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the theoretical frameworks underlying this research project and reviewed previous studies about creative labour, including videogame labour. This project aims to investigate Polish videogame practitioners' approaches to the uncertain landscape of videogame work by drawing on approaches from the critical political economy of communication, creative labour studies and studies about videogame production. My rationale behind the usage of these approaches is to combine a socio-historical analysis of the development of the Polish videogame industry with investigation of its workers' subjective experiences of working in this environment.

This study is underlined by autonomist Marxism and governmentality-inspired approaches to creative labour. I discussed the possible contributions and limitations of these theoretical frameworks with an emphasis on challenges in addressing workers' agency. Therefore, I address this problem in my study, following discussions presented by other authors who investigated creative labour and work in post-socialist countries (Taylor and Littleton, 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Dunn, 2004), by emphasising workers' active participation in discourse internalisation, negotiation and rejection. This approach is valuable from the perspective of investigating subjective experiences of videogame work, as it has been an under-researched subject in studies about videogame labour.

This literature review addresses three gaps in research about videogame work, which this thesis aims to address. Firstly, this research contributes to the knowledge about the videogame industry's historical development, structure and its impact on working conditions from the perspective of an Eastern European country. Secondly, it positions discussions about the videogame workforce within studies about creative labour. Thirdly, it engages with

discussions about development of creative labour in post-socialist countries with an emphasis on the problem of the 'entrepreneurial self'.

The next section engages further with a discussion about the chosen theoretical frameworks and their impact on the methodology and research design applied in this study.

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This research is based on qualitative methods employed to investigate how Polish videogame practitioners understand their work-related experiences. In relation to this study, a qualitative approach is valuable as it is oriented towards searching for the meanings and complex understandings of a particular phenomenon (Patton, 1990:13-14).

This study is underpinned by a constructionist epistemology which emphasises social and cultural contexts along with an active construction of knowledge through the process of social interaction (Schwandt, 2000:197). As used in this research, this epistemological stance stresses the importance of how interviewees understand their working experiences in a particular social and cultural context. Therefore, the knowledge constructed in this research is specific to a particular understanding of labour in the industry by Polish videogame practitioners from the perspective of the industry's development from 2015-2017. Theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review are reconciled in terms of the research methodology by the use of constructionist analytics (Holestein, 2018). This approach requires an investigation of discursive practices and discourse-in-practice, therefore, it emphasises the interplay between social-cultural structures and subjective experiences of creative work.

To comply with these theoretical positions and the methodological stance, research data was collected via three methods: a review of previous research about creative labour; semi-structured interviews with Polish videogame practitioners and representatives of the Polish videogame industry's organisations; and an analysis of secondary sources (such as computer and videogame magazines and industry reports). These data collection methods contributed to the above outlined methodology as they provide an insight into the meaning created in lived experience (semi-structured interviews) and the social and cultural contextualisation of this experience (secondary data). The discussion about data collection, analysis and presentation needs to be acknowledged within the specificity of the videogame industry – specifically with its emphasis on secrecy and the inherent pervasiveness of non-disclosure agreements [15]. Therefore, in this chapter, I will also discuss the ethical challenges that I encountered while carrying out the fieldwork and my positionality in this study as a researcher.

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[15] Non-disclosure agreements (NDA) are contracts constructed to protect companies' confidential and sensitive information. These contracts can cover variety of issues including information about recruitment process or working conditions.

This chapter consists of four main sections. The first section discusses my methodological approach, underpinned by constructionist analytics. The second section focuses on research design, which uses a combination of semi-structured interviews with an analysis of secondary sources. The third section briefly discusses the analysis of the collected data and will be analysed thematically. The fourth section focuses on the ethical challenges I encountered while conducting this study.

## 3.2 FRAMEWORK OF CONSTRUCTIONIST ANALYTICS

This study is underpinned by constructionist analytics (Holstein, 2018; Gubrium and Holstein, 2011). The rationale behind the usage of these methodological and analytical stances is underpinned not only by the research questions but also by the theoretical challenges outlined in Chapter 2. This methodological approach allows me to present the subjective experiences of creative workers within ongoing discussions about their agency and in relation to socially and culturally constructed discourses in which their work is embedded (see discussion Taylor and Littleton, 2012:33-40 Banks et al., 2013:7; Scharff, 2018:143).

Constructionist analytics is positioned within a broader paradigm of social constructionism which also encompasses a variety of methodological approaches (and corresponding philosophical positions). Despite the framework limitations, which are broadly associated with a relativist ontology of this paradigm, I decided to use this framework as it offers an advantage in addressing the challenges associated with investigating subjective experiences of creative work. Constructionist analytics acknowledges the importance of investigating socially constructed discourses, but also does not see them as hegemonic and insists on paying attention to the active role of social subjects in its consumption (Holstein, 2018). Therefore, this approach focuses on discursive practice and discourse-in-practice which should be understood as an interplay:

> A continually shifting focus and concentrating on the interplay at the crossroads of discursive practice and discourse-in-practice, a constructionist analytics works against analytic totalization or reduction. It accommodates the empirical reality of choice and action allowing the analytical flexibility to capture the reflexive relation between structure and process. It restrains the propensity of a Foucauldian analytics to view all interpretations as artefacts of particular institutional arrangements or regimes of power/knowledge. At the same time, interpretative practice isn't completely fluid; it's far from socially arbitrary. In the practice of everyday life, reality is articulated in myriad sites and is socially variegated; actors methodically build up their intersubjective realities in diverse, locally nuanced, and biographically informed terms.

This allows for considerable slippage in how discourses do their work; it is far removed from the apparently uniform, hegemonic regimes of power/knowledge that emerge from some Foucauldian readings. Discernible social organisation, nonetheless is evident in the going concerns referenced by participants, to which they hold their talk and interaction accountable (Holstein, 2018:402).

This approach attempts to address difficulties discussed in previous research about creative labour – notably the challenges in how to approach the complexity of creative workers in terms of their negotiation of discourses (Taylor and Littleton, 2012; Couldry and Littler, 2011; Scharff, 2018:143). The advantage of constructionist analytics lies in its incorporation of poststructuralist influences, which are important in studies about creative labour as they place valuable focus on the dynamic of subjectivity construction. Even in alternative conceptualisations of creative workers' labour, such as Taylor and Littleton (2012) and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), the writers discussed the limitations of a poststructuralist analysis, however, they did not reject its validity. I also maintain that neo-Foucauldian approaches, despite their limitations, are still valuable in investigating creative workers. Constructionist analytics is in accordance with my approach to my interviewees, insofar as it emphasises the active role of creative workers, but does not romanticise their agency. Therefore, by drawing on this approach, the research design of this study focuses on how Polish videogame practitioners make sense of and reflect on their work experiences, and also focuses on the construction of particular discourses about videogame work. This approach is achieved by combining semi-structured interviews with an analysis of secondary sources.

## 3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of the research design is to investigate and present an in-depth understanding of how Polish videogame practitioners understand their work and how they approach the risks associated with employment in videogame development. In order to approach this research problem, I investigated personal accounts of videogame practitioners, the contemporary structure of the Polish videogame industry (found in reports) and discourses presented in dedicated media (such as videogame magazines and online materials). I combined these three areas of investigation in order to gain an in-depth understanding of practitioners' work biographies but also to contextualise them by addressing the socio-historical development of the Polish videogame industry and the discourse associated with it that has been produced by videogame-related media. The choice of research methods is also grounded in a preliminary literature search, which validated their use (see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Deuze, et al., 2007; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015).

### 3.3.1 INTERVIEWS

The primary data collection method encompasses a collection of semi-structured interviews with videogame practitioners who currently work or used to work for videogame companies in Poland. Furthermore, these practitioners' accounts are supplemented by interviews with representatives of the Polish industry's organisations. This research method enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding of videogame practitioner approaches to their working lives. I focused on these practitioners' work biographies and experiences, which could be only accessed through their reflexive recollections. It was particularly useful in the case of this research inquiry, as Seidman (2013:9) argues: 'at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience'.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, I approached the interviewees' recollections by avoiding a theoretical dichotomy between understanding them through romanticised notions of human agency and, conversely, as fully determined by socially and culturally constructed discourses. Therefore, in this research, I emphasise the interplay of between-discourse practice and discourse-in-practice and I pay attention to how interviewees internalise, reject and negotiate their positionality to discourses.

The interviews were also beneficial as they allowed me to refine my initial approach to the collection and analysis of secondary sources. At the beginning of this research project, I focused mainly on archival documents that would allow me to provide a historical and cultural context of videogame industry development in Poland. However, the interviewees directed me to additional secondary sources which they defined as important or useful (such as online sources, events that took place in the industry, portfolios and development blogs). Furthermore, some interviewees contacted me after their interviews to provide me with additional information about working in the industry that they perceived as being important, such as information about their career development and further reflections about their work. Such behaviour on the part of the interviewees further strengthens the need to focus on how interviewees reflect on their own work experiences as well as the possibility of the changing nature of the answers given between interviews. Therefore, the use of semi-structured interviews within the chosen methodology was appropriate in terms of answering this study's research question as well as providing me with additional resources.

### 3.3.1.1 SAMPLING AND INTERVIEWEES' PROFILES

Potential interviewees were invited to participate in this study on the basis of purposive sampling strategies, therefore I aimed to obtain interview samples which would provide 'information-rich cases' (Patton, 1990:169). Within this sampling approach, I also used stratified purposeful and snowballing sampling. This stratified purposeful sampling allowed me to combine typical cases with major variations within the cohort of interviewees (Patton, 1990:174). Initially, I divided the interviewees into the following categories: their gender, the type of videogame production and, finally, occupational position. These categories are informed by previous studies on videogame labour, which suggest the possible differences in these categories (see Johnson, 2013; Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2012; Ganguin and Hoblitz, 2014). The inclusion of these categories allowed me to access the views of people with different work experiences other than the stereotypical videogame practitioner, namely those who are not young, male, and work in Triple-A productions (see Weststar and Legault, 2015:9).

However, within the chosen categories, one interviewee could share multiple experiences about a given phenomenon (Mason, 1996:99). The interviews were approached through the perspective of work biography and therefore they encompassed discussions about the interviewees' career development and past work experiences. In the case of this research, for instance, workers involved in independent game development could fulfil a couple of occupational positions such as being a programmer and musician in a studio. They could also have experience in working in Triple-A companies or working in a Quality Assurance departments (QA)[16] in outsourcing company before joining independent studios.

The initial interview sample was decided based on a number of factors: the relation to the chosen categories; a data analysis tool; and time-based and financial constraints (Baker and Edwards, 2012). To comply with these limitations, I decided to use a medium-sized sample of around 40 semi-structured interviews. The final interview sample consists of 44 interviews, that is, 41 interviews with videogame producers and 3 interviews (Appendix 1 and 2) with representatives of Polish videogame organisations:

- Stowarzyszenie Producentów i Dystrybutorów Oprogramowania Rozrywkowego (Association of Producers and Distributors of Entertainment Software)
- Stowarzyszenie Polskie Gry (Polish Games Association)
- Fundacja Indie Games Polska (Indie Games Poland Foundation)

The industry's demographics need to be taken into partial consideration with regards to the interviewee sample, and these statistics and interpretations need to be approached with caution.

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[16] Quality Assurance departments (QA) are known also as videogame testing departments.

As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), statistics presented in industry-produced reports tend to pose several challenges. According to statistics published in the industry's reports, the average Polish videogame worker is a higher-educated, 31-year old man who spends on average 2.5 years in one job (Bobrowski et al., 2017:72).

The interviewee sample consisted of workers at different career stages ranging from videogame testers and early-career graphic designers to creative directors and software engineers (see Appendix 1). The majority of interviewees had university degrees, with 9 interviewees educated just to high school level, however they came from different educational backgrounds, from graphic design and computer science to sociology and archaeology. The sample consisted of 12 female and 29 male practitioners (excluding representatives of the Polish videogame industry associations). Therefore, female interviewees made up 29 per cent of the overall sample, while it has been estimated that overall in the Polish videogame industry, 15 per cent of workers are women (Bobrowski et al., 2017:73). On average, interviewees had 6 years of experience[17] in videogame development (the minimum being 1.5 years – the most being 20 years).

### 3.3.1.2 RECRUITMENT

I recruited the interviewees from a group of videogame practitioners who currently work or used to work[18] in videogame companies based in Poland; this choice was underpinned by theoretical and practical concerns. Thanks to my previous existing connections in the Polish videogame companies established during my MA research[19] and previous job, I could access potential interviewees through the support of informants. This approach was further strengthened by my familiarity with the socio-cultural context of the industry and the Polish language.

Recruitment strategies consisted of two methods: informants and snowballing sampling. The key informants were a group of people who could provide me with information about potential interviewees, and these informants facilitated access to practitioners through trusted recommendations (King and Harrocks, 2010:31-32). I was keen on using informant help as I was concerned that facilitating the recruitment of interviewees via videogame companies could result in discouraging potential interviewees from participating. These types of

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[17] This estimation is based on an interviewee's combined work experience and not on a job tenure in a single company.
[18] Some of the interviewees changed their workplaces or were in-between workplaces at the time of interview. For example, two of interviewees were moving to Sweden or Germany during the time of my fieldwork.
[19] My MA research explores working practices of independent Polish videogame developers.

difficulties (in terms of access to the videogame industry and its workers) have also been discussed in previous research (Kerr and Kelleher, 2015:181; Ruggill et al., 2018:5).

Meanwhile, my informants also played an active role in the recruitment process – therefore, their potential impact on the study needed to be acknowledged and monitored. I worked with my informants during the recruitment process and I provided them with clear recruitment categories. I also asked potential interviewees to contact me directly regarding their interest in the study in order to preserve their privacy.

The recruitment process did not rely solely on the help of initial informants; I also recruited further interviewees via the snowballing sampling method. Snowballing sampling turned out to be the most effective method, as it allowed me to diversify sources through which I accessed interviewees as well as to reach out to interviewees with different occupational backgrounds (including women engineers, scriptwriters, outsourced testers). It also allowed me to establish a more credible connection with potential interviewees through the trusted recommendations of their colleagues.

### 3.3.1.3 FIELDWORK AND PRACTICALITIES

My fieldwork was carried out in Warsaw, in the Masovian region of Poland where the majority of videogame companies are situated. I conducted my interviews either in person or via Skype. In cases where the interviewees were located in other regions or countries[20], I interviewed them via Skype.

An interview guide was prepared based on a preliminary literature search and analysis of secondary sources which indicated potentially important themes in researching videogame labour such as working conditions (work hours, remuneration and job tenure), work-life balance or self-realisation (work satisfaction and emotional attachment to work/product). The interview guide included a series of main themes about videogame work, and these themes consisted of open questions and possible further probes. The use of the interview guide was an iterative process of establishing an understanding between me and my interviewees – the interview guide required constant reflection in terms of its application with interviewees from different occupational groups. The chosen design of interview guide allowed me to include deductive and indicative themes which were constructed during this research (see section: Preparation and Presentation of Data). The initial interview guide was tested during pilot interviews conducted between October and November 2015. The pilot interviews revealed the

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[20]Two interviewees (Ola, QA and Patryk, QA) were placed outside Poland during my fieldwork, therefore, I used Skype to contact them.

need to improve the interview guide by adding certain questions (for example, about self-employment in Poland and about working experiences outside Poland). The changes were applied and a new interview guide was used in interviews conducted from December 2015 onwards.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes[21] and were audio-recorded. To ensure understanding about the purpose of the research, interviewees were provided with a consent form and information sheet in both Polish and English language versions (section 3.4; Appendix 3 and 4). I conducted interviews with industry representatives after I had collected 41 interviews with videogame practitioners as they gave me a more comprehensive perspective about working conditions in the videogame industry and the kinds of support that videogame practitioners need.

The interviewees were informed about the possibility of contacting me before and after their interviews in case of any further questions or problems. Five of the interviewees decided to contact me post-interview to provide me with additional information about their work in the videogame industry. This additional information ranged from reflections about what they thought could be important for this study, reflections on changes in their responses to the interview questions or to provide some insights into their further career development. The interviewees shared their reflections via Skype, email or scheduled another interview with me. This group of interviewees consisted of younger workers (in their mid-20s) at the beginning of their careers in the industry, therefore it is possible that they felt more precarity in their jobs and wanted to discuss their work experiences in greater depth. These situations did not just emphasise the importance of temporality in interviews, which could be discussed as a methodological challenge; they also demonstrated the active process of the interviewees' reflections on their work experiences. I will come back to these reflections in the empirical chapters so that I can better contextualise the interviewees' responses.

Skype interviews were conducted in the circumstances where an interviewee was not able to meet me in person or was then living in a different city/country (King and Horrocks, 2010:82). The use of the Skype application created differences in relationships between interviewee and interviewer which need to be acknowledged. The problem with Skype interviews I noticed in my studies refers to some interviewees' different perspectives of a Skype interview (namely their social expectations of a Skype interview), which King and Horrocks (2010:83) described as a 'task oriented approach' in which some interviewees are prepared to give a more factual interview than conversation. This problem was resolved by clearly outlining to the

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[21] The shortest interview lasted 45 minutes; the longest was 3 hours.

interviewees the purpose of the interviews and the inherent nature of the questions. However, during the Skype interviews I realised that they could be a valuable application, as they allowed interviewees to record and send to me certain information or send me particular files (such as links to their portfolios). This was especially important in cases where an interviewee felt more comfortable conversing in the written rather than oral communication form (see Magda's quote Chapter 9).

### 3.3.2 SECONDARY DATA

The knowledge gained through the interviews was supplemented by an investigation of secondary sources. This research used historical and contemporary secondary sources to contextualise the Polish videogame industry and its workforce. The secondary sources were identified based on their importance in providing a political-economic perspective on the industry's development (reports), the socio-cultural significance for the development of videogame culture in Poland (videogame magazines and online resources) and that was referred to as being important by the interviewees (online sources). In this study, the secondary data came from three sources:

- Polish computing and videogame magazines (such as *Bajtek* and *Gambler*).
- Industry reports from the videogame industry and cultural sector in Poland, and reports about employment.
- Online materials: Polish videogame website (website Polygamia.pl).

The first secondary data source encompasses the videogame/computing magazines *Bajtek* (1985–1989) and *Gambler* (1993–1999). These two publications were chosen for the purposes of this study because of their socio-cultural significance for Polish videogame culture and their focus on the videogame industry (Kosman, 2015; Budziszewski, 2015). While *Bajtek* continued to be published after 1989, the magazine changed its focus primarily to being a computer magazine. After the preliminary analysis of the 60 issues of *Bajtek* (1985-1989), I selected and coded 30 articles and information related to Polish videogame culture. The second magazine used in this study, *Gambler*, was chosen as it is one of few videogame magazines in Poland that not only focuses on videogames themselves but also publishes information about the Polish videogame industry. After the preliminary analysis of 74 issues of this magazine (1993-1999), I coded 10 articles related to the Polish videogame industry. Overall, the coded magazines data comprised 40 articles about the Polish videogame industry and videogame culture.

The second secondary data source consists of four reports about the Polish videogame industry published between 2013 and 2017. This includes two major reports about the Polish videogame industry (The State of the Polish Videogame Industry from 2015 and 2017), which were prepared with the support of the Polish government (the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage) and industry representatives (Polish Games Association, Indie Games Foundation) (Bobrowski et al., 2015/2017). The other two reports present data about the workforce in the Polish videogame industry (Draug, 2013) along with analysis of the Polish industry conducted by the Polish embassy in Berlin (Liebe and Tielebier, 2014). The third secondary data source consists of online materials such as articles and news about the Polish videogame industry published on the Polygamia.pl website. Overall, the collected materials from websites comprises 12 articles about the Polish videogame industry and 28 short news items about the industry's events between 2013 and 2017.

The investigation of secondary sources such as videogame magazines, press interviews, blog posts and companies' post-mortem documentation is widely used in research about videogame labour (see Martin and Deuze, 2009; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Deuze et al., 2007; Weststar, 2015). The usage of secondary sources is informed by related academic literature which suggests that videogame labour has particular cultural and social connotations, which include: a passion for videogames; an association with long working hours ethos; and the promotion of self-entrepreneurism (see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:53-65; Kline et al., 2003:198-205). It can be argued that the source of these connotations was presented as being embedded in discourse about videogame labour, also presented in the media, and suggested that it may relate to a particular perception about working in the industry. Furthermore, according to previously conducted research, the videogame industry also supports the creation of particular discourses about labour in the industry (see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Dymek, 2012). While the Polish videogame industry has never been systematically investigated, the aforementioned secondary sources (especially archival documents and online materials) can provide some context about the Polish industry's origins and representation which cannot be accessed through other sources (Mason, 1996:73). The previous research based on the investigation of videogame culture through secondary sources provides valuable insights into the development of the discourse about videogame culture (see Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Nonetheless, the documentary research has its limitations and ethical considerations which need to be acknowledged. From an ethical perspective, the investigation of these materials needs to be presented in context and with a clear presentation of the materials' limitations. The investigation of documents does not focus on a presentation of true events, but on the representation of a given phenomenon through documentary materials which are socially and

culturally constructed and therefore limited by their production context (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011:77).

In terms of access to these sources, there are reports and online sources (development blogs and videogame websites) that include information and which are broadly circulated and accessible to a wider public. Computing and videogame magazines were taken from my personal collection and present the most open-to-the-public kind of documentary sources as they are printed for public circulation and are accessible to everyone (Scott, 1990:15).

## 3.4 PREPARATION AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

### 3.4.1 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The collected data was analysed through thematic analysis. Although thematic analysis has only relatively recently gained the status of a research analysis method on its own merits, it has previously been a widely-used analysis method (Willig, 2013:58; Bryman, 2012:578, Braun and Clarke, 2006:77).

Thematic analysis is efficient in the investigation of people's ways of thinking about a particular phenomenon and media representation (Willig, 2013:59). The advantages of thematic analysis include: epistemological and theoretical flexibility; a usefulness in providing a 'thick' description; and emphasising similarities as well as differences in a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006:97; Guest et al., 2012:17-18). I coded themes through a hybrid approach by combining inductive and deductive codes. The interview schedule was designed to guarantee the development of deductive and inductive themes from the collected data. The construction of the former was informed by the literature whereas the latter were co-constructed during the interviews (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006:4). I provided an analysis on an interpretative level to identify 'the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:84, italics in original).

The whole data set was analysed via thematic analysis, including interviews (written and oral additional information), fieldwork notes, and secondary sources. The final code book consists of 11 major themes (from motivation to work in the industry, and from working conditions to characteristics of the Polish videogame industry), and each theme was divided into 3-4 sub-themes which included both deductive and inductive codes. The majority of inductive codes focused on the specificity of the Polish videogame industry.

The limitations of thematic analysis are associated with its epistemological and theoretical flexibility, as well as the reliance on a researcher's interpretation (Guest et al., 2012:10). Willig

(2013:65) argues that such flexibility might be problematic, as it requires from the researcher a clear explanation of their epistemological stances. I do not perceive this to be a particular disadvantage. First and foremost, every piece of research should be addressed from a clear epistemological standpoint. The difference between thematic analysis and other analytical methods lies only in the fact that thematic analysis lacks a clear epistemology which is embedded in the previous historical development of this method. Furthermore, this epistemological and theoretical flexibility allows one to analyse various types of research data, which is beneficial with regards to this research as I combined different data collection methods (Guest et al., 2012:17).

It is also argued that thematic analysis relies on the researcher's interpretation, especially in relation to the use of deductive codes (Willig, 2013:65). This problem also concerns the assurance of research validity and reliability (Guest et al., 2012:86-85). In response to this concern, my study employs a hybrid approach to the thematic analysis presented by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006:4). Furthermore, to ensure the quality of my analysis, I built transparency into it by indicating my epistemological stance, providing the evidence of the logical development of themes, and by acknowledging my active role, as a researcher, in the co-construction of knowledge (Braun and Clarke, 2006:96).

### 3.4.2 TRANSCRIPTIONS

I decided to provide verbatim transcriptions of my interviews because of my previous experiences in the preparation of data and to ensure rigour of analysis (Guest et al., 2012:96). I prepared the transcriptions myself and I informed the interviewees that no one else would have access to the resulting audio recordings. Therefore, interviewees could access a transcription of their own interview only on demand. I encountered only one interviewee (Jarek, QA) who asked for a transcription but he did not make any changes to the transcript. However, he expressed disappointment about the lack of fluency in his responses, which emphasised the differences between the interviewees' perception about the interview and transcription: 'Although sharing transcripts might be driven by a desire to empower interviewees in the process, it can be experienced as threatening; underlying the speakers' ungrammatical style and prompting worry over how they are represented' (Forbat and Henderson, 2005:114). Therefore, interviewees were reminded that a verbatim transcription reflects fragmented and not fluent characteristics of oral communication.

The process of transcription preparation is one which forces you to make choices about how to present your data. Inevitably, some depth of the collected data was missing from the transcription which did not include all non-verbal information or phonetic presentation of language. Interviews were conducted in the Polish language and therefore, to prepare material

for my thesis, I needed to translate the collected data. I decided to perform this translation by myself – not only because of my familiarity with the context of the data collection but also because of issues of anonymity in this study, as I promised the interviewees that I would be the only one with access to the audio-recordings while preparing the transcriptions (Temple and Young, 2004).

It is worth acknowledging that the process of translation took place throughout this research project, from preparation of an interview guide and data collection to data presentation. Firstly, I translated research materials, including an interview guide, from English to Polish. This process required a great sensitivity to the local socio-cultural context and dynamic of the interview process. I checked the viability of an initial interview guide and questions during pilot interviews conducted between October and November 2015. The pilot interviews revealed that certain terms and phrases commonly used in research about creative labour in English-speaking countries would be challenging to translate directly into Polish and required further explanation for interviewees. These terms included, for example, 'working conditions' (pl. *warunki pracy*), as interviewees understood this term primarily as an inquiry about health and safety in their workplaces. To overcome this problem I divided the relevant interview question into sub-questions to probe different elements of broadly defined 'working conditions', from 'employment relations' and 'salaries' to 'benefits' and 'social protection'. While the problem of interviewees' understanding of 'working conditions' concerned my attempt to directly translate this term into the Polish language, interviews collected in Poland also required me to pay greater attention to the country's socio-cultural contexts. For instance, the use of the word 'gender' has specific socio-cultural connotations in Poland because of the pejorative connotations attributed to the term through campaigns promoted by the Catholic Church (see discussion in Chapter 7). This approach to translation in qualitative research also indicates that it is not just a multi-layered process requiring sensitivity to specific socio-cultural contexts but it is also an iterative process requiring constant reflection by the researcher on research choices.

Secondly, after the data collection process, I undertook a thematic analysis of interviews, fieldwork notes and secondary sources in the Polish language. I decided to analyse the collected data in Polish to assure that an immediate translation of the collected data into English did not result in a loss of context-specific meaning provided by interviewees. Therefore, I provided verbatim transcriptions of the collected data interviews in Polish, however, I did not perform verbatim translations of all Polish language data into English. Instead, I first provided verbatim translations of extracts from the interviews. This first stage of translation provided me with excerpts that maintained elements of Polish grammatical

structure and vocabulary. This stage allowed me to rethink and revise verbatim translations of excerpts to find the closest possible grammatical structures/vocabulary in the English language. During the second stage of the translation process, I revised quotes to present them in a coherent grammatical manner with vocabulary used in English. The second stage presented some difficulties as the manner in which interviewees expressed themselves during interviews can be fragmented and incoherent, as in the case of every oral communication, but also marked by local socio-cultural references, grammatical structures and colloquialisms.

Consequently, the need for a preparation of research materials to be used in another language, attentiveness to socio-cultural context during data collection and interviews' translations raises questions about additional interpretation of data. Inevitably during the process of translation, some meanings (such as grammar usage, culturally/socially specific expression) could be missed; 'translating a data collection event from one language to another adds an additional layer of complexity that can affect both the validity and reliability of data' (Guest et al., 2012:96). To ensure a fair and ethical interpretation of the data based on the translated material I provided information about a specific cultural context in the footnotes and include extended abstracts of quotes to contextualise translated quotes.

### 3.4.3 RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity refers to an active process which requires: 'scrutiny, reflection, and interrogation of the data, the researcher, the interviewees, and the context they inhabit' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004:273-274). Reflexivity is also dependent on the critical reflection of the relationships between researcher and interviewees. The complexity of these relationships can be expressed in the following way: 'The relationship changes according to the researcher's personality, world view, ethnic and social background, perceptions derived from the researchers' professional discipline, the qualitative paradigm, the theoretical base of the research, the type of the research and its goals, the research methodology' (Karnich-Miller et al., 2009:280).

My aim was to approach the interviewees as experts in terms of their working experiences and the Polish videogame industry. However, the power dynamic during the interviews I conducted shifted according to the types of interviewees I approached – this power dynamic could depend on an interviewee's occupational position, work experience, previous experience in giving interviews, age and gender. The initial establishment of rapport with the interviewees was partially supported via informants and other interviewees (snowballing) who introduced me to potential interviewees as trustworthy people. This approach was also important given

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the account of 'the culture of secrecy' around videogame production and the pervasiveness of non-disclosure agreements in the industry (see O'Donnell, 2014:205-207). The interviewees were curious about my interest in the Polish videogame industry, as they did not expect that someone from a UK institution would want to talk about Poland (and especially about videogames). Some of the potential interviewees that I approached were also not used to participating in research interviews, while others did have some experience of giving journalistic interviews. Nonetheless, I took some time to explain my study to my interviewees along with my approach to the interviews and how the interviews would be analysed.

While commonalities between myself and the interviewees cannot be simply assumed, I shared with them similarities in socio-cultural and economic background as majority of the interviewees were white, Polish citizens from middle class families. The fact of being an 'insider' to this specific socio-cultural context was both a benefit and a challenge and required me to pay more attention to my reflexivity not only in the process of interviewing but also during data analysis.

Defining my position as an 'insider' or 'outsider' also depended on my familiarity with the videogame culture. My prior experience with the Polish videogame industry and familiarity with videogames was also tested by the interviewees, and inevitably it also translated into establishing a power dynamic during the interviews. It was possible to divide the interviewees into two groups. The first group consisted of interviewees who assumed my interest in the industry and videogames was because of my thesis subject. The interviewees within this group approached me more as an 'insider' to their culture. The second group consisted of interviewees who tried to figure out my positionality to the videogame culture in implicit or explicit ways. In its explicit form, some of the interviewees asked me extensive questions about my research project and my interest in this topic before the interview, whereas others would openly ask me questions during the interviews, such as: 'Do you play videogames?' and 'What kind of videogames do you play?' These questions ranged from being more to less specific as they were also asked in relation to specific events in the videogame industry, companies or inside-jokes ('Do you know Valve?', 'Do you remember when you play *World of Warcraft* and…?'). It could be argued that these questions were associated with my gender and with broader socio-cultural perspectives that women tend not to play videogames (Thornham, 2008). However, these types of questions could also mean that the interviewees were trying to establish how to answer the interview questions.

Furthermore, the power dynamic during the interviews was also dependent on the occupational position of a given interviewee. Interviewees from higher occupational positions and from occupational positions which have extensive contact with media and journalists were not only

more relaxed during the interviews but also more likely to provide 'pre-established' answers and evasive techniques in order to avoid answering uncomfortable questions. This approach was especially visible among the interviewees who worked as producers. Younger interviewees and interviewees, who were rarely interviewed about their work, were more casual and open in discussing their working conditions or providing me with additional information.

## 3.5 ETHICS

Any and all ethical concerns have been addressed through compliance with procedural ethics presented by the University of Leeds research committee[22] and 'ethics in practice', which refers to the application of ethical sensitivity throughout the research process (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004:261-280). This approach indicated that a sense of ethics reaches beyond scientific knowledge and is embedded in an individual's perception and adjustment to a particular research situation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009:67). This approach does not encourage the abandonment of ethical guidelines but provides flexibility and considers the researcher's ethical proficiency and influences of the research context. This approach, known as 'ethics in practice', was necessary in this research as ethical challenges occurred during the fieldwork phase.

### 3.5.1 INFORMED CONSENT AND VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

The case of informed consent is understood here as: 'informing the research interviewees about the overall purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design, as well as of any possible risk and benefits from participation in the research project' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009:70). I undertook several steps to ensure that a negotiation of informed consent and participation in this study would be possible at different stages of this inquiry.

The use of snowballing as a recruitment method also required me to take necessary ethical precautions in order to ensure the interviewees' voluntary participation (King and Horrocks, 2010:34). In the peer-to-peer relations I could not be fully aware of relationships between the informants and further interviewees. This is especially important in the context of Poland and considering the small-scale nature of its industry. I decided to ask the informants to instruct

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[22] This research was approved by the University of Leeds Research Ethical Committee on 28th July 2015. The ethical review was submitted with all supporting documents (including an interview guide, information sheet and consent form). As this research was carried out in Poland, a risk assessment was also prepared to ensure my familiarity with the University's policy on overseas research.

any potential interviewees to contact me directly to avoid any situations where participation in this study would not be voluntary. Furthermore, after contacting interviewees with regards to scheduling an interview date, I then contacted potential interviewees twice to confirm their participation. Some of the potential interviewees did not reply to my emails and, consequently, I did not further pursue their participation in the study.

The interviewees who did take part were provided with an information sheet and a consent form so as to familiarise themselves with the research goals and to make a conscious decision about participating in this study. Interviewees also had the chance to contact me directly to discuss their concerns about their participation. The information sheet included information about the purpose of the research, the interview process, data collection purpose, data storage and anonymity issues (see Appendix 3). The interviewees gave their informed consent in both written and oral form. The introduction of oral consent was necessary in Skype interviews, as in this case a signed copy of the consent form was sent by an interviewee after interview. At the beginning of each interview, I asked the interviewees once more if they had read the information sheet and if they required any further clarification (this part was also audio-recorded).

Although I provided the interviewees with the most accurate information about the study to my knowledge, the interviewees undoubtedly had a more comprehensive impression about their participation in the study after their interviews (King and Horrocks, 2010:110). Therefore, the interviewees had the right to withdraw from the study at any point during the time of investigation. Should that have been the case, all collected materials would be destroyed. They also had the right to refuse to answer any particular question or provide answers 'off the record' for my knowledge but not for public use. I did not encounter any interviewee who wanted to withdraw from the study. However, some interviewees refused to answer particular questions or negotiated with me the publication of specific information. Unsurprisingly, this set of information was usually connected with information that is protected under non-disclosure agreements with companies, such as current game titles, specificities of production processes and forms of employment/remuneration.

### 3.5.2 ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

The importance of preservation of anonymity and confidentiality of data is grounded in the subject of this research, associated with the specificity of the videogame industry and the scope of the inquiry. The purpose of the interviews is associated with the discussion about an interviewee's work experiences and conditions; these subjects are sensitive in light of the industry's approach to data security and reputation management. This approach also further

exemplified the culture of secrecy around videogame production as discussed by O'Donnell (2014:147-148; 205-207) (see Chapter 2).

The specificity of the videogame industry refers to increased efforts to protect videogame companies' public fronts and the possibility of accessing confidential information (such as information about their games and production details) (Kerr, 2011:226). This policy is often even stricter in companies which provide services to other companies (such as outsourcing companies). This problem was mentioned by interviewees, as they discussed how their companies protect the security of their data and require employees to sign non-disclosure agreements. The concerns of discussing working conditions in the industry are also familiar to the employees as working in the industry tends to be presented in the media or by videogame workers relatives as a controversial subject (see EA Spouse, 2004; Rockstar Spouse, 2010).

Furthermore, as the research concerns the investigation of a national industry, the anonymity of the interviewees needed to be particularly preserved because of its small size – approximately 400 videogame companies (Bobrowski et al., 2017:68). During their interviews, the interviewees supported this perspective on the industry by presenting the industry as extremely 'social' and one in which 'everyone knows everyone' (see Chapter 5 and 6). Therefore, some of the interviewees expressed concerns about the possibility of being identified in this research before and during their interviews. These concerns were especially expressed by the younger interviewees of the group who represented lower positions in the industry (such as videogame testers, early-career workers), therefore special precautions towards securing their anonymity and the confidentiality of data were put in place to protect the more vulnerable interviewees.

The interviewees needed the guarantee that their anonymity would be preserved as their interviews could include information which could harm their career development and, potentially, the interests of third parties. The interviewees expressed in a written form of consent that they agreed to be represented anonymously. This strategy was applied to all interviews apart from those held with representatives of Polish videogame associations who could be easily identified even after being made anonymous. This was, for example, the case with the Association of Producers and Distributors of Entertainment Software (pl. *Stowarzyszenie Producentów i Dystrybutorów Oprogramowania Rozrywkowego*), which is in fact organised and coordinated by one person. In these situations I discussed the problem with the interviewees and they agreed to be presented under their own names. I received their oral consent, which was audio-recorded. However, my interviews with the industry's representatives were approached differently in this study compared with videogame practitioners, as they were conducted to obtain further information in order to contextualise

the situation of videogame practitioners in Poland and access potential support from the industry.

To protect videogame practitioners and third parties I decided to remove all potentially identifiable information from transcriptions and ensure a secure storage of data for audio-recordings and transcriptions. To ensure the privacy of my interviewees I anonymised their personal characteristics in my transcriptions by using pseudonyms or vague descriptions (University of Leeds, 2014:3)[23]. Therefore, interviewees are introduced in this thesis under randomly assigned names. Furthermore, their occupational positions are also concealed under vague descriptions.

The research data has been stored on a portable hard drive, one encrypted by University IT services, so that the data collected in Poland could be encrypted in place immediately after an interview. Physical copies of research documentation (informed consents) were deposited in a locked storage space provided by the University. Interviewees were informed about the location of the data storage along with further dissemination of knowledge gained through the interviews. Contact details of the interviewees and their names were separated from the transcriptions. Transcriptions from the interviews were made available to the interviewees on demand, should they have wanted to add or remove their comments or for information.

## 3.6 CONCLUSION

This investigation of subjective experiences of working in the Polish videogame industry is positioned within qualitative approaches and constructionist analytics. I chose this paradigm to acknowledge the theoretical stances outlined in Chapter 2 as well as to focus on how videogame practitioners construct meaning about their work within the particular socio-cultural context of the Polish videogame industry.

This research is based on three data collection methods: a) a review of previous literature about cultural labour; b) providing contextual and historical background by analysing archival and contemporary secondary materials about the Polish videogame industry; and c) 41 semi-structured interviews with Polish videogame practitioners and 3 interviews with representatives of the Polish videogame industry.

The combination of this data allowed me to gain in-depth insights into the working experiences of Polish videogame practitioners from a variety of occupational backgrounds and

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[23] I removed companies' names and games' titles from transcriptions. They appeared in transcriptions as [company's name] and [game title].

contextualise them through an analysis of a variety of secondary sources (historical and contemporary). Furthermore, interviews with the industry representatives allowed me to gain an understanding about the development of the videogame industry in Poland, its co-operation with the Polish government, and possible practitioner support. During the process of data collection and preparation I needed to be attuned to the specificity of the videogame industry – understood here through its emphasis on data protection, reputation management and the culture of secrecy. These problems have been acknowledged by other scholars who have investigated workers in the industry (Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; 181; Ruggill et al., 2018:5).

The following six empirical chapters present an analysis and discussion based on the research design outlined above. These chapters focus on providing a socio-historical understanding of the development of the Polish videogame industry and its workforce as well as on how Polish videogame practitioners understand their work and how they navigate through the highly uncertain landscape of creative labour.

# CHAPTER 4: SOCIO-HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the development of the Polish videogame industry and its contemporary structure, which will allow me to contextualise the interviewees' understandings of their work and their work experiences. Therefore, to understand the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity among videogame practitioners, attention needs to be focused on local social, economic and political conditions.

The aims of this chapter are three-fold. Firstly, in this chapter I will present the Polish videogame industry and videogame culture as a hybrid culture which was formed through various economic and political but also cultural forces. Secondly, I will discuss the structure of the Polish videogame industry and its contribution to the precarious situation of videogame development companies. Thirdly, I will also outline government-initiated discourse about entrepreneurial values and videogame production and how this discourse has not encompassed any acknowledgment of the precarisation of employment relations in Poland, including in the videogame industry.

Polish videogame production is recognised as a site of various cultural and economic forces which are approached through the concept of hybridity (Kraidy, 2005). An investigation of the videogame industry and videogame culture in post-socialist countries through the concept of hybridity presents an advantage in acknowledging the multiplicity of cultural flows which shape not only videogame texts but also videogame industries. Therefore, following other scholars who approach videogame production as hybrid communicative practice (Consalvo, 2006; Kerr, 2017:139; Šisler et al., 2017), in this section I discuss the development of the Polish videogame industry and videogame culture through the acknowledgement that:

> local video game development weaves together diverse, contradictory processes: global cultural flows, media practices of nation-states, the visions and engagements of private entrepreneurs, and migration and appropriation of global games genres. As a result, video game production and consumption are intrinsically hybrid-cultural practices that accommodate cross-cultural encounters. (Šisler et al., 2017:3858)

Furthermore, this chapter presents how the structure of the Polish videogame industry contributes to the unstable situation of Polish videogame developers and, consequently, how their situation impacts the industry's workforce. The majority of videogame developers worldwide operate in high risk environments and asymmetric power relations (see discussion

in Nichols, 2014). However, how this economic risk is dealt with by videogame developers differs regarding the economic and political situation in a given nation; for example, regarding support which the industry can obtain from the state, national industry structure, or security provided by the state at large (see Jørgensen et al., 2017; Jørgensen, 2017).

In this chapter, I argue that the government's interest in the videogame industry is motivated by the sector's possible contribution to the national economy. However, similarly to the 'creative industries' debate (see Garnham, 2005), this support rarely acknowledges the challenging working conditions in the videogame industry. Furthermore, the government engages in promoting an image of videogame practitioners as forerunners of the Polish digital economy by emphasising their entrepreneurial values that are visible in reports and social campaigns supported by the government (such as programuj.gov.pl). The government's emphasis on entrepreneurship is coherent with progressing neoliberal reforms in the country, which, as I will discuss, contributed to increasing individualisation of risk associated with employment from the introduction of a variety of flexible contracts to the dismantling of the welfare system (see Hardy, 2009). A brief investigation of socio-economic changes which have led to the increasing precarisation of employment in Poland is important from the perspective of the videogame industry as, according to provided statistics, 75 per cent of workers are hired on precarious contracts (Bobrowski et al., 2017:72).

This chapter consists of three main sections. The first section discusses the socio-historical development of the industry and implications of this development for establishing videogame production in Poland. The second part presents the structure of the Polish videogame industry. The last section engages with discussion about the Polish government's celebratory approaches to the industry's economic potential. However, these celebratory accounts do not consider the challenging working conditions experienced by videogame practitioners, along with the ongoing precarisation of work in Poland.

## 4.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY AND CULTURE IN POLAND

### 4.2.1 INFORMAL DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIDEOGAME CULTURE

The acknowledgement of connections between political economic and cultural contexts is crucial in understanding the development of the videogame industry and videogame culture in post-socialist countries (see also Švelch, 2010/2013). In this section, I focus on discussing the

cultural hybridity of the Polish videogame industry and culture from two perspectives: the development of Polish videogame cultures (role of grey technology markets); and the videogame industry (the implications of software piracy on the industry's development).

After World War II, Polish citizens had limited access to computer hardware and software because of the inefficiency of domestic production, economic isolation and ideology of the communist party. In 1949, the USA and its Western allies established a committee known as the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (CoCom) to regulate a technology transfer to the Eastern bloc countries (Budziszewski, 2015:400). The imposed embargo prevented Central and Eastern European countries from obtaining technological equipment and exchanging engineering knowledge (Jarząbek, 2010:44). Until 1986 the embargo included 8-bit computers, which could not be imported to Poland through legal channels (Kosman, 2015:35). The first Polish computers were used, as in the USSR and the USA, for military purposes and then gained the attention of universities and research institutes (Kluska, 2014). However, in the communist countries, industrial and technological resources belonged entirely to the government, and they were mainly used to support the military potential of the USSR and its satellites (Siwiński, 1985:21), as the government decided to limit and then forbid any forms of private economic initiatives (Jezierski and Leszczyńska, 2003:472). Because of the USSR countries' orientation toward computers as strategic military technology and the lack of private initiative, computers were not easily accessible to Polish citizens (Kluska, 2014). In contrast, in the USA and Western European countries computing technology was developed in cooperation between the military sector and private companies. The lack of restrictions on private initiative in the Western bloc countries allowed for the faster development of computers for universal use (such as commercial use) than in the Eastern bloc countries (Haigh, 2010:8-9).

As of 1985, Polish citizens could purchase videogame hardware through state-owned shops which distributed rarely accessible Western goods, ranging from jeans to Atari computers, in exchange for foreign currency (Kluska, 2008:49). However, the prices of hardware proposed by state-owned shops were unaffordable for the average citizen. Computers and software accessed through licensed sources, therefore, remained a luxury mostly acquired by research institutions, governmental administrations or were exported to other communist countries (Kluska, 2014).

The then political and economic situation in communist Poland created an economic niche that was filled by informal economy activities such as grey technology markets (or electronic bazaars). Acquiring hardware and software via private import or grey technology markets was widely popular in Poland and other CEE countries (Švelch, 2013:164). The private import and

the appearance of hardware and software on grey markets enabled Polish citizens to buy computers and videogames for more affordable prices. Polish microcomputer production could not fulfil market demand, and private import into Poland was mainly focused on selling Western microcomputers (mostly from the UK) (Polański, 1985:24).

Kraidy (2005:5) argues that the point of emergence of hybrid communicative practice is associated with the movement of cultural commodities and the movement of people through migration. The first type of movement is associated with commerce and geostrategic considerations (acknowledged as an exchange of ideas, commodities and migration), while the second concerns poverty, repression and the promise of upward mobility and human migration. In the context of emerging Polish computing, and the consequent videogame industry, these two types of movement are visible from international companies' expansions of their operations to Central and Eastern Europe (to benefit from lower labour costs) as well as the private import of micro-computers into Poland through informal distribution channels.

In the magazine *Horyzonty Techniki* (Technic's Horizons) from 1987, Szperkowicz discussed the phenomenon of grey technology markets thus: 'In a country drowning in the economic crises, tossed around by political emotions we observed an extensive, solvent computer market' (1987:32). According to a Polish customs report from 1986, 30,000 microcomputers were imported to the country via legal distributors year-on-year, while the number of computers imported illegally was estimated at around 100,000 microcomputers a year (Szperkowicz, 1987:32). The popularity of grey technology markets was also visible in the computer press which printed information about hardware and software prices and advice for prospective buyers (*'We would not advise buying Sharp computers as Polish manuals are not yet available on the market'* (Bajtek, 1987:27)).

The informal economy of Eastern bloc countries should not be considered through the prism of its 'illegality' as in the context of communist and post-communist countries: '(…) distinctions between legal and illegal conduct, between productive trade and non-productive piracy, and between formal and informal economies are inevitably leaky' (Lobato and Thomas, 2015:62). Until 1994, the informal distribution of software (including videogames) was permitted because copyright law did not exist. Furthermore, the communist government was not interested in the prohibition of the informal economy activities, as they fulfilled the needs of society and supplemented the shortages of a centrally planned economy (Feldbrugge, 1984:531-532). Nonetheless, the supposed existence of grey technology markets outside the regulation of the communist government was visible in their moniker as 'islands of capitalism' (Dunn, 2004:29).

According to computer magazines from the 1980s, videogames were the most popular form of software sold on grey technology markets. As one of the articles in the magazine *Komputer* (1987:56) reported:

> As the usual majority of space is taken by videogames. […] All novelties are available on the market a couple of weeks after their official releases. The easiest way is to buy the whole set on a cassette or a disc. The offer can please every player, and we are sure that you would not be able to remember all the titles offered on the market. The technology market's economic operation is spontaneous, and that is why we can see working economic reform therein.

The sale of illegally copied software was a profitable activity – according to estimates by *Gambler* magazine, a person with a computer and working tape recorder could earn approximately 1050 PLN per month [approximately £212.81] (Piekara, 1999:76-78). Videogames were sold as whole sets – usually limited by the memory space of a disc or a cassette. Authorship of videogames was rarely acknowledged, including the original titles of videogames, which were replaced by Polish titles or reference to possible videogame genres/themes such as 'military', 'for children' or 'sport' (Wasiak, 2013:222).

Furthermore, informal distribution channels not only had an implication for the development of videogame culture (regarding software purchase and consumption) but also in terms of hardware use. In communist Poland, micro-computers were more popular than consoles, as consoles were not as cost-effective to import (Kluska, 2008:99). It was easier to sell a microcomputer as it could be acquired for various reasons, ranging from administrative use to entertainment (Kluska, 2008:99). The other advantage of selling computers as gaming platforms lay in their relatively easier software piracy mechanism, which could not be found in videogame cartridges that came with consoles (Kluska and Rozwadowski, 2011).

Computer and videogame magazines established at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s played a significant role in the propagation of videogame culture in Poland (Kluska, 2008:46-50). Similarly to their Western counterparts, they shaped early videogame culture discourse about videogames, gaming preferences and community values (Kirkpatrick, 2015). The most well-known computer magazine *Bajtek* was established in 1985 as an addition to the communist youth magazine entitled 'The Flag of Youth' (pl. *Sztandar Mlodych*) and soon became a standalone magazine about computers and videogames (Kluska, 2008:47). *Bajtek* was a source of information about Polish technological developments, programming tips and information about videogames. From its first issue in 1985, *Bajtek* included information about videogames in the section 'What are we playing?' (*Co Jest Grane*?), in which its editors wrote videogame reviews, drew maps, revealed tricks and created a top games list based on readers'

votes (Bajtek, 1985:16-17). This section became one of the most widely read, according to *Bajtek*'s survey from 1988, as it was the favourite section of 60 per cent of respondents (Bajtek, 1989:4).

The main aim of the *Bajtek* magazine was to propagate the country's computerisation, which the magazine addressed by drawing not only on resources from other communist countries but also on British (such as *Your Sinclair*) and American (such as *BYTE*) computer and videogame magazines (Kluska and Rozwadowski, 2011; Kosman, 2015). *Bajtek* combined a mixture of articles about the strength of Soviet military hardware with discussions about working practices in Silicon Valley, which Wasiak (2013:221) characterises as:

> Trying to promote a variety of applications of computer hardware using a unique mixture of Western ideology, "digital utopianism", and the language of communist propaganda. Quotes from Alvin Toffler's The Third were mixed here with statements of Soviet computer scientists hailing the use of computers in industrial management and "social planning".

In one of the issues, the magazine held an interview with Siberian computer scientists who discussed the development of Soviet computer science, only to include a few pages later fragments of Everett M. Rogers and Judith K. Larsen's book *Silicon Valley Fever: Growth of High-Technology Culture* (1984) (Siwiński,1986:22-23; Bajtek, 1986:24-25). The magazine also re-printed interviews with foreign inventors and computer entrepreneurs such as Steve Wozniak (Apple) or Jack Tramiel (Atari) (Bajtek, 1985:3-4). The magazine was not dominated by Soviet propaganda, but it combined various ideas about 'digital utopianism' and 'information society' also present and known in Western countries. These combinations and exchanges of ideas and ideologies are one more piece of evidence that the computer culture and consequent videogame culture developing in Poland was a hybrid culture not just constructed through economic and political constraints or developed gaming habits but also a language barrier and a combination of ideas about 'information society' from two ideologically different blocs.

The country's political and economic situation influenced the development of videogame culture in Poland. Against the constraints of a centrally-planned economy and technology embargo, videogame culture developed through extensive informal distribution channels. Grey technology markets played an important role in the propagation of videogame culture in Poland, but they were not only points of economic exchange but also clashes of various cultural flows. The hybridity of videogame culture in Poland played on cultural boundaries which were reconciled by the hobbyist community, state support (including *Bajtek*) and through profit-oriented practices (informal distribution channels). Nonetheless, the origins of

Poland's videogame culture had further implications for the development of the videogame industry.

### 4.2.2 ON CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: VIDEOGAME DEVELOPMENT, OUTSOURCING AND LOCALISATION

In this section, I discuss three implications of the effect of informal distribution channels on the development of the Polish videogame industry: 1) The struggle to establish Polish videogame development because of the normalisation of software piracy; 2) foreign investment in videogame production; and 3) the use of localised videogames as a response to software piracy.

Informal distribution channels in Poland helped to popularise videogames. However, they also normalised software piracy, which slowed down the development of the industry and continued to be an industry concern after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. The establishment of a Polish videogame industry in this environment seemed like an impossible project for young aspiring videogame creators (Kluska and Rozwadowski, 2011). While the majority of Polish videogame developers struggled to achieve financial success in the late 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, videogame studios established by foreign investors to develop games for Western markets profited from lower labour costs in Poland. Outsourcing videogame development to more cost-effective regions is not a new practice in the videogame industry, however, in academic literature these practices are mostly only briefly mentioned (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:64-65; Bulut, 2015a). The closest to professional videogame production in communist Poland came was in the form of development studios established for porting and developing videogames from the American market. Communist Poland was a good place to outsource videogame production because of its low-cost workforce, cultural proximity to the West and access to computer science graduates. The only videogame studio established in the 1980s that reflected the standards of videogame studios in Western countries was created by Lucjan Wencel, a Polish immigrant from the USA (Budziszewski, 2015:409-410). In the beginning, the company mainly prepared conversions of American games on a variety of hardware platforms such as the game *Computer Quarterback* (1980) from Apple II computer to Commodore 64 and Atari (Kluska and Rozwadowski, 2011, Chapter 6, Section 1, para. 4). Lucjan Wencel also opened California Dreams game studio which focused on developing their own games. The employees of the studio had access to the newest hardware, software and literature and apart from that, they could go abroad which, considering the conditions of international travel in communist Poland, was a luxury (Kluska and Rozwadowski, 2011). Although the studio successfully developed games for foreign

markets, the owner decided to close its doors in 1993. At the beginning of the 1990s, the currency exchange rate between the dollar and zloty made videogame production in Poland less cost-efficient for foreign investors (Jezierski and Leszczyńska, 2003:470).

Times of political and economic transformation in 1989 were not only challenging for foreign investors but also for Polish videogame companies. Well-known Polish videogame developers and publishers had started their careers as software distributors or computer service providers on grey technology markets and then became official distributors: IPS and Mirage Software (Cenega) (Piekara, 1999:76); CD Project (Piekara, 1998b:68); Metropolis (now: the Astronauts and 11bit studios) (Piekara, 1998a:66); and Techland (Kosman, 2015:74). Undoubtedly, pre-established connections with Western videogame companies helped Polish videogame distributors to survive difficult times of political and economic transformation after 1989. The Balcerowicz economic reforms in 1990 offered new possibilities and presented challenges for the Polish videogame industry. Polish videogame companies confronted a capitalist market economy, increasing competition on the global videogame market and the need to regulate copyright (Kosman, 2015:184).

The new approach to the protection of copyright was reflected in the establishment of The Copyright and Related Rights Act in 1994 which delegalized grey market activities (Prawo autorskie ustawa z 4 lutego 1994). Nonetheless, the emergence of a new law did not contribute to the rapid change and resignation from illegal software distribution. However, some Polish videogame distributors decided to legalise their businesses and officially represent Western publishers in Poland, such as when the distributor IPS signed a contract with EA, or CD Projekt with Blizzard (Kosman, 2013). Western publishers relied on local intermediaries which allowed them to expand into the post-socialist market through people familiar with local videogame cultures and contexts. At the beginning of the 1990s, the economic and political situation in the country was not stable and international companies were more cautious in entering post-socialist markets. Localised versions of Western videogames were also used as a defence against software piracy. The growing complexity of foreign videogames, from their technological aspects such as the use of CDs to the increasing complexity of videogame narratives, allowed localised versions of videogames to gain a significant advantage over illegal copies by offering a different quality of videogame experience (see Kosman, 2015).

Official Polish distributors used a variety of localisation practices, from the preparation of videogame manuals in the Polish language to fully localised versions of foreign videogames, including videogames with professional Polish dubbing (Kosman, 2015:176; Piekara, 1998b). The first full videogame localisation was provided by the company Mirage (now Cenega Poland) in 1995. However, the most famous examples of videogame localisations are the

games *Ace Ventura* (1997) and *Baldur's Gate* (1999) provided by CD Project. Thanks to Marcin Iwiński, one of the company's co-founders, and his connections with the Polish film industry, CD Projekt published Western videogames fully dubbed by professional Polish actors (Kosman, 2015:173).

Legally distributed, localised videogames offered players videogames in the Polish language with access to additional content (from the box to manuals and music). The same approach was also used by Polish videogame developers who realised the potential of releasing localised videogames with additional content and discouraging people from buying pirated software. Maciej, one of the interviewees, discussed his work on his first 'professional' commercial game in 1991 through this approach:

> So he [our boss] decided to put videogames in boxes and would sell them for an attractive price for Polish people, and they would also get something extra – a Polish game in a box with a Polish manual. […] But we made this game in 9 months, and we prepared boxes and manuals. This game had an anti-software piracy block. You needed an original manual to answer questions from the game, and the manuals had lots of pages with some stupid stories inside. We included these stories only to make the manual long enough so that it would not be profitable to copy; the cost of pirating the game would be high. So it was more profitable to buy an original game, and have a box, a Polish game and so on and a cassette with music. The idea was to defeat software piracy rather with your offer and cool product than actually fighting with them and we succeeded. […] The aim was to make Polish people appreciate that we made a game specifically for Polish people. And it turned out that, yes, we could make a business out of it and we could make quite good money out of it. (Maciej Miąsik, Indie Games Poland Foundation)

In this section, I presented the implications of the political and economic situation in communist Poland that led to the establishment of informal distribution channels and a hybrid videogame culture, which incorporated local and Western cultural influences and was also visible in the establishment of the first legal domestic and foreign companies in Poland. These companies emerged thanks to boundaries between cultural (such as language barriers), economic (such as lower labour costs) and social (like Western publishers' lack of familiarity with the socio-cultural situation in Poland) encounters, which allowed some of them to maintain their position at the beginning of significant economic and political reforms in the 1990s. Therefore, videogame companies which initially concerned themselves with distribution (from grey markets to legal businesses), localisation and small-scale local videogame development after market stabilisation in late 1990s and at the beginning of 2000s

turned to videogame development and publishing (including CD Projekt, Metropolis (now 11 bit studios and the Astronauts), and Techland). The shift to videogame development was also initiated by the fact that international videogame corporations (like EA and Sony) were no longer interested in supporting intermediaries and instead established direct offices in the country (Kosman, 2015).

## 4.3 POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY: STRUCTURE

The Polish videogame industry consists of approximately 400 companies, however, in an interview with the co-funder of the Indie Games Poland Foundation, Jakub Marszałkowski admitted that it is difficult to estimate the size of the Polish videogame industry as some videogame studios are not registered (Bobrowski et al., 2017:68). In this section, I use the term Polish videogame industry to refer to all Poland-based companies engaged in developing, publishing, distributing and supporting (including localisation, porting, testing) videogame production. However, in the following sections, I will distinguish between foreign and domestic companies. In terms of geographic location, Polish videogame companies are present in three regions: Mazovia, Lower Silesia and Lesser Poland, which are the most developed with regards to ICT-infrastructure and offer access to a pool of graduates from established universities and polytechnic institutes (Bobrowski et al., 2015:44).

The Polish videogame industry consists mainly of small and medium sized videogame developers (Bobrowski et al. 2015:48). The development studios can be divided into three categories regarding their relation to publishers: first-party studios are development teams integrated with a publisher; second-party studios develop games based on the ideas and licenses from a publisher; and third-party studios focus on creating their own projects (Kerr, 2006:64). Third-party studios are the most prominent in Poland, as the majority of videogames are published within a self-publishing model (Figure 4a). Newer videogame studios (on the market for approximately 3-5 years and less than 3 years) decide to use self-publishing or the support of Polish publishers (Bobrowski et al., 2017:70). Consequently, the majority of videogame development tends to be financed from developers' own resources (85.3 per cent) and produced videogames are placed in a mid-cost range with budgets of between £203 000 to 406 000 with 16 per cent of companies creating low-budget games (less than £11 000) and only 8 per cent focusing on high-budget games (over £2 million) (Bobrowski et al., 2017:70).

The self-financing and self-publishing business model of the majority of videogame development in Poland contributes to companies' market unsustainability. The situation of smaller videogame developers on the videogame market can be addressed through Vincent Mosco's (1996:109) acknowledgement of the dynamic between major international publishers

and independent companies: 'Although the number of 'independent' production companies grow, these absorb high product risks and labour costs for the giants, which maintain their control over the critical areas of finance and distribution'.

The videogame industry is governed, as other cultural industries, through the loose control over the development process and tight distribution control. Thanks to the retail model of distribution, until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century videogame publishers had significant control over the financing, marketing and distribution of videogames (Kerr, 2017:44). This segment of the industry attracted the attention of online distribution platforms dedicated to gaming from Valve's Steam platform to ICT companies such as Apple and Google (Kerr, 2017:45-47).

The increasing importance and accessibility of self-publishing through digital distribution platforms has also been associated – along with other socio-cultural and technological changes – with the rise of contemporary independent videogame development trends (see Keogh, 2015; Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016). The emergence of the 'indie' development trend in the second decade of the twenty-first century has contributed to the appearance of 'emancipatory' discourses about an alternative culture of videogame development and its potential to diversify the market and challenge the domination of Triple-A production (Ruffino, 2013). The emancipatory discourse about the potential of independent videogame production and its possibility to challenge the status quo of the industry has been questioned by scholars (see Lipkin, 2013; Ruffino, 2013; Keogh, 2015; Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016). Furthermore, while independent game development offers the promise of a focus on the 'creative' and 'artistic' side of videogame development, at least in opposition to videogames developed by mainstream companies, independent studios operate in extremely precarious conditions, rarely achieving financial sustainability (see Kerr, 2017:55). Therefore, while small videogames become easier to develop and publish, access to audiences becomes increasingly difficult.

The increase in access to development tools and online distribution platforms has had a significant impact on the development of small, independent videogame studios in Poland, as an increasing number of videogame practitioners aim to self-publish their videogames through online distribution platforms. This trend was visible among the interviewees from small development studios whose primary aim was to distribute their videogames through the Steam Greenlight system[24]. However, increasing competition in the global market and the need to

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[24] Steam Greenlight offered developers the possibility to publish and distribute their videogames via the Steam online distribution platform. Videogames could be 'greenlighted' through users votes. Therefore, this system of publishing required various promotional strategies which allowed a game to be recognised by players. Steam Greenlight was replaced in 2017 by a more direct form of online distribution (fee-based system) titled Steam Direct.

overcome cultural and economic barriers (such as the cost of videogame localisation and marketing) adversely impacts small videogame companies. The need for external support for small developers is also visible in the increasing number of companies specialised in providing support-services for these studios such as public relations (PR) and marketing services. Furthermore, a growing number of domestic publishers that specialise in supporting independent videogame developers can be observed for instance in establishing of such companies as 11 bit studios, Crunching Koalas, Klabater or Techland Publishing (Bobrowski et al. 2017:14).

In the context of Poland, this unfavourable situation of small independent developers led to the establishment of various supporting companies (PR, marketing, translations) to facilitate their access to the global market. The disadvantageous position of local videogame developers in relation to the global videogame market is not unique to Poland (see also Dyer-Witheford and Sharman, 2005), however, it further indicates the competitiveness of the global videogame markets and challenges the celebratory accounts of access to digital distribution.
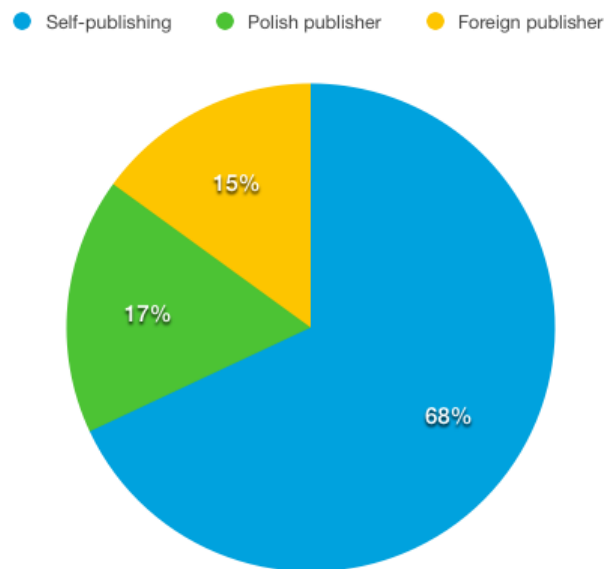


**FIGURE 4.A TYPE OF PUBLISHING SUPPORT**

Source: 'The State of the Polish Videogame Industry 2017' (Bobrowski et al., 2017:70)

Videogames developed in Poland are produced for the global videogame market (mostly Western Europe and North America) rather than for the Polish market. The worth of the Polish

videogame market has been estimated at 1.85 billion PLN ($0.46 billion) (Bobrowski et al., 2017:10-11). From the perspective of the Central and Eastern European market, Poland is placed second on the list of the biggest videogame markets (after Russia), and from a global perspective it is the 23rd biggest (Newzoo, 2017:19). However, as one of the interviewees put it: *"Poland is not a videogame market"* (Maciej, creative director). This situation can also be illustrated by the example of the Witcher videogame series' sales revenues, 97 per cent of which came from export (CD Projekt, 2018). Therefore, the precarious situation of the majority of Polish videogame developers is reflected in their operation on the global videogame market but also in the scarce support in terms of financing videogame development and publishing (see section 4.4.1).

Apart from small and medium-sized videogame development studios, the Polish videogame industry's structure is also influenced by the presence of major videogame companies which invest in publishing, development and online distribution. Major Polish videogame companies, both developers and publishers, have common origins dating back to the time of informal videogame distribution in communist Poland. These companies range from videogame development and distribution (CI Games, CD Projekt S.A.) to regional publishing and videogame services companies (Cenega Poland). Two major videogame developers, CD Projekt RED and Techland, play an important part in shaping the structure of the Polish industry because of their accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital.

In recent years, the company CD Projekt S.A. has established itself as the leader in the industry because of its videogame series successes, its expansion of global operations (opening offices in the USA and China), vertical integration (online distribution, e-sports), and its role as the Polish industry's representative (being the founder of Polish Games Association 2015). The company was established in 1994, originally as a videogame distributor, and opened its videogame development studio in 2002. The CD Projekt RED studio was responsible for the development of the Witcher series (2007-2015), based on a best-selling Polish fantasy series written by Andrzej Sapkowski. The Witcher series become an international success, selling 33 million copies worldwide (Kiciński and Nielubowicz, 2017). In 2014, the company parted ways with their material distribution roots by giving up the rights to distribution company CDP.pl (then known as CDP Blue). Apart from videogame development, the company focuses on its online distribution platform GOG.com (2008), which allows users to buy videogames without DRM[25] protection, and this approach to DRM protection, as the company's co-founders have discussed, is a result of their early experiences of videogame distribution (Critical Path, 2017). The company co-founders started their businesses in the times of the

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[25] DRM (Digital Rights Management) is a copy protection mechanism.

lack of the copyright law and widespread software piracy. They shared the belief that software piracy should not be simply forbidden or considered as illegal activity. Instead they argued that companies should put more effort into offering players additional benefits of buying legal videogame copies such as access to players' communities (Critical Path, 2017).

The company also expanded its operation outside the country by establishing marketing offices in Los Angeles and Shanghai. CD Projekt's office in the People's Republic of China opened in April 2017 with the co-operation of the Chinese company GAEA which specialises in mobile games development and support for videogame developers (GAEA, 2018). The main reason for expanding their operation to mainland China was a result of the company's investment in the development of the Witcher series related-game *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (2018)[26] as an e-sport game and an intention to attract videogame players from Asia (CD Projekt, 2016).

The financial success of CD Projekt S.A. attracted the attention of the Polish government, which praised the Witcher series for its propagation of Polish culture. The often-given illustration of the government's 'support' of the industry was embodied in a gift given by the former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to then US President Barack Obama in the form of *The Witcher II* videogame (Newsweek, 2011). The company's economic success and its political operations have sealed its reputation as a desirable employer for many aspiring videogame practitioners. CD Projekt is the biggest videogame employer in Poland and employs approximately 700 workers in its five studios (CD Projekt, 2018:2). Numerous small and medium Polish videogame studios established by previous workers of the CD Projekt RED and the brand of 'a game by the Witcher creators' is popularly used by publishers to promote videogames of newly established studios (Kreczmar, 2015). The company is also approached as a training ground for videogame practitioners because of the company's accumulation of knowledge about videogame development and the social and cultural prestige associated with it.

Apart from the CD Projekt S.A., there are two other companies engaged in Triple-A videogame development, Techland (1991) and, until 2018, CI Games (2003). However, these two companies did not achieve financial success comparable to CD Projekt RED. The company Techland is famous for its game series: Call of Juarez (2006-2011), Dead Island (2011-2013) and Dying Light (2015 - present). Techland has four offices, in Wroclaw, Warsaw, Ostrów Wielkopolski and Vancouver (Digital Scapes studio)[27]. It is worth acknowledging that, in contrast to CD Projekt's studios outside Poland, Techland's studio in Canada concerns

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[26] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (2017) is a digital card game developed by the CD Projekt RED. During the time of writing this thesis (2015 – 2017), the game was still in its beta version.
[27] Digital Scapes studio was opened in Canada in 2013 (Digital Scapes, 2018).

videogame production. Apart from videogame development, the company engages in publishing, the development of an online distribution platform (gemly) and in mobile game development (studio 'Short Break') (Techland, 2018).

CI Games, in contrast to the business strategy used by CD Projekt and Techland, invested in the mass production of videogames (10-20 videogame projects a year), which were developed through a formulaic design and sold at lower prices. Initially, this business model was profitable for the company as it fit well with the economic situation of videogame players in the CEE region. However, the last instalment of the CI Games' videogame series the Sniper (*Sniper 3: Ghost Warrior* (2017)) received negative reviews and did not meet the company's financial goals. While according to published financial records the company still generated over 100 million PLN in profit, in 2018 the company announced its resignation from the development of Triple-A games (CI Games, 2018). This decision was motivated by increasing competition in that videogame sector along with increasing costs of development and marketing (CI Games, 2018). Consequently, the company decided to focus on the development of smaller videogames, which led to employee lay-offs. CI games kept only a 30-person team and announced that in their further work they would focus on videogame publishing and rely on the support of external contractors.

The case of CI Games highlights the uncertainty and high risk environment of videogame production, which can not only impact small videogame developers but also major companies operating on the global market. In the CI Games case, the industry's trend towards using contractors and outsourcing videogame development to avoid higher production costs is also visible (CI Games, 2018). According to statistics provided by the 'State of the Polish Videogame Industry' (Bobrowski et al., 2017:86), 87 per cent of domestic videogame developers outsource some parts of videogame production (such as localisation, testing, graphic design, music) and 72 per cent of companies outsource up to 25 per cent of videogame production. The case of outsourcing videogame development is visible not only in outsourcing development from Western European and North American companies to Eastern Europe but also among countries within the region by focusing on the differences between countries in terms of their labour costs or policies.

The relationship between international videogame corporations and domestic Polish developers therefore needs to be acknowledged within the broader context of the region and the political-economic situation of nearby countries. International videogame corporations are present in Poland in publishing, distribution and support sectors. However, they have not

established videogame development studios in the country[28], while still investing in opening development studios in other parts of Eastern Europe. For instance, Ubisoft has opened videogame development studios in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine (Ubisoft, 2018). It can be argued that international companies prefer Eastern European countries with lower labour costs than those in Poland (such as Bulgaria and Romania) (Eurostat, 2016) or with incentives for the IT industry and favourable policies (like, for instance in Romania[29]). In comparison, Poland may not seem as attractive a place for these companies because it does not offer any specific support and incentives for videogame companies.

Some interviewees viewed the situation of the Polish videogame market as being unfavourable for the development of the industry and employment market because of the lack of connections with major videogame corporations and 'know-how' exchange about videogame development and its organisation. Maciej, who works as a creative director in a Triple-A studio but also gained experience in videogame development while working abroad, discussed this situation thus:

> If we had at least one development studio from Ubisoft, Activision or EA, people could gain work experience in these studios and they would have completely different perspectives on videogame development and its culture. I think it could be positive, but now unfortunately we have a limited flow of employees among companies - employees with different approaches to videogame development. Polish companies do not feel the need to change things, and to develop further we need change, but without any external factors it would be hard. It is like this: 'our companies are good, no one is attacking us internally in terms of the employment market so why we should change?'

The publishing segment in Poland can be divided into three sections: international publishers (EA, SONY, Ubisoft and Microsoft); Polish publishers (such as CDP.pl or Techland); and Polish publishers advertising their services to independent developers (such as 11 bit studios or Klabater) (see Bobrowski et al., 2017:13-14). The publishers presented in the second category consist of companies that were established to offer publishing services. These

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[28] Epic was the only North American videogame company which bought the Polish videogame studio People Can Fly (and renamed it Epic Games Polska) in 2012. People Can Fly was responsible for such games as *Painkiller* (2004) and *Bulletstorm* (2011). However, the studio was bought out by its founders in 2015 and reverted back to its original name. In 2017, the videogame developer opened a new studio in Newcastle in the UK.

[29] Undoubtedly, there are more questions than answers about tax incentives offered by the Romanian government to the ICT industry and their future development (see Georgescu, 2015:40). However, in comparison to Poland, Romania offers a more attractive fiscal policy for the tech industry, which could influence companies' decisions to outsource their production to this country (for instance for income tax exemptions or tax incentives for research and development activities).

companies also provide services to a variety of development studios within the CEE region. The last category of publishers appeared in the industry reports (see Bobrowski et al., 2017) and encompasses recently established publishers (such as Klabater) or companies previously known from videogame development (such as 11 bit studios, Crunching Koalas), which aim to provide publishing support for smaller development teams. These publishers advertise their services explicitly to 'indie' developers (see Klabater, 2018; Crunching Koalas, 2018).

The difference between the second and third category of publishers is inevitably blurred. This blurring first arises from the definitional problems over the meaning of 'independent development'. Independent or 'indie' development could be understood as videogame development outside of the influences of major videogame publishers, as developers who create games in smaller teams or as developers who focus on different videogame aesthetics (see discussions in Garda and Grabarczyk, 2015; Keogh, 2015; Parker, 2013). However, as Lipkin (2013) suggests, independent game development could also be understood as an emergence of a new videogame development trend, or 'indie' trend, which is supported by and provides profit for major videogame companies. Lipkin's (2013) argument also relates to broader changes in the socio-economic environment in which independent game developers operate, including releasing games into a highly competitive global videogame market, access to digital distribution platforms or increasing importance of videogame marketing.

Secondly, because of definitional problems over the term 'independent game development', it can be argued that the majority of developers in Poland are independent, as the national industry consists mostly of small development teams that rarely use the support of major international publishers (Bobrowski et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is worth acknowledging that the interviewees in this study also used this term to describe their workplaces. In this study, I decided to single out the third category of publishers for two reasons. Firstly, it is a category of publishers that appears in the industry produced reports (Bobrowski et al., 2017). Secondly, the use of this category in the industry reports and on companies' websites further illustrates the emergence of services 'dedicated to indie', which aim to support but also profit from the on-going trend of independent game development.

However, not only do Western corporations invest in publishing and distribution in Poland but there are also regional companies in this segment. In 'The State of the Polish Videogame Industry 2017' report, the authors classified Cenega Poland as a local publishing company, although it originally developed from a merger between two Polish companies and Czech developer Bohemia Interactive, and since 2005 has belonged to Russian entertainment concern 1C (Cenega, 2018; 1C, 2018). 1C also invests in videogame development (1C development), publishing, online distribution (Muve), and support services for publishers and developers

(QLOC). The Polish division of Cenega is mainly responsible for publishing videogames for PC and consoles in the CEE region. Therefore, the consolidation and expansion of the market is not only a matter of Western companies attempting to enter the newly-established capitalist markets after 1989 but also an expansion of companies in the region.

International companies present in Poland are also interested in opening companies which support developers and publishers with regards to videogame testing, porting[30] or localisation such as QLOC (Russia), Lionbridge (USA) or Testronic (UK). The reason for this expansion, in contrast to the lack of interest in establishing development studios in Poland, can be located in the search for specific types of workers. Videogame development differs regarding skills and worker qualifications from work in outsourcing studios (such as porting, localisation or testing). Therefore, these companies search for a relatively cheap workforce, familiar with videogames, but also in regions with relatively flexible work arrangements which could allow them to contract workers on shorter periods of time[31]. Furthermore, their decision could be motivated by cultural differences, especially in cases of localisation and testing localisations (or linguistic testing) where companies aim to hire language graduates with a specific focus on the language in a given region. This situation is illustrated by Cenega Poland which specialises in language support for Central and Eastern European markets (Cenega, 2018).

In this section, I briefly outlined the structure of the Polish videogame industry. I presented that the industry consists mostly of small videogame developers who self-finance and self-publish their project. I also discussed the expansion of two leading videogame companies in Poland – CD Projekt and Techland which play an important role in representing the industry (though Polish Games Association) and as a training grounds for videogame workforce in Poland. Furthermore, foreign videogame companies are present in Poland in publishing, distribution and service-support sectors. In this section, I signalised that the industry does not receive substantial support from the Polish government. In the next two sections, I further develop these points by discussing the Polish government's interest in the industry and the interviewees' approaches to proposed support.

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[30] Porting is the process of adapting a game software for a platform for which it was not originally designed.
[31] I will discuss the working conditions of outsourced videogame testers in Chapter 5 and Chapter 8.

## 4.4 THE POLISH GOVERNMENT AND THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

### 4.4.1 'MAKING GAMES ARE BETTER THAN PLAYING GAMES': THE POLISH GOVERNMENT AND THE PROMOTION OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Thanks to the financial successes of major Polish videogame developers, the government has started promoting videogames as a Polish speciality and an important export commodity. From 2012 onwards, governments from various political persuasions have declared their support for the videogame industry. From Waldemar Pawlak, former minister of the economy, who proclaimed support for the industry regarding promotional initiatives outside the country and opened the Chamber of the Digital Economy in Poland (Newsweek, 2012), to Prime Minister Beata Szydło (2015-2018) who addressed explicit support for the industry in her speech:

> We will support sectors which look the most promising in becoming leaders in the framework of our region. I mean here we have our energy, chemical and military industries but also our rapidly developing IT sector and creative industries like videogame development. (Szydło, 2015)

The government aims to promote the Polish videogame industry as a new creative and innovative branch of the country's economy. A reflection of this was in the investment in infrastructure (technology parks), promotional actions started by Polish embassies (Liebe and Tielebier, 2014), and, more recently, funding for Research and Development (R&D) activities (such as GAMEInn). However, as in the case of the 'creative industries' debate (Garnham, 2005; Oakley, 2013a/2006), the promotional campaigns and investments were mostly oriented toward the government's interest in the potential economic contribution of the videogame industry to the Polish economy. Promotional campaigns and discussions about the role of videogames focused on the possible positive aspects of working in the industry with an emphasis on the entrepreneurial values that workers should possess. Therefore, similarly to discussions about 'creative industries', these initiatives were rarely concerned with videogame practitioners (Oakley, 2006; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009).

The problems regarding videogame practitioners only appeared in discussions about worker shortages and their potential consequences for the industry (see Bobrowski et al., 2015:50; Bobrowski et al., 2017:83). However, this is not surprising as the problem of skills acquisition is also widely debated in the context of other local videogame productions (Kerr, 2017:145; Livingstone and Hope, 2011). The concerns expressed by the industry were interpreted by the Polish government and local administrations as an opportunity to encourage young people to join the industry. As a result, in 2017 the government initiated a social campaign – Programuj.gov.pl (eng. programme.gov.pl) – which aims to encourage Polish citizens to invest

in videogame development. The campaign uses such slogans as '*Making games is better than playing games*' and '*Code, make money, change the world*' (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2017a). Through this campaign, the Polish government portrays working in the videogame industry not only as being intrinsically but also financially satisfactory. The campaign also relates to the discourse of 'work-as-play', often evoked in studies about cultural and new media industries (McRobbie, 2002; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:55-56; Ross, 2003), by suggesting that working in the videogame industry is even better than spending one's leisure time playing videogames, while the idea of 'changing the world' through videogame development placed emphasis on the autonomy of the entrepreneurial individual.

It is also worth noting that the campaign was oriented towards the technical aspects of videogame development. The use of words in the campaign title to its slogans – programuj.gov.pl [programme] and *'code, make money…'* – equates videogame development with software production. This perspective on videogame development as software rather than cultural production is debated (see O'Donnell, 2012) in that videogame production consists of various occupational roles equally important in the production process. However, this approach to the construction of the social campaign exemplified the government's approach to the videogame industry and its focus on its technical and ICT-related aspects rather than the cultural value of videogame production.

The narrative presented in the social campaign, however, also used other connotations that were promoted by the government. The foundation of the Polish videogame industry and its association with informal distribution channels and grey technology markets contributed to the establishment of entrepreneurial discourse about the first videogame producers and distributors, which presented them as pioneers of capitalism who succeeded despite political and economic difficulties (Filiciak, 2016:18). Filiciak (2016:4) argues that in the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, the videogame press and media started to build a narrative about the Polish videogame industry that presented it as 'a synonym of modernity and independence'. This perspective contributed to the particular construction of 'Westernised' entrepreneurial subjectivity, as videogame producers were portrayed as winners rather than losers within the transitioning economy.

The persistence of this discourse is propagated through the media, industry-produced reports and in governmental rhetoric. The discourse about the heroism of the first Polish videogame creators was visible in the 'Digital Dreamers[32]' exhibition in the Palace of Science and Culture in Warsaw in 2016. It is also worth acknowledging that the exhibition, supported by the Polish

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[32] The exhibition presented the historical development of the Polish videogame industry (see Filiciak, 2016).

government, was also featured in Polish embassies in the USA and China (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Therefore it was rhetorically openly supported by the government and presented outside Poland. This narrative is also visible in interviews with industry representatives, for instance, co-founder of CD Projekt, Marcin Iwiński, described grey technology markets as *'incubators of Polish entrepreneurship'* (KręciołaTV, 2016).

Nonetheless, a discourse which associates informal economy activities with entrepreneurship or which emphasises entrepreneurship over state support are not limited to a Polish context. Discourse about entrepreneurship is often associated with balancing between formal and informal economic activities; they are also part of informal economy discussed in other CEE countries (Lobato and Thomas, 2015:49). These narratives echo what Banks (2007:6) addresses as 'entrepreneurial war stories', and they are also prevalent in the socio-historical development of other cultural industries. Discourse about the development of the videogame industry and the entrepreneurial values shared by its founders is not limited to Poland, but it is also visible in a broader narrative about new media industries and videogame industry development in other countries associated with their industry's 'rebelliousness' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009), Californian Ideology (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996), or the culture of Technolibertarianism (Borsook, 2000).

However, as in the case of similar narratives identified in Western videogame industries, the narrative put forward in social campaigns and promotional materials is debatable. Filiciak (2016:16) argues that this discourse presents an oversimplification as 'the computerization of Poland was driven not only by grassroots entrepreneurs, smugglers, and software pirates, but also by the state itself – not only in its capacity as a regulating entity, permitting some practices while prohibiting others, but also as an active (although weak) party supporting select publishing initiatives and hardware purchases'. Communist countries, similarly to capitalist ones, were interested in supporting their countries' computerisation. These efforts are visible in governmental documents (such as Decyzja w sprawie kierunków zastosowań informatyki oraz rozwoju krajowego przemyslu informatycznego (1974) or Uchwala nr 33/71 w sprawie rozwoju, organizacji i koordynacji informatyki (1971)) but also in the state-owned computer magazines, as discussed in the previous sections, with regards to the case of *Bajtek* (section 4.2.1). The communist government supported the development of programming skills through state-owned enterprises and universities. In addition, state support was also tangible in courses and activities organised by the Polish Association of Computer Sciences or the Polish Communist Youth Union activists (Filiciak, 2016; Wasiak, 2013).

Furthermore, it is worth acknowledging that systemic change did not occur as a shift between an ideal communist state and an ideal capitalist state (see Humphrey and Mandel, 2002:2).

Therefore, framing the act of informal software distribution as an act of heroism and rebellion against the state did not correspond with the realities of grey technology markets. Videogame culture reached Poland in the mid-1980s when certain forms of trade and entrepreneurship were allowed by the state (after reforms in 1982), and the government's approach to private initiative and entrepreneurship was not as strict as in the 1950s.

Lastly, the discourse about the origin of the Polish videogame industry does not acknowledge that not many Polish citizens during communist times could distribute videogame hardware or software. Only a limited number of citizens had access to microcomputers, tape recorders and computer science courses to start their entrepreneurial endeavours (Wasiak, 2013; Kosman, 2015). Videogame entrepreneurs who engaged in the distribution and localisation of Western videogames found themselves in a good financial situation and these were usually people from middle-class families, which facilitated their connection with Western countries and access to higher education (through family members, private import and their good command of the English language).

While communist Poland suffered from technological and economic backwardness in comparison to Western countries, relations between the communist state and the narrative about the entrepreneurial origins of the Polish videogame industry needed to be recognised as being more complex. In any case, this particular presentation of working in the videogame industry both through its intrinsic and financial rewards as well as entrepreneurial values associated with first Polish videogame companies conveys a positive and entrepreneurial image of local videogame practitioners.

### 4.4.2 THE GOVERNMENT'S SUPPORT FOR THE INDUSTRY

Local policies can influence perspectives on the economic risk of videogame companies, for instance, in contrast to the videogame industries in Norway and Canada (Jørgensen, 2017; Jørgensen et al., 2017; Dyer-Witheford and Sharman, 2005), the Polish videogame industry developed without the support of the welfare state (see section 4.3.4) and without substantial support for the industry (see section 4.3.3). Therefore, local economic situations and policies, especially when national videogame developers produce games for global markets, can support or hinder the development of their domestic developers.

The Polish government's support for the videogame industry comes from a variety of institutions ranging from the National Centre of Research and Development (such as GAME Inn fund), the Polish Agency of Entrepreneurship to the Ministry of Culture, and National Heritage. The support provided by these bodies ranges from funding for R&D projects to promoting the Polish videogame industry abroad (the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage).

Apart from the promotional campaigns that aimed to attract workers to the videogame industry, in 2015, the government initiated two support programmes for the industry (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2017b). The first initiative, a sectoral support program for the development of 'smart technologies' entitled 'GAME Inn', aimed to provide funding (116 million PLN) for R&D activities related to videogames. According to Stanisław Just (Polish Games Association), the funding scheme was created with the support of the industry's representatives through co-operation with the Polish Games Association.

The second initiative, Agencja Rozwoju Przemyslu (ARP)[33] Games, aims to provide support for videogame start-ups (ARP Games, 2018). Every six months, ARP Games offers ten videogame teams support in the forms of working space, access to hardware and software, the support of experienced videogame mentors, and legal and marketing support. Overall the maximum financial support which start-ups can gain access to is 100,000 PLN [approximately: £20290]. In a newly established start-up companies, ARP Games will have a 25 per cent share in that company. In addition, ARP Games also announced a scheme of paid internships available to people who want to get a career foothold in the industry.

These two initiatives are still in their early phases, and it is difficult to estimate their outcomes. However, it is worth paying attention to the fact that these initiatives do not include wider systemic support for the Polish industry but is rather moving in the direction of stimulating 'entrepreneurship'. In terms of R&D grants, as this type of funding was aimed at major companies, CD Projekt S.A. received the biggest amount of support (30 million PLN [approximately: £6 million]) for the development of its videogame production technology and GOG.com platform (The National Centre for Research and Development, 2016). Other companies which receive funding from the programme have engaged in a variety of applications of game-related technologies (such as VR, virtual fitness, serious games and health games). In terms of ARP Games initiative while welcomed because of scarce support for small development studios in Poland and its precarious condition on the global videogame market, it is worth remembering that videogame development as a creative practice may require more financial support than 100,000 PLN. Since 2015, independent Polish videogame developers have been supported by the Indie Games Poland Foundation (Fundacja Indie Games Polska), which focuses on supporting independent developers mostly with promotion outside the country, including sponsoring events for independent developers, or providing a scholarship to attend major videogame conferences (Maciej Miąsik, Indie Games Poland Foundation).

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[33] The Polish term *Agencja Rozwoju Przemysłu (ARP)* could be translated into English as Industrial Development Agency.

According to the results of reports conducted in co-operation between the industry and the government, the majority of videogame practitioners (80 per cent) argued that the industry needs governmental support. Respondents also argued that the most needed change is in the introduction of tax relief for the videogame sector (63.7 per cent), investments in the promotion of Polish videogame companies outside the country (57.8 per cent) and direct funding for development (44.1 per cent) (Bobrowski et al., 2017:88). However, during the interviews conducted for this study, Polish videogame practitioners had more polarised opinions about government support for the industry. Interviewees' opinions ranged from the rejection of any form of support and questioning the government's motives to viewing it as a possibility to improve the sustainability of national videogame developers.

Videogame practitioners interviewed in this study rejected the idea of governmental support because of the belief that the government only wants to profit from the economic success of the industry. In certain cases, these opinions were the result of personal political affiliations – some of the interviewees admitted that they were liberals and that they believe in market self-regulation rather than in direct state support, as interviewee Janusz (scriptwriter) argued: *"we established the videogame industry in spite of the government regulations and not because of them"*.

> I think that the government's support is an obstacle, I think they should stay away from us. The industry can make it on its own. Politically I am a liberal, so it is probably not surprising that when I heard that the prime minister was visiting [the company's name], I was really angry because as usual, they are [the government], they look for opportunities for themselves and they want to profit from it. (Damian, animator)

Other interviewees were not against government support but rather they were concerned about the authorities' lack of knowledge about videogame production, and consequently questioned the government's motivations as well as pointed out the possibility of this support being potentially abused by videogame companies:

> I am afraid that funds will go to companies not because they could make good games but because these companies can write good grant applications which are approved by an administration which has no idea about what videogame production really entails. There are companies which already make a business model out of it. (Karol, scriptwriter)

> I think it is possible to support the videogame industry but this support needs to be based on decent meritocracy judgement about videogame projects and their financing

system. I have never seen any willingness to do this in the Polish government, to formulate this realistic and knowledge-based judgement. (Konrad, game design)

Similar to Karol's ideas, other interviewees who had experience in applying for grants questioned the authorities' knowledge about videogame production. They not only criticised the authorities' knowledge about videogame production but also the bureaucracy associated with the grant application process, which also excludes smaller development studios from applying for grants because of their lack of legal and business support. Therefore, the interviewees in this study were less enthusiastic about the possibility of acquiring support from the government.

In the Polish context, the idea of an entrepreneurial videogame worker is linked with discourse about entrepreneurial values in government-initiated social campaigns and with the presentation of the Polish videogame industry's origins. As in the case of the 'creative industries' debate, the Polish government initiatives rarely discuss workers and their working conditions but are instead focused on the potential economic contribution of the videogame industry. The support for the Polish videogame industry is still in the early stages of development and their results are difficult to evaluate. However, the increased interest in support for the industry contributed to the establishment of two representative bodies: the Indie Games Poland Foundation and the Polish Games Association. Nonetheless, the interviewees offered polarised opinions about the government initiatives, from rejecting any justifications for such actions to expressing concerns about the authorities' knowledge about the industry or videogame production and its needs. The government's initiatives to promote the videogame industry should be understood within the framework of ongoing neoliberal reforms introduced in the country. Therefore, in the next section I will focus on discussing the Polish labour market and how its structure contributes to the precarious working conditions of videogame practitioners.

### 4.4.3 PRECARISATION OF EMPLOYMENT IN POLAND

The discussion about Polish videogame practitioners' approaches to their working experiences cannot be fully investigated without acknowledging the socio-historical development of the labour market in post-1989 Poland and its dynamics. This approach is invaluable because, as has been argued before by Banks et al. (2013:5), discussions about creative labour require investigation of the socio-historical development of approaches to this type of work. This section touches on a sociological understanding of shifts to non-standard, atypical or informal employment to address the post-socialist (contextual) understanding of 'precarity' (see Barbier, 2013:14; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005).

In the literature about the sociology of work and creative labour, the precarisation of employment relations is often addressed through comparison between work organisation in what can be addressed as Fordism and post-Fordism (Amin, 1997; Brophy and de Peuter, 2007:178). In terms of post-socialist countries, this problem can be addressed through the investigation of ideological differences in approaching work by communist and capitalist countries (Kamosiński, 2016). The propagation of work stability, even at the cost of unregistered unemployment, was widely promoted by the then-communist Polish government (Kamosiński, 2016:65). This illusion collapsed after 1989, which not only revealed the scale of unemployment (previously unregistered) in Poland but also introduced new changes to the employment market, in which labour was not a worker's right but a scarce resource (at least at an ideological level). Political and economic changes introduced in 1990 were difficult for Polish society as 'world market integration was complicated by the lack of any national economic policy, since decision-makers believed in the idea of not interfering with the invisible hand of the market as a mechanism of resource allocation' (Buchner-Jeziorska, 2013:117-118). The negative consequences of 'shock therapy' were visible in the increasing unemployment in the country (Hardy, 2009:29).

Progressing neoliberal reforms also assumed the introduction of a variety of flexible employment contracts whose aim was to control the growing problem of unemployment but also to attract foreign investors to the country (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016:8). Woolfson (2007:554) argues that the normalisation of non-standard working conditions in post-socialist countries is associated with an adjustment to neoliberal economies as 'informalization in post-socialist countries' economies may be seen as that which refers to deteriorated employment relations in a neoliberal environment seeking to create maximum labour compliance and dependency, with a consequential erosion of employment standards'. The flexibility of employment contracts was strengthened during the country's preparation to enter the European Union at the beginning of 2000, and afterwards continued as a form of response to anti-crisis legislation in 2009 and 2013 (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016:8-9).

Although permanent contracts are still the dominant form of regulating employment relations in Poland, the use of temporary contracts (such as fixed term contracts and civil law contracts) distinguish Poland from other EU countries[34] (Czapiński and Panek, 2015:135; Eurostat, 2017). Precarisation of employment relations in Poland could be illustrated through the introduction of various temporary forms of employment, especially introduction of

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[34] According to EU statistics, 1 in 5 Polish workers are hired on temporary contracts (Eurostat, 2017).

employment contracts regulated not by the Labour Code but by civil law in 2002 (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016:8).

In Poland, the term 'civil law contracts' designates a broader category of employment arrangements which are not protected by the Labour Code (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016:19). The most popularly used civil law contracts in the country are: 1) contracts of mandate also known as freelance contracts (pl. *umowa zlecenie*); and 2) contracts for a specific task (pl. *umowa o dzielo*). Self-employment is also classified as a type of civil law contract as this employment relationship is not protected by the Labour Code (Wratny, 2008:31). Therefore, while different types of civil law contracts provide different levels of social security and protection for workers, all of these contracts share two main characteristics: 1) workers should not perform their work under supervision of an employer; and 2) workers are deprived of rights and protection guaranteed by the Labour Code (Wratny, 2008:30).

Civil law contracts are not recognised as employment relationships. Hence they should regulate the 'non-employment relationship', which means that the 'contractor' provides services for the person or company (Urbański, 2014). Consequently, civil law contracts do not include a protection of workers' rights which are guaranteed by the Labour Code (such as paid annual leave, minimum wage, 8-hour working day, unions or right to register with the unemployment office). However, freelance contracts need to include obligatory contributions for social and health security if they are the only source of income for a worker (Ubrański, 2014:11), while specific-task contracts do not include any of these benefits. They also differ in terms of contractor responsibility for a project: on specific-task contracts, an employee is fully responsible for delivering the agreed product; on freelance contracts, an employee is responsible only for delivering it personally and genuinely (a difference in the result of service).

Nevertheless, while the use of civil law contracts is restricted to particular types of work as presented in the Polish Labour Code (Kodeks Pracy. Ustawa z dnia 26 czerwca 1974 r. (z późniejszymi poprawkami) 2018), these contracts are also used as a replacement for permanent contracts (also known as labour law contracts), in order to decrease employment costs and shift the burden of employment to the employee[35] (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016:21). The precarious status of workers who work on civil law contracts is reflected in a pejorative, popularly used nickname for these contracts: 'trash agreements' (or junk contracts) (pl. *śmieciówka*).

Non-employment 'contracts' like the ones discussed above are the most common contracts in the Polish videogame industry, as it has been estimated that 75 per cent of videogame

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[35] The misqualification of labour law contracts as civil law contracts (also known as fraudulent work contracting) is often addressed as one of the problems of the Polish labour market (Eurofound, 2016:9).

practitioners work on civil law contracts (Bobrowski et al., 2017:72). The prevalence of civil law contracts in the Polish videogame industry is only one of the indicators of the precarisation of employment in this sector, and in the following empirical chapters I will discuss interviewees' responses and adaptational strategies to this employment environment (see Chapter 8).

The precariousness of creative workers is often discussed within wider economic and political changes which lead to erosion of standard employment relations and lack of security both in working and private lives (Beck, 2000; Sennett, 1998; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005). Neoliberal reforms introduced in Poland after 1989 resemble the direction of political and economic reforms experienced in Western European countries[36] (see Koch, 2013; Koch and Fritz, 2013). Therefore, similarly to an idea expressed by Dunn (2004), increasingly asymmetrical power relations between employees and employers led to an individualisation of risk, and Polish workers were forced to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach to manoeuvre in this uncertain landscape of work.

## 4.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a contextual background of the Polish videogame industry's development, enriched by empirical data from interviews, information from archival magazines and industry reports. In this chapter, I argued that the Polish videogame industry and videogame culture developed as a cultural hybrid influenced by various economic and political changes and cultural flows (Kraidy, 2005). The industry's origins in grey technology markets impacted on the development of the videogame industry through the popularisation of videogames but also the normalisation of software piracy. Therefore, today's well-known Polish videogame companies have been developed via informal distribution and then legal distribution and localisation of Western games.

Polish videogame companies operate in a highly economically risky environment. While every type of cultural production is undoubtedly associated with high economic risk, national socio-economic variations have supported or hindered the development of domestic cultural industries. The majority of Polish videogame developers are micro-enterprises that self-finance and self-publish their videogames. The increased competition on the global videogame market contributes to highly uncertain situation of local videogame developers who with

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[36] I used the term 'Western European' in this paragraph to refer to countries in Western Europe, countries which historically belonged to the 'Western bloc' and which have introduced neo-liberal polices earlier than 'Eastern bloc' countries (such as Poland). This argument was made based on reviewing Koch and Fritz's (2013) edited collection about non-standard employment in Europe.

limited resources (for development, localisation and marketing) struggle with achieving financial sustainability.

Since the occurrence of financial successes of major Polish videogame companies the government has started to discuss possible support for the industry, which has been labelled a new export commodity of Poland. However, the government was interested in videogame practitioners only with regards to their potential entrepreneurial value and their work contribution to the economic growth of the country. As in the case of the 'creative industries' debate, the government did not discuss videogame practitioners and their working conditions. Instead, the government-supported discourse and social campaigns portray working in the Polish videogame industry as financially and intrinsically rewarding by also emphasising the idea that videogame practitioners are particularly entrepreneurial subjects. This narrative echoes the socio-historical presentation of new media entrepreneurs and the first videogame creators in their emphasis on resilience, innovation and creativity (Kline et al., 2003:86-88). However, the propagation of entrepreneurship among future videogame workforce is coherent with progressing neoliberal reforms introduced in Poland and with the increasing erosion of standard employment arrangements (understood as permanent, full-time employment).

In this chapter I presented economic and socio-historical contexts of the Polish videogame industry development which help to further understand Polish videogame practitioners' approaches to their work which I will discuss in the next five chapters of this thesis.

# CHAPTER 5: 'BREAKING INTO' THE POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Jobs in the videogame industry are often considered to be, and referred to as, 'dream jobs' by videogame players. This discourse also lies at the centre of the discussion about videogame labour organisation. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:55) argue, 'no other industry has been as successful in generating an image of work as play'. Therefore, the industry's emphasis on videogame work as work of 'passion', workplace autonomy and the allure of 'cool' workplaces helps to attract a young, motivated workforce but also contributes to the prevalence of exploitative working practices in the industry (see Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:54-55; Consalvo, 2008:186; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015).

Young people's motivation to work in cultural industries has been discussed in previous research about cultural labour (see Hesmondhalgh, 2013:254; Menger, 1999). According to McRobbie (2016:79), the attraction of work in cultural industries is associated with young people's awareness of the existence of more attractive jobs: 'the well-established occupational cultures, known to young people well in advance are part of the attraction; the awareness of more exciting jobs'. This part also refers to the construction of specific discourse around creative labour which often portrays it as 'cool' and 'fashionable' forms of employment (see Gill, 2002; Neff et al., 2005:330). Discussions about 'passion' and 'cool' jobs can be approached from different perspectives, from seeing cultural labour as a unique form of employment, in the sense of the intrinsic psychological rewards it can provide, to understanding it as a foundation for worker self-exploitation (Banks, 2007:61).

This chapter presents a discussion about Polish videogame practitioners' motivations and the mediation of 'dream job' discourse through the socio-cultural context of Poland. The interviewees discussed their interest in videogames as being part of their motivation to work in the industry, however, they also expressed a variety of other motives in their decisions. Furthermore, in the second part of this chapter I discuss the interviewees' approaches to starting their careers in the industry. In this section, I argue that at the early stages of their careers, these videogame practitioners adopted entrepreneurial behaviour in order to 'break into' the industry. As in other cultural industries, the videogame industry is marked by an informality both in terms of skills and experience acquisition and finding employment in the industry (see Ursell, 2000; Gill, 2013). In the context of Poland, the consequences for the prevalence of informality are amplified by the small size of the industry and its less professionalised structure (Chapter 4). Therefore, early-career practitioners, in attempting to

find employment in the industry, engage in a variety of unpaid and/or underpaid activities, which are discussed in this chapter as 'hope labour' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). The widespread agreement about the lack of clear guidance with regards to entering the industry, self-study, and the reliance on informal networks – but at the same time incorporating a widespread belief in the meritocratic nature of the videogame work – raises questions about who can afford to find employment in the Polish videogame industry.

## 5.2 MOTIVATION AND THE CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES OF 'COOL' JOBS IN THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

### 5.2.1 LOOKING FOR GOOD WORK? ON MOTIVATION TO WORK IN THE INDUSTRY

The majority of interviewees argued that one of their motivations to join the videogame industry was dictated by their interest in videogames. They discussed their work in the videogame industry as a realisation of a childhood dream: *"It was my childhood dream and I managed to make it come true"* (Magda, 2D graphic designer). They also told me stories about their first videogames and socialisation into the videogame culture:

> I was always into [games]. I was brought up with my brother playing videogames on the Amiga, the first PlayStation […] It was during *that* period in Poland, you know, software piracy and all that […] Back then you could buy videogames for pennies so we played everything. (Janusz, scriptwriter)

Interest in videogames and the transition to working in the industry, similarly to the results of previous research (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Dymek, 2012), was, as one interviewee argued: *"[…] kind of natural career pathway, first it was gaming"* (Ania, PR). This perspective was also apparent in the interviewees' discussions about the videogame industry consisting of a workforce passionate about videogames: *"This is an industry wherein only people passionate about videogames are employed"* (Maciej, creative director) or *"For the majority, I mean for 95 per cent of us employees, this is a livelihood based on passion [for videogames]"* (Tom, PR).

Passion for videogames as motivation to work in the videogame industry is often evoked in studies as an important driver for workers, and is also often exploited by the industry (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Consalvo, 2008; Bulut, 2015b). The importance about the role of 'passion' and an emotional attachment to one's work was also repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees in this study, and I will come back to this problem in Chapter 8, in a discussion about working conditions. However, at this point it is worth acknowledging that the

interviewees expressed a clear awareness that their passion for videogames was exploited by videogame companies. It was, however, a widespread and normalised perspective which Maciej (a creative director) summarised as: *"If someone loves what they do, we can assume they already have the motivation to work. […] If someone does a job they don't care about, it is obvious that they need additional motivation. But in the videogame industry, we have motivation for free."*

The interviewees' motivations to join the industry and their understanding of the inherent risk associated with working in the industry differed in terms of their previous work experiences and occupational skills. These differences in understanding one's economic risk of creative employment are relationally constituted and vary in terms of an individual's position in the industry, their skillset and the possibility of finding alternative employment (McRobbie, 2001). This argument was also used to emphasise the heterogeneity of experiences of precarity (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Loboto and Thomas, 2015:77-78; Bulut, 2015a).

Furthermore, the interviewees' understanding of economic risk was associated with socio-culturally constructed connotations, not only in terms of discussing their work as an attractive form of employment (Neff et al., 2005) but also through the perception of one's skills as being desirable (for example, a discourse about the shortage of software engineers or a discourse about humanities graduate unemployment rates). In this section, I do not discuss the interviewees' understanding of work stability as a matter of objective measure, but of their understanding of what 'risk' and 'stability' means to them. Their understanding can also be positioned within different strategies, as discussed by Neff (2012:94), and these include creative, financial and actuarial strategies. Therefore, the interviewees adopted various entrepreneurial strategies to understand their work and find employment which was suitable for them. While the majority of interviewees undoubtedly approached their employment in the videogame industry through the creative strategy, they also understood it beyond the idea of simply being a 'dream job'.

The interviewee sample can be divided into three categories: early-career workers, workers with previous employment in cultural industries, and practitioners with tech-related occupational skills. The first group of interviewees consisted of young workers who decided to join the videogame industry in their search for a career change or by following their interests in videogames. This group was motivated by the need to find a new job and tried their luck in videogame development in order to avoid the risk of being unemployed. Therefore, their decisions and approaches to the inherent risk of being employed in the videogame industry was associated with a normalisation of precariousness in their lives and consequently viewing working in the industry as that which left them with 'nothing to lose' (McRobbie, 2016:79):

Back then I was working as a barmaid and I wanted to find something better. And I thought I was kind of good in what I was doing, I mean with regards to playing videogames. I thought to myself that I could just try getting a job in that industry because of the fact that they did not need me to have any degrees or specific skills. (Ola, QA)

While I was preparing for my PhD defence I played videogames to relax and I once needed a patch for a [game title] so I checked the company's website and I found a job offer there and it turned out that they were actually hiring scriptwriters. I did not want to stay at university so I decided to apply. (Karol, scriptwriter)

This group consists of videogame practitioners who started their careers at the bottom of the occupational hierarchies as videogame testers, junior workers or even at lower management positions. It is not to say that they did not advance in their careers to higher occupational positions, rather they entered the industry with the assumption of trying something new, following their passion and accepting the inherent risks of videogame employment. Therefore, for these workers, being employed in the videogame industry was, indeed, attractive because of its associations with symbolic capital that alternative careers (which they could have pursued) did not have (see Bulut, 2015a).

The second category consisted of interviewees who joined videogame industries having previous employment history in other cultural industries, mostly within the film industry, graphic design and advertising. This group consisted largely of interviewees who had worked in occupational positions related to 'art', such as graphic design, animation and concept design. They also had considerable experience in freelancing – sometimes also having previous experience in supporting videogame-related projects. In their understanding, working conditions in the videogame industry were not only more favourable in comparison to other cultural industries but also provided more creative fulfilment. Bastian, a 3D graphic designer, discussed his motivation to join the industry as the result of the process of eliminating employment choices in other cultural industries. His position echoes not only a creative strategy but also an actuarial strategy in finding employment in an industry which would offer him stable working conditions (Neff, 2012):

I have a bad opinion about work in other cultural industries such as special effects for films or advertising. […] And these companies did not treat their workers very well, whereas in videogame development it is a little bit different. Although in videogame development you can also experience some unpleasant situations, such as investors who give up at the last moment, but people in videogame development? They know

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each other so there are not many companies which cheat their employees. (Bastian, 3D graphic designer)

The idea of an actuarial strategy and also a stress on creative strategy was apparent in Michał's discussion, in which he discussed working in the advertising industry as not particularly creatively challenging nor fulfilling for him:

I was tired of working in advertisement. One day I simply decided that I wanted to move forward, because if I had stayed I would have never done anything beyond what I could already then do. You do not need great skills to work in advertisement when it comes to graphic modelling, yes? And I wanted to model characters, it was always my dream since starting to learn how to work on graphic design. And one day I just woke up and I said that I would never again model tomatoes with eyes. (Michał, character artist)

In this group the interviewees did not perceive their employment primarily through the possibility of working with videogames but through their art-related skills. Their interest in the videogame industry was motivated by the opportunity for creative expression in this type of work – also understood in relation to their previous experiences in other cultural industries.

This group was motivated by what Neff (2012:73-83) termed 'creative strategy' but also by financial strategy, as the interviewees argued that, in comparison to other cultural industries, the videogame industry, at least in Poland, was understood as a form of stable and financially satisfying employment. However, this stability was not measured by stability in terms of the possibility of obtaining permanent contracts but in, for example, longer production cycles in Triple-A videogame development than in film production. Damian, who worked in Triple-A production, compared the stability of his work to the work of his colleagues in the film industry: *"It is because of continuity of employment. Our projects last around three years and when they end, we obviously have some changes, people leave but they are not that extreme"* (Damian, animator). For the interviewees in art-related occupations, working in the videogame industry via a comparison with their previous working experiences in other industries was not approached as being economically risky. It is possible that their previous experiences in cultural industries with less stable employment along with certain normalised patterns of employment has made work opportunities in the videogame industry appear to be more stable forms of employment.

The third group consisted of videogame practitioners with IT-related skills who entered the industry for similar reasons as the second group, because of the challenge and creative autonomy that the industry provides. Their decisions were made with the realisation, in

contrast to the second group, that they would have to give up more financially satisfactory and stable employment in the IT industry (discussed as business IT):

> When it comes to the financial aspects, videogame development is not as well paid as work in IT. But it's because, in this industry, we have people who want to make games and work in IT because it is *just a job*. And we feel this satisfaction when we can see a final product and see happy people who play our game and see our name on a game. So this is quite positive. (Adam, software engineer)

> If you want to earn a lot, videogame development is not for you. You should move, especially if you are a programmer, to business IT. (Maryla, software engineer)

However, these interviewees approached the work-related risks in the videogame industry differently than the previous two groups, as they located their sense of stability in their skills:

> The case is that I have good qualifications and I can find a job whenever I want […] so I am not scared and the other thing is that […] I do not have huge financial needs. I do not want to drive a Ferrari or anything like that. I just think that when I achieve a certain level of financial stability these material things are less important; you want to 'create' something and that is my main motivation. (Mariusz, software engineer)

The interviewees argued that as their skill sets are desirable in the videogame industry and in other IT-related industries, they always have the possibility of following alternative career pathways. This strategy can be seen as a more creative strategy than in the second and first groups in which entrepreneurial strategies were also applied in the hope of finding better employment (in terms of stability and remuneration).

The interviewees discussed their interest in videogames and early socialisation into videogame cultures as important motivational factors for starting their careers in the videogame industry. This approach echoes the results of previous research about videogame workers (see Dyer-Witheford, 2009; Bulut, 2015a; Consalvo, 2008). The interviewees also expressed an awareness that their desire to 'do what you love in your work' contributed to their exploitation in videogame companies. However, they approached it as normal practice or as a trade-off for the possibility of contributing to videogame production. In this section, I also discussed different approaches to working in the videogame industry expressed by the interviewees from different occupational groups. By comparison, between the three approaches presented in the interviewees' sample, it is apparent that work-based precarity in the videogame industry is understood in a relational manner to one's skillset, previous work experiences and possible future career prospects (the possibility of finding alternative employment). While indeed, work in a capitalist society contributes to the precarisation of work at large, including in the

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videogame industry, the economic risk of this type of work is not understood and measured in the same manner (McRobbie, 2001). The realisation of these differences is important in acknowledging the dynamics between different types of occupations in the industry and how they contribute to working conditions and work environment. To explore further the interviewees' opinions about their work – its attractiveness and disadvantages – I explore the cultural attributes of videogame work discussed by the interviewees in the next section.

## 5.2.2 Competing Discourses about Videogame Work: Socio-cultural Perspective

It is worth considering a discussion about videogames within the socio-cultural context of Poland. An investigation of this discourse could provide information about videogames and their cultural legitimacy in the context of a post-socialist country. It also demonstrates social and cultural values attributed to videogames which can influence practitioners' approaches to their work.

The differences in social and cultural values attributed to videogame consumption and production have been acknowledged in Shaw's (2013) and O'Donnell's (2014:143) discussions about the Indian videogame industry. Differences in historical development and peoples' familiarity with a particular medium might have an impact on workforce composition and their approach to labour. For example, the lack of socialisation in videogame culture in India resulted in a different composition of the Indian videogame industry workforce (Shaw, 2013:185; O'Donnell, 2014:143). In contrast to their USA counterparts, Indian practitioners rarely start their careers in the industry because of a 'passion' for videogames (O'Donnell, 2014:143). They are also most likely to be recruited from the pool of computer science graduates and not from videogame fandoms (Shaw, 2013:187).

These perspectives also relate to the broader social and cultural reception of videogames as a medium; different social and cultural environments influence peoples' opinions about certain occupations. O'Donnell (2014:151-152) argues that the perception of videogames as 'childish toys only' influences how the videogame workforce is perceived. In the USA, there are fewer negative connotations with working in the videogame industry. In India this occupation is seen as a less attractive career choice (O'Donnell, 2014:151-152). This perspective demonstrates not only the trivialisation of videogames but also the specific connotations with the videogame workforce. In the model of good and bad work, proposed by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:37), one of the characteristics of good work addresses the notion of producing a 'good product'. This characteristic refers to a good product in the sense of quality or in the sense of

the pro-social values it produces, and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:197) note that the nature of a good cultural product is connected with a subjective audience's reception. In terms of videogame reception, the medium is positioned between two discourses about its quality and pro-social values between videogame players' opinions about a medium and societal judgement of its cultural values.

The interviewees argued that Polish society treats videogames as though they are merely 'toys for children'. This view implies that the development of Polish videogame culture, hindered by economic and technological disadvantages, has shaped people's perspectives on videogames. According to my interviewees, videogames are not just perceived stereotypically and trivialised but this perspective can also influence people's opinions about its practitioners' labour:

> When it comes to young people, it depends, but the ones who play are really positive about this. But some people are really into serious business and businesses and they just think that what we do is really childish; that we are on par with people who make toys. (Adam, software engineer)

> My family perceives my job rather negatively. I mean, ok, it's a job because I bring money back home every month. But very often, especially these older generations, they approach videogames in a very negative way. And they also perceive my work rather negatively. (Paweł, QA)

The values that society attaches to the consumption of a given medium reflects how practitioners' work in that medium is approached. The interviewees also attribute this negative perspective of videogames as a result of generation gaps. Furthermore, some of the interviewees argued that Polish society (as a conservative society) has a problem with adapting to and accepting cultural changes:

> We are a conservative society and in relation to this we have problems with accepting changes […] So this generation of 30 year olds [...] they are educated about videogames and it is very rare for them to have a negative opinion about videogames. […] But for sure, we have this generation gap. And we have people who just look at videogames through the prism of what they see in the newspapers, so you know "he killed someone because he played games" or people would say that "games are just a waste of time". They would say that "games have less value than books". […] People always approach these types of changes [technological changes] very emotionally. It does not matter if we are talking about telephone technology or videogames. (Maciej, creative director)

The negative opinions about videogames in Polish society have also been reflected, according to the interviewees, in their families' understandings of their occupations. The majority of the interviewees indicated that their families had vague ideas about their work and in general perceived it negatively:

> […] at the beginning, my father, being a person from a different generation, was not very happy that I would work with games because from his point of view it was just silly. He thought I would waste my life. (Maciej, creative director)

> When my dad found out that I was going to make videogames, he asked: 'Is that for forever? Will you do something normal [with your life]? He also used the word 'real', 'real' work. (Mary, producer)

> I'll put it like this […] every Christmas my family wish for me 'to finally find a normal job'. (Mariusz, software engineer)

The most obvious tensions in opinions about the interviewees' occupations were made apparent in discussions about their friends' and families' perspectives on videogame labour. These tensions refer to the popular idea about videogame labour being a *'dream job'* along with the trivialisation of this work as *'not a real job'*. While the majority of the interviewees' friends thought of their job as being particularly appealing, their families did not approve of this type of employment. This description further illustrates the problem of videogames' lack of cultural legitimisation and the generation gap in terms of understanding work in cultural industries:

> They [my friends] say that it is amazing […] that I am testing games and that it must be a cool job and, wow that they are jealous. And then I say that I would be very careful with this jealousy […] but maybe it is because people do not really know how this job looks. They have heard people saying that being a game tester is a dream job. And I do not have a reason to change their opinions about that. (Kasia, QA)

> Well, my friends are horribly jealous because they have no idea what videogame development is about. For them it is a beautiful world in which you get videogames for free and you can play all day long. (Pola, game designer)

The interviewees argued that their friends' opinions about their labour correlates with the 'work-as-play' image as constructed by the industry. They also said that their friends' perspectives were mostly positive because they did not have any knowledge about how

working in the videogame industry looked. Kasia's decision to showcase her work in a particular way could be also seen as a coping strategy as 'recognition may, in some cases, feasibly act as compensation for the more difficult and troubling aspects of creative work' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:121). This perspective on videogame industry work is related not only to the industry's willingness to attract and retain particular employees but also 'because of the industry's penchant for secrecy and in part because developers simply don't do enough to discourage these myths' (O'Donnell, 2014:149). The practitioners' themselves maintain the positive image of their labour and by doing so they perpetuate the idea of their jobs as 'dream jobs'. However, the industry's secrecy also has wider implications, as it obscures the possible pathways to the videogame industry – I will explore this subject in the next section of this chapter.

## 5.3 ON INFORMALITY: SKILLS AND NETWORKS

### 5.3.1 FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION

The idea of 'breaking into' the videogame industry is often addressed as: 'You've got to make games, before you can make games' (O'Donnell, 2014:140-141). This approach shows the importance of reputation management (portfolio preparation), autodidactic and self-entrepreneurialism in order to secure employment in the industry. In his ethnographic work on videogame development in the USA and India, O'Donnell (2014:143) argues that the idea of 'breaking into' the industry is more pronounced in the USA, while in India recent graduates are not expected to have prior knowledge about videogame production. O'Donnell (2014:143) also suggests that a similar situation to that in India is evident in Europe. However, according to the interviewees, the situation in the Polish videogame market more closely resembles the USA's approach. In Chapter 4, I discussed that the expansion of the videogame industry in Poland does not contribute to the professionalization of the industry. This problem is also visible in the lack of formalised career pathways to the industry and the prevalence of informality in the industry, both in terms of skills acquisition and finding employment.

Videogame career pathways are neither formalised nor professionalised, and the idea of 'breaking into' the industry assumes an emphasis on autodidactic, talent and experiential learning rather than pursuing a formal education. This approach to skill acquisition in the videogame industry was widespread in the interviews and it can be associated with the ideological underpinnings and historical development of the industry, according to which, the first videogame coders were self-taught and advanced in their careers without the need of a formal education (Kline et al. 2003:86-88). It can be also discussed as a part of the narrative

about the entrepreneurship of Polish videogame practitioners and the industry's development (Chapter 4).

According to statistics presented in Figure 5a, skills (93.1 per cent) in videogame development were discussed as the most important factor in terms of recruiting new workers, followed by work experience (47.1 per cent) and performance during job interviews (Bobrowski et al., 2017:81). Education – in terms of specialised education (2.9 per cent) or the level of education of prospective workers (2 per cent) – was significantly less important for videogame companies. Interviewees opinions about their higher education experience or their companies' recruitment strategies reflected the primacy of experiential leaning and work experience over university degrees.

| RECRUITMENT CRITERIA | % |
|---|---|
| Skills | 93.1 |
| Work experience | 47.1 |
| Job interview | 42.2 |
| Test case | 28.4 |
| Published game | 27.5 |
| Other | 12 |
| Availability | 5.9 |
| Industry-related education | 2.9 |
| Level of education | 2 |
| Work experience (not industry related) | 1 |
| CV/Cover letter | 1 |

**FIGURE 5.A RECRUITMENT CRITERIA**

Source: 'The State of the Polish Videogame Industry' Report 2017 (Bobrowski et al.), 2017:81)

As with other creative workers (see Gill, 2011a:259; Noonan, 2015:443), videogame practitioners tend to be university educated (Weststar and Legault, 2015:10; Bobrowski et al., 2017:72). The majority of interviewees in this research had masters' degrees and nine out of ten interviewees who had a high school education had taken part in university courses (see Appendix 1). However, because of their negative experience in higher education, they decided to quit said courses. The interviewees also had a wide range of educational backgrounds, from humanities and biological sciences to computer sciences. Despite the wide variety of educational experience, the interviewees universally described their formal education as

'useless' and 'unhelpful' in their preparation for working in the industry. This disappointment in formal education is not limited to the videogame industry, as it has been discussed, for example, in terms of new media workers:

> they are also likely to have been disappointed by their experiences of formal education, critiquing the dominance of theory over practice in university education, the failure of courses and teachers to keep pace with change, and the lack of preparation for working in a business environment, or crucially, for managing 'portfolio careers' or other non-standard forms of employment (Gill, 2011a:256).

Polish videogame practitioners shared a similar dissatisfaction with their experience of higher education mostly due to limited engagement in practical, up-to-date skills acquisition. If not considered outdated, the interviewees discussed formal education as something done simply for the sake of it. The possible benefits of acquiring a formal education were undervalued and presented as a necessary evil in order to get a 'paper'. Formal education was also addressed as unchallenging and not intellectually stimulating enough to be worth the effort:

> Everything I learned during my studies I could have thrown into a dustbin. Because [at work] I had to learn everything from the beginning […] so yeah, I was sitting with tutorials and I had my team lead who was helping me. (Karolina, 3D graphic designer)

> Nowadays you can learn anything you need to. We have people in the company who gave up their studies to go to work and we have people who picked jobs in the industry and did not go to university at all because they knew what they wanted to do. […] So it can be done. I am not sure about other companies, but in ours – no one cares about your education. When I check new job applicants, I never look at their education – it does not matter to me. (Bolek, software engineer)

Karolina and Bolek also endorsed the idea of self-study and experiential learning. Their emphasis on self-study is visible in the following fragments: *'I was sitting with tutorials'* (Karolina, 3D graphic designer) or *'Nowadays, you can learn anything'* (Bolek, software engineer). The importance of self-study has also been discussed in terms of accessing new technology and knowledge for free from the Internet. The alleged democratisation of the industry thanks to the development and availability of easy-to-access-and-use tools allows future employees to practice their skills with the support of online communities (see discussion in Keogh, 2015; Ruffino, 2013). Some interviewees, especially those from an art background, argue that it was possible to train themselves into specific occupations only through practice

and access to knowledge online. For example, Michał, who works for a Triple-A company, argues:

> Nowadays, to start work as an intern or at a junior position? You need 6 months, with tutorials which are available online. You need 6 months of study to start work, but I mean 6 months of hard work so you can apply for an internship. (Michał, character artist)

> Videogames are definitely a form of media which develop in their own pace and along their own pathways. So if you are ready to sacrifice, do lots of work and develop your career in the industry you do not need any studies. Especially in these times when we have the tools to make games such as programming editors which allow us to make games pretty quickly without coding knowledge. (Marcin, QA)

However, greater accessibility to development tools does not equal a removal of inequalities and further barriers of entry. The expansion of the industry has also changed its approach to skills which a future workforce should have as some interviewees argued that prerequisites to being given a job in the industry are getting more demanding and proficiency in various graphic-design programmes and coding languages is required. Furthermore, access to hardware and software can also be presented as problematic because of the inherent purchase costs. While access to freely available tools allows people with aspirations to be independent developers (see Keogh, 2015) and, therefore, to possibly advance their careers, the fact that these tools are available online does not remove other barriers of entry – for example, for those who have to sacrifice their time and acquire the hardware in order to train their skills.

The expansion of the videogame industry resulted in the establishment of videogame production courses, however the usefulness of such courses in terms of supporting videogame development has been widely debated (Nichols, 2014:162). The expansion of the Polish videogame industry along with the growing support for the industry from the government has also increased interest in videogame related education for prospective workforces in the industry. There are approximately 36 institutions in Poland which offer courses related to videogame development (from game design to graphic design) (Bobrowski et al., 2017:92-93). These institutions encompass public higher education institutions, private universities and short-term industry established courses (such as GameDev School, Microsoft Videogame Creators School). Stanisław Just, representative of the Polish Games Association, argues that the expansion of the Polish videogame industry resulted in the need for more formal solutions in terms of videogame production-based education:

The problem of recruiting a talented workforce is a challenge for the industry. […] on the one side we support educational courses which are available in Poland i.e. HE and High School courses. On the other side, we try to get people from other industries such as from new media industries, the advertisement or financial sectors […] And in addition, we are looking for employees outside Poland so we encourage any Polish citizen who has left the country to join us as well, and additionally we encourage foreign workers to come and live and work in Poland. (Stanisław Just, Polish Games Association)

The problem of finding a qualified workforce is inevitably connected with a discussion about the place and purpose of education and training in videogame development, and cultural industries at large (Noonan, 2015). The problem of videogame education also resembles on-going debates about other cultural industry related education, which places an emphasis on the difficulties which young people encounter while transitioning to creative occupations and the problems with insufficient or inadequate training that does not equip them with the necessary skills to work in the cultural industries (Ashton, 2011/2015; Bridgestock et al., 2015).

This problem was also discussed by the interviewees, who argued that a videogame education needs to rely on practical knowledge and the support of videogame practitioners. However, the interviewees raised important questions about the development of the Polish videogame industry and possible further educational support for its workforce. Maciej, who supports videogame education as a lecturer at a private university and Game Dev School (2018), argues:

To make these courses effective, they need to be taught by people from the industry. But these would-be tutors work full-time in the industry, often in a crunch [overtime work]. So when they think – Do I want to teach or do I want to work in a company? – they prefer to work in a company because teaching in Poland is more for ideological reasons than for a salary because the money in Polish universities is pathetic. And everyone who teaches, including myself, teach because we believe in it, I could not support myself from teaching alone. (Maciej Miąsik, Indie Games Poland Foundation)

The interviewees argued that the Polish videogame industry is not developed enough to provide adequate educational support for its future workforce. This realisation was based on the lack of workers with appropriate levels of skill and time to support these courses, the lack of interest in this type of education from public universities, and the precarious employment conditions for teachers in Poland. Therefore, the situation in the Polish videogame industry and its relation to higher education in Poland resembles a vicious circle in which the challenging working conditions in the industry, the lack of a qualified workforce and lack of adequate education are linked together. This situation, specifically in the context of Poland

contributes to the persistence of self-learning and a reliance on informal networks in order to 'break into' the industry.

### 5.3.2 INFORMAL NETWORKS

The reliance on informal structures in terms of job recruitment and work opportunity distribution has been a widely debated subject in creative work studies (Gill, 2002; 2013; Wreyford, 2015). As Gill (2013:256) argues:

> informality is the structuring principle in which many small and medium-sized new media companies seem to operate: finding work, recruiting staff, getting clients are all seemingly removed from the formal sphere governed by established procedures, equal opportunities, legislations, or unions agreements and located in an area based on informality, sociality and 'who you know'.

This perspective on informality has also been positioned with its ambivalent character – on one side, informality is discussed as one of the benefits of working in the cultural industries, for instance, because of the lack of rigid hierarchy at work and increased sociality and on the other hand it contributes to widening inequalities among a cultural workforce (McRobbie, 2002; Nixon and Crewe, 2004; Neff, 2012:111; Gill, 2002:82-83).

Research on informality in other cultural industries like film (Wreyford, 2015), advertising (Nixon and Crewe, 2004) or new media work (Gill, 2002; Neff et al., 2005) has indicated that the requirement for networking was accepted as a structuring factor in the cultural industries. As O'Donnell (2014:140) argues, the videogame industry is often considered to be one of the most social industries, where networking plays a significant role in starting careers in the industry. In Poland, the reliance on informal structures was also associated with the small scale of the industry and the lack of established formal career pathways (see section 5.3.1). The interviewees repeatedly mentioned that, in this industry, 'everyone knows everyone' and 'everyone drinks with everyone':

Interviewer:     So are you suggesting that in videogame development, you can find jobs because of personal connections?

Paul:     Yes, yes. It is very a closed community. I agree with the fact that you can find a job through connections. If you work here long enough and you have lots of friends in many companies, it is not that hard. In Poland, additionally, we do not have many developers. So you can

get a job without the whole recruitment process. (Paul, software engineer)

Because it is a very specific industry. On the one hand, it absorbs new talent very quickly. But on the other, if your face is unknown to people, you have little chance that someone will give you an opportunity because they simply do not know you. But even when you are new you have to make a name for yourself by going to some game dev school, or by making your own game or whatever. This is an industry which does not care about your degree but […] they care about your experience and about what kind of person you are. (Piotr, game designer)

The interviewees' awareness of existing informal connections, and the perpetual need for informal networking and 'being in certain places' (such videogame industry parties, conferences and meetings) could be understood as a form of network sociality (Wittel, 2001). This particular presentation of sociality is associated, according to Wittel (2001:51), with late capitalism, especially in cultural industries. Network sociality echoes important concepts of progressing 'individualisation' and a matter of 'choice'. Choice is therefore associated with active constructions of one's life made through decisions, preferences, order and its differences between pre-given relationships and relationships made by 'choice'. The idea of 'choice' is associated with the concept of individualisation according to which individuals are removed from their pre-constituted communities – because of their increasingly uncertain and mobile positions, they thus need to make active choices about their relationships in work-related settings (Wittel, 2001:51).

The persistence of network sociality is visible in the above quotes – in which the possibility of being around the 'right' people increased the interviewees' chances of employment. In Piotr's quote, he also emphasised the need for resourcefulness, or an expression of entrepreneurial qualities – *'making a name for yourself'*. Furthermore, Piotr described how he received his current job offer by networking during the one of the gaming conferences in Poland:

For a while I did not know what to do next. And it did not work out at [a company's name], the only thing they could offer me was some tele-consulting or something like that, and it was only for 2-3 months. […] I had graduated a videogame course, I did not have money, and I was in a really poor situation. But then I got an invitation to [the conference title]. […] And I met [a company's owner name] at the conference

and we went together to a party, we talked and he said they had an open position for a junior game designer. (Piotr, game designer)

The importance of networking and 'being in the right' places at the right time was also emphasised by Robert, who found a job in a small game development studio thanks to networking – or what he called building his "personal employability"[37]. He was one of the interviewees who had previously worked for an outsourcing videogame testing studio. He did not have previous experience in videogame design but thanks to his networking practices, he nonetheless managed to 'break into' the industry:

Polish game devs tended to be there [in the local pub]. So yeah, every day you could meet someone from the industry, someone who makes games: studio owners, designers, graphic designers, animation, anything you care to name. So I just drank beer and vodka with them. I was not aware that I was building my personal employability back then but it turned out to be quite ok.(Robert, QA/game designer)

So yeah, this happens especially when you are from Warsaw. When you go to the right places, and when you are meeting with the right people, you can pretty much get to know lots of employees from many different videogame companies in Poland. […] even with higher management people. (Patryk, QA)

These kinds of practices raise questions about their possible exclusionary character. The importance of informal relationships, based on a system of recommendations and increased sociality, can exclude workers who cannot afford to participate in them or who are purposefully excluded. During my fieldwork, discussions about informal networks of recommendations and the importance of sociality were mostly raised by male practitioners. The gendered nature of post-work socialisation and informality was addressed in Nixon and Crewe's (2004:137-138) studies about advertising work culture as well as in relation to freelance new media workers (Gill, 2002). Participation in social events presented in Robert's and Patryk's quotes describe situations which can be more achievable by specific demographics: people without caring responsibilities, of a certain age, mostly male and living in major Polish cities (in this case Warsaw). Therefore, this approach to recruitment and the requirement of networking raises questions about equal opportunities in finding jobs in the industry. Furthermore, the reliance on informal connections and word of mouth is also

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[37] In the original Polish version of this quote, Robert discussed this issue as a matter of "personal politics" (pl. *polityka personalna*).

contradictory to the interviewees' beliefs in the egalitarian nature of the industry. According to an industry-produced report (Bobrowski et al., 2017:81), employers are most interested in workers' skills and experience, however, with its reliance on informal social networks, the transparency of the recruitment process can be obscured.

This situation also influences how videogame workers steer their careers in more individualised and self-entrepreneurial ways, starting at the beginning of their careers. Furthermore, the problem with accessing adequate training has been replaced with more informal, casual training, which can be potentially exploitative for a young, passionate workforce. By taking into account the limited access for obtaining skills and work experience, many interviewees discussed instances of 'breaking into' the videogame industry in terms of what could be defined as 'hope labour' – unpaid or underpaid work performed in the hope of accumulating the work experience needed to advance in their careers (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013).

## 5.4 HOPE LABOUR – WORKING FOR A CV

The videogame industry, similarly to other cultural industries relies on the 'hope labour' of creative workers at the early stages of their careers. The concept of 'hope labour' was applied by Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) on the grounds of free labour in online social production. However, it can also be valuable for conceptualising the efforts of below-the-line and early career workers in the Polish videogame industry. Firstly, the concept refers to the temporal dimension of this type of work, defined as workers' hope to accumulate the experience and exposure needed to advance their careers in the future. Secondly, it encompasses both unpaid and underpaid work present in the cultural industries, including giving away work and portfolios for free, participating in unpaid internships, and working in underpaid occupations. Thirdly, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013:10) distinguish their concept from the concept of venture labour. It could be suggested that distinctions between these two concepts are blurred and that workers can shift between the two approaches to their work during their careers. Hope labour is associated with entrepreneurial subjectivity in its approach to the estimation of risk and planning for the future while also hoping for the best outcome. Therefore, I approach this concept as also being embedded in entrepreneurial rhetoric and a discourse of meritocracy.

In the discussion about hope labour in the Polish videogame industry, I will focus on interviewees who work or used to work as videogame testers in both outsourcing studios and directly with videogame developers[38].

Videogame testing is a specific form of occupation within the industry which has developed with the expansion of the medium into more complex and technologically demanding products (Bulut, 2015b:242). Videogame testing (quality assurance/QA) departments play a crucial role in videogame development as they are responsible for providing functional games to players (Bulut, 2015b). Their work is mostly associated with playing/re-playing parts of videogames provided by developers to check the games' functionality and quality. Videogame testing is characterised by many contradictions. Although videogame testing is perceived as a 'dream job' for videogame enthusiasts and for the possibility of starting a career in the videogame industry, it is also associated with low occupational prestige and poor working conditions (see Bulut, 2015b; Briziarelli, 2016).

Outsourcing studios offer their services[39] to international and local publishers and developers for whom the possibility of outsourcing testing actually results in a significant reduction in production costs (see Chapter 4). In addition, by outsourcing a given production process, companies tend to distance themselves from any problems associated with labour in sub-contracting companies. Therefore, the working conditions of outsourced videogame testers are positioned within different work structures, which contributes to their greater precarity (Davis-Blake and Broschak, 2009:336).

The interviewees discussed external[40] videogame testing as one of the possible entry points into the videogame industry. External testing can be especially attractive to workers who do not have any previous occupational skills related to the industry, as basic job requirements include: proficiency in the English language; strong powers of perception (useful for spotting errors 'bugs' in videogame software); and a familiarity with videogames. For videogame testers, interest in videogames is not only important in attracting a new workforce but also to ensure that employees would be motivated enough to perform often monotonous activities (Bulut, 2015b:242; Briziarelli, 2016:251-252). The monotony of videogame testing was perceived by the interviewees as a major disadvantage of this type of labour as it could affect their mental well-being. The interviewees who work or used to work in outsourcing studios

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[38] However, it is worth acknowledging that interviewees from various occupations, from programmers to graphic designers, experienced hope labour at the beginning of their careers.

[39] Service-support companies (such as Qloc, Lionbridge and Testronic) provide a variety of services from videogame testing, software porting to localisation (videogame translations).

[40] I use in this thesis the term 'external' videogame testing to discuss testers working in service-support companies. Conversely, I use the term 'internal' videogame testing to refer to videogame testers hired directly by videogame development studios.

discussed their jobs as at *'the lowest position in the food chain'* (Waldek, QA) or as *'cannon fodder'* (Robert, QA/game designer) for videogame developers.

In outsourcing studios, the majority of workers are employed on civil law contracts[41], the flexibility of which allows an outsourcer to adjust the number of workers depending on a given project's needs. Videogame testers, therefore, could be made redundant at any time during and after a project and this practice was described by the interviewees as 'being sent on forced, unpaid holidays'.

> We signed 'trash' contracts [i.e. civil law contracts] so […] but they can say any at time that 'Oh unfortunately we have closed this project so we need to send you on forced, unpaid holidays. So you are not coming to work tomorrow. We will call you'. So it was a huge stress. I felt as though I was in a rat race, honestly, […] everyone was so serious about this job because it was a well-known fact that they would fire the ones that cannot manage at work first. And immediately there would be a new set of employees […] When I got this job, they told me that the company was expanding and that they had lots of projects so I should not be worried about this. I signed a contract with them and I quit my job as a bartender the same day. At the end of my first week at the new job, I received an email telling me that I needed to go on unpaid holidays. It was in the middle of December and they called me back at the end of January. I managed but it was not a very pleasant situation. (Ola, QA)

While this practice allows companies to avoid paying for a constant number of videogame testers, it also contributes to the precarious positions of external videogame testers whose work is not only unstable but also underpaid. The interviewees from this occupational group compared their hourly pay to that as if they were working in McDonald's, as one tester put it: *"When it comes to basic salary, it is not very impressive, comparable to salaries in McDonald's […] It is around 10 PLN [£2] per hour"* (Jarek QA). The interviewees described their working conditions as extremely precarious, marked by an underappreciation of their work, instability and poor pay, however, their work could be understood as a child of hope labour – as a possible ticket into the industry. Videogame testers understood their uncertain and exploitative working conditions as necessary to acquire skills and work experience. They often discussed their approach in terms of improving their CV and planning for further employment opportunities:

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[41] The majority of external videogame testers are hired on civil law contracts. Consequently, they are not recognised by the labour law as 'workers' but as 'service providers' (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016).

I am at the stage of my career where I am thinking about leaving now or maybe at the end of my contract so I will have exactly 2 years' worth of experience [in videogame testing] on my CV. So I will wait until my project release date so I can put it on my CV. (Antoni, QA)

This approach to 'putting-up' with precarious working conditions in order to improve the competitiveness of one's CV was further cemented by stories of workers who found work directly in the development studio or found better occupational positions. This narrative played the role of providing a meritocratic framework for working in the industry, through which videogame testers' dedication, improved CVs and acquired skills would allow them to find more prestigious occupational positions in the industry. However, not all the interviewees agreed with this perspective, for example, Paweł (QA) noted that *"Maybe it is not impossible [to find a job in videogame development after working in external QA], but it is obvious that companies here [developers] have limited capacity to hire testers, so they don't accept everyone".*

In October 2015, I conducted an interview with Robert, who had just found a new job as a junior game designer in a small independent studio. The new job was a significant achievement for Robert, who had previously worked for four years as a tester in an outsourcing studio. During the interview, Robert argued that he had found his new job thanks to his investment in self-study and networking (section 5.2.2). He also expressed relief at leaving testing and finding employment directly in a development studio. In December 2015, we met again to discuss his new job and the transition from videogame testing to design. Robert discussed his new company's motivation to hire mostly inexperienced young people which, according to him, was based on an exploitation of those young people's desires to work in the industry. Robert's inexperience and willingness to take opportunities to stay in the industry provided a guarantee to the company that he would not give up his new position even if it was underpaid. Robert mentioned that it was a wake-up call for him when he realised that most of his colleagues in the development studio were junior workers or interns. He also admitted that he was thinking about returning to testing but he was too ashamed to go back to his previous company. Nonetheless, during our talk, he was also considering staying in the new company so that he could add his experience as a videogame designer to his CV.

The experiences of videogame testers who work in outsourcing companies and the ones who managed to find employment in development studios like Robert, echo examples of self-exploitation discussed in creative labour studies (see Ursell, 2000; Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 1998/2016 Ross, 2003). The interviewees believed in temporality of hardships encountered at

work as being necessary in order to advance their careers and exemplified the conceptualisation of this work as hope labour. While in Antoni's and Robert's accounts they inevitably calculated their risk and opportunities of staying in their current employment, their planning was based on their employer's and project's reputations. However, as in the case of any cultural product, company and project reputation is difficult to estimate before a videogame's release, but it remains in the sphere of risk, the unknown and the hope that their work will somehow pay-off in the future. Antoni's and Robert's perspectives also emphasise the importance of a company's and project's 'prestige' which converts into the importance of one's reputation in the industry (Blair, 2001). The idea of 'prestige' was also visible in the interviewees' accounts in which they discussed working for major, well-known videogame studios as possibly being underpaid work but at the same time valuable work experience which would allow them to advance their careers:

> But videogame testers are mostly students who live with their mums and earn like 200 PLN [approximately £41] per month but they have the chance to enter the industry from the best possible position ever; from the highest level. Contemporarily, there are only couple of videogame studios in the world better than [company's name]. I think that yes, it is extremely hard-work, yes, it is unfair and yes, they will exploit you. But in the end you have on your CV that you have worked on [game title]. And this is good for both your work experience and your work ethics. (Tom, PR)

> It is not even a secret that in the industry, in Poland, even the most famous companies like [company's name], especially with regards to the lower-level workers, they pay them in "prestige" and not money. So the employees can say that it was cool, that they worked on [game title] and maybe now they would be able to apply to some nice company abroad. But this person will earn maybe 1500 PLN net income [approximately £317]. It is really hard to support yourself on this salary, if you are not living with your mum, or something similar, yes? (Patryk, QA)

Patryk emphasises the problems associated with working 'for prestige', which are also present in debates about other cultural industries – most notably with the inequality which arises from this type of work. The work of videogame testers or work in junior positions in videogame companies is not just associated with challenging working conditions but also with social inequality. Therefore, working for 'prestige' reasons or working for one's CV, as the interviewees put it, excludes prospective workers from disadvantaged backgrounds from entering the industry (Oakley, 2013b; Lee, 2011; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013).

Furthermore, as one of the interviewees, Maciej Miąsik (Indie Games Poland Foundation), opined about young employees' justifications to stay in given companies despite difficult working conditions: *"It is always this [they will tell you that] '...but I have [game title] on my CV, so it will help me somewhere'. Probably this is truth – so maybe it is worth it?"* The dilemma is that videogame practitioners do not have the knowledge to predict how their careers will develop and if their efforts will actually be worth it in the end. Young employees are, therefore, driven by the hope that in the future they will find their 'dream job' in the videogame industry, their hope grounded in stories and narratives about other workers who managed to find work in the videogame industry despite their initial shortcomings.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter engaged with the concept of entrepreneurial subjectivity by discussing practitioners' strategies to join the industry, which relied on an emphasis on entrepreneurial ethos and informal structures (both in terms of skills and networking).

The interviewees' ideas correlated with findings of previous research about videogame labour, which indicate that a passion for videogames can be used by the industry to maximise profits at the expense of workers' working conditions (Bulut, 2015b). However, motivation to join the industry, and the economic risk associated with it, was understood differently by workers from different occupational positions. Therefore, their understanding emphasised the complexity of the experience of precarity (McRobbie, 2001; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008) in the videogame industry and consequently the variety of motivations behind decisions to join the industry. Furthermore, the interviewees' approaches to the discourse of the 'dream job' were positioned within the socio-cultural context of Poland. It can be argued that because of the different historical trajectories of the Polish industry and videogame culture development, videogames are still struggling to find their cultural legitimacy. The negative perspective of videogames present in Polish society can also have an impact on how practitioners understand their labour. Therefore, the interviewees were positioned between two discourses about their work – as an attractive form of occupation, and as an occupation of little value to society.

The second part of the chapter focused on videogame workers' strategies to start their careers in the Polish videogame industry. The interviewees discussed their perspectives on gaining skills and training in the industry through a self-entrepreneurial discourse which stresses personal responsibility, investment in skills and self-development, networking and 'hope labour'. These problems, which have also been discussed in previous research about creative

labour (e.g. Gill, 2002/2011a; Wittel, 2001; Bulut, 2015b; Lee, 2011; Wreyford, 2015), are further amplified by the small size and structure of the Polish videogame industry.

# CHAPTER 6: NEGOTIATING WORKPLACE AUTONOMY AND CREATIVE AUTONOMY

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

My investigation of videogame practitioners' motivations for joining the industry revealed that the interviewees justified their career decisions not only through their interest in videogames but also in their search for careers that would bring them greater creative autonomy. This chapter continues this discussion by investigating the interviewees' understandings of workplace autonomy and creative autonomy. An investigation of videogame practitioners' understandings of these two types of autonomy is related to the question of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

The construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity encompasses an acknowledgement of: 1) workers being autonomous and self-managed subjects; 2) workers who embrace opportunities of 'boundary-less' careers but also accept the responsibility and risk of such employment; and 3) an introduction of work organisations which do not operate through direct but in-direct control of their workers. While acknowledging these characteristics, in this chapter I will also present competing discourses and a negotiation of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Workplace autonomy is understood as 'the degree of self-determination that individual workers or groups of workers have within a certain work situation' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011:39). Brophy and de Peuter (2007:177) argue that the degree of autonomy which knowledge workers can achieve in modern workplaces is associated with re-organisation of work in late capitalism, as they described: 'working with his head not his hands, the knowledge worker reportedly enjoyed a workplace where hierarchy was being flattened, participatory process incorporated, and labour conflict gradually eliminated'. The concept of workplace autonomy is also associated with the embracing of a new work culture that favours 'openness, cooperation and self-management' (Ross, 2003:9). Through Marxist approaches, a re-organisation of work and a shift in management styles was presented by Friedman (1977:53), who discussed the shift in managerial strategies from direct control over workers to a responsible autonomy strategy. Friedman's perspective echoes some interpretations of workplace autonomy through governmentality-inspired approaches as an organisational mechanism that could encourage workers' self-governance in workplaces (Banks, 2007:55). This interpretation of workplace organisation and workers' responses to workplace autonomy are favoured in discussions about videogame industries (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015). Nonetheless, it can be argued that post-

structuralist approaches to autonomy present an over-deterministic presentation of the idea of subjectification (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), which does not provide any solutions or possibility for the existence of workplace autonomy that is not defined as an 'illusion' or 'seduction' of work in advanced capitalist societies (Hesmondhalgh, 2010:240).

In this chapter, I argue for more a complex and contextual reading of autonomy in videogame production, which should not be simply reduced to worker disillusion with possible freedom and control over their work process. The interviewees' understandings of workplace autonomy are approached through their interpretation of autonomy as a value in their lives, defined through a relational and contextual understanding of autonomy (or, as they refer to it, 'freedom'). This interpretation raises questions about the meaning of work and its place in the interviewees' lives and about the possibility of workplace autonomy being a characteristic of 'good work' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Furthermore, in their recollections, the interviewees discussed characteristics of creative work presented in previous research about creative labour (including non-monetary rewards, collegiality in workplaces, workplace autonomy, and flexible work time) (McRobbie, 2016:87-114; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:152-155).

Workplace autonomy is interconnected with questions about creative autonomy and the management of creativity in cultural production (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:60). Discussions about creative autonomy in the context of cultural production are crucial in acknowledging the characteristics of creative work. The creative work is characterised by tensions between managing creative workers and workers' creative autonomy required for production of cultural goods (see Ryan, 1992; Banks, 2010). These discussions do not simply recognise creative autonomy as freedom of artistic expression but acknowledge that, while creative autonomy is influenced by external factors, it is also a structural pre-condition of effective capitalist cultural production (Ryan, 1992). In the previous discussion about tensions between 'creative-commerce' relations in the videogame industry, scholars focused on creativity management (Zackariasson et al., 2006a/2006b; Tschang, 2007) and discussions about autonomy and independent videogame development (Ruffino, 2013; Lipkin, 2013). The positioning of videogame production in discussions about creative autonomy is crucial in highlighting the contradictions and complexity of videogame production, which places emphasis on videogame practitioners being creative workers.

The composition of the interviewee sample included practitioners with a variety of work experiences, from Triple-A production and independent game development to freelancing. Therefore, in this chapter I will distinguish between the interviewees who work in the Triple-A companies and those who work in independent development studios. However, as I

investigated the whole career biography of the interviewees (see Chapter 3), I also discussed the interviewees' reflections on their previous work experiences, career choices and approaches to the risks involved in their employment.

## 6.2 THE EXPERIENCE OF AUTONOMY

The interviewees' understandings of autonomy were associated with various characteristics of their work organisation, from a 'lax' work culture to flat organisation structures. Inevitably, they also understood autonomy through their current occupational positions and previous experiences (such as recollections about their first jobs or freelancing). Overall, these videogame practitioners claimed that working in the videogame industry allowed them to achieve a relatively higher degree of autonomy in comparison to working in other occupations. The videogame practitioners also discussed their experiences of workplace autonomy through a connection with flexible work patterns, autonomy in approaching job tasks, flat organisational structures and consequently increased sociality in workplaces. Similarly to previous research about videogame labour, the possibility of engaging in creative, cooperative and flexible work contributed to the allure of videogame employment (see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; O'Donnell, 2014).

Polish videogame practitioners understood autonomy as a relational and contextual idea of self-determination, through which autonomy is addressed as a negotiation between internal and external constraints. Undoubtedly, even in the case of the interviewees who had experienced freelance work or work in smaller development studios, workplace autonomy was not understood as fully autonomous but rather as highly negotiated.

> It is obvious that we are not 'free'; no one is free in a capitalist society and so on. But what I am doing right now gives me more freedom than previously, and I like this […] I think that the greatest thing about this job is this freedom, and by that I mean mobility, freedom from stress and creative freedom. You could highlight the word 'freedom' with a red marker here and put many reasons why. (Jurek, 2D graphic designer)

Jurek discussed his autonomy through the term 'freedom' (pl. *wolność*) which for him encompasses many facets of his work, from mobility to creative freedom. Jurek associated 'freedom' of his work with mobility which according to his understanding was not associated with career mobility but with the degree of self-determination through his work. Jurek used the word mobility (pl. *mobilność*) to discuss that his work allowed him to travel, meet new people and organise his own work according to his needs. This aspect of his work was especially important for Jurek as his previous work experience in the film industry did not

provide him with a possibility of gaining as much 'freedom' as work in the independent game development. Consequently, the context of Jurek's contemporary employment is crucial to understanding his position. Jurek discussed his freedom from the perspective of a worker in a small development studio which had achieved considerable financial success and stability. Therefore, he did not consider his work to be stressful or precarious. In his interpretation, he rejected the idea of 'freedom', or autonomy, as a complete lack of dependence from external pressures. He indicated that even in a small development studios (in this case four permanent employees), he experienced clashes with his colleagues over creative ideas. Jurek's contextual and relational presentation of autonomy was also visible among other interviewees' descriptions of their work (see Mariusz's (software engineer) and Natalia's (concept artist) which I will also discuss in this section).

Creative workers tend to present their work as being different from 'mundane' occupations (Taylor and Littleton, 2012:138; McRobbie, 2016:38-39). This presentation echoes McRobbie's argument about a romanticised understanding of creative work, which includes 'the desire to escape a lifetime of routine work, let us say in a local taxation office, or in life insurance (albeit with a university degree) and the wish to have a self-directed life in regard to work and career' (2016:38). The interviewees' understandings also presented their valorisation of routine work as a negative experience, presented as being in control of ones' work time and process by discussing their workplaces as *"not-ordinary"* (Mary, producer), *"not corporations"* (Marlena, QA; Jurek, 2D graphic designer) or in certain instances as *"not just a job"* (Natalia, concept artist). Their approach can be summarised by Sennett's (1998:42-45) discussion about negative connotations with routine work shared by workers as that which is 'personally degrading'. Working in routine or non-routine occupations was also a matter of social, occupational prestige and polarisation between what practitioners understood as 'creative' and 'non-creative' occupations. One of the videogame testers, Robert, who started his career in an outsourcing studio (see Chapter 5), described the routine of videogame testing, as *"an intellectual equivalent of looking as the paint dries on the walls; maybe it will dry, maybe not"*. This type of comparison was also apparent among software engineers, as Maryla argued that her work in videogame development was more engaging because: *"It is not like you are coming to work to design fifty or more online jewellery stores all day, every day"*. Therefore, the interviewees' search for more exciting, creative careers and variety in their working lives was apparent among all interviewed practitioners, regardless of their occupational positions.

> The worst month in my life was when I was working full-time in an IT company. The
> scariest part was that for the whole week I was coming to work at 10am and at exactly

6pm I was leaving work. And I thought back then, 'Oh god, so now my life looks like this?' And I got scared, and I said to myself that I did not want that […] For me, routine is the problem, the fact that nothing will ever change in your life. (Mariusz, software engineer)

For me, it is not just a 'job'. I would never want to work in a job where I work 8-hours a day, and then go back home. I would like to live my life in a job as well. […] And my parents are not happy because they were raised in a different system. For them, a job is when you do 8 hours of serfdom, and then you have time for yourself at home. They think that I sacrifice myself a lot for this job and that I am tortured by my job, but it is not true because the truth is that I have 24 hours to myself. (Natalia, concept artist)

Mariusz's and Natalia's approaches to their work not only emphasised their negative perspective on routine work but also their reflections on emotional attachment and the importance of work in their personal lives. While Mariusz and Natalia presented a similar understanding of work and rejection of routine in their lives, they both worked in different types of videogame production. Mariusz was the owner of an independent videogame studio while Natalia worked for a medium-sized videogame developer (she later moved to Triple-A development).

After graduating with a mathematics degree, Mariusz decided to follow his interest in videogames by opening an independent videogame studio with his friend. His studio, known by him and his co-workers as 'the den' (pl. *melina*), was officially located in his flat. Mariusz, however, could not support himself from videogame production and also worked as a maths tutor. His studio, similar to many other small developers in Poland (see Chapter 4), self-finances and self-publishes its videogames. At the time of the interview, the studio had released one videogame, which did not achieve substantial financial success. Therefore, Mariusz invested all his resources into the development of two other projects which he had hoped would bring more profit and allow him to work full-time in videogame development. Mariusz did not discuss his situation as precarious or uncertain, but instead he emphasised the importance of 'flexibility' in his life:

I like flexibility, indeed, the flexibility of my life. But actually, everything is flexible in my life. If I decide that 'Hmm I have never been to Paris but I would like to go', so I make two or three phone calls, and I go to Paris. And I want my life to work that way. I can manage like this. Although I would try not to do anything like this right

now because we have deadlines and we need to send [game title] to the VR producers […] but theoretically I could.

Mariusz's position towards 'flexibility' echoes the idea of entrepreneurial subjectivity through the link between work flexibility with personal 'freedom', as 'we imagine being open to change, being adaptable, as qualities of one's character needed for free action – the human being free because he is capable of change' (Sennett, 1998:47). However, as presented by Mariusz, his capacity for change could be 'theoretical'. Work flexibility for him was about the promise and prospect of work autonomy, about 'theoretical' flexibility which, however, could also be understood as the increased interconnectedness of one's work and personal life. In Mariusz's interpretation, also visible in Natalia's idea about her work-life relations, he presents the case of increasingly blurry boundaries between work and personal life. Through this understanding, as Rose (1999) argued, work was increasingly becoming a project, a sense of self-fulfilment and self-realisation, however at the cost of work extensification into personal lives (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006:331). Therefore, as Sennett (1998:45) argued, while routine work was viewed as being less stimulating, it has its advantages in structuring work time and protecting personal lives. The discussion presented in this section is based on the thoughts and opinions of interviews with the younger videogame practitioners (in their late-20s to mid-30s) whose enthusiasm for workplace autonomy can also be the result of the lack of other personal obligations[42].

Work autonomy, understood as a flexibility of work time, contributes to the blurring of the lines between professional and personal lives. Natalia came to Warsaw to study 3D graphic design at one of the private universities in the city. After graduating, she found an internship in one of the local videogame development studios. During the interview, she placed emphasis on her family situation as being financially disadvantageous by describing that she came from a small village and that she could not count on her parents' financial support:

> It turned out ok. For the first month, I was on an internship. I worked hard because this company was really my only chance to succeed because I am from a small village and I did not have the money to move to Warsaw. My parents gave me enough money for the first month there so that I could support myself somehow. I slept on a mattress in my relatives' flat. But this job was my opportunity, and I succeeded. (Natalie, concept artist)

The interviewees who represented less socially prestigious occupational positions (testers, junior graphic designers) offered up similar narratives about their approach to videogame work

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[42] In Chapter 9 I will discuss how the other, older interviewees approach this problem in the industry.

as an aspirational career. These narratives often addressed their migration from small villages to major Polish cities to find employment in the industry and the lack of financial support from their parents. Therefore, because of their disadvantageous situations, these interviewees agreed to take more poorly paid positions in the industry (as testers/community managers) as they did not have any connections within the industry (social capital, see Chapter 5), or they could not afford to gain work experience through free internships.

Natalie's story resembles the idea of 'hope labour' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), as discussed in Chapter 5, in her pursuit of an internship as an opportunity and the possibility of finding permanent employment. Her recollection also echoed entrepreneurial narratives by emphasising the need to grab an opportunity and endure hardship. Natalia also contrasted her approach to work with her parents' approaches, which she defined as 'serfdom'. By using this term, she presented routinized and structured work as being equivalent to degradation, alienation and performed by 'unfree' workers. To the contrary, her work is presented by her as a 'core' part of her identity. Through reference to the experience of her parents' work in the previous system, she also indicates changes in generational perspectives on work, the value of work in one's life and its purpose. Natalia argued that her work is not only 'a job' but something which also provides her with a sense of purpose and self-identity. Her perspective resembles what McRobbie (1998) presented in her research about workers in the fashion industry; the desire for work that will bring self-realisation and, in addition, work as an 'extension of self'.

Mariusz's and Natalia's perspectives on the importance of autonomy and working in 'non-routine' jobs can be also used to justify their career choices and struggles they needed to endure (see Taylor and Littleton, 2012:126-127). The interviewees' perspectives on the importance of autonomy in their working lives can be approached through neo-Foucauldian theories as an 'illusion of autonomy', behind which they could be prone to self-exploitation and self-blame (Banks, 2007:57-63; McRobbie, 1998/2016). However, it could also be a mistake to view videogame practitioners as being disillusioned by the possibility of workplace autonomy, which they always presented as contextual, relational and as a form of searching for employment with greater meaning for them. Therefore, to balance this approach, it can be argued, following Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:134), that 'it is useful to think of the experience of the autonomy of creative labour as a pleasure and satisfaction that can very easily be compromised'.

## 6.3 MANAGEMENT OF WORKPLACE AUTONOMY AND CREATIVITY

Creative autonomy is widely discussed in studies about cultural industries as it encompasses a debate about the characteristics of creative labour and the understanding of this type of employment in capitalism (Banks, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Ryan (1992:34) argued that creative labour is a special type of work as 'capitalists cannot manage artists like they can other categories of workers'. This perspective reflects the need of the capitalist market and cultural production to allow workers relative autonomy to create quality and novelty commodities.

This perspective emphasises the paradox and interconnectedness of 'creativity' and 'commerce' prerogatives in the context of contemporary cultural production, which cannot simply fall into categories of the pure pursuit of 'creativity' or 'commerce'. In this section, I investigate how Polish videogame practitioners understood the idea of creative autonomy. In previous studies, this issue was approached through an institutional (meso-) level of analysis, which will not be explored in this research (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Ryan, 1992) because the focus of this project is on videogame practitioners' interpretations of their work environments. Therefore, I will focus on the similarities between the interviewees' workplaces and strategies for the management of creativity. All the interviewees argued that their workplaces had flat organisational structures. They attributed these characteristics to the acknowledgement of lax work culture and the requirement of an iterative process of videogame development.

Kline et al. (2003:201) discussed management style in the videogame industry as involving 'a high degree of soft coercion, cool co-option, and mystified exploitation'. While Kline et al. (2003) admit that it is possible that this organisation of workplaces translates into genuine satisfaction gained from working in the videogame industry, their description of strategies used by the management in the videogame companies' bear some resemblance to neo-Foucauldian theories (Knights and McCabe, 2003). In this section, I will discuss creative autonomy in the Polish videogame industry through Ryan's (1992) acknowledgement of the specificity of cultural commodities and Friedman's (1977) concept of responsible autonomy. Through engagement with these positions toward autonomy, I will discuss the complexity and tensions in videogame development. However, as Friedman argued, and as I will demonstrate through empirical material, the implementation of the responsible autonomy strategy presents an ideal which encounters many contradictions and varied responses from workers.

Videogame practitioners mediated their understanding of 'freedom' in workplaces through a comparison with their previous work experiences or work experiences of their friends and family in 'mundane' occupations. Polish videogame practitioners repeatedly described their

workplaces as being 'not like corporations'. According to the interviewees, 'corporation-like,' workplaces represent negative socio-cultural connotations of work, which are characterised by rigid, highly hierarchical, routinized work organisation and lack of collegiality:

> It is as absolutely far away from a corporation as it can be. Even our bosses emphasise that we will never become a corporation. We discovered that it is not a viable approach. This honest, cordial approach to fans and people in the company is much more profitable because people feel better and they work better. (Marlena, QA)

> There isn't this corpo style; I can see it in the people who work in the industry. They are happy. When I talk with other people they usually complain about their jobs; I mean people from other occupations. Like, you know, there is always something bad in Poland. As a contrast, in the videogame industry, people are always happy: 'Ok, so what's new? What are we going to do today?' (Natalie, concept artist)

The interviewees' interpretations had socio-economic and historical connotations, through which they approached their current workplaces in opposition to their ideas about 'corporations' because of companies' approach to workers (or generally workers' behaviour), less routinized forms of their work (Natalie: *"What's new? What are we going to do today?"*), and flat organisational structure. Marlena argued that her workplace was not a 'corporation' because, as she justified it, the management would never want it to be a corporation. Marlena's enthusiasm about the company could also be the result of her being at an early stage of her career (two years) and the fact that she worked for a prestigious employer, which confirms the videogame industry's attractiveness to young workers. Furthermore, Marlena's justification for her work being more 'worker friendly' is associated with her internalisation of the companies' approach. In her justification, she not only used the pronoun 'we' in discussing the company's strategy but also discussed what could be a more 'profitable' approach for the company (that being good to workers is profitable). This quote came from an employee from a Triple-A company who was not in a management position but in a lower occupational position (senior QA). This response also resembled academic discussion about how the re-organisation of work and the introduction of a different style of management can convert into workers' interpretation of their workplaces, which sometimes reflects their internalisation of a company's values (de Peuter and Brophy, 2007; Sennett, 1998; Friedman, 1977).

The idea presented by the interviewees about 'no-corporation' resembles 'no-collar mentalities' among new media (Ross, 2003). Ross (2003:36) traced these mentalities back to socio-economic historical change in the organisation of workplaces between IT corporations (such as IBM) and tech companies in Silicon Valley, as he argues 'In South Bay, informality in dress

code, work schedule, and management style was construed as a welcome freedom from the puritanical way of the East Coast corporation'. Similarly, the recollections about the work organisation of videogame studios resemble a division between a direct (or hierarchical) style of management and the 'rebelliousness' of videogame work organisation (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:55, Cohendet and Simon, 2007:595). This emphasis on videogame companies' flat organisational hierarchy, the persistence of informality, and lax work culture were also discussed in more contemporary research about videogame development (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; O'Donnell, 2014; Bulut, 2015; Johnson, 2013). The interviewees from various occupational backgrounds discussed their work cultures as lax, playful and informal, for instance, Karol who works as a scriptwriter in the Triple-A studio argued that:

> …everyone calls you by your name, everyone talks in a very colloquial language, mixing Polish and English words. It has the atmosphere of a student club, more holiday-like but obviously when we do not have deadlines. It is very, very relaxed. If you want to, you can walk without shoes. If you want, you can wear a wig, and if you want, you can lay down on the floor and pick your nose while having a business meeting. Everyone is cool with this; it is total freedom. (Karol, scriptwriter)

Karol's presentation of work culture in his studio being like a 'student club', which he further argued has more to do with an 'atmosphere of Bohemia' than with software development, echoes McRobbie's (2002) discussion about 'club to companies' culture or Ross' (2003) characterisation of work in new media industries as 'work-as-play'. In contrast to the stereotypical presentation of videogame practitioners as introverts who tend to avoid social gatherings, the interviewees argued that one of the most important skills in the videogame industry is to be a social person with good communication skills. Bolek, one of the software engineers who worked in a Triple-A videogame studio argued that: "*you work with people so, at least for me, a person [who wants to work in the industry] who is an introvert and cannot communicate very well with people, or she is not liked by people, they will have problems here*", and in a similar manner Marlena (QA) argued that: "*You need to be an open-minded person and not afraid of other people. From my experience, I know that here [in a videogame studio], you need to talk with everyone even if you do not know them*".

The requirement to possess good communication skills and be a 'more' social person is connected with the highly collaborative characteristic of working in videogame development. This type of labour requires extensive support from a variety of occupational roles – from software engineers, producers, a variety of artists, and videogame testers. Even in the case of small, independent videogame developers, they tend to collaborate and co-operate with other videogame practitioners inside and outside their teams (such as outsourcing). A similar

approach to collaborative work was also presented in outsourcing studios in which videogame testers worked in groups on one project supervised by the team leader. To facilitate this collaborative work, the interviewees argued that their workplaces had flat organisational structures, which allowed them to discuss their ideas with other videogame practitioners, receive/provide feedback and contribute to the iterative and complicated process of videogame development.

> So the company's structure is flat, everyone can talk with everyone else and say anything they want, find out about something and present some new ideas. We do not have this approach that 'you know nothing, you should not talk'. We listen to everyone. We do not have very formal talks; it is always very relaxed. (Bolek, software engineer)

> Here the structure is flat and smarter; I have a feeling that we have more autonomy as workers […] It is more like they allow us to explore, and then we talk about this. We do not have this [attitude from management] 'I want this and this, and you need to do this'. The process is more about iteration about proposals […] There is still a hierarchy but everyone talks with everyone else… (Maryla, software engineer)

The scale of the interviewees' work arrangements was dependent on their occupational positions and the types of videogame production they were engaged with. However, apart from instances of 'crunch time' (see Chapter 8), videogame practitioners were satisfied with greater autonomy in the arrangement of their work tasks. The lack of direct, rigid control exercised by management in videogame studios was converted into the interviewees' different perspectives on their work management, which was defined in terms of flat organisation structure as a *"partnership"* (Piotr, game designer) or *"trust"* (Patrick, QA).

The interviewees' approaches to workplace autonomy could be interpreted through Friedman's (1977) distinction between a direct control strategy and a responsible autonomy strategy used by management. Freidman's definition (1977:48) of the responsible autonomy strategy involves allowing individual workers or groups of workers a wide measure of discretion over the direction of their work tasks and the maintenance of managerial authority by getting workers to identify with the competitive aims of the enterprise so that they act 'responsibly', with minimum supervision. This approach to work management is also visible in the interviewees' understandings of their workplaces. The responsible autonomy strategy aims to exercise indirect control of workers through making them self-managed or more autonomous workers, who would more likely internalise a company's goals. Some of the interviewees' opinions support this interpretation, for instance, in the interviewees' discussion about 'no-corporation-like' organisation of work. However, Friedman (1977:51) argues that

responsible autonomy represents an impossible ideal, which on its own presents many contradictions. Furthermore, his concept was not discussed specifically in relation to creative labour and the characteristics of this type of employment need to be acknowledged in order to discuss relations between managerial control and creative teams (Ryan, 1992). Therefore, while the strategy of responsible autonomy in its idealistic form aims to result in creating self-managed workers who internalise the goals of companies with their own needs (as in neo-Foucauldian studies), these forms of managerial control vary in their applications and they do not need to result in deterministic responses from the workers.

The strategy of responsible autonomy was not approached by the interviewees without criticism. The interviewees argued that Polish videogame companies have less experience and knowledge about the management of videogame development than their Western counterparts. This perspective corresponds with a discussion about the structure of the Polish videogame industry as presented in Chapter 4. Maciej, who worked as a creative director and had previous experience in working for Western developers, argued that Polish videogame companies lack experience in managing videogame development:

> We need to acknowledge that we have to spend years to catch up with the West simply in non-creative aspects of videogame development, like production processes, project management and organisational stuff […] because in the West they have been making games for 40 years now and in Poland, we have been making games for 14.

Maciej presented the lack of knowledge in managing videogame development as a characteristic of Polish companies, and in relative terms, it is true because of the industry's later development than its counterparts. However, similar arguments about difficulties in managing videogame development were discussed by O'Donnell (2014) regarding videogame studios in the USA. He argues that project management or the formalisation of the videogame development process is constrained through an ever-changing technological milieu in which videogames are embedded and through iterations of videogame development, and that videogame practitioners themselves tend to reject the process of project management. Inevitably, these difficulties in project management are associated with economic, technological and cultural changes and perspectives on videogame development, from companies' accumulation of knowledge about the development process and the type of production to the work culture of 'rebelliousness' in videogame studios.

The interviewees presented polarised opinions about Polish videogame companies' approaches to the management of creative projects and some of them argued that a less professionalised approach to videogame development, even in Triple-A studios, supports

practitioners' creativity. This idea was expressed in Bastian's description of the Polish videogame industry's organisation as 'healthy chaos' or a 'garage' way of making games:

> For sure, we have this element of healthy chaos, and we do not have many corporate, bureaucratic schemes of making games. It is still a little bit of a 'garage' way of making games, which is possibly the key to our success, and this is something which has possibly harmed lots of Western companies. They [Western companies] are too big. When you have so many employees, you need to have different management schemes, and this does not influence creativity in a good way. I don't think we have this in Poland, and this is a huge advantage of this country. (Bastian, 3D graphic designer)

The interviewees' references to 'healthy chaos' and rebelliousness of management of videogame development were also mentioned by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:55), whose interviewees presented their work development as 'work anarchy'. Therefore, while the interviewees discussed the backwardness of the Polish videogame industry in comparison to Western countries, it is possible to spot similarities in work organisation of videogame studios in different geographical locations. While in some literature these forms of work organisation were approached by workers as being particularly attractive, the interviewees in this study presented mixed opinions about this style of management.

> The problem is that it is a young industry and very dynamic and companies' structures in videogame development are very undefined […] so sometimes you do not know […] who is responsible for what and who will make the final decision nor what the final decision will be, so we do not always have a clear point of reference in terms of what, when and on what conditions things will happen. (Karol, scriptwriter)

> 'Creative chaos' in videogame development helps one to find unexpected solutions and it can be a good thing. But the organisational chaos that forces development teams to re-do things more times than it is actually necessary. This organisational chaos results in a lack of clear communication in the development team, a lack of knowledge about development priorities and so on. It is possible to reorganise videogame development to avoid this organisational chaos, just like the IT industry did. Better project management will not necessarily impact workers' creativity. (Konrad, game designer)

The interviewees discussed their difficulties with managing the development process, which impacted on the clarity of communication in companies. While the interviewees acknowledged that videogame development is iterative – a creative process which requires a different form

of management than IT projects – they criticised the lack of adequate project management in their studios. Criticism of the management style of the development process in videogame studios is also visible in discussions on the online forums – for both small and Triple-A studios (see Sinclair, 2017). The videogame practitioners criticised their work organisation on the online forums by indicating that: 'management is incompetent' or 'management never listens or cares and always sets up fake goals' (Glassdoor, 2018). During my fieldwork, the interviewees also expressed frustration over in-studio communication between the higher management staff and creative teams which are directed toward different goals consequently emphasising 'creative' or 'commercial' prerogatives. The interviewees argued that CEOs of major Polish companies did not have any knowledge about videogame development and had started their companies ostensibly as entertainment businesses.

Overall, while the Polish videogame practitioners enjoyed both workplace and creative autonomy, they also discussed problems with the management of videogame development in Poland by underlining the contradictions and pitfalls of responsible autonomy. Therefore, while work organisation in videogame studios can be motivated by the responsible autonomy strategy used by management, this strategy, through lack of direct control, lax work culture and flat organisational hierarchies, does have its challenges and difficulties, recognised by the interviewees. Furthermore, tensions between management and creative teams highlighted the importance of creative autonomy in videogame development. Although videogame development is constrained by various internal and external factors, videogame companies need to profit from the creative autonomy of their workers to maintain their position in an increasingly competitive global videogame market.


## 6.4 WORK CULTURE AND AUTONOMY: ON SOCIALITY

The increased sociality in videogame production contributed to interviewees' favourable perspectives of their occupations. Sociality was also discussed as being closely related to workplace and creative autonomy because of less hierarchical occupational structures and increased co-operation in their workplaces. This section also refers to a discussion about informality as presented in Chapter 5, by discussing the interviewees' approaches to increased sociality in the industry, not just concerning finding employment but also in the context of their career development and possible solidarity in the industry. I argue that sociality in the Polish videogame industry should be considered not only as a form of 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001), often discussed in research about cultural industries (Gill, 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Scharff, 2018), but also as a form of informal support network (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011). In the Polish videogame industry, sociality among videogame practitioners

plays an important role in establishing supporting structures because of the lack of formal representative bodies [43] and developed 'know-how' base (see Chapter 4). However, the existence of both entrepreneurial ethos and the requirement to network blurs the boundaries between the commodification of social relations and community support. In addition, increased sociality in the videogame industry also has its negative implications regarding excluding certain demographics from participating in videogame development.

The interviewees portrayed flat organisational structures and informality in social relations as positive aspects of their work. Furthermore, they presented sociality and solidarity as characteristics of the Polish videogame industry because of its small size and high mobility of videogame practitioners between companies. Polish videogame practitioners have discussed the importance of social gatherings as 'team-building' activities and as a part of constructing one's professional identity (Deuze et al., 2007:349). The importance of social events and networking was not only acknowledged within the structure of given companies but also discussed as an important part of creating a Polish videogame practitioners community.

The interviewees discussed the commonality of after-work socialisation, ranging from going to pubs and cinemas to even going on holiday with their co-workers. The importance and prevalence of after-work social events were discussed by the interviewees in different occupational positions and different types of videogame production (from independent studios to Triple-A studios):

> Our HR department really cares about our wellbeing, so we have some events, some small celebrations in the company […] we have something called a 'Beer Friday' so every last Friday of the month we have a party in the company […] we have small parties with alcohol, some extra events, with *Sing Star* game and so on. (Marlena, QA)

> We have lots of these additional communal traditions, whose aim is to help build the team. Bringing chocolates and sweets to work on a particular day is a good example. Or when we decorate a Christmas tree together; these kinds of events. And this builds these common traditions and habits and rituals which build the team. (Tadeusz, producer)

The videogame practitioners said that sociality within the industry and the possibility of working with like-minded people are some of the best parts of their work. Undoubtedly, increased sociality in videogame industries plays a significant role in the conceptualisation of this kind of work as being particularly appealing (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009;

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[43] Until 2015 Polish videogame developers did not have any representative institution.

Johnson, 2013; Bulut, 2015). For videogame practitioners, the possibility of spending time with people who share the same interests and values as they do was perceived as being valuable for the employees' sense of self-worth and self-esteem (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:31). When I asked the interviewees about the best parts about their work, the majority argued that working with like-minded people was the best:

> Interviewer:     So what is the best thing about your work?
> Bolek (software engineer):     The people. Everyone else will give you the same answer.
>
> But in my opinion, this is much more positive because if you are making some software system or I do not know […] let's say financial system this is not […] this [non-creative work] does not connect people. When you have a videogame, and it is something super great, in which people engage and believe […] they are also much nicer to themselves, and they help each other a lot. Because they know that what they are doing is awesome. (Pola, game designer).

The increased sociality in videogame companies translated into the interviewees' emotional and close relationships with their co-workers. The extension of this idea was visible in the interviewees' description of relationships among co-workers as being 'family-like': *"But in my department, I think that we have this family-like atmosphere"* (Bastian, 3D graphic designer) or *"So I think sometimes that this is kind of like my second family. A little bit big but still family"* (Bolek, software engineer). The interviewees attributed characteristics of 'family-like' work cultures to sociality within and outside videogame companies. This description is associated with the nature of the work done by videogame practitioners, from emotionally investing in the project and enduring hardships of development (long working hours) to receiving feedback on their work/games.

Interviewees discussed not only the bonding nature of work in the videogame industry because of its creative components but also the fact that they formed long-lasting friendships with their co-workers. During my fieldwork, I interviewed couples who worked together in the industry, interviewees who had brought their siblings into the industry, and those who claimed that they met the majority of their friends at work or previous videogame studios. This work culture and increased sociality could be easily dismissed as just another form of managing knowledge workforce through 'lax' work cultures and organised by companies' communal practices (see discussion in Fleming, 2005). However, the interviewees from different occupational backgrounds and different types of videogame production presented coherent narratives about the importance of sociality in their workplaces and beyond. These narratives were rarely about

activities organised by companies but mostly about the fact of working with like-minded people on creative projects. This sociality was also increased and emotionally driven by a focus on 'good work' and developing 'good product'.

> I think this is a case of common interests, we are all little bit like Peter Pan, yes? I mean, this is hard work, but at the end of the day we make games and do not do open-heart surgeries. And I think we have inside this lax attitude, and this need to play. This is also combined with the fact that we need this mutual friendship; we want this to be cool. (Mary, producer)

The interviewees' perspectives on exceptional sociality in their workplaces contributes to not just the 'work-as-play' atmosphere but also to their increased emotional attachment to their workplaces. According to the interviewees, the idea of sociality and solidarity was extended beyond one workplace to encompass the whole Polish videogame industry. This perspective echoes the understanding of informal support structures of videogame developers through the concept of 'occupational community' (Weststar, 2015). Weststar argued that due to increased mobility and the lack of development of one's attachment to a workplace, videogame developers tend to rely on the informal support of their occupational communities, which provide them with not only practical and emotional support but also with the set of norms and values shared by videogame practitioners.

Polish videogame practitioners argued that because of high staff turnover among companies, videogame practitioners tend to 'stick' together and provide each other with various forms of support. The importance of this support was not only visible among independent videogame practitioners but also among interviewees from Triple-A companies and outsourcing studios.

> We have lots of companies but not that many actually […] and lots of people used to work for CI Games, CD Projekt Red or Techland, and sometimes after years of working somewhere else they come back. So people within the industry know each other very well. And I think that these relations are rather friendly. You will always have some fuck-ups everywhere but in general, people are very supportive […] it is a very integrated environment in comparison to other industries. (Karol, scriptwriter)

The interviewees discussed the importance of networking, attending conferences and parties organised by particular videogame studios, or their friendships with workers from other companies. The interviewees argued that they had received support from the community through providing each other with recommendations, business strategies, marketing support, technical tips and feedback:

We have lots of support in various forms, such as people asking whether we need translators, marketing people, recommending companies. They usually know someone who can help. And yeah, we are working with a girl who we found through a recommendation. So we have lots of support and we help each other when we have technical problems. Recently we had problems with devkits on Xbox. We phoned our friend, and he explained everything. (Jurek, 2D graphic designer)

We are not competition for each other. We are simply friends, and if we need something, we ask someone to play our game and see how it works and what else we can do with it if we need some external opinions. I think this is important. (Radek, software engineer)

The importance of sociality for videogame practitioners can be understood as an informal support structure that provides videogame practitioners with support networks, which help them overcome the various challenges in their working lives by supporting them in acquiring knowledge about videogame production and distribution (including videogame development, access to online distribution platforms and marketing). This form of support varied in nature from sharing information about employers and working conditions in development studios, testing each other's videogames, giving and receiving feedback, to recommending co-workers and support services. This form of support and solidarity also blurs the boundaries between community support and 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001). Videogame practitioners rely on the support of their colleagues not only emotionally and practically but with the acquiring of commercial/promotional support. Among the interviewees there was also an emphasis on the need of 'self-branding', attending certain conferences in order to receive feedback, attending events to gain recognition for their studios, and 'sharing each-other's greenlights'[44] (Jurek, 2D graphic designer) (using other developers in supporting their promotional campaigns).

However, it is not suggested that this form of work culture does not have its challenges, for instance, regarding the exclusion of certain demographics from socialisation and consequent employment opportunities, and their disadvantaged position when it comes to career progression (Crewe and Nixon, 2004). As previously suggested by other scholars (Gill, 2009;

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[44] Steam Greenlight (2012-2017) allowed the platform's users to choose which games would be added to the service. Developers could present information about their games – such as game play videos or beta game versions. Top-pledged games received support from Valve in terms of their distribution. Consequently, 'sharing each-other's greenlights' was understood by interviewees as supporting and sharing information about new videogame projects and gaining publicity for other videogame projects. This practice was therefore prevalent among independent video-game developers.

Gregg, 2010), compulsory sociality tends to exclude from these opportunities those workers who are shy, do not drink or who cannot participate in after-work events because of family obligations. In this study, I met videogame practitioners who were not interested in this form of socialisation. Paul, for instance, one of the software engineers from a medium-sized videogame studio, argued that he did not participate in this community:

> I know that the Polish industry is well-organised and they have their online forums and parties and annual meetings and that they go together to different places. But I am not part of this community, and I do not participate in these events. If someone is not an extrovert and does not like to be around huge groups of people, however, they do not really take part in such things. (Paul, software engineer)

Occupational communities of videogame developers provide informal networks of support and a reference group for establishing developers' norms and values. However, they also worked as an exclusionary mechanism, which defines what kind of videogame practitioners can participate in community. The problem of videogame practitioners' communities and their boundaries have also a gendered dimension which has been signalised in Chapter 5. I will also explore further the problems with gender inequalities and discrimination in the Polish videogame industry in the following Chapter 7.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION

Autonomy, both in terms of self-determination at work and self-expression of creativity, was highly valued by the interviewees. They approached and negotiated autonomy in relational and contextual terms by defining it through their previous employment, their work experiences, or their relatives' experiences. Workplace autonomy, also defined by the some interviewees as 'freedom' (*wolność*), emphasised the changing approaches to work, especially in terms of the place of work in their lives. Videogame practitioners embraced autonomy at work even at the risk of extensification of work into their personal lives or in situations of greater life uncertainty (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006). Therefore, their emphasis on the importance of autonomy and being in control of their working lives presents a characteristic of entrepreneurial subjectivity contracted through a rejection of the routine, the need to 'grab opportunities' and to embrace the *"theoretical"* (Mariusz) flexibility of their lives.

Creative autonomy in Polish videogame studios presented tension between the demands of capitalist modes of production and the characteristics of creative labour. Videogame development is rationalised to minimalize the risk of project failure; videogame companies need to balance their commercial prerogatives with a need for constant innovation which

demands videogame practitioners have a certain level of creative autonomy. Therefore, creative autonomy is recognised as a systemic requirement, however constrained by internal (within studio) and external factors, for example by publishers, management and marketing divisions. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:55) discuss 'rebelliousness' and 'workplace' anarchy in videogame studios, which was supposed to enable creative autonomy in videogame studios. This form of work organisation was characterised by flat organisational structures, lax work culture and a high degree of worker autonomy. It also resembled a shift toward the responsible autonomy strategy discussed by Friedman (1977).

However, it is worth acknowledging that the idea of responsible autonomy is an ideal which, in the complexity of workers' experiences and unpredictability of videogame production, could be difficult to implement. The interviewees discussed tensions between management and creative teams about creative decisions, tensions within creative teams (various occupations) and the lack of experience in project management in Polish companies, which made them question and criticise management decisions. Therefore, what is sometimes addressed as an 'illusion of autonomy' or responsible autonomy is not a deterministic perspective that prevents workers' discontentment with work, but is an ongoing process of struggles between management and workers. Therefore, while videogame practitioners can act as self-managed, self-entrepreneurial subjects, they are rarely uncritical about their forms of management and autonomy.

One of the characteristics of their workplaces, which the interviewees connoted with workplace autonomy and creative autonomy, was an increased sociality in their workplaces. The idea of sociality was also expanded to the interviewees' acknowledgement of the Polish videogame developers community as a particularly social and friendly environment. However, the occupational community of developers in Poland was addressed through the blurred boundaries between community support and 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:152).

The existence of informal occupational networks and increased sociality in the Polish videogame industry offers support to videogame practitioners at various stages of their career development (such as finding future employment to providing technical support). Furthermore, the possibility of socialising with like-minded people contributed to the interviewees' emotional attachment to their work. However, the existence of such communities can also be approached as a form of compulsory self-commodification to secure favours from one's studio/game (attending events, self-branding, sharing 'green lights') and employability. Furthermore, while occupational communities can provide informal support and a sense of belonging for workers, they also play an important role in defining norms and values of the

community, which consequently leads to exclusion of certain demographics from participation. In the next chapter I will develop this discussion further by addressing gender inequality in the Polish videogame industry.

# CHAPTER 7: 'UNSPEAKABLE INEQUALITIES' IN THE POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates how videogame practitioners understand inequality – specifically gender inequality – in their workplaces. In Chapter 6, I discussed my interviewees' approaches to their work environment through such concepts as workplace autonomy, creative autonomy and sociality. These features of videogame work contributed to the interviewees' favourable perspectives of videogame companies. As in the concept of informality discussed in the context of creative and new media labour (Crewe and Nixon, 2004; Ursell, 2000; Gill, 2002/2011a), the perspective of the videogame industry as being 'cool, creative and egalitarian' (Gill, 2002:1) poses questions about persistent inequality in videogame industries as discussed in academic literature (Prescott and Bogg 2011a/2011b/2014; Consalvo, 2008) and the industry's organisations reports (Weststar et al., 2016).

In this chapter I argue that the interviewees approach gender inequality through individualised narratives, which emphasise a person's responsibility over their working conditions. This perspective is also associated with the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity through which resilience, 'proving oneself' at work and a belief in the meritocratic nature of the industry is emphasised over structural sources of inequality. The investigation of Polish videogame practitioners' understandings of inequality is linked to the thesis' research question as it is associated with the construction of new labouring subjectivity, which favours 'an entrepreneurial individualistic mode that disavows structural power relations' (Gill, 2014:509). Similar difficulties in articulating inequality among workers have been previously acknowledged in studies about creative labour (Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2015/2018; O'Brien, 2014), ICT occupations (Kelan, 2009) and in organisational studies (Lewis et al., 2017).

This chapter focuses primarily on gender inequality and female practitioners' experiences of it for empirical and theoretical reasons. Firstly, while my interviewees seemed to approach questions about gender issues in their workplaces as being rather challenging, everyone seemed to be interested and vocal about these issues for a variety of reasons. Therefore, the interviewees' interests in this issue demanded closer attention. Secondly, this issue required further investigation since previous research has recognised that women in popular discourses are presented as ideal entrepreneurial subjects (see McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2018:18). Thirdly, this discussion encompasses an investigation of post-feminist sensibility, which aims to acknowledge understandings of gender inequality beyond discussions about difficulties in

achieving a 'work-life balance'[45] in the industry along with the difficulties for women to reconcile their family lives with working in the industry (see Prescott and Bogg, 2011a/2011b; Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2012).

Female videogame practitioners' interpretations are approached through an investigation of post-feminist sensibility (Gill, 2007/2017) in their understandings of gender inequality within the videogame industry. However, it is also worth acknowledging that the concept of 'post-feminism' is highly contested (see discussions in Gill, 2007 or McRobbie, 2009) and early research about post-feminist culture has been criticised, inter alia, for its focus on Western[46], white middle class women (Butler, 2013:47; Dosekun, 2015:961). Dosekun (2015:967) presents the importance of questioning the understanding of post-feminism as a continuum, based on an example of the formation of feminism in Western countries. Inspired by Chen's (2012) notion of 'feminism bypassed', Dosekun (2015:967) argues that the development of feminism in non-Western countries does not have to follow the same trajectories of its development in Western countries. It is worth noting that this perspective also acknowledges the complex, fragmented and ambiguous relationships of neoliberalism with entrepreneurial subjectivity and local contexts as presented in the literature review (Chapter 2). This perspective also acknowledges the importance of recognising the post-feminist sensibility through a specific socio-cultural context.

Furthermore, the female videogame practitioners' disavowal of structural factors in terms of gender inequality could also be recognised as something that they did not want to talk about for fear of losing their jobs. The interviewees, for example, could have used this discourse for pragmatic reasons as they may have wanted to present themselves as resilient and entrepreneurial individuals during the interviews. The interviewees' responses could reflect their strategic decisions to avoid the potential consequences of taking part in this research, as discussing inequality in workplaces could be potentially harmful to their careers. Therefore, the discussion presented in this chapter needs to be attuned to the specificity of a Polish socio-cultural context and the videogame industry culture.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first section discusses gender inequality in the Polish videogame industry – through the under-representation of women and gendered occupational segregation. This section presents the three main reasons behind female under-representation

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[45] The subject of 'work-life' relations in the industry is still important and will be discussed in Chapter 9.

[46] I use the term 'Western' in this paragraph following discussions presented by Butler (2013) and Dosekun (2015). Therefore, the term 'Western' is used to indicate that previous studies about post-feminist culture positioned it primarily within the context of Anglo-American culture (Dosekun, 2015:961). Dosekun (2015:961) criticises this approach by calling for more transnational perspectives on post-feminist cultural influences.

in the industry that the interviewees discussed. The second section focuses on the notion of post-feminist sensibility by investigating how female practitioners understand the under-representation of women in the industry and the challenges they encounter in their working lives. This section is divided into three sub-sections which correspond with three characteristics of 'post-feminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017): 1) gender fatigue and repudiation of sexism; 2) the presentation of women as an advantaged gender; and 3) an emphasis on individualised responsibility and the requirement of self-surveillance.

## 7.2 WOMEN IN THE POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

It is something of a truism to say that videogame work is male-dominated; this situation has been well documented by researchers (Prescott and Bogg, 2011a/2013; Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Consalvo, 2008; Deuze et al., 2007; Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2013; Fujihara, 2014) and in industry reports (Weststar et al., 2016:10). Information and statistics about women in the Polish videogame industry are scarce and do not provide any in-depth statistical sources about female participation in videogame development, occupational segregation or job tenure. The only available statistics about female participation in the videogame industry were presented in the report 'The State of the Polish Videogame Industry 2017' (Bobrowski et al., 2017:73)[47]. According to estimations in the report, women account for around 15 per cent of employees in the industry. The report's authors explain that female under-representation is a result of their recent interest in employment in the industry, however the report authors did not provide any further evidence for this argument.

Gendered occupational segregation is also present in the Polish videogame industry (see Figure 7a), which confirms the results of research conducted in other national industries (see Dyer-Witheford and Sharman, 2005; Fujihara, 2014). The majority of women work in art-related occupations (such as 2D artists or concept artists) and management/support occupations (producers). The category of 'other' is not further defined in the report data, however it could be speculated that this category encompasses a variety of support and management occupations. It is also worth acknowledging that the statistics presented in the report did not refer to the occupational category of 'designer'.

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[47] Previous reports did not include any information about female practitioners (see Bobrowski et al., 2015).
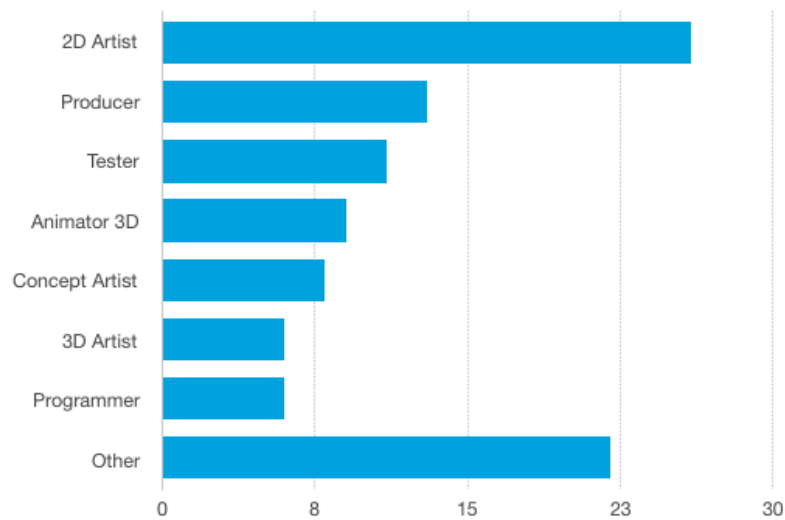
Interviewees discussions about female participation in the Polish videogame industry reflected the results of previous research about women in videogame development in other national industries (see Prescott and Bogg, 2014). The interviewees openly admitted that not many women work in the Polish videogame industry:

> It will be around 10 per cent [of women workers], yeah, but 10 per cent it is still a high estimation. (Artur, QA)

> We definitely do not have parity here, I mean in the [development] team, two girls are working in the company. (Konrad, game designer)

> Here [in her development studio], it is only me and the girls from reception, accounting and HR. (Maryla, software engineer)

The interviewees not only acknowledged that women are in the numerical minority in the industry but, as Maryla also mentioned, if they work in the industry they tend to work outside the development team. The subject of occupational gendered segregation appeared during the interviewee recruitment process, as the interviewees did not have any difficulties in directing

me to their female colleagues who work in 'art-related' occupations or in support roles (PR, marketing or project management). However, it was more difficult to find and interview female software engineers (programmers).

## 7.2.1 Interpreting women under-representation

The interviewees presented three main interpretations for women under-representation in the Polish videogame industry. Firstly, they argued that women do not apply for jobs in the industry. Secondly, the interviewees attempted to discuss this under-representation through a mix of structural and 'biological' factors that presented women as being uninterested in technology and videogames or by being different to men in their interest in technology (see discussions in Wajcman, 1991; Griffiths et al., 2007). Thirdly, the interviewees explicitly discussed gender inequality and discrimination in videogame companies as a possible source of under-representation.

The problem of articulating gender inequality and problems in the workplace has been noted before in organisational research (see Kelan, 2007; Lewis, 2014). Kelan (2007:507), in her research about gender inequality in ICT industries, argues that 'people felt uncomfortable in answering this question as they did not want to give the impression that women have no agency in deciding what they are interested in, while at the same time they did want to blame women for not entering ICT professions'. This problem was present in the first explanation presented by those interviewees who argued that women simply do not apply to videogame companies: *"It is not like we prefer to work with men, actually it's just the contrary, but we just get job applications from men"* (Bolek, software engineer). Bolek and Konrad's opinions reference female interns who previously worked in the development studio: *"Well, we had, for example, female interns but it was on the basis that they just came and left"* (Konrad, game designer).

The second explanation discussed women's lack of interest in computer science, technology and, according to the interviewees, videogames:

> I think it is historically the case that the industry in Poland was built on people's passion for videogames, people who grew up on the demo scene in the 90s. So these kinds of things were for boys – computers, tapes and so on. Technical things. (Konrad, game designer)

> I don't think that there are many girls who are interested in mathematics and physics at a level sufficient to actually engage in videogame production. Because it includes lots of work after hours. You need to develop your skills constantly, study, and attend

conferences and read articles. Trying new things yourself at home. And the majority of these activities are based on hobbies, and I think that is why we do not have women in games. (Błażej, software engineer)

The above quotes demonstrate that gender imbalance in videogame production is still a problem associated with the gendered nature of technology and videogames (Thornham, 2008; Wajcman, 1991). However, these quotes also present differences in understanding the relations between technology and gender. Konrad associates this problem with historical aspects of the Polish videogame industry's development (see Chapter 4), while Błażej argues that women do not have the abilities (the necessary willingness and interest in physics and mathematics) to engage in videogame development at a professional level. In a similar manner, discussions about structural barriers (such as access to a computer-science based education or an interest in videogames) were mixed with discussions about the differences (in terms of skills) between men and women.

The problem of female under-representation in the videogame industry was associated with technology and engineering occupations by the interviewees while disregarding the possibility of engaging with other creative professions. This is especially interesting as it has been estimated that the majority of occupations in the industry are connected to creative (or artistic) positions and not to technical jobs (O'Donnell, 2014:9). In addition, only Błażej had a university degree in software engineering, while the other quoted interviewee did not have formal training in engineering but in social sciences. However, it is possible that the interviewees used this justification as drawing on the most common discourse which appeared in relation to gender inequality and occupational segregation in videogame industries.

In the third explanation, the interviewees specifically discussed gender inequality and discrimination in the industry that contributes to female under-representation in the industry. The acknowledgement of hostile workplace environments for women was discussed by interviewees from different occupational backgrounds ranging from outsourcing companies, independent studios to Triple-A studios, and from videogame testers to software engineers. However, this explanation was mostly articulated by male rather than female practitioners, as only one woman in this research sample explicitly discussed sexist behaviour in her workplace (Ola, QA). Men's openness about the issue of gender discrimination further emphasises that women are more reluctant to discuss these issues for pragmatic reasons.

Jurek, a graphic designer from an independent studio, argued that: *"It is hard for me to say this because I am not a woman but it must be hard for them [women] because for some reason there aren't many of them [in the industry]. There must be a reason why they do not show up at some events. Maybe they feel these events are not for them".*

Other interviewees explicitly suggested that gender discrimination (and other types of discrimination) exists in the industry:

Interviewer:     Have you ever encountered any form of discrimination in the industry?

Paul:            Yes, for anything that you can imagine, actually.

Interviewer:     What do you mean?

Paul:            Gender, age, sexual orientation… occupation, nationality

Interviewer:     Can you give an example?

Paul:            When it comes to discrimination because of gender, one of the examples I can give you is the recruitment process wherein men make fun of potential female job candidates' appearances.

Interviewer:     Did anyone try to report this?

Paul:            If 100 per cent of a recruitment committee consists of men and there is no other gender around, this discrimination is not a problem which will concern anyone. Even if you wanted to report this, no one would do anything about it. I have hardly ever worked with women. And if we had a female on the team they had to have really thick skin to survive in this environment. (Paul, software engineer)

Paul discussed cases of discrimination during the recruitment process. These cases of discrimination also relate to a common practice among Polish companies in which they require potential job candidates to attach their photograph in job applications. Paul discussed managerial negligence in terms of reaction to instances of discrimination and how harassment has also been attributed to social and cultural differences. He also pointed out female workers' strategic 'behaviour' to stay in the industry, which ties back to female practitioners' understanding of gender issues – there is a need to be persistent and to have a thick skin.

The above-presented explanations for women under-representation in the video game industry resemble the findings of previous research which presented that interviewees tend to discuss women as not being interested in working in the industry or not being interested in technology-related occupations (Kelan, 2007). Furthermore, it was mostly the men who explicitly discussed examples of gender discrimination in their workplaces. It was easier for men to discuss these problems as they were not directly, in these particular cases, the subjects of discrimination or harassment. This problem can also be associated with the research methods used. It is possible that the use of anonymised surveys would have allowed me to collect more

responses from those people who felt uncomfortable discussing issues of inequality and discrimination during face-to-face interviews.

## 7.3 POST-FEMINIST SENSIBILITY IN THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

In this section, I continue the discussion about gender dynamics in Polish videogame development by focusing on female videogame practitioners' reflections on their work culture and experiences of being a woman in a male-dominated industry. I positioned their answers through an investigation of post-feminist sensibility, defined by Gill et al. (2017:230) as: 'a focus upon empowerment, choice and individualism; the repudiation of sexism and thus of the need for feminism alongside a sense of 'fatigue' about gender; notions of make-over and self-invention/transformation; an emphasis upon embodiment and femininity as bodily property; and emphasis on surveillance and discipline; a resurgence of sexual difference'.

These characteristics were also present in interviewee discussions; female videogame practitioners discussed their workplaces as being egalitarian, despite instances of gender inequality and discrimination. Although in some cases gender inequality was apparent and well-acknowledged, such as the under-representation of women in the industry or gendered occupational segregation, the interviewees did not discuss gender inequality as though it was a structural problem. Instead, they discussed their experiences mainly through individualised narratives which emphasised worker responsibility (in terms of choice of occupation) and empowerment (in terms of dealing with inequality on your own). Some interviewees also interpreted the under-representation of women in the industry as a favourable situation for female practitioners, for instance, in terms of the ability to attract the attention of male co-workers and receive support at work. Therefore, in this section, I focus on three characteristics of post-feminist sensibility present in the interviews: 1) Repudiation of sexism and 'gender fatigue'; 2) presenting women as an advantaged gender; and 3) individual responsibility and self-surveillance.

### 7.3.1. GENDER FATIGUE AND REPUDIATION OF SEXISM

The majority of female interviewees discussed gender inequality in the industry as 'a thing of the past' or as singular incidents, while simultaneously describing the Polish videogame industry as egalitarian and progressive. Their accounts presented what other scholars have termed as gender fatigue (Gill, 2007; Gill et al., 2017; Kelan, 2009). Kelan, in her research about ICT workers, defines 'gender fatigue' as 'a moment in time in which gender discrimination may still be a feature of the modern workplace but is repudiated in such a way

that workplaces appear to be gender neutral' (2009:206). Kelan discusses two conflicting interpretative repertoires used by her interviewees that simultaneously focused on an acknowledgement of instances of discrimination and claims that their workplaces were egalitarian. Furthermore, Kelan (2009:201) acknowledges that these interpretations seemed unsettling for interviewees as they felt uncomfortable discussing gender issues in their workplaces.

Similarly, discussions about gender inequality in the Polish videogame industry were somewhat challenging for my own interviewees. While some were more open to discussing their experiences, or had very strong opinions about this subject, others thought that even asking questions about inequality in the videogame industry were inappropriate. As one of the interviewees proffered: *"Any attempt to discuss women as being different or discriminated against is in itself discriminatory"* (Mariusz, software engineer). This statement illustrates the interviewees' perspective on the attempt to research gender inequality in the videogame industry, which could be understood through what McRobbie (2004:256) discusses as 'the co-existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated'.

Female Polish videogame practitioners acknowledged the inherent discrimination in the videogame industry. However, they discussed it as being a problem of the past, in terms of it occurring as singular events or linked with broader problems within videogame cultures (such as Gamergate[48]). Despite their acknowledgement of gender inequality, they discussed their workplaces as being gender neutral and egalitarian. This perspective on Polish videogame companies was maintained even when some structural inequality was apparent, and whose presence was admitted by interviewees – for example the scarcity of women in the industry and gendered occupational segregation (Prescott and Bogg, 2011a; Bobrowski et al., 2017:73). Overall, the interviewees argued that they did not encounter gender inequality in their workplaces:

> As a woman in the industry I did not experience anything bad. Actually it was to the contrary; the fact that I am a woman worked in my favour. (Mary, producer)

> I have no idea what it is like in big companies, but in our company, they try to treat us equally. (Magda, 2D graphic designer)

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[48] Gamergate was a harassment campaign which targeted women in the videogame industry and, more broadly, women in the videogame culture (including Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian). The harassment campaign was conducted with the use of #gamergate (see Chess and Shaw, 2015). According to some interviewees in this study, the Gamergate controversy was primarily linked with North American culture and not Polish culture (Maciej, creative director).

> I am not sure if it is because of my attitude towards people and life, but I was never discriminated against because of the fact that I am a woman in the industry. (Joanna, PR)

Marlena, who worked as a videogame tester in a Triple-A company, portrayed her workplace as one that was 'progressive' and 'tolerant' in which she did not experience any forms of discrimination because of her gender. For Marlena, as for many other interviewees, her post in the industry represented her 'dream job'. She was an avid gamer and her job in the videogame company was her first 'serious' job, as previously she had tried different occupations including being a make-up artist and working in a videogame store. Although Marlena was not particularly satisfied with her salary, she was enthusiastic about the company's work culture and the 'hype' of the industry. When asked about the position of women in the videogame industry, she admitted that this was her favourite question as her friends tended to ask her about what it is like to be a woman in the industry:

> For the reason that I am a woman I am underappreciated? No, no, no we are all treated equally. Besides [company's name] is a very progressive company when it comes to tolerance. Because women working in the company is nothing new. We have people of different sexual orientation, people from different countries, and different skin colours […] so here everyone gets used to everyone and everything else. And women being in the company is the last thing that could shock anyone and I have not had any uncomfortable situations because of my gender. (Marlena, QA)

Marlena's quote presents the idea of gender fatigue, as she admitted that the progressiveness of her company allowed 'everyone to get used to everything' including women working in the industry. She emphasises that the cases of gender inequality are a thing of the past, which echoes positions about 'pastness' (Tasker and Negra, 2007:1) of gender inequality. Furthermore, Marlena also used examples of other possible instances of inequality in the industry to strengthen her argument about her company's progressive outlook. However, her understanding of the persistence of inequality and its elimination is a matter of getting used to a diverse workforce. Similarly, Kasia discussed her workplace in terms of positive, progressive changes, which she attributes to an increase in female workers in her company: *"I think that this industry is kind of specific but it is getting better. Fortunately, or unfortunately, women stopped being some kind of crazy phenomenon"* (Kasia, QA). In both Marlena's and Karolina's understandings, situations in the videogame industry in terms of gender inequality are improving, however, these progressive changes are not attributed to structural factors. This

argument also emphasises the 'organic' nature of change which does not require any additional social movements or efforts from the company's side to ensure equality in the workplace (Gill et al., 2017). Therefore, while emphasising a favourable direction of change, the interviewees also disavowed gender inequality.

The interviewees also identified and located gender inequality and discrimination as 'happening elsewhere', not in the context of their companies but in the context of different countries (or cultures), industries or companies (Gill et al., 2017:237). This form of 'gender fatigue' was used by the interviewees in two instances. Maryla (software engineer) argued that business IT is an industry with a more discriminatory approach to women than the videogame industry: *"They told me many times that if I wanted to go into business IT they would see me as a worse programmer due to the fact that I am a woman"*. Furthermore, the case of gender inequality was attributed to wider gender inequality in Polish culture. For instance, Pola (game designer) argued that: *"I do not think it is a problem of the videogame industry, I think it is more the case of Poland generally in that women are not taken or treated seriously"*. While the arguments about Polish culture and gender inequality are important and will be discussed further, it is worth noting that by locating gender inequality outside the videogame industry, the interviewees also shifted responsibility with regards to dealing with these issues outside their workplaces (Gill et al., 2017: 238).

In cases where the interviewees openly discussed sexist behaviour in their workplaces, they often repudiated it. This discursive manoeuvre was used to defend the status quo of the industry – usually by emphasising it being a male-dominated environment and something that women just need to get used to. Furthermore, some interviewees argued that they were not bothered by instances of sexist jokes being made or inappropriate behaviour experienced in their workplaces, as they were not feminists. This argument was apparent in Kasia's discussion about gender relations in her workplace:

> I am not bothered by sexist jokes unless they are in a very bad taste. But I can imagine that for someone with a more feminist sensitivity it could be a problem. Because quite frequently we have discussions about women's breasts or why women are worse than men. It is normal in an environment where three quarters of the workforce are men. This is a group of men who try to impress each other. […] I did not take it seriously and I have never let them dominate me. (Kasia, QA)

Kasia's understanding of inappropriate behaviour in her workplace is presented through an individualised narrative which stresses that a response to inappropriate behaviour in the workplace is a matter of personal sensitivity. The use of the phrase 'feminist sensitivity' presents Kasia's differentiation of her position as not being one of a feminist, and thus not

being 'sensitive' about sexist behaviour. Furthermore, she also differentiates between 'feminist sensitivity' and her perspective, which emphasises her resilience and the ability to deal with these types of behaviour in the workplace on her own. Therefore, in this statement, Kasia not only maintains the status quo of the industry in terms of gender discrimination but also differentiates between women's suitability (or lack thereof) to work in the industry.

Kasia's ideas about feminism could also be understood through the specific context of Polish culture. In the context of Poland, public debates about gender and feminism carry negative connotations. This situation is linked to the persistence of discourses about traditional family values propagated by the Polish Catholic Church and presented in the mainstream media (Detwiler and Snitow, 2016; Odrowąż-Coates, 2015; Płatek, 2004). The relationships between conservative culture and feminist movements in Poland have a long history which presents many ambivalences and complex relationships between a post-socialist subject, neoliberal reforms and local cultures (Grabowska, 2012). While some scholars identify anti-feminist sentiment in Poland within a wider transnational backlash toward feminism and the renewal of far-right religious movements (Graff, 2014), it is worth acknowledging how this culture and public debates may have influenced the interviewees' understandings. An example of these sentiments was visible in an anti-feminist campaign launched by the Catholic Church with the support of government officials between 2013 and 2014 (Graff, 2014). The campaign was entitled 'Stop Gender' and presented gender as a Marxist ideology that contributes to the dissolution of traditional family values (Płatek, 2004; Graff, 2014). It was also not without reason that in public debates, the term 'gender' appeared in its un-translated English form to emphasise its foreign origins, that it was 'different' from Polish culture and values, despite the existence of the Polish equivalent of the term 'płeć kulturowa' (direct translation: cultural sex) (Graff, 2014:442).

The interviewees' reluctance to discuss gender in their workplaces is also marked by their awareness of these debates in public discourse, but also because of their possible lack of critical vocabulary required to address these relationships. To solve this problem, I included questions about the 'situation of women in the Polish videogame industry' in the interview schedule without explicit links to terms such as 'gender' or 'feminism'. The word 'gender' never explicitly appeared in the interviews – that is why in the quotes I used the word 'sex' instead of 'gender'. Furthermore, the term 'feminism' was mentioned only by three female practitioners who discussed it as 'feminist sensitivity' (Kasia, QA) or 'someone of more feminist orientation' (Maryla, software engineer). Therefore, the interviewees' understandings of gender dynamics in the workplace and feminist/anti-feminist ideas were related to post-feminist sensibility and its variations in local socio-cultural structures. Similarly to the concept of neo-liberalism, to which post-feminism is closely linked (see Gill, 2017; Gill et al., 2017),

post-feminist sensibility is dynamic and changes in its adaptation to different contexts. However, it is also in this sense distinctive, or as Dosekun (2015) argues, transnational. In the case of Poland, it could be applied to what Chen (2012) defined in her study as 'bypassing feminism', as ideas of progress, a matter of personal choice, empowerment and the 'pastness' of feminism, which sits comfortably with anti-feminist ideas expressed in Polish cultural conservative values and the techno-libertarian ideology of videogame companies. Further contradictions and ambivalence in terms of discussing gender issues in the Polish videogame industry were also visible in interviewee discussions about women as the advantaged sex in the industry.

### 7.3.2. WOMEN AS THE ADVANTAGED SEX IN THE INDUSTRY

Female practitioners discussed their positions in the videogame industry as being more advantageous than their male peers. This perspective was associated with women being in the numerical minority in the industry, and as such they were able to 'attract men's attention', 'to stand out' and easily acquire help from their male colleagues. One of the interviewees, Joanna (PR) referred to this situation as one in which: *"It is good to be in the minority"*. This particular view on female workers in cultural industries being in an advantageous position has also been discussed by Gill (2002:522) and Scharff (2018:104-108). This perspective reverses traditional gender-power relations by suggesting that women in the industry can receive preferential treatment, contrary to the experience of male practitioners (Gill et al., 2017:236; Prescott and Bogg, 2014:99).

Karolina and Mary reflected on their career progression by emphasising the benefits of being women in the industry. Both interviewees were employed in senior positions – Mary was a producer in a Triple-A company while Karolina was the owner of her own independent videogame studio, before which she had worked as a senior environment artist in a Triple-A development studio:

> And I mean, because I am a woman, and the fact that the company is male-dominated, it was much easier to get the things done. It is especially because we have girls just as an exception. So when girls ask questions, there is always this 'Sure, I can tell you this! Oh, and if you are interested in this, I can tell you this' kind of response. So it is kind of cool, I must admit. (Mary, producer)

> In the previous company, they dealt with me like I was a fragile egg. It was actually kind of positive as they spent lots of time helping me *because* I was a girl. Because they did not treat the men like this. Because why shouldn't you spend more time with

your younger female friend? So yeah, they help me a lot. And thanks to this I learned a lot because I had this support. So yeah, this is a good thing; being a woman in the industry. (Karolina, 3D graphic design)

The above-presented quotes echo the results of previous research about gender in cultural workplaces (such as Gill et al., 2017; Scharff, 2018:104-109; Wreyford, 2015). Mary and Karolina argued implicitly that they could use their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness in their favour, especially in acquiring support at work and learning new skills. In contrast to Scharff's (2018:104) research, female practitioners who worked as freelancers did not perceive their gender as being possibly advantageous when finding jobs. These ideas were mainly expressed by women who worked in development or outsourcing studios. Therefore, in workplaces where there are fewer female practitioners, work requires more collaboration. Ideas about being a woman in the industry were also associated with further discussions about 'feminine' and 'masculine' traits expressed by workers in the industry; these discussions were based on stereotypical ideas about 'natural' gender differences between female and male workers.

Mary was one of the female practitioners who decided to develop further discussion about perceived masculine and feminine traits in the videogame industry. Apart from her emphasis on the benefits of being a woman in the industry, similarly presented as 'being taken care of', she also admitted that she preferred working in male-dominated environments as she thought of men as being less prone to conflict in the workplace. Mary's opinion was grounded in her previous work experience, as previously she had worked mostly in female-dominated occupations such as human resources:

> The only bad thing is that boys do not realise that we react differently to some things. *It is great that we are all equal but at the same time we are not equal*. So sometimes you just need to pull yourself together and get tough. Men's rhetoric is much tougher, they did not pay attention to emotions […] But this female element is also good and sometimes it is worth emphasising that we are different. […] I mean, this is cool. When you are in the minority, they take care of you all the time. They care about your well being because there are not a lot of us. […] I think it is a plus of this work and I have never experienced anything like 'Oh because you are a woman'. (Mary, producer)

This reference to 'natural' gender differences also echoes a post-feminist sensibility. This approach was also visible among other female practitioners; other women were conceptualised as being difficult to work with and different in terms of their psychophysicality. Mary's understanding also assumes that if women want to work in the videogame industry they need to behave 'like men' ("*So sometimes you just need to pull yourself together and get tough*").

In the organisational literature, women who work in occupations traditionally perceived as male-dominated tend to adopt male patterns of behaviour or traits that are (perceived as) masculine identities (see Prescott and Bogg, 2014; Powell et al., 2009:418-421). On the one hand, the women discussed the possibility of using their femininity in the workplace as things they could use to their own advantage. On the other hand, they distanced themselves from stereotypical feminine traits, claiming that their hobbies, interests and personalities are more 'men-like':

> I think we are equal but I am speaking for myself because throughout my whole life I was more into shooting, comic books, games, horror, action and superhero movies than romantic comedies and so on than dolls so it is possible that I like this job because I fit in here. […] (Mary, producer)

> I have this impression that women who work in the industry are some kind of different women. They are neither worse nor better. Or maybe they are better? I do not know. But for sure, it is not women for whom we make these games. I mean these girly games. I witnessed this, I used to work in a team which designed these kinds of games for women. So these games had to be pink and have lots of strange features. And they [her co-workers] discussed with me how they (the games) were supposed to look […] but I felt like I was different. I am a different woman? Some kind of different female of the species. It is obvious that I would not play some pink car game. (Asia, 2D graphic designer)

The female practitioners' presentation of themselves as 'different' was associated with their interest (patterns of media consumption) in stereotypically masculine interests (videogames) and a rejection of stereotypical feminine interests ('girly' games, romantic comedies). This particular perspective was used to justify the interviewees' understandings of the industry as 'egalitarian', by saying that their personality and interests made them suitable for these jobs. Therefore, the 'egalitarian' nature of the industry and gender equality was assumed as long as a worker possesses qualities which make her suitable to work in the industry. Attributes discussed by Mary and Asia presented a clear distinction between interests which are stereotypically presented as masculine and feminine. Furthermore, as Kelan (2009:198) argues 'A common theme is that although workers are often portrayed as disembodied and gender neutral, if one looks at the skills, behaviours, and norms that these workers are expected to display and conform to, it becomes obvious that the ideal worker tends to have more masculine characteristics, traits, and behaviours'. Therefore, the interviewees' understanding presents a danger in interpreting other practitioners' acknowledgement of the existence of gender

discrimination in the industry as them being not resilient enough or just unsuitable to work in the videogame industry.

Female interviewees presented narratives which emphasised women as the more advantageous gender in the videogame industry. Their advantage, however, was associated with the possibility of attracting male colleagues' attention and receiving help with their work. This view on the use of their 'femininity' and, as they phrased it, 'the advantage of being in the minority' was also emphasised in their construction of the 'otherness' of women who work in the industry. In previous studies, women's behaviour, in male-dominated occupations, has been discussed through their adoption of masculine behavioural patterns.

While on the subject of hobbies and personality traits, a female producer discussed a resemblance to her male colleagues: they also evoked the traditional division of roles and characteristics by referring to 'natural' gender differences. This particular conceptualisation of women as the advantaged gender in the industry is also embedded in the form of individualised empowerment and the need for self-surveillance in the workplace through which women demonstrate their suitability to work in the industry.

### 7.3.3. AN INDIVIDUALISED NARRATIVE AND THE NEED FOR SELF-SURVEILLANCE

Female practitioners' opinions were marked by individualised narratives and the belief that their hard-work, work experience, and skills mattered more for their environment than their gender. These interviewees' narratives could be understood as 'aggressive individualism' (McRobbie, 2009:5), as the videogame practitioners strongly emphasised personal responsibility and individual solutions to encountered sexism and gender inequality in the workplace. Furthermore, they also stressed the need to be more resilient at work, the need to 'prove themselves', to be aware of the kind of industry in which they are working. Overall, similar to the findings of Kelan's research (2014), women carried the burden of dealing with instances of discrimination in workplaces instead of demanding changes in the industry.

This approach was visible, for example, in Ania's narrative. Ania once worked in the PR department for a Triple-A development studio, however, because of difficult working conditions she decided to open her own PR-company, specialising in supporting independent videogame development studios:

> […] if you work mostly with men you have a greater probability that you will meet some idiots. […] I have always accepted it as it is and I mean with a full awareness of what kind of industry I was going to. There are more men there, so my presence would

attract some attention […] I have never perceived the whole industry through the fact that I have met some idiots. I just came across these incidents, shrugged my shoulders and moved forward. And I did not make a tragedy or big deal out of it. (Ania, PR).

Ania's understanding emphasises further the individualisation of responsibility of dealing with gender discrimination in the industry, as Kelan (2009:204) points out 'women construct themselves as active agents who can avoid confronting gender discrimination though make themselves responsible for overcoming it'. This perspective on one's responsibility, resilience and 'dealing with' gender discrimination was visible among other female interviewees, for instance:

> I just think you need to grow some cojones to find yourself in this environment. You cannot act like a mimosa. (Asia, 2D graphic designer)

> We have very specific people here, even girls and they know how to deal with this. (Kasia, QA)

> You need to have some form of resilience to work in this environment. (Maryla, software engineer)

These quotes also present a particular 'cool' attitude to the instances of encountered sexism in the industry. In McRobbie's (2010:74) interpretation, the performance of being 'cool' about sexism in cultural work is discussed as 'forces of patriarchal retrenchment implemented through the seemingly harmless but in fact ruthless and tyrannical development of 'cool' as a disciplinary regime'. In these cases, the idea of being 'cool' is not associated with being comfortable in their work environments but with the idea of being 'resilient', adaptive, and developing strategies to 'fit-in'.

This perspective was also mentioned by Maryla, who openly questioned whether her colleagues treated her differently because she was new in her workplace or because of her gender:

> Sometimes it is hard for me to distinguish if it is because I am new or whether it is because I am a woman. I always assume it is because I am new, and then I discuss this with them [work colleagues]. I can prove to them that I know what I am doing and by doing this they learn to respect me. (Maryla, software engineer)

Maryla's discussion about the need to 'prove' to others that she knows what she was doing in the videogame industry could be associated with the need for self-surveillance in providing

enough evidence to her new co-workers so that they would validate her work performance through her skills and not her gender. Again, in Maryla's narrative, she was individually responsible for proving her abilities to other co-workers so that she could work in a company. This was especially interesting in terms of Maryla's previous 4-year experience in videogame development and her educational background in computer science. I did not hear similar narratives from her male colleagues. The above-presented understandings are contradictory but at the same time complementary to the perspective on *'gender fatigue'* (section 7.3.1).

The idea of individualisation was closely related to the female practitioners' emphasis on their ability to be judged by their skills and work experience rather than gender. These narratives were also marked by a sense of 'empowerment' in a belief of achieving career goals through one's own skills and in the rejection of structural factors and any rationalisation for structural support for women to enter the industry.

The best illustration of this position was Mary's discussion of the idea of the 'glass ceiling' as a non-existent, imaginary concept:

> What they talk about this glass ceiling or this 'oh because she is a woman', this is only in our heads, women's heads. This does not exist outside our own minds at least from my experience in these two companies. And when I talked with my girlfriends, it is something people have in their heads. You have this idea that you cannot do this, or shit […] that you are not good enough to do this. (Mary, producer)

Furthermore, this individualised approach to discussing gender in the workplace was also visible in cases where female practitioners attempted to link it with an awareness of structural barriers such as a pay gap or under-representation of women in the industry. Their narrative presented a belief that their efforts would be adequately rewarded: *"I think that experience is more important than gender"* (Mary, producer) or *"The most important thing is our experience, how many projects we have finished, our abilities"* (Asia, 2D graphic designer). Gill et al. (2017:231) argue that 'one of the central features of post-feminism common sense is its adherence to an individualist project and its tendency to formulate issues in individualist terms, that point away from structural understandings or collective solutions'. This perspective also rejects any rationalisation of discussions about structural factors, social actions or discussions about inequality in the industry.

> If I found out that they had hired me because I was a woman, I would be very frustrated. And I probably would leave this place. Because I think skills are the most important thing. But when it comes to types of 'sensitivity', I will not lie – women are different to men. Some other woman with a different sensitivity would probably say something different. But this parity, mixing people at a ratio of 1 to 1 by force, I think it is useless.

I mean yeah, it would be great if girls could see strong women in the industry and could say 'Oh, so I can be like this as well?' but not because 'We need to hire women, we do not have women in the industry so now hire women now'. (Maryla, software engineer)

The interviewees often rejected any form of rationalisation for structural support for women to join the industry. Their argument was motivated by the fear that employers would not accept them because of their skills, which would undermine their credibility in workplaces. In Maryla's quote, she also emphasises the fact that strong women in the industry should find their own place therein because of their skills, persistence and entrepreneurship without any help in terms of structural support. This view on how women in the industry should behave once again stresses the need for entrepreneurial-ethos over an acknowledgement of persistent inequality.

## 7.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed Polish videogame practitioners' understandings of gender relations in their workplaces. Overall, Polish videogame practitioners' understandings can be understood, similarly to the results of other research about persistence of inequalities in cultural industries, as 'unspeakable inequality' (Gill, 2014). In the interviewees' accounts, possible structural barriers and forms of discrimination were obscured or replaced by the narratives which underlined the meritocratic nature of the industry, individual responsibility and self-entrepreneurial values. The interviewees' understanding has been positioned in a broader discussion about 'post-feminist sensibility' (Gill, 2014; Gill et al. 2017), as it is linked to neoliberal forms of governing, entrepreneurial values and 'common sense' relations between feminist and anti-feminist perspectives. The majority of interviewees discussed instances of gender inequality and discrimination in the videogame industry, however, they repudiated such instances and discussed them as singular events, acknowledging inequality as being persistent in other industries or in the Polish culture as a whole by simultaneously discussing the progressive nature of the videogame industry. This situation could be seen as striking in terms of female practitioners who not only expressed 'gender fatigue' in discussing women's positions in the videogame industry but also presented women as the advantaged sex.

# CHAPTER 8: WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

Project-based labour and the flexible approach to employment relations in cultural industries has been widely discussed in various literature (Blair, 2001; Gill, 2011a; Ursell, 2000; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015). The increasingly flexible approach to defining employment relations is addressed through a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism production, which causes increased labour insecurity, a lack of protection for workers and their rights, problems with work/life balance, and the uncertain position of women in the labour market (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007:217-272; Kalleberg, 2009). Nonetheless, the progressive deterioration of standard employment relations and, as a consequence, workers' understanding of precarious employment depends on the socio-economic context of a given country (Lobato and Thomas, 2015:78-79). Therefore, the subjective experience of work insecurity and exploitation is heterogeneous, and I will approach it as such in this chapter. The interviewees' understandings of flexible working contracts and project-based labour needs to be understood through the specific economic and socio-cultural context of a post-socialist country.

This chapter engages with the research question by presenting Polish videogame practitioners' strategic and sometimes entrepreneurial approaches to their employment contracts and their understanding of economic risk. Furthermore, following Peticca-Harris et al. (2015:576), I acknowledge that challenging working conditions as discussed by the interviewees (such as 'crunch time') are persistent in the industry because of their project-based organisation of work and, as a consequence, the requirement from workers to rely on their portfolios and reputation management to maintain a satisfactory level of employability.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the precarisation of employment in Poland from its socio-historical perspective. In this chapter, I continue a discussion about employment contracts by investigating videogame practitioners' approaches their project-based work and flexible work contracts. I argue that the popularisation of civil law contracts (such as specific-task contracts, freelance contracts and self-employment) in Poland has normalised precarious employment, which is reflected in videogame practitioners understanding of their working conditions. The practitioners offered mostly favourable perspectives on the use of civil law contracts, which were further strengthened by their lack of trust in public institutions (particularly those linked to the socio-economic situation in Poland) and the prevalence of self-entrepreneurial discourse about working in the videogame industry. Therefore, the practitioners' understandings of the economic risks associated with project-based work are not only a matter of the

individualisation of risk (Beck, 2000) but are also mediated through socially constructed discourse (Neff, 2012).

The prevalence of civil law contracts is associated with how the work of videogame practitioners is organised, including their salaries, benefits and working hours. Therefore, the second part of this chapter engages in a discussion about the practice of crunch time, understood as labour extensification and intensification in the videogame industry. The practice of crunch time has been widely discussed in academic literature (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:59-65; O'Donnell, 2014:159-165; Bulut 2015a/2015b; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Weststar, 2015), by industry representatives (IGDA, 2004) and in videogame developer communities (EA Spouse, 2004; Rockstar Spouse, 2010). The problem of crunch time in the Polish videogame industry reached a wider audience following publication of articles in the videogame and news press about challenging working conditions in the industry (Kosman, 2013b; Wołosowski, 2015; Augustyniak, 2017). My interviewees associated the practice of crunch time with structural problems such as the lack of professionalization in videogame production, the lack of experience in project management and companies' willingness to cut costs related to videogame workforces.

The interviewees approached crunch time as part of their workplace culture, however they differentiated between 'bad' and 'good' crunch time in terms of its organisation, duration and end goal. Therefore, in the second section of this chapter I argue that crunch time is a form of neo-normative control, used by videogame companies to exploit their practitioners' emotional attachment to projects (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015). Therefore, in the second section of this chapter I argue that crunch time is a form of neo-normative control, used by videogame companies to exploit their practitioners' emotional attachment to projects (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015). My understanding of crunch as a 'neo-normative control mechanism' follows Peticca-Harris et al.'s (2015:571) usage of this concept and its application within a discussion about the management of overtime work in the videogame industry. However, I also discuss the interviewees' emotional attachment to projects, their satisfaction garnered from taking part in the videogame process and their sense of responsibility to their players. I present this discussion to emphasise the complexity of emotional contributions and external influences in the interviewees' understanding of their participation in crunch time, which aims to contextualise their understanding beyond discussing it through a neo-Foucauldian framework as being disillusioned by their passion for videogames.

This chapter consists of two main sections that discuss employment contracts and approaches to crunch time in the Polish videogame industry. The first section investigates the precarious

nature of contracts offered to Polish videogame practitioners and how videogame practitioners consequently understand their employment relationships. The second section discusses the problem of long working hours in the industry by acknowledging the reasons for crunch time, its role in workplace culture, and the interviewees' ideas about 'bad' and 'good' crunch time.

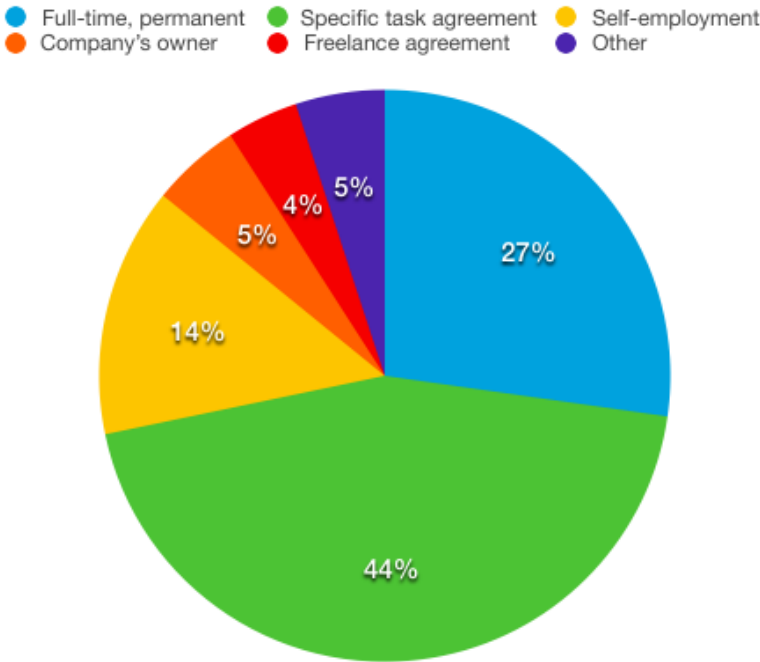## 8.2 EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS IN THE POLISH VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

### 8.2.1 CIVIL LAW CONTRACTS IN THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

An investigation of employment relations is important in the light of on-going debates about work precarity among creative workers (e.g. Ursell, 2000; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Ross, 2003; Gill, 2002/2011a), as these relations not only present a dynamic between an individual worker and their employer but also connect macro and micro levels of analysis (Kalleberg, 2009:12). In Chapter 4, I discussed the consequences of the ongoing precarisation of employment relations in Poland on the videogame industry. In this chapter I continue this discussion by investigating the interviewees' approaches to employment contracts in the industry. I approach these non-labour employment contracts with the awareness that 'most employment contracts are informal, incomplete, and shaped by social institutions and norms in addition to their formal, explicit features' (Kalleberg, 2009:12). I argue that the interviewees' approaches to the prevalence of civil law contracts in the videogame industry are embedded in the socio-economic context of Poland and the videogame industry.

The interviewees' entrepreneurial approach to civil law contracts was visible in their understanding of these types of contracts, which they addressed as an opportunity both in a financial sense (in terms of a higher net income) and as a 'lifestyle' decision (the flexibility of the contract seen as personal freedom). However, the interviewees' approaches to civil law contracts were highly polarised between above- and below-the-line workers. Undoubtedly, all videogame workforces operate in highly uncertain environments thanks to increasing de-skilling, financialisation and outsourcing (see discussion in Bulut, 2015a). Nonetheless, workers with different sets of skills and work experiences approach and understand work uncertainty and the risk to their employment differently, as I argued in Chapter 5.

Information about the types of employment contracts available in the industry is difficult to obtain and until recently such contracts were not openly discussed in industry-published reports. Statistics about employment in the Polish videogame industry are scarce, and the existing reports about the industry's workforce do not provide a holistic picture about workforce demographic or employment contracts because of their limited scope and methodology. According to the data collected via a 'bottom-up' online initiative of workers,

approximately 62 per cent of videogame practitioners in Poland work on civil law contracts (defined as freelance, specific task and self-employment)[49] (Draug, 2013) (see Figure 8a).



**FIGURE 8.A TYPES OF EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN THE POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY**

source: 'Zarobki Polskiego GameDevu' report (Draug, 2013)

In 2017, the report 'The State of the Polish Videogame Industry' included an overview of employment arrangements, which suggested that approximately 75 per cent of Polish videogame workers are hired on civil law contracts (Bobrowski et al., 2017:72). However, the report did not explain the prevalence of civil law contracts in the industry and did not disclose further demographic information about the use of these contracts in the industry (such as type of civil law contract, occupational position or job tenure).

The statistics presented in these reports need to be approached with caution, because of their limited scale and methodology; however, they reflect information about the employment contracts discussed by the interviewees. The prevalence of these forms of employment, while differing in terms of their protection of workers' rights and flexibility (see Chapter 4), contribute to the further casualisation of videogame work in Poland. In comparison to labour law contracts, civil law contracts shift the risk of employment from employer to employee 'by

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[49] I discussed different types of agreements in Chapter 4.

the increase in defined contributions, pension and health insurance plans (in which employees pay more of the premium and absorb more of the risk than do employers) and the decline in defined benefit plans (in which the employer absorbs more of the risk than the employee by guaranteeing a certain level of benefits)' (Kalleberg, 2009:8).

From the interviewees' perspectives, civil law contracts are normalised in the videogame industry. The interviewees repeatedly mentioned that it is difficult to find permanent contracts[50]; they explained this situation with regards to the project-based organisation of work in the industry:

> It is very rare to get a real permanent contract even if you work for a long time in one company because they will explain themselves by their type of work organisation – project based. (Pawel, QA)

> When it comes to contracts, it is true that looking for a permanent contract is a waste of time. (Maryla, software engineer).

> In a formal sense, I think that we have more flexibility on both employee and employer sides. I mean that employees are more mobile than for example, those in IT. So there is less attachment to formalisation of employment relations. (Konrad, game designer)

Employment contracts vary significantly between companies in terms of the benefits and social security they offer to practitioners, even if the contracts fall into the category of civil law contracts. Therefore, it is difficult to generalise the interviewees' work experiences. This problem of a lack of standards in terms of employment contracts in the videogame industry was mentioned by Maciej, who was one of the most experienced interviewees as he had been working in videogame development for more than 15 years. He shared his reflections on working conditions in Poland by talking about the Polish industry's lack of standardisation:

> When it comes to working conditions in Poland, there is a problem that, actually, these conditions are not clear. […] Formally, of course, we have agreements in the sense that a potential employer will tell us 'I will pay you this much money, you will have that many days of holiday and you will or not have benefits' […] And you will not always get this in black and white. And if you have any 'crunch time' at work, it is usually not limited by anything and is often very, very long. Then they will pay you for this extra work or not, or maybe they will pay you for working weekends but not week days. We have lots of unclear things. Obviously, no one in Poland wants to work

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[50] The term 'permanent contracts' refers in this paragraph to employment contracts protected by the Labour Code (labour law contracts).

on a permanent contract and it is not because we love 'trash' agreements [i.e. civil law contracts] but because it is just not worth it. And because of this everything is based on these unclear rules. Every company has it organised differently. And this is a problem. You join a company and what will be will be. It is very hard to even make comparisons. (Maciej Miąsik, Indie Games Poland Foundation)

Maciej presents important characteristics of working conditions in the Polish industry: the lack of clear, unified employment contracts and standards in terms of employment. Consequently, as Maciej described, employment relations along with a worker's future working conditions are highly negotiable, including instances where formal agreements are not concluded. Furthermore, Maciej admits that practitioners tend to prefer civil law contracts (or as he calls them, 'trash' contracts) because they see them as more 'profitable'.

### 8.2.2 ENTREPRENEURIAL BY CHOICE OR BY FORCE: CIVIL LAW CONTRACTS IN THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

The perspective of civil law contracts as being profitable is associated with shifting the risk of employment to the employee (including social security and pension schemes), but also to the possibility for an employee to obtain a higher net income (take-home pay). This approach is visualised by a comparison of salaries based on different types of employment contracts (Figure 8b). This salary comparison shows videogame practitioners' monthly income before taxes. The presented salaries include an estimation of four core occupational categories (QA, programmer, design and art) at senior positions.

| OCCUPATION (SENIOR POSITION) | EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT | MONTHLY SALARY (BEFORE TAX) IN £* |
|---|---|---|
| QA (Internal) | Permanent | 686 |
| | Specific-Task | 501 |
| | Self-employed | n/a |
| Programmer | Permanent | 1 537 |
| | Specific-Task | 1 345 |
| | Self-employed | 2 277 |
| Design | Permanent | 1 169 |
| | Specific-Task | 1 241 |
| | Self-employed | 1 511 |
| Art | Permanent | 1 184 |
| | Specific-Task | 1 366 |
| | Self-employed | 1 976 |

**FIGURE 8.B EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS AND SALARIES**

Source: 'The State of the Polish Videogame Industry 2017' report (Bobrowski et al. 2017:77)

Interviewees viewed civil law contracts as profitable because they result in a higher net income. This is visible in the before-tax calculation between self-employment and labour law contracts. In terms of comparison between a specific-task agreement (type of civil law contract) and labour law contracts, after the deduction of tax, specific-task agreements convert into higher net incomes than on labour law contracts[51] (permanent contracts).

The interviewees discussed situations where they had been offered a choice between a permanent or civil law contract. They could either opt for a civil law contract and receive a higher net salary, or choose permanent employment with better social and legal protection. Among the interviewees, those with more experience, a better skill set and in senior positions were more likely to favour civil law contracts. Michał, a former advertising worker, suggested that civil law contracts were usually his preferred choice. His previous working experience could have contributed to the decision-making process, as the use of civil law contracts was standard practice in the advertising industry. However, for him, more importantly, civil law contracts also connoted personal freedom:

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[51] For instance, if we compare the salaries of programmers after tax deduction; on a labour law contract a videogame practitioner could earn 5241 PLN [approximately £1069] while her net salary will be slightly higher if she decides to work on a specific-task contract 5564 PLN [approximately £1135].

You know, my whole life I have worked on civil contracts. And I am kind of getting used to them. But in my previous company, no one gave me the choice [on which kind of contract I could work]. Here I can pick my employment contract and that is nice. I like being hired on civil contracts because I do not like paying high taxes. If someone wants to have a state pension, cool, their choice. They can change their form of employment and have a state pension in 30 years. […] But I was never bothered by the fact that I am working on a civil contract. […] I think that the media paints these contracts in a very bad light because they want to destroy this form of employment, which, I think personally, is the best. It is the best form of employment for an employee at this moment because if an employee wants to, they can pay NFZ fees[52] […] and if you want you can pay social insurance but if you want to invest your money somewhere else you can, and this I call freedom. You can decide what you want to do with your money. And these are not junk jobs – these are just the best contracts in Poland. (Michał, character artist)

This aspect of employment contracts in Poland has also been discussed through the prism of individualisation, which emphasised the importance of personal choice and freedom in defining the interviewees' own employment agreements. Michał mentioned his opportunity to invest money and to decide if he wants to pay social and health insurance or not. Therefore, the shift of responsibility from employer to employee is translated through an entrepreneurial narrative as an opportunity and not as an economic risk or instability. Michał's willingness to engage in more informal and riskier labour relations (in terms of health and social security) follows Beck's (2000) idea on individualisation of risk. The interviewees who decided to accept more precarious employment contracts to avoid taxes, accepted their individual responsibility over the future risks of their decisions. Furthermore, following Beck's (2000) idea, the discussion about risk taking is not limited to entrepreneurs but to employees as well (in Sennett, 1998:76-97), a position which also echoes Neff's (2012) idea of venture labour.

However, Michał's perspective is not only about an entrepreneurial approach to risk-taking but, as he addresses it, is also about his lifestyle choice. Michał's ideas about his form of employment contracts are based on an emphasis on individual choice and responsibility. He admits that he prefers these contracts because he looks at them in terms of employment freedom. This approach also emphasises the two-faced nature of flexibility which is sometimes presented through positive connotations such as a lack of rigidity (Brophy and de Peuter, 2007:183) or a decision to follow a career path that is different to a conventional one (Taylor

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[52] NFZ (pl. *Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia*) is the Polish equivalent of the National Health Service.

and Littleton, 2012:92). This situation also raises questions about the interviewees' understandings of economic risk, as Sennett (1998:87) argues: 'The modern culture of risk is peculiar in that failure to move is taken as a sign of failure, stability seeming almost a living death'. This perpetuated need to grab opportunities was also apparent in the lives of my interviewees. Mariusz, who works as CEO and software engineer in a small independent videogame studio, argued that for him labour law and open-ended contracts are a form of stagnation: *"For me – no. For me, what they called 'stability', I call 'stagnation'"*.

Another interviewee's approach to employment contracts is used in order to avoid taxation: so-called dependent self-employment. Dependent self-employment could be defined as 'workers who provide work or perform services to other persons within the legal framework of a civil or commercial contract, but who in fact are dependent on or integrated into the firm for which they perform the work or provide the service in question' (ILO, 2003:6). It is difficult to measure the scale of this type of employment because of the lack of official figures (Wiliams and Lapeyre, 2017). Dependent self-employment usually applies in such industries as construction work, however, it is also present in creative industries and ICT-related occupations (Eurofound, 2016:1). While in academic literature dependent self-employment is associated with precarious working conditions, the interviewees argued that they felt secure in their positions and that their decisions to engage in more flexible labour relations had been dictated by the desire to avoid taxation. The idea of being a 'one-person company' to limit employer responsibilities resonates with discourse around self-entrepreneurship, as entrepreneurial behaviour is observed not only among entrepreneurs but a wider population. Through a more pessimistic perspective, Lazzarato (1996:134) discusses this phenomenon as a subjectification of immaterial labour to standards of capitalist production. Lazzarato (1996: 134) argues that the increasing requirement of becoming an entrepreneurial worker actually masks workers' exploitation as 'behind the label of the independent "self-employed" worker, what we actually find is an intellectual proletarian, but who is recognized as such only by the employers who exploit him or her'. The widespread use of civil law contracts and dependent self-employment in the Polish videogame industry illustrates well Lazzarato's argument (1996). Inevitably, even when interviewees discussed these types of work arrangements as beneficial for them, the power dynamic between them and their employers was unequal.

Maryla, a software engineer in a medium-sized videogame development company argued that self-employment is popular in her company, and that is why there are not many permanent contracts:

> It is very hard to find a permanent contract [labour law contract], but it is because the
> majority of employees are one-person companies. And this is better for a company

and for an employee. And the contracts, at least the ones I worked on, were constructed in such a way to be as secure as normal contracts [labour law contracts]. I mean with regards to holidays, sick leave, one-month notice and so on. But I encountered situations where people signed new contracts every month, because having job the next month was never a guarantee. But in my previous company, it was only for employees whose work did not have quality. Because if the employers care about you, they give you a better contract. But there were people who would say: 'please sign one contract, and one more, and one more.' But this was not a threat that 'you should be scared as you do not know if you will be working here next month'. I have never experienced this myself. And because of taxes, it is more profitable. (Maryla, software engineer)

Apart from the entrepreneurial discourse presented in Maryla's perspective, she discussed the possibility of the abuse of atypical forms of employment based on her colleagues' experiences. However, she did not recognise this practice as a structural problem or work instability. On the contrary she placed emphasis on personal responsibility over a given employment contract. This perspective perpetuates, once again, ideas about meritocracy in the videogame industry. Therefore, a worker who is not able to acquire permanent employment is prone to self-blame and self-exploitation (Banks, 2007:73).

Maryla and Michał discussed the use of civil law contracts in the industry as the best solutions for employees and employers. Their perspectives can be understood through the individualisation of risk and the ongoing precarisation of employment (McRobbie, 2016; Beck, 2000; Kalleberg, 2009). However, it is also worth considering this problem in the context of Poland as a post-socialist country and normalisation of precarious forms of employment (see Chapter 4). Therefore, the interviewees' approaches to civil law contracts can be associated with Poland's socio-economic development (not a welfare state). This position is sometimes also associated by scholars with post-socialist countries' historical lack of trust in public institutions in post-socialist countries (Misztal, 2000:208). The rejection of labour law contracts is associated with the perception of the quality of services offered by public institutions and with overregulation as perceived by the interviewees of employment contracts and taxation (Misztal, 2000:208). The interviewees tended to be sceptical about the idea that labour law contracts are a benefit and provide work security because they, for instance, did not believe that the country would provide them with social security, retirement schemes or health care. This approach, therefore, also calls for further recognition of the heterogeneity of precarious subjectivities on recognising that workers' understandings of their work experiences and decisions are shaped by different external and internal forces. Furthermore, while civil law contracts are prevalent in the Polish videogame industry, some companies

attempt to offer their workers some degree of stability and security. For instance, Maryla's company constructs civil law contracts in a manner that assures a certain level of protection for workers (from extended lay-off periods to private health insurance). Nonetheless, these contracts indicate a clear power advantage on the side of the employer, which, in certain situations, can lead to an abuse of these types of contracts. Videogame practitioners who have just started their careers in the industry and workers in lower occupational positions did not approach civil law contracts to be either beneficial or 'profitable'. Instead, they understood their position as an 'exclusion' from permanent, secure employment because of inadequacies in Polish law. As a contrast to those interviewees who favoured civil law contracts and perceived the Polish system to be overregulated, 'below-the-line' workers saw the system as under-regulated. Patryk argued that the problem of videogame testers is associated with the inadequacies of the Polish system:

> My employer? He treated me pretty badly. I mean it is because of the law we have in Poland which allows this to happen. And you know, this was a foreign company which did not break the Polish law. Because, and I will repeat this one more time, Polish law is absolutely broken. So I understand that the company wanted to minimalize costs to almost zero, without breaking the law and yeah, they succeeded. So in my company, we had hundreds of testers who signed new employment contracts every month. So it means that they did not have any space for even one mistake, one instance of being late to work. And to be honest, you do not even have time to worry about this because in one month you might not have a job at all. And well… four weeks is not enough to find something new. (Patryk, QA)

According to the Polish Labour Code (Kodeks Pracy. Ustawa z dnia 26 czerwca 1974 r. (z późniejszymi poprawkami)), civil law contracts should only be limited to specific cases of labour and not overused as in the situation that Patryk described, wherein companies are willing to balance on the edges of the law in order to minimise the costs of hiring new employees. This translates to extreme cases of precarious labour, in which videogame testers in outsourcing studios can be hired, essentially fired, and re-hired on a weekly basis. The problem of civil law contracts abuse was visible in the discussions presented by the interviewees who worked or used to work as videogame testers. I discussed the precarious work of videogame testers in outsourcing studios in Chapter 5, in which I addressed their work as 'hope labour'. In the context of their work organisation, the possibility of hiring videogame testers on civil law contracts should be understood as a strategy of corporate rationalization which 'reduces wage costs, increases flexibility and shifts the burden of risk on to the workforce' (Beck, 2000:89).

Examples of civil law contracts abuse are particularly visible in the case of videogame testers, however, the abuse of these types of contracts was also visible among younger employees who started their work in small and medium videogame studios. The most common form of abuse of civil law contracts was the lack of obligation to pay workers for working overtime which is prevalent in the videogame industry (Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016). Polish videogame practitioners tend to work on civil law contracts (see section 8.2), and as such they are not protected by Labour Code and they are not entitled to payment for working overtime. Therefore, the case of payment for overtime is negotiated from company to company while some interviewees argued that they are, at least, partially remunerated (financially and non-financially through additional benefits) while others participate in crunch time for free. In spring 2016, I conducted an interview with Magda, a 2D graphic designer with three years of experience in the videogame industry. She expressed satisfaction with her work and employer, a medium-sized videogame studio which specialises in Hidden Object Puzzle Adventure games (known as HOPA). However, she discussed that her employer did not pay for doing crunch time, and she argued: *"It is painful for me that crunch is not always paid"*. The persistence of unpaid crunch time was also one of the reasons why Magda decided to later leave the company, when she realised that the company had lost a game deal with a major publisher and started to fire experienced workers. One month after our first interview, Magda sent me a message in which she mentioned that: *"A lot of things have changed since our talk, I am looking for a new job right now because I cannot deal mentally with this unpaid crunch. I really liked this place"*. Magda was one of the interviewees who decided to meet with me for a second interview to discuss her recent work-related experience. When I met with her, she admitted that she had resigned from her position in the studio after having worked there for three months for free.

## 8.3 WORKING HOURS IN THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

The prevalence of crunch time in the industry has long been a subject of discussions about videogame practitioners' quality of life and an example of extreme working practices (IGDA, 2004; Weststar, 2015; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; O'Donnell, 2014). The normalisation of overtime work is also acknowledged in 'crunch' being a staple of the industry's work culture and participation in crunch time being seen as something of 'a badge of honour and a sign of being a true developer' (Weststar, 2015:1244). The existence of crunch time in the project-based work organisation of videogame companies is also associated with the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity as 'the flexible, short-term, project-based cycles and the utmost need for successful project outcomes, due to reputation-based mobility, shifting managerial responsibilities onto employees' (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015:574).

In this section, I present the interviewees' understandings of their working hours through a discussion about crunch time. I acknowledge that participation in overtime work is entangled in a variety of external (high-risk cultural production, industry structure, financing systems) and internal factors (self-realisation through work, emotional attachment to work and the pursuit of 'good product'). Through neo-Foucauldian perspectives, crunch time could be addressed as a neo-normative managerial form of control (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015) through which videogame practitioners' emotional attachment to projects contributes to their exploitation (McRobbie, 1998). I acknowledge that the interviewees' participation in crunch time can indeed be conceptualised as a 'pleasure/pain axis' (McRobbie, 2006) of creative labour and I will also articulate the interviewees' subjective understandings of pleasure in participating in videogame production. This position will be approached by investigating the interviewees' satisfaction of work done well, or 'pleasurable absorption' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:128). This perspective is not taken to defend crunch time in the industry, which inevitably contributes to videogame practitioners' challenging working conditions and influences their physical and mental health, however, it is to discuss the interviewees' perspectives in relation to the specificity of working in cultural production and its affective dimensions.

Discussions about crunch practice in the Polish videogame industry reached a wider public as a result of EA spouse's blog (2004), from blog posts and articles in the videogame press. The majority of negative comments discussed work organisation in the CD Projekt Red studio which appeared during the development process of *The Witcher 3* (2015) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (to be announced). In these comments, current and ex-employees criticised studio management for their lack of experience in developing Triple-A games, 'pathological crunches' and a toxic work environment. Polish conservative newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* reported on an interview with videogame testers from the studio who described their experiences during work on *The Witcher 3* (2015):

> Six months before the game's release, crunch was really tough and around Christmas of 2014 the management announced night shifts. This marathon lasted until the management announced a postponement of the date of release. People were not happy about this because it meant the next couple of months of work would be in crunch. At the last moment, they introduced major modifications to the game; they decided to expand the open world and allow players to check almost everything and this destroyed lots of quest lines. Level and quest designers spent many hours fixing this but one fixed bug generated a couple of new ones. Missions could not be completed, we had graphic errors and problems with locating people characters and objects on

maps. Characters stacked on trees, quests fell apart and weeks of hard work were lost for nothing.  (Augustyniak, 2017)

Nonetheless, discussions about challenging working conditions in Polish videogame companies are limited to occasional mentions about them in the press and discussions among videogame practitioners. Information about challenging conditions in Triple-A studios did not provoke any industry-wide discussion about quality of life among Polish videogame practitioners. Furthermore, organisations that represent the Polish videogame industry are rarely interested in discussing workers' situations.

I contacted a representative of the Polish Games Association, an organisation established in 2015 that consists of 17 major Polish videogame developers. The association's goals are presented on its website and include inter alia a vague focus on videogame practitioners: *'We are interested in creating and maintaining the best conditions in order to produce videogames in Poland, including increasing their quality and developing the talents of their creators'* (SPG, 2018). During the interview, I asked questions about the possible representation of videogame workers and the interest of the association in their working conditions. I received a vague response which did not indicate any specific plans to discuss support for workers:

> I think there is a possibility for this in the future, but we have never heard about these kinds of problems. We could probably have prepared documents about good practices or something like this […] But so far we haven't heard about these kinds of problems. (Stanisław Just, Polish Games Association)

This answer was surprising to me as I had interviewed 41 videogame practitioners who informed me about various problems with their working conditions. It is therefore highly unlikely that the biggest developer in Poland had not heard about such problems following numerous discussions about, for example, crunch practices in the Polish press (Augustyniak, 2017). However, it is possible that this answer was associated with a recently established association which focuses mostly on cooperating with the government regarding potential sector funding. It is also possible that videogame practitioners in Poland are not as vocal about the problems in their working conditions as their North American counterparts. The possible suggestions for a solution of 'possible' bad working conditions were also located in preparation of a 'good practices' guide. As such it is associated with a less invasive and reconciliatory approach to discussing labour organisation in this sector, which has also been supported by international developers (such as EA and Ubisoft). However, the effectiveness of such practices has been questioned by videogame practitioners (Hyman, 2008).

The problem of discussing working conditions with videogame practitioners was also acknowledged by Maciej, who discussed the need to create a space for workers to discuss these problems:

> We are talking about these things, in that this quality of life is not very good, especially in these major companies, and that it would be great to do something. But the effect of these talks is that these big companies, they metaphorically shut down completely, they isolate themselves from these discussions. They separate themselves from the rest of the industry. This is this the 'flooded fortress' syndrome. I mean 'they attack us' and 'it is unreasonable because we are so awesome' so yeah 'let's not talk about this' [the working conditions]. (Maciej Miasik, Indie Games Poland Foundation)

Maciej's quote explains the difficulties that videogame practitioners encounter when they want to criticise their employers and why they prefer engaging in discussing these matters anonymously in online forums. This approach also echoes that discussed by Peticca-Harris et al. (2015:575) as 'decaf resistance' (Contu, 2008:370), which is present in the form of online comments and reviews that allow practitioners to remain anonymous. This approach can also be limited by legal obligations to the company, secured by the requirement to sign non-disclosure agreements. This approach was further highlighted by Maciej Miąsik's remark that: *"it is not a very smart thing to talk about this [working conditions]"*.

### 8.3.1 MANAGEMENT OF CRUNCH TIME

Crunch time results from a combination of external and internal factors associated with the high risks of videogame production and its operation within a capitalist system. Crunch time can be a result of the need to reach development milestones (deadlines set by publishers), the need to adjust the project to external demands (publishers, feedback from players), the complexity of the videogame production itself, or difficulty in managing the videogame production process (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:59-60).

According to data provided by the International Game Developers Association (2004:6), videogame practitioners associated the persistence of crunch time with poor managerial practices. Similarly, the interviewees in this study argued that having to crunch is a result of a lack of experience in the planning/development process: *"Crunch is an effect of inexperience in planning videogame production"* (Paul, software engineer) or *"If you crunch in a lot and above any acceptable norms, it means that managers and producers planned your work poorly"* (Joanna, PR).

The problem of the lack of development in process management in the videogame industry was associated with the industry's maturity, understood as the lack of adaptation of adequate project management skills to the industry's development and Triple-A production. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009:60), however, questioned this argument by pointing out that the practice of crunch should then be prevalent in small studios rather than in Triple-A productions which have been on the market for a while and whose games are more formulaic. Therefore, they argue that crunch time is used by companies simply because it is profitable (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:60). Undoubtedly, the practice of crunch time can be a result of the following problems: the lack of planning in videogame production; and companies' desires to cut workforce costs. This approach was also exemplified in the interviewees' discussions about their participation in unpaid crunch time and their lack of protection because of the prevalence of civil law contracts.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's (2009) argument is based on a discussion about the maturity of the videogame industry, however, and it is not difficult to spot that the approaches used by EA and Activision differ from the approaches and experiences of Polish videogame developers. Konrad and Maciej continued this discussion by arguing that Polish companies do not have adequate experience in managing videogame production:

> Although the industry is creative and strong in terms of key brand companies in Poland, it is not very big and it is messy, I would say. It is not a young industry, it has been around for the last 20 years or more. But it is not formalised, it is not professionalised like other companies. (Konrad, game designer)

> We do not know how to plan these projects, how manage them well, and as a result they are very chaotic. The production process is actually unpredictable. Maybe in Activision when they develop games like *Call of Duty*, they know how to do this because they are doing the same thing for the ninth time. But we are doing our own projects that are new to us. We do not have any experience in managing the development process so it is obvious that we will plan it wrong. (Maciej, creative director)

While Konrad's perspective can be applied to work organisation in the videogame industries worldwide by emphasising the lax approach to organisational cultures or their socio-historical development from 'garage' style videogame development, his opinion needs to be understood within the socio-economic context of the Polish videogame industry. It is worth remembering that the Polish videogame industry consists mainly of small and medium companies, and that

the majority of Polish videogames are funded through self-financing (Bobrowski et al., 2017:70). Furthermore, videogame development is a highly complex cultural production and in this environment, project management derived from other software production cannot be simply applied as the process of videogame development requires a constant, experimental approach and includes a multitude of changing variables. Furthermore, O'Donnell (2014:140) has argued that videogame companies are positioned within an 'unstable socio-technical milieu' whose dynamic influences the unpredictability of videogame production. Therefore, it can be argued that Polish videogame companies have indeed less experience in planning videogame development and their unstable position in operating in the high-risk global videogame market makes for challenging working conditions in the industry. One interviewee, Maciej, re-collected his experience of working on the first *Witcher* videogame at the beginning of the 2000s:

> It was a much bigger project and there was more money […] but still it was 'garage' work, and the same thing. We needed to learn on our own how to make games and to be honest we did not have people to learn from. I mean we had some experience with our previous small projects […] But we had no ideas on how to finish big projects like this, how to organise a company, how to design a Triple-A game and so on […] I would say that everything was born on the front-line. We were making it and during the process we introduced lots of modifications. But as I said, the way *The Witcher* was developed, this was work from the ground up. In the company, no one had any previous experience in developing a Triple-A game. (Maciej, creative director)

In this section, I presented how the management of crunch time in Poland can be understood, similarly to previously-presented discussions as a form of challenge for adapting to the external and internal demands of a competitive videogame market, as well as a form of exploitation of the videogame workforce. However, it is worth acknowledging that the problem of overtime (crunch time) is also connected with the structure and maturity of the Polish videogame industry.

### 8.3.2 SOCIALISATION INTO CRUNCH CULTURE

The majority of interviewees widely commented on and re-collected their own experiences of working overtime. Some interviewees discussed crunch time in the forms of anecdotes, jokes and well-known stories about instances of crunch in Polish videogame companies. From the interviewees, I heard descriptions of 'legendary crunches', jokes or gossip about difficult crunches in other studios: *"This is a famous story from [company's name] where the*

*company's CEO was buying workers clean t-shirts because they could not leave the company during the crunch"* (Patryk, QA) or *"Do you know the story with [name]? He went to a development team in the marketing department and asked them to prepare a game demo for E3 three days before the conference"* (Tom, PR).

> These were very difficult two months, we crunched non-stop. […] we crunched 12 hours a day. I only had a chance to taste cold pizza with beer at 10pm after 16 hours of work. Overall, I remember that we left office at 4am the day before the game's release. (Piotr, game designer)

> Some time ago my friend asked me when I would start crunch before the release and I told him 'two years ago' so yeah, living in permanent crunch is not healthy. (Radek, software engineer)

These stories play a role not only in normalising the experience of crunch but also in consolidating videogame developers' communities through shared, difficult work experiences (Weststar, 2015:1243-44). This presentation of crunch trivialised and undermined its consequences as the interviewees presented it as an 'extreme' practice but also addressed it as 'enjoyable', 'social' and a 'worthwhile' experience. One interviewee who worked in the marketing department in a Triple-A company criticised this approach:

> When I joined the industry, crunch was something that you bragged about and was proud of. How many hours you did not sleep, how many hours you spent in the company. This kind of sacrifice for a project was a matter of anecdotes, and it was closely connected with the industry and with the approach that it is unavoidable. (Joanna, PR)

Although the majority of the interviewees agreed that crunch time has an impact on their work-life balance and health (both physical and mental), they were also excited and proud of their experience of crunch. Participation in crunch time places an emphasis on working ethos in the videogame industry and is associated with resilience and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of the project (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015). This experience and the changes in his approach to crunch time were discussed by Paul, who worked in a variety of videogame studios from Triple-A to independent, and discussed crunch practice in the following way:

> Interviewer:    Do you remember your first crunch?
>
> Paul:           I was ecstatic. I was 26 years old, had no responsibilities at home and I had this period when I spent two weeks non-stop at work. I was proud that I was working in a team which understood me and knew what I was doing. Everyone was engaged at the same level. I think

everyone has similar experiences from their first crunch, when you are 20-something.

Interviewer: And then?

Paul: Everyone needs to feel it on their own skin, you cannot explain to someone that crunch is bad for them. I tried this a couple of times and… I even had this situation when I was leading the programmer team. I had 7 or 8 people in the team and we were at a very important stage of the project. But according to the schedule, we should have been able to finish it on time. We had enough time to meet the deadline. And then someone from the management came and said it would be great if we could improve the game quality and add other things. He said it in front of the whole team and the team said 'Great, let's do this. We will have to crunch but well…' And I said 'Absolutely, not. We agreed that we would not crunch'. It did not make sense because we could deliver our part on time. And I was outvoted by the whole team. They did not have any previous experience of crunch and they did not know what it was like. And I was not able to convince anyone that this was a bad idea. (Paul, software engineer)

Paul described his first experience of crunch in terms of what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2006) addressed as 'creative, cooperative and cool' work. Paul's reflection on his approach to crunch time addresses the perspective on this practice as a socialisation into the work culture of the videogame industry. Paul's reflection on his younger-self's approach to working in the industry resembles the findings of Ross (2003:73), whose ethnography among new media workers found that work intensification was approached by the interviewees as one of the exciting elements of their jobs. Paul's account also reflects a description of an ideal industry worker, which is often portrayed as one who is young, male, devoted to videogames and without family obligations (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:53; Consalvo, 2008). Paul's account presents a thin line between self-actualisation and self-exploitation through creative work, by his indication that his team decided among themselves to participate in crunch. Furthermore, although his opinion that the experience of crunch in the videogame industry is negative, he argued that he did not have any problems with working over-hours for his own project: *"I can crunch a lot for myself, for my own project. Because I know I am doing this for myself. But now, when someone requires me to crunch, I say no"* (Paul, software engineer). He would work on his own projects after work and for his own creative visions, as something

that belongs to him. Therefore, he argued that crunch practice is primarily a characteristic of freelance and independent developers' work and not of work in Triple-A development studios. The interviewees' understanding of crunch time is heterogeneous and associated with a variety of internal and external factors. The interviewees understood their experience of crunch through the specificity of their own occupational and videogame production context. From the perspective of interviewees who work in Triple-A companies, crunch time was associated with the last stages of the development process. The interviewees who specialised in the production of smaller videogames, associated with shorter production cycles, discussed problems of experiencing frequent 'small' crunches while independent developers and freelancers argued that *'they crunch all the time'* (Paul, software engineer). The understanding of crunch time is therefore heterogeneous and associated with a variety of internal and external factors. However, this approach to crunch as well as Paul's division between different valorisations of crunch time raises question of how the interviewees understand this practice.

### 8.3.3 THE 'BAD' AND THE 'GOOD' CRUNCH

The interviewees presented various understandings of crunch practice and their approaches to it. In contrast to research conducted by IGDA (2004), the majority of the interviewees' understandings and perspectives on crunch were not overwhelmingly negative, as they identified negative and positive elements of overtime work, as addressed by one interviewee: *"And everyone has probably already told you that there are two types of crunch: good and bad."* (Maciej, creative director). Through this understanding, participation in crunch time was not recognised as an exploitative practice but was also associated with pleasure when participating in the creative process (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:129-133; Banks, 2014).

The interviewees' ideas of 'bad' crunch resembled what IGDA's (2004:6) reports identified as 'forced workaholism' in the industry. The interviewees defined 'bad crunch' as the result of organisational problems, external pressure and undefined goals. Therefore, according to the interviewees, 'bad crunch' is understood as extensification and intensification of work imposed by the management, unreasonable publisher demands or overtime work which lasts too long and leads to physical and mental health problems in the workers:

> Bad crunch is when it is organised as forced, non-stop work and you have to do this and at a certain moment you burn-out. […] Now, the people who complain about crunch? These are people who probably experience a couple of months or even a year of non-stop crunch. They are forced to crunch. […] And this approach should not exist. Unfortunately, it is a little bit like this; if workers manage to crunch for one year then the management might want to try this one more time. But what if the alternative is a

company's bankruptcy? In this case you do not have a choice (you have to crunch). (Maciej, creative director).

It is not cool when crunch is badly planned, and when it lasts 9 months. And your family life is falling apart, and your personal life is falling apart and you have health problems. […] Especially when we are doing this to ourselves. Instead of saying 'no, we will not do this', no one will say that they cannot do it; everyone will push harder to finish. And then it turns out that it is not crunch for 3 weeks but 3 months and not 12 hours a day but 16. (Mary, producer)

Conversely, the interviewees defined 'good crunch' as an increased work effort which has a clearly defined purpose and which is based on the 'drive' to create. Good crunch was associated with the natural cycle of the creative process, with one's willingness to 'do their best', and with the camaraderie of videogame development during critical stages of videogame production. As such, the interviewees' idea of 'good crunch' resembled 'pleasurable absorption', discussed by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:128) as the 'opposite of the alienated clock-watching that many of us dread in labour' and with the satisfaction of seeing the work 'coming together' after long hours of labour, designing and finally delivering the product:

If crunch lasts 2-3 weeks, and it is implemented only to reach some milestones, it is cool. Because it is cool to sit together during a weekend, in tracksuits and eat pizza, and work as a team. We, of course, look like zombies the next day but we know that we can make it. This is cool. (Mary, producer)

It is a good crunch when people are mobilised and they put a specific, additional effort in what they are doing because they know they are doing something that will work. And this is this good crunch. If this crunch happens regularly but it does not last long i.e. around one week. […] This crunch fits within the framework of how creative people work when it is a natural element of the cycle. We need time to relax, to look at what we are doing, to think, and then when we know what to do, we are driven by the need to see the results of our work. And then people sit at work, even 12 hours a day to finish something and to see how it will work the next day. (Maciej, creative director)

The videogame practitioners argued that while creative work demands long working hours and effort, it also brings them a 'sense of satisfaction and reward from work well-done' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:132). The interviewees' understandings of their work resembled the results of a previous investigation of creative work in television, music and the

magazine industry (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Scharff, 2018; Banks, 2014). Furthermore, this emotional attachment to product and process also translates into a responsibility to deliver for the audience the best possible experience. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:197) discussed this issue in their model of good and bad work by emphasising the specificity of cultural production: 'this is communication more often than not intended to produce some kind of emotional or affective relationship'. Therefore, in their model of good and bad work, they also placed emphasis on the social and cultural values of products and the value of focusing on providing 'excellent' products (or the intrinsic value of work done well) (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:37). Evidence of the interviewees' emotional investment in their work and in the pursuit of delivering the best possible videogames to players was present in every interview. They argued that the pursuit of 'good product' was not only motivated by their passion for videogames, but also by the fact that they wanted to deliver the best games possible to videogame players.

> I feel an emotional attachment to my work and I really care [...] I really want to make everything the best as I can. I mean that's my vision but it would be great if people liked it as well. (Janusz, scriptwriter)

> I simply care about this, I want to give as much as possible of myself […] and I am really stressed because I want to work faster but I cannot work faster yet. I think it might sound funny because these are really small games. But I am really emotionally attached to the things I am making. (Magda, 2D graphic designer)

Emotional attachment was not just associated with the videogame practitioners' attachment to their videogame as an expression of their creative vision, but also with videogame players. It can be argued that the interviewees' connections with their audiences depended on the type of videogame production they were engaged with. The videogame testers had limited contact with players and found out about the reception to their games through reviews. Independent game developers communicated with their audiences via development blogs, social media or during conferences. The majority of the interviewees discussed interaction with players, mostly through their reactions to reviews and feedback from them, however, similarly to creative workers' experiences discussed in Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011:197) study: 'the often deeply affective and emotional nature of the response sought by creative workers in these distant, mediated audiences produces anxiety, ambivalence and even distrust'. The interviewees discussed their vulnerability and anxiety while checking players' responses to their games –reading their videogame reviews, watching people playing their games during conferences, or waiting for feedback from their peers. I conducted an interview with Mary (a

producer) during the day of her videogame downloadable content (DLC) release[53] and she expressed her anxiety about reading reviews online in the following manner:

> Yeah, so today we had a game DLC release and everyone was afraid to come to work and check the reviews and to see what people think about us because it is lots of work, and everyone puts in […] everything actually – sweat, blood, tears but also your family life, your health […] And now I am talking about a game about zombies so I know this does not sound the best. But I remember my friend said today 'Mary, do not worry, it will be ok!' and I was like 'of course I am worrying; this is my baby!' […] and this is true, this was my first big project as a producer. It was horrible, I could not sleep at night […] I was thinking this is my baby because we are working on it together, I remember every hour on this project, every stressful moment, every funny situation, every joke and now people can experience this game, now they can play it […] Even now I am afraid of reading reviews, because I take them very personally. Because if they only knew what price we personally paid for this game. (Mary, producer)

## 8.4 CONCLUSION

Working conditions in the industry need to be approached through the socio-economic context of Poland, in which the use of temporary contracts (including civil law contracts) is one of the highest among all EU countries (Eurostat, 2017). The prevalence of civil law contracts in Poland has also normalised the experience of precariousness for videogame practitioners. While approximately 75 per cent of videogame practitioners were employed on civil law contracts, the use of this type of employment varied because of the interviewees' personal motives and occupational positions (Bobrowski et al. 2017:68). Some interviewees approached civil law contracts as a strategic choice to increase their net income. This strategic (but understood) entrepreneurial choice was motivated by their perspective of the support that Polish institutions can offer them, as well as by what could be termed 'lifestyle choices'. Therefore, civil law contracts were approached in terms of 'investments', as a sense of freedom and choice. This transfer of risk of employment from an employer to an employee could be discussed as individualisation of risk (Beck, 2000) but also as venture labour (Neff, 2012) constructed through a particular socio-cultural narrative about the normalisation of civil law contracts.

Nonetheless, the discussions about engaging with entrepreneurial subjectivity were also based on a differentiation between entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial subject characteristics. This discussion presented assumptions among the interviewees that the abuse of civil law

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[53] Downloadable content (DLC) is additional content created for a previously released video game.

contracts will not happen to people whose work is perceived to be of higher quality. This approach demonstrates the power of an employer on the type and distribution of contracts but also demonstrates a shift in the idea of one's full responsibility over employment contracts and therefore the meritocracy of the videogame industry. This particular view on civil law contracts was not shared by those interviewees who experienced an exploitation through the use of civil law contracts, especially the younger interviewees at the beginning of their careers. For them, the prevalence of civil law contracts resulted in not only work instability but also an increase in their work intensification (similar to hope labour, as discussed in Chapter 5) so as to secure future employment or retain their current job. Their entrepreneurial position here was mostly hinged on their reputation management and an ability to 'prove oneself'.

The forms of employment and the project-based nature of the Polish videogame industry work are also associated with working time. In this chapter, I approached the case of work time through a discussion about crunch time, which has been widely debated in academic writing (see discussions in Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:59-65; O'Donnell, 2014:159-165; Peticca-Harris et al. 2015). In this chapter, I presented the difficulties in discussing the experiences of crunch and the disavowal of these experiences by Polish videogame organisations. For Polish videogame practitioners, participation in crunch time was defined as a 'badge of honour' of real videogame developers, however, it was also discussed as a highly exploitative practice which was defined as *"feeding on the workers' emotional attachment to a project"* (Paul, software engineer). From this perspective, crunch time was interpreted as a neo-normative form of control in the videogame industry through which workers gain more autonomy and, driven by their attachment to a given project, are willing to work overtime. This is despite the fact that the prevalence of civil law contracts does not provide workers with any legal protection by Polish Labour Code for overtime hours.

Nonetheless, videogame practitioners differentiated between 'bad' and 'good' crunch, which, according to them, differs in intention, duration and final goals. Therefore, while the interviewees' participation in crunch time can be understood through the neo-Foucauldian interpretation as a form of self-exploitation, the interviewees' discussion of pleasure in finalising creative production, the sense of co-operation and the inherent satisfaction in work well-done cannot be ignored. Therefore, the interviewees' emotional attachment to their work and participation in crunch is not only defined by 'passion' but by their pursuit of making excellent games which can bring them satisfaction, but which can also be a cause of struggles and anxieties. The further consequences of this work organisation and challenging working conditions will be further discussed in Chapter 9.

# CHAPTER 9: WORK/LIFE ARTICULATION

## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents Polish videogame practitioners' discussions about their work-related vulnerabilities and struggles over the reconciliation of work and private lives. Consequently, this chapter continues a discussion about the interviewees' approaches to precarious working conditions, the culture of overtime work and their emotional attachment to their work by emphasising its consequences for workers (Chapter 8). In this chapter, I will not only present the interviewees' construction of entrepreneurial subjectivities concerning an interpretation of their vulnerabilities, but also their engagement with competing discourses.

I argue that although videogame practitioners acknowledged their vulnerabilities and presented them through their engagement with entrepreneurial narratives or their rejections, their solutions for any experienced problems were mostly positioned within individualised narratives which stressed personal responsibility for finding solutions to difficult working conditions.

The first part of this chapter presents Polish videogame practitioners' approaches to dealing with the uncertainties of videogame production. The interviewees attributed these 'uncertainties' to working under time-pressures, the unpredictability of a project's outcome, and their emotional attachments to their project (see also Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:178-195). The interviewees' description of the unpredictability of their working lives exemplified further the precariousness of videogame practitioners' lives. The acknowledgment of their vulnerabilities also highlights the unstable nature of their careers despite their expression of 'perceived' stability associated with their company's reputation or their work-related experiences (see Chapter 5).

All videogame practitioners interviewed admitted that their work is characterised by a high degree of anxiety and stress, however, they presented these struggles in two different ways. Some of them presented their struggles through entrepreneurial narratives that placed emphasis on their personal responsibility to maintain a positive attitude toward work or to manage 'stress' themselves. Within this group of interviewees, some also presented their vulnerabilities in the form of an entrepreneurial narrative about struggle as a means to success (Banks, 2007:60; Scharff, 2018:122-123). However, not all of the interviewees agreed with this discourse and conversely, through reflection on their work-related experiences, discussed working in the industry as an exploitative entity. Nonetheless, even those interviewees who acknowledged the exploitation and challenges of the working conditions in the industry focused on individualised narratives in potential solutions to encountered difficulties.

In the second section, I will discuss the interviewees' interpretations of relations between their working and private lives. According to the interviewees, dealing with the struggle over reconciling their professional and private lives is one the biggest negatives of their work. Therefore, this part engages in a debate about the encroachment of work time into the interviewees' private lives. Work/family relations were discussed differently by the female and male interviewees, although all interviewees suffered from societal pressures based on a traditional division of gender roles. The female interviewees confirmed the results of previous research about women in the videogame industry (such as Prescott and Bogg, 2013/2011b) which discussed work organisation in the industry (including the culture of overtime work and intensification of work) as incompatible with women's domestic obligations. However, increasing difficulties related to reconciling working in the industry with their personal lives contributes to practitioners' decisions to leave the industry, and this situation contributes to the skilled-workforce shortage, pressuring Polish videogame companies to improve their working conditions. Nonetheless a solution proposed by the Polish companies did not concern changes in work organisation but can however further contribute to the encroachment of work into private lives.

The last section encompasses a discussion about how the interviewees imagine their futures along with their career development in the industry. In previous research about creative work, scholars argue that workers struggle to imagine their career trajectories or present polarised opinions about their spectacular future successes or failures (Gill, 2009:40-42). While some of the Polish videogame practitioners I interviewed presented similar narratives about their future in the industry, they also argued that problems with maintaining a work/life balance made them think about changing their occupations or finding employment in Western videogame industries.

## 9.2 NORMALISATION OF THE STRUGGLE: DISCUSSING VULNERABILITIES

The challenging working conditions in the videogame industry along with the interviewees' emotional responsibility for their projects contributed to a higher degree of stress and anxiety among those workers. In Chapter 8 I discussed the interviewees' approaches to overtime work and the intensification of work (crunch) as mediated affective labour towards players and the emotional responsibility to provide a 'good product'. In this section, I present the interviewees' understandings of the struggles associated with their work. In this section I use the term 'struggle' instead of narrower definitional terms such as 'anxiety' or 'stress' as the interviewees defined their emotional struggles through a variety of effects, such as 'unconscious anxiety', 'uncertainty' or 'stress'.

The Polish videogame practitioners I interviewed admitted that their work involves a high level of stress and anxiety associated with: working under time pressure; the uncertainty of a production process and its outcome; and emotional responsibility for a project.

> This is a huge stress. We have deadlines, we want to make good games, but we also need to finish them, fast. There is this constant fight to balance everything. (Adam, software engineer)

> Stress was eating me up from the inside; maybe it is because of my personality. Whatever I do, I give 100 per cent of myself, and I care about the success of the thing I am responsible for directly along with the success of the whole game. (Ania, PR)

These forms of emotional struggles expressed by the interviewees are not unique to videogame development and have been discussed in other studies about creative workers (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:204). However, the interviewees' interpretations of their emotional struggles reflect the precariousness of their work and, consequently, their lives. Even when these videogame practitioners claimed that their work was stable because of their perceived security in their skillsets or stable situation of their employer (as discussed in Chapter 5), the majority addressed their struggles through an acknowledgement of the unpredictability of their career trajectories. Videogame practitioners' presentations of their struggles and vulnerabilities were two-fold. Firstly, they presented their struggles through discursive formations which emphasised their entrepreneurial values: maintaining a positive attitude; resilience; and through narratives which placed emphasis on 'entrepreneurial war stories' (Banks, 2007:60). Secondly, some of the interviewees reflected on their work experiences and directly questioned entrepreneurial narratives.

The interviewees described their interpretation of encountered emotional struggles (stress and anxiety) as being unavoidable in this type of work. Their feelings of 'uncertainty' and anxiety were disregarded or even normalised. They assumed that it was their individual responsibility to deal with the consequences of their challenging work environment. Janusz, who worked as a co-founder and scriptwriter for a 10-person, independent videogame studio, admitted that he had a hard time coping with the stress associated with videogame work:

> I am not coping with it [stress] very well. I mean, I have to deal with it, so I deal with it because I cannot just sit down and cry. But there is always this balancing act because on one side, for example, a game is not working, a game is crashing, or someone says it is awful. On the other, there are people who say: 'Oh, cool idea!'. (Janusz, scriptwriter)

Janusz's idea about dealing with stress reflects on not only the normalisation of the struggle but also on his emphasis on being resilient: "*I cannot just sit down and cry*." This attitude also portrays the interviewees as capable subjects who can cope with challenging work-related situations (Scharff, 2018:123). His argument that he needed to look for positive elements in his work echoes the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivities, by their focus on maintaining a positive attitude – a positive outlook for a future outcome. The interviewees emphasised the self-management of emotional struggles or even considered the stress associated with videogame production as a positive, motivational entity. This narrative also refers to entrepreneurial values by highlighting what kinds of people can work in the industry, and that stress can be approached as a positive feeling.

> I can distance myself from this stress, I think about it more like a task by task thing. [...] But obviously, it is work done under constant pressure, time-based pressure. And some people cannot deal with this and yeah, there is lots of crying and vomiting and so on. I saw men acting like this as well. It is not a pleasant picture, but some people react like this to stress. (Karolina, 3D graphic designer)

> It is this internal anxiety I would say, mixed with adrenaline […] I think stress is something I consider as a negative feeling. It is something like being anxious when, for example, you know when you are going somewhere, preparing to travel. Although it is certain that we need to finish our duties and we need to check milestones every day, every week and every month and this escalates, and this is what I call unconscious anxiety. (Mary, producer)

The videogame practitioners' narratives about vulnerabilities encompassed a discussion about struggles experienced in the past and overcome in the present (see also Scharff, 2018:122-124; Gill, 2009). The interviewees who used these narratives discussed how they had overcome their emotional struggles through repeated failures, hard work, overcoming mental problems or changing jobs (or their attitudes toward work). These narratives also presented the interviewees' exposition of their vulnerabilities to further highlight their contemporary successes, and as mentioned above, their self-presentation as people who can cope on their own with their problems. These narratives reflected on the ideological presentation of failure and struggles in which one can fail/struggle as long as they achieve success in the end.

Tom, who worked both as a game designer and as a public relations manager in the videogame industry, described the uncertainty and anxiety associated with working in videogame production as 'living your life on a volcano':

> This [videogame development] is a stressful job. It feels like sitting on a volcano […] I happened to have nervous episodes because of my work. Because of this experience, I kind of know how to deal with these types of situations. (Tom, PR)

Tom admitted to his struggles with stress and anxiety in his work, and also indicated that because of his experiences, he knew how to cope with stressful situations at work. Therefore, his work presents a type of 'survival' narrative through which past experiences made him more resilient to the inherent challenges connected to working in the industry (Scharff, 2018:122; Orgad, 2009). Another example of the entrepreneurial narrative was presented in Patryk's work biography. Patryk had started his career in the videogame industry working as a videogame tester in an outsourcing studio. He admitted that the working conditions in the outsourcing studio were difficult; however, thanks to his positive attitude and endurance he managed to eventually find better employment in Berlin:

> I had to start working very early in life, when I was 18. I have worked hard in my life. […] So I sat in this [testing] company, and I smiled, I was nice to people, and I think that my optimism and willpower allowed me to become one of the best testers within the first ten months of my work. This also allowed me to get to my new job in Berlin.

However, not all interviewees discussed their vulnerabilities and struggles in the form of entrepreneurial narratives, but instead questioned the narrative itself. This group of interviewees reflected on their previous work-related experiences in the videogame industry and their emotional attachment to this type of work and came to the conclusion that the industry (not only) exploits its workers and therefore this work also requires a certain distance between work and private lives:

> I did not hide my discontent about this situation [the challenging working conditions]. It was not very well received by the management because they always expect a positive attitude from employees. I was too old for this, I had 15 years of experience in videogame development, and I did not trust them. The attraction of developing [a game title] for any price is not attractive to me anymore. (Maciej, software engineer)

> Is the question – to be or to have? Because some people think that the project is the most important thing. They can earn whatever but they want by working on a project. Now I look at this differently than I looked at it ten years ago. You need to think about your future; you need to remember that: 'this is not your project', that the proceeds do not go into your bank account, a percentage, an investment or whatever. There is no point in destroying your health. This is not a fight you can win. (Jurek, 2D graphic designer)

In the quotes above, the interviewees questioned the discourse of personal sacrifice in videogame development. In Maciej's case, he argued that the realisation that an emotional attachment to a project and his willingness to self-exploit came to him through his work-related experiences, as he argued:

> You will not realise it [the self-exploitation] wasn't worth it until years after the fact. You will realise this when parts of your life start to fall apart such as your relationships, your health and so on […] and then you will ask yourself if it was worth it. Probably not, but by then it will be too late. (Maciej, Indie Games Poland Foundation)

In contrast to the interviewees who discussed their struggles through entrepreneurial discourses, the interviewees who questioned this narrative used references to future and not past events to emphasise the emotional prices which videogame practitioners pay for their work. Therefore, as seen in Jarek's quote, he argued for the separation of his work from any emotional attachment and possible consequences in the future. While both Maciej and Jarek presented competing discourses about entrepreneurial values, their approaches did not provide a possible solution to the challenging working conditions in the industry. The interviewees discussed their struggles through individualised narratives that stressed individual responsibility in dealing with or improving one's work conditions. This individualised narrative was presented in the videogame practitioners' emphasis on their requirement to be optimistic, removed from stress and to not self-sacrifice for the project[54].

The Polish videogame employees I interviewed argued that their work contributes to their emotional struggles, which they attributed to working in high-time-pressure environments and their emotional responsibility to videogames. In further discussions about how they approached these struggles, they drew on entrepreneurial narratives by emphasising the need to be positive and thinking about possible future rewards (see also Scharff, 2018:120-123). Some of the interviewees presented narratives about their emotional struggles in the form of their triumphant stories about overcoming stress which could be associated with 'survivor narratives' (Orgad, 2009). However, not all of the interviewees drew on discourses associated with entrepreneurship. Some of them reflected on their work-related experiences and rejected this narrative by focusing on the possible future consequences of self-exploitation for workers. In the next section, I discuss how challenging working conditions and emotional struggles are reconciled regarding the interviewees' work/life articulation.

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[54] I will return to the discussion about the interviewees' individualised narratives and lack of collective action in the industry in section 9.4.

## 9.3 WORK AND LIFE ARTICULATION

### 9.3.1 DEFINING PERFECT WORKING SUBJECT

In contrast to anecdotal stories and discussions about the hurdles of the crunch process, discussions about their personal lives and family lives posed a challenge for the interviewees. They also revealed a contrast between perceiving their intensity and sacrifice at work as virtues, a sense of belonging to their occupational community, and their difficulties in reconciling their work with their personal lives:

> It is not like, one half of a couple works at the Post Office and the other is at home with the children so that the whole family can eat dinner together at four o'clock. […] It requires lots of logistical effort. […] But undoubtedly, it is more difficult than in other occupations. (Karol, scriptwriter)

> This is not a job that you can just leave the office and go back home at 4pm. You still think about your work after you have finished. Because this is creative work and if you have some problems, you think about them all the time. (Tadeusz, producer)

Karol and Tadeusz's approaches resonate with the extensification of work into private lives, in workers' engagement in work outside working hours. The problems connected to the extensification and intensification of labour in advanced capitalism have been discussed by the subscribers to the Autonomist Marxism school of thought who argue that work broke beyond the factory walls with the expansion of more service-based occupations (Gill and Pratt, 2008:6; Berardi, 2009:115-116). The blurred lines between work time and personal lives resulted from the precarious positions of the majority of jobs as well as in an internalisation of more individualistic narratives, which prioritise working lives (see Berardi, 2009:111; McRobbie, 2002:518). The interviewees' approaches to the adaptation of their private lives to work times resemble a perspective endorsed by the proponents of governmentality-inspired approaches. Of course, as some of my other interviewees suggested, people can approach these requirements differently; however, these approaches are mainly based on individual choices rather than on collective actions. During the discussion, Ania, who used to work in a Triple-A company, discussed her co-workers' approaches to dealing with working long hours:

> People deal with them in many ways. There are people who just accept them for what they are. I mean they accept this because it was their choice of job. There are people who try to be a little bit more reasonable, and they say: 'Ok, I will crunch until X o'clock and that's it.' So they do not care how urgent a project is; they just go back

home. And we also have people who try to let off some steam in different ways such as by going to parties and so on. (Ania, PR)

But it is possibly all down to personal preference. I think that if you do not like this type of job, you will not continue working here. It is something for something. If you do not like it, you should probably find something more stable. (Kasia, QA)

In Ania's narrative, all the strategies used by workers refer to their management of time. The articulation of 'work/life balance' is mostly based on an individual's responsibility for a chosen career path. This response corresponds with Beck's (2000) discussion about increased individualisation and personal responsibility for risk. Apart from theoretical discussions about the individualisation of economic risk, Hoffman and Cowan (2008:228) also indicated in their studies that in the majority of companies' internal politics on 'work/life balance', they emphasise the workers' responsibility over their time management.

In previous research, scholars have indicated that videogame companies tend to target a specific demographic for their future workforce. This demographic is often described as young, passionate about videogames and predominantly male (see Chapter 7). As discussed in Chapter 5, a workforce familiar with and 'passionate' about videogames is perceived as an asset. Firstly, this is because they are familiar with the videogame market and competitive products. Secondly, as the previous study suggested, this is because their 'passion' can be easily exploited by videogame companies (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009:59-65; Bulut, 2015a/2015b; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015). Thirdly, this is because there is an assumption that they tend not to have family obligations and can devote more of their time to work. A similar description of the 'ideal' worker was raised by the interviewees who were wondering what kind of employees would be the most desirable for the industry. The interviewees discussed the image of a 'passionate' gamer who turns into a practitioner:

I think there are people who like these kinds of jobs and they do not care about anything else [other than their jobs]. People who moved for a job to the big city, rent accommodation and are single. They have nothing except their work. They do not have lots of friends here; they do not have families. So you can see them at work at 10pm and ask why they aren't going back home. When they do go back home, they sit and watch TV, while they'd probably prefer to sit in the office and work. So yeah, there are people who are ok with this. But for the majority, this is very difficult and it gets even more difficult when you have a family. (Ania, PR)

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> [On crunch] Because it can be a cool thing for someone who is a single and still in their 20s. But some of my friends were forced to work so much that they could not maintain normal contact with their families. It was a huge disadvantage for them, and they quit. (Robert, QA/game designer)

Some of the interviewees tried to justify some practitioners' willingness to place work at the centre of their lives because of peoples' 'passion' for videogames. It is also not surprising that the interviewees also used their example based on practitioners' ages, as according to reports provided by occupational associations, the majority of videogame practitioners are between 20-34 years old (Weststar et al., 2016:32). In a Polish context, the average age of a videogame practitioner was estimated at 31 years (Bobrowski et al., 2017:72).

> I mean I look at one of our programmers; this a guy who is running away from his family and into his work. His passion is to make games […], so I could say that these people self-fulfil through work. I have ruined my relationship because I sit in front of a computer too much so it can be deadly for your relationships. There is a reason why we had these Rockstar Wives. […] So we will always have this problem of balancing our passion with our relationships. But I think it is also a personal thing with regards to how you deal with this. (Tom, PR)

Tom was the only interviewee who openly admitted that he had failed to reconcile his work with his personal life. He also claimed that he understood and confirmed the probability of the Rockstar Wives post (Rockstar Spouse, 2010). Similarly to an EA_Spouse blog post, Rockstar Wives published a statement about the deteriorating working conditions in Rockstar's studio in San Diego, during the development of *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) in 2009 (Rockstar Spouse, 2010). In his quote, Tom not only emphasised personal responsibility over a chosen career path and time management as expressed by other interviewees but also the dynamic between gender roles in his narrative. It refers to the opposition between men willing to sacrifice their families' well-being in order to find fulfilment through work. It is, for example, visible in the statement that his friend 'was running away from his family'. Nonetheless, Tom's quote presents stereotypical connotations with the videogame practitioner's demographic along with the traditional division of gender roles.

### 9.3.2 WORK AND FAMILY LIFE

Through establishing that the ideal worker in the videogame industry is gendered, I will discuss how women and men approach the reconciliation of work and family life in the

industry in this section. The ongoing changes in the labour market had a different impact on both men and women's working lives (McRobbie, 2002:527-528; Banks and Milestone, 2011:80). Arguably, these changes have had an influence on gender inequality in the industry, as the demand for flexible work (in addition to the culture of long working hours in the videogame industry's case) may prevent women from entering cultural industries because of their parental and domestic obligations, or contribute to their decision to leave the industry (Gill, 2002:84; Prescott and Bogg 2014:94).

In this research sample the majority of female interviewees did not have children and were single. This composition of the research sample can be reflected in the fact that the majority of female interviewees were in their late 20s and early 30s. However, even those female interviewees who had not yet or did not plan to have children struggled to achieve a work/life balance. Mary, who worked as a producer in a Triple-A company, admitted that she struggled with her work/life articulation as a single person and that she had difficulties imagining how her co-workers organised their family lives:

> To be honest with you, I am a happy single woman. And a good example of my lack of time would probably be that, four months ago, I bought an aquarium because I wanted to have a pet and thought of buying a fish. And even now the aquarium is still empty because I did not have the time to buy a fish. So I am not sure how people with children deal with working in this industry. (Mary, producer)

In March 2016, I interviewed Magda, who was working as a graphic designer in a medium-sized development studio. During our conversation, she admitted that she did not encounter any problems with maintaining her work/life balance. However, two days after our first interview, she sent me a message in which she argued that although she did not have difficulties with work/life articulation at her company, working in the videogame industry still constrains her personal choices (including with regards to starting a family).

> Hi, there is one more thing I wanted to say, I think it might be important, but I was afraid to talk about this… The scariest thing for my female friends and I is getting pregnant because permanent contracts are rare. And this is sad, and it is probably something that concerns most of the young women in Poland. I am sorry that I did not say this earlier, but it is a difficult subject. I mean I feel super secure in this job right now, but I am absolutely avoiding getting pregnant 1000 per cent. I have female friends (from different companies who had got pregnant) and they had really hard times. They did not want to go back to work because they felt terrible there. Or maybe they were afraid that they could not catch up with projects? […] They had situations such as their boss calling them and complaining that you could not finish something

on time because you were six months pregnant and that made you feel bad… (Magda, 2D graphic designer)

Magda's argument that she did not experience any difficulties regarding her work and personal life relations was dictated by her resistance (hesitance) to discuss these issues during the interview and this is possibly why she was more comfortable with sending this message to me after the interview. Magda's behaviour further emphasises the methodological difficulties in accessing and discussing working conditions with videogame workers who might feel uncomfortable discussing their work challenges (see Chapter 3).

Undoubtedly, the fear that Magda described is widespread among Polish women working on fixed-term contracts (civil law contracts) who cannot count on the full protection of the labour law. Employers' negative perspectives of female employees and their decisions to start families was further emphasised by Magda who argued that '*a pregnant worker is always a tragedy for a company*'. Therefore, Magda's fear was a result of her uncertain work situation (the lack of legal protection and social security) as well as the pace of work in the videogame industry (being afraid of not being able to catch-up with one's work). Magda's arguments confirm the findings of previous research about women in the videogame industry who encounter problems with achieving a work/life balance due to their family obligations (Prescott and Boggs, 2011b:12). Furthermore, it has also been acknowledged that female videogame practitioners are more likely to postpone decisions about parenthood due to the lack of protection and stability (Prescott and Boggs, 2014:94/ 2011b:11-12).

Through a discussion about her friends' experiences, Magda also indicated that dealing with the pressure to prioritise work over family life is difficult for many workers and contributes to their decisions to quit the industry. In July 2016, I met with Magda to discuss her career development. I asked her about women's approaches to videogame work. Magda admitted that her friends who were parents (mostly graphic designers) were willing to move to the online gambling industry. This particular form of employment for graphic designers offers more stable working hours, more formulaic work, and offer permanent contracts with a 3000 PLN basic salary (approximately £600). This offer seemed particularly reasonable for Magda who earned around 2000 PLN (approximately £400) in her studio as a junior graphic designer. Magda also admitted that if she were unable to find better employment than her current job, she would try to find employment in the gambling industry even though such jobs are not as attractive as working in the videogame industry.

In contrast to the female interviewees, most of male interviewees had families and also discussed their struggles. Although the videogame workforce consists of mostly male employees, research about work/life articulation is mostly focused on discussing the barriers

encountered by women in the industry regarding organising their family life (Consalvo, 2008; Prescott and Bogg, 2011b). As Jacobs and Gerson (2004:85) argue: 'Work-family conflicts may be acute for women, but it is not restricted to them. Certainly, time squeezes are not simply a 'working mother's problem' although the popular debate is often framed in this way'. Both men and women in the industry experience problems with work/life articulation, in addition to being both constrained by the traditional societal perspectives on gender roles in a family (Duckworth and Buzzanell, 2009:559).

> I think I would have a better chance for career development if I did not need to balance my work with family life. But my family is very important to me, and I want to balance my career and family life. I used to work as a journalist, and my previous work did not coincide with the time I wanted to spend with my family. This work flexibility is one of the biggest disadvantages for me. (Tadeusz, producer)

> I was a little bit afraid about how it would be as I took 6-month's paternity leave. And I was the first guy in the company who had ever done that. I was worried about how they would look at me and if they would make some nasty comments about this or not. But my boss and my producer were very supportive, and they said it was ok for me to stay with my child and that they would wait for me. (Karol, scriptwriter)

Karol's recollections present a different dynamic to Magda's friends' experiences with starting a family. Undoubtedly, there are companies that have better policies regarding allowing their employees to balance their work/life relations. Karol's worries about his paternity leave were not only associated with the fact that he was the only man in the company who decided to take 6 months of paternity leave, but also about the rarity of men taking paternity leave in Poland. According to Polish law, men are allowed to take a short paternity leave (2 weeks during the first 12 months of a child's life, introduced in 2010) and 6 months of leave (introduced in 2013) (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2016). While the shorter paternity leave is becoming more popular among working men, only 1 per cent of fathers decide to take longer paternity leave (Bankier, 2017). This situation can be associated with more conservative perspectives on traditional gender roles in families. Furthermore, it can also be associated with the gender pay gap and the prevalence of precarious forms of employment in Poland.

The interviewees argued that videogame companies tried to facilitate a reconciliation of family and work time among workers by introducing the possibility of working from home and organising kindergartens at their companies. This approach was used to prevent experienced workers, with established family lives, from quitting the companies. Damian,

who worked in the animation department of a Triple-A studio, described his company's approach:

> Our studio is maturing along with its workforce. I would say that the average age of an employee at the company is around 32 years old. These are people who already have families […], so our company needs to facilitate people balancing their work and private lives. (Damian, animator)

The interviewees argued that Polish videogame companies, especially more established companies, are afraid of losing skilled workers to other national companies or even foreign companies. Therefore, they need to think about the adjustment of work organisation to their workers' needs. The videogame practitioners discussed various forms of support that they had received from their studios ranging from the possibility of working from home to establishing kindergartens in the companies.

> I am working from home. Because on Tuesday I have no one to take care of my children and we do not have grandparents. I know that the company does not have a problem with this and I can work remotely. Even if something happened concerning my family, my boss would say 'Go; children are more important than work.' This is their approach, not the reverse. (Olgierd, character artist)

> I know that for everyone who needs this, during more severe crunch, the company organised special child care and kindergartens for them. And we had children here in the company, so it is not like children are always with their mothers. […]And for example, there were people who come to work because they need to supervise some parts of a project, so they spent one hour with their child and another hour on their project, but the children have constant care. (Mary, producer)

While these forms of support were approached by the interviewees enthusiastically, the result might not contribute to the achievement of a balance between work and family life but might instead lead to further encroachment of work into videogame practitioners' private lives. However, this form of support is available mostly in established videogame studios that could afford to provide additional help for their workforce (Triple-A companies), while for the interviewees from smaller studios this form of support was unattainable.

Furthermore, this facilitation of working from home or establishing kindergartens at workplaces does not adequately address the challenges of working in the videogame industry (also discussed in this thesis) as it does not include any changes in project management, payment for overtime work, social support or legal protection for workers. This approach to

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organising work in the videogame industry also further emphasises the industry's favourable approach to workers without family obligations. The male and female practitioners in this study encountered difficulties in reconciling their work with family lives. Nonetheless, the female practitioners expressed a greater fear of their future career development, family planning and security. Therefore, these approaches to organising work in the industry also emphasise the perspective that videogame work is gendered, and that women who decide to work in the industry need to sacrifice their family lives.

## 9.4 ABOUT THE FUTURE

The Polish videogame practitioners' approaches to their work presented tensions between their willingness to gain self-realisation through working in the industry and a recognition of the challenging working conditions in the industry and their exploitative character. In light of this dilemma, I asked the interviewees about their plans and possible career developments. In her research about new media workers, Gill (2009:41) noted that her interviewees had difficulties in imagining their future career trajectories and she argued that: 'the precariousness and insecurity experienced by many of our interviewees quite literally makes the future unthinkable for them'. The new media workers in Gill's research discussed their future in two polarised discourses which focused on their fantasies about spectacular successes or failures and quitting their current employment. In the accounts presented by my interviewees, I found similar predictions for their futures. However, I also found more 'realistic' approaches to their future careers. Some of the interviewees fantasised about opening their own videogame studios or working as freelancers in Thailand. However, the majority had more realistic justifications for their imagined futures and careers in videogame development.

Firstly, the majority of the interviewees, despite experiencing difficulties in their working lives and with an acknowledgement of the challenges of working in the videogame industry, planned to continue their careers. These ideas were connected to their emotional attachment to being employed in the videogame industry:

> It is unimaginable for me, working anywhere else [not in the industry] […] I would get bored in other jobs. (Bolek, software engineer)

> Yes, I am looking for a job now still in the industry. Despite everything I have been through, I am still into games. I want to continue my career in videogame development but not necessarily in Poland. (Paweł, QA)

Paweł's idea of working in the videogame industry but not in the Polish videogame industry was also readily acknowledged by other interviewees:

> Yes, I am thinking about this. If I got an offer from the USA or UK, I would probably go. (Ania, PR)

> In the future? I would like to work abroad in a videogame company. (Magda, 2D graphic designer)

Paul, who also took part in the job recruitment process in his previous videogame company, argued that for many young videogame practitioners, working in the Polish videogame industry is just seen as necessary experience in order to migrate to other countries:

> You have people who, during the recruitment process, would reply to you straight away to a question such as: 'Why do you want to work in our company?' 'Because in three years I would like to work in Western companies and I need to learn something [to gain work experience]'. (Paul, software engineer)

The interviewees approached the opportunity to work in other countries as a possibility to find better salaries and better working conditions. Interviewees used the term 'Western' (pl. *Zachód*) to discuss videogame companies located in Western Europe and North America. According to interviewees, videogame companies in such regions offer better working conditions and a possibility of participating in the development of more prestigious videogame projects. It is also worth acknowledging that the interviewees' willingness to find employment abroad, in 'Western' videogame companies, resembles a general trend of economic migration among Polish citizens (Hardy, 2009:126-129). However, the use of the term 'Western' by interviewees relates not only to the desirable geographical direction of their economic migration but also to their positive connotations with videogame industries in Western Europe and North America. These positive connotations include a possibility of finding more financially rewarding positions in the industry as discussed by Jurek and Bastian:

> People want to work abroad; they do not want to work in Poland because the salaries are too low and it is tough to find someone to work with us. Besides, I would like to work abroad myself. If I ever went to look for a job, the first thing I'd do would be to send my CV abroad and not to a Polish company. Even more so that now I have published games, I do not want to work in Poland. (Jurek, 2D graphic designer)

> This is a good question. I am thinking about this because there are many job offers [abroad]. I feel good [in Poland], and in comparison with Polish society at large, we

[videogame practitioners] have a decent life here. But in contrast to Western industries, we do not look that good. (Bastian, 3D graphic designer)

Those videogame practitioners with greater work experience revealed that they had been approached by international companies and were considering working abroad. They explained that Western European and North American companies have more experience in videogame development than Polish companies (see Chapter 4) and can help to facilitate their career and skills development. Furthermore, for below-the-line workers, working in Western European and North American testing studios (or developers) was associated with a higher salary. It could also be argued that the interviewees' ideas about 'Western' industries were forms of fantasies regarding their perceived better-or-worse working conditions. Therefore, interviewees' use of the term 'Western' perpetuated the division between less-developed countries of the previous Eastern bloc and developed countries of Western bloc.

This form of videogame practitioners' economic exodus to the West in search of career development and economic stability was not mentioned in reports provided by the industry. However, the interviewees' eagerness to work abroad could explain the workforce shortage in Poland, as Maryla (software engineer) observed: *"Game development is great, game development is all around the world, and I can always move somewhere else"*. This problem was also acknowledged by Paul, who argued that the huge rotation among videogame workers and the interest in working abroad contributes to the loss of well-trained practitioners in that: *"along with those leaving, we lose 'know how' about videogame development"*. The problem of 'knowledge drain' has also been mentioned in reports prepared by IGDA (2004:5;17-21) which emphasised the importance of improving working conditions in order to keep a skilled workforce in the industry. However, not all practitioners could leave Poland, but those who decided to stay defended their decisions through their difficulties in moving to a different country with their families. Therefore, the possibility of employment change and search for better working conditions was seen as a privilege of workers without family obligations.

Thirdly, the videogame practitioners said that they plan to quit working in the industry in the future as they would not be able to keep up with the intense pace of work that the industry demands until their retirement. Their argument not only strengthens the idea that an ideal working subject in the industry is a young person, but also highlights the drain of a skilled workforce from the industry due to burn out, challenging working conditions (such as work time or financial incentives), and difficulties in reconciling work with private lives.

I realised that I would not be able to cope with this pace of work for my whole life so when I am around 45-50 years old I will definitely need to think about something else,

maybe about my studio […] or maybe I will change industries entirely. (Adam, software engineer)

This is not the industry in which I would like to work until my retirement. I cannot imagine a 65 year old me developing a super dynamic game for teenagers […] It is a job for people with a young spirit, very energetic people, ready to deal with periods of intense work. […] I live with the thought that this is not something I will do until the end of my life. (Karol, scriptwriter)

Work in the videogame industry was not approached by the interviewees as a 'work for life' thing, despite their earlier declarations about their passion for videogames and their emotional attachment to their work (Chapters 5 and 8). They argued that because of the challenging working conditions in Poland (the lack of career progression; dissatisfaction with economic remuneration; casualisation of employment relations) they plan to leave Poland to work abroad or quit the industry in the future. These discussions presented much clearer plans for careers and imagined futures for workers in the videogame industry in Poland than those observed in Gill's (2009:40-42) or Scharff's studies (2018). They consist of elements of 'hopeful' imagination, for instance, and in interviews romanticise their approach to opening their own studio or finding employment with better conditions in Western companies (or well-known videogame corporations). However, they also presented a form of individual resistance to the challenging working conditions in Polish videogame companies. The workforce shortage in the Polish industry is presented in industry reports as a rapid development of the videogame industry, which might be true regarding micro-enterprises, but major companies, such as CI as discussed in Chapter 4, invest in outsourcing. However, the problem of the workforce shortage can also be associated with the difficulties in balancing work and private lives, overtime work, exploitation and the search for better work, and better worker protection in other countries. Videogame practitioners' decisions to work abroad or quit the industry also contribute to problems with the accumulation of knowledge about project management and videogame development in the industry.

The interviewees' chances of finding employment in companies abroad, or resigning, were the most common approaches to illustrate the practitioners' dissatisfaction with their working conditions. However, these approaches are primarily used by practitioners who have a competitive set of skills on the market and, therefore, more bargaining power which allowed them to find different employment. Their instances of 'resistance' to poor working conditions encompass both personal responsibility and individual solutions over the possibility of collective action. I am not using the term 'resistance' as suggested by proponents of the autonomist Marxist tradition, which associates 'resistance' with forms of workers' collective

mobilisation (Brophy and de Peuter, 2007). Similarly to previous research about the videogame industry and videogame practitioners (such as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Bulut, 2015a), I found no evidence of videogame practitioners' discussions about the possibility of establishing and joining unions. Furthermore, as presented in Chapters 4 and 8, the representatives of Polish videogame associations were not concerned with difficult working conditions in the industry (both Polish Games Association and Association of Producers and Distributors of Entertainment Software). A representative of Indie Games Poland (Maciej Miąsik) admitted that discussions about difficulties in reconciling working and private lives as well as poor working conditions are mainly informal and do not translate into the possibility of collective actions. Consequently, the term 'resistance' designates rather interviewees' personal struggles with work experiences and working conditions in the Polish videogame industry and the hope of continuing their careers in a more sustainable environment. Their attempts at personal 'resistance' do not encompass collective mobilisation of workers but individual struggles over their choices to find employment in other videogame companies or quitting the industry. Interviewees were aware of the shortage of skilled workers in the Polish videogame industry and local companies' difficulties in attracting qualified practitioners. Therefore, for Polish videogame companies the loss of qualified videogame practitioners has an impact on not only their game project schedules but also further skills development in their companies and their future.

## 9.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I discussed the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity through the interviewees' narratives about the stress and anxiety associated with the unpredictability of videogame production and working conditions in the industry. Some of the interviewees used entrepreneurial discourse to emphasise their capabilities in dealing with any emotional struggles presented in their work through, for instance, the recollections of their past experiences. However, not all the interviewees agreed with this discourse, as some questioned it by indicating that emotional attachment to projects results in self-exploitation. Therefore, through these two competing discourses, I observed that the interviewees' entrepreneurial subjectivity and approaches to the risk associated with videogame development were fragmented and negotiated.

The struggle to negotiate the entrepreneurial narrative was also visible in the interviewees' discussions about the difficulties in achieving a work/life balance in their careers. Polish videogame practitioners confirmed the findings of previous research about the workforce in

the videogame industry (Johnson, 2013; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009), in that the industry favours workers who are young, passionate about videogames and without family obligations.

Both the male and female interviewees experienced difficulties in reconciling their working lives with their family lives. However, the decision to start a family was approached differently depending on their sex. Through the discussion I had with Magda about her experience, I observed that women in the industry decide to postpone motherhood because of their fear of losing their jobs in the industry. Magda's argument further supplemented the discussion about women's underrepresentation in the videogame industry (see Chapter 7) by indicating that female practitioners may decide not to apply for jobs in the industry or even quit the industry due to difficulties in reconciling their work/life relations. Furthermore, Magda's hesitance to discuss this issue during our first interview highlights videogame practitioners' fears of losing their jobs because of discussing working conditions with third parties (see Chapter 3).

My male interviewees were also constrained by their gender roles and difficulties in establishing families. This was exemplified by Karol's fear of taking paternity leave. Nonetheless, videogame companies, in order to prevent videogame practitioners from quitting their jobs because of the problems of work/life balance, have introduced a more 'pro-family' approach as addressed by the interviewees, which encompasses the possibility of working from home or establishing kindergartens in the companies (during crunch). However, this form of support did not provide a viable, systematic solution for the challenging working conditions in the industry but rather contributed to further encroachment of work into personal lives.

Polish videogame companies experience difficulties in finding skilled workers due to videogame practitioners' abilities and decisions to find employment in Western companies or to quit the industry altogether. The last section of this chapter presented the interviewees' imagination of their futures and possible interviewees' responses to harsh working conditions. While some Polish videogame workers planned to continue their careers in the videogame industry, the majority were also interested in working for Western videogame companies. Their decision was motivated by the need for further career development (skilled workers) or for economic reasons (below-the-line workers). The interviewees' approaches are consistent with the overall trend among Polish citizens with regards to economic migration to Western countries (Hardy, 2009:126-129). However, the interviewees' willingness to work in Western companies can also present a form of an 'imaginary' future; as a form of never-ending hope labour in search of better working conditions. The interviewees' decision to migrate, or to quit the industry, can be read as a form of individual resistance towards the challenging working conditions in the Polish industry.

# CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

## 10.1 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This thesis investigated the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity in the context of creative work in a post-socialist country. I approached this investigation through the synthesis of theories from political economy of communication, creative labour and videogame production studies. In this thesis, I presented how Polish videogame practitioners adapted and negotiated the idea of entrepreneurial subjectivity through their local context and the context of videogame production. This thesis aimed to demonstrate that entrepreneurial subjectivity is fragmented, negotiated and non-deterministic by presenting workers' reflections on their work and competing discourses. The thesis was governed by three research questions, the answers to which I will articulate below.

### 10.1.1 CONSTRUCTION OF ENTREPRENEURIAL DISCOURSE ABOUT POST-SOCIALIST VIDEOGAME PRODUCTION

In this thesis, I argued that discourses about work in the Polish videogame industry were developed in relation to the industry's socio-historical development, the government's promotional initiatives and on-going precarisation of employment in the Polish labour market.

I explained that the discourse about the entrepreneurial qualities of the Polish videogame workforce was associated with the industry's origins during the time of the Polish People's Republic. This discourse emphasised the entrepreneurial ethos of Polish videogame practitioners through the acknowledgement of entrepreneurial values of the first videogame creators and distributors who operated in grey technology markets and distributed videogames informally. The narrative of their heroism was also presented in the media from journalistic, historical accounts to interviews with key figures in the Polish videogame industry. The presentation of entrepreneurial values on boundaries between formal and informal work is not limited to the videogame industry as has been discussed in relation to other media productions (see Lobato and Thomas, 2015:45-48). In the context of Polish videogame practitioners, the history of the Polish videogame industry's development during the time of communism, and the consequent different political economic system, needs to be acknowledged to understand the emergent discourses about informal economic activities and 'entrepreneurship'. After 1989, Polish citizens who operated outside the control of the communist state were presented as particularly entrepreneurial individuals or even as in opposition to the communist government. This particularly positive perspective on individuals who engage in informal economic

activities is associated with neoliberal policies introduced in the country and an emphasis on the triumph of individual entrepreneurship over the shortcomings of a centrally planned economy and the incompetency of the communist government.

I demonstrated that this discourse presented an oversimplification in terms of addressing the development of the Polish videogame industry (see also Filiciak, 2016). I suggested that this discourse did not acknowledge the complexity of the socio-economic situation in Poland in the 1980s and state support for the development of ICT industries in Poland. Furthermore, I observed that individuals who were able to make, sell or distribute videogames on the grey technology markets usually came from more affluent families (in terms of their access to education, resources and connections with Western countries). Therefore, this discourse presents an oversimplified perspective about the entrepreneurial beginnings of the first Polish videogame creators. However, as I argued in this thesis, the entrepreneurial discourse was strategically mobilised to present positive connotations with entrepreneurial values, neoliberal reforms and the 'fairness' of the free market. Furthermore, it is not to say that the situation of the Polish videogame market is somehow unique, as similar narratives about videogame industries, and broadly ICT industries, are visible in discussions about Western tech-industries (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996; Borsook, 2000).

Furthermore, I argued that the elements of this discourse are present in the Polish government's emphasis on the entrepreneurial potential of the videogame industry through which they have started promoting it as a new, innovative sector of the national economy. The instances of this celebratory discourse were visible in announcements made by the representatives of the Polish government (between 2012-2017), promotion of the Polish videogame industry inside and outside the country (such as through the 'Digital Dreamers' exhibition) and launching of public campaigns aimed at encouraging young people to join the videogame industry (such as programuj.gov.pl).

I observed that the propagation of the Polish videogame industry by the government resembled celebratory approaches, visible in the creative industries debates, which emphasise not only the creative industries' significant contribution to national economic development but also discuss the attractiveness of employment in the creative sector (McRobbie, 2016; Oakley, 2006; Garnham, 2005). I argued that the government's initiatives established in co-operation with the industry's representatives, such as the Polish Games Association, focused on preparing initiatives that essentially supported major videogame companies (such as grants for research and development) or were established to stimulate the entrepreneurial potential of start-ups (such as ARP Games, 2018).

Consequently, I argued that the work in the videogame industry was presented as intrinsically and financially attractive while disregarding challenging working conditions in the industry. I demonstrated that in the industry's prepared reports, the problems of the videogame workforce were mostly associated with a shortage of skilled workers and the lack of adequate preparation among aspiring videogame practitioners to work in the industry (see Bobrowski et al., 2015/2017). This lack of acknowledgement of problems with working conditions in the industry was also visible in my interviews conducted with the industry's representatives.

In this thesis, I demonstrated the importance of investigating work in the cultural industries with the acknowledgement of broader economic and socio-cultural changes in post-socialist countries. Economic and political reconstruction introduced in Poland resembles ongoing neoliberal reforms in Western countries (Koch, 2013; Kalleberg, 2009). In Poland, since the announcement of Balcerowicz's plan in 1991, which resulted in flexibilization of employment contracts and dismantling of the welfare state, consecutive governments have introduced a variety of reforms that contribute to the progressive precarisation of employment relations (see Buchner-Jeziorska, 2013; Hardy, 2009:115-126; Maciejewska and Mrozowicki, 2016). According to the industry-prepared reports, 75 per cent of videogame practitioners are hired on contracts that do not guarantee workers protection of the Labour Code (Bobrowski et al., 2017:72). In this thesis, I confirmed the prevalence of civil law contracts in the industry and its widespread use for both above- and below-the-line workers. In this thesis, I demonstrated that civil law contracts are used by videogame companies, both national and internationals based in Poland, to circumvent Labour Code regulations. Therefore, the ongoing reforms in the country contributed to the increasing shift of power relations from employers to employees and individualisation of risk associated with employment to workers' rights (Sennett, 1998; Beck, 2000).

This thesis revealed that on the contrary to the celebratory discourse presented by the Polish government and in the popular press, Polish videogame practitioners face not only problems with their insecure work contracts but also with long working hours, increased stress and anxiety, reconciling work with family lives, and persisting inequalities in the industry.

## 10.1.2 NEGOTIATING ENTREPRENEURIAL SUBJECTIVITY

Throughout this thesis, I argued that Polish videogame practitioners narrate their working lives through engagement with entrepreneurial discourses, from emphasising the importance of resilience, individual responsibility for one's career development and disavowal of structural factors. However, practitioners were not entirely subjected to this discourse as they also engaged in competing discourses by discussing their struggles, vulnerabilities and problems

in the industry. Furthermore, their narratives need to be understood within the specificity of the local economic and socio-cultural context such as normalisation of civil law contracts in Poland or addressing Polish culture as 'conservative'. In addition, the question of videogame practitioners' narration of their working lives should also be considered within the specificity of the industry especially in its emphasis on security measures and production surrounded by 'the culture of secrecy' (O'Donnell, 2014:147-149; 205-207).

I observed that some of the Polish videogame practitioners' narratives about their working lives confirm neo-Foucauldian readings of creative workers' construction of entrepreneurial subjectivities through an emphasis on the importance of self-branding, networking, resilience, and endurance of precarious working conditions to the point of self-exploitation (see also Gill, 2009; Scharff, 2018; Ross, 2003). Furthermore, elements of entrepreneurial subjectivity were also presented in individualised narratives visible in videogame practitioners' discussions about inequalities in the industry and their approaches to overcoming vulnerabilities. Consequently, I demonstrated that Polish videogame practitioners partially constructed a meritocratic narrative about work in the videogame industry which therefore obscured structural inequalities.

However, in this doctoral project, I also drew attention to the variety of responses and discourses presented by Polish videogame practitioners that do not comply with the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivities. These competing discourses, which emphasised practitioners' challenging working conditions, vulnerabilities and genuine satisfaction from performed work, reflect Taylor and Littleton's (2012:133) argument that governmentality-inspired approaches do not encompass the complexity of creative workers' experiences.

Videogame practitioners expressed clear awareness that the videogame companies exploit their emotional attachment to videogames and work in the industry. Therefore, not all interviewees agreed with entrepreneurial discourses that stress resilience and a strategic approach to the accumulation of experience by workers, as some argued that self-exploitation and sacrifice for the project are physically and mentally damaging. Furthermore, I explained that the disruption to the entrepreneurial subjectivities was also presented in interviewees' discussions about struggles to reconcile their work with private lives. While both interviewees with and without families experienced these difficulties, this thesis revealed that women and men experienced these struggles differently, although they were both construed by society's traditional perspective on gender roles. As I argued in this research, challenging working conditions in the industry resulted in interviewees' different approaches to planning their future careers in the industry. The majority of interviewees acknowledged that challenging working conditions made them consider leaving the Polish industry and possibly finding

employment in Western videogame companies. These examples of narratives of awareness of exploitation, acknowledgment of vulnerabilities, problems with reconciling work with personal life and planning a future outside the industry in Western videogame companies present a break from entrepreneurial discourse about work in the industry.

Furthermore, in this research, I also found genuine satisfaction from performed work presented by interviewees. Therefore it would be unwise to disregard the interviewees' emotional attachment of work, relatively greater work autonomy and pleasure from taking part in a creative process as pure disillusionment and subjectification to the objectives of post-industrial capitalist modes of production. Interviewees' understanding of their working lives needs to be positioned within the context of their previous working experiences. They were able to identify elements of their work that brought them self-fulfilment. They discussed the greater possibility of developing their skills than in other cultural industries; they enjoyed the comradery and sociality of the videogame industry. They formed long-lasting friendships in their work, and they enjoyed interactions, even if only mediated, with their games' fans. Undoubtedly, all of the attractive characteristics of work in the videogame industry can be discredited merely as a mode of exploitation employed by the industry to control and exploit workers. This is theoretical, based on a deterministic reading of neo-Foucauldian approaches, however; the explanation does not grasp nuances of working lives in the videogame industry, which in this research were discussed by interviewees from different occupational backgrounds, from independent game developers to testers in Triple-A companies.

In this thesis, I also demonstrated that the idea of entrepreneurial subjectivity was mediated by the economic and socio-cultural contexts of the industry's development and ongoing changes on the Polish labour market. From the perspective of the Polish labour market, I argued that since 1989 ongoing political and economic changes have contributed to widespread use of non-standard employment relations (such as civil law contracts). The reorganisation of the labour market in Poland reflects on the broader changes experienced in Western countries (see Koch, 2013). However, I argued that interviewees approached the widespread use of civil law contracts in the videogame industry as a normalised practice, as these types of contracts are widely used in the country at large. In addition interviewees addressed the conservativeness of Polish society in their discussions about Polish society's approach to videogames or in their discussions about gender inequalities.

Furthermore, I explained that videogame practitioners' approaches present a particular narrative about their working lives that needs to be considered from a methodological perspective. In this thesis, I signalled that interviewees' approaches to the presentation of their working lives can be limited by their fear of losing their jobs, restricted by signing non-

disclosure agreements and their acknowledgement of the small size of the industry in which 'everyone knows everyone' (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). I addressed this problem as an ethical challenge of this research in Chapter 3. However, the interviewees' awareness of their often unfavourable position in videogame production raises questions about their presentation during interviews. Consequently, interviewees' decisions to present their working lives through entrepreneurial narratives can be dictated by avoidance of any potential risk of losing their employment in the industry (Chapters 7, 8 and 9). This problem, as I argued throughout the thesis, is not limited to this study but has also been widely acknowledged by other researchers (see Ruggill et al., 2018:5). Therefore, the problem of access to the industry and interviewees is a methodological and ethical issue, which requires further academic attention.

Videogame practitioners' narratives and self-presentation in the industry should also be understood through the acknowledgement of the temporality of interviews. The interviews, while presenting an in-depth understanding of individual opinions/interpretations of their work, show some limitations in understanding the dynamic of career developments in the industry. In this thesis, I encountered situations where some of the interviewees, for instance, Robert (Chapter 5) or Magda (Chapters 8 and 9), decided to provide me with additional information about their work, which presented their reflections about working conditions in the industry and their career development. Their reflections present not only additional information but also provided insights into the evolution of their thinking about their work. This research experience prompts me to think about not only the limits of interviews as a research method in investigating creative work but also in a possible direction for future research. In future research, I argue that longitudinal studies, which will allow for re-interviewing videogame practitioners and following their career progress, will enrich research about the understanding of work in the industry.

### 10.1.3 NAVIGATING UNCERTAIN CAREERS IN THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

Polish videogame practitioners addressed the uncertainty of their careers through implementation of a variety of strategies, which enabled them to find and maintain employment in the industry. I argued that interviewees accepted the risk associated with jobs in the industry and engaged in entrepreneurial behaviour from relying on informal support networks and intense networking to an emphasis upon continually improving their employability (see also Ross, 2003; Gill, 2002/2011a; McRobbie, 1998/2016; Ursell, 2000).

The shift in responsibility for a person's conduct of life is characterised by increasing individualisation of risk associated with employment, which requires workers to become 'enterprising self' (Rose, 1992), 'venture labourers' (Neff, 2012) or 'choosing subjects' (Dunn,

2004). In the context of videogame production in Poland and socio-economic changes in Polish society as presented above, videogame practitioners used a variety of entrepreneurial strategies to find and develop their careers in the industry. I observed that interviewees used these strategies from different occupational backgrounds, including creative directors in Triple-A companies, freelance graphic designers and videogame testers.

In this thesis, I noted that Polish videogame practitioners rely on informal skills acquisition and informal networks to find and maintain their employment in the industry. Contrary to industry reports that emphasise egalitarian characteristics of work in the industry (see Bobrowski et al., 2017:81), interviewees discussed the importance of establishing informal support structures through networking, attending dedicated videogame events and the necessity of 'getting to know the right people' (Chapter 5). Interviewees also attributed the persistence of informality in the industry to the relatively small size of Polish videogame production, the high mobility of employees among videogame studios, and increased sociality in the industry.

I argued that this form of informal support (such as knowledge exchange, promotion and feedback) played an essential role for smaller videogame studios that struggled with achieving sustainability (Chapters 4 and 6). These relations, therefore, required interviewees' investment in networking, self-branding and maintaining social relations with the wider videogame developers' community. This form of co-operation should not just be considered as a form of 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001) as it can also be a form of community support. However, I also demonstrated that informal support networks also worked as a gate-keeping mechanism, which enables or restricts access to the Polish videogame industry regarding resources (such as knowledge exchange), support and jobs distribution (Chapters 5 and 6). Consequently, the prevalence of informality in the Polish videogame industry raises questions about exclusion of workers who do not have access to informal networks (due to, for instance, age, gender, race, social class or geographical location) and who cannot participate in the culture of increased sociality prevalent in the videogame industry (due to personality, family obligations) (see also discussions in Gill, 2011a; Gill, 2009; Nixon and Crewe, 2004).

Furthermore, this thesis also explored experiences of outsourced testers, approached in this thesis as 'below-the-line' workers who provide testing as a support service for local and international videogame companies (Chapters 4 and 5). This group of interviewees lacked specialised occupational skills and had limited possibility to access support networks. Therefore, interviewees from this occupational group decided to start their career in the industry from the lowest occupational position to accumulate necessary experience to find future employment in the industry. This form of work, along with other interviewees on

different occupational positions who worked in unpaid or underpaid positions to improve their chances for employability in the future, echoes the concept of hope labour (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). Their hope labour relates to the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity through its emphasis on investing in possible work opportunities, belief in the egalitarian nature of work in the industry and interviewees' hope in the temporality of their self-exploitation that in the future will allow them to secure employment in the industry.

In this thesis, I demonstrated that videogame practitioners experience insecure working conditions depending on a variety of factors, from their occupational positions and previous work experiences to educational backgrounds. Therefore, videogame practitioners approached differently, for instance, the normalisation of precarious work contracts in the industry. I argued that interviewees' approaches indicate the multiplicity of experiences of precarity, which require further investigation to reveal tensions and the possibility of solidarity among different occupational groups. While Polish videogame practitioners recognised the uncertainty of their working lives, they located the stability of their working lives in other elements of their work for instance, in their current project's length, in their employer's prestige, or in their educational background (possibility of finding alternative careers).

This personalised strategy for understanding one's working life instability was also demonstrated in interviewees' discussions about their future plans. I found that the majority of Polish videogame practitioners planned to quit the industry in the future because of challenging working conditions or they also planned to find employment in Western videogame industries. Consequently, I argued that interviewees use entrepreneurial strategies to find and maintain jobs in the industry. Their strategies also varied considerably in terms of their occupational positions, work experiences and skills as well as gender and age. Interviewees' entrepreneurial strategies did not assume staying in the industry but also encompassed possibilities of giving up their work or searching for work in other countries, with possibly better working conditions.

## 10.2 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

### 10.2.1 CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COMMUNICATION AND CREATIVE LABOUR STUDIES

The thesis findings contribute to the critical political economy of videogame industries by: 1) investigating the socio-historical development of the Polish videogame industry; 2) discussing

the industry's structure; and 3) presenting the Polish government with propositions of support for the industry.

Firstly, the findings of this doctoral research enrich academic knowledge about the socio-historical development of the videogame industry (Chapter 4). It not only explored the development of the Polish videogame cultures and sector through the development of grey technology markets and informal distribution channels but also presented it as a development of hybrid culture (Kraidy, 2005). I addressed the hybridity of Polish videogame culture through its economic encounters with Western countries and consequently as an interconnectedness of various cultural flows. This thesis demonstrated that the Polish videogame industry was developed through economic and cultural tensions. The first Polish videogame creators and distributors built their companies on these economic and cultural tensions by providing localised versions of Western games to play the role of intermediaries between Western and Eastern European markets.

Secondly, this research contributes to the understanding of the videogame industry's development outside of Western countries by investigating the contemporary structure of the Polish videogame industry (Chapter 4). Through this analysis, I discussed that the Polish videogame development segment is dominated by two major Triple-A companies, which are not only expanding their modes of operations to publishing, online distribution and e-sports but also play a crucial role as training grounds for the Polish videogame workforce. I also demonstrated that the publishing-distribution sector and service-support sector are dominated by foreign companies – not just well-known international videogame corporations (such as Sony, EA or Microsoft) but also Russian media corporations (1C). However, I also acknowledged that while the Polish videogame industry is expanding, in the majority it consists of micro-enterprises that struggle to achieve financial sustainability in the global videogame market. In Poland, this 'perpetual start-up' model of small videogame developers is further exemplified by limited resources accessible by Polish videogame practitioners such as knowledge about production, marketing and legal support or even access to translators. The need for these forms of support is also visible in a growing number of companies specialised in PR and marketing support for independent developers and legal assistance for companies and smaller, local publishers. Therefore, in this thesis, I revealed the instability and insecurity of the majority of local videogame developers.

Thirdly, this doctoral research presented the Polish government response to the expanding Polish videogame industry and its attempt to provide support for local videogame developers. My research rejected the optimistic narrative about the Polish videogame industry development by indicating not only the precarious working conditions of local videogame

practitioners but also the superficiality proposed by the government support for the industry. Furthermore, this research argued that the major Polish videogame company CD Projekt S.A. plays a crucial role in representing the industry in talks with the government. Moreover, this thesis revealed that videogame practitioners are highly sceptical about possible support for the industry from the government. These findings contribute to the growing body of research about governmental support and policy for the local videogame industries (Jin, 2010; Zackariasson and Wilson, 2012; Kerr, 2012).

This thesis provides an empirical and theoretical contribution to research on creative labour (including videogame production studies) by investigating it in the context of Central and Eastern Europe and investigating entrepreneurial subjectivity among videogame practitioners.

In terms of empirical contribution, this thesis considered the development of creative labour in the context of the post-socialist country. As such the thesis' findings enrich academic knowledge about creative labour outside a Western context (such as Curtin and Sanson, 2015; Szczepanik, 2013; Jin, 2010). In this doctoral research project, I acknowledged the importance of investigating creative workers and their approach to work as historically and geographically situated (see also Banks et al., 2013:6). Neoliberal reforms introduced in Poland have resulted in the increasing precarisation of working conditions and dismantling of social security, as in the case of other European countries (see Koch, 2013). However, as I demonstrated in my research, it does not mean that creative workers' approach to their employment will be unified as they need to be considered through socio-historical changes in the labour market, the country's provided support (or security) and the specificity of a given cultural production.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this thesis enriches understanding of the concept of entrepreneurial subjectivity among creative workers in the context of the post-socialist cultural industry. The concept of entrepreneurial subjectivity is understood through neo-Foucauldian approaches to creative work, which have been criticised for their deterministic perspective on creative labour (see Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Taylor and Littleton, 2012:133; Scharff, 2018:143). I addressed this criticism by focusing both on theoretical and methodological sensitivity in approaching videogame practitioners' understanding of their work experiences, which was necessary to 'avoid caricatures of either the cultural dupe or the rational maximizer of information or (economic) benefits, in order to develop a fuller notion of the creative worker as a subtly responsive and interpreting situated subject' (Banks et al., 2013:7).

In this thesis, I argued that videogame practitioners' recollections are not only grounded in the socio-historical development of the Polish industry and the state of Polish society but also through acknowledgement of the importance of competing discourses of entrepreneurial ethos

and their reflections on career development and work experiences. This theoretical sensitivity was also coherent with the chosen methodological stances (constructionist analysis), which presents an advantage in understanding interviewees' approaches as 'actors methodically build up their intersubjective realities in diverse, locally nuanced, and biographically informed terms' (Holstein, 2018:402). Therefore, this research supported the findings of Taylor and Littleton (2012) whereby governmentality-inspired theories neglect the nuances, complexity and fragmented characteristics of creative workers' subjective experiences.

Approaching entrepreneurial subjectivity as fragmented and negotiated is vital in the context of the post-socialist country. The construction of entrepreneurial subjectivity is linked to the rise of neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008; Brown, 2003). However, as I presented in this thesis, and as other scholars have argued, neoliberal subjects, and consequently entrepreneurial subjectivity, are characterised by fluidity and 'promiscuity' in their adaptation in different socio-cultural contexts. Thus, to understand creative workers' understanding of their working lives the local political and socio-economic contexts need to be taken into consideration. In this research, I also call for further investigation of negotiation, fragmentation and rejection of entrepreneurial subjectivities and in paying greater attention to creative workers' self-reflections about their work.

### 10.2.2 CONTRIBUTION TO STUDIES ABOUT VIDEOGAME PRODUCTION

This doctoral thesis provides both a theoretical and empirical contribution to studies about videogame production, and specifically to studies about videogame labour. In this thesis, I demonstrated that investigating videogame labour in different geographical locations is crucial for understanding the contemporary videogame industry. I also presented how local economic and socio-cultural contexts shape videogame practitioners' understandings of their work.

Firstly, this doctoral thesis provides a contribution to videogame production studies by investigating the experiences of videogame practitioners outside North America. Since 2012 there has been a growing interest in investigating the development of videogame industries and videogame cultures in different geographical regions and socio-cultural contexts (see Huntemann and Aslinger, 2013; Wolf, 2015; Jørgensen et al., 2017), including the CEE region (Švelch, 2010/2013; Šisler et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the majority of such research has not paid particular attention to the working lives of local videogame practitioners. Furthermore, this body of research tends to draw on an analysis of secondary sources (such as videogame magazines or online resources) while rarely discussing in-depth contemporary experiences of videogame practitioners (see Švelch, 2010/2013; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015). This thesis addresses this gap in research by drawing not only on an analysis of secondary sources but also on interviews with Polish videogame practitioners to understand their career development

and reflections on their work. The findings presented in this thesis contribute to the growing body of research about the development of national videogame industries (see also Jørgensen, 2017; Jørgensen et al., 2017) with a specific focus on labour market changes and the professional positions of workers. Therefore, this research's findings also provide comparative material for further research about videogame workers in the CEE region and other geographical locations.

Secondly, this research focuses primarily on exploring the subjective experiences of videogame work. Previously, research about videogame practitioners has been relatively scarce in comparison to studies about other creative workers (see Deuze et al., 2007:336). However, this gap in knowledge about the videogame development process and videogame workers has been slowly closing since 2014 and the appearance of ethnographic studies conducted in North American videogame development studios (such as Johnson, 2013; O'Donnell, 2014; Bulut, 2015a/2015b). The majority of these studies are invaluable in discussing the daily practices of videogame practitioners, bringing much-needed attention to the problems of the materiality of videogame production, explaining the complexity and collaborative dimensions of the videogame development process.

However, studies of videogame development studios rarely focus on the subjective experiences of videogame work and videogame practitioners operating outside of the videogame development studio environment. Therefore, this doctoral research enriches understandings of videogame production by investigating videogame practitioners' reflections on their work-related experiences, ranging from discussions of their career choices, paths into the industry, and pervasiveness of informality, to their endurance of precarious working conditions and struggles to reconcile working and private lives. In this thesis I have investigated a variety of working experiences, including practitioners from different occupational backgrounds and stages of their careers. My aim in this research project was to emphasise the importance of incorporating the perspectives of practitioners who are positioned outside videogame development studios (such as outsourced workers and freelancers), as such experiences are rarely acknowledged in industry reports (see Bobrowski et al., 2017) or in research about videogame production (with the exception of Kerr and Kelleher, 2015). In addition, the inclusion of various work-related experiences in the videogame industry emphasises the high mobility of practitioners in the videogame industry, fragmented career trajectories, and the variety of occupational experiences shared by my interviewees (see Chapter 3).

Ethical and methodological concerns also motivated the chosen approach to researching the working experiences of Polish videogame practitioners. The findings of this research

contribute to videogame production studies by engaging in a discussion about the institutional context of videogame production, researcher positionality in videogame production studies, and the pervasive 'culture of secrecy' in the industry (O'Donnell, 2014:205-207). Until recently, this aspect of videogame production studies has been largely under-explored, however, other scholars within this field acknowledge the ethical problems with interviewing videogame practitioners in their companies (see Jørgensen (2017:7) or with access to videogame practitioners (see Ruggill et al., 2018:5-9; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015). This issue was also raised by the interviewees in this study, who were afraid that they could lose their jobs because of their participation in this research. In addition, some interviewees also had problems in sharing their difficult work experiences (see Magda's quote in Chapter 9). This study, by emphasising such problems, indicates that this unequal power dynamic between videogame practitioners, companies and researchers requires further, in-depth debate in studies about videogame production.

Thirdly, in contrast to ethnographic studies conducted in videogame development studios, this thesis is underpinned by theories and concepts widely used in studies about creative labour (see Taylor and Littleton, 2012; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2018). This study validates the use of theories and concepts known from other creative labour research in the context of investigating videogame labour. The theoretical perspective approached in the present research, while frequently applied in the context of other cultural industries, is under-explored in previous research about videogame workers. The majority of research about videogame practitioners positions such experiences within the theoretical framework of autonomist Marxism (Kline et al., 2003; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Bulut 2015a/2015b). This thesis, however, draws on post-structuralist studies of creative labour (inspired by neo-Foucauldian approaches) to investigate the construction of Polish videogame practitioners' subjectivities. I have addressed the limitations of this theoretical framework by drawing on alternative theoretical approaches of creative labour (Taylor and Littleton, 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) and by discussing in my analysis how my interviewees accepted, rejected or negotiated their entrepreneurial discourses. Therefore, in this study videogame practitioners were not presented as '(…) dupes of a post-industrial system that exploits them' (O'Donnell, 2014:161), but neither did I approach them through a romanticised perspective in relation to their agency.

In order to address the tensions between videogame practitioners' agency and the variety of discourses about their work, this thesis has engaged with the concept of 'entrepreneurial subjectivity'. Such engagement with entrepreneurial discourses and entrepreneurial subjectivities was introduced not only from the socio-historical perspective of the Polish industry development (Chapter 4) but also through my interviewees' reflections on this

perspective as well as competing discourses (Chapters 5-9). In this thesis I discuss the tensions between claims of the meritocratic character of the industry and pervasiveness of informality; between the requirements of sociality and the exclusionary mechanisms of local occupational community; between my interviewees' acknowledgement of inequality and discrimination in the videogame industry and the emphasis on individual responsibility and resilience. Therefore, this thesis provides an in-depth analysis of Polish videogame practitioners' subjective experiences of work, which are complex, and sometimes contradictory, but stress the workers' on-going reflections on their working lives, career development and possible futures in the industry.

Finally, in this thesis I have introduced a discussion about 'entrepreneurial subjectivities' and persistent inequalities in the videogame industry following Gill's (2014/2007) ideas of 'unspeakable inequalities' and 'post-feminist sensibilities'. It is worth acknowledging that this study was not designed with a feminist perspective on videogame production in mind, and consequently I referred to the concept of 'post-feminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007) through its associations with constructions of entrepreneurial and neoliberal subjectivities (see Gill, 2007/2014/2017; Conor et al., 2015; Scharff, 2018). I also limit the scope of inquiry about inequalities in the videogame industry to gender inequality and discrimination, which were the most prominently discussed by my interviewees.

The investigation of a post-feminist sensibility among Polish videogame practitioners provides a contribution to studies about understanding gender inequalities in the videogame industries (Harvey and Fisher, 2015/2013; Kennedy, 2018). This perspective does not discuss women's under-representation in the industry by acknowledging their struggles with achieving a work-life balance but through exploring their attitudes and an understanding of their positions in the industry (see also Harvey and Fisher, 2015). In this thesis I discussed 'common sense' understandings and contradictory ideas about persistent gender inequalities presented by interviewees. I demonstrated that while the Polish videogame practitioners acknowledge gender inequalities and instances of discrimination in the industry, they also disavow structural causes of inequality and discrimination (see Chapter 7). Furthermore, the findings of this thesis contribute to discussions about gender and feminism in the videogame culture at large (see Jenson and de Castell, 2015/2008; Taylor et al., 2009; Humphreys, 2017). In this doctoral dissertation, I discussed Polish videogame practitioners' opinions about gender inequality in their workplaces, which on one hand emphasised individual responsibility, resilience and 'progressiveness' of the industry, while on the other hand, interviewees agreed with stereotypical differences between men and women workers in terms of their skills and work attitudes. Furthermore, I argued that interviewees' perspectives and the instances of post-feminist sensibility are understood within the context of conservative Polish culture, especially

influenced by the Catholic Church and its traditional perspectives on male and female roles in society.

In conclusion, this thesis provides an empirical and theoretical contribution to studies about videogame production. This research enriches academic understanding of subjective work experiences of videogame practitioners as it not only explores the working lives of videogame practitioners outside the North American context but also investigates constructions of 'entrepreneurial subjectivities' among Polish videogame practitioners.

## 10.3 RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the development of this research project, I present three further directions for research into the videogame industry and its workforce. These three recommendations encompass investigation of workforce unionisation, investigation of working experiences of below-the-line workers, and the study of social class inequality in the industry.

### 10.3.1 GAME WORKERS UNITE: UNIONS, ACTIVISM AND COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

The videogame industry, and more broadly new media industries, is known for workers' opposition toward unions (Milton, 2003; Robinson & McIlwee, 1989; Early & Wilson, 1986). This perspective has been challenged by increasingly open discussions about exploitative work practices in the videogame industry (Augustyniak, 2017; Gach, 2018), proposals of unionisation in the French videogame industry, a voice actors strike (Maiberg, 2017) and establishing 'Game Workers Unite' initiative during the Game Developers Conference in March 2018 (Game Workers Unite, 2018). The last initiative aims to operate internationally and it has opened new chapters in the USA, Canada, UK, Germany and Brazil. The emergence of these initiatives presents videogame practitioners' willingness to join organised actions and resist precarious working conditions in the industry. However, as these initiatives are still in their early stages of development, they require a systematic investigation to assess their scope of operation and possibility of success.

This research inquiry should encompass not only exploration of the possibility of unionisations but also various forms of activism and collective mobilisation (see discussion in de Peuter and Cohen, 2015). The investigation of multiple kinds of activism is necessary in acknowledging heterogeneity of working experiences, including videogame workers who cannot join traditional unions because of their forms of employment such as freelancers, independent game developers or interns. Therefore, to acknowledge the variety of work experiences, including the prevalence of non-standard employment relations in the industry, the future

research could also explore the possibility of collective mobilisations from grassroots groups, virtual campaigns or alliances with labour movements (de Peuter and Cohen, 2015:306; Eidelson, 2013). Furthermore, the investigation of various challenges of work in the industry and possible policy solutions should also encompass a dialogue with workers themselves – this form of policy from below will enrich understanding of work in videogame production from the perspective of workers and not companies, which often in policy discussions refer to shortage of skilled workforce or lack of regulatory incentives for ICT companies (see Bobrowski et al., 2017).

The investigation of resistance and mobilisation in the videogame industry should also explore what Brophy et al. (2016:316) addressed as 'practices of autonomous communication', understood as an infrastructure and resources built to raise awareness about precarious working conditions in cultural industries. Further research about these practices, which include *inter alia* the use of social media, to spread counter-publicity about working conditions and production of other materials not only to raise awareness but also to build solidarity among workers (Brophy et al., 2016:319), will contribute to an understanding of workers' struggles, reactions to resistance and points of tension between workers, their employees and professional organisations. Furthermore, this investigation will explore the possibility of international solidarity among workers.

Research into unionisation and collective activism in the videogame industry will also allow a contribution to the theoretical discussion about the subjective experience of creative labour. This inquiry will have a potential to question the idea of creative workers as an entrepreneur by focusing on instances of struggles and tensions between workers and their working conditions (de Peuter and Cohen, 2015:309). In addition, the investigation of unions and activism will advance the discussion about the possibility of 'good work' in cultural industries by engaging with normative solutions for challenging the working conditions of creative labourers (Oakley, 2014; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011:219).

## 10.3.2 EXPLORING THE LIVES OF 'BELOW-THE-LINE' WORKERS

Previous research about videogame workforce has tended to focus on the working lives of videogame developers (see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Johnson, 2013; O'Donnell, 2014), while the working lives of 'below-the-line' workers (Mayer, 2011), such as videogame testers, community managers, translators, workers supporting software porting and workers who are engaged in hardware production, are rarely explored (except Bulut, 2015b; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; Huntemann, 2013). An investigation of the working lives of 'below-the-line' workers who provide support for videogame developers and videogame publishers from

creative work, middleware (such as development tools) to administrative/community services, will contribute not only to the growing body of research about the videogame industry workforce but also discuss further expansion of global videogame industry networks.

The work of 'below-the-line' workers in the industry presents the expansion of the industry, which also includes the creation of new occupations. The investigation of their working conditions also allows demonstration of the continuum of precarity among videogame workers, as the work of videogame developers in 'core' videogame development regions is widely supported by the exploited workforce of hardware producers in China, outsourced testers in Poland, and community managers in Ireland.

Consequently, the emphasis on supporting videogame industry occupations also draws attention to the geographical diversity and expansion of international videogame corporations and the increasing popularity of outsourcing in the videogame industry. This form of industry analysis is under-researched in videogame production but widely acknowledged and explored in research inquiries about television and film production (see for instance Miller et al., 2001). Research into the working lives of 'below-the-line' workers and the industry's production networks further emphasises the globalised character of the videogame industry but also the importance of local workforce cost, policy, the scope of unionisation and access to the talent pool.

### 10.3.3 SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

An increasing number of studies and reports about work in cultural industries indicates persistent inequalities among the creative workforce despite the presentation of these industries as particularly egalitarian (Gill, 2002:1; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012; Randle et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2016). The growing body of research about social inequalities in cultural industries indicates that these industries are dominated by 'white, middle-class men' (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012:1311). Furthermore, scholars argued that in the studies about employment in creative industries, the most visible inequalities explored are gender and ethnicity, while others such as sexuality, disability, age and social class remain under-explored (see Randle, 2015:331; Oakley and O'Brien, 2015).

While there is an urgent need to investigate social class inequalities in cultural industries, these studies present some challenges. Firstly, while connections between 'social class' and 'employment' are widely used and empirically tested (Scott, 2002), discussing social class inequalities through employment-derived measures presents some shortcomings, for example, in the focus on economics rather than on incorporating other cultural and social components

that define one's social class position (see discussion in Crompton, 2010). To address this limitation, some scholars who investigate work in cultural industries use a Bourdieusian analysis (see Randle et al., 2014). Secondly, reliable data and statistics about demographics and distribution of social inequalities are difficult to access (see discussion about the UK in Oakley and O'Brien, 2015:20-22).

In the literature about videogame industries, researchers often confirm that predominantly white men work in these workplaces (see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009). There has also been a growing research interest into investigating inequalities in the videogame industry such as gender inequalities (see Prescott and Bogg, 2011a/2011b/2013; Harvey and Fisher, 2013) and race and ethnicity (Srauy, 2017). Nonetheless, there is a growing need to discuss further inequalities and their intentionality in the videogame industry, especially regarding social class, which is rarely acknowledged in studies about the videogame workforce (and videogame players; see Crawford, 2012).

The meritocratic discourse about work in tech-related industries, including the videogame industry, is also presented within narratives about 'heroic' individuals, their entrepreneurial ethos and resilience. However, there is an urgent need to assess social class inequalities in the videogame industry not only in terms of workforce composition but also in investigating students' career pathways into the industry. Previous studies about social class and creative education have revealed persistence on discourse about meritocracy in HE and high schools, the prevalence of unpaid internships, which put students from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds at an advantage, and the importance of social capital, understood as a network of connections which facilitates access to the industry (Banks and Oakley, 2015). These elements play a crucial role to investigate, especially in the growing interest in establishing videogame-related courses in high schools and at HE level (Nichols, 2014).

## 10.4 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

'A fighting Poland: The birth and growth of Eastern Europe's hottest game industry' (Crewley, 2014); 'Polish Gaming Sector an International Hit' (Shah, 2018); 'The story behind Poland's rise to become an indie game powerhouse success story' (Fontan, 2018) – these are just a few article titles that emphasised the uniqueness, strength and rapid development of the videogame industry in Poland. However, in this growing interest in national videogame development, challenges encountered by Polish videogame practitioners are rarely acknowledged. In this thesis, I have demonstrated not only the complexities of socio-cultural construction of discourse about work in the Polish videogame industry but also explored working lives and career biographies of both 'below-the-line' and 'above-the-line' workers, from outsourced

testers to creative directors. This thesis aimed to enrich scholarly understandings of the subjective experience of work in the videogame industry whereby videogame practitioners are not just young people disillusioned by promises of work in 'cool' creative industries, but consist of a variety of practitioners with diverse skills, educational backgrounds, previous work experiences, motivations to join and reasons to leave the industry.

At the time of writing-up my concluding thoughts, the industry's attention and players' eyes are directed to Los Angeles, to an ongoing E3 conference in which major videogame companies present and announce their long-awaited projects. Among them there are game projects made by Polish developers, from CD Projekt Red's *Cyberpunk 2077* (to be announced) and Techland's *Dying Light 2* (2019) to independent games like 11 bit studios' *Children of Morta* (2018).

However, this E3 conference is different to previous ones, as newly established the Game Workers Unite (2018) initiative spreads awareness of exploitative working conditions in the industry and draws public attention to the fact that videogame work is not just a 'dream job' but work that should be fairly compensated without exploitation of people's emotional attachment to work. It is still too early to discuss the potential impact of such initiatives. However, it is a step in the right direction in acknowledging the problems of working conditions in the industry and attempting workers' collective mobilisation. It is possible that in the future, Polish videogame associations, along with videogame practitioners, will be more willing to discuss working conditions in the industry and find better solutions for an organisation of videogame production. Even if nowadays this scenario seems unlikely, the Polish videogame industry will need to face this problem, as they can no longer pretend that the lack of workforce is just a result of the industry's expansion – they also need to acknowledge that Polish practitioners migrate to other countries in search of better career opportunities.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES (VIDEOGAME PRACTITIONERS)

| No. | Name | Age | Gender | Occupation (employment history) | Type of production |
|-----|------|-----|--------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. | Ola | 20s | F | QA | Triple-A studio Outsourcing |
| 2. | Robert | 20s | M | junior game designer QA | Outsourcing Independent studio |
| 3. | Artur | 20s | M | QA | Outsourcing |
| 4. | Marcin | 20s | M | QA | Outsourcing |
| 5. | Jarek | 20s | M | QA independent developer | Outsourcing |
| 6. | Pawel | 30s | M | QA | Outsourcing |
| 7. | Marlena | 30s | F | QA | Triple-A studio |
| 8. | Waldek | 30s | M | QA | Outsourcing |
| 9. | Maciej | 40s | M | creative director game designer software engineer | Triple-A studio Independent studio |
| 10. | Kasia | 20s | F | QA | Outsourcing |
| 11. | Antoni | 20s | M | QA | Outsourcing Triple-A studio |
| 12. | Ania | 30s | F | PR | Triple-A studio |

| | | | | | Independent studio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13. | Konrad | 30s | M | game designer | Independent studio |
| 14. | Patryk | 30s | M | QA | Outsourcing<br><br>Triple-A studio |
| 15. | Tom | 40s | M | game designer<br><br>PR<br><br>community manager | independent studio<br><br>Triple-A studio |
| 16. | Natalia | 20s | F | concept artist | Independent studio<br><br>Triple-A studio |
| 17. | Mary | 40s | F | producer | Triple-A studio |
| 18. | Pola | 30s | F | game designer<br><br>project manager<br><br>community manager | Independent studio<br><br>Triple-A studio |
| 19. | Bastian | 40s | M | 3D graphic designer | Triple-A studio<br><br>Freelance |
| 20. | Tadeusz | 40s | M | producer | Triple-A studio |
| 21. | Damian | 30s | M | animator | Triple-A studio |
| 22. | Adam | 30s | M | software engineer | Triple-A studio |
| 23. | Amelia | 20s | F | game designer<br><br>software engineer | Independent studio |
| 24. | Janusz | 20s | M | scriptwriter | Independent studio (owner) |
| 25. | Jurek | 30s | M | 2D graphic designer | Independent studio |
| 26. | Karolina | 30s | F | 3D graphic designer | Independent studio (owner)<br><br>Triple-A studio |
| 27. | Magda | 20s | F | 2D graphic designer | Independent studio |

| | | | | | Freelance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 28. | Piotr | 20s | M | game designer | Independent studio |
| 29. | Rafał | 30s | M | software engineer | Independent studio (co-founder) |
| 30. | Karol | 30s | M | scriptwriter | Triple-A studio |
| 31. | Maryla | 30s | F | software engineer<br><br>game designer | Triple-A studio<br><br>Independent studio |
| 32. | Paul | 40s | M | software engineer | Triple-A studio<br><br>Independent studio (owner)<br><br>Freelance |
| 33. | Błażej | 20s | M | software engineer | Triple-A studio |
| 34. | Michał | 30s | M | character artist | Triple-A studio<br><br>Freelance |
| 35. | Olgierd | 40s | M | character artist | Independent studio |
| 36. | Mariusz | 30s | M | software engineer | Independent studio |
| 37. | Mikołaj | 30s | M | software engineer | Independent studio (owner) |
| 38. | Asia | 30s | F | 2D graphic designer | Independent studio<br><br>Freelance |
| 39. | Wojtek | 40s | M | PR | Independent studio |
| 40. | Joanna | 30s | F | PR | Triple-A studio |
| 41. | Bolek | 30s | M | software engineer<br><br>game designer | Triple-A studio |

## APPENDIX 2: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES (THE POLISH VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY REPRESENTATIVES)

| Name | Organisation | Established in |
|---|---|---|
| Stanisław Just | Polish Games Association | 2015 |
| Dr Dominka Urbańska-Galanciak | SPiDOR (Association of Producers and Distributors of Entertainment Software) | 2008 |
| Maciej Miąsik | Indie Games Polska Foundation | 2015 |

# APPENDIX 3: INFORMATION SHEET

School of Media and Communication
University of Leeds

**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

**Information Sheet:** A Qualitative Inquiry about the Construction of Polish Videogame Practitioners' Occupational Identities

### Project Overview

You are being invited to take part in a research project about the labour in the Polish videogame industry. You have been chosen as a person who is involved in the industry and who has significant work experience. The project's purpose is to investigate the occupational identities of Polish videogame practitioners. I am interested in your work experience and biography as well as your opinions about the Polish videogame industry. This research is being conducted as a part of my PhD project and has been approved by the University of Leeds ethical review board. I have also attended ethical and research training sessions provided by the University of Leeds to ensure that this research will be conducted according to the highest ethical standards. If you want to know more about me you can find my profile on the university's website: http://media.leeds.ac.uk/people/anna-ozimek/.

Please take you time to think through your participation in this project, do not hesitate to contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information (please find my contact details at the end of this document). If you decide that you do not want to take part in this research you can reject my invitation without any consequence. If you decide that you are interested in this study – we will schedule an interview that will last between 40 minutes to 1 hour, to talk about your work in the videogame industry. I will also like to record our interview so that I will be able to produce a transcription from our conversation. You will have the chance to obtain a copy of the transcription so you can make additional comments about our conversation. At the beginning of the interview you will be asked to sign a consent form which will include information about ethical issues and your rights as an interviewee. You can withdraw from this research at any point during the conducting of this research. However, your withdrawal will be impossible after the submission of my thesis as after this date I will destroy all audio recordings. In this research your responses will be anonymised so you will not be identified in the final report nor in other forms of publications such as journal articles of conference presentations unless you express your willingness to be identified in the final report**.** If you are interested in this study, you can find more details below:

| Project title | Document type | Version # | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| A Qualitative Inquiry about the Construction of Polish Videogame Practitioners' Occupational Identities | Information Sheet | 1 | 14/07/15 |

1

**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

### 1. What is the project's purpose?

The project's purpose is to investigate the occupational identities of videogame practitioners. I am interested in your work experience and biography as well as in your opinions about working conditions and the Polish videogame industry. This research is being conducted as a part of my PhD project, therefore your responses will be included in my dissertation and possibly other publications (such as conference presentations, journal articles, book chapters) with my authorship.

### 2. Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you decide to take part. If you do decide to participate you will be given this information sheet to keep and we will schedule a meeting to conduct an interview. You will also be asked to sign a consent form, which I can email to you on request. You can withdraw from the study at any time during the conducting of this research – understood as until the date of my thesis submission. You do not have to give a reason and you can withdraw without consequence.

### 3. What do I have to do?

You will be asked to give one interview at an agreed time and date. The location of the interview will be mutually agreed upon. The interview will last between 40 minutes to 1 hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about your work background (e.g. your current job position) and about your career in the industry (e.g. your work biography), your opinions about the Polish videogame industry and its structure.

I will want to record an interview on an audio recorder so I will be able to produce a transcript of the interview. However, no other use will be made of audio recordings without your written permission, and no one outside me will be allowed access to the original recordings. The recorded files will be securely uploaded to the University of Leeds' website. The audio recordings will be destroyed after the end of this research (upon the submission of my thesis). The copy of transcription will be available on demand so you will be able to reflect on your responses and correct potential mistakes. The transcription of the interview will be sent to you via an encrypted email.

### 4. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no special benefits intended to the participant for taking part in the project.

| Project title | Document type | Version # | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| A Qualitative Inquiry about the Construction of Polish Videogame Practitioners' Occupational Identities | Information Sheet | 1 | 14/07/15 |

2

### 5. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Information collected from you will be kept confidential unless you indicate that you want to be publicly identified.

### 6. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The final results of the research will be published in my PhD thesis, journal articles and other publications authored by me (Anna Ozimek). If you need further information about this research please contact me (you can find my contact details presented below).

### 7. Contact details:

**Anna Ozimek, PhD student, School of Media and Communication, The Faculty of Performance, Visual Arts and Communication, The University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, csamo@leeds.ac.uk, +48 501084012, +44 75108652**

| Project title | Document type | Version # | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| A Qualitative Inquiry about the Construction of Polish Videogame Practitioners' Occupational Identities | Information Sheet | 1 | 14/07/15 |

3

## APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORM

School of Media and Communication
University of Leeds

**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

## CONSENT FORM

A Qualitative Inquiry about the Construction of Polish Videogame Practitioners'

Occupational Identities

|  | Add your initials next to the statement if you agree |
|---|---|
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 14.07.2015 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. | |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the conducting of interview and after it. I can withdraw without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. | |
| In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions or to take part in any particular activity or activities, I am free to decline. | |
| I give permission for the researcher (Anna Ozimek) to have access to my responses. I understand that I will not be identified or identifiable in the published writing that results from the research unless I give written permission to that effect. | |
| I agree to take part in the above research project and for the data collected from me to be used in future research. I will inform the principal investigator (details on the Information sheet) if my contact details change. | |
| I understand that the data collected for the purpose of this research will be further used for publications with Anna Ozimek's authorship. These forms may include: conference presentations, journal articles or book chapters. | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Name of participant | |
| Participant's signature | |
| Date | |
| Name of lead researcher | Anna Ozimek |
| Signature | |
| Date* | |

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

| Project title | Document type | Version # | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| A Qualitative Inquiry about the Construction of Polish Videogame Practitioners' Occupational Identities | Consent Form | 1 | 14/07/15 |