ABSTRACT

JACKSON, JOSHUA. Passion Traps: Cruel Optimism in Videogame Production (Under the direction of Dr. Helen Burgess).

Working conditions are precarious in videogame production. Issues like crunch, or extended periods of 60+ hour work weeks, opaque meritocratic advancement that favors certain bodies over others, and workplace culture fits that act as self-policing measures all characterize the types of precarity that videogame production workers face. Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, from the book by the same name, provides a framework by which we can examine attachment, precarity, and most importantly how passion is operationalized in the pursuit of capital generation.

Cruel optimism alone is not a productive way of talking about precarity. Without an understanding of how individuals within videogame production experience precarity, define what precarity is and is not, think about passion, and understand their role in perpetuating and usurping the current state of production, movement towards industry-wide reform cannot happen in a sustainable way. I used tools from feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography to approach this project. Kamila Visweswaran's work from *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Alison Griffith and Dorothy Smith's *Mothering for Schooling*, and Dorothy Smith's *Institutional Ethnography* constitute the main texts from which I drew methodological elements as a way of establishing how I approached interviews and knowledge collection, and why a case study was important for exploring the contours of my informants' experiences.

My informants spoke about their experiences with unions, and how, for some, not seeing themselves represented in union discourse made them question the necessity for collective action. Each informant has their own attachments and thoughts about crunch, but all agree that it must stop if videogame production is to become sustainable. Informants also spoke about workplace interactions and cultures and how largely positive their experiences with coworkers were, while they all had stories of power clashes with management that seemed distant and out of the loop. Finally, informants spoke about they defined precarity for themselves. The word 'precarity' became understood as a noun, a verb, and an adjective for my informants.

Within each of my informants' experiences, I was able to employ feminist and institutional ethnography to understand and explain how power flowed through those institutions, where it coagulated, and what bodies it favored over others. Issues such as sexism, transphobia, minimizing workers' affective states because the product was more important, and blatant use of privilege to minimize other bodies were revealed through feminist ethnographic readings of situations. Issues such as how institutional discourse, circuity, and power-play allow for power within organizations to coalesce out of the reach of certain bodies, and coalesce in ways that seek to first code and then isolate certain behavior as harmful to production were revealed through institutional ethnographic readings of situations.

This project relies on both theoretical work and qualitative work to help contour what precarities are manifesting in videogame production for my informants and what those precarities look like. By starting out with an understanding of the relationship between cruel optimism, passion, and precarity, I open the floor for ethnographic work to be done with informants that help me to outline and more responsible contour what *types* of situations they are facing that they define as precarity. Within those ethnographic details, I can then piece together core parts of precarity to move towards a theorization of *multiple* component parts of precarity.

This move allows for a fuller vocabulary and more specificity when discussing issues of precarity such as trauma, vulnerability, and risk (re)distribution.

In lieu of providing a path forward that is readily applicable to videogame production in its current state, I produced a physical critical-making project which has three iterations called *Passion Traps*. Each iteration offers a physical, embodied, and interactable way of displaying the knowledges and experiences of my informants.

Before a plan of action can be put forth that institutions like Communication Workers of America and Game Workers Unite are keen to push, it is important to acknowledge that, without granular understandings of workplaces and the bodies within them, unionization and collective action on a large scale cannot happen. I have created the groundwork for further exploration, definitional work, and formative steps to be taken towards a radically soft ethic of care within work talking about videogame production, and the next steps are to keep chipping away at the inherent service to capital that videogame production favors instead of the bodies that are working in it.

Passion Traps: Cruel Optimism in Videogame Production

By
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DEDICATION

To my family, both here and resting. I finally did it but never without y'all.

BIOGRAPHY

Joshua Jackson (MA DePaul University, 2016; Ph.D. North Carolina State University, 2020) is a media studies scholar who focuses on gender and labour issues within videogame production.

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Roadmapping

Popular press coverage has laid bare what types of precarity videogame production workers face in the industry. Issues like crunch[1], or extended periods of 60+ hour work weeks, opaque meritocratic advancement that favors certain people over others, and workplace culture fits that act as self-policing measures all characterize the types of precarity that videogame production workers face. 2018 work from Jason Schrier put forth a call for production workers to unionize alongside a 2019 New York Times piece that exposed the backbreaking labour that goes into making a videogame. James Batchelor's work for gameindustry.biz thoughtfully considerers what the stakes are regarding the controversy around *Red Dead Redemption II*'s 100+ hour work weeks. Rebekah Valentine's work examines the disarray that the Electronic Software Association (ESA) is in regarding how best to divorce themselves of a past that valorized overwork and burnout. In the past, videogame production has leveraged narratives such as of 'gaming while you work', 'doing what you're passionate about', and 'working with like-minded people in like-minded environments.' Ergin Bulut in "Glamor Above, Precarity Below" references images of "playing games at work or playing soccer in the fields of Electronic Arts" (197), which continue to be popular depictions of what it is like to work in videogame production. However, there are rather few examples that highlight the precarity that has taken place behind the scenes of videogame production. Until very recently, the perennial popular culture example of toxic working conditions in videogame production was Mike Capps' 2008 IGDA Leadership Forum comments. He stated that 60 hour work weeks were an expectation at the videogame production company Epic, and that Epic would not hire (or would soon after hiring, fire) workers who were not committed to spending this kind of time working on the games that they were making. Other exposés regarding precarity have fleshed out the contours of this problem. Ian William's 2013 Jacobin piece titled "You Can Sleep Here All Night" outlined how the videogame production industry subsists on exploitation of passion as a means of producing games with such quick turnaround. The "Rockstar Spouse" blog and "EA Spouse"

[1] For a substantial discussion on what crunch is in a general sense, how it operates, and the devious ways that crunch is enacted and perpetuated in videogame production, see: "You Can Sleep Here All Night" by Ian Williams (2013), "The Recruitment of Passion and Community in the Service of Capital" by Aphra Kerr and John Kelleher (2015), and "The Perils of Project-Based Work" by Amanda Pettica-Harris, Johanna Weststar, and Steve McKenna. Each of these pieces discusses and defines crunch as 'overwork' with extra situational and labour-related trappings.

blog are two early examples of people within the industry talking about what types of precarity they face and people they are close to face. Both of these blog post came from spouses of videogame production workers. These blogs recount, for a non-videogame production audience, the tumult that production workers endure, and the toll it takes on their families. The questions remain, though: how do we keep account of these instances? How do we engage with them from a scholarly standpoint and a cultural standpoint? How do we come to understand the labour processes that occur in videogame production specifically, and media production widely that are producing the forms of precarity that this project will discuss? What can we do to address these concerns as scholars, as activists, and as consumers? How can we quantify immaterial labour against "hard" or "material" labour jobs when we talk about unionization and fair working rights? How can we understand the situated, embodied experiences of digital media production workers in such a way that it becomes real to us so their struggle doesn't remain abstracted? These questions characterize this project's main operating question: what does precarity look like in videogame production, and how does it function?

For the purposes of this project, I am borrowing definitional work around what 'precarity' manifests as or has been identified as in anthropology, science and technology studies, and English Language Teaching (ELT). Through a triangulation of culture, technology, and semiotic theory, it becomes clear how best to prepare for initial definitional work around what precarity looks like in videogame production which will be done in **Multifaceted Manifestations**. This definition will not stay static, though. Precarity is multifaceted and presents different based on circumstances. Paul Walsh in "Precarity" defines precarity in ELT as a "condition resulting from an employment regime in which deregulated labour markets give rise to various types of insecure work; in which social protections are minimized; and in which the ability to plan a coherent future is compromised" (459). Walsh locates precarity in ELT as consisting of devaluation of labour of those teaching English in non-English speaking countries, and research and teaching material for ELT increasingly becoming beholden to capital generation and marketing imperatives (460).Clara Han in "Precarity, Precariousness, and Vulnerability" locates precarity in a similar way as Walsh in that precarity is labour- and capital-based, but Han draws upon Marx & Engels to understand precarity through a socioeconomic working lens: as states have withdrawn welfare and undergone austerity measures, encouraged the casualization of labour, and created informal and 'gig' economies, there has coalesced a digital *lumpenproletariat*, or un-anchored lower/unskilled class that is forced into intermittent labour to survive. As labour regimes have become more flexible, assaults on the 'welfare state' continues, and the global economy becomes increasingly intertwined with the informational economy, Han locates precarity as meaning "those who would have expected long-term stable employment and the benefits of a welfare state [who today], instead, live through intermittent labour while thwarted in their aspirations for a "good life" (Berlant 2011)" (335). Finally, Phoebe Moore in *The Quantified Self in Precarity* locates precarity, again, in terms of capital, but more as a bodily attribution: "[precarity] is the purest form of alienation where the worker loses all personal association with the labor she performs. She is disposed and location-less in her working life and all value is extracted from her in every aspect of life" (79). Moore locates precarity something closer to what Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* characterizes the namesake of the book as: a search for the "good life", or stable, fulfilling work and grounded social attachments. Moore characterizes labour in an ever-growing informational economy as consisting of "constantly chasing the next 'gig'" (79), which renders spatial and temporal consistency in life out of reach of workers. Through these three pieces of definitional work in

other fields, the idea of what *facilitates* precarity becomes easier to talk about, but the act of pinpointing what precarity *is* is still out of reach. We can ascertain that precarity has roots in, and is exacerbated by, neoliberalism, casualization of labour, and the strip-mining of worker protections and worker welfare, and we can ascertain that there are certain discursive situations in which these ingredients must be present for these attributions to be attached to a person. The informational economy, and derivative forms of 'information' labour such as immaterial labour provides the circumstances necessary for precarity to manifest.

Mauricio Lazzarato in "Immaterial Labor" describes specifically non-physical work that produces knowledge capital to the benefit *of* capitalism. Immaterial labour is often unremunerated and thought of as 'just another job responsibility' in much of the tech sector, and especially in media production. Systems theory theorists Judith Innes and David Booher in "Consensus Building and Complex Adaptive Systems" and its derivative Communication Constitution of Organization (CCO), taken from *The Emergent Organization* by James Taylor and Elizabeth Van Every, both invite a positivist approach to dealing with interorganizational problems such as precarity by decentering the individual(s) experiencing precarity and instead inviting theorizing and action based on strategic alliance with other organizations. This means that, in lieu of situated protections for workers from systemic, organizational violence, organizations seek to align themselves with 'initiatives' or 'stances' against hot-button issues. This public-facing stance against, for example, overwork, garners positive public sentiment, which allows for capital generation to continue uninterrupted while also allowing organizations to continue allowing abuse to propagate

What these and similar theoretical approaches elide, are the people that the precarity is affecting, and how those people came to be entangled in precarity in the first place. Within videogame production, more so than most other media production sectors, 'passion' or 'being a gamer' or 'being hardcore' are traits that are fetishized in job ad material, interview material, and workplace culture. Cecilia D'Anastasio in "Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games" provides a succinct example of this by talking about Riot Games' work culture. The hiring process described by her informants seemed contingent on them being 'hardcore gamers:' to the point that one informant told a story about a hiring manager blatantly harassing her about her characters' gear and raid progression in *World of Warcraft* to make her prove she was 'hardcore' enough to work there. Aphra Kerr and John Kelleher in "The Recruitment of Passion and Community in the Service of Capital" describe the hiring process, job material, and job expectations of community managers in games and find that the word 'passion' is one of the most used terms in the job ad material they examined. These jobs require people who are passionate about the games that they are supporting to undertake the huge emotional labour of supporting and being the face of an entire gaming community. Understanding how 'passion' is operationalized to exploit workers and create precarity is the main conceptual backing of this project. But to understand why passion is such a powerful motivator, there is a deeper understanding that needs to be unpacked. The concept of 'passion' often comes up as a footnote to some other identified problems when thinking about bodily entanglement with precarity. The passion, or lack thereof, that a person displays towards their workplace, work itself, bosses, peers, etc. is rarely, if ever, addressed in terms of its role in facilitating precarity

Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, introduced in her 2012 book of the same name, is a way of understanding why people would put themselves in problematic, precarious, or exploitative situations willingly. Cruel optimism as a concept describes the proverbial carrot on a stick allure of a possibly toxic situation for a person: something that can be dangled in front of

them to encourage them to work harder, do more, or push themselves in the hopes that their hard work will be recognized and they will be promoted or given more responsibilities. Berlant characterizes these attachments as "clusters of promises" (23) which can be examined to understand how attachments become 'cruel.' Attachments are not always straightforward. Why we become attached and transfixed by something is not always clear. Berlant argues that these attachments can be "incoherent or enigmatic… not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us and good for us whole others, not so much" (23). In videogame production, the ways in which these cruel optimistic attachments build and become recognized pathways to success, regardless of whether they valid pathways or not, can be seen in a number of instances. Williams in "You Can Sleep Here All Night" and Bulut in "Glamor Above, Precarity Below" talk about quality assurance workers working grueling hours in cramped rooms in the hopes of their work ethic being recognized. Bulut, in "Glamor Above, Precarity Below" also talks about videogame production workers working months of crunch in the hopes that the game sells well and they get rewarded with vested stock options or years-long payouts that will make the work feel "worth it" Robin Johnson in "Toward Greater Production Diversity" talks about contract-labourers constantly overworking in the hopes that they could be hired to be part of a core development team on some intellectual property (IP) or failing that, to make sure that they keep from being blacklisted in the production community. These problems are but observable instances of how cruel optimism manifests. The investments that go into building and maintaining these cruel optimistic situations are much deeper and more insidious than these isolated instances. Contract work, quality assurance work, and crunch are examples that assist in creating grounded understandings of why and how passion and cruel optimism come together in videogame production to be such a powerful tool for exploitation. To take these examples of work-related precarity further, though, and understand the infrastructural and capital-production-driven reasons for why they subsist in videogame production requires an understanding of many facets of videogame culture, game studies, and videogame production processes to get to the heart of the issue.

This project relies on both theoretical work and ethnographic work to help contour what precarities are manifesting in videogame production for my informants and what those precarities look like. By starting out with an understanding of the relationship between cruel optimism, passion, and precarity, I open the floor for ethnographic work to be done with informants that help me to outline and more responsible contour what *types* of situations they are facing that they define as precarity. Within those ethnographic details, I can then piece together core parts of precarity to move towards a theorization of *multiple* component parts of precarity. This move allows for a fuller vocabulary and more specificity when discussing issues of precarity such as trauma, vulnerability, and risk (re)distribution.

The basis of this project is to understand, from an embodied, personal perspective, the stories, feelings, and experiences of videogame production workers in a multitude of different ways. The most important way is through experience of informants that have volunteered to share their stories with me. Batchelor, Schrier, and Valentine's work talk about how precarity is manifesting in videogame production, but do not consider at any length the people who are suffering through these abuses. The closest that these articles come is making sweeping generalizations about crunch and toxic workplace cultures as being bad for ALL production workers. Other popular culture work that I will engage with that talks about precarity in

videogame production commit to the same method of generalization. Even the scholarly work that I engage with throughout this project that talks about videogame production does not do an adequate job of understanding the distinctly human element of videogame production. Often, production workers' thoughts or experiences are used to substantiate an author's claim about videogame production as a whole instead of attempting to engage with the embodied element of those stories.

Without the clarity and granularity that exploring individual, embodied experiences bring to light, generalizations made about videogame production will always miss the mark and will do no good in helping to bring about reform. At its core, this project is an intimately *human* project; it is imperative to understand the stories, contexts, and experiences of the workers who have shared their stories with me. In doing so, I seek to provide a platform by which I can elevate the stories and experiences being entrusted to me and make a case for why embodied knowledge is integral for collective action and unionization. I also seek to explore the contours of what current videogame production 'is' for my informants, and what it could be. What would ethics of care look like in videogame production? How drastically would workplace cultures have to shift to accommodate and rehumanize workers seeking ethics of care? I aim to explore and create actionable interventions in both a scholarly and activist capacity that do not repeat the missteps that previous interventions into videogame production culture have made. The only way to accomplish these goals is to use methodologies that encourage intimate, embodied accounts of both the positive and negative experiences that workers have regarding precarity through talking to as many people working in the industry as possible. It is also important to understand that there is no possibility for a catch-all explanation or course of action that will protect and empower *all* videogame production workers. I argue that without intersectional, feminist, and queer interventions in videogame production, the importance of (re)centering people when talking about technical spaces would arguably not exist, and a project like this that seeks to foreground granular experience as a desired research output would not be possible. Understanding the granular, experiential knowledge of videogame production workers, the affects that surround their interpersonal interactions, and how best to talk through these things responsibly is difficult.

When the "face" of videogames is still far too often a white male face, representation is still quite a contentious issue. Even more so when considering who these representational bodies are forgetting. Todd Howard, Ion Hazzikostas, Jeramy Cooke, Randy Pitchford, Ed Boon, Peter Molyneux, Jeff Kaplan, John Smedley, Sam Houser, Rod Fergusson, Nolan Bushnell, Reggie Fils-Amie, Andy Gavin, Jason Rubin, Trip Hawkins, Doug Lowenstein, Peter Moore, Mike Morhaime, Scott Orr, Chris Weaver: each of these people have almost instant name recognition among people who are familiar with the videogame industry. They are presidents, founders, CEO/COOs, IP managers, community managers, or producers of some of the most well-known and well-received games, platforms, and innovations in videogaming history. Time and again, we see these familiar faces onstage at PAX, E3, Gamescon, BlizzCon, CES, GDC, and DreamHack[2], presenting "the future" of their IP, company, or videogaming as a whole. The noticeable lack of women, queers, non-binary and trans bodies, and bodies of color in positions where they are public figures is an ever-present reminder that diversity, and diversity initiatives in this industry still lack any sort of serious commitment to diversifying videogaming and

[2] PAX, E3, Gamescon, BlizzCon, CES, GDC, and DreamHack are prominent gaming conventions that take place in the US and abroad. Each of these conventions caters to a specific gaming niche. For example, BlizzCon is put on by game developer Blizzard, and is an annual showcase of upcoming content for their games.

videogame production. To truly promote diversity in this industry requires more than just 'quick fixes' like including a token selection of diverse people in videogames or including queer romance options. Promoting and integrating diversity require systematically questioning why the videogame industry values men more than anyone else. Why men and why white people are seen as more valid and more expert than non-white and non-men are. Creating a truly diverse, welcoming, and accepting videogame environment requires having some uncomfortable conversations about what an industry would look like that *doesn't* cater to primarily male people; one that doesn't conflate technical mastery with a set of genitals. What would an industry look like where people of color, queers, trans and nonbinary bodies are in charge at all levels, including technical and ideological, and are not just "diversity hires" to fill check boxes? What would an industry look like where radical softness is valued over radical overwork – where human decency, empathy, and a pronounced 'softness' towards peoples' bodies needing rest is valued over grinding people into dust? What would an industry look like where the people playing the games that are produced don't see the industry as a service industry, but as an industry where radically inventive ideas are valued? Some of these questions are outside of the scope of this project. But they are questions that have inspired this project and will continue to inspire my scholarship for many years to come. These are questions that need answering, and this project will hopefully become a base-camp of sorts where I can start climbing that metaphorical mountain. To make formative steps towards answering these questions fully, it is necessary to examine theoretical understandings of 'precarity' and draw from qualitative interviews to create a foundational definition of *precarities*. Instead of continuing to use 'precarity' as a catch-all term to describe issues like trauma, vulnerability, and risk distribution, there needs to be a move towards describing workers' experiences as they are and what they evoke.

In my first chapter, I go over some definitional work regarding precarity. This chapter starts by examines how 'passion' is conceived of and operationalized across a variety of business-oriented scholarship. This is done to lay the groundwork for understanding how passion is approached in videogame production specifically: how is passion being used to subjectivate workers into accepting toxic working conditions and workplace cultures? To understand this, the concept of immaterial labour must first be understood so that the specific types of precarity within immaterial labour can be examined. Once those understandings are established, it becomes possible to think through how, within videogame production, precarity manifests and who it affects. It becomes possible to intertwine the concept of cruel optimism with passion as a way of understanding the complicity of one within the other. This approach allows for ways of thinking through what types of workers and what types of bodies are in danger of being further marginalized by the lack of clear understanding of unionization efforts and collective organization within videogame production. This chapter is acting as a literature review of what 'precairty', 'passion' and 'cruel optimism' mean in highly specific and theoretical circumstances.

In my second chapter, I examine my methodological approach to this project. With the ever-present reminder both to myself and to the reader that this project is concerned with embodied, experiential stories and not working towards sweeping generalizations, I outline how feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography lend themselves to a new way of understanding and emphasizing the stories of my informants. Feminist ethnography presents a useful way of wrestling with the question of objectivity. Feminist ethnography, especially the work of Kamala Visweswaran (1994), provides frameworks to help situate myself within this necessarily uncomfortable work. Objectivity in regard to anthropological and ethnographic work

oftentimes formulates the scholar or observer as somehow *more human* than those being observed; the observer is tracing behaviors, patterns, and other deeply intimate and wholly personal behavior while trying to generalize. Though granular accounts may make up parts of the theory being crafted, the goal of anthropology isn't for the author to challenge their own views and mores; it is to create a ledger of a group of people and their behavior. My own passion and increasingly complicated relationship towards videogaming creates a point of contention that, if I were to claim any sort of objectivity towards this project, would render anything I said hollow and untruthful. Feminist objectivity allows me to not only acknowledge how close I am to this situation, but for this project to flourish from that closeness. By re-centering where and what "truth" is in this project away from an objective right/wrong truth and into an experiential, embodied story, I am able to present the truths of my informants in such a way that their granular experiences are not lost to generalization. In the same way that feminist ethnography creates a groundwork for recontextualizing objectivity and repositioning bodily experience as the object of inquiry, institutional ethnography provides a horizontal way of understanding *how* precarity comes to be. Dorothy Smith's *Institutional Ethnography* alongside Alison Griffith and Dorothy Smith's *Mothering For Schooling* provide examples of how to scaffold an investigation into power structures within an organization. These investigations traces the various institutional appendages that work together to produce precarity for certain people in that system. Institutional ethnography also creates a way of tracking how corporatized entities leverage knowledge- and information-production to create necessary precarities that incentivize workers to overwork and not question status quos.

In my third chapter, I will introduce and (re)tell my informants' stories about their experiences with videogame production. I start by introducing my informants, giving a general description of where in the videogame industry they work, their years of experience, and what size studios they work/have worked for. Then, I will give an overview of the themes that the chapter will cover, and a reminder of why seeking experiential, embodied knowledges of this kind is integral foundational and definitional work. I then I examine the four main themes that I identified with my informants. Those themes are i) unions and collective action, ii) crunch and why it is necessary for crunch to stop if the industry is to survive and change, iii) workplace culture and power clashes, and the iv) semantics of "precarity" and "precarious". Two informants talked about precarity, and the feeling of their job being a precarious one. All six informants talked about their experiences with reticence and zealotry towards unionization. All six informants discussed the cultural expectation that crunch is important and is a defining characteristic of, and a weeding-out mechanism for videogame production. All six informants concluded that crunch has no place in videogame production. Each informant had varying opinions on what to do in the wake of that declaration, though. All six of my informants experienced overwhelmingly positive experiences as far as workplace culture was concerned. The caveat to this, though, is that they had positive experiences *with other coworkers*. The tension came from interacting with people in positions of power. All six of my informants dealt with power struggles with management at some point. All six informants felt powerless at some juncture to do what they knew was right within their job. Subjects ranged from how they dealt with creative decisions that they disagreed with and knew better than to make, to the knowledge that upper-management only views them and potential audiences for their game as data points.

In my fourth chapter, I use two methodological toolsets to examine my informants' stories and experiences through: feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography. I am mobilizing the methodological synthesis discussed in my second chapter towards being able to

triangulate how my informants' interactions inform their experience with other people in their institution. By doing this, I show that it becomes easier to interrogate how forms of resistance such as collective bargaining interact with, and move through institutions. When combined, these two methodologies offer ways of examining similar issues in a complementary way while also revealing insight that, with just using one or the other methodology, may be lost. Similarly, the conclusions that they come to are similar but utilized significantly differently. They share the goal of understating how organizations consolidate power, but they differ in how those results are presented and in what ways those understandings can solve inequity.

In my fifth chapter, I make tentative steps towards a theorization of *precarities*. The literature review that I did in the first chapter does a good job of outlining in very general terms what and where precarity can manifest and how that links to cruel optimism. But the term 'precarity' does not do a good enough job of describing the experiences of my informants. This is why it is necessary to start to think beyond just a singular, all-encompassing understanding of the situations, affects, entanglements, and extenuating circumstances that surround and characterize my informants as just 'precarity'. The things that my informants talked about need to be understand on a more granular level than what classifying their experiences under 'precarity' can provide. This chapter, instead, is interesting in taking formative steps towards understanding multiple, situated, embodied experiences as precarit*ies*. This chapter looks at three themes that appeared across all my informants' stories, but varied wildly in scope, impact, and fallout. These themes are trauma, vulnerability, and risk. This chapter unpacks what these themes mean and how they collocated alongside, within, and outside a general understanding of singular precarity.

In my sixth, I describe *Passion Traps*, a critical making installation that this entire project is named after. *Passion Traps* is an installation with three iterations that each add a dimension of physicality to the issues of passion and precarity that this project covers. Each iteration makes use of quotations from interviews I've conducted with various types of videogame production workers. Each of these quotes is associated with a certain object or piece of each iteration. The first iteration, "Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas", highlights the voices of videogame production workers whose primary job is game development. This iteration is contextualized in a standing rectangle of eviscerated books that create two 'windows' that users can see through. Within the window, there is an old Super Nintendo controller perched precariously at the intersecting point of four 8-inch wood screws. Above the controller are two more 8-inch wood screws which form an 'X'. This iteration makes use of conductive paint and a Bare Conductive Touchboard to create seven interactable nodes on various parts of the controller where, where users press them, quotes play that I have gathered from interviews with current, working videogame production workers about their experiences with videogame production.

The second iteration, "Passion Traps 2 – Community Passion", highlights community managers. The community managers that I have interviewed for this iteration talk about how they came to be community managers, and how they experience passion traps in ways that production workers, and fan labourers and contingent labourers (the subjects of my third iteration) do not. This iteration is contextualized by an old laptop, missing the keycaps 'I', ' ', 'L', 'E', 'T', 'H', 'M', 'K', 'N', 'O', and 'W'. Connected to the laptop via a laptop security cable is a cellphone. The cellphone has a ½'' stainless steel shackle-type screw pin anchor inserted into the top of the cellphone, with the looped end of the security cable looped onto the anchor. Additionally, a popular self-help book that is often recommended to workers in technology sectors where their job will require being on-call or working crunch entitled *Time Management*

From the Inside Out has had a portion of its innards cut out to accommodate a Bare Conductive Touchboard and six banana clips. Using the Bare Conductive touchboard and conductive paint, I created six touch sensors on the phone, laptop, laptop security cable, and pin anchor.

The third iteration, "Passion Traps 3 – Modding Materiality", examines the types of passion that unremunerated, contingent, and fan labourers exhibit. This iteration is contextualized by a 1" by 1" model of a bedroom. Four black plastic walls create a square enclosure with a black plastic floor. There is chain link wrapped around the entire display. There are only two physical objects in this room: a doll bed, and a candle in the middle of the room. The rest of the room's features are printed on pieces of paper and glued to the walls of the room. The decorations around the room are reminiscent of a quintessentially "geeky" room: action figures and models of popular videogame characters, posters of games, a computer with two large monitors, windows with the blinds drawn. The candle in the middle of the room is a trick candle.

Each chapter in this project offers a substantial way of approaching cruel optimism in videogame production. This project offers a multi-faceted understanding of precarity. This project also proves that precarity, which is one of the most important aspects of cruel optimism, is not one-size-fits-all. Precarities manifests in many different instances for many different people in videogame production. Though those manifestations share overlap between body types, the type of precarity that manifests and how it manifests is dependent on just as many factors as cruel optimism. It is important to, first, understand the material components of cruel optimism. Within videogame production, cruel optimism requires certain material-discursive conditionalities to manifest and to proliferate.

1.
Multifaceted Manifestations

This project is one where positioning and embodied experiences are more important, and a more desirable end goal, than explanations of motivation regarding a broad swatch of people. In this chapter, I will give a broad stroke and theory-based understanding of what precarity is and what its discreet parts are made of according to various literature. Lauren Berlant's conception of cruel optimism is an important starting place to talk about the theorization of precarity. Once Berlant's theoretical contributions are established, I can examine the necessary discrete parts of cruel optimism that allow for the theorization of videogame production as an engine of subjectivation. Subjectivation in this project is understood to be a series of events, actions, cultural expectations, labour relations, affective and emotion entrapments and attachments that contribute to and shape a person's current present. In History of Sexuality (1988), Michel Foucault talks about subjectivity and subjectivation as historically constituted and situated 'events', but not as 'substances', meaning that, as a person experiences life, they are shaped by those experiences. Finally, I will examine how passion, precarity, and immaterial labour operate in relation to videogame production.

The most important theoretical concept that this project leverages comes from Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism*. By understanding and updating Berlant's conception of how cruel optimism happens and who it happens to, it is possible to understand how cruel optimism manifests in videogame production. It is important to understand cruel optimism as Berlant presents the concept. From her original definition, it will become easier to understand how cruel optimism functions in the specific material-discursive circumstances of videogame production. Cruel optimism in videogame production functions akin to a recipe. It needs certain ingredients to allow it to function. The concepts of precarity, passion, and immaterial labour describe material-discursive circumstances in which cruel optimism can exist and proliferate.

The first ingredient of cruel optimism is the setting. Where, exactly, can cruel optimism manifest? What are the conditions that it thrives in? By drawing on Lazzarato's definitional work of what immaterial labour is, the bounds and contours of immaterial labour become apparent. Within immaterial labour, affect and affective attachment become powerful subjectivating tools. Immaterial labour's goal is to produce surplus values of knowledge capital by subjectivating workers to accept heterogenous working spaces that cater to certain types of people over others and value iterative, safe change over sweeping change. Immaterial labour enables institutional

circuits that trap threats to production and allow for those problems to be isolated, which allows for production pipelines to minimally change or be interrupted. Cruel optimism exists here to allow workers to be subjectivated into conforming to institutional discourses that dictate what a productive body is versus a non-productive body.

The second ingredient of cruel optimism is passion. In videogame production specifically, passion is operationalized as both a recruitment and a retention tool. Drawing from management studies, organizational psychology, entrepreneurial studies, and business studies, it will be possible to tease out a cohesive composite image of what 'passion' can be defined as and then thought about in regard to videogame production. What about videogame production inspires passion? How has videogame production operationalized passion into a subjectivation tool? How does this operationalization create precarity? Videogame production is careful to show the playfulness of videogame production as a job and are careful to appeal to the aspect of workers 'doing what they love'. Passion is showcased and operationalized as a cultural fit tool, a meritocractic advancement component, and, ultimately, a way of subjectivating workers to accept that overwork, or crunch, is just a part of producing a truly sublime product: a case of 'bleed for what you love.' Cruel optimism rides on the coattails of that sentiment, driving workers to work harder, longer, and quicker in the hopes of recognition and meritocratic advancement..

The final ingredient of cruel optimism is precarity. How does overwork, casualization of work, job scarcity & insecurity, and outsourcing, contribute to precarity as it pertains to videogame production? In videogame production, precarity depends upon the next two ingredients of cruel optimism: passion and immaterial labour. When those two are established, precarity can exist as the sort of icing on the cake; the glue that keeps cruel optimism together in videogame production. Though 'precarity' can pejoratively refer to how an industry is positioned (e.g. the precarity of the banking industry, housing bubbles, etc.), precarity needs support to exist. Precarity requires the conditionality of immaterial labour enabling work that is knowledge-capital-generating, does not require prolonged physical presence, and is interconnected. Immaterial work can be sent elsewhere in the world should the price of keeping that labour in the US be too much. Once the conditionality is established, and there's an ever-present 'threat' of losing the immaterial labour a body is responsible for (in this case outsourcing), passion can be operationalized and called upon to convince a worker to work harder, longer, and quicker. All in the name of producing a product in the medium that theperson is 'passionate' about.

By establishing these concepts as the 'ingredients' of cruel optimism, it is possible to, finally, examine possible next steps in regard to precarity in videogame production. Are unions a ready-made answer? Does the model of a 'union' that is largely predicated on and made for material labour provide an able method for workers to collectively bargain? The answers, unfortunately, become more muddy the further into the issue one looks.

Cruel Optimistic Attachment

Cruel optimism presents a nuanced way of understanding the motivations at work in embodied experiences with videogame production that can facilitate precarity. Berlant defines cruel optimism as

> [relations… that exist] when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. […] These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel.

> They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (1)

There is a necessary component of fantasy attached to cruel optimism: "the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (2). Fantasy allows for imaging new normals; situations beyond what is already not working. Berlant locates the willingness to engage with fantasy as an important aspect of cruel optimism, characterizing fantasy as "the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world "add up to something"" (2). The search for normalcy and habitude are endemic to fantasy, and are bolstered by allowing affective attachments to anchor themselves *in* those fantasies. The characterization of affect and its implication in the act of attaching a person to a fantasy in such a way that that attachment, and the action of seeking being closer to that attachment, becomes damaging is important. Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn in "Affect" partially characterize 'affect' as "non-verbal, non-conscious dimensions of experience [as] reengagement with sensation, memory, perception, attention and listening" (8). This becomes important when thinking through how attachments can be bolstered in fantasy. Affective investment in a desired object or a routine or thing is not always done consciously, or rather, with consciousness towards the decision of becoming 'attached'. Instead, affect greases the gears of attachment, creating a decision-making process that goes beyond a simple yes/no of whether to continue pursuing that thing. Affect creates emotional achors to and around an object that change the simple yes/no decision-making proces to 'yes, but' and 'no, but'.Berlant characterizes affect as a way of finding habitude and normalcy (57), but also as an "[attachment] to the soft hierarchies of inequality [that] provide a sense of *their place in the world"* (194). It becomes a series of processes, of cognitions, actions, attachments, entrapments, feelings, labours, that produce the material discursive positioning of a person within a suspended, temporal moment. The affective structure of cruel optimism is both the containing force of cruel optimism and one of its drivers. The return to fantasy that Berlant mentions is an iterative process. The iterative process can be as simple as rethinking a relationship, trying to make it work; downplaying perceived negative behaviors and highlighting perceived positive behaviors to paint an attainable picture of a happy life together. Or making a pros and cons list regarding a decision where objectivity is really relative, and the weights of both pros and cons can vastly differ because the allure of what is on the other side of that decision is greater than the desire to remain in the present situated experience.

Berlant makes a point again and again of saying that, regardless of how cruel optimism operates in any given situation, there is no shame to be had in it. Cruel optimism, she argues, isn't about doing the irrational just for the sake of irrationality – at the end of the day, it is about searching for normalcy and every-day-ness (54) in addition to establishing habitude (57). But what Berlant is building to is the *context* in which the processes of seeking normalcy and habitude occur. Berlant uses Bordowitz' 2001 film *Habit* to understand how habitude and searching for normalcy in late-stage capitalism exist in a constant temporal space of crisis. *Habit* mirrors Bordowitz' own attempt at creating an understanding of his historical present: how does his cruel optimism towards normalcy and habitude operate in a timeframe and a body frame that is actively non-normal. Due to stacked cultural stigmas (queer identification and being HIV-positive), the temporality and feasibility of normalcy becomes a quest for the impossible due to unaccountable circumstances. The attachment towards, and the processual movement toward, a

habitude of perceived normalcy while existing in a state of non-normalcy creates a discord that is impossible to soothe.

Berlant makes the point of saying that cruel optimism is about attachment to an object of desire (24). Objects of desire are "a cluster of promises [which] allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises" (24). When I talk about cruel optimism in this project, I am talking about a two-fold thing: the first is the attachment of a body to an object of desire. In the case of videogame production, I hypothesize some possible object(s) of attachment as being cultural capital, 'living a dream', and clout. As some of my informants in later chapters talk about, the idea of 'living the dream' of being in videogames and having access to the cultural capital associated with a 'cool' job becomes enticing enough to buy fully into a fantasy that videogame production perpetuates. Work while you play, play games for a living, passion: all characterizations of the clout associated with working in games. The second is that the object itself is not the 'cruel' part. What makes videogame production and attachment to it 'cruel' is the operationalization of passion to subjectivate workers into accepting the abuses of the industry in order to succeed. The operationalization of passion can manifest in several ways. For my informants, which I will talk more about in chapter 3, their passion for playing videogames, being part of a counter-culture, or seeking and finding validation within videogames was a catalyst for wanting to pursue videogame production. The end result for my informants was almost word-for-word that they wanted to have a hand in creating something that people would play and enjoy.

In videogame production, the promises attached to the object of attachment are threefold. First, displaying how passionate a worker is presents a path to become the next well-known face of a videogame, like Todd Howard: meritocracy will recognize workers' commitment and reward them accordingly. Second is that the abuses that videogame production entail are defensible because that's just the culture of the job. Activities such as hazing or 'passion-checking' are simply a cultural expectation of this type of job and a necessity to become successful. . Third, having access to the cultural cache of "doing-what-you-love" marks a person as inherently 'lucky'; that person does not have to work a job they hate, and in the case of videogame production, that person has the option to 'play while they work.', means that workers are seen as Miya Tokumitsu in *Do What You Love: And Other Lies About Success & Happiness* talks about the culture of 'doing what you love' as one that you must suffer for, but one that is, ultimately, more fulfilling (49). Rationally, a person can look at these promises and see the vague nature and possible dangers. There are no concrete steps attached to these promises that produce verifiable results. Instead, popular media presents videogame production through interviews with well-known workers as less of a toxic subjectiation process and more of a challenge: a game to be won, and a proving ground for why that winner shouldn't be someone else. Everyone knows that 'grinding' in videogames makes you stronger and makes it easier to progress. Yet, videogame production relies on these promises as a way of coaxing out the passion of potential workers.

It is important to remember that passion isn't a static interaction in an affective environment. Instead, it is just another process that is operating within, alongside, and in opposition to other processes. Those processes combine to form the affective moment that a person inhabits. Berlant says that "The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve

out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment" (3). Cruel optimism thrives on the promise of a 'good life', or some sort of equilibrium where precarity does not exist or is not actively fraying away: "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively durable intimacy" (3). All my informants for this project stated that they followed the career path that they did due to the promise of something better. Each person pursued videogame production to obtain something that they dreamed of having: stability for some, a home for others, enough capital to live comfortably for themselves. They saw the videogame production industry as a thriving, vibrant entity that could accommodate their wishes for something better while also being able to see their passion bloom into physical things that people would interact with and absorb into their own affective processing.

The construction of the 'the good life' encompasses the passion, the objects of attachment, the unsustainable promises, the endurance of people towards a goal, and the actual conceptual identity that this project is ascribing to videogame production. In short, the idea of 'the good life' as a carrot dangling on a stick that people struggle toward is the containing unit of cruel optimism. Meritocracy and the neoliberal push for everyone and everything to be self-starting, autonomous, and professional but also wholly beholden to the whims of late-stage capitalism ultimately yield a decaying fantasy where hard work and gumption are still the capital of upward mobility. These beliefs are integral for the current survival and capitulation of the capitalist socius. If capital and cultural capital are the ultimate productive goal of late-stage capitalism, the core of it falls apart without productive, subjectivatable people. Most specifically when people that believe they have an imperative function in what Alena Chia (2019) calls a 'new economy' are extricated (773). In *Disruptive Fixation* Sims (2018) talks about the early New School in NYC as an example of rampant subjectivation in this vein. Students from economically disadvantaged areas were brought into a highly technologized space and taught technological competencies and learning skills that would enable them to switch from knowledge-production job to knowledge-production job.

New methods of production that don't favor late-stage capitalism's model of producing surpluses of knowledge and cultural capital by way of breaking people into subjectivated production machines cannot occur on a large scale. Late-stage capitalism is concerned with producing as much capital as it can with as few non-controllable parts as it can. This is where subjectivation, or cultural and material-discursive expectations of 'work', become important. Late-stage capitalism subjectivates people to accept whatever conditions of work are most advantageous to production and not question those conditions. This subjectivation isn't always necessarily horrific, especially in immaterial labour in the West. Rarely is it a sweatshop narrative where workers are forced to work exceedingly long hours constantly in unsafe conditions for fractions of the wealth they are producing. Subjectivation can be as simple as subtle pressures to work overtime instead of relaxing, or just expecting that certain time periods of the year will require more work hours than other times. Subjectivation and cruel optimism work together to become part-and-parcel of what keeps workers actively engaged and *overworking* towards a goal or attachment. People are subjectivated to continue capitulating the idea that only hyperproductive bodies are of any use in this current productive era. However, there are cultural strata being gestured to as consolation prizes for workers to soften the fatalistic nature of this subjectivation. Working hard can earn more money, more cultural cache, more respect from bosses, more admiration from your peers. The only barrier to those things is working harder. Pockets of resistance occur, but the capitalist socius, which Deleuze and

Guattari refer to in *Anti-Oedipus* as the 'body' or form of capitalism which includes labour processes, social influence, and subjectivation, actively finds ways of consuming those pockets and monetizing them. Ultimately, this renders these sites of resistance as little more than overly-idealistic pits of good intention that lead further into the hellscape of late-stage capitalism. For instance, something as simple as 'being nice' has become a tool of capitalism. Tom Whyman, in his online article "What Is Cupcake Fascism" articulates that neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism have started to rely not on oppressive, autocratic structures to beat the populace into submission, but instead on militant *niceness* to bury any unseemly negativity that could lead to revolution: "Cupcake fascism asserts itself violently through something the infantilized subject holds deeply as an ideal. This ideal is *niceness*. On the one hand, niceness is just what the infantilized subject thinks is lacking from the world [they are] hiding from." The example that Whyman uses to talk this concept through is 2011 post-riots London. After tensions mounted over possible financial crisis and riots broke out, a piece of WW2 propaganda reemerged. Keep Calm and Carry On (KCCO) found its way back into cultural relevance. Only, instead of KCCO in the face of bombing runs, the people of London were KCCO cleaning up after the riots. Instead of confronting the issues that caused the riots in the first place, and directing action towards social change in that regard, social media and news outlets infantilized the riots as "temper tantrums" and valorized those cleaning up as cooler heads prevailing. It is this pathological *need* for niceness to bury the ugliness in the world that allows for the capitalist socius to continue consuming and monetizing potentially revolutionary acts of resistance.

Passion and Precarity in Videogame Production

In the case of videogame production, passion is used as a recruiting, retention, and subjectivation tool. Workplace culture in videogame production is often created around the passion for playing videogames. In "Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games", D'Anastasio outlines how the workplace culture and the workplace 'fit' at Riot Games insists upon potential employees being 'hardcore gamers'. One informant that shared her story with D'Anastasio talked about the hiring process as being a constant push from the male hiring committee to see how passionate she was about playing videogames and to try and catch her lying about her passion. When the topic of raiding in *World of Warcraft* came up, the informant listed her raiding experience as above-average, and named some of the raids that she had cleared, and the hiring committee grilled her to see if she was lying because they couldn't seem to grasp that a woman could achieve those types of successes.

Kerr and Kelleher outline how, in community-management positions, passion is a buzzword that is used in job material to mask a grueling on-call schedule, few holidays off, and poor compensation. Kerr and Kelleher also note that "Passion was most frequently co-located with gaming knowledge and arguably, what many of these advertisements were doing was hailing fans and game players. This also, we suggest, excludes those who do not see themselves as passionate game players and blurs the boundaries between work and play" (185). As is the case with D'Anastasio's informant's experiences, passion is, again, being used as a metric to gauge culture fit and willingness to sacrifice to work in videogames. The way in which passion is collocated with knowledge of gaming in general, or with the particular game that is being recruited for, hints at the necessity of recruiting passionate workers to do the grueling labour that keeps games profitable as a service model. Without people that are amenable to that kind of labour, and subjectivated to be willing to endure overwork and the potential of that overwork not

leading to the promise of stability and glamor that was promised, the model of making game content as a service to fans would fall apart.

In "The Perils of Project-Based Work", Pettica-Harris, Westar, and McKenna look at how passion explicitly creates environments that are inherently anti-unionization. Their work looks at how passion is mobilized to first hook in talent by promising that workers will be working in "cool" environments (for instance, pizza and donut Fridays)(580), and then to systematically keep them hooked through stock options and kickbacks from sales that will trickle in over the span of years. Additionally, the way that blame is shifted away from human actors and onto the project is another insidious methodology of control. It's easy to be mad at a person for demanding that a worker work late or work unfair hours. It is much harder to be mad at a project; especially when the project, ostensibly, is the thing that recruited workers and mobilized workers in the first place to join the company. Pettica-Harris, Wester, and McKenna say that the allure of 'cool' food and a 'cool' working environment for employees is a way of making it seem like the company cares about them while skirting the responsibility for their deteriorating health from eating junk food constantly, working under extreme pressure, and not taking care of their bodies (581). Pettica-Harris, Westar, and McKenna set up the conditions where passion is, instead of just a mobilizing force now, a force of spite. The act of 'production' invites workers to think of these jobs in videogame production as "cool" and "hip" instead of as precarious and awful. By appealing to the cultural capital of 'working in videogames' and 'being a cool job', these jobs carry certain expectations, like being ok with working 60, 70, 80 hour weeks. (again, see: Mike Capps' 2008 IDGA comments[3]). The entire attitude of crunch, and of old-style work-until-you-drop can be summed up with the saying 'work hard, play hard.' By having access to the cultural capital that few have (e.g. working in videogames), workers are expected to constantly prove that they belong there.

Robin Johnson, in "Hiding in Plain Sight: Reproducing Masculine Culture at a Video Game Studio", outlines how hegemonic masculinity in production workplaces can be linked with 'winning' or 'putting in the effort to get better' at games (582). People who 'win' more, or show more passion for getting better tend to be considered more masculine. Passion then becomes a workplace culture fit policing measure where those who lose or do show passion for winning become less masculine, and the passion that these workers *do* exhibit is discounted because it is not operationalized for production. Workers who do not or cannot work crunch are considered less fit to work in the industry and share in the cultural cache. Bulut in "Playboring in the Tester Pit" talks about how the cultural cache of working within videogames is so appealing to some workers that they are willing to take pay cuts, work in abusive work environments, and contend with poor working conditions just to say that they work in videogames (243).

Another aspect of precarity that videogame production encourages is job insecurity. Contract labour and outsourcing create new contours to explore when talking about hiring practices, retention & advertising, and following passion into videogame production. Contract labour and outsourcing feed into cruel optimism by allowing management to operationalize the passion of workers to convince them to work harder, longer, and faster for the *chance* of upward mobility, which is more often than not an untruth. Contract labour and outsourcing also produce new contours when considering skill mastery. Just as material skills such as masonry require specialized physical skills and workplaces, videogame production, and software production in

[3] In a panel at 2008's International Game Developers Association's (IDGA) annual conference, Mike Capps, head of Epic Games, stated in a panel that working 60 hours a week or more was standard practice at Epic and that those who are not willing to work those hours should seek employment elsewhere, or will be weeded out very quickly.

general, have their own specialized skills. Software knowledge, coding languages, process knowledge, or infrastructure knowledge are more valuable to capitalism than material knowledge since those knowledge sets are integral to producing knowledge and cultural capital. But with those competencies, new forms of precarity must be accounted for. No longer is software and immaterial knowledge production tools a privileged Western knowledge. Eastern European countries like Ukraine, Belarus, and Turkey, and third-world countries such as India, Malaysia, Iraq and Iran are developing highly technologized sectors that are capable of doing the same work as Westerners at a fraction of the price. The faux-promise of possibly being hired full time, and the threat of losing contract work to outsourcing create another dimension of precarity within videogame production.

Software production as a field utilizes contract labour and what Spinuzzi, in *All Edge*, refers to as 'swarming' (73) to accomplish tasks quickly, and then dissipate. A core team may work on the planning stages and preproduction of a software, then contract labour is brought in to help build prototypes and iterations of the software, and when that prototype is at a marketable stage, the labour force is disbanded back down to a core team. When that software needs to be tested, or other features added, contract labour can be brought back in to 'swarm' those jobs, and then disbanded again. In a 2014 expose, Jason Schrier talked to Holden Link, publisher of GamesJobWatch, who said:

> "It's weirdly common to hear about people getting laid off from the same company more than once—i.e., they get laid off, rehired, and laid off again in a span of two or three years, often without a different job in between," said Link. "Those scenarios are a vivid illustration of these kind of layoffs—the company didn't need someone for a few months, then decided they needed them full time again until something else went wrong."

In videogame production, especially, contract labour is often brought on with the promised possibility of being made core members of a team once their contract is up. Rarely does this happen.

As outlined in a 2016 exposé called "The game industry's disposable workers", Colin Campbell details how contract labour in videogame production are constantly baited with the possibility of being brought on full-time while still struggling with the reality of being contract labour. Campbell's informants reported that "…they feel mistreated and even mislead by managers who dangle the possibility of full employment, but rarely follow through. In employment law circles, this is known as 'employment misclassification'. One informant of Campbell's said: " '[Game companies] put you on a year's contract and they say that it might end with a full-time position. You're in suspense until two weeks before your contract is up and then say 'oh we can't convert you'". As production costs rise, videogame production is turning more and more to contract labour to even out the pay gap. Campbell speaks to Nate Gibson, an expert on employee misclassification, who says that hiring contract labour versus hiring full time labour saves approximately 30% in costs for *each contractor hired in place of a full-time staff member*. In addition to the ability for an employer to simply fire contract labour when they are no longer needed, contract labourers do not receive insurance through the company contracting them, nor do they receive sick days, vacation days, or personal days. They are generally paid by the hour or by the day, which creates an environment for contract labour where time literally is money. Contract labourers in videogame production are often faced with work stipulations that were never made clear to them. Similarly, Campbell talks about one of their informants who worked

as a video editor for a large publisher. He was informed, after he was hired, that he actually was employed by a contract firm and not the company itself. In addition to this omission, his work responsibilities and working hours shifted several times without his consent, while his wage stayed the same: “"We never signed anything agreeing to [these changes], nor were we told it was happening." he says. "When one of my [contract] coworkers asked if it was negotiable, he was told no and that he could always look for another placement if he wasn't happy"”.

The factor that makes contract labour possible, which then makes job insecurity possible, is the practice of outsourcing, and the constant threat *of* outsourcing. In addition to the devastatingly stressful environments that videogame production takes place in, a good portion of that work is outsourced, contributing to further job instability and precarity. In “OUTSOURCING: Video Game Art is Increasingly ‘To Go’, Paul Hyman examines how the outsourcing practices of videogame art was an early harbinger of things to come. The company he profiles, THQ (today known as THQNordic), is a multi-billion dollar triple-A videogame producer that refers to outsourcing as ‘distributed development.’ Hyman references THQ having outsourced 20-25% of their art asset development in 2008, whereas today they outsource somewhere around 80% of their art asset development. Their in-house production is now primarily game systems, proprietary art assets, and marketing/branding. THQ’s rampant outsourcing speaks to the nature videogame production process: what you keep in-house will end up costing you more than outsourcing. The majority of the art assets that THQ’s internal developers outsource are to developing countries with burgeoning tech sectors like India; this means that, for what would cost these internal developers millions of dollars to develop in-house, they can outsource for it to be developed for a fraction of that price. In “‘EA Spouse’ and the Crisis of Video Game Labur”, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter talk about what was then a rising concern, saying “…there is an intensifying trend toward outsourcing game development work, with big studios such as EA on a global quest, from Shanghai to Ho Chi Minh, for new sources of skilled game labour. Within even its most privileged echelons, there are no certainties under conditions of globalization” (602). According to Chebotareva in “Why Ukranian CG Market is One of the Driving Forces Behind the Success of the Games Industry”, burgeoning third-world tech sectors still see a massive share of outsourcing, but new tech sectors such as Eastern Europe are presenting a more enticing alternative due to ‘cultural concerns’ and language barriers. (

Cruel optimism is enabled through precarity. If there is the promise of a ‘better life’, or advancement, workers would be foolish to not work to their full potential to achieve more, right? It is exactly this mindset that allows for institutions to keep moving the goal posts as capital-generation dictates the need to move them. American neoliberalism, according to Julie Wilson, boils down to humans not being encouraged “to understand, much less critique or try to change, their society. Rather, they should be trained for competition in the market. For only via competition can individuals realize their freedom, which, for neoliberals, means realizing their place and purpose in the unfolding of spontaneous market order” (63). By encouraging unchecked competition among people in a continually-globalized market, precarity becomes a control mechanism insofar as the threat of losing a job, it being outsourced, and a body being rendered redundant are used to keep workers working at their limits and being *accepting* of that. But what force can be tapped to make people do this?

Whose Passion, and Why Does It Matter?

In game studies, and even digital media studies, the concept of 'passion' is not well-understood in regard to how it is leveraged to gauge work, success, enjoyment of a job, or as a catalyst to inspire workers (or customers) to take greater pride in their 'brand.' It is important, then, to turn to a corpus where passion *is* well-theorized and documented to help us assemble our own working definition. In management studies, organizational psychology, entrepreneurial studies, and business studies, passion is leveraged as means of understanding intention behind a set of actions, a person's drive to succeed at something, or a person's willingness to persevere in precarious circumstances to achieve a goal. Passion, as defined by Murnieks, Mosakowski, and Cardon in "Pathways of Passion", is a strong inclination towards certain activities over others that acts as an agent of influence regarding choices, relationship-building, or pursuance of certain paths of education or vocational training (1586). Baum and Locke, in "A Multidimensional Model of Venture Growth" characterize how entrepreneurial studies approach passion as growth vector due to the personal nature of both passion and entrepreneurship: without passion for one's business model, growth is difficult (292). Thorgen and Wincent, in "Passion and Challenging Goals" say that passion "is a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that people like, find important and in which they invest time and energy…" (2318). They hypothesize that, as an entrepreneur becomes more ensconced in a culture of self-starting and self-sustaining work habits, that they will exhibit more harmonious passion and obsessive passion as well. Harmonious passion refers to streamlining their business model, creating cohesive marketing and modeling, and creating more uniformity across platforms, while obsessive passion refers to doing the aforementioned during times usually designated for leisure or non-job activities. This means their drive for success, and the passion that they have towards the *idea itself* and ensuring its success, consumes more non-work and personal time than similar ideas/initiatives might for non-entrepreneurial workers. This speaks to enculturation as a powerful subjectivating measure in entrepreneurial circles: the more belief that one has in their idea, and the more time that one spends thinking about, workshopping, and obsessing about their idea, the more successful the idea should be. And inversely, if adequate passion is not invested in a project, then the chances are greater that the initiative will fail.

Another important concept within passion to understand is 'grit.' Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, in "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals" define grit as a sub-set of passion; an augmentation to, and explanation of success within passion. They identify grit as an x-factor of sorts that determine why some people achieve more than peers of equal intelligence, privilege, and station. They define this concept as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (1087-8). They define the ideal "gritty" body as being someone that approaches success in their venture as if they were running a marathon: perseverance and stamina are the keys to leveraging grit. Grit and passion create an entanglement that is difficult to undo; without one, the other is bound to fail according to them. Whereas the previous literature was concentrated in entrepreneurial endeavors, Duckwork, Peterson, Matthews and Kelly identified the concept of grit as a measure of success across academia, medicine, journalism, law, banking and painting (1089). The people that they interviewed talked at length about how and why they persevered through adversity and precarity, and the reason was that each body had some form of affective attachment to their area of expertise. Grit, for these people, exemplified a willingness to grind against precarity *because* of

the passion that those people had for their expertise. For some, grit was augmented with a humanitarian or humanistic spin. Some informants were convinced that the world needed their passion and their passion-project to come to fruition because, without it, the world would be a less full place. For others, grit augmented a desire to achieve more: more than their peers, more than their parents, friends, etc. In both cases, grit presented an interesting and useful term for gauging how *personal* passion is meted out in any project. As with most entrepreneurial endeavors, grit is predicated on an ultimately neoliberal ideation that the project at hand, or the underlying passion, is *necessary* for enriching the world around the project-owner.

According to Albert, Merunka, Valette-Florence in "The Feeling of Love Toward a Brand", passion can also be defined as a certain entrapment or disposition regarding an idea, brand, or entity (300). Passion, as they situate it, becomes less about grit or persevering through an activity in search of self-fulfillment or character-building, and becomes more about fealty; affectively, aesthetically, ideologically, *something* about an idea, brand, or entity creates a similarly charged affective response as what previous literature describes. There is a certain quirk or idea or detail that appeals to a person that sets that entity apart from competitors, or per Bennet in *Vibrant Matter*, that entity has a certain 'stickiness'. As an entity develops a social presence, it develops institutional quirks that set it apart from other competing businesses. These quirks put affective dimensions to the entity that become potential points of positive or negative engagement with (potential) customers. One example of an established brand using the 'passion' narrative associated with gaming in order to establish a customer-base is the fast food franchise Arby's. Arby's success on social media is due in large part to leveraging geek culture and maker culture to create recognizable and relatable content that then creates chatter among people who see the posts. Love or hate the food, Arby's has a unique way of leveraging content that people profess to be passionate about (games, comics, etc.). The affective hook comes from remediating that content into a new potential form of attachment, or as Bolter and Grusen say in *Remediation*, "new [mediums have] to find [their] economic place by replacing or supplementing what is already available, and popular acceptance, and therefore economic success, can come only by convincing customers that the new medium improves on the experience of older ones" (68). This adds another facet to understanding personal attachment and passion toward an institution. The entrapment or disposition that Albert, Merunka and Valette-Florence talk about isn't necessarily towards the product that the business is creating. In the case of Arby's, the passionate entrapment that their social media invites isn't about the food. Increased food sales may be a byproduct of their social media presence because customers may be more willing to try their food if they see their favorite *Final Fantasy VII* character created out of wrappers, but the food itself is not the intended device for developing passion towards the brand. The important element of Arby's social media interaction is that it is leveraging affective attachments to media that people are glad to reminisce about. Arby's, by leveraging source material that people are already passionate about, creates easy pathways to brand recognition and opportunities for chatter and dissemination of knowledge *about* Arby's. Another example of Arby's unique understanding of appealing to geek culture is their presence at Games Done Quick (GDQ). Games Done Quick is a semiannual gaming event where speedrunners run games on a twitch stream and in front of a live audience to raise money for charity. GDQ is the largest speedrunning event in North America, and routinely attracts anywhere from 15,000 to 65,000+ viewers on twitch. Viewers are encouraged to donate to charity to be entered into contests to win gaming art, game systems, and other game-related prizes. Arby's papercraft has been an incentive for the last 4 GDQ events. Arby's paper artists, who are responsible for the pieces behind the social media success, set up a

table at GDQ and did papercraft during the entire fall event. Some of the pieces were added to the prize pool that watchers could donate to be entered to win. The food that Arby's produces never came up; there were no awkward plugs for a roast beef sandwich from H. John Benjamin, nor were GDQ's between-events commentators required to plug such-and-such new special sandwich. The papercrafters worked to create relevant material, and that was the crux of the attention that Arby's was given. But simply by *mentioning* Arby's, and linking the name with the conceptual passion that nerds may have towards game characters, Arby's created potential entrapment opportunities. Arby's will come up again later in this chapter when talking through the importance of the *type* of labour that this nerd-signposting comprises. By understanding how passion is operationalized here, how passion becomes operationalized via the material discursive conditions of immaterial labour becomes clear.

Immaterial Labour

To understand further how and why passion and precarity become intertwined in videogame production to create the material-discursive conditions that it currently subsists in, it is important to understand the *type* of labour being performed. Immaterial labour, as defined by Lazzarato is "the labor that produces the informational and cultural concept of the commodity" (134). Instead of being concerned with creating a physical 'thing' that has its own static capabilities, quirks, and positioning that requires physicality to change those aspects, immaterial labour is concerned with creating knowledge-capital. Additionally, knowledge production relies much less on physical labour than material production does. Instead of performing types of labour such as heavy lifting, welding, or structural building, knowledge production relies on 'light' physical labour through which knowledge capital is produced. Typing, drawing, clay rendering, walking, standing, and playing are examples of the type of physical labour needed to create knowledge capital. Knowledge production utilizes affective, mindful, and psychical energy in the same way that physical production utilizes physical, kinetic, and corporeal energy. The labour involved with making a videogame involves using immaterial knowledge-based skills to create sign-based systems and architecture that can be changed easily. Material labour is required for things like data entry, prototyping, and interfacing with colleagues, but the bulk of the labour being done is non-material. Immaterial labour in industries like videogame production does not produce a physical architecture that depends on utilizing physical labour with very little immaterial labour for it be functional or to be changed.

Knowledge capital is, inherently, a commodity: something that can be used to produce currency, either monetary or cultural currency. Unlike the commodities that physical labour produce, immaterial commodities aren't necessarily "gone" after they are used. Their thingness, their form is not destroyed or remediated in such a way as destroying a car fundamentally renders it useless. Instead, when immaterial commodities are 'used', they are not "destroyed in the act of consumption, but rather [enlarged, transformed, and create] the "ideological" and cultural environment of the consumer" (Lazzarato, 134). An example of the enlargement and transformation that Lazzarato is talking about is videogame marketing. In "Valuable Virality", Akpinar and Berger talk about viral marketing as a highly-coveted non-paid form of marketing. Teixeira, in "The New Science of Viral Ads" talks about virality as a form of marketing that allows cultural capital to move *through* people instead of getting stuck. Due to the nature of virality, or something spreading organically through multiple people and proliferating, companies that use social media platforms as a selling-point aim to create ads and content that

are interesting both with and without the brand name attached to it. Unlike material labour that requires conscious creation of components to be sold to produce revenue, immaterial labour can rely on something being 'viral' as a way to generate knowledge- and cultural-capital, which in turn, will produce revenue. But for revenue to be produced through knowledge- and cultural-capital generation, and especially through an avenue such as memes, affective attachment becomes an important consideration.

An important part of virality is how the material being advertised appeals to emotions; Akpinar and Berger say that

> Whereas emotional ads increase sharing compared with informative ads, informative ads bolster brand evaluation and purchase likelihood compared with emotional nonintegral ads. Emotional integral ads combine the benefits of both approaches: they encourage people to share while also boosting brand-related outcomes (by generating more positive inferences about persuasion attempts and increasing brand knowledge). (328)

One form of viral marketing that relies on emotions without much context to the product itself is that of 'hype' marketing. Hype marketing relies on context and affect to tease possible new games or new content. For example, Rockstar Games, in teasing *Red Dead Redemption 2* simply tweeted a picture of their logo, the Rockstar 'R' and star, on a red background. The logo is weathered, and the red background is also weathered. A picture of the tweet can be seen in

Figure A: RockStar's teaser image of *Red Dead Redemption II*

Figure B: Bethesda's teaser image of *Fallout: 76*

Figure A. Fans of the original *Red Dead* game could recognize the weathering effect as a common theme on environmental artwork. The first game, released in 2010, was a cult classic; well-reviewed and well-received by fans. There were six years of silence around a possible follow-up to the first game, and the announcement for *Read Dead Redemption 2* seemingly came out of nowhere. The tweet was tweeted in October of 2016, well outside of award season or typical show season for videogame production. Within minutes of Rockstar tweeting the image, a Reddit post (linked here) reached the front page of Reddit and the r/gaming subreddit, amassing over 25,000 upvotes in the first three hours of the post. The post was archived at nearly 55,200 upvotes. Another example of hype marketing is Bethesda's teasing of *Fallout 76* prior to e3 in 2018. A picture of the tweet can be seen in *Figure B.* This game announcement, especially,

rode the hype surrounding previous Fallout games. *Fallout 4*, the newest Fallout game before *76* was critically praised and has become a fan-favorite ranking with *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Fallout: 3*. The marketing around *Fallout 76* followed much the same formula that Rockstar used for *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Nothing had been announced regarding another entrance in the Fallout franchise since *4*, and considering that *4* had released in late 2015, a new game announcement wasn't forecasted. As with Rockstar's announcement, no context was given in teasing *Fallout 76* except that it used assets that are recognizable from previous Fallout games. Similarly to the Reddit post that skyrocketed to the frontpages of Reddit and r/gaming, Bethesda's teaser received similar attention, but the thread was summarily deleted due to trolling regarding this just being another *Skyrim* announcement.

Part of the goal of immaterial labour is to produce knowledge and cultural capital as easily and quickly as possible, with as little expenditure of bodies or resources as possible. Limor Shifman, in "Memes in a Digital World", defines memes as "cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon" (363). The goal of hype marketing is to stir as much interest around a new title as possible without expending the marketing budget of, say, *Final Fantasy VII*'s original $100 million. Another important aspect of hype marketing is to keep potential customers talking about, spreading, and culturally ingratiating these games into social vernacular. Jane Bennet, in *Vibrant Matter*, talks about successfully spreadable media being 'sticky', like peanut butter. Like peanut butter, it is difficult to un-stick oneself from a particularly exciting or appealing game announcement, especially if someone has affective ties to the game, series, or company.

Immaterial labour functions to enable knowledge production by creating pathways of subjectivation in which precarity and passion combine to form cruel optimism. By enabling knowledge production as a new arena of production, neoliberalism allows for production to become a competition in which 'winners' work more, produce more, and sacrifice more. In videogame production, this overwork manifests as and is operationalized through 'passion'. Passion relies on, and is invigorated by, a person's willingness to persevere in precarious circumstances to achieve a goal and drive for success. Passion is, then, used to subjectivate workers into always working harder, longer, and quicker not only as a meritocratic dimension but also a precarious dimension. Capital-generation in videogame production dictates that, if a worker is not doing 'enough' (however *that* is defined, which is beyond the scope of this project), that work can be outsourced to developing countries, or a new, younger body can be brought in to do the same job for less pay simply because of the cultural cache of working in videogames in North America. All of this taken together forms what cruel optimism looks like in videogame production in North America from a top-down, generalist viewpoint.

What Now, What Next?

This chapter has defined several concepts and made a case for a theoretical understanding of what precarity is, how it might manifest in certain circumstances, and under what conditions it might become exacerbated. Passion, as a concept, is a way of gauging a person's commitment to a thing over other things. Business and entrepreneurial studies consider passion as a driving metric in understanding success: the more of oneself that is committed to an idea or a project, the more success that that project will have. Immaterial labour, or "labour that produces the informational and culture concept of the commodity (Lazzarato, 134)", creates new forms of precarity that are not present in material labour. These precarities pose less of a bodily-injury

risk, and are more focused on job insecurity in the forms of contract labour and outsourcing. Within videogame production, passion is leveraged as a way of justifying contract labour positions and job insecurity: those that are willing to show their passion in the form of labour will be rewarded with full-time positions, less precarious working conditions, and less job insecurity (Johnson 2013a). Passion is also used as a recruitment and retention tool within videogame production, and as a workplace policing measure. D'Anastasio's example of Riot's toxic recruiting culture, and how one informant reported being subjected to extensive questions about her *World of Warcraft* experience, are commonplace as far as passion being used as a workplace policing method. Within videogame production, passion is used to create environments that are inherently anti-union because of the valorization of overwork (Pettica-Harris, Wester, McKenna, 580)

As previously stated, the goal of this project, and the intended academic contributions are not to make generalizable or anthropological characterizations of an entire group of people. I have used this chapter to lay out, theoretically, what precarity *should* or *could* be. There are forms of precarity in this chapter that can apply to certain circumstances or job-types that won't transfer to other circumstances or job-types. What this chapter theorizes is an impersonal understanding of 'precarity' as an umbrella term. The literature I have reviewed in this chapter talks at length about characteristics and conditionalities of precarity, and is useful for establishing contexts to try and examine precarity in.

Cruel optimism presents a very convincing way of understanding motivation regarding peoples' choice to stay in videogame production or to pursue videogame production. The concept accounts for passion as both a driving force in subjectivation and as an overarching explanation of how videogame production can keep people hooked into potentially damaging or traumatic situations. It accounts for the necessity of seating this entire theoretical argument in immaterial labour. Without knowledge-capital as the goal of the activity being discussed, passion and precarity assume different roles, answer to different material-discursive and ontological imperatives, and cannot be understood in the same ways. It also highlights how neoliberalism enables precarity by decentering agency from producers and instead focusing on productive capacity as the telling 'worth' of a body.

What these theories fail to account for is the individual, embodied experiences of people working in videogame production. These theories lend themselves to making theoretical claims regarding how labour operates and how precarity manifests, but integrated world capitalism, the capitalist socius, and platformization do not take into account the people involved in these processes, nor the affective dimensions of what a body is processing through and experiencing. Cruel optimism, on the other hand, accounts for who, what, and why people that are involved in videogame production act, feel, and processes in the ways that they do. But what cruel optimism cannot account for is the embodied experience of the individuals involved in production. As Berlant reminds us when she is first sketching the contours of cruel optimism, this concept is an understanding of how capitalism and neoliberalism are privileging certain bodies and modes of consumption over others (3). The purpose of this project, and the purpose of Berlant's work, is not to make a sweeping generalization regarding intentionality. Berlant's work is more concerned with how the affective contours of bodily processing render themselves porous and nonsensical. What this project is interested in, on the other hand, is taking the singular, embodied experiences of people that are at work in various positions in videogame production and giving them a platform to share their truths. Cruel optimism can explain certain aspects of decision making, especially how affect and emotionality play into decision-making regarding constructs

of capital, but it cannot produce the personal truths of those that are involved in the industry for better or for worse. In the next chapter, I will go over my methodological approaches to this project in addition to my understanding of the impact those choices have on this project.

2.
Making a Method

In this chapter I will outline the methodological frameworks of my research and make a case for why those choices fit this project better than others. This chapter builds on definitional work from the previous chapter to define who and what constitutes videogame production in a theoretical sense. Much of the previous chapter deals with definitional and foundational work explaining why precarity is the lynchpin of this project, and what different forms precarity could, theoretically, take in videogame production. Since this project is concerned with understanding precarity in videogame production, it is important to use accurate representations of the experiences of informants brave enough to share their stories with me. Without those first-hand representations of experiences, this project cannot understand precarity from a granular, personal level up through an institutional level. .

To reproduce my informants' stories truthfully and as carefully as I possibly can puts me in a position to more fully understand these questions and how my informants' experiences have been shaped by precarity. This is why this project uses tools from feminist ethnographic work like Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* and institutional ethnographic work like Alison Griffith and Dorothy Smith's *Mothering for School* to help frame what, exactly, I am hoping to uncover by talking to informants. Not only do I want to produce an authentic account of my informants' experiences, but I also want to understand the power structures and power struggles that occur within their stories and how they handle them.

By using these methods as complimentary tools to one another, I am able to more fully explore the questions that this project is based on. These methods both excel at revealing intricacies, relations, and hidden contours that are not easily discernable. Feminist and institutional ethnography both rely on locating people within systems of power. The difference, and what makes the pairing of these two methods so enticing, is what those people are being located in relation to. To locate people within videogame production in relation to passion and precarity requires understanding embodied narratives and definitions for those experiencing precarity and working through and with their passion. It also requires understanding the potential impact of these people on corporatized structure of videogame production: where peopleare trapped in institutional circuitry, where power imbalances take place, and where the rules are not the same for all types of people. I do not seek to speak for everybody in videogame production, nor do I seek to be able to quantify all of their experiences. Instead, I seek to build a corpus of

experiential knowledge of how workers describe and characterize precarity. If there is ever to come a point where collective action and unionization are achievable goals, due diligence must be done to take into account what *actual workers* are experiencing and where weaknesses in corporate videogame production labour are present.

Groundwork(ing) and Front Matters

In the previous chapter, I determined that precarity signals a possible state of uncertainty towards job safety or the ability of people to find gainful employment. Contract labour, and what Colin Campbell talking to Nate Gibson, labels as 'employment misclassification' present precarity in a way that isn't initially clear to those entering into contract digital labour. Often, contract positions will state in the job material that the position is in place for so many months, with the chance of the position ending in fulltime employment, depending on budget approval and workplace fit. But questions of who the employee is actually being hired *by* complicate this further; I gave an example of a video editor that was 'hired' by a videogame production company, only to find out that he was technically hired by a contract firm that the videogame production company hired. So even though the front matter of this informant's contract stated that there was a possibility of them being hired full-time at the end of the contract, this falsehood was only made clear to them after they had started. In addition to the cruel optimism of being hired as a contract employee, a full-time position dangled in front of workers to force them into working harder and going outside of the bounds of their contract to complete work, and then finding out that that was never a possibility to begin with, the question of basic things such as sick leave, insurance, and payscales are further complicated by contract (mis)classifications.

Having that definitional work in place, it becomes easier to try and determine how precarity manifests in videogame production. Since I am not interested in creating work that is totalizing or can speak for a large portion of videogame production, the best choice for figuring out where and how precarity manifests is by conducting a case study. The term 'case study' has a few different understandings depending on the context that in which the case study is being conducted. Herve Dumez, in "What is a Case, and What is a Case Study?" says that, within sociological discourse, a case study can be said to revolve around a singularity that can be isolated (44). Additionally, Clyde Herreid in "What is a Case?" defines a case study as an event or case that has a narrative element to it (92). John Gerring, in "What is a Case Study and What is it Good For?" offers additional clarification of why case studies are useful methodological tools by interrogating what they are good for in the first place (344). Gerring says that they allow for multidisciplinary theoretical approaches, and allow for researchers to approach perceived problems without being embedded in a singular community, but instead, using embedded research from multiple communities as one cohesive thought experiment.

I chose to conduct a case study for two reasons: one of those being access, and the other being safety of my informants. As I touched on in the introduction to this project, videogame production is a blackbox as far as critical research goes. Potential informants already deal with overreaching NDA agreements and fear of getting fired or blacklisted due to speaking ill of the company. Issues of popular news media and academic publishing grossly misquoting or glamorizing videogame production precarity create even more mistrust between potential industry informants and journalists *and* academics. In this project, I have gone to the extent of using throw-away Discord and Skype names for interviews, asking my institution to purge deleted emails from my trashcan, keeping interviews on a password protected USB stick that will

melt if the incorrect password is entered too many times, and not keeping identifying details on any informants outside of when the interview took place and the first letter of their last names (if they consented to that). Seeking an ethnographic, embedded experience with a videogame production company raises the same issues. In terms of seeking to critically analyze workplace culture, the machinations of production, or the people at work in keeping these structures in place, very few companies are willing to open themselves up to this kind of observation. Ethnographic projects in videogame production, such as those conducted by Robin Johnson and Ergin Bulut, provide useful understandings of the limitations of just how far a researcher can push and prod before their work is no longer welcome. Their ethnographic work chronicles the steady decline of the researcher being an anomaly and becoming a nuisance. Johnson's work in "Towards Greater Production Diversity" asks questions about gender, expectation, racism, and sexism, and the answers he receives to some of those questions are very guarded and careful, but clearly contentious. Bulut's work in "Playboring in the Tester Pit" asks similar questions and received similar stark and guarded answers. Both researchers provide valuable information about how production operates, how previously-theorized precarity can manifest, and embodied, experiential data about workplace culture. Unfortunately, ethnographic data beyond those points is absent. To some extent, the lack of access, or more accurately the *privilege* of access afforded to few, limits the insights that can be garnered from work like theirs since what they publish does not include the entirety of their field notes, transcriptions, etc. This is yet another reason why I chose to employ the methodologies that I did: they are predicated on careful, thoughtful reporting and recording – I produce my informants' stories truthfully and accurately and acknowledge that there are gaps, but nonetheless, their stories constitute important additions to the body of literature about production spaces.

All of this to say, for the scope of this project, and for the time (and money, relocation, lodging, food, etc.) constraints on me to do this project, embedded research presented too much of a personal liability. By leveraging a case-study approach, though, and by making it explicitly clear that none of this project is meant to stand as generalizable knowledge regarding videogame production but instead as situated, embodied experiences being shared to triangulate precarity, passion, and cruel optimism, it has become possible to complete a project that I feel has wider implications in providing workers with a platform to share their experiences and define their own precarity. Additionally, this project acts as a public-facing and accessible document that production workers can look to and see that they're not alone in experiencing assorted forms of precarity.

Deductive, Inductive, and Project Revisions

At the outset, I approached this project as leaning on deductive data gathering to further refine a theory: that cruel optimism runs rampant in videogame production, which, then, breeds precarity. I did so under the *guise* that it was an inductive experiment, and that I was open to hearing informants' stories and experiences, but how I was structuring my questions, the interviews themselves, how I was responding to informants, and how I was writing about informants was not inductive. This project evolved into a truly semi-inductive, but mostly deductive, data collection project. Whereas traditional ethnography, and the two types of ethnography that I borrow from, approach issues openly and allow for problems, patterns, and implications to emerge, I am approaching this project with a particular object of study: precarity. How I go about searching for precarity determines that this is not a wholly deductive project, but

somewhere in between deductive and inductive. The first round of interviews were more concerned with furthering my own agenda with its own definitions, preconceived notions of precarity, and own nearly-already-written outcomes. I approached the second round of interviews as a way of allowing my informants to talk about what *they* felt was important. I allowed informants to lead me through their lives, set their own bounds and contours, define how *they* conceived of precarity, if they even did, and how they approached collective action and other strategies for minimizing precarity. By establishing institutional ethnography and feminist ethnography as the main two tools in my kit through which I conduct this qualitative case study about precarity, the focus also became less about finding red-handed examples of pre-formulated ideas of what makes precarity, and instead became concerned with letting my informants tell *me* what precarity was in their lives. My informants told *me* how they defined precarity, what events they had experienced that made them feel vulnerable and precarious, how they defined precarity versus precariousness (which informs a good portion of my theory chapter), and how their resilience in the face of these events helped to strengthen them. By engaging with institutional ethnography, especially, in this project, I am much more interested in gendered relations of power and modes of production, and using institutional ethnography as a way of accessing, across a number of non-ethnographic sources, embodied experiences that speak to what precarity is for them.

The matter of precarity living and thriving in production of *any* sort is not new theory or a groundbreaking idea. As with any knowledge-production venture in late-capitalism, digital media production, especially videogame production, relies on producing units of knowledge at the cost of anything else. Bodies, both technical and biological, are disposable; their use is creating currency. The easier it is to subjectify workers into working relentlessly and without question, the easier it is to produce capital. Whereas material production and skilled trade labourer such as airline mechanics, factory workers, and carpenters found the methodologies of collective bargaining and striking as a way to demand equity in their work, immaterial production, especially videogame production, has not found the right methodology by which collective bargaining can be truly effective, *yet*. This project seeks to allow my informants to define this for themselves: what is precarity for the people who are working in these trenches every day? What does collective action in *any* form or facet look like for them? How can game studies, media studies, and academia at large support these workers to find equity and collective bargaining methods that effect the change that they need? By utilizing a case-study approach where I pull from institutional ethnography and feminist ethnography, I have been able to explore not only my informants' experiences with their examples of precarity, but also find common places within the institution of videogame production where these problems tended to occur.

Correlating Experience

This project's methodological approach was that of a qualitative case study, with that case being 'videogame production.' A case study made the most sense as a way to approach this project because it allowed me to correlate two different experiential aspects that relate to videogame production without having to commit to a long-term ethnography and without having access to employees in one videogame production company, or access to a number of employees in a set regional area. By conducting a qualitative case study, I was able to refer to numerous first-hand, second-hand, and third-hand accounts of videogame production to triangulate how

each experience I examine complements and contrasts with other experiences. By borrowing from feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography without having to commit fully to either of those frameworks, I was free to look for and identify patterns in my data in complementary ways that have yielded both a personal understanding of the state of precarity that informants face, while also formulating an understanding of how precarity functions in a broadly institutional sense. In the case of this project, the 'institution' that I try and begin understanding isn't a single company or region, but the whole of North American triple-A videogame production since my informants were spread out all over the continental US, and my own experience took place in two different states. Videogame production as an activity takes place in similar enough material-discursive circumstances regardless of the game being made that the trappings of the activity (e.g. prototyping an idea, creating assets for the game, storyboarding or developing the script, coding) make for an interchangeable *material* entity through which it becomes possible to look at the act of videogame production as one cohesive 'thing.' If any part of this project were to be generalizable, it would be that the places in which videogame production work take place are similar enough to find commonality between one workspace and another in terms of what things and devices are present (computers, phones, laptops, screens, memorabilia) and how those things being present constitute and give agency to the space *as* a "production space". Karen Barad in "Posthumanist Performativity" talks about the attribution of agency as being defined by "material-discursive practice through which boundaries are constituted" (818). A space may be coded as "production", but only through the practices taking place within that space. It follows then that the generalizable bit that makes videogame production spaces similar is not *just* that they contain certain devices, but that they assist in articulating practices that are productive. Where the differences start to populate regarding how the institution presents differently come from the embodied experiences of my informants and the experiences of each and every videogame production worker. Each one of them has their own truth for the events that are happening within videogame production which then further illuminate how videogame production works, where power coagulates, and how power flows.

The first aspect of experiential knowledge that this project is concerned with is scholarly and popular media representations of precarity in videogame production. These representations provided an entry into thinking and initially theorizing about how cruel optimism and precarity have become entangled with passion and precarity in videogame production. Scholarship such as Johnson's "Hiding in Plain Sight," Bulut's "Glamour Above, Precarity Below," Stephanie Fisher and Alison Harvey's "Intervention for Inclusivity", and Kerr and Kelleher's "The Recruitment of Passion and Community in the Service of Capital" provide concrete examples of videogame production culture, talk about previously-theorized areas of precarity in digital media production, and use highly curated representations of the understandings of the people being written about. By the very nature of what these pieces of media highlight – precarity within videogames -- and where they are being presented, the curation comes in the form of word count, article flow, or doctoring stories to fit the publication's or the editor's criteria. These are not necessarily negative things, though. These pieces of literature provide an entry point into labour-related politics in videogame production, and provide polarizing headlines that grab the attention of scholars, people in media production, and people that may not usually be interested in these types of narratives. For example, Johnson's "Technomasculinity and Its Influence in Video Game Production" details upfront how the broad concept of hypermasculinity becomes entwined with playing games in production spaces, but uses highly curated and often truncated-feeling narratives such as "Carl" and "Chris's" conversations below:

> *Carl:* So back in the winter of 1996, I put on a suit, and I came here and asked for a job. They said, 'No, you don't have enough experience, but there is a company down the street. You could probably go there to get some experience.' I was heartbroken. I ended up applying for the job there, and a few months later, I got an interview. They hired me on the spot actually, which was pretty nice. That resulted in me not getting thrown out of my parents' house and proving to my mother that staying up all night playing video games did not hurt but actually helped me. That was pretty cool (256).
>
> *Chris:* What helps me is that I've probably played more [of Dynevolve's franchise game series] than anyone else, which is both good and bad. It's good because I got a job, but had I not then it would have been a problem. My mom wasn't too much of a fan of the game until I got hired, and she was suddenly a big fan. It's funny how that works. I've had lots and lots of experience with this genre, with this game series in particular. … You become aware over time the things that people like and dislike, and the issues that might arise from these ideas.

These narratives both detail how a lifetime of passion towards playing videogames culminated in a job for these people without exploring any of the facets of the precarious nature of job hunting (aside from "Carl" being "heartbroken"), nor do they give any substantive insight to what these two people did in the interim of job-searching, how their passion may have shifted, what they did to market themselves, etc. The narratives that authors like Fisher and Harvey are working with are, by nature, third-hand accounts, which means that the ability to account for them is trickier than accounting for my own experiences, or the experiences of those that I have spent time personally talking to[4]. That doesn't mean that their perspectives are any less true, but it does mean that I am making a conscious decision to use scholarship like Johnson's, Bulut's, Kerr and Kelleher's, and Fisher and Harvey's as framing tools, and as entries into the discussion about labour and precarity in videogame production instead of using them as situated, experiential knowledge that I can personally account for like my own experiences and the experiences of my informants. Using these scholarly works as a basis for further theorizing and recontextualizing how precarity operates, it became easier to talk about my own experiences in videogame production.

The second and final aspect of experiential knowledge this project is concerned with are the experiences of my informants. Of the six people whose accounts are part of this project, 2 of them are in management positions at triple-A studios (big-budget studios usually backed by a publishing company), 2 of them are contract/contingent employees who are currently contracted on a yearly basis with two triple-A studios, and the other 2 were salaried developers with two triple-A studios. I was concerned first and foremost with making space for my informants to share their truth about their embodied experiences with videogame production. My own experience is different from their experiences in a number of ways, but our experiences overlap in a number of ways, too. The acknowledgement that loneliness was a shared symptom of my informants' lives, my own life, and the lives of the people who I am reading third-hand accounts of indicates that, across these accounts, we all share affective experiences that we may not have been aware that we shared. But the ways in which we handled those affective experiences somewhat (re)defined precarity for myself, and certainly for my informants. That is why the

[4] Fisher and Harvey, on pg. 28 of "Intervention for Inclusivity" (2013) discuss examples of Hand-Eye Society's (HES) media.

space being made here for their situated, experiential truths is integral to this project's success and the future success of labour-related scholarly activism. My informants' stories, and how they shared those stories, also shared a secondary embodied affect that is important: things like body language, silence, non-answers, redirections in conversation, and sharing raw feelings about reliving possibly scarring situations give further autonomy and credence to their experiences and, in my mind, instill in me that their experiences *are* their truths. And to be able to share with them the process of constructing our truths is powerful and timely for a project like this.

Interview Experience

The interviews themselves, and the interview experience is where this project became what it is: a semi-inductive experience in which I talked to informants, talked to them while they defined what precarity was for themselves, and then helped them talk through how they had handled precarity and in what ways they had been empowered by these experiences towards considering collective action.

This project has gone through two formal rounds of questions with informants. The first formal round of questions followed a strict, semi-structured interview format following the structure that Sharan Webster lays out in Qualitative Research (89). This first round of questioning was primarily focused on securing formal, on-the-record accounts of the following questions from participants. All seven of these interviews took place in the Carolyn B. Miller conference room in Ricks Annex on North Carolina State University's campus between the dates of August 16, 2018 and October 15, 2018.

Unlike a purely inductive project, I recognize that, with both rounds of questions that this project went through with informants, I was looking for something in particular. The difference between these two rounds of questions that I went through is that the first round of questioning was necessitated on *me* exploring *my own* theorizations and formalizations of what precarity looked like. I went in with very small view of what precarity was, how I think it should manifest in videogame production, and I was content on pushing that agenda with my informants. Hence, I only have 6 usable interviews because I failed to embrace the sort of open, inviting interview style that feminist ethnography, especially Visweararan, emphasizes. In the second round of interviews with my informants, I allowed *them* to guide the discussion and use their experience working in videogame production to guide what we talked about. We still focused on the concept of 'precarity,' but instead of trying to fit their experiences into my narrow definition of what precarity is, I made the conscious choice to allow their objective truths to guide my definitional process. This created a more robust and more embodied sense of what precarity 'is' and how it manifests for people actively working within videogame production.

The 'blinders', so to speak, that I put on this project were simple: building from my theory chapter, I had defined what immaterial precarity looked at in a broad sense, and then possible ways in which cruel optimism could be seen as an entanglement of precarity in videogame production that preyed on workers' passion, and also work misclassification, to create necessary conditions of exploitation in videogame production. In the 'second chance' interviews, I put this definition aside and instead sought to engage my informants' ideas of what precarity means for them. Their definitional work, how they approached defining precarity, and how they dealt with the situations they talked about, went a long way to helping me redefine my own bounds and contours of how I talked about precarity in this project.

To find participants for my project, I sent out 649 emails soliciting interviews with

developers, quality assurance workers, systems workers, community managers, localization teams, sound designers and engineers, and artists about my project. I received responses from 53. Of those 53, 39 said that they did not want to speak with me about the subjects I was bringing up for a number of reasons. One of the most-cited reasons was job safety and the fear of punishment should their information or what they confided in me would get out. Of the 14 potential interviewees left, only seven were able or willing to carry through with interviews. Two of the seven that did not carry through with being interviewed cited that their workload was too intense to really take time away to do something like this, and another cited, again, fear of reprisal from the company that they worked for. The other four that did not participate in my project did not respond to my follow-up email after the initial email. From the seven people willing to be interviewed, I conducted six usable interviews. By usable, I mean that the six that I am using for this project were amenable to at least two further rounds of questions.

The first formal round of questions for, at the time, seven participants was split into three rough sections. The first section consisted of four questions, each of which was geared towards the actual structural and architectural concerns of the places that my informants had worked. These questions can be found in Appendix A. Questions focused, specifically, on where informants did the most amount of their work. For some informants, this was a set desk with privacy, for some informants this was an open area. A follow-up to that question asked informants about colors, patterns, furniture, personal effects, and how their space was organized. These were my attempt at situating where, exactly, my participants were so that I could get a better idea of what their actual material working conditions were like. I then asked whether informants could remember any specific times where the space that they described to me impacted their work habits, health habits, and/or interpersonal communication habits, or had hampered their ability to perform a task. I hypothesized that the spaces that these people were in every day would have deep affective meaning; since they spent well beyond 'normal' 9-5 working hours in these places, I hypothesized that there could be a connection to the actual architecture of these spaces, like imprints. In retrospect, I see that I was setting these questions up almost as a way to segue into trauma studies literature in the same way that in *Cruel Optimism* Berlant segued from literary criticism into talking about slow-death and continual trauma (97). I assumed that these people had the same emotional trauma as, say, a domestic abuse survivor. They were both, for some reason or another, bound to a space where they could not leave. In the sense of videogame production, this was sometimes literal (overwork, crunch, etc.).

The next section of questions dealt with interpersonal communication and workplace culture concerns. Informants were asked first about coworkers: were your coworkers friendly, what did you like about them, what did *their* working spaces look like, what sorts of interactions did you have with them, was there every any friction? Next, informants were asked if they, personally, had ever felt discriminated against, and if so, could they describe the space that the event took place in. Colors, furniture, did the space seem bigger/smaller, etc. were encouraged to be expounded upon. I then asked informants about times that they witnessed coworkers being discriminated against, or coworkers being discriminatory. Again, I encouraged discussion about spatial awareness, colors, furniture, etc. Akin to the first section, I was questioning in such a way that informants would either answer in line with my presupposed hypotheses or their information would not be useful to me. I was hyperfocused on fitting each participant into a ready-fit mold where everything they had experienced was terrible, and where negativity and negative experiences hung over them like a raincloud over Portland. This hyperfocus was due in

large part wanting to not 'miss' anything that correlated with my operating concern of digging out explicit instances of precarity.

The final section dealt with an assortment of questions that didn't fit neatly into one category. The first question of this section asked informants to try and remember what their manager's offices looked like and where they were located. Specifically, if the offices were overlooking the production floor, or were on a separate floor from the informant. I then asked about extraneous furniture that was not in the space for the express purpose of facilitating videogame production. Things like ping pong tables, bean bag chairs, beer kegs. I inquired about the functionality of these furniture pieces, who usually used them, and what the space allotted to those items was versus space allotted to working furniture. I then asked informants about times when they felt pressured to stay late/work late. I especially wanted to understand if comments regarding deadlines were used as to pressure workers, or if the furniture that was extraneous to videogame production became more than just a during-the-day work break. One participant mentioned that they slept many nights of crunch on bean bag chairs in their communal working space and when they were asked to stay late but protested, those in charge always made light of the situation, saying something to the effect of "Well, there's plenty of room on the bean bag chairs! C'mon, be a team player." So for this question, furniture, again, became important for locating where exploitation was happening. Finally, I asked participants if they felt like the spaces that they worked in were meant to keep them there and keep them working. Again, these questions were designed to solicit very specific answers from participants that would fit into my pre-determined narrative of videogame production.

The logic behind these questions specifically was the leading assumption that everything with videogame production was overly-negative, no one wanted to work there, people were working their out of spite or to prove a point to someone, or that their passion for videogames had pressured them into some sort of indentured servitude with videogames. This line of reasoning, of course, did not make room for my informants' experiences that did not fall in line with what I was talking about. The way that this first round of questions was formatted (and to some extent, asked in conversation) pushed an agenda that put the human being that I was talking to in a state of subjugation to the architecture around them. I was obsessed with understanding how architecture subjugates and subjectivates people, to the detriment of the conversations that I had with informants. This obsessive insistence on architecture over person led to one of my participants feeling alienated and not feeling like they were being listened to and actually heard. To that informant, I cannot apologize enough for my missteps, but I thank them for saying what they did. With this project, it has always been my intention to locate the 'person' in the 'personal narratives' that I knew I would be collecting. What I did not account for was trying to locate the people in question so intently in the environment informants inhabited on a daily basis that I completely displaced them altogether and lost them to whims and fancies of my own.

The second round of questioning was conducted in the same place as the first round and took place between January 1, 2019 and January 29, 2019. This time, I didn't prepare questions, and I didn't prepare an agenda to get through. I simply had a few points of conversation that I wanted to cover. I emailed each of my 7 informants about a follow-up round of questions, and 6 were amenable. I framed this second interaction with my 6 informants as a conversation, like we should have been having in the first place. I wanted to talk to them about three main points and whatever came from that discussion mixed with what they had said in the previous interview was the situated, embodied knowledge and experience that I had to work with. I wanted to talk to

them about how they defined 'precarity' in videogame production, and what their experiences were with precarity. Next, I asked their thoughts on unionization. Were they pro-union, anti-union, or abstained? Finally, I wanted to ask them frankly how they felt about videogame production as a whole. These three loose areas of interest facilitated more fruitful conversations than the previous 11 questions combined.

By no means am I insinuating that this second round of questions was the textbook 'correct' way that these interviews should have been conducted in the first place. Work from Patti Lather's *Getting Smart* (1991) and Annie Oakley's "Interviewing Women" (2016) were instrumental in helping me to move past the initial sense of failure that I felt in committing mistakes that I read, synthesized, and then promptly seemed to forget Vizweswaran talking at length about. Their work helped me (re)shape my second round of questions into something more conversational and less formal and more accessible. I am very certain, however, that the discussions that I had the second time around were much more generative because I approached these conversations with the intent to make space for my informants' experiences instead of bulldozing over their experiences, or trying to conform their experiences to my own agenda. Instead, this second round of questions was conducted with the acknowledgement that I was entering into these sessions with an open mind and an open agenda; that the stories that needed to be told would be told, and those would be the situated, embodied experiences that Haraway talked about, and what this project needed to succeed.

Institutional Ethnography: Tracing power, (re)creating authentic experiences

With the acknowledgement of possible bias that is built into all projects, I want to move forward toward what, exactly, I hope to gain by employing the methodologies that I am working with. Institutional ethnography seeks to understand power relations within social orders. Alison Griffith and Dorothy Smith, in *Mothering for Schooling*, chose to examine how 'mundane' tasks that parents were expected to perform impacted and shaped the school environment their children took part in and the childrens' success in formal schooling. They conducted this work in the late 80's and early 90's, which informed the types of social relations they sought to understand, the tasks that they examined, and ultimately, how they determined power moving through the institution they examined. They recognized that there are distinct levels of power within the structure of formal public school education: namely, that there are innumerable taken-for-granted tasks that parents (mainly women, as explained on pages 23 and 27 of *Mothering for Schooling*) are expected to perform to prepare their child for 'learning.' In their case, 'learning' was defined as district-mandated learning objectives that students were expected to meet throughout the school years in different subjects. Strict blocks of time were allocated per subject (60-61). Smith and Griffith identified that these learning objectives and expectations set forth did not account for familial dynamics besides middle- to upper-middle-class families that had free time and resources to assist children in learning outside of school. Things like helping with homework, for instance. They identified distinct instances of disadvantage for "non-normative" family structures where, say, a single parent's time is partitioned off much differently than a two-parent household. They also identified varying levels of engagement among parents with regard to their child's education. Some parents did not push education like others did because they deemed that their child was doing well enough without prodding. What Griffith and Smith end up coming away with from examining how familial structures interact with, and shape, education structures is that "the public school system, with its apparent potential for equity, has been

hijacked, largely by middle-class women, to become an *engine of inequality*. Changes in the last 20 years have removed many of the economic underpinnings of the middle-class family household" (Griffith and Smith, 133).

Griffith and Smith's *Mothering for Schooling* brought to light how the entire system of education in Toronto regarding "learning" is predicated on an imagined middle-class, heteronormative, nuclear family where the father is the primary wage-earner, which then frees the mother up to conduct supplementary educational work and school enhancement (27). What this does is systematically disadvantage children from non-normative families by a) expecting there to be a parent that has the free time to facilitate out-of-school learning and enrichment, and b) not providing, or even acknowledging the need for, a course of action for children whose parents are both required to work or only one parent is present.

More than anything, *Mothering for Schooling* brought to light how power structures operate within the very specific example of Tornto Public School systems, and how there are a multitude of granular power-struggles happening on all levels of the system, not just a grand declaration of "PARENTS VERSUS SCHOOL". Instead, this work showed parents versus parents, parents versus teachers, teachers versus teachers, teachers versus administration, parents versus children, children versus teachers, etc. It is this multiplicity of understanding that makes institutional ethnography so important to this type of project. Though I am not conducting an institutional ethnography, I am borrowing from the understandings that Smith, in *Institutional Ethnography* and Griffith and Smith in *Mothering for Schooling* highlight. Namely, that there is granularity, or a number of different expectations/reactions/interactions, within any system of power, and to understand that granularity is to better understand the person being interviewed, and their specific place within not only an organization such as a game studio, but their place in personal and familial matters, social and political matters, and the wide assemblage of media production. And by understanding people and their experiences at a deep, intimate level, I am able to more authentically (re)produce their stories and gain a more nuanced understanding of their embodied, situated experiences. Within institutional ethnography, specific locative characteristics for their informants that are telling to how, within the institution of Toronto public schooling, non-normativity is punished. In revisiting the work that Griffith and Smith did in *Mothering for Schooling*, Smith's case study in *Institutional Ethnography*, highlights how public school and 'success' within public school favors certain geographical characteristics of a family: namely, mobility, or the ability for parents to get children home quickly. That may be by use of car, or living within close walking distance of the school. 'Success' also favors familial locativeness. Dual-parent families and families with extra help (meaning that at least one parent is free to earn a living without having to be prime caregiver for children) had an advantage over single-parent families, or families in which both parents worked full-time jobs without assistance. 'Success' was predicated on disposable income and disposable time, as well. The locativeness of these traits is important because, as Griffith and Smith mention multiple times, success in public school occurs in the home, not necessarily within the school. Without the material-discursive environment and tools that the they identified were important to the institution of Toronto Public Schools, students and parents that did not match those traits were at a stark disadvantage.

The non-normativity being punished in Griffith and Smith's example is not a societal standard of what normal is, though. It is an institutional standard of what is normal. In their case, the assumption from Toronto Pubic Schools that students would have: a) support structures outside of just the classroom to facilitate learning; a static, dependable household without

interruption; and the luxury of timely mobility created the expectation that students who are not doing well in school were not taking advantage of their resources. This is strikingly similar to videogame production. The institution of videogame production presupposes a certain type of person that is more ideal for production. It expects that these people have certain characteristics: passion, the desire for cultural clout, and a willingness to do whatever needs to be done to have a *chance* at achieving success. When people within the production process do not possess these characteristics, questions about their passion or their willingness to do what needs to be done are called into question and used as policing measures. Just as Toronto Public Schools did not seek to understand the granularity within the students and families that it served, videogame production is not interested in understanding similarly granular situations and people. Both institutions are in place to produce certain revenue streams: for Toronto Public Schools, it was people who could be subjectivated to work; for videogame production, it is people that are subjectivated to do very specific types of work as quickly as possible and with as little pushback as possible.

It is important to point out that the ways in which I am using institutional ethnography point to how power imbalances specific to the types of precarity that my informants talk about in the next chapter, is often felt from a far. Informant D presents a spectacular case for how ruling relations operate when spatial constraints (i.e. management being in an office, worker being on the production floor) are stripped away. The institution of videogame production is a system of historically situated movements that privilege certain people over others – this much is clear without institutional ethnography. The processes at work in videogame production, starting with investor meetings where target demographics, sales expectations, and product development expectations, going all the way down the hierarchy to contract labourers who create background assets all characterize granular historical movements that characterize the institution itself. The importance of institutional ethnography in this project comes from locating my informants in relation to the types of power that are at work within the companies they are working for. Institutional ethnography offers a particular theorization of how power operates remotely via textual practices and processes that become institutional circuitry.

By cross-referencing my own experiences, the experiences of people in popular and scholarly media, and the experiences of my informants, this project is creating a ground-level understanding of how precarity functions in situated instances, but it also provides an understanding that each incident is not an isolated incident; that there are other examples of that same type or precarity happening at other studios. Institutional ethnography becomes important for creating a basis by which I can examine the types of people that these institutions favor, and how people that either are unwilling or unable to conform are treated. As I said with Griffith and Smith's example, videogame production and Toronto Public Schools share a similarity in that one of their goals is to produce a certain type of body that can then undertake specialist labour. The loneliness that I've experienced and that my informants have experienced is such an important part of the narrative that to not acknowledge and work with it is to erase entire sections of a person; to tell them that that specific truth is less valid. One thing that this project has found is that loneliness and isolation are insidious parts of the workplace culture of videogame production. This means that, on a systemic level, videogame production's continued existence is predicated on silence to some extent.

What these responses tell me is that, on a systematic level, in every facet of work in videogame production, silent, productive people are valued and are kept in the herd, so to speak. In "Hiding in Plain Sight", Robin Johnson recounts of how one of his informants talks about

crunch and the strain of working in videogame production as something not to dwell on, but just to get through it (590). Make it through this project, take a break, start again. There is a reliance on people that value work/working over questioning labour practices or workplace culture. The themes of overwork and silence around 'complaining' become apparent in my interview material across all 6 of my informants. This understanding of silence, loneliness, and production are building blocks to understanding how the institutional framework of videogame production (ranging from hiring practices to grooming practices in colleges, universities, and coding 'bootcamps') produces, subjectivates, and values these types of people over people who value work-life balance, or do not proudly display their passion for videogames as readily as other people. By understanding, and making space for my informants' experiences, I am exercising a very rudimentary and very early production of *types* of precarity that live within videogame production. Loneliness, silence, and productive people are but a few lines in the script of institutionalism.

Feminist Ethnography: Experiential knowledge and feminist objectivity

Much like my treatment of institutional ethnography, it is important to emphasize that I am borrowing tools from feminist ethnography, but I am not conducting a feminist ethnography. Specifically, I am focusing on tools from Visweswaran and Haraway. One useful tool from feminist ethnography that has become especially important to remember and consider in this project is 'objectivity.' Though not specifically a methodological argument, Donna Haraway's work around objectivity in "Situated Knowledges" became a center-piece for the second round of questioning.

Feminist objectivity, and the art of conducting work that involves being objective in the face of knowledge-production, is tricky work. The first round of interview questions for this project did not leave room for the embodied, lived experiences of my informants. I asked questions that did not invite my informants to share their lives with me, but instead, as Informant B put it after we finished our second interview, "felt like you were waiting for me to give an answer that wasn't the experience that I'd had." Other informants said similar things about our first interviews. The questions felt stilted and, to quote Informant D, "like I had just had a wet dream thinking about a theory book or something." Which, admittedly, was probably not far from the truth. In other words, I realized that this was a somewhat deductive project, mixed with inductive elements. Not from the aspect that it was my daily life, but from the aspect that I was *talking* about peoples' daily lives, and that, at one time this had, in fact, been my daily life. Some small part of me realized that I couldn't conduct the remaining interviews with the hard objectivity that I had been convinced that I needed. I didn't have a name for it at the time of conducting the first round of questions in these first 7 interviews. Once I went through my data from these interviews, Haraway helped me to realize that I was creating situated knowledges, which then helped me to reconfigure this project in fruitful ways. This project is predicated on limited location and situated knowledge (583): my own experiences, the experiences of my informants, the experiences of the people who have been written about in scholarly and popular media, how I am processing my own experiences with videogame production, how I am processing my informants' experiences, and how I am processing the already-processed experiences of those being written about. All of these experiences and how they are processed are puzzle pieces of a puzzle that doesn't have a completable picture. To even gesture towards this project being able to represent every worker in videogame production's experience with

precarity would be a one "unlocated, and so irresponsible, knowledge [claim] (583)" where "[irresponsible] means unable to be called into account" (583). This project embodies situated experience. To me, this means that the parts of this project where I reference my own experiences, my informants' experiences, and the experiences of those written about in scholarly and popular media are all able to be called into account at some point by being referenceable and being concrete.

The other aspect of feminist ethnography that I struggled with in this project prior to incorporating Haraway's work, and Smith's work was that of identity politics. In the early stages of planning this project, I was insistent to enforce a binary of "x number of heterosexual, white, able-bodied men, and x number of women and/or queer and/or disabled bodies" among informants in a bid to a) see different manifestations of the precarity that I had identified in videogame production (that of race/sexual orientation/gender/ability politics versus the 'non-' of those categories), and b) to try and emphasize the voice of the 'disenfranchised' of this project. Haraway's very stark redress regarding the treatment of marginal people threw this project into disarray: "Subjugation is not grounds for ontology" (586). Whereas, in earlier stages of this project, I had been set on a binary of 'x male bodies versus x women/queer/disabled bodies", Haraway's work presented me with an important reminder: not to fetishize "vision… from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful" (583). With this in mind, it became even more important to position the experiences of all of my interviewees, myself, and the people in scholarly and popular media as all inherently 'true' experiences. There was no doubt that, at some point, each of my informants, myself, and those being written about had experienced precarity. Then, it became less important to understand in sweeping generalizations how that precarity had been experienced. What, instead, became the focus of this project was making a space for a "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situation, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These claims are people's lives" (589).

Whereas my initial thoughts and actions toward this project had been grounded in impartiality, creating a space for myself in an academic discourse, and creating a foundation to build future work on, this project has now become inherently personal and deeply feminist. Haraway, speaking about what feminism *is* at its core, says "Feminism is about the sciences of the multiple subject with (at least) double vision. Feminism is about a critical vision consequent upon a critical positioning in unhomogenous gendered social space. Translation is always interpretive, critical, and partial" (589). But the reservation of how the researcher is supposed to position themselves towards knowledge-production, toward translation, and toward interpretation become critical questions, and the underpinning for why *feminist* ethnography was the necessary supporting framework to institutional ethnography became the question. How can I responsibly translate these stories, draw conclusions from them, and do so with confidence? Kamala Visweswaran in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, examines feminist anthropological work and rebuffs anthropology that could not account for gender "because it was not 'at issue' in that society" (30). Instead of assuming that everything that I have experienced and will write about is the only objective truth, or everything that my informants have told me is the only objective truth, there needs to be consideration given to the possibility of multiple truths. This is where the necessity of 'situatedness' comes into play from Haraway: "location is about vulnerability; location resists the politics of closure, finality, or to borrow from Althusser, feminist objectivity resists "simplification in the last instance" (590). It became a linchpin for this project to take into account the people that I was interviewing, the spaces that I was interviewing them in, body

language, speech patterns, conversation flow, etc. It became about taking into account what the person was saying and understanding that *their voice* is what is giving credence to what they are saying. Visweswaran identifies heteroglossia in anthropological texts (31) as another form of erasure that feminist anthropologists had engaged with in search of true objectivity. Instead of using pronouns like 'I' or 'we' in transcription of events, complete impartiality was thought to have been achieved by removing the author from the texts altogether, so texts read more like "the subjects did…" or "the subjects went…". Feminist ethnography is not about a clean-cut understanding of a subject or purported absolute truth. Feminist ethnography is about understanding situated, embodied experience and creating a space where those experiences can be unpacked and translated using an ethic of care to account for what the person is feeling, their bodily position, their silence, and their experience without bulldozing over them and claiming that I, the researcher, have more knowledge of their situatedness than they do.

Concerns

To this point, this section has been concerned with making a convincing argument as to why the way I have structured my methodological approach to this project is the correct one, or as correct an approach as possible. There are still a few concerns that I want to address with the first being objectivity. This is partially for my own sanity as I have emphasized the importance of objectivity, attachment, and bias well before this project started. The other concern that I will address here is why, specifically, I did not want to commit to one methodological framing over another, and instead chose to pursue a case study over an institutional ethnography or a feminist ethnography.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I have struggled with balancing how distant or close I am to informants and their experiences in this project and seeking to open, and keep open, a proper, truthful dialogue about precarity. Even when I acknowledged to myself that absolute objectivity was impossible (well before I'd connected the dots to Haraway's work) and that there were stakes in this project for me as well as whomever I interviewed, I still struggled, and continue to struggle a little bit, with the nagging concern that this work could end up being read as me talking over or for the people I've interviewed, and for the people that have been written about in scholarly and popular media. Doubly so at the beginning of this project when I sought to basically split videogame production into the binaries of "heterosexual, white, able-bodied male" and "queer and/or woman and/or disabled and/or person of color." I still have a rather diverse informant pool, but again, the worry is that *because* of my inherent position of power in the exchanges happening between myself and my informants and between myself and representations of experiences in scholarly and popular media, that I may grievously misrepresent those experiences and perpetuate erasure. Again, though, Haraway provides an important reminder that the people this project is concerned with (or really any project that deals in feminist objectivity) *are* people, not just objects of inquiry: "Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, *never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge*" (emphasis my own) (592). My involvement with this work is not to subjugate or to lock people out of speaking, or to seek an objective truth at all. Instead, I am interested in what Nicholas Taylor says of his own methodological investments in "I'd Rather Be a Cyborg than a Gamer Bro": "I am more interested in exploring how my own non-trivial investments in games and masculinity (persistent despite years of attempting to

unlearn them) shape how I read, write, and *make sense* of these play contexts" (13). Once I came to terms with the fact that there was no way to extract myself and my prior situated experiences from this project, and that I have a non-trivial investment in the labour discussions that I am trying to help facilitate, it became important, then, to be aware and be reflective for how my own body has taken up space in videogame production spaces and to understand my own complicity in possibly re-entrenching precarity. This is why, for the purpose of this case study, my own autobiographical experiences are important. They offer me a way to share my own truth, and to be reflexive about how I constructed my presence in those spaces.

The discussion on talking for/over informants can be thought about, too, through why I chose to borrow tools from the methodological frameworks I did instead of fully committing to one framework or another. Feminist ethnography is predicated on making space for participants; their truths are undisputed as far as feminist ethnography is concerned, and I choose to believe that that is the case for this project as well. I believe that my participants are not trying to fleece me, or trick me into thinking something that isn't true. I believe that the things that they have told me, they have told me truthfully. I also believe that part of that truth lies in how the conversation went: flows of conversation, body language, non-answers, and silence. Visweswaran talks at length in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* about silence or the unwillingness to relay information between informants and herself and how it felt like a betrayal at some points (51). She then recontextualizes how she approaches that sense of betrayal by making the case that answers to the questions that she had were not the only source of truth be had. There was a rich assemblage of cultures meeting head-on, the expectation of impartiality and objective truth when it may not have been earned, and the misconception of "friendship" meaning that she had access to information regardless of the wants or needs of those she was befriending. The way that she recontextualizes these experiences has been important for me to contextualize what I thought were 'anomalies' in my data at first. It isn't that my informant's segueing in a conversation away from something that they later said made them uncomfortable means that I failed to properly extract information from them: it means that they weren't ready or willing to share that truth at the time, and the *context* in which it was shared (first as not being shared, and then later as being contextualized) are important pieces of knowledge creation in understanding situated, embodied experiences.

Though these are important reminders and important framing tools for how I approach this project, the practicalities of carrying out a feminist ethnography on this subject just aren't feasible. In addition to there only really being a handful of triple-A videogame production companies in the Raleigh/Durham area, none of them were open to the idea of allowing me to embed with their developers for, at most, a month, and at least, two weeks. I reached out to Epic Games, FunCom, and Red Storm Entertainment and asked if they would be amenable to having someone around who was curious about how videogame production workers interacted with the spaces that they worked in (mostly concerned with physical architecture). Only FunCom responded, saying that their management wasn't comfortable with that considering that they were in the middle of a busy season and that they had their IPs to worry about. I replied that I would be more than happy to sign a non-disclosure agreement for up to 5 years, but I never received a response. So while it would be highly generative to be able to be embed with one triple-A studio and to get to know the employees there on a personal level, it won't happen with this project, and it is unlikely to happen in future projects as well, considering that my work consists of critique of production. If I were interested in how streamlining work processes could lead to quicker turn-around on revisions in projects, then my presence may not have been such a

burden. But, since I am actively examining exploitative labour practices and precarity, my work will mostly likely not get me invited to embed with a studio.

Institutional ethnography, in the scope of this project, provides a naturally supplemental way of examining precarity in videogame production. Feminist ethnography is concerned with making space for informants' experiences, while institutional ethnography is concerned with figuring out how power structures operate at all levels within an institution: laterally and vertically, between peers and bosses, between lay-people and specialists, etc. Since this project is concerned with an industry-wide problem, it makes sense, then, that, in addition to understanding how informants have dealt with that precarity, what is has meant for them, and how it has affected them, it would be the next logical step to try and understand how relational dynamics have played out to possibly facilitate or diffuse precarity in their experiences. The theme of loneliness, too, became an appealing subject of inquiry for me as well, especially when the question is posed about how loneliness and isolation function in keeping workers working. The question became for me not *why* are my participants lonely: that was clear enough. The question, then, is what sorts of sociality were occurring within the structure of videogame production that made every single one of my participants and myself feel isolated. Between things that have nothing to do with videogame production, such as social anxiety, identity issues, and hobbies that are inherently meant to be "lonely" activities (like console gaming), and the established precarities of working in videogame production such as crunch, a widely heterogenous workplace culture, and possibly morally questionable themes within the games that my informants were making that required them to put aside their own morals, the *why* of why my participants and myself felt so lonely working in videogame production are clear. What taking cues from institutional ethnography has allowed this project to do is understand how relational dynamics, and how power relations especially, have played a part in at least seven peoples' lives to make them feel isolated and alone. Power, be it seniority among peers, job titles, or monetary superiority, has been wielded in such a way as to force my informants and myself, at some point, into a period of isolation where we did not feel comfortable discussing a problem with our peers or management.

In addition to feminist ethnography's problem areas regarding being the sole methodological approach to a project like this, institutional ethnography shares many of the same constraints, and introduces a few more. In addition to concerns about having access to specific institutions such as a single videogame production company, the ways in which I would be expected to carry out an institutional ethnography present the same concerns that kept an innumerable amount of people from working with me: reprisal from their employers. That, and one employee possibly telling me something that could alienate a coworker, or exacerbate a strained relationship. In Griffon and Smith's *Mothering for School* , they had access at multiple levels to the school districts that their children were enrolled in; they also had access to administrators, Parent-Teacher Association meetings, meetings with teachers, their own children's experiential knowledge, and their autobiographical knowledge of what power structures were at work in the school district to shape it how it was. I don't have access, at any level, to really any of those structures; let alone have access to all of those structures within one specific videogame company. The access that I *do* have is, admittedly, very well diverse in terms of jobs, but very limited in scope, hence I cannot commit to a full institutional ethnography in the way that it would need to be carried out if I wanted to examine how precarity functions structurally.

On their own, both of these methodologies would make compelling projects given the

same general parameters, but due to lack of access, my ability to frame this project in terms of one or the other is impossible. This is why I chose to carry out a case study and to borrow heavily from both feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography, as they both have important implications for a project like this. What a case study allows me to do is, in lieu of having access to a videogame production company and its employees, examine experiential knowledge from a number of diverse sources. By examining my own experience, the experience of my six participants, and a wellspring of scholarly and popular media experiences, I am able to find similarities and differences in much the same way that I could do with a feminist ethnography or an institutional ethnography, but I am able to do so from varied sources. Additionally, by conducting a case study, I am free to emphasize that the situated experiences that I am examining are just that: personal, situated experiences. They do not speak for an entire industry, or an institution, or a region. Instead, they are experiences with similarities and differences that are being employed in the hopes of facilitating conversations about labour-related issues in videogame production.

Preparing for Defining, Negotiating, and Responding to Precarity

By dissecting how I have approached data collection and methodology in this project, I have made a case for the 'hows' and 'whys' I chose these particular approaches to this project. These methodologies support my goal of making this project about embodied experience: this is not meant to be taken as a stand-in for any other part of videogame production, any other person's experience with videogame production, or as a deposition about the definitive ways that precarity manifests in videogame production. By setting this project up as a case study in which I borrow from feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography to characterize the critical approaches I take to my informants' experience, this project becomes the beginnings of a corpus of work that values embodied experiences, record-keeping, and activism as valuable pieces of knowledge production in game studies.

In the next chapter, I will go into detail about what themes my informants presented to me about their experiences with, and definitions of, precarity in videogame production. This chapter will highlight the main six themes that came to light across all my informants' experiences while also making room for their individual, highly embodied experiences with these experiences. Additionally, this chapter sets down concrete examples that I can apply institutional and feminist ethnography to see where power has flowed and coagulated for my informants.

3.
Interfacing

In this chapter, I will examine themes that came up within the six interview I conducted. Within my interviews, my informants and I talked through their experiences of working in videogame production. I will start by examining the four main themes that I identified from our conversations. These themes are: 1) experiencing or showing resistance to or zealotry for unionization, 2) the necessity for crunch to stop, 3) positive experiences with coworkers and power struggles with management, and 4) informants' feelings of being referred to as 'precarious', or asked about certain experiences they've had as being 'precarious'. These themes provide an initial groundworking that I will continue to build upon through chapters four and five. These themes provide grounded instances that introduce issues that feminist and institutional ethnographic tools can help to dig further into, which then provide the proper theoretical and personal undergirding to access the heart of the issues raised here: multiplicative *precarities*. The themes that this chapter raises help to establish the general working areas where my informants have talked about, experienced, and worked through precarity.

Conducting these interviews highlights the importance of understanding embodied and granular experiences within videogame production. Without these workers' accounts of how they've interacted with, faced down, and overcome precarity, I would still be working with very stark binarisms about who is affected by precarity and how they are affected. These interviews shed light on the main questions of this entire project: how does precarity manifest? How do people working in videogame production experience precarity? Work through precarity? Interact with, recontextualize, and reconfigure precarity? These interviews show that precarity is not a nebulous, all-encompassing term for bad things happening. Precarity is granular; it has contours that, without embodied, experiential data, we would lack a clear understanding of how and what is precarious. In addition to shedding light on what precarity 'is' for videogame production workers, these interviews provide an intimate understanding of how people *become* precarious. A precarious work situation does not manifest the same for two people, regardless of how close they are in job/rank/responsibility. There are suites of mitigating factors that present for, say, a contract re-signing. Two people could be up for renewal, have done the same amount of work at the same quality, and tangential, ethereal complaints like "Person One's attitude is bad for productivity" can make the difference between getting resigned or fired. But what caused someone to say that Person One's attitude is bad? *Is* there attitude actually affecting

productivity? Is it something in their personal life? Did something negative happen between Person One and the person who complained? Is the complainer looking to make a sidelong move into the position Person One holds? Again, there are a range of mitigating factors to determine why or how a situation becomes precarious Again, precarity is granular. It is an adjective, an adverb, a noun; people or conditions are precarious, people experience precarity, people interact with precarity. These interviews provide important semantic context for more responsibly talking about people that are experiencing precarity.

Within these six interviews, there was a good deal of overlap in how each informant approached things like precarity, passion, overwork, and workplace culture. In the second round of interviews, I did not approach informants with any clear questions or a deterministicagenda that I was trying to get answers through. Instead, I approached them with a few general conversation topics, and my goal was to allow them to lead me through their own experiences. Those conversation topics included: asking about any experience with unions that they were comfortable talking about; asking about any negative work experiences that they felt comfortable sharing; asking about their explicit take on crunch; and asking about what they thought of the words ‘precarity’ and ‘precarious’.

Introducing…

My informants for this chapter are six current videogame production workers. Each of them have worked at least one full contract term in North American videogame production. Their jobs are all mostly coding and development-based labour with the exception of Informant E who performs quality assurance labour and community management labour in addition to coding labour. In the interest of keeping my informants’ identities as anonymous as possible, I will not be providing age, gender, or any locative information other than a state.

Informant A: Informant A has worked in videogame production since the late ‘80’s. They have worked on big-budget triple-A titles that are still around today. During their time working on the aforementioned titles, they started as a programmer and were promoted to a senior management position when the company they worked for began to corporatize and do away with the flattened hierarchy they had. This informant now owns their own game company which has less than 10 people. They characterize the places that they have worked as hectic, passionate, and willing to put in long hours to produce good products. They characterize their studio now as somewhere where everyone knows and has worked with each other for many years, so they are very chill and very in sync with one another. This person resides in California.

Informant A and I talked about their experiences coming up through videogame production. Where they started, the games that sparked passion in them, the game that ultimately lead them to *become* a videogame production worker. We also talked about crunch, and this informant’s experiences with crunch. For them, crunch started as a challenge: it was a way of showing just *how* passionate they were about making a good product and the lengths that they would go to to prove that they were committed. They acknowledged that this is not healthy in the long run, and contributed a great deal to burn out that they faced before opening their own company and doing consulting work.

Informant B: Informant B has worked in videogame production for five years; one of those years was as a contractor, and the other 4 have been as a full-time developer. They are a developer who specializes in weather systems and game physics. They have worked at the same company for all five of those years; the company is a medium-sized studio that produces mostly

indie games. This person characterized their workplace as fairly hands off until they become hands on, meaning that there are issues with time management amongst coworkers that have been addressed in the past. Other than an occasional intervention from management, this person says that they enjoy working where they do most of the time. This person resides in California.

Informant B and I discussed at length questions around unionization. Who is it for? What does it do? Why are people pushing for it? Informant B was very well informed about unionization efforts in videogame production and provided me with a lot to think about in regard to how I talk about videogame production. Additionally, Informant B brought up the possible issue of misattribution in how I talked about precarity and asked them and others about precarity. They said that precarity is not just "one thing", but rather, is a whirlwind of things happening at once, growing, shrinking, leaving, and coming. They also talked to me about crunch and how destructive it is, yet how necessary it is due to how videogame production operates and the cultural ticks that constitute *why* videogame production needs crunch to operate.

Informant C: Informant C worked as a videogame production worker (developer) for four years and as a labour organizer/unionization organizer for two. They put in extreme hours to make themselves available and open to helping others in videogame production understand the need for and benefits of collective action. They still work in videogame production at a medium-sized triple-A company. This person did not spend time characterizing their workplace, but instead, their work processes. They described those s hectic, somewhat intimidating, and always challenging. On the labour organizing side of things, they characterized that as emotionally and physically draining, but ultimately the most rewarding thing they have ever done. This person resides in Massachusetts.

Informant C and I talked at length about crunch. They characterized crunch as the issue that got them into organizing in the first place. They don't like to see people suffer, therefore they started to try and find ways of alleviating the stress and precarity that they saw their coworkers embroiled in. They also talked about how they served on a board for an initiative at the company they were working for. This board had a crossection of people from across the company including QA workers, the CIO and CTO, marketing and communication workers, developers, and even administrative workers. They characterized their time working on this board as odd at times, upsetting at other times, and downright frustrating most of the rest of the time. The peers to this informant in other departments could communicate with this informant, be nice, and share ideas, but anyone above their seniority in the company that was on this board was rude, derisive, and seemed to be speaking another language when talking about the games that were being made. This informant characterized management as out of touch and completely obsessed with numbers.

Informant D: Informant D has worked in videogame production for 10 contract cycles now. They have only worked as a developer, though they have worked on games, game engines, and game tools through their work. All of their contracts have been for very popular triple-A games. They have characterized their previous workplaces as mostly chill, but with the occasional transphobe which makes their job hard.They are currently in a contract with a triple-A company in California.

Informant D and I ran the gamut of questions. We talked about everything from fandoms to queer modding and resistances in making games, to being trans and working in games, to struggling to date while working in games. They characterized their experience in videogame production both as a labour process and as a social experiment. They talked often about how the entanglements of videogame production like overwork, burnout, and obsession interrupted and

rearranged their social life to the point where dating was next to impossible because their partners never shared the same level of passion for games that they did. This informant also helped me to build upon what Informant B brought up about misattribution. Informant D and I had a long talk about what precarious and precarity means (the same type of conversation you would hear in a 1000-level Philosophy class) and how we can talk about it as such a multifaceted 'thing'.

Informant E: owns their own game studio in Canada. They characterize their studio as 'indie' and put out games that evoke 'indie aesthetics': pixelated graphics, 2D or isometric views, unique art styles. This informant has worked in videogame production for eight years and has worked at a few major triple-A companies. They decided that they wanted to change the work culture of videogame production and started their own company. They characterize their workplace as work-focused; they have largely dispensed with the "work while you play" ethic of triple-A production in favor of workers leaving the work they do *at* work instead of taking it home with them. They characterize their workers as people who enjoy playing and making games, but equally enjoy having lives outside of making games. This person resides in Canada.

Informant E and I talked mostly about workplace culture. Having worked in a few triple-A, big budget studios, their take on what workplace culture constituted was more than just who you see on a daily basis. It became about office politics; not tipping your hand too soon before you knew someone. There always seemed to be a sense of secrecy and possible back-stabby-ness at work in those environments. That's why, when this informant opened their own studio they were adamant about making it a place of work, not a typical "videogame production studio". They encourage a 40 hour work week with rare instances of possibly 45-50. They foreground the importance of understanding timelines, sticking to timelines, and communicating if something cannot get done in the time frame it was originally needed. Since their studio is fairly small still, issues with communication are non-existent for the most part; everyone gets on well, everyone is down to help everyone else if they need it, and everyone enjoyed the company of their coworkers and being able to work somewhere that values their time as much as it values their labour.

Informant F: Informant F works for a mobile-games company and has supported a very popular mobile title in addition to helping create another title that will release later this year. Though they do not self-identify as a "videogame developer", they do acknowledge that they carry out some of the labour associated with development, but also they carry out labour associated with quality assurance and community management. They have worked here for four years, and they characterize the company as "indie with a twist" meaning that they are largely left alone to do their work, but they are aware that the company does have investors and bottom lines to meet. This person resides in Texas.

Informant F and I talked a lot about videogame production form a social aspect. Having shared roots in Austin, it was easy to talk about what bars we go to, who we would see, what barcades are better than others, so on and so forth. This informant also talked to me about interactions with coworkers which presented quite an interesting case. Though they are adamant that their company does not have a union structure, this informant and their coworkers are so supportive of each other that, in effect, they have a class solidarity system where no one faces scrutiny alone and everyone shares the burden of work.

Data Wrangling

Now that my informants have been (somewhat) properly introduced, it is important to quickly go over how I handled coming up with the themes of this chapter, processing my informants' stories, and figuring out how best to (re)tell their stories in such a way as to foreground what *they* are saying instead of me saying what they are saying. I transcribed all my interviews using an Express Scribe Pro transcription kit. After I transcribed all of my interviews, I started to look for similar sentiments in the stories that informants were sharing with me. From our conversations, I had ballpark ideas about what themes would be more prevalent, and what the stories that my informants were telling were gesturing towards. As time went on, and I had informal communication with them outside of our interviews to ask follow-questions like "Hey, what did you mean when you said x and y", I identified these four themes over and over again across all my informants' conversations with me. Though they are similar themes, the context that my informants talked about these themes varied heavily from person to person and theme to theme. Each informant had their affective attachments, hopes, dreams, fantasies, and motivations for pursuing a job in videogame production. These mitigating factors became apparent as I worked through assembling each theme. So while the themes themselves provide some common ground through which I can 'group' experiences, I want to stress that the informants' experiences I'm talking about are different and unique to them.

In each section, I highlight certain parts of informants' stories. This is not because other informants talked about it in a way that was counter to the narrative that I wish to spin. In large part, these sections of story were picked because they echo the bits and pieces of conversation that I had elsewhere and with other informants and raise important questions that are attached to the subject matter of the stories. For example, in the **Crunch and the Necessity of it to Stop** section, I highlight informants C, A, and E's comments about crunch because they touch on deeper issues than just "crunch is bad and it needs to stop." All my informants were of that mind; informants C, A, and E had novel takes on complicated relationships with crunch, why crunch is a gross but necessary evil in videogame production's current state, and how possible it is for production to change.

Unions: Reticence, Zealotry, and Questions

Each one of my informants brought up unionization at some point during our conversations. Informants' opinions and experiences with unions ranged from being indifferent or neutral to being actively involved in fighting for collective action and trying to assist workplaces in taking formative steps towards unionization. When my informants spoke about unions, they tended to do so in context of other themes. For example, one informant talked about their experience working 80 hour weeks for 3 months on a popular online title that launched in 2016 and how the overwork ended up giving them chronic stomach ulcers. Shortly after wrapping this project and seeking medical attention, they were approached by a co-worker asking them about how they felt about unions. This informant hadn't really given unions too much thought outside of what they had seen on twitter or via International Game Developers Association (IGDA) forums/facebook. The conversation that this informant and I had was less them taking an affirmative stance about unions and more about them using our conversation as a sounding board for how they understood current union rhetorics. It was a very natural back-and-forth between this informant and myself about the good, the bad, and the ugly of unionization in

videogame production.

Another informant talked about unions in terms of workplace culture. They experienced a lot of negativity from their manager that manifested in abuse workplace practices. They described the experience as "the old saying 'dad yells at mom, mom yells at the kid, the kid kicks the dog, who does the dog bite? The other dog". Meaning that, as negativity pervaded the workplace and trickled down from management to workers, workers started to become toxic to one another because they had no outlet for the toxicity they were dealing with from management. One of this informant's fellow worker's spouses brought up Game Workers Unite (GWU) to their spouse, who got in contact with GWU regarding what a union might mean in terms of making their workplace less toxic and deal with bad management. They then brought that information to this informant and they worked to set up precedents to unionize their workplace. Though the original employee who brought GWU up to my informant was fired (as a note, my informant is convinced it was about trying to unionize while the reason given was "poor workplace fit"), my informant is still carrying on trying to unionize, and has branched out to helping other game companies start unionization proceedings.

Retelling

Being as close to this project as I have been for as long as I have been, I realize that I routinely make assumptions about what people do and don't know or think about unionization and collective action. Informants F, C, and B reminded me that this issue is not as important to everyone in videogame production as it is to a few. They also reminded me of the importance of representation within media that sought to unionize people. When informant F mentioned that they did not see themselves in the media that was being shared, that was a stark reminder that I inhabit a privileged space where I *can* critique the people being shared because they mostly all look like me. I want to highlight Informants F, C, and B's comments in this section. Parts of my conversation with these informants presented contours regarding understanding *what* a union is, who can be part of unions, and what a union looks like from a manager's perspective. Informant F, especially, brought up some important points about their experience with unions.

> F: We looked through [Game Worker's Unite's] twitter, and it seemed like, from their beginning, they were retweeting good stuff! But we didn't see them retweeting anyone that looked like us. Like, I think the only person of color that got retweeted was Austin Walker? It's cool that Anna [Anthropy] got retweeted, and some women got retweeted. Oh! And then we looked at their website, and I get that most of the 'About' stuff is going to be slightly nebulous for something like this, but some of the answers from the FAQ they had were weird. Like, who can be in a union. The answer to that question on their website was literally anyone who does anything with games. That's good, don't get me wrong, but that, taken with who they're retweeting just didn't instill a lot of trust in me.

That Informant F did not see people who looked like them being given attention via the official twitter account of GWU *is* important to consider. It begs investigation into how, structurally, organizations that are concerned with anti-capitalist practices, promoting diversity, and creating equitable working conditions mimics how the systems they are critiquing are set up. This also speaks to problem of heterogeneity within videogame production that I have brought up prior. Due to the gender imbalance within videogame production, it would follow that even counter-

capitalist measures within videogame production would see similar gender imbalances. Informant F's comments about not seeing anyone represented that looked like them, and the language being used to describe what the official function of GWU is as nebulous present important distinctions in terms of recent announcement by the *Communication Workers of America* (CWA) to assist videogame production workers in unionization. The CWA's official statement shares similar nebulous, non-specific, non-committal language with GWU's general 'about' section, which signals a problem that is more broad than just who we see being retweeted or shared by social media accounts. It signals a problem of scope. In the case of unionizing videogame production, the problem of an unidentified scope. There are not solid bifurcations as to who can and cannot participate in union efforts and receive union support, so we continue to see the language around unionization efforts as unwieldy and too broad.

Informant B discussed concerns of theirs around who they can and can't see being in unions that echoed the problems that Informant F raised. Informant B was not adamantly for or against unions, and their careful scrutiny of what unions meant not only for them, but for the whole of videogame production produced important talking points that forced me to think about my own relationship with and agenda towards union activity.

> B: Ok, so, unions. I know what they're for. I know what the reason is. Better work conditions, less crunch, better pay, job security. Right? [I nod] Ok. So… who is that for? Who gets that and who doesn't?
>
> J: Ummm… well, according to Game Workers Unite, I think they think that *everyone* who works in videogames could get access to union help.
>
> B: Ok, that's helpful. But how far reaching is that? Who are we defining as 'works in videogames'? Does office staff or administrative staff get access to the union and protections? Hackers? Modders?
>
> J: Uh… um. I don't… know. Do you have any ideas regarding that?
>
> B: Initially, maybe. When you think about it, everyone who has a hand in actually creating the game should definitely be included. So programmers, artists, Foley, writers, directors. But from there, for me, it becomes harder to pinpoint. I don't think, right now, there is enough of an understanding of who actually *works in videogames* to provide an objectively *correct* answer. A-and don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to mine for an objectively correct answer, but it bothers me that I can't have more clarity for myself on who my colleagues and peers might be in a union, you know? […] My way of thinking, it might come down to someone who makes *money* working on videogames. But even then, y'know, I think of the Bethesda store and their half-assed attempt at monetizing mods. Are those people entitled to join the same union as someone who, say, works on *The Elder Scrolls 5 For Samsung Smart TV*? [laughs] Or do they have to make their own union? […] Also, what happens to contract people? Do you think they get to be part of a union? But if *they* can be part of a union, why even bother having contract workers in the first place? If unions are fighting for job stability, and allowing people to not have to labor and overwork through contracts trying to get hired? Does that mean that the industry would shrink? I mean, if you take on a bunch of full-time people and can't really

> fire them, what else *would* happen, right? If that happened, then maybe the industry would stop wasting money and being so poorly managed, but I don't think that would happen in a day, you know? What seems like would come first is definitely a recession.

For Informant B, the nebulous language that is associated with unionizing became a point of contention for them. Informant B pointed to multiple tweets and portions of GWU's website that provided very little context about anything that GWU was about or supported. I refer back to my previous example of GWU's FAQ section that says "…if you are doing any kind of job for a game company – whether that be in-house, in an agency, on contract or casual – you're a game worker." Without any sort of specificity to what issues GWU is aiming to tackle, focused plans of attack become highly improbably, and any plan that wishes to take on *all* the issues being listed is setting itself up for failure. Issues gestured toward through the website are poor pay, politics, abuse, bully/harassment, neoliberal 'do what you love' mentality, overly competitive job market, crunch, weak negotiations with potential employers re: overly competitive job market, sacrificing person time in service of production. Throughout our conversation, they had been careful to say that they were still learning about unions, and what the unionization process could be like, but that the resources that they had at their disposal (e.g. GWU's website, twitter, googling 'what is a union') raised more questions than they answered. Even though they had their own initial formulations about who feasibly *could* be involved with unionization and seek protection through unions, Informant B's ideas about who could be protected ended up relying on the flow of capital through the institution of videogame production. Without considering how capital flows, who enables it to flow, and the real possibility of contractions in videogame production due to unionization, coming to any sort of initial understanding of who can and can't take part in unions in production will stay abstracted and we will continue to see vague language like that from CWA and GWU.

Even though terminology around unionization is still nebulous and imprecise, Informant C talked at length not about the broad view of unionizing the videogame industry, but their own individual motivation for wanting to help unionize. As I said previously, often the themes that my informants spoke with me about were not isolated. Informant C's experience with organizing unionization efforts came from working crunch, and their concern with people they knew having access to working conditions that allowed them to have a normal work-life balance.

> " J: Do you think that that stress and that separation played a part in why you gravitated towards unionization and helping with unionization so much?
>
> C: I certainly think that was part of it. I am a person who doesn't enjoy seeing other people suffer. I don't like seeing my friends, coworkers, strangers on the street sad. I think that my involvement with unions started to present these really great opportunities to not be alone in that I am always *with* people, talking about this stuff, and I am also helping people to craft plans on how *they* can get back to their families or have some sort of work-life balance that they maybe didn't have previously. I certainly think that that was part of it. […] The more I worked, the more I *didn't* want to work. It was always crunch that made me fall more and more out of love. I just didn't have the passion to stay

long nights or work all week anymore because I had seen a better side of things. I saw what it *could* be.

J: With collective bargaining?

C: That and unionization. Around the time that my contact told me about that union group, I started thinking about how I could help. How could I be productive with this.

In other parts of our conversation, Informant C said that their experience with unionizing and helping to establish union plans for videogame production companies wasn't done to help or hinder agencies like GWU. Informant C brought up the nebulous language on GWU's website as a point of contention for them as well when I asked. They said that, due to this, and due to their own upbringing in a primarily blue-collar household, they understood unions to be not an ideal that is intellectualized and turned over and over, but as an action plan to help people. They said that their approach in talking about unions both to people like me and to potential clients wasn't to get them to think about the whole of unionizing videogame production, but how Informant C's experiences could help potential clients to recontextualize their relationship with production to recapture a work-life balance.

While each informant had their own understanding of, contextual examples of, and interactions with unionization/the idea of unions within videogame production that ranged from indifferent to zealous, informants brought up important questions *about* unionization that, without their embodied experiences, I would not have been able to consider. What is especially important about what they shared is the attention that needs to be paid to the types of language that are currently being used to talk about unionization and what deeper issues this signal. For Informant F, the lack of clear language or clear action plans goes hand-in-hand with heterogeneity and not seeing themselves being represented by high-profile unionization entities. The lack of diverse engagement that they had witnessed did not instill in them the sense that GWU, or formal unionization at all, was necessarily what was best for them or their workplace. For Informant B, a lack of clear language means a lack of understanding of who unions would be serving. Their acknowledgement that money ultimately will probably dictate who can and can't be considered part of a union also speaks to the embedednes of capital-generation in all parts of videogame production, whether it is in the *making* of games, the *playing* of games, or in the *unionizing* of games. For Informant C, the nebulous language of unionization didn't bother them; they talked about current discussions around unionizing videogame production as being overly intellectualized, which is why they valued approaching potential unionizing as a personal, actionable approach and not one that is overly concerned with making sweeping statements. Their primary goal in unionization was to get people help to establish a work-life balance that they themselves saw so sorely lacking in the industry.

Recontextualizing

Each of my informants talked to me to some extent about what the purpose of unions was to them. For some, it was to create fair working conditions. For others, it was to create actionable plans towards addressing precarity. For both of these groups, though, unions represented a path forward for them to harmonize what they enjoyed about the industry with what they didn't; a middle-ground where their problems and their colleagues' problems could be solved. What my

informants spoke about around unions presents important instances where the definitional work precarity from my first chapter can be updated in respect to what these workers experience. Unionization continues to be something that videogame production workers are pushing for, but it never seems to get any closer. According to my informants, this is due in large part to the lack of a cohesive narrative, lack of actionable plans, and lack of representation. The problems that my informants identified characterize a fundamental misunderstanding, or possibly a fundamental *refusal* to understand, what constitutes precarity within videogame production on the part of union outfits.

A recent example of this lack of understanding comes from the Communication Workers of America's (CWA) announcement in January that they would be assisting tech and videogame production workers in unionization efforts. For such a large unionization body to step forward and announce that they would be deploying resources *specifically* to help game workers unionize is exciting news. But the CWA's statement repeats many of the same problems that other unionization outfits like Game Workers Unite can't seem to move past, and raises new concerns as well. The CWA seems to be linking tech workers and game workers together, without any sort of distinction between the two, or who is eligible for this new initiative. Game workers and tech workers are used interchangeably both in the official statement put forth by CWA president Chris Shelton and on the initiative's website. There is also a distinct lack of actionable plans put forth. In the statement released by Shelton, more time is spent discussing who the initiative has hired and their merits than what the actual problems being addressed are. Similarly, on the Campaign to Organize Digital Employees (CODE-CWA)'s website, there is a lack of any sort of plans of action, previous research, acknowledgement of specific cases where actions listed in Shelton's press release have occurred, or ways in the interim to help to start to talk to coworkers about organizing. Instead, there are buzzwords that adorn the front page, a very stark summary of "rights", and an 'about' section that does nothing to characterize the immediate, timely actions being taken by the initiative (if any).

Without any sort of plan in place, or a plan even hinted at, my informants' concerns are substantiated. The CWA, CODE, and GWU are not *not* equipped to make inroads. There is capital behind these groups, there are people willing to collectivize, but there is a distinct lack of current videogame production workers' voices being heard or acknowledged. Within that lack of acknowledgement, the 'issues' that CWA, CODE, and GWU discuss are void of any meaningful engagement. For *whom* are these situations precarious? Every single videogame production worker? Marginal workers? Only certain, non-quantifiable people? As it stands, the issues that the CWA identifies in their statement are all just blanketly 'bad' and need to be 'fixed' without any deeper engagement with those issues or the circumstances that have *caused* those issues. As my informants have stated, the media presence of very well-known videogame production unionization groups tells them nothing about what the initiative does or is advocating for and does nothing to acknowledge in substantial ways the types of precarity that videogame production workers face. As Informant F stated about their experience with unionization in videogame production "Nothing is a one-size-fits-all solution." In addition to this, these union outfits are not acknowledging any understanding of the contours of precarity within videogame production. Issues such as overwork are gestured towards, but there is no contextualization done, nor are there any ethnographic accounts being given. *Why* are workers overworking? What is causing workers to be ok with overwork? Who is dictating that they must overwork? Until unionization outfits put forth understandings around contributing factors to precarity, different forms of precarity that different workers face, and also acknowledge that precarity does not

manifest the same for every production worker, unionization will continue to be a hollow, well-meaning activity that, akin to cupcake fascism, diverts energy away from rooting the cause of the problem in favor of feeling good about taking a stand against the problem.

C**runch and the Necessity of it to Stop**

Overwhelmingly, my informants did not support crunch in any way. The universal disdain by all 6 informants for crunch was made abundantly clear multiple times. Each informant had their own story involving crunch, and each informant recognized that committing to the act of crunch had a suite of ramifications ranging from personal inability to create or maintain a responsible work-life balance to upholding the expectation that crunch will forever be part of videogame production. When my informants spoke about crunch, some spoke about it as a "necessary evil." None of my informants were happy with crunch as a part of their job, but each informant had a different way of contextualizing and coming to grips with crunch. One informant spoke about their experience with crunch as being an adrenaline rush: they knew that they were toward the end of a project, and they knew they were close to being finished and done. So they pushed themselves even harder to be perfect, fix problems quickly, and code late into the night, every night. They also tried to use this burst of energy to encourage their fellow workers to see the time spent crunching not just as a challenge, but as a team bonding experience (bonding through trauma, as they termed it). One other informant talked about crunch as a way of "fixing" themselves in terms of prioritizing the important things in their life. Their first experience with crunch nearly killed them (in terms of scarce sleep, over-stress, and poor nutrition). It also took an inordinate toll on their relationship with family and friends. The experiences triggered a deep depression for them, and in doing so, rendered them unable and/or unwilling to respond to text messages, calls, or emails in a timely manner, which as they said, only compounded the symptoms of their depression. Once the project wrapped, this informant sought out counselling, and one major revelation they had was that, to continue working in this industry, they had to learn how to prioritize themselves, firstly, and them prioritize their family, friends, and partner. They recognized that if their body or mind failed, then no amount of help from family, friends, and partner can help prop them up. They also realized that, if they allowed work to cause them to alienate the people supporting them, then if their mental or physical health took a hit, they *wouldn't* have the support they needed to work through it. In having this realization, they started bullet journaling nearly everything related to work and by doing so were able to restore a proper work-life balance, despite having to crunch over and over again.

Retelling

I want to highlight Informant C, A, and E's comments about crunch. Each of their experiences raises important questions about what sort of toll crunch takes aside from just time. Informants A and C's relationship with crunch was surprising. I had not considered that a concept that has been so universally panned for being exploitative and irresponsible could have notes of complication like what Informants A and C presents. For Informant C, crunch was one of the predominant reasons for them committing to unionizing their own production workplace at the time, which then extended to *any* production workplace.

C: Oh, [crunch] was awful. At the end of it, I was just so emotionally and physically drained. And you know how small things sometimes trigger the biggest points of reflection? Someone offhandedly mentioned 'Can't wait to do this again' in a sarcastic tone, and I heard it and all of a sudden, I had this visceral reaction. I hadn't done anything to try and circumvent this. No one had. We did the work that was assigned to us, and we accepted revision requests and did them because that's what you do. I… I guess from the start, we're sort of trained to just… do it. Not to question why we're doing it, or how we could maybe do better. It hit me that we really had zero control.

J: Right, like if you're getting bombarded with work, and people are just working and working, then what are you supposed to do?

C: Correct. And it makes you think, what are you supposed to do if you can't get anyone to see that this stuff needs to change! Well, in my case, I started helping with unions! [laughs] I- it makes me think that if we don't change something, this could just keep happening. I mean, it *has* kept happening, right? No one that I know doesn't work crunch. It's just an expectation of the job."

Crunch touches across all the themes covered in this chapter, and often goes hand-in-hand with contextualizing other themes as well. As I covered in the previous section with Informant C, their passion toward unionization and collective action stems from them wanting to help people. For Informant C, not only did crunch end up causing medical problems for them in the form of ulcers, but it also helped them to find something that they feel strongly about in unionization.

For Informant A, crunch was also a facilitating force in their life. Though how they view crunch is different than Informant C, both have experienced crunch in such a way that they can recognize how awful it is, but also recognize that the act of crunching brought them to where they are today. Informant A spoke about crunch in their early days as being "what they signed up for" but still refers to crunch with some fondness. At other points in our conversation, Informant A referenced crunch as the time when they felt closest to other coworkers; "shared trauma", as they referred to it. But they also talked about crunch as a way of honoring their early days in the industry. Not *them* crunching or making their employees crunch, but remembering crunch as something that they did in the past that they enjoyed and that helped them to create relationships that they still have today.

A: Ah- I suppose that's somewhat true. I feel like when we were working on [GAME], we were renegade in that people still didn't value us as true programmers. The work we did was considered to be 'just for fun.' So we got this reputation of playing while we work and not being serious. I guess we fell into that a little. We worked the long hours and did the hard work because… I- well, I can't speak for everyone, but I did it because it was fun, and I did it because it meant that I was making something fun. We didn't work those hours because we felt… I don't know, obligated. We did it because we had passion for the project. We wanted to make it a good thing. […]What am I saying here. [pause] I think… that crunch is just sort of… part of software production overall. It can't be extracted. Y-y'know I know people who work in software engineering and on operating systems and they do crunch, too, sometimes. I- it's just part of doing this kind of job, I think. So when people talk about unions and getting rid of crunch, I- I'm not sure what

> they have in mind necessarily to replace it. We already use Agile to speed up and streamline how we handle tasks. [pause] If… if you're talking about doing away with crunch altogether, something has to change in the process before that can happen.

For Informant A, crunch was alluring at first; in other parts of our conversation, this informant talked about how their overwork was valorized and they wore that valorization as a badge of honor to show that they were passionate about making games. Informant A also initially considered their closeness to videogames (or as they said "being inundated with videogames") as something that went hand-in-hand with crunch – they were passionate, they were always around videogames, they always *wanted* to be around videogames. However, instead of taking as pronounced a stance towards crunch ending as other informants did, Informant A raised the question of "well, what would replace it?" From their perspective as a manager of a videogame production company, someone who has worked in videogames production for many years, and as someone who has friends in other sectors of software development, crunch is not something that can be easily extracted without a fundamental remodel of how videogame production takes place.

Informant E spoke about 'challenge' in much the same way that Informant A did: crunch was alluring at first because of the challenge it presented. But Informant E expressed the cost of crunch, as well, as something that took advantage of habits that they had developed in college that were unhealthy, both in terms of physical health and in terms of mental and affective health.

> E: In my first job, straight out of college, I was contract on a game that never shipped. Financing fell through, I think? Anyway, I came in after prototyping, and I had a year long contract to work on cleaning up the codebase, condensing some stuff down, that sort of stuff. I went into this job thinking that, if I did a good enough job, if I was prepared and did well, that I could skip the contracting-my-life-out part and go straight to the working part. In college, I was always stressed, and that manifested in insomnia. I would routinely just work through the night, take a nap, go to class and go from there. That didn't really go away when I got to that first job.
>
> J: The insomnia? Or the working through the night. Well, I mean I guess both kind of go hand-in-hand maybe.
>
> E: Yeah, they did for a long time. I thought that when I was out of school, that, magically I suppose, a paycheck would fix my sleeping problems. Right? Because I'm getting paid, I finally don't have to eat ramen and be stressed about everything, so that should fix my sleeping problem. It didn't. I thought that what was best at the time would be to soldier through it. If I'm going to keep having problems sleeping, maybe I could at least be productive. If I was productive, that would look good on me. See where I'm going? So, I tried to use the insomnia to my advantage. And, admittedly, during the crunch that came in working about 4 months there, it helped. I was able to just work all the time. And, it was a lot more challenging than doing school stuff. I enjoyed it for a while. But, after putting my heart and soul into that job and then getting told my work was 'adequate at best', and what I did was 'just part of the job,' it was a blow. It was definitely a blow. Needless to say, I didn't skip the contracting stuff. I thought that I was proving myself

and going above and beyond. I think that's when I realized how busted the whole act of crunch was.

For Informant E, crunch had the opposite catalyzing effect that it did for Informant A. Instead of them seeing it as a positive, character-building experience, Informant E recognized that the act of crunching, and the façade of valorized overwork attached to it, was little more than a way for their labour to be exploited, and for their passion to be operationalized without them getting anything in return.

For Informants C, A, and E, crunch presented as something that was alluring, but ended up being ultimately destructive, even if there was still some emotional untangling to do in regard to it. The circumstances that each informant underwent crunch in were different, but again, there was common ground in that they were forced to crunch. For Informant A, crunch numbered in the thousands of hours across their career. For Informant C, that number was in the 150-200 hour range. For Informant E, that number was in the 300-350 range. For informant C, crunch created medical problems for them, but it also connected them with something that they are truly passionate about: helping people unionize. Informant C's hope is that their efforts will help alleviate and prevent the pain that they experienced. For Informant A, the pain that crunch became started as something that was alluring at first, and is still something that means a great deal to them. Crunch occurred during a time in their lives when they were seeking companionship with other people in a relatively young industry, and within that period of time, they made lasting relationships. They also present an important question about what will happen if crunch falls away: what will take its place? For Informant E, crunch presented a possible challenge and a possible arena to prove themselves in; the example they gave of crunch within their first job had the opposite effect on them that it had on Informant A. Crunch became something that was "busted"; something that was expected of them and that they thought they were making the most of, but in reality, was just a way for their labour to be exploited.

Recontextualizing

Each of my informants talked about crunch as something that was just part of the job; not something they necessarily enjoyed, but a subjectivation measure of 'being in videogame production'. Some informants talked about crunch as enticing at first, or challenging at first, but ultimately bothersome, and others characterized it from the start as a problematic of the industry. All my informants, though they stated that crunch needs to stop for videogame production to be sustainable, had admittedly complicated relationships with crunch. What was interesting, though, is that they talked about crunch not as something mandated by their bosses first-and-foremost, but as something that was intimately linked to their own passion. Four of my informants recounted stories of crunch where, to me, the reason for the crunch seemed like gross mismanagement on the part of their bosses. Each informant recounted the procedure of crunch as an issue that their bosses brought to them as something *the project* needed; not something that they, their boss, needed. None of my informants mentioned mismanagement, bad leadership, or botched timelines as being overt contributing factors to crunch. Instead, they talked about it as something else expected of them from videogame production.

Passion, to my informants, had become such a powerful object of operationalization that the way they perceived of crunch was not as mismanagement or as something inherently destructive or "wrong", but as something they gave freely of themselves to to make sure that the

game they produced was something that they would be passionate about playing. This narrative is seen again in my fifth chapter regarding informants in the third iteration of my project *Passion Traps*. This iteration examines passion in fan-made videogame production labour, and one informant said "I make mods and small games because I'm passionate about making things that 'little me' would enjoy. I grew up playing videogames and they were such a fundamentally shaping force in my life that, even though I'm not a professional, I couldn't imagine not doing it. It's worship, of sorts." Passion for my informants can't be boiled down to a "good" or "bad" feeling, set of actions, circumstances, or implications. Passion is more multifaceted than that, and like much of this project, requires embodied understandings to be responsibly discussed.

Passion in videogame production has a duality that needs unpacking, especially for my informants. On the one hand, passion for videogames can be seen as a positive, shaping force that workers, regardless of remuneration, put into products that they create because they love the medium and they want to make things that other people will enjoy, regardless of the cost to themselves. Their enjoyment of and passion for the medium becomes a mixture of what Murnieks, Mosakowski, and Cardon in "Pathways of Passion" characterize passion to be and what Thorgen and Wincent, in "Passion and Challenging Goals" characterize passion to be: a strong inclination towards a self-defining activity that people like, find important, invest time and energy into, and which acts as an agent of influence regarding choices, relationship-building, and pursuance of certain education of vocational paths. All of my informants talk about videogames being an enclave for them in some form: escape from bad home situations, social spaces where they can explore themselves, or places where they can become skilled at something. For all my informants, videogames constitute a substantial part of their identity and their social arrangements.

On the other hand, passion becomes a tool for extracting even more labour from workers and perpetuates cruel optimism. This works by preying on the positive aspects of passion, especially the attachments that workers may have towards videogames as catalysts for social relations and as parts of who they are as people. Videogame production exploits those positive aspects by then characterizing mismanagement, toxic meritocracy, and other broken or difficult-to-automize parts of production-based late-stage capitalism not as problems; not even as *errors*! Instead, the problematic nature of these issues is elided altogether, and the blame is shifted away from humans and is instead put on the project and recharacterized as "necessary" for the project to come out successful. This can be seen when my informants don't pinpoint where, exactly, in the production process crunch stops being a polishing activity, or an investment of passion, and instead becomes a methodology for exploiting their labour.

Workplace Culture and Power Clashes

I was not expecting all six of my informants to largely have had very positive experiences that, in some cases, bordered on class solidarity with coworkers. So often in popular media, we videogame production culture generalized as oppressive, hypermasculine, and antifeminine. Yes, my informants had less-than-savory experiences with coworkers at points, but all but one informant was able to patch those instances up (and also locate those instances in relation to stress). Additionally, I did not expect the *types* of power struggles that my informants talked about. There were instances of violent power imbalances like the story that Informant C shared about working on a board, but mostly, the instances of power imbalance were softer than I expected. Subtle power play, like that expressed by Informant D each time they were brought on

for a contract, almost-promised a job at the end of the contract if they worked their hardest, and then brushed off when there was, in fact, not a job for them. It was in how Informant D characterized these decisions that passion seemed to be oddly silent and noticeably absent: suddenly, Informant D's passion was of no use to them; their passion had been operationalized as much as it needed to be, and therefore, that passion was no longer required. All six of my informants reminisced about both good and bad experiences that they had with coworkers. Importantly, they all characterized their experiences as one that they made themselves. One said that co-worker interaction "is totally what you make of it." When my informants spoke about workplace culture, they had a mixture of experiences, ideas about what the concept *means*, what a successful workplace culture looks like, and how to facilitate a better workplace. Overwhelmingly, my informants had mostly positive workplace culture experiences with their coworkers. When discussing interactions with management (read: not case managers or IP heads, but a step above them), all six of my informants had very similar issues: they felt like they were being blown off, that no one was listening to them, or that no one cared what they were saying. One informant, who was on a board of trustees-type collaboration process talked about how well they got on with people that were roughly in their same pay-grade (other coders, technical documentation workers, communication/PR workers), but how poorly their interactions were with management. In one meeting in particular, this informant was giving a progress report about a set of system interactions their team was working on, and a manager in finance asked "if we could hurry the fuck up because it seems like a mindless thing. He said 'we should just pay some monkies to do it' referring to Indian people" and then laughed with his friend, who was the CFO. Another informant, who self-identified as trans, said that during their transformation, their coworkers were incredibly supportive and happy to see this informant finally feeling confirmed. But their direct manager did not appreciate the progress this informant was making and would routinely assign time-consuming work to them, make jokes and misgender them to other workers, and make a big deal about doctor's appointments that this informant had to attend. This informant's coworkers rallied around them, kept notes on what this manager said and work that this manager foisted off on my informant, and collectively went to human resources to complain. They pushed until this manager was fired.

Retelling

Informants B, C, D, and F all recalled times where they were annoyed by co-workers and struck out at them, or had a co-worker do the same thing to them. Three in particular are elucidating for the reason that they were major enough for the informant to remember as possibly negatively-coded, meaning that there was overt negativity, but not as a moment of griefing, or trying to intentionally make them feel badly about something. They also resolved the conflict in a way that was healthy for them and allowed them to continue working with those people.

Informant B talked to me at length about how at various times during crunch, small, inconsequential workplace behavior that they usually would have ignored ended up being huge points of contention for them until after crunch was done.

> "B: I mean, when you're working crunch, it's easy to forget that the people you work with are actually friendly to you and that they aren't trying to sabotage your entire life by screwing something up. We're *all* tired, we're *all* grumpy, we're *all* missing family, pets, or our beds. One time I will never forget is when we were almost done with [GAME]. It

was so stupid. We were doing some very minor fixes for a clipping issue in one certain place, and someone just couldn't get the coordinates of a rock and the ground to meet. I sat by them, and I saw them over and over and over again just guessing at coordinates until they almost started crying. For some reason, it distracted me so much from my own work that I literally just reached over, rewrote the four or five lines of code for them so that stuff just autodetected. They looked at me and I went "you're welcome" and they walked off. I could hear them crying in the bathroom, and I think that annoyed me even more, so I just left. Next day, that person refused to talk to me. I don't blame them, that was a really unprofessional thing to do. After we got done, we were all at the wrap party, I was drunk and so were they and we had a good old-fashioned heart-to-heart drunk cry with each other. We're still friends, but I still look back at that moment sometimes and I'm like 'jeez. You had an opportunity to *not* be a dick, and you were a dick.' You know?

Earlier in our conversation, Informant B characterized their experience with crunch as "living in a pressure cooker". They said that everything was elevated when they were crunching: tensions, emotions, everything. Even though this particular instance stuck with Informant B, and they characterized their actions as "jarring" not just to themselves, but to this particular coworker too, Informant B and this coworker were able to contextualize the pressure that they were under as being integral to the situation happening in the first place. Informant B attributed crunch to the reason that they were able to repair this relationship; both they and their coworker were in an emotional pressure cooker foisted upon them by their boss' mismanagement. Informant B said that, had their entire time *not* been mismanaged, then they don't think that there ever would have been a time that they had any sort of spat with their coworkers.

Informant D recounted a similar story with crunch, stress, and emotion, but their example pertained to misgendering instead of snapping at a coworker.

"D: Bro I get misgendered all the time. I wear a dress, people think I'm a boy. I wear sweats and a hoodie, people think I'm a girl. It's not even upsetting anymore, I just don't really give a frick? I guess?

J: I totally get that. Has anything like that ever happened at work?

D: Yes! Well I say yes, but it wasn't intentional? Like, I don't think anyone I work with would deadname me or misgender me on purpose. Especially after they've totally had my shit when shit went south a couple of times. But it was this one time fairly early into a project and we had a new manager, [puts hand to mouth in secret telling gesture?] the one who fuckin' got got good. But anyway [THEY -- MANAGER] were a fucking bitch and made us do [finger quotes] 'pre-crunch crunch' which was basically just us trying to get ahead of schedule so we wouldn't crunch later.

J: Uh… doesn't that just mean you crunched at a different time?

D: I'm glad that at least *you* understand that! Anyway, so we were 'pre-crunch crunching' along and someone on my team who insists on using email instead of Slack was sending out emails about assets and stuff to people, and they kept using [GENDER] pronouns which, in my goddamn *email signature* I clearly had [GENDER] pronouns.

> They did a couple of times, and in each email I had to send to them, I tried to refer to myself in the third person as like… I don't know, some way to get them to see that they're misgendering me. They like didn't quite catch the hint at all, so I ended up just emailing them and being like 'hey can you stop misgendering me please it's literally in my email signature are you ok?' And they apologized profusely. They worked remotely, and I'm pretty sure that they were like… overseas or something, so factor in crunch on top of the time difference between [CITY] and wherever they were. That shit had to be hard to keep straight, so I ain't mad. But yeah, they were like 'oh my god, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to do that, it's totally my mistake and I'll never do it again.' [shrugs] They haven't so far, so I don't know. But yeah, all of my group is super supportive, and even though I don't really… ever… *see* them, they've got my back just like I'd have theirs if they were trans [laughs].

Even though Informant D has stated that they are and will always be uncomfortable with being misgendered or dead-named, they were willing to take into account stress and a time difference as being mediating factors between someone maliciously misgendering them and doing it on accident. This informant didn't outrightly excuse the behavior, but they also said that due to the mediating factors, they were much more willing to just forgive and move on since they knew how stressful working at that job was just normally, let alone doing so with a huge time differential.

Informant F talked about someone that they work with getting upset over misplaced lip balm.

> "F: No actually during the first time I did crunch, there was a [PERSON] we worked with that was super obsessive about [THEIR] Burt's Bees. Like, [THEY] had lip gloss, lip balm, I'm pretty sure that [THEY] used the soap, half of the little baggies in [THEIR] backpack were Burt's Bees related. [Laughs] I- I like Burt's Bees, but there's a limit, right? Anyway… everyone was stressed, we weren't sleeping well, no one was eating well, and [NAME] misplaced [THEIR] lip balm. And now don't get me wrong, it was the dead of winter in [CITY]. You NEEDED lip balm or your lips would just deteriorate into dust. So it went missing, and [THEY] kind of had a freak out a little bit. [THEY] accused me of taking it or throwing it away or something, and I was like 'what? [PRONOUN], I respect the grind and there's no way I'd throw away a perfectly good thing of Burt's. I'll help you look for it, though.' And we looked around my desk and [NAME]'s desk and we didn't find anything. I don't think she believed that I didn't snake it, but she was like 'Aw man, ok, I guess it's just gone forever.' Fast forward like 3 hours, [THEY'RE] digging through [THEIR] backpack looking for something and out falls the magical lost tube of Burt's! [THEY] pop and [THEY'RE] like 'Oh shit I found it, I found it! It was in the front pocket because that's where I put my wallet this morning!' [THEY] apologized and bought me coffee the next day to make up for it which is totally whatever because I wasn't mad. It's just stress, you know? If I lost my lip balm in the middle of a stressful situation, I'd freak out too. But besides that, everything's been really chill. All my [PRONOUNS] like each other, and we've got each other's backs. And plus, now I know what to get [NAME] for Christmas forever [laughs]"

As with the previous two examples, Informant F contextualized the situation as taking place during a point in time when things around their office were in a pressure-cooker-type feverpitch right before a game released. Though the circumstances are fairly innocuous, and the stakes of this event were low (the stakes being a lost tube of Bert's Bees), Informant F still acknowledged that it had the potential to be much more of a problem than simply just a misplaced tube of lip balm.

Though my informants all regarded their coworkers and peers as overwhelmingly positive, they all outlined certain power struggles that they had with their management. Each informant walked me through times that they've clashed over implementation ideas, process ideas, or just simple day-to-day operations stuff with management. Informant C's example encapsulates and summarizes all my informants' experiences well. Informant C talked about how well they got on with people that were roughly in their same pay-grade (other coders, technical documentation workers, communication/PR workers), but how poorly their interactions were with management. In one meeting in particular, this informant was giving a progress report about a set of system interactions their team was working on, and someone in finance managed to belittle their work *and* make hateful racist comments.

> "C: One of the most degrading experiences of my life came when I was working on [GAME]. In my infinite struggle to breach all boundaries of game work to make everyone unionize, [laughs] even the marketing folks, I volunteered to represent my group on this… sort of… board-type initiative. We had people from marketing, finance, engineering, and other departments who got to talk directly to the CFO, CIO, CTO, and Vice-CFO, vice-CIO, and vice-CTO. Well, one of the second meetings we had, we were talking about a progress report from my team about some systems stuff and how we were making progress, but it was still slow since this wasn't really in any of our wheelhouses. The vice-CFO, I think… [pause] I… I know it was someone in finance, but I don't remember exactly who. Anyway, we were talking, and this person interrupts me to say 'your team needs to hurry the fuck up because it seems like a pretty mindless task that you're working on.' Then he said 'we should just pay some monkies to do it', referring to Indian people. I think everyone who had half a conscious was so shocked by that that we all just froze. I remember making eye-contact with someone in marketing, and their eyes being about as large as a saucer. Then, I just got up and left. I couldn't believe what I had heard."

For informants B, D, and F, the workplace cultures that they have experienced were only marred by small instances of butting heads with coworkers. These informants characterized these events as negative enough to remember them, but not negative enough for them to keep them held in mind for long. For Informant F, especially, they characterized the events they shared as having little more effect on their workplace culture than someone getting them the wrong coffee from Starbucks: annoying for a few moments and then forgotten. For Informant B, the stress that they and their coworkers were under when the event occurred where Informant B made a coworker cry was quickly forgotten once the stress abated and life in their studio went back to pre-crunch. Informant D as well characterized their experiences with ccoworkers as wildly positive, especially the coworkers who supported them when their boss was being transphobic. But, each of them were able to contextualize the circumstances *around* those spats as being the things that caused them in the first place. For Informants B, D, and F, that was crunch. They recognized that

emotions ran high because of the heighted expectations being put on them, and they recognized that, because of this, normally innocuous things could end up becoming points of contention. They were also able to resolve these issues *because* of the understandings that they had about what was happening not only to them, but to those around them as well. While all six informants talked about rifts that they felt would sometimes appear between them and management, or how out of touch management were both with the informants and with the customers, it was this fundamental lack of understanding what informants were doing, and the lack of motivation to learn from management that created tension between them and my informants. Informant C's experiences encapsulated perfectly what my other informants had been talking about. Oftentimes, it came down to the workers' being intimately familiar with the processes that go into making the IP, and management (not product managers, but big boss managers) being woefully out of touch with both consumer base and with workers while also having no intention of getting in touch.

Recontextualizing

To return to the example of the list of objectively 'bad' things that the CWA put forth in their statement regarding unionizing videogame production, five of the seven issues identified revolve around workplace culture. Again, the way in which this press release talks about these issues provides no contextual information, no contouring, and no acknowledgement of the granularity that these situations occur in. It is important, then, for this project to provide recontextualization regarding where precarious situations with workplace culture have occurred with my informants.

When referring to workplace culture, my informants established a hierarchy of where and with whom they experienced precarious situations. Every one of my informants charactertized interactions with peers as mostly friendly, mostly positive with small pockets of rising tension that were resolved as quickly as they surfaced. Incidentally, when my informants talked about those lapses in civility with peers, they located those instances as times of stress, usually during crunch time. Only Informant C received prolonged abuse from a peer. This abuse came from a contractor that did not work in their department but who held an exceedingly negative viewpoint about unions. The abuser was of the mind that unions are weak, people who need unions to protect them are weak, and if a person 'belongs' in videogame production, they should be prepared to deal with the work requirements. My other informants' experiences with peers did little to substantiate sweeping claims of toxic workplace culture. Where the toxicity came to be located was in interactions with *superiors*. Informant C's example of working on a board where people from different departments and levels of seniority came together is telling of the types of power imbalances at play in videogame production.

Informant D's experiencing with working contract jobs and being incentivized to work harder because there might be an open position on a development team provide insight into how meritocracy works when there is an inherent power imbalance between worker and promoter. Del Forno and Di Gregorio in "Meritocracy: The Third Way and the Effervescence of Capital" provides a basis by which we can understand the political underpinnings of meritocratic advancement. Meritocratic advancement as a political strategy favors advancement of non-threatening people; to keep a political party alive and the political party's ideas alive, people with similar ideas must be promoted to positions of power and guided through the system. This means that people that more radical or espouse ideology that does not serve the advancement of cultural

capital within that party are less favored for advancement and may actually be impeded in their advancement. This sort of hedging around who can or should advance in politics can be seen within videogame production as well. Informant D's experiences speak to the inherently political nature of advancement in videogame production. This informant showed copious passion for the projects they worked on, worked a sustained level of crunch *throughout* the contracts they were a part of, routinely did work that other coworkers could not be bothered to do, yet they were still passed over in favor of people who were non-threatening and unassuming. Informant D talked at length about their perceived "fuck up" by getting their transphobic boss fired. The implications of this statement alone are startling. For advancement within videogame production, merit isn't weighted nearly as importantly as being willing to endure abuse and willing to do what is asked of them regardless of the fallout.

O'Brien et al in "Are the creative industries meritocratic" analyzed the 2014 British Labour Force Survey and sought to find out whether socioeconomic class played a determining factor in meritocratic advancement in creative industries. They found that, depending on the strata of class that a worker enters a cultural and creative industry (CCI) from, that worker may face career-long class-origin pay gapping and denial of advancement based on class whereas workers from privileged socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds had the cultural and monetary cache to advance more easily. My informants substantiated these claims with their experiences in videogame production. Only one of my informants did not report being passed over for some sort of merit-based advancement, and they said that they believe their race and class were significant factors in why they were advanced over other, possibly more well-suited candidates.

Union outfits must acknowledge that, within the structures they are advocating against, the enemy is not a person's coworker, but is the system of power and advancement in place that favors people similar to their boss and their boss's boss and is prejudice against other people. Strategies to collectivize and unionize will be hard-pressed to produce actionable paths forward until this acknowledgement happens. Casting sweeping generalizations about crunch, toxic workplace culture, and racial and gender disparities as being points of precarity without delving into the implications, granularity, and contours of those issues within situated, embodied instances spells disaster.

Precarity? Precarious? Misattributions and a Reminder About Granularity

While talking about meritocracy and advancement within videogame production with my informants, an interesting subtopic of conversation came up. Two informants in particular noticed that I kept using the word 'precarity' as a sort of catch-all and easy way to refer to negative situations that we could talk about within videogame production. I used the word 'precarity' to describe my own experiences working in videogame production, and I used it when talking to my informants. I don't think that these words properly describe the experiences of my informants or myself. Even though all six informants characterized their relationship with meritocracy (promotions, merit-based advancements, more responsibilities, recognition for a job well done) as one where they were never sure whether the work they had done was worthy of praise and how, at some point, they all had been passed over for a promotion, had their hard work attributed to someone else, or been told that they weren't actually working hard enough to merit any sort of recognition, some informants brought up that, when they found out they were passed over or found wanting, they did not immediately think of it as 'precarity'. Referring back

to cruel optimism, the way that cruel optimism conditions people to experience the world around us means that a person's view of what is and isn't normal, what is and isn't precarious, changes and warps.

Retelling

For Informants B and D, they had different understandings of what being precarious, experiencing precarity, and working in a precarious industry were. Fundamentally, as they both were quick to admit, the stress, the passion, and the overall workplace culture of videogame production changed their perceptions of what they were willing to accept as normal.

Informant B was curious as to what, exactly, the semantics of precarity were to me in the context of this project. They made a point to ask me why I kept referring to crunch as a form of precarity. This, then, allowed for a dialogue where Informant B was able to use their experiences in videogame production to further refine what my working definition of precarity could be.

"J: Do you feel like the precarity of making games affects how you approach your work?

B: Not to answer a question with a question, but why do you keep saying 'precarity'?

J: Ah- well, it's how I, personally, refer to working conditions, work culture, crunch… um… meritocracy. Like, the whole package of that. That's 'precarity' to me.

B: That makes sense. But I don't think I feel like that. I guess from a top-down view, when you think about all of that stuff together, it makes sense. But when you're working in those conditions, I feel like it's hard to say "this is precarity that I am experiencing!"

J: That's... that's a very fair point. How would you characterize it?

B: See, I don't think it's about characterizing it. Things feel *precarious* sometimes. Code, especially, can be precarious. Like I'm building something unstable on top of other unstable stuff, and I'm waiting on it to fall over. But I don't feel like I'm *in precarity* like you're describing. What, specifically, are you referring to with precarity?

J: I suppose one of the main things that I'm referring to is crunch, and another being contract labor. Like, I've had people tell me that they've worked 7, 8 contract gigs and been 'promised' to get hired on, but never did.

B: I- well… [long pause] As much as I hate to say it, and as callous as it's going to sound, that's just part of the job sometimes. Like I said before with the union stuff, we're in a precarious place in this industry, for sure. But to say that our experiences *are* precarity isn't quite there, I think. I think that that kind of totalizes what it is. I mean, for myself, I've almost always taken contract gigs because it allows me to move around, see new people, go and work with friends… Yeah, it isn't great in terms of maybe not having health insurance for a couple of months maybe, but it's so nice to just pick up and go when you finish a project. When I wrapped [GAME], I bought a plane ticket to Spain. Didn't pack a lot of clothes, just took what I thought I needed and I basically hostel-

hopped for a month. While I was there, I spent about 2 hours a day looking for jobs, and the rest of the time, I was exploring, watching, learning. It was amazing! The people I know who work full-time don't have that kind of leisure. Sure, they get a week, two weeks off at the end of a project, but after you crunch… I just don't think that's enough time to recover sometimes. It's not always awful."

Informant B's careful considering of what, exactly, the words 'precarious' and 'precarity' mean shed more light on why the embodied, experiential aspect of this project is so important, especially when considering definitions of word that are getting used quite often. Each of my informants talked about crunch or workplace power struggles or opaque meritocracy or unclear language regarding unions as 'precarious' or some form of 'precarity'. What differed between informants, and what Informant B is exemplifying here, though, is that each person's account of what constitutes precarity is different. Though there was overlap, as this chapter demonstrates, there is not enough overlap where I am comfortable making a sweeping generalization about what themes from this chapter constitute precarity unquestionably. Crunch is the perfect example of this: some informants talked about crunch as being bittersweet and were able a silver lining to crunch. Others had nothing positive to say about the experience. For some informants, crunch *was* the preeminent form of precarity within videogame production. For others, it was simply part of the package – a necessary evil.

Informant D also presented an important understanding of the scattered and disparate, abstracted ways in which precarious circumstances have manifested for them in videogame production. Though they had less of a silver-lining attitude towards what precarity is/what being precarious is, they were able to talk through how they, as a trans person, have experienced precarity in multiple forms: not just precarity inherent to production, but also precarity inherent to being a different kind of body than what production workspaces are made for.

"J: So, you've told me about some times that you've just… outrightly been discriminated against, both by management and by meritocracy. Does it make sense to you to call that precarity? Like, to classify those experiences as 'experiencing precarity'? I know this is an odd question, but I had a discussion with someone else about the semantics of these two words, and it's been kind of weighing on me.

D: No, yeah, I totally get that. Ummm, I've never distinctly thought of precarity as something that really means what I'm doing? I don't know, can you tell me what you mean by those two words?

J: Yeah, I totally can. So, when I started this project, I started by saying that stuff like crunch, meritocracy, workplace culture, racism, sexism so on when all bundled together made precarity in videogame production. I had a discussion with someone a few days ago about how I may be misdefining that packaging, and I may be doing an unfair thing in my work by bundling all those things together to define precarity, you know? So, when that person and I were talking, they said that they don't feel, or rather, can't conceptualize feeling 'precarity'. They said that they feel 'precarious', but not the whole package of 'precarity' like I'm presenting it.

D: Yes, uh huh, uh huh. Ok. That makes sense.

J: So what do you think?

D: Uhhhhh. Well, I see where you're both coming from. This industry *is* precarious. It is *shittily* precarious. You never know if you're gonna have a job next week, or if everyone is gonna get laid off without notice like at Telltale, right? I *feel* precarious when I go to work. Like, just being trans, even in [CITY], you're not safe. I could get [imitates gunshot sounds] BLAP BLAP, just like that. Out of nowhere. I mean, I told you that I've been discriminated against, just outrightly. But I also think that I've been passed over for permanent positions because I'm trans, I'm loud, and I don't give a fuck about making anyone happy. In fact, I *know* that I have. I worked so much harder than everyone else at this one gig I had working for [COMPANY]. It was such bullshit because I literally carried development on a system we were working on. And I kept documentation of *eeeeeeverything*. And when I went in for review, they even acknowledged that I had done a ton. And the entire time, they were like 'oohhh we might have an open position, we just gotta see how things shake out ya know' but that position never happened, and after the contract was done, I magically didn't hear from anyone there anymore. I know one of those idiots actually got a job over me at [COMPANY] because they were butt-buddies with the manager from [COMPANY] and I guess that asshole put in a good word for them and not for me. Stupid. Fucking sucks. I think THAT is precarity; stuff outside of my control. Stuff like this bullshit where I obviously was the better candidate for a position and I still didn't get it because of some fucked up nepotism. I don't know. I think there's more outside of just what you're saying now that counts as precarity.

Informant D was able to open up new ways of talking about what does and does not constitute precarity because of their ability to relate workplace precarity back to situations of social precarity that they had experienced. For them, the two often went hand-in-hand. Throughout our conversations, Informant D had told me about times that they had done the majority of work on a project, been all but promised to be hired on full time, and then passed over for, in their words, "straight, white, non-threatening dude bros". In addition to this, Informant D's comments, like Informant B's, are a reminder that precarity is not an all-encompassing thing. It is granular; it is an adjective, a verb, and a noun, and it can mean completely different sets of circumstances in all three of those roles for anyone I were to ask about their experiences with precarity in videogame production.

Recontextualizing

My informants' considerations around what being precarious meant to them and what precarity was in their lives yielded important understandings of how better to (re)tell their stories, draw conclusions from their embodied experiences, and recontextualize my definitional work of 'precarity'. My informants' contributions also helped to shape the ***Recontextualizing*** sections in this chapter. How I talk about their experiences, and what theoretical concepts I can relate back to their work take shape depending on the stories that they've told me. For each of my informants within each of these themes, their experiences share overlap and certain attributions, but each of their experiences is their own. They cannot be distilled down into base elements that can be put back together to equal 'precarity' in the same way for other people. This

is why the semantics of precarity become important.

Though I have been careful to try and refer to individual experiences without leading readers to quantify their experiences, my informants' wrestling with the semantic structure of the word 'precarity' is a constant reminder to do better. For my informants, the term 'precarity' is not just an adjective or an attribution. It is a noun: they deal with precarity. Precarity is sometimes a force in their lives just the same as a glass wall is. It is an adverb: a situation becomes precarious. Precarity does not manifest and stay still; it shifts, grows, and changes. It is an affect: they feel precarious, or they feel *precariousness*. My informants feel precarious in that they are unsure of their next step or next job, and they feel precariousness in the arrangement of set actions and workflow of the job that they are completing. Again, precarity is not a static thing; precarity encompasses actions and bodily attributions, facilitates decision-making, and exists as a manifested obstacle in the lives of my informants.

Immaterial labour becomes a slippery arena for collective action because of the material-discursive circumstances of the medium. Immaterial labour is creating non-material capital, and is doing so in production environments that are mostly non-material. The ease by which an immaterial labourer can work from home or a coffee shop or from the beach and still complete their work lends itself even further for why it is imperative to understand the multifaceted nature of the term 'precarity' and the multiple manifestations *of* precarity. In videogame production, precarity, feeling and being precarious, and encountering precarity do not manifest the same way for every single videogame production worker. This is due in large part to the granularity with which each videogame production worker lives their lives: what affective attachments they bring to work, what they characterize their lives and social make up as, what baggage they have from their past. As my informants' stories detail, layer upon layer of mitigating factors create abounding contours for how videogame production workers think about, encounter, and experience precarity.

I return once more to the example of the CWA's press-release regarding unionizing videogame production workers. The last element that makes this example impotent is that there is no acknowledgement or understanding of either the forms that precarity takes, or the manifestations of precarity. Concepts are listed in the CWA's press release as objectively negative, but no contextualization is given to what *makes* those concepts 'bad'. Is it that they instill a feeling of precarity in workers? Is it that the structures that these concepts operate in are precarious? Is it that these concepts stand as markers of embodied precarity? Without paying attention to the definition of the words that we work with, setting forth to protect workers against 'precarity' becomes little more than an exercise in feel-good organization. The thing that makes precarity such a convenient buzzword is that it can easily stand in for and encompass negative issues, which is clearly the strategy of the CWA in their press release. But by embracing that convenience, specificity is forsaken in favor of using stand-ins and generalizations.

Conclusive Proof: Granular Experiences

Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted how, across four main themes of conversation, my informants have presented not only important contributions which have helped me further refine and re-define the concepts that this entire project approaches, but they have also presented important reminders about the importance of embodied and experiential data. The stories that my informants told me all come from their own experiences with precarious aspects of videogame production. Them sharing those experiences has allowed me to highlight certain

aspects of precarity that wouldn't have been possible if I had only attempted to define precarity via a chapter of theory.

Each of the four themes that this chapter highlights provides important context for how and why approaching defining precarity, talking about cruel optimism in videogame production, and thinking about what unionization and collective action will look like are not generalizable subjects. Unions, as my informants pointed out, are not well-known or well-understood by everyone who would or could participate in their formation. Additionally, unionization suffers from a lack of clear, concise language about what issues it will address, and current representation from union outfits lacks engagement with diversity. All of these issues brought up by my informants present even *more* considerations that need to be foregrounded before collective action can happen on a large scale.

Even though all my informants agreed that crunch needs to come to an end in videogame production, there was still granularity in how each informant approached or experienced crunch. Akin to unionization, crunch is not as intricately understood as it could be. Why did some of my informants have bittersweet reactions to talking about crunch when others had very negative reactions to crunch? As my informants pointed out, it comes down to the circumstances around crunch that defined what it was like for them. With some informants, crunch occurred at a time or place in their lives where they were able to use it help shape relationships that they still maintain. For others, crunch embodied a time in which they saw themselves being taken advantage of while management tried to sell them a false narrative of their overwork as something to be proud of and worn like a badge of honor.

Each of my informants was able to talk about a misunderstanding or disagreement that they had with coworkers, and instances where misunderstandings with management went beyond just simple misunderstandings and constituted something more fundamentally broken about the structures that they were working in. My informants were able to contextualize for me what the circumstances were around the events that happened with coworkers that exacerbated seemingly small issues into being spats. For all of my informants, it was simply the environment that they were working in, and the emotional toll working under duress and within times of crunch had on them. In regard to the strange interactions that my informants had with managers, they made it clear that those interactions were occurred because, to my informants, the management entities that they were interacting with were out of touch and were not concerned with being in touch. This, then, created environments where things like crunch were bound to continue to occur because management had no understandings of day-to-day operational issues that created the *need* for crunch.

Finally, my informants' understandings of the situations and circumstances that they have been through with videogame production provide important meta commentary on the importance of embodied, experiential data when doing definitional work around subjects that affect large groups of people. All of my informants had a situated understanding of, and way of thinking about, how the events that they had experienced so far in their videogame production careers constituted 'precarity'. Informants B and D, though, made important points by pushing me to be more clear with how I was using 'precarity' and what I was allowing the word 'precarity' to stand in for: suites of attachments and affects, certain ways of dealing with passion, vastly different and irreconcilable understandings of what does and does not constitute the fundamental undergirdings of 'precarity.'

More than anything, this chapter presents data that makes a case for why granular knowledge-making is just as important as generalizable knowledge-making. Without the

situated, embodied experiences of my informants, there would be contours of this project that would be impossible for one person to think about and account for which would present more problems than answers. By seeking the types of knowledge that this chapter has exemplified through the lenses that I have talked at length about, it becomes possible to talk about my informants' experiences as experiences that are being mediated by structures of power that my methodologies shed light on.

4.
Institutionalization and Location

As I outlined in my third chapter, this project relies on theoretical tools from two kinds of ethnography to understand the systems at work behind the use of, and operationalization of passion within videogame production as a tool of recruitment, retention, and precarity-generation. It is important to establish how feminist ethnography is being utilized as a tool for making knowledge in this project. Feminist ethnography provides powerful tools for thinking through inequity while keeping the person being talked about held in mind and talked about in a respectful, generative way while institutional ethnography provides tools for understanding how institutions create the material-discursive realities where precarity manifests and workers become inculcated into systems and institutional discourses. These methodologies present two unique ways of approaching examining precarity. Combined, they reveal nuanced, decisive understandings of the interconnected nature of power-play, bodily characteristics, meritocracy, passion, and institutions that subsist on knowledge production.

Using the general themes outlined in my third chapter, it becomes possible to explore specific areas within those themes that feminist and institutional ethnography provide important further insight into precarity. For example, the issue of crunch was one that my informants all felt strongly about. Generally speaking, all my informants had a complex relationship with crunch: they endured it, they signaled their disdain for it, and they all said that they were in favor of it stopping as an industry-wide practice. Within my informants' experience, questions of who held the power to *create* situations where crunch was necessary could not be properly unpacked. In this chapter, using the theoretical tools provided by feminist and institutional ethnography, I can further unpack specific issues such as power play & communicational breakdowns and the propensity for immediate managers, human resources, and heads of divisions to ignore, discount, or inflame situations and concerns that workers had. Issues of workers' location both physically and affectively to management, institutional prioritization of numbers over people, and institutional practices that seek to isolate and silence problematic (read: non-productive, or possibly disruptive to production) elements run rampant throughout my informants' stories. This chapter seeks to acknowledge and dig into those issues in order to continue properly examining

my informants' experiences so that I can build towards a theory of multiple *precarities*; my informants' experiences in the previous chapter, especially Informants B and D's experiences with misattribution of what 'precarity' is become integral to understanding the granular ways in which each informant has experienced and worked through not just one general 'precarity', but multiple *precarities.*

The pressing question for this section are: where are these discourses moving? Whose voices am I highlighting, and to what effect? Is it enough to acknowledge the struggles occurring among my informants and their coworkers and to provide a platform to tell their stories? Or is this just another 'well-meaning initiative?' Employing the methodological tools that I am, I am seeking to create something uncomfortable; something that *requires* reckoning with and can't be buried under niceness or disregarded as tantamount to an academic temper-tantrum. These methodologies highlight and require embodied, experiential data. They require locating people in relation to systems of power and instances of abuse and they open the possibility of looking at how precarity can present similarly but not uniformly for different videogame production workers.

Institutional ethnography and feminist ethnography offer theoretical tools for examining similar issues in a complementary way while also revealing insight that, with just using one or the other methodology, may be lost. For example, both feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography are concerned with how power moves through an organization. Feminist ethnography is concerned with the people at work in an organization, modes of patriarchal and hegemonic control that dictate who has power and who does not, and attempts to understand how issues of sexism, racism, and homo/transphobia come to be embedded in organizational culture. Similarly, institutional ethnography is concerned with people in an organizational context but relies on the discursive circumstances *around* those people to help uncover how the same issues of sexism, racism, and homo/transphobia become embedded. Instead of relying on feminist ethnographic sensing, feeling, and non-verbal communication, institutional ethnography relies more on how people slot into dynamics such as institutional circuitry, or institutional discourses such as creating policy about harassment, task forces, or initiatives towards inclusivity. This allows researchers to more clearly examine how people become operationalized within discourses about power, meritocracy, and workplace culture & fit. Both methodologies are concerned with inequity and power-play, but they both rely on different understandings of subject matter to flesh out those concern areas.

Similarly, the conclusions that they come to are similar but utilized significantly differently. They share the goal of understating how organizations consolidate power, but they differ in how those results are presented and in what ways those understandings can solve inequity. Feminist ethnography understands that hegemony and patriarchy are key tools in keeping non-male people out of power. The ways in which feminist ethnographies are conducted seek to understand how inequity proliferates, possibilities to diversify workforces and positions of power in meaningful ways, and how to create more accessible models of production. In short, feminist interventionist work that comes out of feminist ethnographies seeks to shorten, and eventually eliminate, the gap between men and non-men in places of power, which then should create more equitable working conditions, living conditions, and societal conditions. Institutional ethnography understands that, as an organization grows, the structure of that organization must start to account for certain behaviors which could hamper production. For example, human resource departments are a tool for removing threats to productivity from the institutional circuitry of an organization. It becomes less about what type of body is in charge as what

behavior presents potential disruptions and how best to solve those potential disruptions and keep them from happening repeatedly. An example of this is Ubisoft Toronto using employee-led special interest groups, called ERGs. These groups are employee-run, employee-assembled groups that meet regarding certain workplace or culture issues such as correct use of pronouns, non-gender bathrooms, accessibility, women in games, etc. These issues are then presented to executives at Ubisoft Toronto with recommendations on how to better address these issues, or to ask for them to be fixed outrightly.

This chapter will trace how instances of exclusion, racism, sexism, power coagulation, mismanagement, operationalization of passion, and precarity occurred for my informants and what that means about the institutions that my informants are working in and how their embodied experiences are integral to creating ground for dismantling these practices. This chapter will produce systematic examples of negative cultural entrenchment that I've discussed in previous chapters and provide a springboard for talking about the general term 'precarity' in more concise, descriptive terms that don't lump all or the majority of negative situations and affects under one umbrella term.

Feminist Ethnography, Objective Truth, and Pastoralism

In popular press and academic pieces about videogames, we are often critical of the object: videogames. There are few instances where we have to acknowledge anything beyond the game itself or the community it impacts. In not acknowledging the granular, embodied existences of workers *behind* the videogames, we run the risk of erasing their voices and experiences, further instantiating the black box mythos of videogame production. This is why the labour done by Erin Hoffman in her LiveJournal blog *EA Spouse* (2004) and the anonymous writer of the Gamasutra piece entitled "Wives of Rockstar San Diego Employees have collected themselves" (2010), commonly referred to just as 'Rockstar Spouse, have been so integral to my ability to think about doing this project. These two women bore the brunt of a highly gendered, highly racialized industry in opening the black box of videogame production. Without their contributions and their strength, projects like this one or other projects that examine embodied, experiential accounts of workers within videogames would not have the critical touchpoints that allowed their work to chip away at the narrative of 'games over people' that has allowed the culture of videogame production to remain as toxic and destructive as it has been. All of that to say, I am glad to write my informants' objective truths in the manner that I am writing them: as stories that highlight their resilience and strength, stories that further highlight the culture that has, for years, destroyed lives both in egregious ways and subtle ways, and stories about *their* ways of encountering precarity.

This section will focus on feminist ethnographic characterizations in the stories that my informants shared that, for the most part, deal with issues of sexism, transphobia, minimizing workers' affective states because the product was more important, and blatant use of privilege to minimize other people. Within each informant's story, there are pieces of data that gesture towards institutional ethnography that highlight how, without institutional discourses in place that clearly favor one type of body, autonomy, and truth over another, these issues would have a harder time manifesting as readily as they do. Within my informants' experiences, feminist ethnography helps to characterize the contours of issues that I will cover in chapter five such as trauma and vulnerability. Using tools from feminist ethnography, these contours are not foregrounded in my informants' stories; instead, they constitute but one part of a broader context

of what a 'precarious' situation is like.

One theme that came up from all six of my informants was that, at some point, they talked about how their boss, project lead/manager, or HR representative did not approach concerns that informants shared with the gravitas that was necessary. The severity of the problem that needed addressing varied, but the response was the same for all my informants: they spoke about being ignored, brushed aside, or minimized. Informant A, for example, when talking about the corporatization that occurred at the first company they worked at, mentioned that they experienced severe burnout and "passion-poisoning", as they called it, following the suicide of their co-worker.

> "A: T-that's why I brought up bravado earlier; I think that was the only thing keeping it together for some of us. Well, I know for me. I was so cocky that what I was doing was important and good that I was self-obsessed. But once… you know. Once it hit that I lost one of my closest friends because I wasn't paying attention, I fell apart. Whereas y-know… we were all full of piss and vinegar and working and crunching and slaving… after that, I just couldn't. I remember going to my boss and saying 'hey, look, I'm not ok. This whole thing has, y'know, taken a lot out of me.' And they said 'yeah, we understand that, but we're so busy right now that we can't really let you have time off. Do you want to talk to someone? We can pay for one session and then the rest is out of pocket.'[…] I felt like I got… I- you know, I felt like I had food poisoning. Passion poisoning. I had given so much of myself, I still feel like I sacrificed one of my closest friends for this thing that, ultimately, meant nothing because I couldn't share it with [THEM]. I still think about it. Still blame myself for it."

Informant A's experience losing their friend during a time in their personal and professional life that was full of tumult manifested as them understanding that they couldn't press on in the same way that they had before. They said that, because of their obsession with making the game good, they blame themselves for potentially missing warning signs of their coworker's struggle. They, then, linked their coworker's death with the realization that they may have been too focused on the game and not focused enough on the people around them. Then, the human resources office's unhelpfulness in giving them time off to cope with this loss presented this informant's first experience within this company of them being less important in the grand scheme of the company than capital generation was. They had hand-made this game, put their life into it, and now that passion – the passion that lead to their company being bought – was working against them; denying them time to grieve properly. Instead, they were offered a one-off grief session in the hopes that this would allow Informant A to untangle years of passion, relationship-growth, and now grief that had become entangled. Additionally, the HR agent's minimization of Informant A's grief shows that, in terms of value-production, Informant A taking time out to grieve would, ultimately, impact the deadlines in place for the project, which meant that capital would be lost.

Informant F talked about how facing constant sexism and continued sexualization ended up becoming a reason for them and their coworkers to seek collective action. Even though they reported these instances to their boss and to HR, the validity of their claims were questioned and ultimately undermined.

> "F: I remember being asked why I didn't wear [PIECE OF CLOTHING] to the office, or why I didn't smile by someone who I didn't know. And like… Because I don't want to? […]I was like sure that it was just me that this was happening to, but come to find out? No. It was a *lot* of people. One day I was out with [COWORKER] after work and I was like 'man, if I get told to smile one more time when we're having a team meeting, I'm going to freaking kick a door in or something.' [COWORKER] agreed and said something like 'yeah, I know. It's so annoying.' From there, we started talking about some other times that some sexist halfwittery happened. Apparently, this one dude who contracted in some other part of the office had been heavy flirting with [COWORKER], our other coworker, and it was like getting really uncomfortable. [COWORKER] went to [BOSS] and told [THEM] about it and requested to not like interact with him. [BOSS] waved it off and told [COWORKER] to just ignore him, it was harmless flirting. […] It was like not long at all. I think we were both feeling sort of tired of the casual sexism and racism that kept happening and how we would get blown off when we brought it up to [BOSS]. [We'd] report sexist stuff in like pairs and groups, keep a look out for your [DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTIC], and make sure we're all supported."

Informant F's workplace experience presents an interesting case of worker solidarity, and workers using their collective power to not only support one another, but also to create a working environment that they deem equitable. In Interfacing, Informant F talked about their personal reticence, and the reticence of their coworkers to formally unionize in their workplace because they didn't feel like it was warranted. Instead, as Informant F's narrative demonstrates here, the collective action that these workers have in place came not from disparate wants and needs from many different kinds of people, but from shared experiences with precarity. As with Informant A, the systems in place in their institution to reroute behavior that could cause problems ended up failing: HR and their boss was not providing them with the necessary support that they needed, so they created their own ERG-like group. Instead of relying on a system that favors male people and productivity over all else, Informant F and their coworkers created an extra-institutional collective that presented the necessary solidary for them to continue working there.

Informant D talked specifically about their experience with transphobia as it extended to institutional powers and the obsession of their workplace at the time to 'do' diversity without, as this informant says, "actually [giving] two shits about me or any trans people."

> "D: Dawg. Human resources sought *me* out. […] I go and make an appointment and literally the head of human resources is, swear to god, waiting with his head like poking out from around a corner and when I introduce myself he full-fucking-on BUSTED out from behind that corner. He was all smiley and overly nice like he, personally, was apologizing to me for being transphobic. So uncomfy. We get to his office, he asks me to take a seat, and he brings in like.. the co-head? I don't know. Anyway, we sit there and they ask me some dumb questions about 'Oh well did anything leading up to the attack tip you off about this?' And I had to reel them back in. First, it wasn't 'an attack'. It was a bunch of them. And even at that, 'attack' to me sounds like he tried to beat the shit out of me for using the [GENDER] bathroom. I had to explain to them that he was basically just making anti-trans jokes behind my back and that my coworkers had basically taken notes. […] Then the questions come. The dreaded question. 'What can we do here to make you feel more comfortable?' And for real first thing out of my mouth was 'Well,

> don't hire transphobes.' They both froze up and it took them a minute to be like 'Oh. OH, well, yes of course, we're already looking into our hiring process to find ways to make it better.' […] After that, they kept tip-toeing around, asking questions like 'Oh well, if we instituted X Initative, how would that make you feel? Oh if we did Y sensitivity training, would that make things easier on you?'

Though this may seem like positive and proactive behavior from the institution that Informant D worked for, Informant D was left wondering what the purpose of this exercise was. "Did they just want to try and avert a lawsuits? Because dawg, it sure feels like it. As soon as I was out of their office, I never heard from them again." Informant D's experience with being sought out and brought into human resources is "some kind of show. It felt truly Truman Show-esque in how they were poking their heads around and shit." Informant D's help directing and recontextualizing the questions that were asked of them produced no action plans, initiatives, or resources that they were aware of in the time that they stayed under contract there. There was an element of intentionality in human resources' actions that sought up-front praise and positivity without investing resources or time into measures to reduce or eliminate further transphobic abuse. Akin to cupcake fascism, human resources' actions read as attempting to divert attention away from the systemic problem at hand and instead offer condolences, a façade of intentionality towards future action, and then a closed case. Informant D also talked about their perception of intentionality within the institutions they've inhabited; from how the situation of them being discriminated against was handled, they did not express that they thought any change would come of their experiences.

> "D: I still don't think they care or cared. It was completely [Cover Your Ass]. Some small part of me wanted to humor them just so they'd shut up and leave me alone. […] Being discriminated against sucks. But I've been discriminated against in like every job I've ever had. I've been called all the names in the book, made fun of for how I look, so on."

Informant D's experience with transphobia of varying extent, in addition to the very pointed transphobia that they experienced, points not only to the tendency of these workplaces to be heterogenous, but also to seek to applaud the efforts of those who stepped in to mitigate the situation and therefore minimize the negative event that took place. Instead of holding the workplace culture, or the offenders, accountable and talking with Informant D about those events, Informant D describes their interactions with HR being constituted mostly of valorizing their coworkers and deemphasizing the events that lead to HR's involvement. Often, the work of education about diversity falls to the marginal people being discriminated against. Informant D reported that, after this engagement with HR, they heard nothing more from them about this issue, nor did they hear anything further about inclusivity initiatives, workshops, or policy changes.

Informant C talked more about what happened after their experience with upper-management in the cross-sectional meetings they attended. Informant C's experience with blatant sexism and racism, again, speak to the nature of heterogeneity that videogame production works best under. They reported the behavior to HR, and HR said that they would look into what happened and take action. When asked if they thought anything would come out of them reporting their concerns, Informant C said:

> "C: Oh of course not. When I reported the event to HR, I got the patented condescending 'Oh honey. Well, the important thing is that you reported him. We'll look into it.' And then I was summarily shooed out of the office. Do I think anything came from that? Not on your life. Do I even think that that HR rep documented the case? Most likely not. It's just hearsay, but I'd heard other people going to HR for worse than this and it never getting resolved. I have a pretty thick skin, so I felt like I could shoulder what he said, but it's the racist intent that he said it with that really bothered me. Even if nothing came of it, and I don't think anything did, I convinced myself that this was my own little protest; a way of sticking to The Man."

Even though Informant C reported what happened, they were unsure of HR's commitment to actually fixing, or even addressing, the issue. Instead, they took the act of reporting the behavior as their own protest against a culture that does little to police such behavior and provide a safe working place.

Informant B reported harassment from a contractor that they worked with, and then harassment, including death threats, from people on twitter. They believe that after they reported the in-office harassment to HR, HR may have talked to or punished the harasser. This could have caused the harassment that this informant experienced after the informant departed.

> "B: My only real, hard-and-fast negative experience I've had with someone in any studio I've worked with was this one person who felt like unions were a waste of time and that they showed weakness. […] There was a lot of this person stopping me in hallways to try and argue with me, a few confrontations where they basically tried to 'out' me in front of a bunch of coworkers and superiors as 'that crazy union [DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTIC]', and some other unsavory stuff. Well, I reported them to HR after them yelling at me at a birthday party we threw for someone who was leaving. After that, everything was fine for a good 3 months, and then all of a sudden I start getting DMs on twitter from people telling me that they're going to kill me, that I'm a useless b-word, that they know where I live… all kinds of stuff. Around that time, the person who harassed me stopped working at [STUDIO]. […] It makes me wonder if HR did anything, and if they did do something, what did they say that pissed this person off that much."

Informant B had an informal conversation about the twitter harassment with the same HR rep that assisted them with the in-person harassment, and the HR rep stated that "we can't do anything about that because it isn't happening at work, and no one can prove that [GENDER] gave your username out anyway. It's best to just let it blow over."

One important consideration of this section that all my participants talked through with me was that they weren't necessarily sure what, if anything, could be done to foster a better environment, tackle issues that they faced differently, or how they could affect systemic change in their workplaces. Each participant could identify what would have possibly eased the tension that they faced, or how it could have been diffused differently, and they were aware of how their own complicity in that situation affected them. Their embodied experiences, though, and their embodied methods of problem-solving and reacting to the situations they talked through create non-generalizable information about how precarity can be handled, thought through, and diffused. There is no ready-made solution to create less tense, less precarious conditions like the

ones that my informants have faced. This does not mean that trying to create less precarious working conditions is moot, though. What this section exemplifies is that one-size-fits-all solutions are not generative when considering how wildly different conditions, affects, and attachments are from worker to worker. The power that is inherent in a human resources department's ability to draft guidelines for interaction, or the power inherent in a manager's ability to dehumanize or invigorate a worker speaks to the necessity of embodied, granular understandings of workers' positionalities prior to trying to create new material-discursive bounds that are aimed at diffusing precarity or creating equitable working conditions. In other words, what may work for some, may not work for all, and when considering initiative-building, it is important to keep that understanding at the forefront of planning.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the entwinement happening between issues of feminist ethnography and issues of institutional ethnography that these selections from my informants highlight. While this section exemplifies issues regarding body, positionality, power-play, and hegemony, it also underlines the nature of the institutions that my informants are ensconced in. These events and these embodied experiences cannot be extracted from the situations that they occurred in. Nor can they be extracted from the institutional discourses that allowed for these situations to form in the first place. By nature of having an institutional component like an HR department, there is an admission in place that things won't always be equitable.

Informant Institutions

Institutional ethnography presents a way of taking into account how, as Griffith and Smith say in *Mothering For Schooling* "everyday lives and worlds are embedded in and organized by relations that transcend them, relations coordinating what we do with what others are doing elsewhere and elsewhen (10)." For my informants, their relationality to coworkers, immediate and upper management, the material-discursive boundaries of their job (the times that work takes place, the places, the chairs they sit in, etc.), and the actual rote tasks that needed to be performed to accomplish a task all triangulate these informants' places within institutions. What exploring their stories via institutional ethnography allows is a more nuanced examination of *how* things happen or are allowed to happen within their institutions. The institutional discourse that my informants engaged with dealt in large part with their social relations, especially around coworker-to-coworker and worker-to-management. Each informant presented me with clear schisms in communication, expectation, and perceived importance of issues ranging from blatant transphobia to union organization suppression to casual sexism. The ways in which my informants' problems were handled (by often being minimized) offers clear signposting towards what Griffith and Smith in *Mothering for Schooling* refer to as a byproduct of ruling relations. Those in power in an institution dictate what values the institution will emphasize, what values will be downplayed, what constitutes a 'problem', and what a proper solution a problem is. For my informants, they found themselves in various institutional scenarios that showed how the institution in question dealt with certain problems.

This section will focus on institutional ethnographic takeaways that deal with issues of how institutional discourse, circuity, and power-play allow for power within organizations to coalesce out of the reach of certain people, and coalesce in ways that seek to first code and then isolate certain behavior as harmful to production. Within each example, though, there are kernels of feminist ethnographic knowledge-making that highlight how, inextricably, the concepts of

power, meritocracy, and mobility are tied to bodily characteristics and tied to isolating and disempowering people that experience circumstances that can affect productivity. As with feminist ethnography, institutional ethnography provides a place to start to characterize the contours of issues that I will further expand upon in chapter five. Institutional ethnography provides important theoretical tools for understanding how risk and risk (re)distribution operate as characteristics of a broader context of 'precarity'.

Informant D described an instance of what Michelle LaFrance in *Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studios Researchers* refers to as 'institutional circuitry.' Institutional circuitry is a way of describing the apparatuses in place for institutions to resolve perceived problems, or to isolate certain problems. In Informant D's case, they 1) experienced blatant transphobia, which then 2) resulted in the offender being fired. This resulted in 3) Human Resources for the company seeking out Informant D to 4) attempt to understand the situation that happened, by which they could 5) 'take action'. In much the same way as Sara Ahmed talks about her experience with 'doing diversity work' in *On Being Included*, Informant D's experiences, along with Informants A, C, and F's experiences, of human resources was not helpful; they were slow, ineffective, and in Informants A, C, and F's experiences, not willing to entertain the severity of the problem at hand as being a relevant issue. The circuit that occurred when these informants interacted with human resources was one meant to isolate a disruption to productiveness. The point of isolating that problem, however, was not to *fix* the problem in any meaningful way, as Ahmed characterized her own experiences in *On Being Included*. Instead, it was to make it seem like the problem is meaningful, and that by exercising a modicum of institutional power to create (in Informant D's case, especially) initiatives to try and address the problem, the institution is interested in making a safe workplace for their workers.

Isolating threats to productivity did not just happen with interpersonal conflict. It also occurred when informants had input toward subject matter, work practices, or really anything regarding workplace culture. With my informants' experiences, one thing that came up over and over was their experience with how the word 'passion' was operationalized by upper-management and upper-division heads of departments. Informants' input was often overwritten or outrightly ignored by upper-management, but still, they were asked to carry out work on their products in the name of 'passion' that they knew was detrimental to the product. They talked about being powerless when dealing with design decisions that went against their own moral code in some cases, and against what they knew that their community wanted in other cases.

Informant B talked about times in which they were asked to manipulate data that went into progress reports to make the work that their team was doing seem further along than it was. They told their manager that fudging data would lead to worse crunch, and that they should just come clean about progress to which their boss launched into a tirade questioning how much this informant cared about their job and about the project as a whole.

> B: So when my boss was showing me how they did documentation, we were doing a timeline, and [THEY] asked me to just go ahead and move some dates of completion around because 'it wasn't a big deal, we're going to finish them anyway.' I said 'uhhh, that doesn't sound like a good idea. Wouldn't this just make things harder on us down the road? I mean if we lie about where we are, we're going to have to keep lying because even if [NAMES OF SICK EMPLOYEES] come back tomorrow and work 12 hour days for the next week, we still can't finish things in time for this schedule to be right.' […] I ended up fudging. [THEY] put too much pressure on me. I mean, there were veiled

> threats of blacklisting me, appeals to me wanting to make a good product, all kinds of stuff. […] I had to turn all of this into [BOSS'S NAME] anyway, so even if I was obstinate and didn't change anything or do what [THEY] asked me to do, it didn't matter. I had no power in this situation. I had no real say.

Ultimately, Informant B had little recourse *except* to do what their boss asked of them. In this case, a certain degree of power was taken away from the process of documentation. If nothing else, the usually mundane task of documenting progress should serve as an institution-wide device that allows for subtle shifts in departments to accommodate possible slippages in other departments in much the same way that tall steel buildings sway in the wind to distribute weight so they don't topple over. Informant B's unique positionality within their team, and within this organization to help the institution accommodate subtle shifts was hamstrung when it was perceived that that power would end up upsetting the power structures above the informant. Informant B was tasked with documenting how their team was progressing, stumbling blocks, and amending timelines, as is common in *any* form of software development. Instead of being able to do the task that was assigned to them, Informant B's boss operationalized passion as a way of, firstly, manipulating them into fudging numbers, and secondly to de-personalize the situation at hand. Instead of allowing Informant B to say that two of their coworkers had the flu and that, since they were integral parts of the team, progress had slowed considerably because of their illness, Informant B's boss flexed their power to say that everything was fine in print, but also that, through sheer force of 'passion', the project's progress would be made up at some indeterminate time.

Informant C raised concerns about the management entities above their direct manager being completely out of touch with the communities they were attempting to sell to and serve. In the following example, Informant C talked about a certain instance where someone in upper-management demonstrated a lack of tact in addressing a schedule delay that this informant's team was experiencing.

> "C: We had people from marketing, finance, engineering, and other departments who got to talk directly to the CFO, CIO, CTO, and Vice-CFO, vice-CIO, and vice-CTO. Well, one of the meetings we had, we were talking about a progress report from my team about some systems stuff and how we were making progress, but it was still slow since this wasn't really in any of our wheelhouses. The vice-CFO […] interrupts me to say 'your team needs to hurry the fuck up because it seems like a pretty mindless task that you're working on.' Then he said 'we should just pay some monkeys to do it', referring to Indian people. […] I remember making eye-contact with someone in marketing, and their eyes being about as large as a saucer. Then, I just got up and left. I couldn't believe what I had heard."

Informant C further talked about how abstracted from the community that they were serving upper-management, or really anyone in a position of power above themselves, was. They talked about how middle- and upper-management treated potential consumers as data points and only wanted to cater to demographics instead of to "actual human people." They also spoke about the development ideals that came down from shareholders and upper management that seemed so abstract and esoteric that they had no idea how to actually implement those ideals. This, then, turned into a point of contention between themselves and upper-management.

> "C: It just seemed like everyone in upper-management that I interacted with didn't know anything about the game or the people who made it. Everyone was just a data point. Like I said with the CTO, you would think that someone who is the *chief* technology officer of a *videogame production* company would just make a sweeping generalization about me. 'You are engineer, you make vid-ee-oh game, ungah bungah.' When it was their turn to talk in meetings, or, you know, when it was someone else's turn, but they were deemed less important, upper-management just said really strange things. […] Mostly, it was them talking about 'numbers' and 'data points'."

Informant C was exposed to upper-management in timed and contained circumstances. They experienced first-hand the differences in thought, action, accountability, and knowledge that upper-management favored. Akin to my other informants, though, the feeling of disconnection between workers and upper-management manifested throughout their experience at this company.

Passion was operationalized as a way of gating who progressed in videogame production and who did not, as well. All of my informants reported having passion brought up to them multiple times throughout their production careers, either as a way to encourage them to work harder, to question their motivations (again, to make them work harder or beyond normal hours/conditions), or as a meritocratic measure. Two informants, Informant A and Informant D, had unique understandings of how passion and meritocracy operate due to their own experience. Informant D has experienced what they consider veiled discrimination based on their choice of transitioning, but has had that discrimination put them as them being not passionate enough, or not working hard enough on merit being hired full-time, kept on a project, or promoted.

> D: I fucking guess that it's either because I'm trans or because I'm not a straight white dude. Like, ok. So, when I was working on [GAME], I had a 6 month contract. BUSTED my ass. […] So the chance to get to work on [GAME SERIES] in some small part? Yes. Immediate yes. When I signed the contract, I was like 'Ok bitch this is it. They said that there is room for hiring. You got this.' So I literally worked 80 hour weeks, documented the holy heck out of everything I did, stepped up and like… de-facto led the team, or tried to. I picked up so much slack when other people couldn't be bothered, right? Fast forward to like month 5 ½. I'm getting my review. […] The end of the meeting rolls around and we haven't talked about my future. So I skirt it and ask what's up with the position that they said there may be room for. Dude straight up says 'Yeah, we um… we're looking for someone with a little more passion for the project. Your work is great, don't get me wrong, but we just think that someone else would probably be a better fit.' Bruh. I have never felt more betrayed. Like, I literally laid my life out on this project. So stupid dude.

Informant D characterized their experience with contract work that had a possibility of being hired with clearly contrasting expectations of how their work was perceived and the work they actually did as a basis on which to not hire them. Informant D also talked about a more explicit example of being discriminated against based on them being *retroactive* discriminated against and subsequent firing of the manager that had discriminated against them.

> D: So, this contract was for a year, and shit-head got fired around 4 months in. […] we're talking like 65, 70 hour weeks. […] So I'm just sort of vibing from month 6 to 11, doing my thing, my coworkers are still tight, my new boss is weird but at least not a transphobe and honestly not any weirder than any other boss I've had. So the end of ye old contract doth approach and one day I'm sitting in my review meeting, me and [BOSS'S NAME] are chillin', shooting the shit while talking through my stuff. […] It gets down to the end of the meeting and I'm like 'So? Am I gonna get big hired?' And [BOSS'S NAME]'s face kinda dropped, and he was like 'Ah, well… n- I mean, ah, no. There were some questions from *my* boss about… you know… and how that affected your people skills. I told him that you were great and fine but he wouldn't stop asking about workplace fit and stuff.' Well fuckin' come to find out, they hired [COWORKER], whose work I was constantly fixing. I don't even think dude knew how to code anything outside of Python. I don't know. I- like that's one of those things where I think 'holy shit, why.' And then I realized 'oooohhhh because he didn't get someone fired for them being transphobic. Riiiight.'

Even though Informant D went through the correct institutional channels to report what had happened, proper action was taken against their boss, and the rest of the contract was completed without incident, there were still traces within the circuit of disruption not only to productivity but to workplace culture as well.

Informant A, having been on all sides of videogame production, has a similar understanding, but a self-admittedly muddled sense of where to go or how to fix meritocracy. Ultimately, Informant A identified being 'loud' or, as they also termed it 'cocky', as a way of standing out and achieving job progression. They talk about the formal corporatization process of the first company that they worked for as somewhat of a whirlwind. They also express concerns in hindsight that the promotions they received, they were not the best suited for.

> A: I think I was cocky enough that when people came in and didn't know our team, they saw me and thought 'Oh, well, he can do a fine job.' And so I was ah- I was thrust into that role. I- do you remember the guy I told you about who had to code that Easter egg? The slightly racist one? He would have been just as good as me. Maybe better. He was meticulous whereas I was just… cocky. I- I know enough to get the job done, but no I don't… I wasn't the best choice, no. […] I think by 'cocky' I mean I was intense. Well, we were all intense. We were making something that we loved; we were fiercely protective of it. I was just outspoken enough that, ah, I guess it came across as me being the most passionate one in the room, and that… [short pause] somehow translated to me being competent. [laughs]

Informant A also talked about how the formal structure of the company that they own provides an alternative to hierarchical workplaces.

> A: Well, here's the thing. We only have six people at [COMPANY]. I've known most of them for ten, twelve years. We truly are flat there. I mean… as flat as it can get. I own [COMPANY] [finger quotes] "officially". […] W-we all are doing the work, we all are completing the projects. In my way of thinking, I prefer this model to any other model because it doesn't play us against each other, you know? I- what I think a lot of merit-

> based upward movement is predicated on is 'outdoing' your coworkers. The way I run [COMPANY] isn't like that. If we finish a project and get some bonus or residuals or something, *everyone* gets it. […] Everyone gets the same ah- same payout at the end of a project. But again, I feel like [COMPANY INFORMANT OWNS] is a special case. We're a specialized case. If you're talking about big companies, Riot or Epic o-or um… Blizzard. It becomes unwieldy to do something like what we have. At that point, you have to consider merit and a hierarchical structure. But, you have to do that blindly, I think. Blind reviews. Blind uh- blind uh, hiring and promotion. But even that presents problems. It isn't a perfect system, but- but I think that there's ways of gaming it so to speak. It uh… depends on your company and the make-up though.

Informant A's unique experience with videogame production, having been on the working side and the upper-management side, created an interesting dichotomy between how they had first experienced passion being operationalized and having their passion turned into capital via a promotion and how they had to do the same thing to ensure their own company's success. Whereas, initially, they had worked at a completely flat company, tackling work in a proto-version of Clay Spinuzzi's concept of swarming from *All-Edge*, they witnessed structuration occur: they experienced how their own passion, whereas before it was just a mark of good game development, was turned into an institutional control mechanism. They spoke louder than other workers, therefore, they were promoted. Then, when they started their own company, they attempted to emulate that flattened working hierarchy they enjoyed with their first company, but this time, they were in a slightly elevated role that required thinking of the company as a possible success/failure venture, which meant that this informant had to find a way of making sure that their competent, trusted employees continued successfully completing projects.

All four of these informants experiences demonstrate different institutional mechanism aimed at isolating problems that could affect productivity. Chris Paul, in The *Toxic Meritocracy of Videogames* talks about how passion means two different things to workers and upper-management, and that clear schism works its way into meritocratic upward movement. For workers, 'passion' was used as a hiring metric and a workplace culture fit metric, and then used as a way of subjectivating informants to expect overwork and to invest their emotional and psychical energy into projects. For leadership and upper-management, passion is a resource that can be operationalized to increase knowledge production and can be used as a control method to gate progression through an institution.

All of these cases present instances of considerably 'mundane' tasks such as cross-sectional reporting meetings, reviews, designing documents, and being a subject matter expert. These tasks are necessary mechanisms of any institution, yet they left my informants open to passion being operationalized against them in ways that made what should have been straightforward job responsibilities into precarious situations that asked them to navigate in ways that they may not have been comfortable doing.

I Dunno What To Say Except That Both of These Things Discriminate Against Workers

This chapter sheds light on how institutions function, and how institutions are complicit in embedding and enabling issues that feminism seeks to critique. By using feminist and institutional ethnography to trace how control mechanisms within institutions manifest, be it institutional discourse, ruling relations, hypersexism, racism, or transphobia, it becomes less

obfuscating to understand the inner workings of these organizations. What especially becomes clear are how the rhetorics of impartiality in meritocratic advancement can be seen as vehicles to enable blatant favoritism and power consolidation as ways of further entrenching homogenous workplace cultures regardless of whether the institution in question has a stated interest in diversity and bettering videogame production. Victoria Brescoll, in "Who Takes the Floor and Why" makes clear linkages between gender and power within three different contexts, stating that men are more commonly thought of as innovative, connected, and forward-thinking than women, even when proven to have regressive track-records. Additionally, Ethan Burris, in "The Risks and Rewards of speaking Up" found that, when non-men speak up to try and correct a problem or challenge a workplace norm in a context where leadership was comprised mostly of men, their concerns are often invalidated on the basis of perceived (in)competence. Adam Grant in "Rocking the Boat but Keeping it Steady" found that the tone of voice and emotionality of speech when addressing a problem or raising a concern was directly linked to uptake of the idea being presented. Grant also linked overexpression or overemotional investment as a perceived distinctly non-male characteristic. Informant D, linked passion to output, and they overworked in the name of passion to try and land a permanent position. Instead, someone whose work this informant constantly fixed was hired because the workplace cultural fit suited that person better. In the case of Informant A, they conceded that they were not the most qualified for the position that they received at the first company they worked for, yet by portraying themselves as 'cocky' and talking 'loud', they were seen as more competent.

The ways in which feminist and institutional ethnography have been used in this chapter to examine my informants' experiences with the institutions that they've worked in reveal some striking similarities across methodologies. It is clear that institutional structuration is intimately linked to subject matter with which feminist ethnography is concerned: how do informants characterize their unique, embodied experiences? How do informants locate themselves within these institutions via social relations? Where and how can we locate people in relation to the power structures that they are operating in? When these methodologies intersect, what is possibly being obfuscated or not given *enough* attention?

One salient example of this linkage is Informant C's experience with abusive and degrading language from upper-management in the cross-sectional meeting that they were a part of. Informant C talked about how their peers in that group were supportive, kind, and attentive (which echoes sentiments about coworkers from Informants B, D, E, and F), but characterized 'anyone with vice' or 'c' in their job title' as being disengaged, disconnected, and ultimately concerned with data points and capital generation over the people at work in their institution, or even the people that *ended up becoming* the data points. The abuse that Informant C suffered from the CTO of their company is indicative of the clear schism in communication and goal-setting between workers and upper-management.

Another example of how these two methodological approaches are intertwined is informants' companies' attempts to 'do' diversity. Informant D experienced two jobs that said they wanted to be more inclusive and create a better working environment, but twice failed due to institutional constraints. Part of this failure is, as discussed previously, videogame production's reliance on the tools of capitalism to subjectivate workers and create environments where workers are less likely to try to radically change working culture. Though Informant D went through the correct institutional channels to report discrimination and uncomfortability, documented their experiences, and in one case had coworkers who also documented experiences on behalf of them, change did not occur while they were employed there. Their experiences were

reported, and they never heard back about them except in the case of the firing of their immediate manager for transphobia. On the one hand, this lack of clarity in institutional processes is due to bureaucratic process in *any* institution being necessarily opaque, but also this lack of clarity has a more dire subtext to it: one that seems to indicate that, even though violation has occurred, the person being violated has no autonomy in regard to those events. Instead of being involved and kept apprised of investigation or possible actions, Informant D aptly commented that they thought their 'reports went into the black hole, never to return.'

Where Do We Go Next

I want to briefly return to the questions that I asked at the beginning of this chapter, and provide last bits of context before we move on. First and foremost, the question of whose voice I am highlighting needs to be addressed. Like I covered in Methodology: Situated, Experiential, Granular, the hundreds of cold emails I sent out, and the unanswered LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter messages from people who I've worked with in the past and developed professional relationships with is telling of the cultural expectations around talking about work in videogame production. There is a fear that whomever these workers talk to will use their words carelessly, and to push an agenda. It has been done time and again in popular press around games (see: Ben Kuchera berating the designers of *Cuphead* for making a game that does not cater to, nor willingly *lets* players win and Kotaku's long history with inflammatory titles, click-bait journalism, and internal corruption).

Feminist ethnography and institutional ethnography highlight and complement each other in ways that makes it impossible to examine issues of precarity without considering the people being affected, the institutional power(s) at work, and how power is moving through these institutions. Issues of power coagulating at the top of an institution and becoming a schism between workers and upper-management allows for the feminist issues I've identified to entrench, while the feminist issues occurring are predicated on sexism, racism, homo/transphobia, and exclusivity. The highly gendered, racialized, and hegemonic structure of videogame production already allows for rampant discounting of marginal people. That includes, but is not limited to, people of color, women, queer people, and trans people. In a more general sense, who can be discounted comes down to power, and brings into question how meritocracy *thoroughly* enables a culture of favoritism that often leaves non-white, non-male people as token pieces of diversity and little more.

As diversity becomes more easily monetizable as I prove in my own works entitled "The Capitalist Socius and Videogame Production" and "Videogame Production: How the Capitalist Socius and Platformization Subjectivate", and cultural capital starts to accrue at a critical point behind the idea of diverse working spaces in North America especially, the highly gendered, highly racialized state of videogame production *is* changing. And while it may seem antithetical to link capital-generation due to a cultural concept reaching critical mass to a positive change, it is a positive, if somewhat complicated, step forward. As with any project that touches on capitalism in a critical way, it is important to continue to be wary of its intentions, the ever-developing tools for oppression, and its tendrils that can reach down into unclear parts of the industry to create new forms of precarity. It is important, however, to acknowledge that diversity in videogame production is starting to move away from the tokenism that work like Megan Condis' *No Homosexuals in Star Wars* critically and rightly points out. We are starting to see genuinely diverse game offerings; games like *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Beyond Good and Evil 2*, and

Borderlands 3 are starting to dismantle the tired tropes of white saviorism, romance paths written for male characters and just carbon copied for women characters, and hypermasculinity. To no one's surprise, these games are being made by increasingly diverse teams, too. After the controversy around *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and the backlash that was spawned from the creation of a trans character without anyone consulting a trans person, triple-A game companies are starting to value the input of non-white, non-male people when creating non-white, non-male people for their games. Admittedly, these are small steps forward, but it is forward progress. And this is not to say that people of color, women, and queer people do not suffer precarity at *far* higher rates than heterosexual, white, men do. Because they do. But this chapter would be incomplete without acknowledging the small, positive steps forward that are happening, regardless of capital-generation capacity.

5.
Towards a Theorization of *Precarities*

Throughout this project, my focus has been on foregrounding the experiences of my informants. Their unique experiences are the most important part of this project, and with their experiences, I want to posit a formative (re)theorization of 'precarity' to 'precarit*ies*'. The point in differentiating between 'precarity' and 'precarities' is that one is a catch-all term to describe possible instances of, well, precarity. As the literature in the first chapter describes, 'precarity' as a theorized concept spans a number of circumstances, attributions, situations, etc. and is catalyzed by, contained within, and signified by a number of affects, uncontrollable floes and redirections within production, and whims of late stage capitalism. What the conceptions of precarity that were covered in the first chapter do not account for are highlighted by what my informants in the last section of the third chapter spoke about: misattribution, non-specificity, and, again, one-size-fits-all description. In order for the goal of this project to be realized, groundwork needs to be done toward a formative theorization of *precarities.* There are intersections and entanglements between humans, conditions of labour, and extenuating circumstances that are not addressed by business psychology, organizational communication, critical media studies, or game studies that must be addressed. Precarity as a concept covers a lot of theoretical ground, and it gives scholars a way of talking through tumultuous working and living conditions without having to identify or engage with the underlying issues that are causing what they deem 'precarious'. This project, however, *needs* to engage with these issues. Therefore it is important to move towards a multifaceted, multidimensional theorization of *precarities*.

The previous two chapters provided two important elements that enable this chapter to exist. The first is a general set of themes that my informants deemed to be precarious in some way. Those themes included unionization, crunch, power clashes and workplace culture, and misattributions of what/who is 'precarious'. The second is a more granular, more rigorously theorized explanation for possibly reasons *why* these situations are precarious for my informants. Using institutional and feminist ethnography, it becomes possible to examine issues of culture and power at work in my informants' settings that could enable precarity to manifest. The themes that chapter three lays out, and the theorizations that chapter four allows for, still amount to and encourage an umbrella understanding of 'precarity'. The issues that my informants talk about are granular, intricate, and personal, therefore they deserve the type of theorization that allows for that kind of care and understanding to be given to further understanding how to *fix* those issues.

My informants helped me to understand that without further interrogation of what I meant when I was ascribing their stories and situations as 'precarious', or said that they were facing 'precarity', I wasn't doing enough to highlight and to substantiate what was happening in their lives and what these experiences actually meant. This is why it is necessary to take into account my informants' stories about their experiences working in videogame production to talk about the intersections and entanglements that form precarity as they understand and experience it. For my informants, the term 'precarity' is not just an adjective or an attribution. It is a noun: they deal with precarity. Precarity is sometimes a force in their lives just the same as a glass wall is. It is an adverb: a situation becomes precarious. Precarity does not manifest and stay still; it shifts, grows, and changes. It is an affect: they feel precarious, or they feel *precariousness*. My informants feel precarious in that they are unsure of their next step or next job, and they feel precariousness in the arrangement of set actions and workflow of the job that they are completing. Again, precarity is not a static thing; precarity encompasses actions and bodily attributions, facilitates decision-making, and exists as a manifested obstacle in the lives of my informants.

This move from the singular 'precarity' to the multiple 'precarities' is not meant to signal an expansion of what circumstances could be conceived of to *create* precarity. Instead, the move to multiple precarities is meant to signal that there are mitigating factors and attributions that happen on a personal, human level that are complicit in creating the circumstances in which precarity can present. It does no good to continue trying to lay bare what named, specific actions that happen in labour conditions are 'precarious'. Crunch, overwork, toxic workplace conditions, etc. are forms of precarity. The literature that this project has reviewed and relied on to come up with frameworks show that, in line with Walsh, Han and Moore, those activities are theoretically-backed as 'precarious'. Therefore, I have no interest in further defining what *events* are precarious. Instead, I am interested in picking at the underlying causes for why those events can be considered precarious to some people and not others, to differing degrees, with differing attachments, contestations, and understandings of why or how those things are precarious.

Using my informants' stories about their time and experience working in videogame production as evidence, this chapter draws conclusions about three general themes that are present within my informants' stories that provide more context for the grey spaces in between theoretical distinctions of what 'precarity' is. Those themes are: trauma, vulnerability, and risk. The work done in my previous two chapters created themes and ways of organizing data that enable this theorization of *precarities*. These three sets of themes, while separate, are highly intertwined and reflect how insidious the concept of 'precarity' is and how multifaceted its appearances are. This is the reason why it is imperative to dig down into the themes from the previous two chapters to better understand just what issues are at stake when making a move towards multiple, multifaceted *precarities*. Returning to my introduction where I used work from Paul Walsh, Clara Han and Phoebe Moore to help triangulate what a definition of 'precarity' could be, my move towards 'precarities' does not preclude or excise their work. Through these three pieces of definitional work in other fields, the idea of what *facilitates* precarity becomes easier to talk about, but the act of pinpointing what precarity *is* is still out of reach by relying on these works alone. We can ascertain that precarity has roots in, and is exacerbated by, neoliberalism, casualization of labour, and the strip-mining of worker protections and worker welfare. But the extenuating circumstances of the people involved in the everyday systemic labour of late-stage, neoliberal capitalism are unaccounted for, which is where the move towards multiplicative precarities becomes useful.

Trauma

During my time talking to my informants, trauma often came connected to what they deemed as negative or 'precarious'. Trauma, in common parlance, refers to a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. My informants all talked about trauma at some point in their careers. How they each approached or validated their own experiences, though, shifted drastically from informant to informant. Some talked about self-inflicted trauma in the form of overwork: the overwork that they were expected to perform should be worn as a badge of honor – you're doing a cool job, millions of people are going to play your work, and you have to work your way through the negative stuff if you want to make your own game some day. Other informants talked about issues of sexual harassment and discrimination. Since videogame production has been and continues to be largely male dominated[5], the perpetuation of hypermasculinity and the necessity of dominance within videogame production spaces creates an environment, as D'Anastasio says of Riot Games, ultimately built for a male gaze and only concerned with male advancement: both of people into positions of leadership, and of male-coded ideology. Still others talked about power abuse from superiors at their companies. For each of my informants, they experienced things in their time in videogame production that fundamentally shifted how they approached production, how they viewed their own entanglement in production, or somehow tainted their initial conception of the role that being passionate about games played in being successful.

I want to highlight three examples of trauma that my informants brought up as a way to contextualize how 'trauma' as a concept is not static, and depends on circumstances beyond a generalizable theoretical framework to determine *why* and *what* is traumatic about a series of events. The experiences I will be talking about in this section are from Informants A, C, and D. When talking about 'trauma' in regard to my informants, it's important to remember that they have vastly different quantifications of what trauma is and what it means. In recent informal conversations with Informant D, I talked to them about the idea that trauma might be an underlying cause of precarity, and a reason why referring to situations that I'd talked with them about as a catch-call 'precarity' wasn't correct, and thus necessitates a move towards multiple *precarities*. I asked them what they thought of trauma when thinking about their time in videogames, and they raised a very important point:

> D: I feel like I have the most fucked up sense of trauma. Like, someone could yell at me and I could casually drop that that traumatized me, but, like I've told you, I just fucking truck away at work, get transphobia'd, and still keep going. Where does the line get drawn, man? I don't even know what traumatizes me or could traumatize me anymore.

Similarly, Informant A talked about trauma as something that's not neat or clearly understandable in a conversation we had recently.

> A: I uh, I remember talking about o-or well, mentioning trauma the last time we spoke, actually. It made me think about if I was using that term too loosely. And you know, I-I don't think I was. What happened was a breaking point. Something that uh… I couldn't necessarily come back from. But then, I also have these fond memories of overworking

[5] according to the IGDA 2017 members' survey, roughly 80% of respondents were male, and 20% of respondents were women [Westarr et al, 2017]

> prior to that. Did I ruin it b-because of my dad? Or was it just finally my time to stop wanting to do it? I don't know. And I think that it would be drastically different if it hadn't been at that point in my life.

Again, similarly, Informant C talked about how traumatic experiences don't necessarily create a recognizable or quantifiable event immediately; it's the fallout of that event or events that define the type of, level of, reaction to, and understanding of what elements were traumatic.

> C: Do I remember how it felt when that jackass said that stuff about me and my team? Yes. But, somehow, that doesn't feel traumatic. I've heard people say similar things before but it hasn't been directed at me. No, it was when I was talking to people, and trying to contextualize how or… or I guess why that happened that it became real. When coworkers who I had just met at [COMPANY] started talking about similar past experiences and saying it with just such resignation, that's when the stuff that happened felt real. More weighty.

Each of these informants' events and experiences with trauma share characteristics of the issues that I defined in the third chapter of this project: power abuse, misattribution, workplace culture, crunch, and collective action. But what is important is the granularity of the experiences that each informant has shared. Nothing about their experiences is the same; none of it is quantifiable. Using this definitional work, nothing about their experiences lends itself to saying "this and this are aspects of trauma that are directly related to precarity". Instead, their experiences provide framing for saying "trauma is a personal affect, and these informants shared with me these aspects of their experiences that they considered traumatic".

Informant A spoke at length in previous chapters about their attachment to crunch; they recognized that, when they entered videogame production, overwork had not yet coalesced as a way of conceptualizing the work that they were doing. It was simply 'work', and they committed themselves to that work because they were passionate about videogames. Informant A, towards the end of their time at their first studio, was burnt out on overwork because of the corporatization of the company. The initial allure of videogame production as a rogue, lawless endeavor was lost when the organization established hierarchies and un-flattened. The last session of crunch that this informant worked was where they located the source of trauma that we spoke about during out conversations.

> A: My father passed around 3 months before crunch started on [GAME]. I thought 'You know, this will take my mind off things, and give me some distance.' Well, it did not. The entire time that we were crunching, I had my boss and his boss breathing down my neck. A-and usually, that wouldn't bother me. But there was something so oppressive about it. I remember very vividly the set of events that led up to me feeling… I… traumatized. I guess. By it. […] We went into [BOSS]'s office and he just pushed a report at me and looked at me like I was a-an invalid or something. All he asked was 'So, when are you going to get this stuff done that should have been done three weeks ago?' I don't know what happened. The past month and a half just flooded back in on me and I realized that regardless of what I was doing at work, it was like I was undoing the work that other people were doing. I wasn't, but it felt like it in my mind. A-and the way that [BOSS] asked me this… I had a nervous breakdown right there. So much stuff piled up

> on top of other stuff on top of other stuff that I finally broke. Whereas I had always been killer-efficient, on top of my game, all of a sudden, I realized that I didn't belong in this system anymore. My way of doing things wasn't the way of the world anymore. I realized that crunch, and overwork, had, for me, been a way of pushing things uh… pushing things out of my head. So I didn't have to deal with them. […] I started my own thing so that I could make *sure* that I worked with people who respected my values and thought the same way that I did. I never wanted to be the cause of someone else hurting like I did. It fundamentally changed my value system and the value system that I predicated my work on. […] If I think about it from someone else's perspective like my [PARTNER]'s, it's clear that crunch wasn't something that I ever should have uh… c-confided in or valorized. It wasn't and isn't the key to success. It was just mini traumas over and over again. I-it just was a more attractive and more productive uh… uh, way to push through things that I didn't want to deal with.

This was a shocking turn of events in my experience with Informant A. In previous conversations we'd had, crunch had been something that they were proud of, and that they talked about their past experiences with fondly. Informant A, at this point, had approximately eight years' worth of time invested in videogame production. They were used to hard work; to overwork. They reveled in it and they used it as a way of characterizing their commitment to videogames. In doing so, crunch became a cruelly optimistic attachment. Instead of that attachment being predicated on advancing forward into a better life monetarily, or eschewing precarity that was labour-based, this attachment was a regression away from issues outside of the realm of videogame production. In allowing for crunch to occupy this space for them and allowing crunch to become attached to them both as a sense of prideful duty and as a way of escaping difficult issues in life, the circumstances surrounding crunch for this informant became what they feared most: the *reason* that they would have to regress and deal with issues that they had been eschewing.

Informant C located trauma not in a set of events that transpired, but in how they *unpacked* those events and what those events implied to them about the nature of videogame production. As I covered in chapter 3, Informant C served on a crossectional board at their studio that was meant to represent all levels of employees and was meant to be an open forum to discuss progress, questions, and concerns. Informant C experienced blatant power abuse when speaking at this crossectional meeting one day:

> C: Anyway, we were talking, and this person interrupts me to say 'your team needs to hurry the fuck up because it seems like a pretty mindless task that you're working on.' Then he said 'we should just pay some monkies to do it', referring to Indian people. I think everyone who had half a conscious was so shocked by that that we all just froze. I remember making eye-contact with someone in marketing, and their eyes being about as large as a saucer. Then, I just got up and left. I couldn't believe what I had heard.

In the wake of that event, it became apparent that this was more than just a one-off event; as they spoke with other members of different teams across the studio, they soon came to realize that not only had workers experienced similar interactions at this studio, but at other studios they had worked at as well. Though not as blatantly racist, nor necessarily as blatantly abusive, Informant C characterized, others had similar experiences. In the following weeks, as they unpacked what

had happened to them, what their peers had told them, and what those implications meant, they realized how deeply disturbing those implications were.

> C: After all of that, I just kind of spun out. I'm an empath. I don't like to hear about people suffering. And for people that I highly respect to report similar stuff had happened to them here and other places? I went into overdrive. Unionization and collective action became the single most important thing to me, like a mania. I mean, I knew that this stuff happened, you know, but it didn't click with me until the few weeks after this. It shook me to my core. What were we doing here? Why is this kind of stuff just an expectation? It hit me that passion might pay the bills, but trauma isn't, or, well, shouldn't, be an expectation too.

The initial event that Informant C experienced could have been where trauma was demarked for them. Instead, it was the implications of that event that became traumatic and catalyzed them to further pursue means of helping their coworkers and peers start the process of unionizing and creating cohesive collective action plans. Informant C entered videogame production under the impression that all parts of the process functioned to serve the end-goal of bringing videogames to life. They acknowledged that there was roughness in the process, even before experiencing these events, hence their drive to unionize. But it was the distinction that the different parts of videogame production *weren't* all serving the same ends that changed their way of talking about, thinking about, and interacting with videogame production. They talked to me about their self-reported mania in the wake of these events and juxtaposed it with the come-down from that mania as being "the thing that really drove home how, pardon me, completely fucked videogame production was". Instead of allowing disillusionment and apathy to characterize the post-trauma landscape that this informant found themselves in, they talked about how, even though they were not able to maintain the mania that they experienced in those first few weeks, these events fundamentally reaffirmed that what they were doing was more important and more fulfilling to them than the act of producing videogames.

Informant D paints their experience with videogame production as complicated. Though they have yet to obtain a full-time core development position and have only had contract work, they're still hopeful that they'll be able to break through and obtain a permanent position in the near future. They liken this duality to an abusive relationship, however:

> D: Man, fuckin', I know that I should just go do something else. I know it. At the end of the day, I just want to love what I do. I don't think I would love software production. [long pause] It's abusive, you know. I guess I'm abusing myself? I know that not being in videogame production, I would be happier in the long run. Or, at least less stressed, maybe even actually appreciated. But man, there's nothing appealing about it. At least in videogame production, I'm already here, I know how to roll with the punches and just… I dunno. Get by? Do my thing? Here, I feel necessary. There's excitement and passion. But there's also small borderline traumas every time I hear that I'm not getting a permanent job after it was dangled in front of my damn face. I always swear it's the last time. But I cool off for a week or two, go back to basics and play some stuff that I haven't played in a while and I fall in love with it all all over again. I don't really know what to do.

For Informant D, videogame production has proven volatile: from job instability and false hope about being hired full-time to their experiences being actively discriminated against, they have experienced a lot of situations that could be considered precarious. But the situations in and of themselves are not what cause this informant to pause when considering their relationship with videogame production. It's the attachment to the feeling of falling out of love and then back in love with videogames that they self-reportedly go through at the end of nearly every contract cycle that bookends the complicated relationship they have with putting all of themselves into the act of production. In chapter 3, Informant D detailed how they commit to work during a typical contract, and their time commitment is admirable. Though they have scaled back their commitment to work, they still report that with each contract, they don't give up the hope that they actually *will* be hired fulltime at the end of that contract. That means that they continue to put themselves into each project and commit enough energy that it becomes a point of trauma when they learn that their efforts were in vain.

Using these informants' explicit experiences with trauma, and their understandings of what trauma *is*, it becomes possible to start to locate how trauma is an aspect of precarity. Much like precarity, trauma is a shifting presence in a person's life; what is traumatic for one is not necessarily traumatic for all. Additionally, finding something traumatic entails looking past just the spatiotemporal presence of the event or events themselves and instead looking at the web of attachments and intertwinements that reach into the past and the present where that person finds themselves co-located with what they find traumatic. Trauma is slippery as is precarity.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is understood to be a state of being exposed to the possibility of mental or physical attack or harm. Being vulnerable, or experiencing vulnerability can be talked about in multiple circumstances, and attached to multiple situations. Akin to trauma, vulnerability to my informants was not an easily quantifiable thing, nor was did it mean the same thing across any conversation that I had with any informant. For some informants, vulnerability was a state of existence. They felt powerless to change the state of things around them, or they felt that they were, as informant B said "belly up, waiting for someone to attack". For others, vulnerability was a mindset that came after a set of events. Informant D reported that, after each stint as a contract employee, they were worn down and burnt out and lacked the will to self-preserve; that "if someone literally asked me to jump off a fucking bridge, I'd do it". Informant F characterized vulnerability not as something negative, but as a place of trust that only certain people had access to. Whereas during work hours, they were expected to keep a stalwart façade, after hours, their trusted friends and their partner gave them the space to be vulnerable – to cry, to complain, to cheer, to experience emotions that they could not, or did not feel comfortable, sharing with their employees.

Each of my informant except for Informant A talked explicitly about being or feeling vulnerable, of experiencing vulnerability, but akin to trauma, each person's conception of and colocation with vulnerability was wildly different. In this section, I want to highlight specifically the conversations I had with Informants B and F. These two informants presented ways of thinking about and experiencing vulnerability that challenge how we conceive of the common understanding of the concept. Both of these informants touched on aspects of this definition, but expanded on what it *meant* to be exposed. Whereas the definition of vulnerability takes away the autonomy of those experiencing vulnerability, both of these informants acknowledged that they

had control over being vulnerable – to some extent. Informant B talked about vulnerability as being implicit in working in videogame production outside of a management position:

> B: You're always liable to be fired, I've learned that the hard way. Even if you are full-time, you can get fired for pretty much anything. I suppose that kind of vulnerability is sobering. I have been lucky that I haven't worked somewhere where people got fired for seemingly no reason, but I have worked places where getting fired has been threatened. It's tough. It is very tough to come to work and work on something that you know isn't working but being scared of taking initiative to change it because you're scared that you're going to be fired. It renders you belly up, waiting for someone to attack you or your ideas when it's just easier to resign yourself to the fact that what you are working on may not work but just doing it anyway. It's a job after all.

When asked about whether they had seen anyone take initiative and what happened, they recounted a story of a coworker at a previous company who, during production, was insistent that not using a workflow program like AGILE or Scrum was slowing down their production. Informant B said that at every opportunity, this coworker brought up the boons of workflow programs and it finally got to the point where they were yelled at and threatened to be fired in front of their entire group if they brought the subject up again.

Informant F similarly talked about feeling vulnerable, especially toward fans; part of them felt that the games that they produced at their company needed to be a certain way to appease fans and to continue generating revenue.

> F: You have to listen to your fans. I started this company because I had the goal of making games that my friends and I would enjoy. Simple as that. But that was in [YEAR]. Things have changed. The world has changed. Lately, it's caught me on my back foot as some of the things we've talked about have been panned by fans. It's hard to take that kind of critique when you're working on something that you, personally, want and are provisioning for. But, at the end of the day, we're a business and we have to give fans the experiences that will make them happy.

Informant F, though, also spoke about vulnerability in another way: as a way of self-care.

> F: I don't know if this is too much, but I value being vulnerable with my friends and [PARTNER]. I love them. I know they love me. I know that I can show emotions around them and that they aren't going to prey on me. They're going to support me when I need it, give me a shoulder to cry on when I need it, and cheer with me when I need it. It's all circle-of-trust stuff.

In this context, Informant F provides an interesting interpretation of the scope of vulnerability: it might mean something negative in relation to some situations, but it is also a source of power; a source of radical self-care and trust-building that allows this informant to reclaim control over both the situations that are occurring in their life and the term 'vulnerability' itself.

Both of these informants provide important contextualization and a reminder that vulnerability (like trauma) is slippery. It is not static, it takes many forms, and it doesn't translate cleanly from situation to situation. But unlike trauma, the concept of vulnerability does not

render the person experiencing vulnerability as scarred or fundamentally marked as 'traumatized'. Vulnerability more than anything is attributive and tends to exist in relation to other aspects of precarity. That existence is predicated on entanglements, affects, and events that form the temporal capacity for that moment to render someone vulnerable both in a positive and a negative way. Informant B, throughout our conversations, has been very careful to clarify the terms that they use, how they use them, and what the impact of those terms has on what they are talking about. Talking about vulnerability was no exception. This informant talked about vulnerability in two ways: the first way is as a pall across their existence in videogame production. They were careful to quantify the *amount* of vulnerability they felt, though.

> B: Like I said, working in games is just an invitation to always be vulnerable. There's no job that you can have that marks you as 'safe'. Look at Telltale. They made amazing games, but there was some kink in the system and they went belly up. Same for places like Lionhead and THQ and Insomniac, right? You're never safe. Even if you make games that transcend the era they were made in, that doesn't matter. What I'm getting at is, in the moment, I don't think of myself as vulnerable. It is a meta commentary. I don't go throughout my day scared that someone is going to fire me. I would go insane! It's background noise, but it is ever-present background noise. It's like tinnitus. It doesn't mean much on its own. Just a buzzing. But in context, it means *a lot.* But we don't think 'in context'. Or, at least, I don't. I take things moment to moment, hour to hour, day to day.

Informant B's quantification of vulnerability, and the way that they contextualize how they feel it, or rather, don't feel like is telling regarding how we can think about living with vulnerability. The precarious element of possibly not having a job if a project does not make money is not native or unique to videogame production. Late capitalism and neoliberalism have created labour regimes that have become casualized and contingent. We live with the 'background noise' of knowing that, should some catastrophe occur that renders the institution we work for nonproductive or incapable of recouping a loss, we will lose our ability to make money. To Informant B, though, this is not an ever-present or looming threat – it does render them perpetually vulnerable. Instead, it is an element of the job that they are aware of: they are aware that by the nature of capitalism and the videogame production industry, they are vulnerable to tumult. They also realize that this space of mind is not the same for everyone.

> B: But that's just how I live. I know people and I work with people who are scared to lose their jobs. For some reason or another, some of my friends live and work like if they don't commit to the job or they don't do their absolute best, they will lose that job. I don't want to say they live in fear, but they are fearful of this aspect of the industry. And I think that it is something that employers can take advantage of. For me, I like working in games, but I know that I have other options. I've worked in other industries. I mean, working in any industry is a risk, if we want to get really meta about it, right? But I don't let that fear drive me.

For Informant B, vulnerability coexisted with fear in the context of losing a job. They observed this with coworkers and friends. The fear of losing a job is the inverse side of the type of work commitment that Informant D outlined in my third chapter. Instead of working hard to obtain a

job like Informant D says that they do, Informant B has characterized people they know as working to *keep* a job; they recognize that the aspect of vulnerability that they characterize as background noise is not necessarily that minor for others.

Akin to Informant B, Informant F characterized the videogame production industry as creating an environment where you are vulnerable to being fired for nothing. Informant F talked about instances when they still worked for a company that they did not own when their peers were fired mid-project for things that were not apparent.

> F: When I still worked at [COMPANY], the ship was run tight. We were expected to fall in line and do our work, be productive, and don't ruffle feathers. For some people, that didn't sit right. When we were working on [GAME], I had a coworker who constantly worked late. They were there when I got there in the morning, and stayed past when I left. For all intents and purposes, I thought they were the most productive one in our group. One day, they got fired pretty unceremoniously. Taken into the office, given an excuse about downsizing, let go. It was baffling. Even now, I can't figure out what it was. Having some years between then and now, I almost wonder if it was a veiled threat to the rest of us. [FIRED EMPLOYEE] was a workhorse. What other reason would you have to fire someone like that unless you wanted to send a message? I know that we're not exactly 'corporate' here, but I still have to sometimes mindgame employees. But man, never like that. I could be wrong, though, of course. It's just the only thing that I can think of that. Even if [FIRED EMPLOYEE] had a bad attitude, constantly complained, or constantly was knocking on my door to tattle or something, the amount of work [THEY] put in was just… too valuable. It must have been a threat. I can't think of any other reason.

This instance stuck with Informant F, and they characterized it as something ominous. In retrospect, and given the context of their current job, they couldn't think of any other reason but it being some sort of veiled threat, or play for their team to increase productivity, which they did.

> F: In the wake of that, yeah, we were all firing on all cylinders. Now we had to pick up the slack of [FIRED EMPLOYEE], which for all accounts, was the work of two people, and we had to basically jump someone new in when they hired them. Our hands were forced, and we were basically pre-crunch crunching just to show that we wanted to be there.

In this instance, the vulnerable nature of working in videogame production existed alongside control. Informant F provides a way to think about institutional mechanisms such as hiring and firing as not only effecting the person being hired or fired, but as a way of ensuring continuity in the subjectivation that the production space favors. Informant F admittedly did not have access to the extenuating circumstances around this employee's firing, but they do have a special context from which to examine this incident. They admit that part of running a studio (which I would expand to 'running a business in general') is mindgaming employees. They briefly contextualized 'mindgaming' as: "not abusing employees or gaslighting them, but sometimes they have ideas that you know will sink your company and you have to kind of… nudge them towards your way of thinking by helping them understand how damaging their idea could be to the fans' experience."

Informant F presents an alternative to just colocating vulnerability with systems in capitalism. Instead, this informant talks about the act of being vulnerable and choosing who to be vulnerable with as a radical form of self-care and healing.

> F: When I think of being vulnerable, or feeling vulnerable, I can't help but think about how that characterizes my closest relationships. It's still related to videogames, of course, but it isn't ABOUT videogames. I make myself vulnerable with [PARTNER] and my close friends. They get to see the parts of me that no one else does. When I'm sad, when I'm happy, frustrated, mad, burnt out. These are the people I rely on to accept me as I am and allow me a space to feel these feelings. It isn't about being in this state for extended periods of time. It's just contextual. Like, if [PARTNER] is having a bad day, I want [THEM] to be able to feel like they can open up to me and know that I'll support them however I can.

Informant F was able to locate vulnerability not in relation to precarity, but in relation to healing. Informant F coopted what, for most of my informants, is a negative attribution due to the line of work that they are in, or due to power imbalances within their jobs, and flip the script. Instead of being concerned with the negative situations and characterizations that vulnerability contains, Informant F talks about its healing power. But, its healing power is located in relation to *trust*. The circumstances where this informant was able to use vulnerability as a positive force coalesce around trusted friends and their partner; their 'circle-of-trust'.

Vulnerability can be located in relation to precarity in a number of circumstances and in a number of varying degrees of severity. But it can also be located alongside self-care, forging trusting bonds with peers in similar situations, and can act as a moment of respite in an otherwise tumultuous environ. The act of *being vulnerable* is multifaceted and depends on the immediate situation that a person finds themselves in, the suite of entanglements and attachments that that person brings to the situation, and the mitigating factors of what type of situation they find themselves in: is the context for vulnerability a social situation? A labour situation? An interpersonal situation? The context where we find ourselves in a position of vulnerability is as important as the events themselves. Akin to trauma, what we conceptualize as vulnerability swings widely depending on a suite of factors.

Risk and (re)Distribution

When talking to my informants, the subject of risk came up in a multitude of different contexts. Risk, for some informants, complimented a state of vulnerability: they risk working in a job that makes them vulnerable, they risk creating a hostile work environment should their work subpar, they risk their physical and mental health by committing to crunch. Some informants located risk not as a state of being but as a thing to be shared. At work, risk can be shared across an entire time. Informant D talked about "doing risky things with code" that could have cost their team time and resources if the risk didn't pay off. Informant F talked about risk redistribution in the same way that they talked about vulnerability with their partner. Between jobs, Informant F's partner had to support them both while Informant F tried to secure a new job. This lead to them starting their own company, which then presented different aspects of redistributed risk in that Informant F's partner had to support both of them while the company sought funding.

Risk is understood to be a situation where someone is exposed to some element of danger, uncertainty, or potential loss. In a similar way to vulnerability, risk exists alongside other elements of precarity. For something to be 'of risk' or 'risky', it has to present elements that are unstable or uncertain, but must also present elements that are possibly lucrative. Unlike vulnerability or trauma, risk can expand and retract to encompass multiple people, situations, and entanglements. As with Informant F, one person can enter a risky situation, and then that risk can be redistributed across other people to help shoulder the potentially destructive element of the risk if what is being sought doesn't pay dividends. In this section, I want to highlight conversations with Informants E, D, and F. All six informants acknowledged that they have engaged in what they perceive to be risky behavior, or been in situations that presented risk. But these three informants presented nuanced and multifaceted understandings of where risk lived in their lives, how risk has led to trauma and vulnerability, and how risk becomes an agent of change for better or worse.

Informant E, during our first conversation for this project, talked about the act of committing to videogame production against her parents' wishes as risky not just in that they had heard how tumultuous the job market could be, but also that they risked alienating and straining already strained relations with their parents.

> E: I hid that I was focusing on videogame production while doing my software engineering degree! I didn't tell anyone for the longest time. Finally, it got to be too much and on Christmas break of my junior year, I told my mom when my dad had gone out to do something. She said that she would support me, but that she didn't think I was doing the right thing. As she said 'Videogames aren't serious. They're frivolity and your father doesn't like them.'

This informant's family has a history of being in software production. Both their parents have worked in software production for Fortune 100 companies, their siblings have their own consulting business, and it was expected that this informant would follow an equally "serious" trajectory in software production. Informant F acknowledged that, given the prevalence of software engineers in their family, that they were acquainted with the employment risks of going into videogame production, but this did not deter them because "I don't just want to be another cog making an OS [operating system] or some bloatware. I want to make something people like." The risk that their job path posed to the relationship with their family was something that they did consider heavily, and it proved to be somewhat founded.

> E: I didn't tell my dad until I graduated. And he saw it in the freaking commencement material! At [UNIVERSITY], we did general commencement and then our own department commencement, so he didn't see it until then. He didn't talk to me for a week after he found out. *laughs* I mean, we're fine now, but he still worries a lot about me, and he does that typical [ETHNICITY] thing where he compares me to [SIBLINGS]. 'Oh [SIBLING] makes $200,000 a year. You could be doing that too!' I don't care dad! *laughs* But I mean, there's a reason why I stayed in [CITY] after I graduated. They live up north. I don't have to see them every day. My dad means well, but it's a lot to hear that kind of stuff um… a-all the time. You know?

One of the factors of risk for this informant does not have roots in labour or economic concerns, but instead in familial and emotional concerns. Their family had clear expectations that this informant "just didn't live up to"; they traded economic prosperity for doing something that they enjoyed. This informant chalked their father's badgering up largely to cultural expectation: they did not follow their father's wishes *and* they pursued something that their family considered unbefitting of the time, effort, and money invested in their college experience. For this informant though, the potential job risks and state of vulnerability that their family attributed to videogame production did not outweigh their need to do something interesting and that they would enjoy doing. They spoke about their experience in videogame production as largely positive, and their family's worries unfounded.

> E: I know that people have a bad time in videogames, but I think I got really lucky working for [COMPANY]. I also think that it might have to do with being a [PLATFORM] company, too. There's more iteration, less 'you must finish this and ship it now!' We get to work on bug fixes, content, and other stuff and roll it out as it gets done, not by a deadline. So I think for me, the risk hasn't really been there in the same way as it is for other people.

Though they acknowledge that they are lucky to be working where they are and in the platform that they do, they also acknowledge that their experiences are somewhat nontypical. But even within a non-typical situations that this informant characterized as largely positive, risk is still like a background noise, to borrow from Informant B.

For Informant F, risk manifested in two discrete ways. The first way was when they talked about opening their own studio following getting burnt out of working for someone else. They understood that, even though they had novel ideas about how to run a studio, how to treat workers, and how to get work done, that that did not guarantee success by any means. They also recognized the risk of finding investors or seed money because of the underlying expectations that the partners would have about making a return on investment. The second manifestation of risk in this informant's life links back to what this informant said about vulnerability; instead of shouldering the entirety of the financial burden that starting up a company would put on them, the risk was shared with their significant other. Akin to well-known stories of spouses supporting game creators like Eric Barone of Stardew Valley fame, this informant characterized a similar experience of their partner allowing them to redistribute the financial, emotional, and temporal risk of opening a studio by supporting both of them during the startup period and assisting them in finding potential investors that would be more understanding of this informant's vision.

> F: [PARTNER] helped me every step of the way. Not only [WERE THEY] there for me when I was burning out, [THEY] gave me space when I needed it, cooked me dinner and made sure I was ok when I was so depressed I couldn't move, and so much more. Then, when I started talking about opening my own studio, [PARTNER] supported me from the beginning. [THEY] knew what I wanted to do, and [THEY] believed that I could do. I told [THEM] that I was scared I wouldn't be able to live and that I'd drain my savings, and that's when [THEY] suggested we move in together. *laughs* It didn't stop there, though. As I was getting everything together, [THEY] were sending me referrals to venture capital companies [THEY] worked with! Like, daily. [PARTNER] was always there and [THEY] helped me shoulder a lot of this burden.

This informant was able to locate risk not *just* as a state of being exposed to potentially damaging circumstances with no fallback, but also as something to be redistributed across support networks. Their partner's financial, emotional, and business support allowed for Informant F to offload some of the risk that they were facing by opening their own studio. In doing so, the precarities that can manifest in videogame production were almost entirely mitigated. As a note, this is a special case of risk distribution in videogame production. This informant's ability to start and maintain their own studio, and to make that studio successful, eschews the need to reckon with certain forms of precarity like instability, negative workplace culture, and opaque meritocracy.

Informant D, however, provides what I would consider a stereotypical case of risk distribution. In much the same way that Informant F relied on their partner to help them shoulder some of the burden of switching jobs and creating a studio, Informant D relied on their sibling to provide them with the same emotional support, and at points, financial support.

> D: Me and [SIBLING] both moved out to [CITY] because we wanted to shake things up. Midwest sucks, the people there suck, so we said no and left. Anyway, [SIBLING] is a marketing genius, so [THEY] got a job like… 5 seconds after we landed making a hundred billion dollars a year. For me, things rolled a little slower. Shit took me like three months to get anything. The first contract gig I landed was out in [CITY], which is like 30 miles from where we were living. […] Since things were kinda fucky getting going, I had to ask [SIBLING] to basically sugar-sibling me for like… gas and stuff for about a month and a half until I got paid and started selling plasma.

For this informant to begin to be successful in videogame production, they had to rely on their sibling to help them with transport, food, shelter, and other necessities until they could get established. Informant D talked about the slowness of getting a job in videogame production as being unexpected; their sibling got a job almost immediately making six figures while it took them almost three months to obtain a contract position. They also talked about the initial move as "kind of a boner on my part. I didn't think it'd take so fucking long to get a job. Like, I'm trans, just give me a job now please. I don't guess I realized it was gonna be that risky to just up and move without a plan. Who'd have thought." Though this informant retrospectively acknowledges that there was risk inherent in the plan of moving cross-country without having a job offer in hand, they were able to mitigate the worst effects of due to the distribution of risk across themselves and their sibling. Having that support from their sibling was integral for them to be able to find a job that suited them and that they would be happy in, even if it was just a temporary job. This informant talked about how their sibling was their emotional 'rock' during the process of trying to find a full-time core developer role.

> D: [SIBLING] listened to me bitch soooo much and so long. Like, I constantly complained how I couldn't find anything except contract work. Now, I lived with [THEM] for 2 ½ years before I finally had enough saved to strike out on my own. And during that time, I worked three contract gigs. Two of those dangled the ol' wormy of 'if you work hard enough, we might have a job open up' in front of me. [SIBLING] was my rock the whole time, though. I'd work until like 10, 11 at night, come home, and [THEY]'d have me like… a fuckin' bento box ready to eat every night. It was insane.

> [THEY] also helped me think through next steps, alternatives, everything that I needed when I was about to have a goddamn breakdown.

Informant D's experiences with risk distribution present what I think is a more typical case of the phenomenon. They are aware of the vulnerabilities of being contract and not getting lucky getting hired on at the end of projects. They were able to mitigate the worst of the possible emotional and psychical traumas by having their sibling to talk them through problems, help them problem-solve, provide them with emotional and financial security, and to make sure that they ate healthy food when they were exhausted.

Using these informants' experiences with risk, it becomes possible to locate where risk intersects with precarity. Risk is not a prolonged situational aspect of precarity like vulnerability is. Risk, instead, is a static state. It still depends on the person who is experiencing or contemplating potentially risky circumstances as to the level of risk involved and what that risk means for them, but a set of events either is or is not risky. Whereas a person can *be* vulnerable or experience vulnerability, someone cannot experience risk as a prolonged state. The set of events at hand have the demarcation of some variation of "is risky": is risky, isn't that risky, is very risky, etc. Risk can, however, be a mediating factor in other aspects of precarity. Undertaking a set of risky decisions can prolong or induce vulnerability, it can traumatize, it can produce other unaccountable attachments and entanglements that, if the risk was not taken, would not otherwise exist.

Precarit*ies*

This chapter is concerned with making formative steps towards a theorization of 'precarity' as multifaceted and multiplicative: precarit*ies*. As I stated previously, 'precarity' as an umbrella term is useful to do a lot of heavy theoretical lifting that does not directly point to specific characteristics of, instances of, or entanglements with the underlying elements of precarity. However, this project's entanglement with cruel optimism begs for closer inspection of precarity. Precarity, as this chapter proves, is not a static or singular thing. On its own, it can function as a way of talking about a situation or person, but it can also accompany and compliment the terms that I discussed in this chapter. Precarity can be a paired attribution to a person who is experiencing vulnerability or trauma. A precarious situation also be a traumatic or risky situation. Precarity shifts and changes to suit circumstances and labour conditions. It morphs to encompass and exacerbate personal attachments to objects, people, or concepts. It spills out from singular events, encompasses fallout and preceding circumstances of events. Precarity is an interchangeable term that encompasses the things that this chapter outlines and more and it is also its own conceptualization of potentially negative circumstances. The distillation of precarity to these three terms is a first step towards a better and more thoroughly theorization of the multifaceted nature *of* precarity, but these terms only encompass a small, observable part of precarity specifically for six workers in videogame production that all come from similar working conditions but have experiences, affects, and dispositions that render them individual and one of a kind and unquantifiable.

The concepts that this chapter covers open up consideration for what the concept of 'precarity' means, what we conceive of as 'precarious', and how we engage with, attribute, and think about 'being precarious'. Trauma, vulnerability, and risk can all be located alongside and within precarity. Using my informants' stories, I was able to observe some generalizable

phenomenon and circumstance that can be collocated with precarity, with one another, and with/in cruel optimism. Inductive observations are helpful for establishing generalizable concepts; my informants' stories are no different. But, I want to couch what is generalizable about their experience and what isn't. Just because all of most of my informants experienced trauma, vulnerability, or risk does not mean that these concepts transfer cleanly to other workers in videogame production. What is beyond the scope of this project is exploring the wild web of entanglements that go into characterizing just one person's affects, attachments, predispositions, cognitive processes, and psychical energy. Therefore, it would be irresponsible to say that these facets of precarity can *be* generalized. Similar to how Maturana and Varela talked about the concept of autopoiesis *solely* in relation to biology, I want to talk about the terms of trauma, vulnerability, and risk *solely* in relation to these six informants' experiences. These concepts have the potential to reach beyond this project and become more generalizable, but much more work needs to be done to flesh out what these concepts mean when talking through the complex web of attachments and cruel optimism that videogame production workers experience in general, and what they experience individually.

6.
Passion Traps

The final chapter of this project seeks to add a dimension of physicality by examining a critical making project I created called *Passion Traps*. In lieu of providing hard-and-fast rules or measurable recommendations as a final chapter, I chose to take the quotations from informants that I have worked with throughout this project and (re)tell their stories one final time. In doing so, *Passion Traps* asks participants to think about their own material complicity in supporting the problems, precarity, and abuse that my informants have suffered in videogame production. *Passion Traps* highlights aspects of the concepts that I covered in the previous chapter regarding risk, vulnerability, and trauma: these concepts don't have to specifically be named for their discrete attributions to be invoked regarding a situation or a person. Passion *Traps* was always meant to focus attention on videogame production as a labour issue because if scholarly and activist progress is to be made in understanding design choices of games, and implementing new ways of designing that are not beholden to the stranglehold that capitalism has on knowledge production, it is *imperative* to understand the conditions, subjectivations, and motivations happening in production. *Passion Traps* is three discrete iterations. Each iteration is named something different to provide more clarity about that iteration's pertinence to the overall critical making project. These three sections are named "Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas", "Passion Traps 2 – Community Passion", and "Passion Traps 3 – Modding Materiality." *Passion Traps* is work that deals specifically with how passion becomes entangled in videogame production, and how it produces precarity. The 'trapping' that the name refers to isn't a physical trap so much as an affective, discursive trap. As parts of this critical making project exemplifies, no one is forced into production, or community management, or fan labour/playbour. And that makes how passion is deployed in these circumstances a bit more diabolical; there is always an out: stop working in the production process, stop working as a community manger or a moderator, stop producing unremunerated content for games. But, as with so many things, saying that and then doing it are two completely different processes.

Passion Traps is an exercise in critical making and in applied media theory. Each of the three iterations that this chapter examines are prototypes that wrestle with creating impactful ways of talking about precarity in videogame production that live beyond the page, or the hyperlink. In much the same way that Marcel O'Gorman in "Broken Tools and Misfit Toys" positions formal experimentation and applied media theory (AMT) as disruptive and novel

methodologies of creating knowledge (30), *Passion Traps* seeks to continue prodding and articulating the multifaceted nature of precarity in the same way. This critical making project incorporates the iterative, continually improved-upon ethic of critical making and puts emphasis on the materiality of the project not as a way of itself producing new knowledge, but as a way of creating new forums through which discussion can be had regarding the multiplicity of precarity.

This work is split into three iterations. This is done to provide three separate objects to interact with that each highlight a specific theme within passion and precarity. Each iteration showcases the voices of different communities: "Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas" highlights the voices of videogame production workers whose primary job is game development. "Passion Traps 2 – Community Passion" highlights the voices of community managers. "Passion Traps 3 – Modding Materiality" highlights the voices of fans and non-professional game workers such as modders. The installation overall speaks to the operationalization of passion, but each area has its own focus and affect.

"Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas" deals specifically with videogame production, and the source material for the auditory portions are taken straight from my informants. This iteration of the installation is contextualized in a standing rectangle of eviscerated books that create two 'windows' that users can see through. Within the window, there is an old Super Nintendo controller perched precariously at the intersecting point of four 8-inch wood screws. Above the controller are two more 8-inch wood screws which form an 'X'. This iteration makes use of conductive paint and a Bare Conductive Touchboard to create seven interactable nodes on various parts of the controller where, where users press them, quotes play that I have gathered from interviews with current, working videogame production workers about their experiences with videogame production. The nodes are connected to Touchboard via banana clips, and a small set of speakers are attached to the Touchboard to play the clips. This work requires 110-volt AC electricity to function.

"Passion Traps 2 – Community Passion" deals with community management and moderators, and the expectation to be 'always-on' for their job. This piece if contextualized by an old laptop, missing the keycaps 'I', ' ', 'L', 'E', 'T', 'H', 'M', 'K', 'N', 'O', and 'W'. Connected to the laptop via a laptop security cable is a cellphone. The cellphone has a ½'' stainless steel shackle-type screw pin anchor inserted into the top of the cellphone, with the looped end of the security cable looped onto the anchor. Additionally, a popular self-help book that is often recommended to workers in technology sectors where their job will require being on-call or working crunch entitled *Time Management From the Inside Out* has had a portion of its innards cut out to accommodate a Bare Conductive Touchboard and six banana clips. Using the Bare Conductive touchboard and conductive paint, I created six touch sensors on the phone, laptop, laptop security cable, and pin anchor. When a user interacts with any of these six nodes, an associated quote from current community managers will be played. The nodes are connected to Touchboard via banana clips, and a small set of speakers are attached to the Touchboard to play the clips. This iterationrequires 110-volt AC electricity to function.

"Passion Traps 3 – Modding Materiality" deals with the complex and contentious place that fan labourers and non-professional videogame production workers inhabit. People that mod games, hack games, create content for games, or support the communities around the games that they are passionate about do immaterial labour that often goes unacknowledged. Unlike the work of game developers or community managers, the labour being performed by fans is often unremunerated and unrecognized by the company who makes the game(s). This iteration is contextualized by a 1 ft. by 1 ft. model of a bedroom. Four black plastic walls create a square

enclosure with a black plastic floor. There is chain link wrapped around the entire display. There are only two physical objects in this room: a doll bed, and a candle in the middle of the room. The rest of the room's features are printed on pieces of paper and glued to the walls of the room. The decorations around the room are reminiscent of a quintessentially "geeky" room: action figures and models of popular videogame characters, posters of games, a computer with two large monitors, windows with the blinds drawn. The candle in the middle of the room is a trick candle. Using a Bare Conductive touchboard and conductive paint, I created five touch sensors around the room. When a user interacts with any of these five nodes, an associated quote from the fan labourers I talked to will play. The nodes are connected to the touchboard via banana clips, and a small set of speakers are attached to the touchboard to play the clips. This iteration requires 110-volt AC electricity to function.

The three major themes that have come out of these three areas are: passion, how passion for videogaming is exploited into creating precarious working conditions, and how passion interacts with upward movement; burnout and frustration towards stagnation and the inability to move up; and the acknowledgement of the necessity of new ethics of care to account for and offset a growing sense of precarity.

Artist Statement

Passion Traps utilizes free indirect discourse to draw attention to the personal narratives of videogame workers I have interviewed about passion's role in forming who they are today. Fletcher and Monterosso in "The Science of Free-Indirect Discourse" say that free indirect discourse in literature allows readers to seemingly read the minds of characters (85). Readers can examine the dreams, inner-monologues, and machinations of characters without ever having to read them speaking. Free indirect discourse in a non-literary sense allows for a way of (re)telling stories that is both sincere to the person telling the story while also allowing for characterization of events and circumstances that are important to know. Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, says that free indirect discourse "performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body and therefore forces the [interactor] to transact a different, more open relation of unfolding to what she is reading, judging, being, and thinking she understands. (26)" *Passion Traps* stands as a reminder that there is more to a story than what we read. The continual trend in social sciences towards totalizing 'understandings' of groups of people fail not just the most marginal people in those groups, but also people that appear 'normal' but may not be. There is no perfect fit, theoretically, systematically, or anthropologically for describing how a body encounters, interacts with, and parses precarity in videogame production. With that knowledge, *Passion Traps* embodies what Haraway talks about in "Situated Knowledges" about feminist objectivity in place of objective truths: "Feminist objectivity makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world. (594)"

Prior to trying to establish culture-wide praxis around issues of discrimination, sexism, racism, homo/transphobia, and hypermasculinity in videogames overall, it is necessary to understand the very personal, very embodied contours of those issues. Additionally, this project was always meant to focus attention on videogame production as a labour issue because if scholarly and activist progress is to be made in understanding design choices of games, and implementing new ways of designing that are not beholden to the stranglehold that capitalism has on knowledge production, it is *imperative* to understand the conditions, subjectivations, and motivations happening in production. That is why *Passion Traps* fits so well with this project as

a whole in that they are both concerned with supporting and giving a platform to videogame production workers.

But, these ideals are not easy to execute precisely, nor is precise execution altogether a desirable outcome when considering the subjects that I've talked about throughout this project as a whole. These ideals can easily get far ahead of themselves instead of examining brick-by-brick the circumstances that build a single narrative where precarity can be talked about. As Whyman characterized with the rise of cupcake fascism, these ideals can easily start to seek not to sit with the problem, be uncomfortable, and be vulnerable, but instead seek to commit the same mistakes as I identified in the CWA's announcement. They can start to favor buzzwords and generalizations instead of being in the trenches and building hyperspecific and hyperfocused understandings of what *actually* is occurring and what *actually* workers are experiencing. Thus, with that in mind this project embraces what Matt Ratto talks about in "Critical Making" and what Santoso et al talk about in "Researchers as Makers": iteration, the act of continually tinkering, fixing, taking apart, rebuilding, and working through a problem. Not being afraid to be wrong, or to retool an approach, or take the whole thing apart and start over. *Passion Traps* presents three iterations that all wrestle with ideas of aesthetics, 'messiness', and bricolage as ways of taking what is already a multifaceted concept (precarity) and representing it and my informants experiences with it, as disparate but somehow cohesive elements. Within the affective, physical, and psychical cacophony that these iterations represent, I take solace in what Elizabeth Grosz says in *Chaos, Territory, Art*: "[art] comes from the excess, in the world, in objects, in living things, that enables them to be more than they are, to give more than themselves, their material properties and qualities, their possible uses, than is self-evident" (63). *Passion Traps*, like my informants, like this project as a whole, takes from excess to try and represent something bigger than itself both materially, artistically, affectively, and psychically. Sweeping generalization about what is bad in videogame production, industry-wide demographic information that somehow is supposed to paint a picture of precarity and inequity without any context, bold and audacious claims of allyhood with no plans in place. *Passion Traps must* extract meaning from these excesses for it to be successful in presenting a truthful (re)presentation of what precarity is, has been, does, and has affected my informants.

Like I said previously, precarity is not a static 'thing'. Precarity is multifaceted; a noun, verb, adjective, affect, and attribution sometimes individually, sometimes all at once. To further drive home the importance of the embodied, experiential accounts I've taken for this project, it becomes integral to think of a new way of representing these ideas, inviting others to interact with them, and accounting for those interactions while also driving the point home of what one of the root causes of all the types of precarity that I've gone through in this entire project is: hearing without understanding and touching without feeling. I created a meta example of what my informants were experiencing in real time: people heard what was being said, but were too wrapped up in optics and aesthetics to get down to brass tacks for what this meant. With this critical making project, I strove to create a physical representation of precarity that informants had describe to me by way of vocalizing their stories. Their stories were recontextualized into physical, interactable nodes and into robotic-voiced sound-bytes. Those voices became aesthetic instead of informative – users were *listening* to the problems being communicated, but not *hearing* what was being talked about. The nodes were simply a means to an end: users were *touching* the representative parts of this project, but they were not *feeling* the impact of what these things represented.

Passion Traps offers a material way of interacting with stories from people in videogame

production, or as Grosz says in *Chaos, Territory, Art* "[a] becoming-sensation of materiality, the transformation of matter into sensation, the becoming-more of the artistic subjects and objects that is bound up with the subject's crossfertilziation with the art object" (75). By offering a physical (re)mediation of stories from people that are embedded in this work, *Passion Traps* provides an embodied, intimate space to interact with, understand, and rethink our relationship with videogames, videogame culture, and how we perceive videogames being made. The installation also offers a way of bridging our own experience with 'passion' towards videogames: playing videogames, interacting with the culture around videogames, making videogames, the list goes on. My informants' stories all revolve around how passion does not operate on a good/bad binary but is an entanglement whose contours are not the same for any two people. Passion acts as not only a driving force in my informants' commitment to producing quality products that they are proud of, but also drives them to the brink of burnout and back, and has sparked new ethics of self-care and new ethics of radical softness towards themselves and their coworkers.

Interacting with *Passion Traps*

This section will provide context for each iteration of *Passion Traps*. I provide descriptions of the physicality of the iterations themselves, why I made certain design choices, why I used certain materials, and the importance of structuring these iterations in the way that I did. Each section will also provide a description of the context of each quote recorded and repeated in *Passion Traps,* focusing on each participants' interview comments. After each quote and video, I provide a quick contextual summary of the experiences in which the quotation came up.

"Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas"

Interacting with "Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas", involves touching the controller that is held by woodscrews while avoiding the possibly injurious and sharp edges of the area's construction. The area has seven pressure sensors that are painted with conductive paint and linked to a Bare Conductive touch board. When one of these nodes is pressed, it plays a voice clip associated with that section of the project. Users are invited to interact with the top of the installation. I cut windows in two books to create a 'window' that is approximately 5 ½ x 8 inches in the back covers of both books. The two books are Tanya DePass' *Game Devs and Others: Tales from the margins* and Jennifer Brandes Helper's edited volume *Women in Game Development: Breaking the Glass Level-Cap*. The books were adhered together with industrial adhesive to form a box where both front covers of the book are visible. Inside the window, there is an old Super Nintendo controller that is seated precariously on four 8-inch wood screws. The screws pierce both front covers and the heads meet in a sharp intersection below the controller. Above the controller, two more wood screws form an 'X' above the controller. One person is "meant" to interact with this piece at a time. With more than one person interacting and pushing the nodes, a cacophony of experiential knowledge comes cascading out of the speakers.

DePass and Helper's work were chosen specifically to 'frame' this iteration because of the work both books do of highlighting positive experiences and achievements of women and queer people in videogame production. Each book discusses types of abuse and marginalization that the authors' informants have experienced, but there is a deeper issue at play that neither fully

explore: how passion has created a feedback loop for these people where their passion for videogame production has put them in contact with precarious circumstances where labour alienation, psychical and affective abuse are more likely to occur. The physicality of this iteration is intended to create an antagonistic environment where users are invited to interact with something that is easily recognizable (the controller) as a source of 'passion', but in a new material discursive situation ('passion' being on display in an antagonistic environment). Interactors may have childhood memories of playing old game systems and may have affective attachments to those times. "Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas", is interested in challenging users' truths about their experiences with videogaming and asking them to contextualize those experiences in light of current, working videogame production professionals' experiences with *making* the games that we enjoy or have enjoyed.

The workers whose quotes have contributed to this project represent seven granular, embodied instances of a person talking about intimate, experiential knowledge. Their voices and stories contribute to how passion has been framed for them in their time in videogame production. Some felt frustration at certain aspects, while some felt dogged determination that, regardless of what gets thrown at them, they *will* succeed. For all of them, though, passion for playing, creating, and problem-solving videogames brought them to videogame production in the first place.

Touchpoints, Context, Material Discursivity: Passion Traps 1 – Developers' Dilemmas

This iteration foregrounds the importance of understanding how passion and precarity intertwine to create the material discursive situations that these informants experience and discuss. Each informant has their own specific embodied experiences within videogame production that shape and contour their relationship with passion. For some of this iteration's informants, passion encompasses different subjects. Some informants see passion as a point of contention. Some talked about passion being used as a reason for them to work harder, longer, and quicker. They also talked about passion in regard to feeling burnt out by the rigor of videogame production. Other informants see their entanglement with passion as being a necessary and integrated part of videogame production: passion, for them, is a catalyst for, as one informant says, "doing better and being better".

Select Button: **A Time to Choose:**

> *"The architecture, the feel, of where you work doesn't just affect you. It can ruin things. But it can also create a second home".*

Part of my conversation with this informant revolved around how their passion for knitting as a de-stressor ended up fundamentally changing how they set up their workspace. They worked at a company where open floor plans were the norm, and that meant that 'personal space' was at a bit of a premium, as was private space. Their solution to this at their first job was to create a sorting system for tasks, notes, and design specs. Their creative process was what they described as "out of the box"; they doodled pictures as notes, created pictographs of what type of

work had to be accomplished that day, and re-drew concept art to better fit the section of an environment they were designing. This informant described their relationship with their boss as 'tenuous, at best.' Their boss interpreted their choice to organize their workspace and draw, rather than write, their process as a sign of laziness and time-wasting Their boss also discounted their ability to organize since this informant was not keeping log books or process notes, which was standard operating practice at this company. They said that, due to the mounting pressure being put on them by their boss to stop 'doodling' and conform to standard operating procedure of keeping written notes and records,this informant came up with a strategy that involved using their knitting skills to create color-coded 'paper-cozies' which helped them to better process written communications. These cozies resemble standard 'in/out' trays that one would find in any office environment, but instead of the standard steel or plastic, this informant knit, and then stuffed, their own color-coded trays. Once they convinced their boss (through HR) that this system of organization fundamentally met company policy because it was an "actual system of organization that I could show him and he could get inside my head better," my informant said that their relationship both with their office space and their boss improved.

Back of the Controller Body (Middle of Controller Body): **Material:**

> *"Sometimes you have to make the hard call. Is it worth it anymore? You're on a fucking select screen, it feels like, deciding whether to save and quit or slam your head against the wall some more."*

My conversations with this informant revolved mostly around burnout and how passion, as they put it, "was a fishing hook in my cheek." This informant talked about how, every day for 6 months when they were working on a high profile title, they would come in, put their stuff down, and ask themselves if they really wanted this; if they could handle it anymore. The inevitable answer for them was "yes, because I need to support my partner and kid." They said that when they joined videogame production, everything seemed free-form and unstructured. They could do what they wanted, pitch ideas as an equal, and get real work done in real time. As videogame production corporatized, my informant started to see instances of the passion they had grown accustomed to interacting with being snuffed out by talk of shareholders and safe development strategies. But still, they stay in videogame production because they are good at what they do, and they are known for creating engaging material. They rarely ever experienced the type of precarity I have outlined in previous chapters of this project. They were always part of a core development team, often were project leads, and always highly thought of by peers. But as the 'renegade' feeling of development started to go away, this informant's passion for creating and pushing the envelop started to dissipate. When they felt that corporatization had completely eaten the soul of the company that they were working for (around the time they were working on the high profile title mentioned earlier), they realized that, even though they were still passionate about videogames, they weren't passionate about the new structure of production. By the end of the aforementioned project, they had already created an LLC and had money from investors to

start “reliving their renegade days” by becoming a single-person indie developer. It remains to be seen how this informant goes about building their new brand and how they choose to embody the ‘renegade’ ethic of production, but their unique approach to videogame production, and the unique, focused rationale behind how they allowed passion to drive them could prove to be a new ethic of development that could well operate outside the bounds of the types of precarity this project as a whole has discussed.

B Button: **Cancel:**

> *“I've almost quit so many times. Long hours, massive miscommunications between workers and management. No amount of passion can cancel out that kind of abuse.”*

This informant detailed a past of working in very gender-imbalanced production houses, and as a non-binary person, how they were exposed to unremitting abuse from bosses and management. They made sure that I was aware that their coworkers were some of the most supportive people in their lives. Coworkers would often stand up for the informant when work was divided unfairly, or the informant was made fun of out of earshot.. This person spoke at length about how videogames had played a huge part in shaping their gender identity. They described their transition into coding as a “journey”. They sought out radical developers who helped them learn to code and learn how to alter, cut, and remix games to show queerness. Through high school they were unable to dress, date, and or present as the gender they were comfortable with; they couldn’t “be [them]self”. This is due to family pressure and the pressure of growing up in a small-to-medium town in the Rustbelt. This informant’s interactions with videogames and videogame production not only became a passion, but an escape mechanism as well. They saw formal videogame production as a way to escape out of their current repressive environment and move to a big city where they were more free to explore their identity. They moved to Los Angeles and were offered a job at a fairly new production house run by “a bunch of tech bros”. After a few months of work, their studio was bought out, and the studio’s workers were combined with another project that was, basically, a competing game. Similar mechanics, story, characters, and narrative arc. This informant worked on the game that the studio who bought them out was making or 8 months and talked about how, in the span of that 8 months, they saw their direct boss once and were expected to communicate problems, courses of action, etc. via email or text message. Poor management, in addition to working with a rather clique-ish group after the merger, created an environment of on-communication where this informant was referred to as “it” in memos and emails that did not involve them. This non-communication created prolonged crunch (“about 5 months of it”). Despite this abuse, they never encountered burnout; they are still working in the industry somewhere that appreciates them.

Front D-Pad (Down Directional): **Moving “up”:**

> *“You can move up. It's not easy, but you just have to grind and show you're passionate.”*

This informant talked at length about meritocracy and how "moving up" was "a scam unless you're white, male, and nonthreatening" in videogame production. This informant worked as a contractor at a medium-sized production company at the time of our interview and recounted their work history as "always being 'the most promising, but most unhirable contractor ever.'" They had worked on five AAA titles and three or four indie titles, and every single time, they were passed over to be brought on board. They firmly believed this was due to their appearance (self-described as "alternative as fuck and kind of scary to be honest"). They showed me examples of their specific contributions to projects, code that they wrote, systems that they programmed, and characterized their work as "work of passion; no person who wasn't in love with videogames would do this shit to themselves." They said that they exposed themselves to extreme overwork at every juncture that they could because they didn't really have any social or familial obligations; "it was just more fun to work, you know? Lose yourself in something." This informant also hoped that, by showing their sacrifice and their clear drive to make the things they were responsible for work, someone would give them a chance and let them on a development team. This informant also talked at length about how they saw people who hadn't done a fraction of the work that they had done, or had tried to actively sabotage them, be brought on or have their contracts renewed multiple times. They said that seeing people progress who did not put forth the effort that this informant did was the most heartbreaking part of not being hired full-time. This informant knew that their level of commitment and drive for making good videogames should be the only piece of evidence considered in meritocratic advancement. Yet their passion wasn't considered as valid as others because of how they looked, and what games they chose to play. They said that they constantly felt like incentives were dangled n front of them because of how clear they were with their intention: make it out of contracting and bring their work ethic and passion to a team that was like-minded and serious about game development.

Cord: **Don't Get Hung Up:**

> *"Don't get hung up on negative stuff. Yeah, it can be bad, but it gets better. When? Eventually."*

This informant talked at length about their journey to being an indie developer, echoing many of the sentiments of other informants of this project: long working hours, miscommunication between management and their teams, their passion for videogames being exploited ("The most fucked up thing was when my boss told my entire team we had to stay even *later* than usual because 'the project needs some TLC and we don't have a more passionate team than you all.'"), meritocractic structures that weren't clear, so on and so forth. They talked about their experience in working in corporate videogame production as being one where all the fun was slowly squeezed out of working there, and where the cachet of working in games meant nothing:

> "It doesn't matter if you can say to someone on a date 'Yeah, y'know, I work at X Videogame Company. I said it so many times, and the only responses I got were things like 'Oh really? Can you help me get past this really glitchy part' or 'Oh neat, I don't really play videogames, though. I'm just bad at them I suppose [fake laugh].' Ultimately, the cool factor of working for X Videogame Company really only meant anything to other videogame nerds. And even then, not really because we were all trying to one-up each other."

They reported that their time in corporate videogame production caused them to develop severe depression, and it was only after they left did they start to feel passionate about videogames again. They still suffer from anxiety, but they are trying "not to get hung up" on small failures.

Back Body (Button Pad): **Coming Circumstances:**

> *"Unions are 100% the future. Without a union stance, we're all going to either burn out or get ground to dust for products that, ultimately, we aren't proud of."*

This informant is a now-part-time developer who is working extensively with videogame production unionization efforts in Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Austin, Boston, and surrounding areas. They are working actively in those areas trying to find people who are amenable to unionization efforts in videogame production. They hope that, through outreach and a careful contextualization of why unions are necessary to videogame production, they can assist groups in starting the proceedings to forming unions at their own studios. They acknowledged that, even though they are still employed at a triple-A videogame production firm, and they have started unionization proceedings there, they have been met with more set-backs than successes. They characterize their experience in trying to create a union-friendly environment as one that is both harrowing and immensely gratifying when they manage to finally convince a peer that unions are integral. Even though they received pushback in multiple forms from Human Resources, their state government, anti-union peers, and even upper management, they strove to prove that unionization and collective action is what is best for their workplace. This informant's stance on unions "borders on obsession. Obsession not only for fair working conditions for myself and my friends, but for taking the bad bosses we've all had to task." This informant talked at length about how miscommunications between their peers and "stockholders and whoever else funds this circus" have resulted time and time again in hundreds of hours of hard work both of theirs and their peers, ending up on the cutting room floor because the work wasn't appealing, or upper management didn't agree with design choices. They talked about how their passion for videogame production has manifested in their desire to change the fundamental system of videogame production instead of just plodding along. They believe that unions are the key to reformulating workplace conditions from oppressive to friendly.

Back Body (D-Pad): **Change is Slow:**

"Change is slow. But care is inherent in change."

This informant spoke at length about how their own models of praxis have changed from working in triple-A videogame production to owning their own studio. When asked about the state of their production house's work culture and how they handle crunch, this informant said that, over the life of their studio, they've had to crunch once, for about a week due to unforeseen illness. Aside from that, not only have they never crunched, but their workers are actively discouraged from crunching. They talk about their company's workplace culture being

> "way more professional than anywhere else I've worked. I've fought really hard to keep a 45 hour work week at max, and that has manifested in people not really doing the industry-standard '45 minute to an hour break to play a game, back to work for an hour or two, back to break' because I think they know that I value work-life balance more than playing videogames during work."

They say that, of course, this culture of care and professionalism did not happen overnight. From their previous experiences working in large production houses, they noticed that 'care' is an underrated concept. This informant fosters not only an inclusive working environment, but one that emphasizes "self-care" and saying 'no' when there is already enough work on someone's plate. They said that they understand that videogame production is not ready to take the dive towards an entire industry full of 40 to 45-hour work weeks, and that their company is somewhat of an anomaly. But, this informant hopes that, as their company grows, and as, inevitably, workers leave for other opportunities, they take with them the seeds of care that they have sown in this company.

Recontextualizing

Each of the clips that I share from my informants in this iteration foregrounds a willingness and a hopefulness to continue doing what they are doing in the hopes that things will get better while acknowledging that things as they current are might not get better. Like the physicality of the iteration itself, these informants struggle fully reconciling motivations and their passions; everything is a potential hazard that could bring some sort of harm, but the allure of the object is enough to chance that harm to interact with it. All of these informants talked about the repetitive cycle of videogame production, and the trauma that can come with it. One informant talked about videogame production as being akin to self-harm: there's a mixture of pleasure and utter control in being able to dictate a cut, or in being able to re-sign or not re-sign a contract for another term. But, there's also the reality of the harm that is being self-inflicted in both instances. The two *can* coexist, and like Berlant talks about regarding sovereignty and decision-making within trauma navigation in *Cruel Optimism* (96-7), they are not always in

negative coexistence. Sometimes, the self-harm that could be characterized as stepping back into precarious working conditions can be mitigated by the knowledge that they are doing something that they are truly passionate about. It may not make sense or seem rational to someone who does not have the same passion or the same life experiences, but it is a valid narrative, and one that needs (re)telling.

This narrative does not strip autonomy away from the worker, nor does it create a narrative of a helpless, trapped individual like cruel optimism so easily can. Instead, this narrative provides a clear picture of just *how* fraught videogame production can be. There can be clear indications that a situation is objectively 'bad', but a person may still choose to engage in that situation due to their own previous entanglements with precarity, videogame production, and passion. Again, the reasoning may not make sense, but as Berlant says, trauma can be thought of something that "presumes nothing about the meaning of decision or the impact of an act. Without attending to the varieties of constraints and unconsciousness that condition ordinary activity, we persist in an attachment to a fantasy that in the truly lived life, emotions are always… expressed in modes of effective agency" (98-9). This is why understanding the effects of precarity is so important on a case-by-case basis; while precarity manifests in similar ways, the person that the precarity is manifesting for is not a uniform copy of the last person to experience a similar precarious situation. My informants have talked at length about different methods of coping with, mitigating, or leaning into possible trauma that precarity has caused them. Though not all of them characterized experiences of abuse as sites of trauma, they characterized the events instead as negative, destructive, draining, and yes, precarious. The quotes that I share in this iteration all talk about videogame production from a perspective where autonomy is still firmly intact for these informants, though. All of my informants have acknowledged that they don't *have* to be doing this; they have the ability to walk away. But, something keeps them engaged; something keeps them hooked. For some, it is raw passion; for others, it's the cultural cache that videogame production provides access to. For all, though, it is a conscious, thoughtful act of attaching to the object of videogame production.

"Passion Traps 2 – Community Passion"

Interacting with "Passion Traps 2 – Community Passion" is more freeform than the first iteration. There is no immediately 'right' place to touch; each node on the phone, pin anchor, and laptop are clearly marked and are all visible at once. This installation has six pressure sensors that are painted with conductive paint and linked to a Bare Conductive touch board. When one of these nodes is pressed, it plays a voice clip from community managers who shared their stories with me. The laptop is an old MSI laptop that has a faulty graphics card in it, and the phone is a burner Trac-Phone from an unnamed company. The only connective tissue in this area of the project is the laptop security cable and pin anchor in the phone. Drawing from Kerr and Kelleher's work in "The Recruitment of Passion and Community in the service of Capital" about community managers and the concept of 'passion', I chose to make use of these two objects because of the frequency with which informants in their study (and in my own investigations)

were given a company-issued laptop and phone and expected to basically be on-call 24/7 to interact with the community that they managed or moderated. The rationale behind this expectation is that since the company was providing them with phones and laptops, being on-call was the least that workers could do to repay this kindness.

The phone component of this iteration has a hole that is approximately 3'' by 3'' in the upper middle of the screen. I started the process by taking a drill and drilling straight through the flash on the back by the camera. It took approximately 30 minutes of continued drilling (and two drill bits, RIP) to finally see a white spot appear on the front screen of the phone, meaning that I had finally gotten through the metal body casing of the phone and shorted out part of the screen. From there, it took drilling four more pilot holes *around* the initial hole in the flash before the structural integrity of the phone failed and cracks appeared on the front screen. I then drilled through the front of the phone to create the real pilot hole where the pin anchor would finally be able to sit.

Julie Morgenstern's book *Time Management From the Inside Out* houses the Bare Conductive touchboard since the book was mentioned time and time again as the bible of figuring out how to balance a community manager's job. The book provides a surface-level understanding of how entry-level to middle-management employees can better manage time through journaling, interactive activities that ask readers to identify areas of their lives where they feel that tasks are piling up, and mindfulness activities that seek to help readers establish rituals to provide them with structured blocks of time during which they *only* focus on accomplishing the task at hand. The book also provides a rudimentary understanding of how to manage time outside of just day-to-day through using a calendar system, labeling tasks clearly with importance, and, again, mindfulness activities that ask readers to establish rituals.

In addition to the almost-condescending tone of the book, the tether that connects and locks the phone and computer are meant to remind interactors of the circumstances and affects of the jobs that community managers are doing. They are tethered to developers, and tethered to the community. They are expected to interact with both the community and developers like they have autonomy that does not tether them to either. Community managers at most companies do not have a direct line to developers, but, at some point, videogame culture started to think of community managers and moderators as the mouthpieces of development and demand that these people relay information quickly to developers and answer the community quickly as well.

Neither piece of equipment works, and this is intentional. The tasks of community managers aren't, for most companies, to 'fix' problems. For companies like Ubisoft, Blizzard, EA, and GearBox, community managers that are active on Twitter, or on official forums become the faces of those games, and by assuming that role, are expected to shoulder the discontent of the community in regard to design and implementation decisions. Kerr and Kelleher (2015) talk about the text in job ads as being intentionally blurry; out of their sample size of 70 job ads, 3 of them mentioned remuneration schemes, and 5 of them mentioned the hours that would be required of workers. But every single job ad the authors examined used 'passion' and 'passionate' in the body text to describe a successful applicant (ex: 'you must be passionate

about videogames') and describe the affective atmosphere that they would be working in (ex: 'you will work with passionate fans, gamers, and consumers'). I examined 20 other community manager postings for North American videogame production companies and found that, within the job ad text, no mention was ever made of lateral communication: who workers would be working *with*, to whom and how they could communicate the community's concerns, or how they could communicate *with* the community. Even in speaking with current community managers, some of them still did not have clear guidelines provided for them about how to report the community's concerns. One community manager in particular characterized their work not as being passionate about fixing problems, but being passionate about being a target for abuse. That same community manager talked at length about how developers had their own agenda that they were working from, and that they simply didn't have *time* to fix the things that the community suggested. Community managers are unable to directly assist in fixing technical or design problems that communities bring up. My informants said that constantly interacting with the communities they manage and having the bulk of those interaction being hearing complaints, critique, and needed adjustments contributes to burn out. It also raises the question of what the actual importance is of *being* a community manager if for nothing else than to be public-facing targets of abuse.

I intentionally chose to include an iteration that focuses on community managers because it draws focus to a question that I touched on much earlier in this overall project: who can be counted 'in' when it comes to being considered a 'videogame production workers'? Community managers and similar types of labour in videogames make a case for answering that question by asking another question: "whose passion has been taken advantage of and operationalized to serve videogame production in some manner?" Though this question is somewhat inflammatory, it poses a possible element of cohesion in figuring out who actually can and cannot be included under the label of 'videogame production worker'. This has ramifications in unionization and collective action circumstances because the metric itself opens new avenues of discussion around whose labour is *important enough* to unionization outfits to be counted as members and whose labour is not. In other words, whose passion yields adequate amounts of capital and therefore are seen as 'needing protection'.

Touchpoints, Context, Material Discursivity: Passion Traps 2 – Community Passion

This section foregrounds how passion and precarity operates for non-production videogame workers. Each of these informants talk about passion still being one motivation for doing the labour that they are doing, but they each locate passion in a different area than *making* the games that the previous iteration's informants do. Instead, this iteration is concerned with how informants' passion is providing them with alternate but valid ways of being 'in' videogame production while also being able to leverage the talents that they already have. This iteration is also concerned with how the labour that these informants are performing has put them in a position of being an object of abuse that production workers do not often experience. This iteration's informants are public-facing: they interact with, talk to, and unfortunately, are abused

by people in the communities that they manage. This iteration's informants have all talked at length about the misconception that members of their community seem to have regarding informants' ability to directly influence or fix problems that their community perceive.

Laptop Keyboard: **Pathing**

"It's hard to get into making games. I've got friends who went to school for it and they never made it. I know that I'm not good enough at coding to get in that way, so I figured that this was my only path in."

This informant acknowledged how cutthroat videogame production is; they have friends who have worked contract jobs continually since graduating from school, always hoping that they will be asked to join full-time at the end of their contract. This informant saw how their friends and colleagues were overworking themselves to make a life for themselves in videogame production and decided that, after attempting to learn to code and not doing well, to take another avenue into game production. Their impetus behind pursuing a community management position was that it allowed them to work closely on games as a full-time employee, interact with fans and developers alike, feel fulfilled, and experience the same social clout that their developers-friends had without the necessity for coding. Though they downplayed their ability and what technical skills they were bringing to the table regarding "producing" the game, they acknowledged that, without their role and their skill in engaging customers, the developers themselves would receive backlash, which could further push back production progress. They saw themselves as a necessary buffer, but one that enjoyed the same social clout, just with different stressors that they were more equipped to handle.

Anchor Hitch: **Symbiosis**

"It's a back-and-forth. Sometimes it seems thankless, but they [our fans] need us. Without us, they're going to be blind about progress. And we need them. I mean, without them, we don't have a job."

This informant recognized that their labour was somewhat emotionally precarious: they showed me mean Twitter messages that they've gotten, death threats, sexual remarks, and racism that has been directed at them, and then showed me gushing messages from fans thanking them for their transparency, being a beacon of light in a toxic community, and creating a welcoming and loving community. It seemed as though the messages were bifurcated as far as *fans'* conceptions of what the community is (toxic, loving, accepting, racist, bigots, etc.), but it was clear that the nice messages were truly complimentary. This informant was very clear in saying that they had developed a thick skin regarding mean comments. They also made the observation that some of the perceived meanness was cultural misunderstanding. For example, EU fans of the game they community manage tended to be very brusque with feedback whereas AUS fans made

jokes about game bugs or other things that needed fixing. This informant also talked about how, akin to the informant in **Pathing**, that they felt like they were a necessary buffer between community and developers: "Sometimes, the devs I work with can barely make eye contact with me when we talk. Most of the time, their emails read like a technical manual instead of just answering the very simple question I asked for clarification on. Can you imagine turning them loose on Twitter to talk about their game? No."

Key Caps, 'I', ' ', 'L', 'E', 'T', 'H', 'M', 'K', 'N', 'O', 'W': **'I'll' 'Let' 'Them' 'Know'**

"People think we've got this magical connection to the fucking developers. I've never met any of them. They don't come around, and we're discouraged from going to them, so what the hell am I supposed to do with a hundred 'You should do this' messages a day? Do I risk making fans angry? Lose my job? No, I take the only rational way out: a cheery 'I'll let them know!'"

This informant expressed frustration and disdain for how interactions occurred between themselves and developers, developers and fans, and fans and themselves. The company that this informant manages communities for structures internal problem reporting as a tiered system: fans can report problems and give feedback via social media, and from there, community managers are expected to "weigh" how important those problems are. If they are not breaking the game or , as this informant stated "on the scale of inciting a full-blown Nazi riot in the game's world", then management expects this informant and other community managers to tally how many times a certain problem is reported or a suggestion is given, and once it hits a critical mass, only then can the Community managers forward that concern or problem onto their boss, who then reviews the cases and decides which problems get communicated with developers. While I do recognize that this is a pipeline problem that is specific to this one studio, it is still important to acknowledge how power is coagulating and where power is focused. The active hindering that the people interacting with the community on a day-to-day basis face fundamentally invalidates the job that the community managers were hired to do. Or, according to this informant, "supposedly hired to do."

Phone Area with Speaker: **Listen, Man**

"Listen man. I've had people show me the Kotaku articles about overwork and abuse. This isn't like that, man. We're hype-men for this game. It isn't all bad. "

This informant repeated a familiar refrain: 'it isn't all bad.' They acknowledged that parts of the job that they were performing were potentially precarious, but they welcomed that precarity:

> "It's hard as fuck. But I like the challenge. It seems like customer service, but it's so much more than just that. I've played [GAME] for YEARS. Getting to interact with the community, make friends, and see how people react to content is an adrenaline rush."

They also voiced concern about how popular games journalism has fallen into cancel culture, outrage culture, and hyperspecificity culture in regard to videogame production. Kotaku's community and the work that Kotaku produces along with Ben Kuchera's article about *Cuphead*'s design being exclusionary and problematic were two examples this informant gave regarding how popular games journalism has fallen into writing cancel culture and outrage culture articles. Outrage culture articles seek to paint an objectively negative and irredeemable picture of a person, event, belief, etc. based on small kernels of truth wrapped in dubious, misleading or miscontextualzied information. Some examples of this include Chris Plante and Arielle Duhaime-Ross's article for The Verge titled "I don't care if you landed a spacecraft on a comet, your shirt is sexist and ostracizing", which inspired the shortlived #ShirtGate controversy, and the backlash in 2018 that the 'Charlie Brown Thanksgiving' special faced when twitter users insinuated that Franklin sitting by himself at the Thanksgiving table was a sleight and that Schulz was a racist, even though he threatened to pull Charlie Brown from the cartoon's publisher when asked why he would want to add a black character in 1968. Cancel culture articles employ public backlash against a person, event, belief, etc. to "cancel" or remove that thing from the public. Examples of cancel culture include R.Kelly when his sex scandal came to light, public ridicule of Scarlett Johansson's offensive comments about her 'freedom' to portray any race, person, or "tree" that she wants, and public backlash to Kevin Hart's past homophobic jokes and present continued homophobia. The articles that this informant brought up were all hyperspecific examples of outrage: Kuchera's piece demonized *Cuphead* for being difficult, calling the design choices fundamentally exclusionary and problematic; if players bought the game, they were owed to see the entire game. Other examples ranged from how this informant perceived Jason Schrier's work as being flippant regarding specific problems that production workers who he written about face and Cecilia D'Anastasio's piece about Riot being hyperspecific and not at all justifiable in the broad scope of videogame production. Just in talking to me, they voiced that they were wary of my intentions. They knew enough about game studies to know that, recently, there has been a trend of turning to popular games journalism as citational sources (the example given was something the informant read that cited Tokumitsu's *Jacobin* piece "In The Name of Love") to instantiate points that did not reflect the whole community of games. This informant talked about a couple of articles on gamestudies.com that cited Kotaku articles, EuroGamer articles, and VentureBeat articles alongside what they thought to be "more scholarly and serious-sounding texts", which, to them, detracted from the scholarly presence of the pieces of reserach. This informant's path through community management was, as they put it, 'stereotypical' of what is to be expected of anyone who works in games: the expectation to commit time and energy to keeping up the product, the expectation to produce quality interactions, and the expectation to roll with the punches. As they said, "It isn't all bad."

Chain: **It Isn't a Life Sentence**

"It's not a life sentence. I'm learning C and Python and I'm taking classes in my free time. It's not. I'm making such important contacts doing this. It's my dream to make a game, and it will happen."

This informant identified community management as a possible 'in' into videogame production. They said that, over the span of their time community managing, they had met well-known industry workers like Todd Howard, Steven Molineux, and Randy Pitchford. This informant had identified community management as a way of networking that other 'entry level' jobs such as quality assurance work afford them. They had worked as a quality assurance tester for a year prior to making the move to community management, and they said that the two jobs were very different: whereas QA work saw them in a rather cramped room, doing the same thing over and over, and not really interacting with anyone, CM work allowed them to work from home, the office, coffee shops, conventions, wherever there was an outlet and the internet. CMing also allowed them flexibility to take classes in computer science, learn coding languages on their own, and 'talk shop' with the developers at their company. Though this informant had had mostly positive experiences with CMing due to their gregariousness and "the honest, hungry passion [they] have for gaming", they identified CMing as a stepping stone to get to where they wanted to be: making games. They plied their passion as a way to enter into the conversation of videogame production at their own pace while also staying close enough to the industry that they could stay abreast of industry trends.

Computer Screen: **Stockholm**

"Sometimes it feels bad. There are times when I don't want to be a CM anymore. No one has anything nice to say to me and treat me like I, personally, delayed their game. But then there's times like when we release a game and everyone is super excited. It's sort of Stockholm syndrome, I guess."

This informant characterized their relationship with CMing as much more intense, demanding, and draining than they were lead to believe. They talked about how they were currently dealing with severe burnout, depression, and apathy towards working and towards videogames in general. They talked about how demoralizing it was to deal with fans that assumed that they had a direct line to developers, and that developers were just "sitting around waiting on me to text them like 'hey can you all just whip up this GREAT fan-made idea really quick? I'll buy coffee :) x" At the same time, they characterized their job as "sometimes ok", especially right before and after patch or content releases:

> "We release content on about an eight week cycle. The week leading up to the new content, fans are really excited, they're making jokes, cracking wise, the reddit thread is

> robust. Same for the first week, week and a half after release. Those times are the times where I think 'maybe this is ok.' But, then, people start in with the comments and the hate and I just… I can't deal with it."

They further characterized their current relationship with community management as a relationship where the passion had died and they were left going through the motions. "I can't leave. I'm effectively priced out of a lateral move. I just have to grin and bear it."

Recontextualizing

This iteration presents a much starker assessment of how cruel optimism has operated to capitalize on the same types of passion as the first iteration, but with much less hopefulness in regard to mobility. Some of the informants for this iteration detailed getting into community management as a possible 'in' through which they thought they could more easily advance to production jobs. Others have degrees in digital media or communication and thought that doing social media and communication for game companies would allow them to still be passionate about games and still allow games to be a major and defining part of their lives. Akin to the informants in the first iteration, these informants are doing their best to reconcile passion and the discursive circumstances that they find themselves in. Unlike the first iteration's informants, though, the labour of community management is fundamentally different from production, therefore the types of precarity that workers encounter in community management can manifest differently.

Community management creates an interesting site of consideration where passion is not only a motivator, nor is it only an avenue of operationalization to extract more labour from a worker. Community management introduces passion in a new context altogether: passion from an outside source, focused *towards* the community manager. That passion is fan passion. Fan passion characterizes types of discourse that happens within gaming communities where fans interface with community managers in varying degrees of civility to try and communicate their wants and needs to developers. Developers like my informants in the first iteration typically do not interface with fans in any meaningful ways that allow for critique to be communicated directly from fan to developer. Community managers become the de facto voices of game franchises: they interface with the community on a daily basis via social media, communicate ideas that the developers are working on, and act as couriers for suggestions to improve the game. They also are the ones who receive unmitigated abuse from fans; critiques of the game, company, workflow, and production cycle that they have no control over nor any input in structuring; and death threats when popular community ideas are not implemented.

Bridget Blodgett in "Media in the Post #GamerGate Era" articulates the contentious interplay of certain communities grounded in gaming that breed misogyny, hypermasculinity, and toxicity with community-moderation and communication within gaming communities through official, company-sanctioned channels. The narratives that surrounded #GamerGate and the rise of belligerent hypermasculinity and antifeminism in the years following can be traced

back in no small part to select groups of men's 'passion' for gaming becoming more than just passion for play or community. It became militant obsession with a set of ideals that characterized who could and could not talk about and play videogames. The brazen antifemininity, racism, hate, and contempt that characterized participants in #GamerGate's feelings towards anyone not of their own ilk has never gone away or abated. Instead of being as laser-focused and frighteningly prevalent as those early #GamerGate days, the antifemininity, racism, hate, and contempt have diffused into cultural expectations within gaming communities. If people aren't exhibiting passion for a game through anger, tirades, or racism when things don't go their way, their passion can be called into question, which could invalidate a portion of their identity. Easy examples of people who have seen success by adhering to these tenants and building communities that value these tenants are popular content creators like xQc, Tyler1, Trainwrecks, PewDiePie, and IcePosiden just to name a few. Racist remarks like PewDiePie's 2017 use of what is now colloquially know as 'the gamer word' (or the n-word for the uninitiated) are talked about as moments of passion, hence the colloquial name of the n-word as 'the gamer word' in gaming culture now.

This twisting of what passion 'is' and what constitutes 'being passionate' permeate discourses within gaming and characterize experiences of the types of communication that community managers see daily. All my informants for this iteration talked to me at length about times when they experienced the types of abuse that I've outlined in this section, but had it framed to them as fans 'being passionate' about the state of the game. One informant talked about how quick to anger fans seemed to be when this informant was simply doing their job of communicating current events around their studio:

> I can post on the forums or on twitter or on the sub[reddit] about anything. It could be that we are producing seven new games and have funding secured for a hundred expansions without having to take on a publishing partner and still, I know that someone is going to call me the gamer word, tell me to kill myself, or try and dox my information. It's like dealing with fucking terrorists while having to keep a smile on my face.

Fan passion, and how 'passion' can be used as a pseudonym and excuse for abuse from fans, articulates further granularity in how precarity manifests for videogame production workers. Community management, too, calls into question what, exactly a 'videogame production worker' can be defined as. Passion, or the operationalization of passion, is a point of unity in defining what a videogame production worker is, though does not provide a fully articulate idea of who can and cannot be part of collective action movements or unions. These two points taken together substantiate the importance of embodied, experiential accounts from workers about what constitutes precarity for them.

"Passion Traps 3 – Modding Materiality"

Area three provides a much more fininte and defined interactive area. This iteration details how passion operates for fan labourers and tangential labour to videogame production. Meaning, how does passion move through modders, hackers, fan creationists, Let's Players, and fans in general? For many, their passion is purely passion for games or gaming. Often, these labourers are unremunerated, and their labour is done out of passion, a perceived need for their work, or just for fun. This iteration's setting recontextualizes the places and material discursive bounds of where passion can be found, operationalized, and experienced. There are five nodes that are painted with conductive paint and linked to a Bare Conductive Touch Board. When one of these nodes is pressed, it plays a voice clip associated with that section of the project. Like area two, there is no immediate "correct" place to touch. Black tackboard was used to make a 10"L x 10"W x 5"H "room" that resembles a diorama. Using Photoshop, each side of the room is adorned with flattened, pixelized pictures of what would constitute a stereotypical 'gamer's' room: posters, computer, memorabilia, game systems, etc. These pictures resemble a wall-decal in that the proportions don't seem quite right. Everything seems too flat, but there is enough recognizable material that it feels homey. The diorama itself (the black tackboard parts) is assembled using industrial adhesive. No physical objects inhabit this room except for a dollhouse bed in the top righthand corner of the room and a votive candle holder full of trick birthday candles.

I chose modding, hacking, fan-made games, and creation of accessories *to* gaming as the passionate-entrapment of this iteration to express how muddy the waters are between professional and non-professional videogame production, and how further muddy the waters are between what can and cannot count for work that is due remuneration. Are modders due pay for their work on games? Are hackers due pay for their exposure of security concerns, regardless of intent, or are they only subject to legal action such as that taken by Blizzard against Bossland GMB? Are fan-made-game developers due some sort of recognition for their work instead of just a DCMA or a cease-and-desist a la Nintendo? Without a clear understanding of what value these types of fringe labour are producing, and in what capacity remuneration and/or recognition are owed to them, collective action and unionization cannot occur responsibly. Union outfits like GWU say this about who would be covered by a union: "We strongly believe in the industrial model of unionization, meaning if you are doing any kind of job for a game company – whether that be in-house, in an agency, on contract, or casual – you're a game worker" (gameworkersunit.com; FAQ – 'Who would be covered by a union for game workers?'). Again, the language being employed to characterize who can and cannot be included in unions and collective action is nebulous and without context. Though they recognize casual labour as a type of games work, there is no contextual information for *what types* of casual labour constitute games work. This sort of non-specificity will continue to hamper progress towards collective action.

What the modders that have taken part in corporate-sanctioned and -sold modding received in remuneration was often not on the terms that they agreed to. Additionally, the

modders received little to no recognition from the company, and almost universally received backlash from the communities who would make use of the mods. One prominent example of this was Bethesda's *Creation Club,* where prominent community modders were invited to work with Bethesda via a standard production pipeline, QA cycle, and release. Gallagher et al in "Who Wrote the Elder Scrolls" speak about how modding has been, and continues to be the backbone of *The Elder Scrolls* games. *TES* modders routinely make fixes and optimizations to *TES* games that the developers either don't have time for, and flat out don't want to do. But why has it fallen to modders to do the work that developers are being paid for? For some, it's a matter of representation, or lack thereof. Lauteria, in "Ga(y)mer Theory" talks at length about queer modding for *Mass Effect,* arguing that the reason the modders put the work into fixing the game was done as a protest against Bioware's careless reskinning of male romance options for women.

I chose to completely wall off the diorama instead of presenting it with one open wall because of one specific informant's comments about feeling isolated and alone, even though they had the entire internet at their fingertips. Their passion, created either a physical, psychical, affective, or temporal distortion of some manner: be it, losing hours making a mod, modders being attacked for trying to monetize their work either via patreon or ko-fi and losing the respect of community members, isolating themselves physically from friends and family because they wanted to work, or using mods as an avenue for emotional exploration and growth.

The quotes associated with "Passion Traps 3 – Modding Materiality" present five embodied experiences with passion in the realm of fan labour. Their voices and stories are no less important than anyone elses' stories I've told in this project. These people have much different stakes in this project and production as a whole, but their work can be and still is operationalized via passion, and they are expected to produce work for little to no remuneration except for the social standing in their communities.

Touchpoints, Context, Material Discursivity: Passion Traps 3 – Modding Materiality

The context of this iteration is different than the previous two iterations. This iteration contextualizes the entwinement of passion and videogames outside of remuneration. None of the informants in this section are employed by game studios, nor are they making a living as videogame production workers. Their passion for games and game production operates in a raw context: these informants are performing the labour that they are performing simply for the love of the game they are modding, the love of the community around the game, or the love of creating what they perceive as important material that has been left out of the games that they are modding. Remuneration, or "breaking into" videogame production are not foregrounded by any of these informants – at least, not *immediately*. Some informants have intentions to try and get into videogame production, but the immediate thought of making a living off making games is absent. Instead, they locate passion and precarity in different ways. Some of these informants feel responsible for keeping mods updated that they are no longer passion about, some find passion in learning how to code and operate in a self-imposed timeline and pipeline akin to

formal videogame production, and some feel serially alienated from the games that they play due to alternative sexual needs or gender presentations.

Computer Station: **Burnt at Both Ends**

"I have a day job. I'm a nurse. But while I was in school, I helped to maintain a popular multimodding pack in Skyrim. I still help with it. It takes so much time, but when I try and step back, I'm met with a range of "This will fail without you" to "Fine, fuck you, forsake your community." It's impossible to please everyone. It's exhausting."

This informant's experience with precarity isn't with *making* mods or games, but with feeling guilty about not maintaining them, or trying to step away from them. This informant works an important job that leaves them emotionally and physically drained (ICU in a hospital in a large midwestern city), yet they feel obligated to continue helping maintain and support a package of mods, or edits to the game, that has been supported for over 6 years by them and five other modders. This mod package consisted of several graphical edits to make the game prettier, model updates that fixed certain buggy behavior of non-player characters, and added content such as new weapons and new armor. They know the mods intimately, they created large parts of the mods, and while they say that it wouldn't be difficult for literally anyone who is slightly code literate to step into their shoes and keep this pack updated, they are met with guilt-tripping, 'letting the community down', or outright anger when they express the need to step away. This informant expressed frustration at being expected to continue doing something that they didn't want to do anymore and said that they largely resent both the community and the mod. When I asked whether that resentment had started to eat away at them caring what the community or collaborators said, they said that it was more complicated than that: "It would be like tossing out your bratty two-year-old. I can't do it. I'm hoping at some point I can love this game again, but right now, I do it out of parental responsibility more than anything."

Posters: **Worship**

"I make mods and small games because I'm passionate about making things that 'little me' would enjoy. I grew up playing videogames and they were such a fundamentally shaping force in my life that, even though I'm not a professional, I couldn't imagine not doing it. It's worship, of sorts."

This informant talked at length about how videogames had been a fundamental shaping force in their life. From fond memories of playing games with their parents when they were little, to being captivated by *Myst*, to making friends with people from all over the world in *Everquest*, videogames had been a fundamental social aspect of this informant's life. They detailed how, as they grew up through high school and early college, they tinkered with coding, game making (both physical and virtual), logic and math, and building computers. Though they ended up not

pursuing a career in software production like they had entered college assuming they would do, they still were reverent towards the process of videogame production. Additionally, they talked about how captivated they were by games like *Myst* growing up, which inspired them to make "escape-room-like games where people have to search, scour, and interact with the environment to tell a story."

Bed: **Time Lost**

"I've lost so much time playing games, making mods, doing things even remotely related to games. Last week, when Borderlands 3 came out, I said 'Ok, two hours, then bed.' I look at my clock and it's 6 am! All of a sudden. It's happened to me all my life."

This informant and I had an interesting conversation about why and how we think time "escapes" us when we do things that we enjoy. For both of us, videogames have always occupied an odd space: they have the ability to displace hours and hours of time and seem like only a few minutes have passed, while also creating hooks in us that, even when we're away from them, we think about them and what we're going to do in them, which further displaces time for us. For this informant, time displacement didn't just stop at *playing* games, though:

> "Ever since I was a kid, I've struggled with prioritizing time for videogames away from time for everything else. As kids, I think you and I both lost time at school thinking about gaming. And, y'know, when you're a kid, that's expected right? But I never really grew out of it. I catch myself doing it still to this day. Like I said with *Borderlands 3*, I lost a lot of time with that already. And even when I make or update *Skyrim* mods; it's so easy to just fall into what you're doing. I've always rationalized it as 'when you do something you love, time doesn't matter.'"

This informant adhered very strongly to discourse around 'doing what they love.' They talked about their work being a passion project; they loved *Skyrim*, especially, and they wanted to make the game as cool as they possibly could and share it with as many people as they could. The point of their work was to give people more content to enjoy so that they, too, might be inspired to contribute to things that they loved in the same way.

Candle: **It's All Up From Here**

"I dropped out of college. I wanted to be a software programmer, but university… I just can't do it. When I dropped out, I was suicidal. The only thing that kept me here was the thought of friends I've made through videogames never hearing from me again. So I started making games. It's been how I've coped, and I'm releasing my first game in a few months! It's getting better. It's getting better."

This informant's experience with precarity isn't necessarily with videogame production itself; their experience with precarity takes place within the formalized learning component of production. They said that, after dropping out of college, they tried to learn coding through a bootcamp, but that the pace of it made it impossible for them to maintain a work/life balance. Even though the bootcamp was advertised as an after-work/weekends program that would prepare participants to enter into software production in 9 weeks or less, this informant was not successful in gaining employment working with what they learned. After the bootcamp, they took the foundational aspects of what they leaned and started using Lynda.com and books to teach themselves and fill in their knowledge gaps. The ability to learn at their own pace without the expectation of "success" measured in terms of obtaining a job immediately after graduating, or working long hours of crunch to show that they were 'passionate' about making games allowed them to flourish in a way that formal education did not. This informant also talked about the strain of producing, and producing well, in beginning classes:

> "I have these cool initial ideas; I always have. I guess I thought that that alone would carry me through the harder parts of school. Even in beginner classes like C and Java, there was this expectation that we produce perfectly, on a schedule, and we bear the brunt of whatever the professor has to say. It was supposed to be for our own edification, I guess? But I don't work that way. I can have eight concurrent ideas, and I can work on all of them at the same time. I don't want to give them all up to work on one thing. I want to all of them, and school and that bootcamp didn't help me there. It was like trying to shove a square peg into a round hole."

This informant, in retrospect, understood the process of *learning* production as an enculturation activity: they were expected to work extensively outside of class on both project-based learning and theoretical learning to the point where they did not have time for other things. They understood that the learning process would be intense, and they were prepared for 'intense'. What they weren't prepared for was the cold demeanor of professors in the bootcamp and how often they equated success to being passionate about overworking.

Window: **Sunrise**

"I make romance mods because I don't see 'me' in the games I play. I don't see nonbinary people or ace people. I don't want to worry about in-game sex or feeling gross. I just want to watch a sunrise in Tamriel with a nice nonbinary Kahjit. No one was doing that, so I did it."

This informant and I talked at length about early BioWare games' dubious reputation for faux-inclusivity, early *Mass Effect* romance mods, and the robustness of *The Elder Scrolls*' engine. They recognized very early on that BioWare was cognizant of the fact that they were committing some form of erasure by reskinning male romance paths verbatim for womens' romances, and not allowing queer romance until the second game. It didn't sit well with them,

but they were also aware of the mod packs that had been made to *fix* the problems with romance, and had quite enjoyed those. They were inspired to make their own contributions to a game that they had spent hundreds of hours in: *Skyrim*. There is very little in the way of queerness in *Skyrim*, surprisingly, and this informant has created six different mods to add new gender options, new romance options, and new ways of creating a family. Dynamics are still much the same: you must woo certain characters, ask them to move in, and then take things from there, but this informant expanded out who could be romanced and even added a mod that randomized the genders, sexual orientations, and emotional needs of some characters. They were emphatic in saying that they didn't care how the community received them: they knew that they would get backlash for making mods that unapologetically foregrounds alternative sexualities and lifestyles.

Recontextualization

This final iteration represents a contentious sector of videogame production labour that is often gestured *towards* in game studies, but rarely critically engaged with. Fan labour and tangential labour operate under the same regimes of passion that developers and community managers do, but they do so most often without any sort of remuneration or recognition for their work. Additionally, fan and tangential labour deal with the same fan passion that community managers do, albeit in mostly smaller and more concentrated dosages. What makes fan labour and tangential labour an important final iteration for *Passion Traps* is the motivational aspect of the labour that they perform. Fan and tangential labour, though they face instances of precarity that overlap with developers and community managers, use their free time to create monetizable labour that they most likely will not be remunerated for.

Returning to the second iteration and the question of "whose passion has been taken advantage of and operationalized to serve videogame production in some manner", a strong case can be made for why fan and contingent labour *need* proper representation. Fan labour and contingent labour present the ultimate distillation of neoliberalism in videogame production. My informants all talked at length about *why* they create content for games and continue to support that content without reliable remuneration streams: their passion for creating something that they think the world needs. For some of my informants, they created content that they thought past-thems would have enjoyed. For others, they created content that tackled social issues like diversity and queer love. All of my informants for this iteration were well aware that the labour that they were doing was in support of a capital-generation scheme that they would receive little to no part of. All of my informants said that that did not matter to them – the labour they did, they did because they had made an impact on a community that they could not have done otherwise.

Another way to look at this type of labour is to return to late-stage capitalism's goal of producing capital *and* cultural capital. If capital and cultural capital are the ultimate productive goal of late-stage capitalism, the production cycle would fall apart without people that believe they have an imperative function in what Chia calls a 'new economy' (773). These types of

labourers are *necessary* to buoy capital generation and create new cultural contours in which late-stage capitalism can monetize. One informant for this iteration talked at length about the lack of diversity that comes standard in games like *Skyrim*. They mentioned that, in a world where cat-people were a legitimate and valued race in the mythos of the world, it was incredibly strange to them that there was almost complete erasure of queer romance, trans people, or any non-normative sexuality or body. This informant's work spans multiple mods and includes adding new romance options, new sexuality options, new gender options, and new body modification options. Their work has been featured prominently in queer gaming popular news media previously and they have been hailed as a true social justice warrior. But their work has also been taken out of context to try and paint *Skyrim* as a thoughtful, inclusive game that gives players the option to be whoever they want to be. Large news media companies have written articles with subtitles that attribute *Skyrim* as being a "radically queer and inclusive game" without acknowledging that the queerness being discussed does not come stock with the game. These types of misattributions work in favor of the games being discussed, but effectively erase the queer people at work who are doing the labour of queering the game. So while cultural capital has accrued to a critical point behind the idea of diversity in games in the past few years, and game companies have started to include often barebones and caricaturized versions of non-normative people, more often than not this is done in an attempt to look progressive and inclusive in an industry that is neither.

Mass Effect: Andromeda is an infamous example of caricaturizing diversity. The team who made the game was lauded for being led by a woman and including people of color, and the game itself was supposed to be a giant, queer space opera. But upon arrival, the game was stilted, with dialogue and characterization being incredibly offensive. The best example of this is Hainly Abrams, the director of scientific research aboard the Eos. When the game shipped, Abrams outed herself as a trans woman within the first conversation of meeting Ryder, the player-character. The trans community was rightfully outraged, and come to find out, no one on the dev team for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* had consulted a trans person when creating this character. BioWare released a statement apologizing for the insensitivity, and two patches were deployed that changed where in branching dialogue Ryder would have access to this information. The second patch finally established that Abrams would only divulge her reasons for being aboard the Eos after a proper relationship was established with Ryder that spanned multiple quests, interactions, and time.

In the wake of cheap cultural capital grabs like *Mass Effect: Andromeda* that talk more about how important diversity is than showing it in the products, it continues to fall to contingent and fan labour to create thoughtful, true representations of queerness. They type of passion that catalyzes fans to create videogame content unremunerated is akin to the types of passion shown in DIY creation. Michelle Kempson in "'My Version of Feminism'" and in "'I Sometimes Wonder Whether I'm an Outsider'" characterizes the ethos of DIY as being anti-establishment, community-based, and done so in the hopes that change will be affected through what is created. DIY tenants acknowledge that the act of adhering to and creating with DIY materials still

operates within the boundaries of capitalism, but that they are operating outside typical regimes of labour to produce content that rights a wrong or exposes an injustice. My informants for this iteration have characterized their own labour as being similar: they hope that by creating the content that they do, the community for the game they mod for will be better off for it. Only one of my informants talked at all about the possibility of moving from modding into remunerated videogame production work, but they still showed the same passion and social consciousness that the rest of my informants did.

Parting Shots and Final Thoughts: Reflections on *Passion Traps*

Passion Traps takes an intimate look at three groups of people who labour on videogames. Each group has a very different relationships with, and understandings of passion, though. They also perform very different kinds of labour, which affects how their entanglement with videogames and passion forms. Though there is overlap between groups as far as *what* part of videogames catalyzes informants' passion, each of these groups has a specific focus *around* the passion that they exhibit. For videogame production workers, their passion is entangled in making a product that communities will enjoy and that they are proud of making. For community managers, their passion is entangled with supporting and interfacing with the communities that they manage. For fan labourers, they may be doing a combination of the aforementioned labours, but outside of official channels meaning that their work is often not compensated or recognized by the companies who produce the games that fan labour is done for.

The process of selecting what groups to highlight through *Passion Traps* is imperfect, just as the process of selecting the informants to include. Even though I address three groups that constitute a large part of what makes videogames and videogame production function, there are only three groups being addressed. Like the rest of this dissertation project, *Passion Traps'* iterations are not meant to be a totalizing look into how passion forms and functions for any of these groups. *Passion Traps*, instead, is meant to raise awareness to an issue in game studies that has not given much consideration: the people behind the games that we enjoy, and that game studies examines as its *objet d'étude*. *Passion Traps* puts physicality to what this dissertation project has foregrounded: there is a tangible connection between passion and videogame production that needs to be understood before anything else labour-related regarding videogame production can be researched. That connection is not the same for everyone or for every type of labour. But the connection is there. Without understanding that connection in a robust way, future research runs the risk of falling into totalizing, sensationalizing, or unfairly treating the people and problems it intends to solve.

Passion Traps recontextualizes the embodied experiences of the people informing these iterations into physical, thoughtful pieces of media that challenge interactors to consider their own passionate entanglements. *Passion Traps* presents timely, important context for a subject matter that has, to this point, been disconnected. There are people working in this industry that are experiencing problems, experiencing forms of precarity, and problem-solving these issues that neither scholarship or popular press address *could* address due to the hyperspecificity of

each instance of workers' lives. *Passion Traps* provides a textual element that is not simply academic in nature; it is not *just* quotes pulled from a lived experience. *Passion Traps* takes that a step further and instead provides material contextualization that participants can interact with and be challenged in a variety of ways to a variety of depths that traditional academic texts cannot so easily evoke. *Passion Traps*, as a critical making project, foregrounds the importance of iteration: learning, growing, assembling, reassembling, breaking down, tearing apart, starting over. These themes are present for all the informants that are a part of *Passion Traps*. They have all experienced iteration and growth that has pushed them beyond what they initially thought that their capabilities, wants, or needs were. This connects to the nature of precarity not being a uniform thing. It does not manifest uniformly across the industry. There is individual nuance that must be contoured. *Passion Traps*' iterations signal the need for more connective tissue between the lives of the people working in the industry, feeling these feelings, dealing with these problems, and the writing being done to profile the problems in the industry and effective ways of challenging those problems. As the industry shifts, as unionization and collective action gain momentum in videogame production workplaces, and as late-stage capitalism and neoliberalism saturate the industry further, our understandings of passion will shift. *Passion Traps* intends to shift with the industry to continue to provide physical connective tissue between the people working in the industry and the scholarship being undertaken to assist those people.

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It's All Over But the Crying

This project has been equal parts ground clearing, exploring and defining contours, and channeling frustration to create a physical representation of the stories that my informants shared with me. This project started as what I thought would be a straightforward look at how people get tricked into working jobs that degrade in return for social clout. Instead, it became a project about human experience, embodied knowledge, and understanding how multifaceted precarity is. Precarity is not a static *thing*. It is a noun, a verb, and an adjective all at once. A state of existence, a fugue, a bodily attribution (regardless of feeling precarious). My informants talked about being in states of precarity. They talked about the precarious aspects of their jobs. They talked about the precarity that hangs over the videogame production industry. Precarity manifested different for each of my informants. Though each of their stories overlapped in some fashion regarding where precarity was located and what it was doing and being, each of my informants presented granular, embodied experiences that were their own and only their own. Precarity in its multifacetedness presents something beyond the scope of simple classification and recording. Popular games journalism has proven that recording, disseminating, and calling attention to precarity is a necessary step in combating it. It has also proved that without extremely careful treatment, spreading information about precarity and calling attention to it erases the people experiencing precarity, and sensationalizes the issues being addressed while missing or downplaying other facets of precarity. While the treatment of precarity remains generalizable and sensationalized, it is impossible to begin trying to think through ways to understand the material-discursive circumstances of people experiencing precarity in this industry. As I said previously, there *is* overlap in what, where, and how precarity manifests and what it manifests *as*, but each of my informants present granular, embodied examples of how autonomy and agency is rarely, if ever, considered in written work about precarity.

Within understanding the multifacetedness of precarity, a few things became clear. Firstly, videogame production in its current state does not have the infrastructure to talk about precarity in meaningful ways. This project has made major inroads into determining starting points where work needs to be done to build those types of understandings, though. I have identified unions and collective action as the type of reform necessary to diminish precarity as I have examined it, diminish the precarity my informants have experienced, and diminish the precarity that my sources have written about. However, there are more contours that need to be

explored before unionization can occur that does not displace marginal workers, or outrightly erase non-white, non-male workers.

Part of what this project identified and linked precarity's proliferation with was a fundamental lack of understanding as to who does and does not count as a videogame production worker. The definitional work of this project is a place to start, but it will need to continually be refined, especially in conjunction with the CWA's proposed unionization efforts. The CWA has not been clear about who they consider union-eligible people, which presents possible cracks that already-marginal workers could slip through. Unionization is a workplace-by-workplace process, and each workplace ultimately decides the structure that they will adhere to. Therefore, I am leery of a one-size-fits-all, sweeping reform structure that the CWA seems to be keen on pushing. Without a proper understanding of who is union-eligible, though, the discussion around what type of workplace union structure any given studio needs is moot. Uncomfortable lines will need to be drawn regarding who can take advantage of unions. Developing a vocabulary through which scholars, popular press journalists, industry workers, union outfits like the CWA, and local and national governments can talk about videogame production workers is essential to establishing the foundation for unionization. Unfortunately, this necessitates developing binaries of 'is' and 'is not'. But what happens when those bifurcations are drawn? Can we finally hold companies responsible for abusive, exploitative workplace cultures?

The fundamental linking factor between precarity and the state of videogame production that I have identified in this project is the concept of 'passion'. Passion is operationalized in a number of ways in videogame production that it is not in other forms of software production or media production. As I talked about throughout this project, videogame production is presented as a fundamentally "do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life" type of job Miya Tokumitsu in "In the Name of Love" talks about 'doing what you love' as a job path that more often than not asks workers to sacrifice work-life balances in favor of pursuing a job that they have 'passion' for. Videogame production presents a shiny veneer of getting to play while you work while also reaping the cultural cache of working in videogames. What has historically gone unhighlighted until very recently is the types of abuse that the workplace culture in videogame production has harbored since its inception. Crunch, hypermasculinity, power abuse, mismanagement, heterogony, and forced subjectivation are all part of what create precarious situations within production spaces. The concept of 'passion', when put into conversation with these workplace abuses, recontextualizes these situations as valorized overwork and as a measure of self-policing. Robin Johnson, in "Hiding in Plain Sight", talks about how crunch and hypermasculinity become metrics for showing how passionate a worker is for making a good product. Additionally, Johnson shows how competitive workers are with each other (all in good fun) to create the best product possible. Power abuse, mismanagement, and heterogenous workplaces become weeding-out practices where "weak" or "unwilling" workers don't make it. The recontextualization of these concepts needs something to stick to; an attachment of sorts.

Videogame production and the culture surrounding videogame production act as insulation for the ideas that the more passion a worker shows for videogames and the more willing a person is to devote themselves to videogames, the more access they will have to advancement and cultural cache. Ergin Bulut, in "Glamor Above, Precarity Below" talks about how, regardless of the position workers are in (be it below-the-line like quality assurance, community management, or contingent contract work, or above-the-line like management, being a producer, or being a core developer that is non-contract), passion is operationalized in similar ways to keep workers working towards the goal of advancing. I related this willingness to work

to Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism from her book of the same name. Berlant talks about cruel optimism as being a way of understanding why seemingly rational people put themselves into positions of precarity. Cruel optimism presents an enticing way of both distancing ourselves from the problems that this project has identified as well as looking at the systematics of how those problems occur. Unfortunately, cruel optimism does not provide any sort of ready-made escape plan from the precarity that it helps to lay bare. Instead, it baits more thought, more questions, more effort to refine and compartmentalize in the hopes that we are one permutation away from creating something that is agreeable and a step forward.

According to Mike Epps' infamous 2005 comments about passion and hiring, workers who aren't willing to overwork for the passion of being in the industry don't belong there. Informants of Johnson's, in "Toward Greater Production Diversity" talk about heterogony as being regrettable and ultimately a byproduct of women not having the 'right' kinds of ideas or having adequate passion for the material being made. Informants of Bulut's in "Playboring in the Tester Pit" echo this sentiment, especially when considering below-the-line jobs like quality assurance as ways of progressing in videogame production without having learned to code or do art/sound. Passion is not only a meritocratic advancement measure, but it also becomes co-located with a person's willingness to adhere to cruel optimism – not as a blind, preordained fate, but as a recognized attachment. Berlant says that

> "[attachments] are made not by will, after all, but buy an intelligence after which we are always running. […] This lagging and sagging relation to attachment threatens to make us feel vertiginous and formless, except that normative conventions and our own creative repetitions are there along the way to help quell the panic we might feel at the prospect of becoming exhausted or dead before we can make sense of ourselves. (125)"

Passion becomes the normative convention that quells the fear that videogame production might be predicated on a broken model. Instead of interrogating why the production process *needs* people that are subjectivated to accept overwork and abuse as just part of the job, passion becomes a motivator and a self-policing tool to make sure that, as people drop out of production due to burnout, other readily subjectivatable people are there to take their place. As each of my informants talked to me at length about, passion became an important reason for why they pursued videogame production in the first place.

I have been careful to not strip agency away from my informants and not to (re)tell their stories in such a way that they are not foregrounded as completely autonomous in the decisions they make and the actions they carry out. With so many critical pieces of both popular media and scholarly work around precarity in videogame production, informants are not treated as autonomous people who chose to work in this field and make a conscious choice to return to work every day. This presents a problem when trying to highlight the precarity that the systematics of production highlight.

My methodological commitments to this project were chosen in order to highlight my informants' experiences and to allow them to guide the ways in which I conducted the groundclearing that this project has done. Feminist ethnography has been especially important in keeping this project grounded in embodied experience. I talked about initial missteps that I took with interviews and treatment of my informants. Feminist ethnography provided me with a set of tools that allowed me to recontextualize my relationship with my informants. Through active listening, meeting my informants as an equal and not as an interviewer, and believing my

informants' information to be their objective truth, I have been able to present (re)tellings of my informants' stories that they have all read, approve of, and have commented on the way I have chosen to write about them as being careful, caring, and authentic.

Institutional ethnography provided tools for taking the objectivity and radical care that feminist ethnography foregrounds and using it to examine how institutions create ways to isolate and eliminate people that are problematic to production. Throughout my informants' stories, they each spoke of experiences in their workplaces where abuse of power occurred, mismanagement occurred, and misunderstanding occurred. What was the same across all of my informants, though, was that these issues were occurring between management and workers. My informants all had experienced minor issues or squabbles with coworkers, but the bulk of the precarious situations that they had been put into could be traced back to power abuse between them and a superior. Institutional ethnography provided me a way to create a working understanding of how power, institutional rhetoric, workplace culture, workplace self-policing, and institutional circuitry function in relation to precarity. This approach is important because, in addition to the structural knowledge being produced, I am still being able to foreground my informants and their experiences as the fundamental factor in this structuration: their precarity is not the industry's precarity. Though their precarity may share characteristics with the industry's precarity as it has been portrayed through popular media, the two are different.

All of these moving parts, when taken together, create a rudimentary and abstracted portrait of what *could* be happening within videogame production. The moving parts that I've identified are not the only parts that are aiding and abetting the spread of precarity in videogame production. Nor are the solutions that I've identified in collective action and unionization the only methods of solving precarity. This project has been a ground-clearing project; one where embodied, experiential accounts of how precarity has functioned for informants is more important than creating generalizable information, or creating a sweeping reform plan. Both of those things would be hollow and would be predicated on forecasting futures and eventualities that could immediately change. Take for example the CWA saying that they want to assist in overhauling union structures in videogame production. The CWA has been a relevant union body for years in terms of software and media production. It shares traits with other screen-media-related union outfits like Screen Actors Guild, Voice Actors Guild, and Writers Guild. SAG, VAG, and WG have all been vocal supporters of videogame production's drive to unionize, but CWA has had very little interaction with videogame production as a whole. In retrospect, it seems almost guaranteed that, at some point, the CWA of course would step in and offer assistance to videogame production. But in the immediate context of these events, it is still equally exciting and scary. This series of events by themselves proves to me that any sweeping generalizations that this project *could* have potentially made are better off left untended to. The embodied, experiential knowledge and lived circumstances of what my informants have shared with me has allowed me to triangulate, theoretically, some instances and settings through which precarity can manifest. Their experience has also shined light on how incomplete the knowledge that this project is producing would be if I tried to generalize any of it.

I want to use this last section to briefly think through some issues related to this project and connect the work that I've done here to my future research. The future research I see myself doing falls broadly into two categories: digital media unionization and understanding how diversity is operationalized within institutions via capitalist socius attachment. To do the type of research I want to do, I feel the need to address how this project connects to these areas in substantial ways.

Thoughts on Unions and Immaterial Labour

When considering unions and collective action in videogame production, there is still a sizeable hole in how we, as researchers, talk about unions. This is due to immaterial labour and knowledge-production jobs in a digital age presenting distinct differences from any type of job before. Due to the interconnectedness that the internet provides, immaterial labour and knowledge-production jobs are no longer tied to a physical location insofar as they require resources in physical locations to do the work. Software programmers, for example, don't necessarily have to be in the office to write code. Nor does a community manager have to be in the office to interact with the community they manage. A staff writer for a digital news outlet has unprecedented hypermobility when compared to journalists in the past. Due to these new material discursive conditions of work, conditions of exploitation are different, which means that conditions under which collective action can happen effectively are different. New strategies need to be developed to put comparable pressure on management that, say, a walk-out or a picket line would do for material labourers. While collective action strategies such as walk-outs and picketing can still be used to signpost the need for change and can be used to make a point about working concerns (see: Riot employee walk-out over company's toxic culture in 2019), they lack the ability to stop the flow of money as effectively as these strategies do in material labour. For example, in 2018, half of Eugen Systems, a French videogame production company, staged a walk-out that turned into a strike to protest Eugen System's blatant violation of labour laws. The strike lasted from February of 2018 until April, when strikers gave up due to lack of progress. In an update to this case, Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo (The Video Game Workers Union of France), posted a press release in late December detailing how 6 of the 21 workers involved in the labour dispute had been fired by Eugen Systems for "negatively affecting the mood of the studio." Unbeknownst to strikers, Eugen Systems pressured non-striking workers into crunching, and outsourced work to a now-defunct asset firm in Malaysia.

Fernandez and Fisher in "More than 30 Media Companies Have Unioized in the Past 2 Years" say that almost every 'digital media' company that comes up in conversations regarding unionization is a news outlet. Why is it that news outlets have such seemingly good success as opposed to software production companies? Or videogame production? Or TV production? In large part, this is due to the structural unionization that occurred with the American Newspaper Guild (ANG) between the 1930's to 1960's. Bonnie Brennen in "Cultural Discourse of Journalists" characterizes how the ANG's unionization push was inspired by material labour unions such as mechanics, factory workers, and transport workers (84). The ANG recognized that the union structures in material labour provided a good initial model for success, but they also recognized that, to succeed in the goal of creating a collective bargaining entity that would be able to pressure management, provide workers with the same types of job safety and arbitration protection that material labour unions did, the ANG had to recontextualize who they were seeking to protect, what they were seeking to protect from, and bargaining tactics. Daniel Leab talks specifically about workday considerations that the ANG made. Before the ANG stepped in, newspaper workers had unregulated working hours, unregulated pay, and unregulated editing standards. To solve these problems, the ANG had to establish who could be considered for protection, which meant that delineations had to be made in who was and wasn't a full-fledged 'journalist'. Though the guidelines regarding who is a journalist and who is a contributor has shifted over the years (and has all but disappeared with digital media and online news), the general rule of thumb remained that staff writers, or those who would work 8-12 hour shifts

researching, writing, fact-checking, and producing news items would be considered for ANG membership. Contingent staff that directly contributed to these jobs, but did not fall within the guidelines, could not be considered. Therefore, they became known as 'contributors.'

Lee Wilkinson and Bonnie Brennen in "Conflicted Interests, Contested Terrain" talk about how, in a digital age, journalism has become less material, meaning that worker classifications are in flux (299). In terms of what this means for digital media and online news organizations now, we can see that there have been subtle recontextualizations, but that the basic framework of the ANG's membership understanding is still in place. Websites like BuzzFeed, HuffPost, and Vice have news journalists who are responsible for producing, editing, researching, and fact-checking work that is then distributed. In much the same way as journalists under the ANG unionized, it is mainly this rank of person across any digital media or online news organization that belong to unions. For BuzzFeed, this rank is referred to as 'Buzzfeed News Reporter'. Vice refers to core writers as 'Staff Writers', and advertises jobs as such, and HuffPost refers to core writers as 'reporters' and advertises jobs as such.

There are, then, a rather unclear list of other classifications that fall into contingent/contributor roles, or, full-time, commensurate roles that are either excluded from unionization privileges or only given *some* protection. For Buzzfeed, for example, there are multiple 'correspondent' ranks depending on the category of news you look at: investigations correspondents such as Jane Bradley or world correspondent such as Mike Giglio. Additionally, there are multiple different classifications of 'staff' that are associated with writing: Farrah Penn, who is classified as a BuzzFeed Staff Writer, Kayla Yandoli, who is classified as just BuzzFeed Staff, and Laura Wright, who is classified as a BuzzFeed contributor.

There are still unanswered questions regarding best practices to unionizing and creating pressure when talking about digital media jobs. Even digital journalism, which has the most thorough and progressive union model, presents a multitude of problems regarding contingent labour, who gets counted in when talking about unions, and who/how we refer to union-eligible people. In videogame production, the same problems exists. There is a dearth of understanding of who can be in a union, who counts as contingent labour, how contingent labour is remunerated (if at all), and where/how contingent labour fits into union plans. One possible crisis that could come with unionization is that more and more of the workforce becomes contract labour. This will most likely be due to the pressure that unionizing will put on production. The current contract labour model of videogame production proves that continued emphasis on operationalizing passion and the cultural capital that working in videogames brings is enough to establish a caste of workers that will strive to break through cruel optimism. I am concerned that, as unionization starts to gain traction, and distinctions are made between who can and can't rely on union protection, there is a lacking legal safety net that will prevent companies from firing all but essential personnel. As with any event that displaces workers and creates precarity, marginal people will be disproportionately affected. When, not if, this occurs, then another overhaul of how we understand unions in videogame production will be necessary.

Thoughts on Diversity, Workplace Culture, and 'Initiatives'

Thinking about diversity is impossible without thinking about institutional discourse and the circuitry that operates within organizations. We operate within late-capitalism, and companies still operate within the confines of capital. Companies must have a budget, expenses, some sort of good(s) or service(s), some manner of storefront or professional presence. Within

each institution the discourses around what and who is valued affect business plans and vice-versa. Therefore, when thinking about diversity's place within institutions, it boils down to two main questions. First being 'how does 'diversity' affect capital generation?' The second question stems from the first: 'how can 'diversity' be given credence without ruining the subjectivation measures in place to create willingly exploitable people'? To understand how the capitalist socius is intimately tied to issues of institutional heterogeny, it is necessary to look at how subjectivation occurs within videogame production, and how that subjectivation encourages non-diversity. This, then, will leave room to discuss how diversity is 'done', why it is 'done' how it is, and what good, if any, that does for creating diverse places.

Capitalism is complicit in perpetuating binaries by creating and maintain the material properties of bodily normativity by linking things such as gender to colors, masculinity or femininity to clothes and hygiene products, and masculinity/femininity to sports. It also allows rampant cultural subjectivation in other strata. For example, in the videogame production process, hypermasculinity, anti-feminism, and colonialism are common storylines in videogames. But the question remains: how, and why, are these tropes perpetuated, even in games that are supposed to be progressive and inclusive?

Guattari refers to cinema as a medium of "transference, Oedipus, and castration. (235)" meaning that cinema produces cultural markers by which people in modern society become subjectivated to value certain standards of beauty, products, religious forms, and other marks of enculturation to make these things profitable and able to be monetized. In other words, Guattari alludes to cinema as being a trend-setting affair. It creates the 'cool' things that drive supply and demand. The case can be made, too, that videogames operate in much the same way as cinema insofar as they both subjectivate consumers to value certain products, people, and forms over others, and create value systems that other media incorporates adhere to or run the risk of failing. The value systems that triple-A game production values and perpetuates are tropes of anti-femininity, hypermasculinity, colonialism, etc.

Current videogame production processes are beginning to understand and recognize that affective and emotionally investing games can be monetized. Doris Rusch, in *Making Deep Games* and Katherine Isbister in *Making Deep Games* cover how affect can be used to create hooks in the same way that, previously, action and hyperviolence created content that appealed to certain people. So, whereas intimate, timely experiences that were rendered in videogame form used to be prevalent only in DIY and non-professional spaces, such as a (in)famous indie incubator called Difference Engine Initiative covered by Stephani Fisher Alison Harvey in "Intervention for Inclusivity", the capitalist socius has begun to develop the tools to consume and repurpose these game types in service of capitalism. In professional videogame development spaces, the people creating these affective experiences and attachments have not changed; in fact, the people in these spaces have stayed much the same: white, male, and heterosexual. This has fostered an increasingly toxic and predatory work environment where videogame production workers must labour under subjectivation regimes of not only being ok with creating and perpetuating anti-feminine, hypermasculine, colonialist, and anti-homo/transsexual media, but now also creating affectively and emotionally predatory media as well. This further instantiates the dehumanizing cynicism that Lazzarato talks about in "Immaterial Labor" by expecting workers to cede any moral judgement or objections to projects and just get on with them.

Change in these realms does not happen with any urgency. Videogame production spaces are risk-averse and are often so locked to capitalistic production cycles that even *if* a studio wanted to rehabilitate its culture, often that cannot happen due to the nature of stagnation that the

capitalist socius favors. Simply put, slow, incremental changes to videogame IPs and genres is prized over innovation and newness, both in triple-A production spaces and indie production spaces. This perspective speaks to the Guattarian notion of heterogenesis as being "an active, immanent singularization of subjectivity, as opposed to a transcendent, universalizing and reductionist homogenization … an expression of desire, of a becoming that is always in the process of adapting, transforming and modifying itself in relation to its environment" (*The Three Ecologies*, 95n49)." Heterogeny and iterative design are locked together in videogame production because they are part and parcel of what Guattari referred to with cinema in *The Three Ecologies* (28). Videogame production is an enculturation endeavor and is responsible for subjectivating large sectors of the population. Capitalism has allowed videogame production to target certain audiences, readily subjectivize them to accept certain bodily, racial, and sexual portrayals as valid. Any attempt to break with those readily recognizable tropes would mean that the entire industry would have to radically reformat not only itself, but to whom it is marketing or risk the entire medium crumbling in on itself from alienating faithful consumers. This is, again, seen played out in the culture of videogame production spaces. The people at work creating the subjectivizing material have themselves been subjectivized to some degree into accepting the validity of only certain people for the medium, and whether consciously or not, that subjectivization has embedded itself in workplace cultures that actively favor (mostly white) straight men for meritocratic purposes.

Large developers encourage heteogeniety throughout their studios. If the production processes and workflows are similar, it is easier to identify where and when a system is breaking down so that it can be rectified. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter in "From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again" talk about how nodes in a network breakdown if the structures become incongruent. This means that, as more nodes are added to a network, the structure of those networks have more edges through which non-normative productive behavior can occur, which will throw the whole network into turmoil. If the workspaces are similar, it follows that, as more heterogenic elements are incorporated into the life of a studio, even games from different genres will start to emulate one another's systems and become mixed-genre media. And just as the games become more similar, the people that make those games are expected to become more similar. This is where the tropes of hypermasculinity and anti-feminism and anti-individualism start to become apparent. Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter in "EA Spouse' and the Crisis of Video Game Labour" state that "for many, the initially enjoyable aspects of work in digital play mutate into a linchpin of exploitative and exclusionary practices, including exclusion based upon gender" (601).

Gender moderation is another aspect of production culture that contributes to the precarity of videogame production and perpetuation of negative tropes. Julie Prescott and Jan Bogg in "The Computer Games Industry" find that gender segregation is still happening in triple-A production spaces, and that women who do enter the industry must renegotiate their gender identity in order to fit in better with male coworkers (142). Robin Johnson, in "Technomasculinities and Its Influence in Videogame Production" outlines how, if they do not do the work of renegotiating, they run the risk of being accused of being "fake gamers" and have their passion called into question (254). This further demonstrates an unwillingness on the part of male production workers to accept alternate forms of passion to their own, alternate forms of people, and what those people are capable of.

The act of renegotiating gender in videogame production spaces becomes an act of subsistence rather than the more modern act of subversion that queer theory has attempted to

recast it as. Judith Halberstam in *Queer Art of Failure* talks about failure as an iterative process where 'failing' does not denote the end of an endeavor, but rather as a way of considering new methods to approach solving a problem (89). In modern culture, gender fluidity is recognized and is becoming more and more accepted, and people are free to express their gender how they see fit. Guattari, in *Soft Subversions* talks about how, within capitalist subjectivation, non-male bodies, or bodies that are not willing to perform the necessary gender renegotiating to become-male become a hindrance. In an interview Johnson conducted in "Hiding in Plain Sight", he was able to extract a clear look at gender in the videogame production process: "other men offered a clearer window into the sexism of the digital play industry, explaining, for example, that 'girls' often do not have 'the right ideas' when it comes to games but that it 'looks good' for a developer to employ 'some girls'" (579). The necessity of women bodies to renegotiate their femininity, or to become-male, to be taken seriously and valued in the videogame production process presents a very troubling look at how gender is performed in these spaces, and how videogame production's workplace culture has come to recognize only one certain type of body as acceptably axiomatizable.

What Happens Next

Neither issue I've talked about here has a clean "this is what happens next" answer, which falls in line with the rest of this project. This work is a work of 'understanding'. Meaning, this work cannot and is not about presenting hard-and-fast facts. I have presented an *understanding* of a possible theoretical avenue to pursue a better way of understanding how and why the shiny veneer of videogame production is so alluring and how the concept of 'passion' has gotten incorporated and operationalized by capital-generation. My understanding of how passion functions, based on my informants, my own passion, and research around passion, is not flat: it functions as a motivator, a subjectivator, a fishhook, an ever-present 'if I just a little harder work harder, maybe I can…', and a bridge between work and play. This is but one corner of a larger picture of the embodied experiences of each and every person in videogame production. Passion operates in vastly different ways for each of my informants, for me, and for the people about whom scholars that I've sourced in this project have written about.

Akin to how I approached the theoretical underpinnings of this project, I approached my methodology in the same way. Institutional ethnography and feminist ethnography encourage earnest understandings of informants and their material discursive conditions. Feminist ethnography, especially, is concerned with sensing, supporting, and creating an environment where the researcher is not the arbiter of truth. Instead, it is concerned with sensing, hearing, listening, and understanding informants from as close a place as possible. Their truth *is* the truth. Often that truth reveals power-struggles, hypersexism, racism, discrimination, etc. The same can be said of institutional ethnography. To understand the material-discursive circumstances of informants, and to understand how issues of precarity and imbalance surface, understanding how an institution works is paramount.

As with transcription of any sort, this project puts forth my best understanding of what my informants talked about and what they experienced. In (re)telling their stories, I took extra care to not sensationalize their experiences, use their experience to generalize problems across all of videogame production, or twist their words to fit a narrow, self-serving narrative. Every one of my informants talked about reading or experiencing a written work about precarity in videogames that sensationalized, butchered, or mistreated the people whose stories were being

told. Still, though, my informants confided their stories in me. As I covered, there were missteps initially with interviews and general approach, but I do thoroughly believe that the stories that my informants shared with me are undoubtedly their truths, and this project relies on their frankness. The understandings of their own entanglements with passion, precarity, and workplace culture in videogame production provides examples of the importance of seeking and understanding experiential granularity in *any* subject group, but videogame production especially.

Finally, in the absence of actionable, generalizable information, the critical making piece that this project is named after stands as a way of interacting with the concepts that I've presented. An 'object-lesson', so to speak. The installation's intention is to remind participants about their own cruel optimistic entanglements with passion and videogames. Most of the people who will interact with this project have affective attachments to videogames in some way, however small. Memories of playing videogames with family, using videogames to escape life, finding friends or a community. Regardless of where the attachment lies, the attachment is important. The three parts of this installation challenge participants to not only reflect on their own entanglements, but also to think through how they are complicit in either aiding precarious formations in videogame production or recognizing and calling out companies and circumstances that allow for precarity. The informants' stories that I've shared throughout this project and that I conclude with in this three-piece installation are only as important as the credence that readers and participants give them. If we as scholars are not critical of how our own attachments have fostered how precarity appears in videogame production, then we are powerless to change the circumstances of the medium that we research. This sentiment is the reason why I'm doing the work that I'm doing. In large part, it is also why I'm so critical of game studies work that doesn't attempt to understand that, behind the product it critiques, lives real people whose passion bleeds into these products. I hope that with this installation, and with his project as a whole, I inspire colleagues to give more careful thought to the people that make the product that our discourse is built upon and around.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Where did you do most of your work? I'd especially like to know what part of the building you worked in, if there were any colloquials for that space, what other labour divisions were close to yours, etc.
2. Describe what you remember of how the space you worked in looked like. You can describe colors, patterns, furniture, how your space was set up, personal effects… anything that you'd like to describe.
3. How do you feel like using that space shaped your work habits? Your health habits? Your interpersonal communication habits?
4. Can you describe some instances in which you felt like the space you were working in was restricting or hampered your ability to perform a task? Conversely, can you describe some times that you felt like the space you worked in helped your ability to perform a task?
5. Describe what your coworkers were like. How did they seem to get along in their work spaces? What decorations or personal effects did they have? What kinds of positive and negative interactions did you have with them? How did the spaces that you and they worked in affect your ways and methods of interacting with them?
6. Can you describe a time that you, personally, felt discriminated against? If so, can you describe the space that that event took place in? Colors, furniture, did the space seem smaller or bigger than it usually did?
7. Can you describe a time that you witnessed one of your coworkers being discriminated against, or a time that you witnessed one of your coworkers being discriminatory? This can include discriminatory language or actions towards someone else, homo/transphobic comments, misogynistic comments, etc. What do you recall of the spaces that you were in when you experienced these events?
8. Can you describe how management's offices looked? For example, where they on another floor or elevated (like… did they overlook the production floor/production spaces?)? Furnitures, colors, personal effects, anything that you can remember. Where they single-occupant office spaces? Did managers sit with production workers while doing their daily tasks or did they spend the majority of the time in their offices?
9. Did the space where all production workers did their tasks have any pieces of furniture that weren't specifically and explicitly for videogame production (example: beanbag chairs and a pingpong table)? If so, can you describe what they were, who generally used them, and what kind of space they took up in relation to the area in which you worked?
10. Can you describe some times when you felt pressured to stay at work longer than you wanted to or needed to? This can be anything from comments like "we have to get this done by x date!" or "well, we can order food and sleep on the beanbag chairs" to your supervisor or someone in a position of power saying that you MUST stay until they say you can leave or your job will be terminated.
11. Do you feel like the spaces that you worked in were built to keep you there? If so, can you talk about what, specifically, you identified as elements that were in your workspace that were not your own, but were there to keep you working?