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BOUNDARYLESS CAREERS IN-BETWEEN VIDEO GAME FIELDS AND INDUSTRIES: THE JOB EXPERIENCES OF EXPATRIATE AND REMOTE WORKERS IN CZECH VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

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Introduction

The Czech game industry exists in semi-periphery (Švelch, 2021), affected by developments in game production centres, while having its local features. Smaller Czech studios are part of the video game field (Keogh, 2023), framing themselves as indie compared to AAA, high-budget industrial productions. Nevertheless, both industries and fields are subject to trans-local relations due to the international nature of video game production (Keogh, 2023). I address the experiences of actors whose careers span different game industries – expatriates working on-site and remote workers, cooperating with Czech-based studios from other countries as contractors or freelancers. I focus on their evaluation of the Czech game industry, discussing its strengths and weaknesses compared to their careers in other national game industries.

As industry data (Czech Game Developer Association infographics, 2023) have shown us, one third of the Czech game industry workforce was constituted by internationals and three quarters of companies have less than 10 workers. However, I picked respondents from small to big businesses (within a span of more than 10 to more than 250 workers) as those employ more international workers. Therefore, I limited the number of game studios to 10.

The Czech game industry attracts international talent, but compared with European industry centres such as Finland (cf. Park, 2024), this talent is rather junior-level and needed in various production roles. The local industry holds domestic traits in local company ownership and hierarchies, with Czech workers often being founding team members, responsible for building or maintaining proprietary game engines. Game engines are software tools that enable digital content to be created, and a code framework that enables that content to run on different platforms. But in comparison

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with commercial engines such as Unity or Unreal, proprietary engines point to the specific provenance of local game industries and contextually specific games (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019). The Czech game production thus stands aside from *imagined globality* (Park, 2024) of commercial game engines and common know-hows of game development work. It is important to inquire why internationals choose this semi-peripheral production over industry centres as it benefits game production research which mostly focused on the latter contexts.

Methodology and theoretical background

I used the longitudinal research method of 3 repeated semi-structured interviews with a person. All interview rounds were conducted within a period of 6 to 8 months, with 3 to 4 months between the interview rounds. I talked with 28 respondents, with 14 from Eastern Europe and 14 from the West (i.e., Western Europe and North and South America). Most respondents belonged to the triad of programmers, artists and designers, but some were also involved in management and marketing roles. Respondents were recruited on a voluntary basis and with regards to purposive sampling, i.e. diversity in job positions, or levels of seniority.

Although the reason for longitudinal study was originally related to capturing respondents' career changes in project-based game development (Weststar, 2015), it proved invaluable to discuss industrial aspects, too. Theoretically, the game industries are in a state of constant flux as they draw from the larger video game fields, consisting of ever-changing foundations of skills, communities, and aesthetics of individual game workers or smaller teams (Keogh, 2023). The one-off interviews would be at risk of missing this dynamic side of game industries.

Similarly to previous research (Minassian & Zabban, 2021; Park et al., 2022), I relate positively and negatively perceived industrial features to the relocation motivations of international game workers. Using the push-pull migration model, I discuss game expats' motives that pushed them from previous industries to the Czech one, or that were pulling them to, and were evaluated positively about, the Czech game industry. This is complemented by shock factors as industrial features that are perceived negatively and can lead to relocation elsewhere (Park et al., 2022; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). The concept of boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Weststar, 2015) is used to discuss the experiences of remote workers, inquiring if their borderless, digital work includes connections to the wider production ecosystem of the Czech game industry.

Analysis

For many respondents, push factors included less developed game industries in their home countries, resulting in pull factors when evaluating the Czech game industry as highly developed within the European context. As respondents experienced time pressures and precarity in contexts of AAA or outsourcing (Ozimek, 2021), they saw the diversified video game field with many smaller, but successful companies as a "pulling" feature of the Czech game industry. Despite this, Czech indie companies were described by respondents as AAA-like, rigid productions as they saw them prioritizing

business over creativity. While a common contention of workers across creative industries (Baker & Hesmondhalgh, 2010), respondents saw such profit-orientation as not in line with production environments free of corporate structures. Although working in companies with very horizontal hierarchies, live service productions driven by player demands (Weststar & Dubois, 2023) and supported by outdated proprietary game engines often led to respondents' creative fatigue (Dubois & Chalk, 2024). These production features, together with frequent Czech language use at meetings or on social events served as shock factors (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010), motivating respondents to leave companies or Czechia itself. The Czech game industry was, likewise, evaluated as lagging behind the game industry centres in regard to diversified portfolios of games.

Within boundaryless jobs of remote workers, related to companies, rather than industries (Weststar, 2015), the Czech language effectively disappeared in their platformized work. But even in remote teams, workers were stagnating for the same reasons as game expats on-site. This was because their Czech leads were drawing from established patterns and modes of production common in the wider Czech video game field. This goes against the idea of the boundaryless career of remote work (Park et al., 2022) and rather supports the perspective on game development as a product of distinct national cultures (Sotamaa, 2021) even in virtual remote settings.

Conclusion

The resulting perspective on the Czech game industry by both expatriate and remote game workers is that of a diversified field but not diverse game production or inclusive labour conditions. Although the Czech game industry is undergoing a proliferation of video game field with many independent games from smaller teams or solo developers being created (Fousek Krobová et al., 2023), respondents did not recognise the same level of creativity and innovativeness at dominant industrial positions, despite their indie self-label. Paradoxically, it is this self-label that pulled internationals to Czech game companies, while they were met with shock factors of rigid company structures, the use of Czech language and outdated tools pushing them to other industries. Certain culture thus indeed produces specific industries, and vice versa (Negus, 1999). Within globally defined occupational community of game makers (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Weststar, 2015), Czech game development culture is at risk of being evaluated as not inclusive to the creative endeavours of internationals, effectively falling behind its global game industry competitors.

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