

FREE

# GAME WORKERS

MARCH  
2019

unite

MORE  
CO-OP  
TACTICS

REAL LIFE RPG:  
LEARN  
ALL ABOUT  
THE CLASSES

TIPS FOR  
BEATING  
ALL THE  
BOSSSES

SPECIAL  
GDC  
ISSUE

HANDY NEW  
UNIONIZATION  
TRICKS

BONUS STRATEGY  
GUIDE INCLUDED!

Labour conditions and mass layoffs in the game industry have made the news for years, but despite outcries precious little has changed in that time — in fact, things seem to be getting worse. A year ago, we took matters into our own hands and started **Game Workers Unite** (GWU) to collectively fight for better conditions.

Are you tired of crunch?

Are you struggling to pay bills? Do you lack basic benefits like health care insurance or paid sick and parental leave?

Are you made to endure harassment at work? Do you suspect you're paid less than your coworkers because of your race or gender?

As game workers, we recognize that **these widespread issues will persist as long as we have to depend on management to address them**. It is only through workers of the game industry organizing **on our own terms and in order to defend our collective interest as workers** that any progress will be possible.

GWU is comprised exclusively of workers — no bosses! — and has chapters across the globe. We are building a movement of pro-union solidarity and helping game workers organize for better conditions at their workplace wherever they may be.

The game industry is making record profits, yet very little of that is flowing into the hands of the people who *actually create the games*. Together, we have the power to change this.

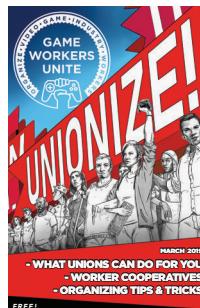
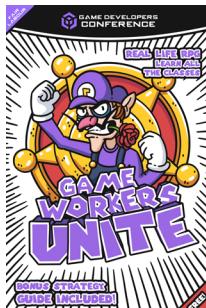
## Table of Contents

What Can Unions Do to Help?	6
Versus Mode: Owners vs. Workers	16
How Gamer Rage is Harnessed to Discipline Workers	22
Boss Fight Tips & Tricks	30
Workers' Co-ops: A New Way of Creating Commercial Games	41
Strategy Guide: How to Start Organizing your Workplace	46

## UnionFAQs

What's a Game Worker?	5
A History of Unrest	14
Is Profit-Sharing What We Want?	21
What Are Strikes?	29
Below the (Grass)root	33
Get Indie?	38
Craft Unions, Industrial Unions... What's the Difference?	44
Not in the industry?	49

## Variant Covers: Collect Them All!



Share them with your coworkers!

# FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITORS



**Dear Reader...**

Welcome back to another thrilling issue of the **Game Workers Unite magazine**. By the time this mag, hot off the presses, reaches your shaking, excited hands, GWU will be celebrating its **first anniversary**. We thought we'd take a moment to reflect on the tidings of the past year, both good and ill.

**Let's start with the ill.** Telltale, Capcom Vancouver, Visceral, Big Fish, Disney Canada, Six Foot, Trion Worlds, Carbine, Motiga, Boss Key, Runic, Bartlet Jones, Wargaming Seattle, Gazillion, Eugen, Firemonkeys, ArenaNet and NCSoft, GOG, Techland, NetEase, Valve, and Activision Blizzard — and forgive us if we've forgotten anyone, it's been a little hard to keep count — all suffered mass layoffs or were shuttered outright.

You might not recognize all these names, but if you've been in the industry for a while there's a good chance you know someone who's been affected. Between September and October 2018 alone, **at least 800 game workers** lost their jobs. February 2019's toll stands at **at least 1000 lost jobs**. With the swift drop of an axe, the Firemonkeys layoffs singlehandedly shrank the Australian games industry workforce by 5% — just months after they extended an invitation to former Capcom and Telltale employees on Twitter noting they were hiring<sup>1</sup>. All in all, **thousands of industry jobs have been lost over the past year**.

Why are all these layoffs happening, you ask? Why, record-breaking revenues, of course! In a press release to investors the day layoffs started at Activision, CEO Bobby Kotick wrote: “While our financial results for 2018 were the **best in our history**, we didn't realize our full potential.”<sup>2</sup> (*Full potential?*

Seriously? He sounds like a parent disowning their child for getting perfect grades and an inbox full of scholarship offers. We'd also be remiss to fail to note that Kotick himself is one of the highest-paid CEOs — not just in the games industry, not just in tech, not just in America, but everywhere, of all time.) Elsewhere, Telltale's fall from massive critical and commercial success, widely attributed to routine mismanagement and nearsighted pursuit of profit on the part of its shareholders, is by now well-documented<sup>3</sup>.

It's been a rough, scary year for those of us working in the industry, and signs don't point to things getting better anytime soon. **But we're starting to fight back.**

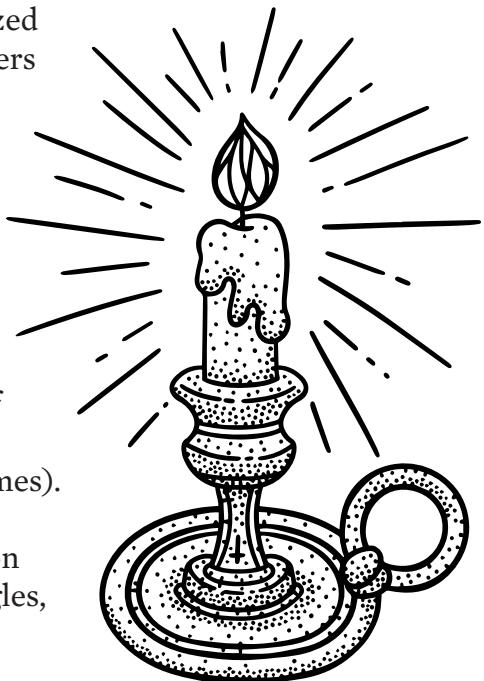
In that same year of tumult, **over 25 local chapters of Game Workers Unite** were founded around the world. Earlier this year, **GWU UK formed an official trade union** in partnership with the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB), joining the Syndicat des Travailleuse·eur·s du Jeu Vidéo (STJV) in France and the Game Makers of Finland as one of the first official unions representing game workers. GWU members have made zines, pamphlets, and other literature, and we've organized or taken part in dozens of panels, presentations, workshops, and public events. We've spoken to press, podcasters, and YouTubers, and helped shine a light on working conditions in the industry and the urgent need for unionization.

But more than all that, **we've been engaging in on-the-ground organizing**. We've been forming workplace committees and building collective power to win concrete demands. There's a lot of underground work happening that you won't hear about because of the risks for the workers involved, but we've already helped win gratifying **legal victories against some of the industry's most powerful bosses** and **reclaim stolen wages**. This is arguably the most critical work we've been doing. Organizing is a long haul, and doing it in the open would only put workers' jobs and well-

being on the line. But **a sea change is happening**, even if you can't feel the waves from the shore.

Crucially, **we're not alone**. The international labour movement is picking up steam: in India, **between 150 and 200 million workers** joined a general strike against the Modi government's anti-labour policies. (For context, a strike of comparable size in Europe would include the **entire combined labour force of the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal**.) The 2018 US prison strike, where inmates demanded an end to prison slavery, dehumanizing conditions, and racial discrimination, saw participation in at least 17 states and solidarity actions across North America and around the globe.

Even in the tech sector (which historically has not been fertile ground for labour organizing) significant movements and actions are taking place. At Google, employees banded together to protest military AI contracts and organized a walkout against sexual harassment and a culture hostile to marginalized people<sup>4</sup>. At Microsoft, workers are organizing against the use of their products for border policing and the surveillance of journalists and activists<sup>5</sup> and against the militarization of consumer technology like the Hololens<sup>6</sup> (which also concerns us, as many of these technologies are also developed for or used in games). Groups like Tech Workers Coalition are gaining traction as they support these struggles, and others, across their industry.



Meanwhile, an international wave of strikes in education, healthcare, hospitality, transportation, and many other industries showcased the scale and scope of workers' dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Together, we have the capacity to build a better, fairer, and more sustainable future for workers all around the globe. If you're a worker in games, abuses like **mass layoffs**, **crunch**, and **harassment** might seem like unavoidable realities of the industry. **But they don't have to be.** Join us.



## What's a Game Worker?

by Tetramino\_MindGame

You may notice us using terms like “employee” and “worker” in this zine when we’re not speaking about a specific trade (like “programmer” or “artist”). Why not just “game dev”? Isn’t that simpler?

When we talk about game workers, we’re referring to **anyone involved with the production of a game**. Programmers, artists, designers, musicians? Yep. Voice and mocap actors, audio engineers? Definitely. Community managers? Of course. But we’re also talking about workers whom players may not instantly associate with production. What about factory workers who manufacture the consoles that games are played on? And workers mining the coltan used in those consoles? How about the people working to prepare food at the cafeteria on the company campus? Even if it may be less obvious, these workers are all **essential to the production of games**. They’re game workers too.

If you’re in the industry but currently unemployed, **you’re also a game worker**. The same goes for students and interns. In an industry where so much labour is erased or goes unrecognized, it’s important that we stick together and resist bosses’ efforts to divide and conquer.

# WHAT CAN UNIONS DO TO HELP?

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** to balance out the power held by bosses and shareholders.

As workers, all of us benefit from past unionizing efforts. Here are some things unions have fought for and won in the past:

Safety regulations • Health care insurance • Ending unpaid overtime • Unemployment insurance • Protection from mass layoffs and unfair firings • Anti-harassment policies • Closing the wage gap • Paid sick leave • Paid parental leave • Annual leave • Pensions • Week-ends • Meal breaks • Abolishing child labour

In the sections that follow we'll break down some of the specific ways that unions can help workers in the game industry.

## Layoffs

Most game work is contract or “project”-based, meaning that many game workers may find themselves out of a job when projects (even very successful ones) are launched. This is already an unhealthy way to work, but on top of that sometimes workers are laid off without any warning whatsoever.

If you've never participated in or been represented by a union, you might be wondering how it can help with something like mass layoffs; cuts are cuts, right? Well — not quite. One of the most important things a union can achieve for a workplace

or industry is a **collective agreement** (sometimes called a collective bargaining agreement, CBA, or collective labour agreement; the term varies by country). A collective agreement is not the only way of organizing or making demands — but it's a common and battle-tested one, and most collective agreements include some form of protection from layoffs by employers:

Some CBAs don't allow layoffs **even when the employer claims that it doesn't have enough money to pay everyone on payroll...** Similarly, many CBAs bar employers from laying off union workers and subcontracting out their jobs.

Many CBAs require employers to “recall” or rehire laid-off workers once the need for the layoff subsides (for example, when work picks up again).<sup>7</sup>

In an industry that often experiences cycles of hirings and layoffs as projects ramp up to full production, go gold, get cancelled, or change in scope, it's pretty obvious that even a weaker “right to recall” could still help buy workers extra stability and peace of mind.

Employers often treat the skilled labour force of game workers in a given region as a “talent pool” that they can sponge people from when they need them, and wring people back into when they're no longer needed. But we know that **precarity doesn't have to be a condition of working in the industry.**



# Crunch

In those days, Miyamoto would come to us at 11 PM, after he finished all of his board-member work, and say, “**It’s Mario time.**” At that point, we’d start a planning meeting that would run until 2 AM.

— Former Nintendo planner Motoi Okamoto  
on the development of Mario 64 DS<sup>8</sup>

Last October, with the release of Red Dead Redemption 2 imminent, Rockstar Games co-founder and boss Dan Houser proudly declared to New York Magazine that workers **were regularly putting in 100-hour work weeks getting the game ready to ship.** Hang on — if you sleep around 8 hours a night there’s only 112 hours in a week! Factor in transit (presuming people weren’t sleeping under their desks, which is not a given), time to eat, etc., and that works out to Rockstar labourers spending almost every waking moment at their job.

Houser later retracted the statement, saying only the writing team was working those hours, and only during a period of a few weeks. But that only prompted backlash from current and former workers: some called out the obvious falsehood of the retraction and told stories of the immense pressure placed on them (one former worker noted “during the *GTA IV* era, it was like working with a gun to your head, 7 days a week”<sup>9</sup>) while others were just unhappy to have their backbreaking labour downplayed and denied by a studio head.

Houser and others seem to think that crunch is a sign of dedication and passion and speaks to the quality of their game. **But crunch is abusive.** It can go on for months — even years — and it has very real long-term mental and physical health

impacts for developers. In 2015, *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* creative director Clint Hocking recalled the effects prolonged crunch had on his health during development of that game a decade prior:

[My friend] had spent a week living in my house. I had curtailed my work week down from 70-80 hours to a normal 40 in order to spend time with him. We had eaten great meals, gone to great bars, seen movies, played games, and talked about our careers and the industry and our pasts and our futures, and all of it was simply fucking gone. I could not remember any of it.

To be clear — I do not mean I didn't remember what we did or what we talked about. I mean that I literally had no memory of the events. To me it was like it never happened. It was like he never visited. There was just an empty space in my brain that had been overwritten by the stress and anxiety of *Splinter Cell*. ***Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory gave me brain damage.***<sup>10</sup>

Maybe Hocking got off easy. In 2016, a game developer at South Korean company Netmarble was acknowledged to have “died from a work-related cause” after putting in months of intense overtime<sup>11</sup>.

Many in the game industry try to paint crunch as unavoidable, but we believe it is ultimately a story of poor planning and unreachable deadlines — and more importantly, of **putting profits above the human beings whose labour makes games**. Concretely, unions can discourage crunch by **ensuring that employees are paid for overtime, by increasing overtime rates, and by putting a hard limit on how many hours of overtime can be required in a given day or week**. This helps those already in the industry, but it also makes it more likely that employers will hire more people instead of cheating prospective workers out of a job by forcing too much work on existing employees.

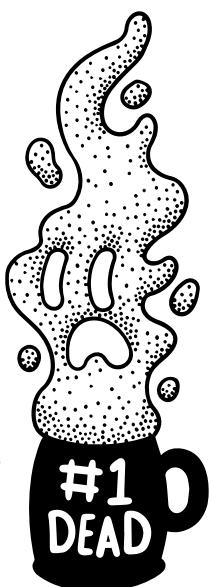
When in Bioware they said they had a three-month crunch, we laughed. During the Witcher 3, a lot of people crunched for over a year — some of them for three years.

Witcher 3 development kept getting worse by the month. The morale got very low and everyone ended up complaining during crunch supper. Some of us were still looking forward to being moved to Cyberpunk and having a fresh start with a “new” project. When we finally started switching to Cyberpunk... things got even wilder, even more chaotic. At that time, almost everybody in my team wanted to leave.

— CD Projekt Red developer on conditions at the studio<sup>12</sup>

## Harassment

Harassment has been a well-known problem in the game industry for years now, but so far **bosses have done little to actually address the issue** apart from releasing boilerplate statements about how the company “condemns harassment.” When harassment happens inside the workplace, workers often have nowhere to turn. HR departments are supposed to be the first port of call, but too often they’re more concerned with protecting the company’s public image than they are with protecting the employees.



Unions can help by providing workers with a place they can go to make sure their concerns are heard, and unlike HR, they are directly answerable to the workers they represent. While an individual worker could be ignored or even fired for talking about their experiences with harassment (especially if the harasser is in a position of power within the company), they are much more likely to be taken seriously when they have the **backing of other employees**. Unions can also push for systemic changes, such as the introduction of anti-harassment policies or training programs, that help prevent harassment from happening in the first place.

Harassment is more likely to happen in situations where employers or managers have unilateral power to make or break an employee's career, and therefore **anything that tips the balance of power in favour of employees also helps reduce harassment**. Since harassment is often tied to discrimination and a lack of diversity in the workplace, measures that increase diversity such as fairer hiring practices, wage equity, or more comprehensive health benefits, can also be a way to curb harassment.<sup>13</sup>

Marginalized workers, who are more likely to be the targets of harassment, are **already organizing** in many workplaces through whisper networks and informal support groups. These efforts often form the foundations for wider organizing campaigns, and help build solidarity, trust, and mutual respect between workers. While businesses push workers to compete with one another for jobs or raises, creating a hostile and toxic work culture, the process of unionizing encourages workers to come together to solve their problems collectively. **Solidarity is key to building a successful union campaign**, and once workers realize this, they are more likely to change views and behaviours that ultimately just serve to divide and disempower us.

# Creative Control

You might believe your employers' motivation is to create great games, and in some cases that may be true. But at the end of the day they're here to make money, and that has a direct influence on creative decisions. Executives don't necessarily care that the development team is aiming to make, say, a great single-player game, but they *do* care about how Battle Royale games are outselling everything else right now and how microtransactions are a major driver of revenue for large publishers. So the order comes from above to add those things to the project, even if they are creatively incompatible.

The pursuit of profit is what drives bosses to prioritize one project over another, to think about ad placement, to change design based on market research, and make other kinds of creative compromises. This is also what leads companies to cancel more experimental projects in favour of the “safe bet,” or force workers to meet unrealistic deadlines in order to release before the holiday season.

If you work in the industry, **how often have you had to implement or cut features following a decision by an executive**, which ended up being detrimental to the quality of the game? **Don't you wish you'd had the power to negotiate in that kind of situation?** Don't you wish you'd at least been asked for your input, instead of having to work silently in a direction only to have to start again from scratch a month later because higher-ups decided a new trend needed to be worked into the project somehow?

Workers in the game industry are passionate about what they do — that's why companies get away with exploiting them! — so it is particularly hurtful when they're forced to create things that they don't believe in. Whether workers ultimately agree with management's decisions or not, at least **in a unionized workplace, their opinion gets to be voiced and heard.**

A strong unionized workforce or a worker co-op doesn't just help improve conditions in the workplace! It also allows the people who *actually make the games* to exercise more creative control and put their efforts towards something they believe in.

## Crediting Issues

In games, credits are one of the most important ways your efforts as a worker get noticed. If you're new to the games industry, you might believe that getting credited for your work on a game is a straightforward process. But that's not always the case. Rockstar, for example, is known for holding credits over workers' heads as a reward for finishing work on a game. As journalist Richard Moss wrote last year<sup>14</sup>:

For studios, crediting can be a tool for leverage ...  
[Rockstar] has long maintained a policy of not crediting people who worked on a game unless they were present when it shipped, to encourage the team "to get to the finish line."

This form of "encouragement" is not just manipulative, it hurts workers' ability to find future employment.

Workers in other industries (such as film) have fought for and won the right to proper crediting through unions.<sup>15</sup> Unions can do the same for the games industry.

## Better Pay

Here's an easy one: **unionized workers have higher wages on average than workers who are not unionized** — often between **15 to 25%** more. With the leverage of an organized workforce, collective bargaining is a very effective way to make sure you're paid what you're worth. But **unions also 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 more** than similar workers in less unionized industries.<sup>16</sup>

**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**. On top of improving general working conditions for these folks, it also turns out solidarity is a great way to cut down the gendered pay gap.<sup>17</sup>

## A History of Unrest

by MichelTheHedgehog

It's easy to forget that labour issues have been central to the business of making games from the very beginning. Easter eggs, now a widely-known phenomenon in games, initially emerged from issues around crediting and disputes between workers and management at game companies.

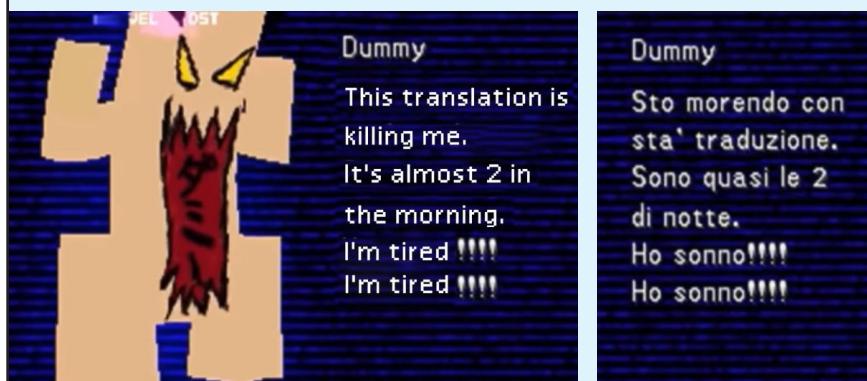
Warren Robinett was developing Adventure at Atari in the late 70s. At that time, it was typical for studios to suppress any attribution for the games they released to prevent competitors from poaching their talent (and to make it harder for workers to establish a provable portfolio of work to get hired elsewhere or develop a reputation of auteurship). In protest, Robinett introduced an additional room to the game, carefully hiding it behind a convoluted series of tasks so that it wouldn't be discovered until after release, that would display the words "Created by Warren Robinett."

When the Easter egg was discovered by Atari, Robinett had already left the company, but that didn't stop them from devoting development resources to uncovering the offending code. However, Brad Stewart, the Atari employee who tracked down the

code in question, said that if he were to fix it, he'd just change the message in the game to say "Fixed by Brad Stewart" instead. Eventually, Atari management decided that Easter eggs should be permitted, and even encouraged developers to add them as a way to increase playtime and give players more value – but they generally limited them to developers' initials rather than full names.<sup>18</sup>



Developers have never really stopped hiding messages in games as protest or in hidden resistance. In the Italian translation of Final Fantasy VIII, When the "Scan" spell is cast on a placeholder debug enemy, a message is shown written by the translator themselves: "This translation is killing me. It's almost 2 in the morning. I'm tired!!!! I'm tired!!!!"<sup>19</sup>



*Hidden message left in Final Fantasy VIII by an overworked translator.*

# VERSUS MODE: OWNERS VS. WORKERS

The recent round of layoffs at Activision-Blizzard and elsewhere have made it all too clear that **game industry bosses are prioritizing short-term profit over the health and livelihoods of workers**. CEOs like Bobby Kotick are rewarded for treating workers as disposable, even when those same workers help to generate record revenue for the company. No matter how well the company is doing, shareholders and executives never seem to be satisfied, and are constantly searching for new ways to cut costs and boost profits, often at the expense of workers. Why does this keep happening? To better understand it, we need to look past the PR and into how the ownership of these companies is structured, where the profits go, and where decision-making power actually lies.

**Any business is above all made up of its workers:** they are the ones who are actually producing what the business sells, and whose labour is the source of its profits. But who do these profits go to? Not to them, but rather to those who happen to own the company: the shareholders. Large publicly-traded corporations can have millions of shareholders, and while some companies can be owned by a single business owner, even tiny startups typically have outside investors as shareholders beyond the original founders.

To shareholders, all that the business represents is a source of profit, either through the business itself increasing in value, or through money dividends. **Shareholders might not have any real connection to the company** or even care about what it does, let alone care about the welfare of its workers. They have money, and they buy shares because they want this money

to grow into more money, without doing any work for it. (Creating this additional value does take work, but that work is done by workers like you and me, not by them.)

Jorgensen says the shuttering [of Visceral] was **purely a business decision**... “You’ve got to cut the bridge when you realize you can’t really make a lot of money on something, so that’s the decision we made.”

— Gamasutra speaking to EA CFO Blake Jorgensen on the reasons for Visceral Studios’ closure<sup>20</sup>

The main way shareholders exercise control over corporations is through elections of the board of directors. Shareholders leverage the amount of voting shares they have to influence board elections, making the board directly accountable to them. Executive officers like the CEO are appointed by the board of directors, directly linking management, the board, and shareholders. Management ultimately only answers to the board of directors, and the board of directors answers to shareholders and shareholders only. **They have no accountability to the workers.**

Legislation varies, but CEOs have “fiduciary duty” to the shareholders, which effectively means that they are **legally required** to maximize profits. They can even be sued for putting ethical concerns above the duty of increasing value for shareholders! Not that they need the extra motivation: upper management’s loyalty to shareholders is usually ensured by granting them shares as compensation, as well as large bonuses tied to company profits.

Shareholders always have the option to sell their shares and buy into a different company, so if a business doesn’t perform well enough in terms of profits in the short-term, the value of

the shares decreases. The consequence is that businesses are not merely driven to make a profit, but to make the **highest possible profit** in the short-term, over anything else. And one of the main ways of increasing profits is to minimize expenses such as salaries to workers, which is why the mass layoffs keep recurring. Studios can hire a bunch of game developers as work ramps up on a large project, make them crunch unreasonable hours to get it released as fast as possible, then lay off most of them after sales start coming in to ensure that salary expenses are minimized and profits kept as high as possible. **This isn't "bad management." It's the system working as designed.** Executives make decisions for the benefit of the owners at the expense of the rest of us.

This is why we also typically see share value increase after every round of layoffs, as happened recently with Activision Blizzard: when mass layoffs get announced, management is sending a message to shareholders that they are willing to



do what it takes to ensure ever-increasing profits **no matter what**, and this makes company shares more attractive on the market. Shareholders are thrilled! They get richer, and the rest of us get poorer. That's why the decision is made in the first place, not out of any real necessity, despite how they try to spin it to the workers.

---

It's not a question of "good bosses" vs "bad bosses." **Workers and owners have fundamentally different interests.** Most of the things that benefit workers – higher wages, shorter working hours, better benefits, job security, a safer work environment – also cut into company profits. In short, **every dollar that goes to your wage is a dollar that doesn't go to the owners.** In order to maximize profit, many bosses will try and squeeze as much labour as possible out of their workforce while keeping wages as low as possible. Long periods of unpaid overtime are common in the game industry in part

## **Every dollar that goes to your wage is a dollar that doesn't go to the owners.**

because bosses have (so far) been able to get away with it, despite laws that make unpaid overtime illegal in many countries.

Often bosses justify this treatment by arguing that anyone who complains just isn't "passionate" enough. But selective appeals to passion are just another strategy to wring more out of workers who just want to be able to make games sustainably and hone their craft without burning out. Unlike workers, **owners and bosses don't actually care about making the best game possible.** Their first priority is to make money – and right now they're the ones calling the shots, without any accountability to the people *actually making the game.*

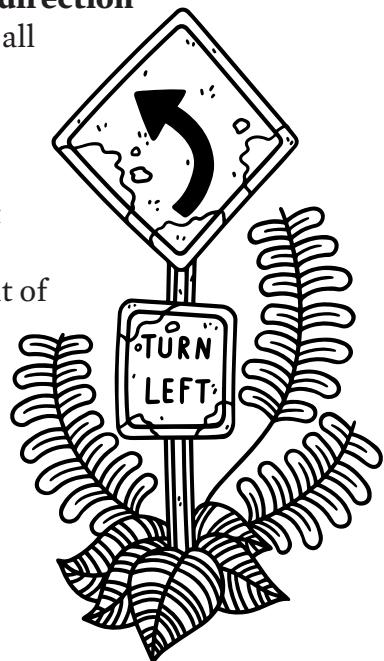
But it doesn't have to be this way! Workers have the potential power to change this dynamic and to force the businesses they



work for to take their best interests into consideration too. This is because in every industry, every business, it's always their labour that is the source of

all the owners' profits. **When it comes down to it, it's owners who need the workers, not the other way around.** Isolated from each other, workers are completely vulnerable to the whims of management, as they are devalued and reduced to having to beg for better conditions — but united and organized, workers can build the leverage to actually negotiate with management from a position of power. **Unionizing is the only way to tip the balance in the other direction** and create a better game industry for all workers!

Beyond this, **we can also imagine an entirely different way of structuring the industry** — one that would not fundamentally rely on the exploitation of workers for the benefit of shareholders. This is what workers' cooperatives aim to do: they are businesses with no external shareholders that are entirely and collectively owned by all the workers who work there themselves, allowing them to earn the full benefit of their labour. (Check the section on worker co-ops later in the zine!)



by SuperSaccoVanzettiBros

Many studios offer contracts to their employees that include some sort of “profit-sharing” scheme. This sounds nice at first glance: why wouldn’t you want a share of the profits if the game you’re working on does extremely well? The issue is that **these profit-sharing deals are fundamentally a way of offloading company financial risk from the owners to the workers.**

Unlike shareholders, workers who sign into profit-sharing agreements are **not actually given any ownership over the company**, nor are they granted any power or influence in its decisionmaking process.

They’re promised a variable amount of money based on how much profit the company makes, but without any real control over it. There are countless stories in our industry of workers who agree to a lower salary than they would demand otherwise in exchange for a percentage of the sales because they truly believe in a project, and work hard on it for years – only for it to get cancelled without warning by an upper-management decision, leaving them with nothing to show for their labour.

By giving workers a promise of future profits instead of a better salary, owners are effectively transferring some of their own financial risk onto the workers themselves, while maintaining absolute and total control over the decisions of the company. Employees can be paid less while a game is in development, and if for whatever reason it doesn’t sell well (or management cancels it), then it’s their problem. **If workers are going to invest hours of unremunerated labour into a project because they believe in it, they should be given actual ownership and real decision-making power over it**, as in a workers’ cooperative. In any other situation, a higher guaranteed salary will almost always be a better deal for workers than a promised fraction of future profits.

# HOW GAMER RAGE IS HARNESSSED TO DISCIPLINE WORKERS

Sam [Dan's brother and Rockstar president] and I talk about this a lot, and it's that games are still magical. It's like they're made by elves... You turn on the screen and it's just this world that exists on TV. I think you gain something by not knowing how they're made.

— Rockstar Games co-founder Dan Houser on the development of Red Dead Redemption 2<sup>21</sup>

There is no real reason why workers and consumers should have different interests or be at odds with one another. It sounds absurd when you think about it: many workers take a great deal of pride and personal satisfaction from making games that players love to play, and without workers there would be no games for players to enjoy in the first place. Unfortunately, **many players don't know the conditions under which games are made** (in large part because bosses prevent workers from talking about it publicly!). They are also encouraged to see themselves as having a special relationship with a brand, a company, or a product, rather than with the real people making the games they play. This dynamic encourages consumers to blame workers when things go wrong, and benefits owners. Throwing workers under the bus directs negative attention away from the bosses, even when they're the ones responsible for making decisions that hurt

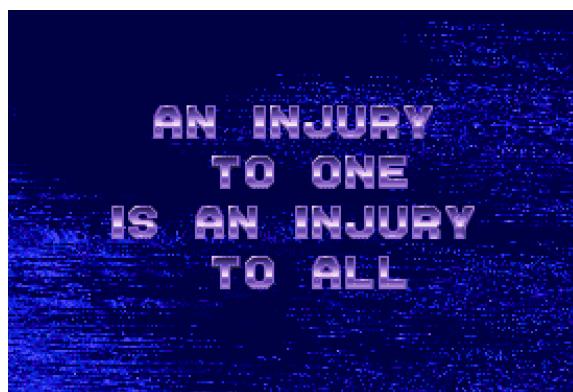
consumers. It can also serve as an intimidation tactic that can be used to discipline workers.

We're unfortunately all too familiar with the way a small but extremely vocal minority of consumers take entitlement to the next level in their relationship to developers. As more game workers speak up about working conditions in the industry, **we've also seen hate-driven harassment campaigns appearing in response**. Often this harassment specifically targets marginalized workers who are simply trying to participate in the creative direction of the games they build and speak to their own struggles, backgrounds, and experiences. Individual workers become singled out and targeted by an online mob of entitled consumers who don't want to see the game industry become more welcoming to new voices and who scapegoat them for everything they believe is wrong with games.

Sadly, they often succeed in goading bosses into punishing or even firing these workers: two well-known examples

are last year's firing of Jessica Price and Peter Fries from ArenaNet<sup>22</sup> and the dismissal of Alison Rapp from Nintendo in 2016<sup>23</sup>. Look a little closer and you'll discover these aren't isolated cases: in private conversation, in whisper networks, **incidents like these are all too common**.

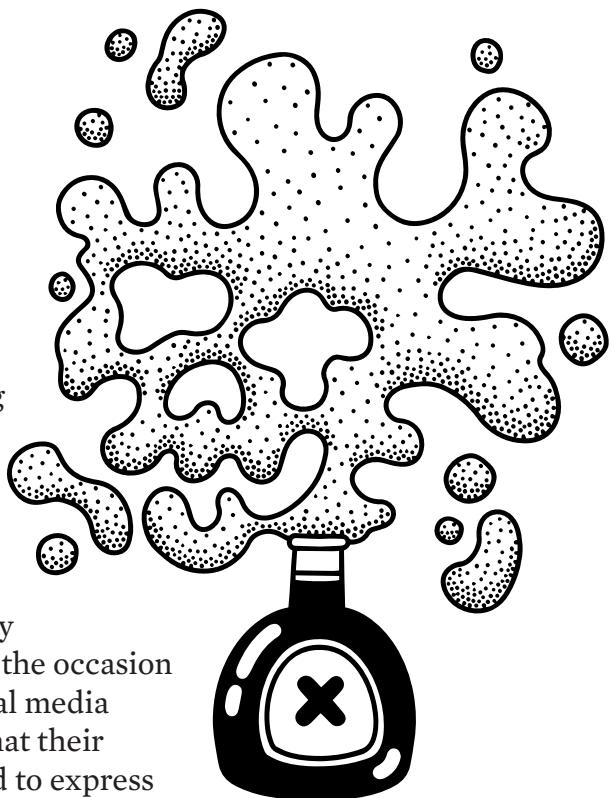
Giving in to demands from angry, reactionary gamers is a convenient excuse for bosses to get rid of "troublesome" workers — like, say, someone speaking out about sexism and



racism in their workplace. **Many game industry bosses see their priorities as being more in line with the harassers than with the people who work for them.** (THQ Nordic recently reminded us of this by choosing to do a marketing Q&A on 8chan, a website known for harboring Nazis, enabling the spread of child porn, and playing a leading role in massive hate campaigns targeted against marginalized game workers.)

In these situations, management will often pretend to have the best interests of workers in mind even as they systematically yield to the slightest strain and validate gamer entitlement. **This can lead to bosses implementing new ways of controlling, suppressing, and disciplining their workers, all under the guise of “protecting them” from such harassment.** (Protecting

from what? Getting fired for standing up to harassment? Some protection racket that is!) After ArenaNet president Mike O'Brien fired developers Price and Fries at the demand of an online mob — for committing the egregious offence of pushing back against the misogyny women game designers face in the industry — many employers jumped on the occasion to introduce new social media policies restricting what their employees are allowed to express online outside of working hours.



These policies effectively make workers responsible for being a 24/7 brand ambassador on top of their regular job — and for no additional compensation, to boot. (What a bargain!)

In her article from October on the topic, “*Worse than Scabs: Gamer Rage as Anti-Union Violence*”<sup>24</sup>, Lana Polansky writes:

**“As long as gamers direct their grievances at individual workers**, videogame companies understand that they can use that dynamic **to shield themselves from community criticism** while **using it as leverage** in internal conflicts with employees. This has, for a long time, represented a win-win for companies, ensuring not just the PR victory with their fans, but also a deeply suppressed and compliant workforce, and an opaque shroud over the industry’s internal workings. That shroud, however, seems to be starting to clear.”

This tactic was deployed in 2016 when studio owners at Activision, EA, Disney, Warner Bros, Take-Two, and others launched a website<sup>25</sup> and video that explicitly targeted a gamer audience and demonized the SAG-AFTRA voice actors’ union. At the time, union members were demanding, among other things, better safety standards for voice strain and risks associated with stunt coordination (for motion capture), an improved structure for bonus payments, better transparency, and employment mobility. **In a blatant effort to direct fan rage at the workers**, bosses argued that these demands would somehow lead to worse games for consumers.

Executives ultimately answer to shareholders and investors, and thus to the profit motive. They’ll give in to the cry of a vocal, angry minority of perceived fans *even if the consequence in the long-term is a worse game*. We can’t rely on them to

# GAME WORKERS

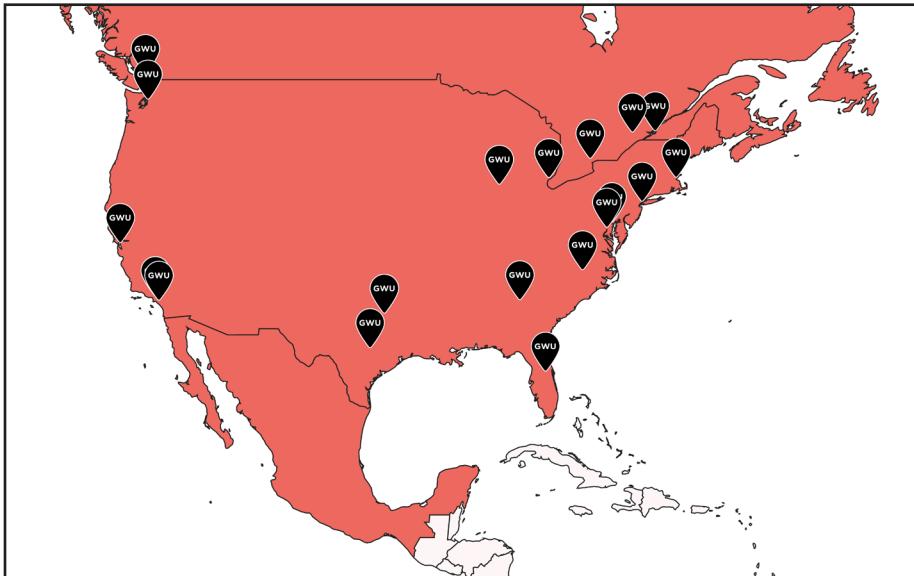
## CHAPTERS AND MEMBERS AROUND THE WORLD



CHAPTER LOCATION



MEMBER LOCATION



# KERS UNITE

## UND THE WORLD, MARCH 2019



have our backs on this front: **we need to have each other's.** The best way to resist harassment — and the summary, mob-driven firings that so often seem to follow — is by organizing. And if gamers really want to see better games, **they should focus their attention on the bosses and the conditions employees are forced to work under**, not on individual vulnerable employees that are easily scapegoated. But for this to mean anything, **the conversation also needs to go beyond a simplistic call to “vote with your dollars”** and to buy more from the “good companies” and less from the bad ones. Player support for unionization will go much farther towards crafting a better industry.



The topic of striking will necessarily come up whenever unions are being discussed. The thing is, nobody really wants a strike to happen. Workers generally just want to be able to do their job in good conditions, while being paid fairly and in dignity. Strikes can be harrowing affairs for everyone involved.

But in a way, it's the hypothetical possibility of calling a strike that forms the basis of our power when we unionize. It's because our labour is the source of all profits that the idea of workers withdrawing that labour is so threatening to bosses. **It's our biggest bargaining chip.**

Ideally, strikes would never happen, and reason would always prevail in negotiations with bosses. When strikes do happen, it's because those negotiations already failed, and an acceptable agreement couldn't be reached between management and the union.

Everybody wants to avoid that and find a better solution, but the important thing to remember is that without the potential to call a strike as a last-resort measure, workers would have no real leverage with bosses, and bosses would have no reason to take them seriously.



# BOSS FIGHT TIPS & TRICKS

## Union-busting tactics to look out for

As union talk continues to spread throughout the game industry, bosses who feel threatened are turning to an arsenal of tactics to break up organizing and discourage and demoralize workers. **Luckily for us, their toolbox is rather limited:** throughout every industry and every era, we keep seeing the exact same dirty tricks being reused by bosses over and over again. This means that **by learning to recognize them and warning our fellow workers about them, we can be ready and prepared when they inevitably get pulled out** and render them ineffective. Here's a few classics:

### The “Captive Audience” Meeting

If management ever catches wind that there's organizing (or even just vague union talk) happening at the workplace, their first response will usually be to call a “captive audience” meeting. All employees will be required to attend, and the meeting will be a one-way affair where management goes over standard union-busting talking points in **an effort to sow fear, suspicion, and distrust.** The goal is to reach any workers who are uneducated about unions before their organizing co-workers do, and feed them negative preconceptions on the topic. You're likely to see many of the other union-busting moves in this list being deployed at those meetings, and the best way to counter them is for you and your co-workers to be prepared and to know what to expect!

Note also that when it comes to the topic of unionizing, managers will often repeat these talking points on any platform they have access to, such as game industry conferences or industry-oriented websites...

- Houser Bros held a Captive Audience Meeting!
- Audre fell asleep!

## The “Open Door” Policy

Bosses often encourage workers to talk to them directly about workplace issues, insisting their “door is always open” and that no one will be reprimanded for sharing concerns. A well-worn tactic everywhere from the game industry to companies like Wal-Mart or Amazon<sup>26</sup>, this “open door policy” sounds harmless on the surface.

In fact, **this is the number one way management maintains full control over information flow in the workplace** and ensure they are able to nip any seed of organizing in the bud. They’ll say they are here to help and are genuinely concerned about your well-being. But the catch is that **it’s a way to ensure workers only ever interact with management alone** as isolated and disempowered individuals, instead of turning to their coworkers for support and solidarity. Bosses will make vague promises and excuses, reassuring you that your issues are taken seriously and will be addressed eventually, while also instructing you to keep things quiet and only ever discuss the issue in question directly with management. If they do catch

you sharing concerns with other workers, it probably won't take long for that supportive demeanor to disappear, which is why **it's important to make sure any initial organizing you do happens away from the eyes and ears of management.**

## **"Unions might be great for other companies/industries, but it's different here!"**

Whether it's because games are "too creative a medium," "too recent an industry," "too dependent on flexibility" (boss-speak for worker precarity) or because the company is "too indie," or "too large," not making enough money or "making too much" — you'll hear all sorts of reasons why your job is very special, unique, and different when it comes to unionizing. The funny thing, of course, is that every boss in every industry says the exact same thing to their workers! (WORKERTIP: It's never true.)

## **Framing the union as a "third party"**

Many bosses try and frame unions as some kind of external third party that will come in between you and your employer, ruining your happy family relationship, or maybe trying to get rich off your back. (Projection much?) You might even hear that they are dangerous radicals seeking to overthrow capitalism! (Oh no!) But in reality the union is not "they" — it's you. **It's you and your co-workers who form this potential union and decide every action it takes**, not some outside strangers — and what your bosses fundamentally fear is **the empowerment that you will gain through organizing**.

# “You can’t have a union, because you’re not really employees!”

More and more employers try to paper over the true nature of the relationship they have with their workers by referring to them as “partners” or “associates” instead of employees, for



## Below the (Grass)root

by KarlSephiroth99

**What defines a union isn't the legal structure around it.** A union is a group of workers organizing together, regardless of whether or not they're a registered legal entity. If that's not always obvious today, it's because many governments impose daunting-sounding legal requirements for forming a union; for example, in Australia a trade union needs at least 1000 members to be officially recognized. These requirements are the result of decades of lobbying by business owners. It's meant to weaken the power of labour and undermine our ability to build collective power.

Fortunately, we don't need to follow these rules to start organizing! And you definitely don't need your whole industry or your whole workplace on board to start changing things for the better. You can start by talking to your coworkers – off the clock, in private – about things you wish were better. Existing labour organizations can help you figure out how to rally together and get organized from the ground up. And if you're working in a big multinational, international groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) might be your best help at building workplace solidarity across offices and borders: one of the ways unions have been hobbled by law is by limiting their legal existence to a single country.

example, or by pretending that we're all just one big group of friends; **it's just that some friends own the company, and others don't!** Another common tactic is to give "manager" titles to just about everyone in the company, but with none of the decision-making power or additional pay that usually accompanies such a role.

Perhaps most importantly, **many workers in the game industry who should be recognized as full employees are instead hired as freelance contractors as a way for owners to get around the legal obligations they owe to employees.** This is an especially common problem in sectors like QA. However, there is a growing number of unions that specialize in helping such workers fight for better conditions or gain full employee status. Recently, artists and lecturers (primarily women) at Britain's National Gallery won a case which confirmed that, because they were required to attend training sessions and were paid from the same source as noncontractual employees, they were not in fact self-employed. This meant they were entitled to the same benefits as so-called "permanent" employees.<sup>27</sup> **Remember that if you're hired to work for someone who makes a profit from selling what you produce, you can unionize.**

## Threats of outsourcing and cuts

A common line – and one frequently internalized by workers – is that if workers unionize, bosses will make cuts to jobs or outsource them to where labour is cheaper and less organized. Whether management is assuring you that they're really sorry but they have no choice and it's "just the way it is" or they're openly threatening direct retaliation for unionizing, **the important thing to keep in mind is that the goal of these threats is to create fear and compliance through intimidation. They usually have no basis in anything concrete.**

Bosses lay off workers all the time for no good reason, and unionizing is the only way you have to protect yourself from that. Remember that it's always our labour that creates value for the business owners, and that they can't get rid of all of us or they'd be getting rid of the very source of all their profits. Besides, **relocating is an extremely expensive endeavour for any business to make, and not something that can be decided on a whim simply to punish workers for unionizing.** This is especially true if the union movement is one that crosses borders in such a way that there's nowhere for the owners to go — emphasizing why it's so important for our organizing efforts to be international in nature and in solidarity with fellow workers all around the world!

## The “Guilt Trip”

Some owners, especially those who think of themselves as “good bosses” and maintain a lot of contact with their employees, might react to unionizing efforts by taking it extremely personally. **Those bosses will try to make you feel like you are committing some sort of horrible betrayal by contemplating the possibility of organizing,** and try to shame you for being ungrateful or make you feel like you somehow owe them for “giving” you a job.

Remember that the core issue is the inequality of power between you and them, and that they are reacting that way because they are so used to holding that power over you



and acting without any accountability to employees, that **any step towards a more equal relationship feels to them like some kind of terrible offence**. Some bosses have been known to respond to union organizing efforts with tears! These sentiments may even be genuine, but in any case, dealing with them should be the responsibility of your boss's therapist, not their employees.

## The “Company Union”

Some bosses claim to support unions, and will even offer to help you set one up. If your boss tries to pull this move, you might think at first you're very lucky to work for such a progressive employer. They might even bring in people to do it for you and take care of all the complicated stuff... until you realize that your new “union” was created without any organizing among the workers themselves, that it includes company management in its decision-making, that it reproduces the same power dynamics that were always present in your workplace, and that it was implemented in a top-down fashion to ensure its loyalty to the owners over the workers. This sort of cooptation can really succeed at appropriating and neutralizing pro-union sentiment, dramatically setting back any genuine organizing efforts — **don't let it happen to you!**

A similar role is played in our broader industry by some currently-existing industry organizations, who publicly claim to represent game developers but **in practice are led and funded exclusively by business owners and management** and have consistently sided with their interests over those of workers whenever they conflict. The IGDA is one of these organizations, of course (see our review of the IGDA in the previous issue!), but there are other examples too. A similar role is played in Québec by “La Guilde”, and in France by the “Syndicat National du Jeu Vidéo” (SNJV, not to be confused with the STJV, which is the actual French game workers’ union).

## Scab Labour

One of the dirtiest tricks a boss can employ, “scabs” are people who, as workers themselves and thus potential members of a union, receive special preferential treatment over others in exchange for turning against their fellow workers. Scabs are often brought in temporarily from the outside in an emergency as a way to replace workers who are trying to unionize. Bosses will sometimes even make a point of offering scabs all the demands that the organizing workers originally put forward, while continuing to refuse them to the latter — just as a way of demoralizing you by making the point that your demands can in fact easily be met, but that it’s really about punishing you “on principle” for standing up for your rights.

During the SAG-AFTRA voice actors’ strike in 2017, scab voice actor labour was notably used — and roundly criticized — in the *Life Is Strange* prequel *Before the Storm*.<sup>28</sup>

In order to work towards the long-term goal of a unionized game industry, it will be important to create a culture where taking a scab contract is treated as the despicable, selfish act that it is — and one that harms the scabs themselves in the longer term.



**Unions aren't just for huge workplaces.** While unions might sound like a logical fit for large companies (say, ones where a multibillionaire boss you've never met can fire you while talking about how you haven't realized your "full potential"), **even smaller workplaces can benefit enormously from being organized.** In fact, in our experiences small studios can sometimes be **even more abusive**, and more prone (wittingly or unwittingly) to violating your rights and boundaries as a worker. Small studio owners will often claim "we're all in this together," but they're the ones controlling your salary and the ones who stand to benefit from the company's successes – not to mention the ones who can fire you when things go wrong (or if they decide they don't like you). Again, organizing with your coworkers can help give you leverage against these kinds of abuses.

Another way of looking at it is that organizing can simply help better reflect *who's actually doing the work* at your job. Even if small business owners may wear many hats or work alongside you, they usually have disproportionate decision-making power or the ability to veto whatever they choose, because *they're the boss*. If game development really is a team effort, **why shouldn't we be guaranteed a hand in steering the ship?**

Unionizing now also means you'll be prepared in case of a change of management, whatever the reason for it. **It's the owners who decide when to sell the studio**, and they're the ones who get to cash in on all the work that was put into it when it gets bought out. When that happens, usually all you get as a worker is a change of bosses. Notoriously, Notch sold Mojang to Microsoft for \$2.5 billion and became enormously wealthy for it, while his employees received nothing. (Microsoft would later offer a comparatively tiny \$300,000 – that's a whole

\$0.0003 billion, folks – incentive to workers, but only if they agreed to remain Microsoft employees for another six months.)

News of the sale changed things at Mojang. Some felt betrayed by Markus's decision. Morale plummeted. "People felt like the world was coming to an end."<sup>29</sup>

There are many more untold stories in the indie scene of folks who join a small startup and accept to be paid less than they're worth because they really believe in the project – only to receive nothing after the game makes it big and the owners sell out for millions.

If your small studio boss claims to be sympathetic to unions: great! As a worker, you're well-positioned to help them put their money where their mouth is. But be warned that their sympathy



Mona! I need your help.  
What's it pay? Uh, hold on...  
Crzzsh, Crzzsh! I can't hear you.  
You're breaking up!

might evaporate if you make it clear that you want to unionize your own “scrappy” little indie studio rather than some other company a hundred times bigger than you. Ultimately, owners stand to lose power and money if their studio unionizes, which – go figure – makes it a hard sell for a lot of them when it comes down to brass tacks. **It's in these moments that it becomes clear just how shallow the “we're all friends here” mantra really is.**

By bargaining collectively, you are forcing your employer to reckon with the realities of working together: the boundaries you want to ensure are in place, the rights you want to assert, the conditions you want to improve. These are all topics that tend to be difficult to broach on your own when there's an unacknowledged power dynamic.

“By fabricating the illusion of employer as friend, the employed is denied the opportunity to protest, argue, fight, be adversarial and demand more of their working conditions.”

If your boss *really really* means it when they say they're sympathetic and want everyone to be equal, why not push for collective ownership? Transitioning to a cooperative model is a great way to ensure everyone at a company benefits from their successes and hard work. And if you're thinking of starting a new studio yourself, forming a worker cooperative is a great way to bake in those values right from the start.

# WORKERS' COOPERATIVES: A NEW WAY OF CREATING COMMERCIAL GAMES

## No Bosses Required!

Many workers in the game industry cope with the less-than-ideal working conditions by dreaming of one day starting their own business and “becoming their own boss.” And it makes sense! Who wants to be exploited for someone else’s profits when you could start your own studio and earn the full benefit of your labour?

Game workers are also particularly lucky that they work in an industry where starting your own game studio, although far from being accessible to everyone, is much easier than, say, starting your own car factory as an auto worker. Game studios need much less starting capital — no expensive machinery or raw materials are required.

The problem with the traditional “startup” model, however, is that **it inevitably tends to replicate the worst problems of the existing game industry**. The few founders who are lucky enough to launch a successful business might never need to get a job working for someone else ever again, but it will be at the expense of the workers they hire as employees as their business expands. Their employees will be the ones now working for their profits, thus reproducing the relationship of exploitation that is found everywhere else in the industry.

But it doesn't have to be that way! **This is where workers' cooperatives come in:** workers' co-ops are businesses that are **fully and democratically owned by the people who work there.** Nobody in a workers' co-op is working to create profits for some shareholder, and everyone can earn the full value of their labour. When the co-op expands, new workers become worker-owners, as opposed to merely being employees hired by separate business owners. Many people who start a business don't even know that this is an option!

There are already multiple examples of workers' cooperatives operating in the game industry, such as **Pixel Pushers Union 512** and **Motion Twin** (the creators of *Dead Cells*). And two of the creators of *Night in the Woods* have just launched a workers' cooperative called **The Glory Society**. Cooperatives can also be a great model for freelance workers, who can benefit from uniting under a single banner to sell their services.

There are many kinds of organizations that call themselves “cooperatives”, which is why we emphasize that we’re talking about **workers' co-ops** here. You may also have heard of “consumer co-ops,” which are owned by the consumers (such as REI in the United States or MEC in Canada), but those can be just as exploitative to their employees as any other business. There are even some business owners’ associations that style themselves as “cooperatives” — but in actuality they’re nothing more than cartels of bosses; employees have no say in how they are run. (In the Québec game industry, for instance, a group called *La Guilde* has gotten significant media attention and funding and now proudly claims to be the “largest cooperative in this industry in the world.”<sup>30</sup>) This can get pretty confusing and might be worth highlighting, especially when discussing the possibility of starting a workers' co-op with fellow game workers who might never have heard of that business model.

**So how do you go about starting a workers' cooperative?**

Game Workers Unite is here to help, and can put you in touch with the legal assistance you need to found such a business with your fellow workers! Unfortunately, most business lawyers who help people form startups have no experience with co-ops. They're often used to just signing people up for the standard corporate model instead, so having access to specialized advice can be a big help in forming a co-op. The details also vary from place to place, but starting a co-op is an option everywhere. Another thing to keep in mind is that venture capitalists will not want to invest in a workers' cooperative, since they can't become external shareholders and reap in the profits from your work - so they will always focus on pressuring aspiring entrepreneurs to start traditional corporate startups instead. That said, workers' co-ops are still perfectly eligible for business loans, and credit unions often have especially favorable deals for them!

So if you're considering starting a business or know game workers who are, contact your local GWU chapter (or the international if you don't have one yet) and ask them about workers' co-ops!





## Craft Unions, Industrial Unions... What's the Difference?

by GoombaProle\_68

There is more than a single strategy for unionization. Lots of existing unions take the approach of representing workers who are all part of a specific craft or trade, across multiple industries. This is the case of SAG-AFTRA, the US union representing voice actors and other media professionals across all sectors including the game industry. These unions are generally referred to as "**craft unions**".

There are also unions called "**industrial unions**" that aim to organize all workers within an industry **regardless of their specific craft** by having the entire workforce of each company unionize their workplace and join with the others into the industrial union. This is the case of the United Auto Workers (UAW) for all workers of the US automobile industry, for example. What approach to take and which strategy is best can depend on the specific context workers are facing, as the legal framework varies a lot from place to place and the situation may differ in terms of what already-existing unions in other industries or trades are available to offer support and resources. But two things are important to remember:

**1. Unionization always starts by organizing at the workplace.** A craft union may have a lot of members, and a union may be officially and legally recognized, but if there is no organizing happening at a workplace, bosses there have no reason to enter into negotiation. They can also just make sure to only hire non-members so they never have to worry about the union. It's only through the active involvement of workers at their own workplace that real change will be possible for the industry.

## **2. Workers are always stronger when they unite.**

Divisions between workers tend to be produced by the core conflict between workers and owners. In a lot of industries for example bosses give preferential treatment to white-collar workers so they don't act in solidarity with blue-collar workers who are trying to unionize, but that opposition is artificial, and a consequence of the deeper division between workers and owners.

In the long term, workers can only lose by letting themselves be divided in such a way. On the other hand, all of us benefit by working together and supporting each other in our various struggles. **QA testers, localization workers, console manufacturing workers, and all other game workers must be part of the effort to create a better game industry for it to succeed.** More privileged and better-positioned workers have a responsibility to use their position to support organizing efforts among the workers who are struggling the most. **“Having it good already” is not an excuse to not unionize.**



# STRATEGY GUIDE: HOW TO START ORGANIZING YOUR WORKPLACE

Interested in organizing with your coworkers, but don't know where to start? Here are six simple steps to get you on your way to forming a union! **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.**

**1. Reach out to existing unions** and organizations in your area for help, advice, and solidarity. Game Workers Unite chapters, related trade and industrial unions, and existing game worker unions internationally are all great resources for learning how to organize your own workplace, and establishing relationships now can strengthen both parties' actions in the future. **If possible, talk to experienced organizers or attend a training session on workplace organizing.**

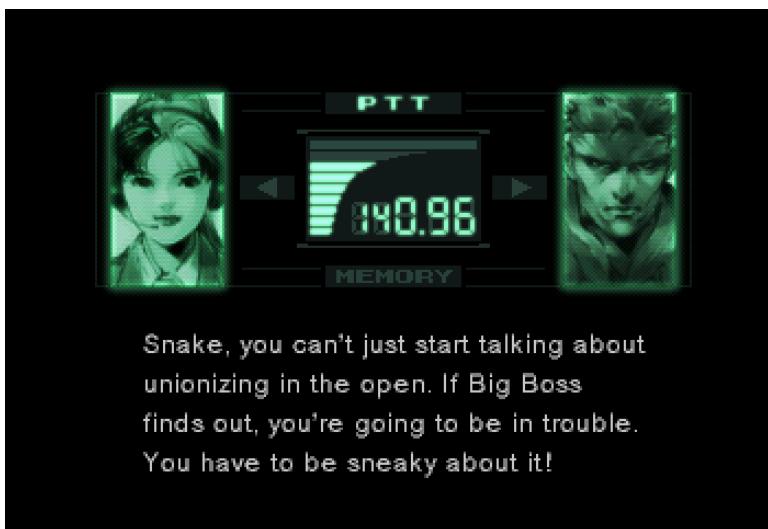
**2. Talk to your coworkers** one-on-one about their problems in the workplace, away from the supervision of management. Ask questions, and let them tell you the things that they want to fix; listen carefully, and don't assume you know what their problems are. Be supportive and understanding, and help them realize they're not alone in these issues. **Don't start talking about unions yet!** Start by identifying problems to solve.

**3. Help them identify collective solutions** to the problems they've shared. Just talking about issues isn't enough; stopping there can build frustration and anger without being constructive with those feelings. Your goal is to guide your coworkers towards seeing collective action as a solution to their

problems, by asking questions and listening to their answers. Open-ended questions like “Who else feels this way?” and “What would happen if...” are useful. **Always be honest!** Don’t oversell what’s possible, and don’t minimize the potential dangers.

**4. Organize a first action** to solve a simple, achievable problem. You don’t need the whole office on board! Start with 10% of your coworkers, and target something concrete and achievable: demanding free coffee, or complaining to the boss as a group. By winning these fights, you and your coworkers will see the power of collective action, gain courage and experience, and inspire others to join in the next action.

**Before you take that first action, though...**



**5. Prepare your coworkers for the bosses’ reaction** when they find out you’re organizing. Bosses have a lot of tactics to break up organizing workers, and they can be very effective and intimidating to the unprepared, but they’re also very predictable. Learn these tactics yourself, and share them with your coworkers. These plays are much less effective when people know they’re coming, and you’ve already had a chance to counter their anti-union lines.

## **6. Push your coworkers to become organizers themselves.**

You can't do everything yourself, so help your coworkers become more involved by giving them tasks and following up. A task can be anything from taking notes at a meeting, to designing and printing flyers, to bringing in new members themselves. Don't forget to set deadlines and follow up on these tasks; this is real and important work, and doing it is empowering. Eventually, your coworkers will be suggesting their own tasks and managing themselves!

**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).

Reach out to us for more details. The GWU membership application as well as links to local chapters are available here: [www.gameworkersunite.org/get-involved](http://www.gameworkersunite.org/get-involved)

If there's no GWU chapter in your area, contact the international and we can help put you in touch with local unions and even help you start a new chapter!

**And remember: you're not in this fight alone! Together, we can win better working conditions for everyone.**

## Not in the industry? Here's how to get involved

by MetabolikRifter

Even if you don't work in the game industry yourself, there are still lots of other ways you can support organizing efforts:

- 1. Help unionize your own industry, or get involved in your own union!** The more workers that are organized, the more potential there is for cross-industry solidarity and mutual aid. And the more unionization gains momentum across industries, the more it becomes a logical path for unorganized sectors.
- 2. Talk to players about why unions are important** and how they can address problems that affect both workers and consumers. Remind them that the conditions and pressures that result in compromised games (or abusive mechanics like loot boxes) aren't the choice of the workers – we hate that stuff too and we want to make the best games possible! – but the result of bosses' decisions.
- 3. Signal boost workers in the industry** who speak out about working conditions. If you're a streamer, a writer, or someone who makes videos, talk about these issues in the work you produce. (There's lots of different avenues to explore, too – we'd love to see a broader historical perspective on how labour issues have been part of games since the beginning.)
- 4. Join Game Workers Unite and get involved** in on-the-ground organizing efforts! We actively encourage players, academics, and anyone who wants to improve conditions in the industry to engage in the community and help us succeed.

We will not defend an industry characterized by workplace discrimination, low wages, crunch, and short careers ending in burnout. **Whether or not we are currently employed, we are game workers**, and we reject the unsustainable conditions we have endured for far too long. **The game industry is our industry, and together we have the power to improve it.**

To join us, you can go on the Game Workers Unite website and find the contact info for your local branch, or if there isn't one yet where you are, you can join the international group and help start it yourself! You can also follow us on Twitter (**@gameworkers**) and Facebook for updates on the union movement and for a labour perspective on what's happening in the industry.

Want to know more? Check out our online supplement for links, citations, organizing tips, and further reading:

**GAMEWORKERSUNITE.ORG**

[www.gameworkersunite.org/gwu-literature](http://www.gameworkersunite.org/gwu-literature)

First printing, March 2019

Cover art by @mushbuh ([mushbuh.tumblr.com](http://mushbuh.tumblr.com))

Interior illustrations by @Pioldes ([pioldes.tumblr.com](http://pioldes.tumblr.com))

# NOTES

- 1 Tweet by @TheFiremonkeys <https://bit.ly/2XTw7EM>
- 2 “Activision Blizzard Lays Off Hundreds Of Employees”, Jason Schreier, *Kotaku* <https://bit.ly/2DxaUHt>
- 3 “How Telltale Went Broke”, *Super Bunnyhop* <https://bit.ly/2J8wAjb>
- 4 “Google Walkout For Real Change”, *Twitter account* <https://bit.ly/2XSkdef>
- 5 Tweet by @techworkersco <https://bit.ly/2CiYanM>
- 6 “Microsoft Workers 4 Good”, *Twitter account* <https://bit.ly/2J5O3IZ>
- 7 “Union Employees: Are You Protected From Layoffs?”, Lisa Guerin, *Lawyers.com* <https://bit.ly/2IWnBBE>
- 8 “At Nintendo, Working All Night Is ‘Mario Time’”, Jason Schreier, *Kotaku* <https://bit.ly/2VVnsjq>
- 9 Archived Tweet by @jobjaystauffer <https://archive.org/fo/2M7CG>
- 10 “Ten Years Down”, Clint Hocking, *Click Nothing* <https://bit.ly/2u3vvyQ>
- 11 “Crunch mode caused a young Netmarble game developer’s death, Korean government says”, Bree Royce, *Massively Overpowered* <https://bit.ly/2Hj3jjY>
- 12 “CD Projekt Red developers speak up on the realities of working on Witcher 3 and Cyberpunk 2077”, Tatiana Morris, *Gamezone* <https://bit.ly/2Hg3498>

- 13** “The 3 Things That Make Organizations More Prone to Sexual Harassment”, Marianne Cooper, *The Atlantic* <https://bit.ly/2AbzFZY>
- 14** “How bad crediting hurts the game industry and muddles history”, Richard Moss, *Gamasutra* <https://ubm.io/2J6N0bz>
- 15** *BCCFU Master Agreement* <https://bit.ly/2T5dFWg>
- 16** “How Unions Help All Workers”, Matthew Walters & Lawrence Mishel, *Economic Policy Institute*  
<https://bit.ly/1r0Wq9U>
- 17** “How does Collective Bargaining Affect the Gender Pay Gap?”, Marta M. Elvira, Ishak Saporta, *Work and Occupations* <https://bit.ly/2XRQFxs>
- 18** “The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology”, Katie Salen Tekinbas, pp. 713 <https://bit.ly/2NXraGi>
- 19** Tweet by @SimplyRagny <https://bit.ly/2Uy1kuY>
- 20** “EA: Visceral’s canned Star Wars project ‘too linear’ for modern tastes”, Chris Kerr, *Gamasutra*  
<https://ubm.io/2u3Ujq8>
- 21** “Red Dead Redemption 2’s labor controversy, explained”, Owen S. Good, *Polygon* <https://bit.ly/2F6pyYc>
- 22** “ArenaNet ‘folded like a cheap card table,’ says fired Guild Wars 2 writer”, Colin Campbell, *Polygon* <https://bit.ly/2ufOuqr>
- 23** “Nintendo Employee ‘Terminated’ After Smear Campaign Over Censorship, Company Denies Harassment Was Factor”, Patrick Klepek, *Kotaku* <https://bit.ly/2TDJmes>
- 24** “Worse than Scabs: Gamer Rage as Anti-Union Violence”, Lana Polansky, *Rhizome* <https://bit.ly/2F6mkCT>

- 25** “Activision, EA and others launch site attacking voice actors union over strike”, Julia Alexander, *Polygon* <https://bit.ly/2THL3GN>
- 26** “Amazon’s Aggressive Anti-Union Tactics Revealed in Leaked 45-Minute Video”, Bryan Menegus, *Gizmodo* <https://bit.ly/2R6XvMe>
- 27** “National Gallery art educators win workers’ rights in ‘first public sector gig economy victory’”, Emma Snaith, *Independent* <https://ind.pn/2ELiv6U>
- 28** “Crappy Voice Acting Undercuts an Otherwise Strong ‘Life Is Strange’ Prequel”, Patrick Klepek, *Waypoint* <https://bit.ly/2UweYid>
- 29** “The Unlikely Story of Microsoft’s Surprise Minecraft Buyout”, Daniel Goldberg & Linus Larsson, *Wired* <https://bit.ly/2NYKvac>
- 30** “La Guilde Receives a \$750,000 Grant”, *Radio Canada* <https://bit.ly/2TE8dhi>

Links to all the notes and further reading can be found at:

**[www.gameworkersunite.org/gwu-literature](http://www.gameworkersunite.org/gwu-literature)**



**GAMEWORKERSUNITE.ORG**