

GAME WORKERS UNITE!

ISSUE 68

**MARCH
2018**

**STAY ALIVE
IN THE
INDUSTRIAL
ZONE!**

**GDC 2018
COVERAGE
INSIDE!**



**CO-OP
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**TIPS FOR
BEATING
ALL THE
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**FREE STRATEGY
GUIDE INSIDE!**



HEY YOU!

Are you tired of **CRUNCH**?

Worried management isn't listening to you or your concerns?

Are you struggling to pay bills, or lacking basic benefits like health care insurance or paid parental leave?

Do you suspect you're being paid less than your co-workers because of your race or gender?



FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITORS



Poor working conditions in the game industry have been making headlines for many years now. But so far there's been little concrete action to actually address widespread issues like unpaid overtime, mass layoffs, or wages that are much lower than the rest of the tech sector. Multinationals like EA are making record profits, yet very little of that is flowing into the hands of the people who actually create the games.¹ It's been known since 2008 that major game industry companies illegally collude with each other in order to keep employees' wages down.² Developers in small studios are also struggling to get by, and most people leave the industry after only a few years because the conditions are so bad.

What can we do about this? And why are organizations that claim to represent game developers, like the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) not stepping up to the task?

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-electronic-arts-results/ea-profit-blows-past-estimates-as-game-downloads-jump-idUSKBN1852F5> (Short url: goo.gl/4hbmyT)
² https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/112081/InDepth_Montreal_Game_Biz_Sees_SalaryFixing_Collusion.php (Short url: goo.gl/qMd6hf)

GAME WORKERS UNITE

Game Workers Unite is a broad-reaching organization that seeks to connect pro-union activists, exploited workers, and allies across borders and across ideologies in the name of building a unionized game industry.

We are building pro-union solidarity across disciplines, classes, and countries.

The organization is run exclusively by workers (non-employers), but we actively encourage employers, academics, and others to engage in the community and help support the organization's direct action efforts both materially and through their visibility.

 [gameworkers](https://twitter.com/gameworkers)

gameworkersunite.org

Sonic clay model on cover
by Jinta-karn Charnchit
(<https://jinta-karn-imagine.blogspot.com>)

REVIEW ZONE

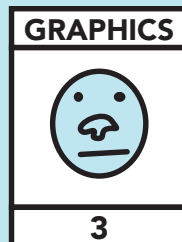
GWU REVIEWS: International Game Developers Association

While the **IGDA** bills itself as an organization “dedicated to advancing the careers and enhancing the lives of game developers,” the board of directors and executives are mostly CEOs and company owners. The **IGDA** also relies directly on corporate sponsorships from large businesses. This influences the direction the organization takes, which issues they choose to address, and how they address them. It leads them to avoid anything that might displease sponsors (and thus threaten a key source of funding). As a result, the **IGDA** tends to serve the interests of corporate shareholders, and *not* the interests of *the people who actually make the games* — the workers.



WORKERTIP: Sneak in and eat the free food at events.

This is why they have generally taken an anti-union stance (internally if not always outwardly), pretending to serve the function of a union without actually providing any of the benefits. They also claim to advocate for game developers internationally, but do very little to address the exploitative practices of multinationals that rely on global inequality and precarity — practices which negatively affect all of us.



What is a union?

A union is an organization of workers dedicated to improving wages, hours, and working conditions within their workplace or industry through collective bargaining. Unions leverage the collective power of workers, who in the end are the ones who *actually make the products*, to balance out the power held by bosses and shareholders.

How do workers benefit from unions?

Unionized workers have higher wages on average than workers who are not unionized, often between **15 to 25% more**. Unions even benefit workers who are not unionized by raising the bar for everyone. For example, a high school graduate whose workplace is *not* unionized but who works in an industry that's 25% unionized overall can still expect to be paid 5% more than similar workers in less unionized industries.³

Unions can also help reduce inequality. While all workers benefit from having unions, those who benefit the most are typically the people who are the most disempowered or in the most precarious positions.

³ http://www.epi.org/publication/briefingpapers_bp143/ (or goo.gl/JN61J)

Why do we need a union? Can't we just work with sympathetic employers to improve our conditions?

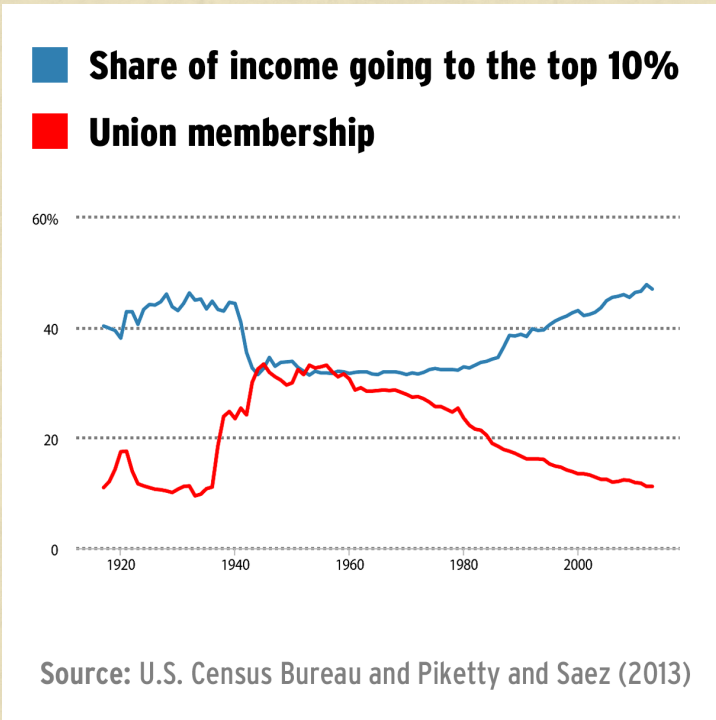
Under our current economic system, the interests of business owners and of employees are often in opposition: the system itself works to divide people among these two classes, and things that would benefit and empower the workers (redistribution of wealth, shorter working hours, strong health and safety regulations, collective ownership of businesses, etc.) hurt the owners, while things that benefit and empower the owners (deregulation, cheaper wages, automation) end up hurting the workers.

The balance of power between employers and employees is generally tipped in favour of employers, who have the power to hire or fire workers, and are therefore in a position to decide if employees can pay rent, buy food, pay the bills, and anything else necessary for their survival. It's the

Here are some things that unions have fought for and won in the past:

- Health care insurance
- Ending unpaid overtime
- Protection from mass layoffs
- Anti-harassment policies
- Closing the wage gap
- Paid sick leave
- Paid parental leave
- Pensions
- Week-ends

employers who get to decide how a business is run, and who pocket any of the profits that are created by the labor of their employees. The function of a union is to change this fundamentally unequal relationship, and to empower workers to negotiate with employers on a stronger, collective basis.



Again: what makes this possible is that in the end, it's the *workers who make the products that the company sells*, and who create the bosses' profits. This is the source of our power when we get together and organize.

READERS SPEAK OUT!

We've been receiving a lot of mail lately from readers with questions about unionization. We've decided to gather some of the most interesting ones and answer them here for you, dear reader. -ed.

"The bosses only want what's best for you. Our door is always open if you have any problems, you can talk to us directly instead of through a third party."

-Trippin' Hawk, Pasadena, CA

Unions are not a "third party," but rather an organization created by and for workers to advance their interests. Even the nicest, most well-intentioned bosses still have interests that are fundamentally at odds with those of their workers. **Every dollar that goes to your wage is a dollar that doesn't go to company profits**, and there's really no way around that. Try talking openly with other employees or prospective hires about how much you're each getting paid, and see how your "well-intentioned" bosses respond to that! Employers often emphasize an open-door policy to make sure that they're the first to hear about any problems; that way they maintain control over the situation and can make sure that employees don't try to take matters into their own hands. Employees are also at a disadvantage when negotiating with bosses one-on-one, and can be intimidated or pitted against each other.

"Unions are good in other industries, but the game industry is exceptional."

- *"Dreamy" De Gruttola, Paris, France*

Every boss in every industry will try to argue that they're the exception to the rule. But while working conditions and the type of work that's done may vary, all workers need representation. Without the collective power of a union to back them up, workers have no recourse and are at the mercy of their employers, who can fire, abuse, or exploit them with relative impunity. The reason many of these horror stories never see the light of day is because workers are afraid of being blacklisted from the industry, and as long as there are no unions, these kinds of dynamics will continue to be reproduced.

"Unions will just force workers to be put into rigid predefined roles, and will ruin the flexibility of the industry."

- *Reggie "Year of" Weege, Redmond, WA*

A union is nothing without the workers that make it up, so anything that hurts the workers will also hurt the union. There is no reason for a union to push for something that actively makes life harder for most of its members. If, on the other hand, "flexibility" is just a code word for a lack of stable jobs or for mass layoffs at the end of every project, then changing that would actually be a good thing for the workers. Given that freelancers tend to deal with such precarious conditions, and that the average full-time employee

has worked for at least two different game companies in the last 5 years (only slightly less than freelancers), maybe we could all do with a bit less flexibility.⁴

“Unions are just businesses trying to take your money.”

- *“Cash” Hirai, Tokyo, Japan*

While businesses are created for the purpose of making a profit for the business owners, unions are created by workers to improve their conditions. Unlike businesses, unions are collectively controlled by workers, who generally play a major role in decision-making. While more established unions sometimes develop a leadership that is disconnected from the membership base and can be swayed by the business owners to side against workers, workers always have the option to resist these efforts to co-opt the union. Instead of using these examples to dismiss unions altogether, we should learn from the successes and failures of past efforts, and build on the work that has already been done.

“Unions will destroy our “positive” company culture by sowing conflict.”

- *« Guillemet, frère », Rennes, France*

Pretending that we’re all just one big happy family is just another way for bosses to continue exerting control over their employees. Whether they want to admit it or not, that conflict is already there. The bosses would just prefer that it stay hidden. Bringing issues like exploitation out into the

⁴ http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.igda.org/resource/resmgr/2017_DSS_!!IGDA_DSS_2017_SummaryReport.pdf

open, and actively trying to address them is better than simply allowing abuses to continue unchecked. If bosses really want to avoid conflict, then they should be more than happy to meet the demands of their employees for a better, healthier, more sustainable work environment.

“Business owners do work too! The worker / boss divide is so outdated — we’re all independent business partners now.”

- *“Tai Chi Tesla” Blow, Berkeley, CA*

While it’s true that small business owners often work alongside their employees, *all the benefits of that labor flow to the owners first*, and the owners have the power when deciding how to distribute the profits. Even if the business isn’t making much (or any) profit, the owner’s role is still to ensure that you and your co-workers are exploited for the benefit of someone else — whether that’s the landlord, the publisher, or the owner of a platform like Steam. **Starting a business is a privilege** — and it’s one that’s not available to most workers, who lack the financial means, social connections, or other resources necessary to found a company. By becoming a company owner and refusing to share ownership over that company with the other workers in it, the boss is effectively cementing the divide between those with more, and those with less. If business owners really think the worker/boss divide is outdated, they can turn their business into a worker cooperative, where ownership and control over the company is shared equally among workers.

What are some concrete steps I can take towards unionizing?

If you work in the game industry, **the first step is to talk with fellow workers outside of your employer's supervision**, starting with the people you trust. Talk to them about your working conditions, ask them what their concerns are, and if they aren't already informed, share info about unions (*like this mag! -ed.*) You should also contact existing local unions to seek their help and advice on how to unionize your workplace. Make sure to keep discussions about the possibility of unionizing away from the ears of employers, even if you think they're sympathetic to your cause!

Only go public when you're confident you have the backing of the majority of your workforce *and* you have a concrete plan that everyone has agreed upon. People are routinely fired for trying to unionize, so make sure to protect your privacy, and the privacy of your fellow workers. In most countries a worker's right to unionize is protected under law, so make sure to inform yourself on what your rights are (local unions can help with this). Remember that you're not in this fight alone! **Together we can win better working conditions for everyone.**

Further Reading

“You Can Sleep Here All Night” by Ian Williams, sharing various stories about labor issues in the game industry

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/11/video-game-industry/>

“Now You’re Playing With Power” by Ian Williams, an intro to what unions are and what they could do for the game industry

<https://www.giantbomb.com/articles/guest-column-now-youre-working-with-power/1100-5422/>

Anonymous info about backlash from a game industry worker who tried to start a union:

<https://pastebin.com/jQ6WSBgp>

“The Video Game Industry is Afraid of Unions” by Emanuel Maiberg, on the SAG-AFTRA strike

https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/nz9e58/walk-the-line

Gameqol, a website that measures quality of life in the games industry

<http://www.gameqol.org>

“The Videogame Industry’s Invisible Workforce” by David Wolinsky

Part 1: <https://medium.com/@davidwolinsky/the-videogame-industrys-invisible-workforce-part-1-6c860f24eebf>

Part 2: <https://medium.com/@davidwolinsky/the-videogame-industrys-invisible-workforce-part-2-8365ecd19940>

Developers’ pledge against crunch organized by Tanya

Short:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc2L-Gt1HOZN5G9dPS81qPxmY2f3TaqmBTMeVUvter50n5u_Lg/viewform?c=0&w=1

“Video Games are Destroying the People Who Make Them” by Jason Schreier

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/opinion/work-culture-video-games-crunch.html>

“The universe has been outsourced” by Michael Thomsen, about how the production of AAA games is increasingly taking place in East Asia, and how these contractors are not sweatshops. (These workers absolutely have to be included in the conversation! Outsourcing will be the number-one argument against better conditions in the west.)

<https://theoutline.com/post/3087/outsourcing-blockbuster-video-games-made-in-china-horizon-zero-dawn?zd=3&zi=qdhnto6j>

“Immaterial Labor” from *Games of Empire* by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter. This chapter is a quick history of games in relation to social movements and countercultures. The main thesis of the book is that videogames are a vantage point to understand the transformations of contemporary capitalism.

<http://mycours.es/playfultheory2018/files/2018/02/Games-of-the-Empire-Nick-Dyer-Witheford-and-Greig-De-Peuter.pdf>

Another excerpt from *Games of Empire*, documenting the legal actions taken by EA workers against crunch time in the mid 2000s

<http://mycours.es/playfultheory2018/files/2018/03/Crunch-time-from-Nick-Dyer-Witheford-and-Greig-De-Peuter-Games-of-the-empire.pdf>

Union-Busting Playbook: “Union busting attorneys train supervisors on what to say to persuade workers to vote down a union. The “script” doesn’t change much.”

<https://unionbustingplaybook.com/>

“What a Labor Union Is and How It Works” by Kim Kelly

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-a-labor-union-is-and-how-it-works>



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