ANALYZING LABOR MOBILITY AND MIGRATION IN THE DIGITAL GAMES INDUSTRY: A STUDY WITH BRAZILIAN WORKERS

André Campos Rocha
Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, Brazil

Summary and Methods

This paper aims to investigate the mobility and migration experiences of Brazilian workers in the digital games industry. Based on issues of digital labor and political economy of tech and cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Mirrlees, 2013), it answers questions regarding the modes of circulation of these workers in the labor market, the relationship between migration and labor process and the territoriality of digital games industry. Apart from state of industry reports and literature review on migration and game production studies (Anderson, 2010; Sotamaa & Švelch, 2020), it is methodologically based on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted between October/2022 and August/2024 with workers linked to the Brazilian games scene, most of them with those who perform central functions in the production process of a digital game (programming, art, design and management). It's guided by the hypothesis that, in a global labor market, a portion of the workforce of peripheral countries, such as Brazil, has strong economic incentives to migrate and work for foreign companies, located especially in the Global North, with a more developed games industry, and which benefits from this competitive advantage to maintain their hegemony in this field of cultural/tech production.

Discussing the theoretical framework of Labour Process Theory (LPT), the paper: (1) demonstrates that the labor mobility experience of these workers, who circulate in a global market characterized by sharp global inequalities, is marked by dynamics of mobility/immobility, interpreted through the concept of differentiated inclusion; (2) exposes the multiple instances of mediation of the circulation of these workers in the labor market, from educational institutions, social networks, social media, events and conferences, to more institutionalized forms, induced by government agencies in partnership with technology companies; (3) investigates to what extent territory and spatial-time constraints are still important for understanding labor process in digital games industry, highlighting issues such as local cultures of production, work organization and unionization. In addition to establishing dialogues with LPT and migration studies, the paper contributes to the study of relationship between migration

and digital labor, focusing on a more qualified sector of tech industries, that is, digital games industry, in which the implications of mobility and migration for digital value production chains and labor process are little discussed.

Object and Theoretical framework

Game industry is one of the most lucrative and successful sectors of entertainment industries worldwide. On the one hand, it's a global enterprise with big and multinational studios/companies that boost capital and labor through extensive value production chains (Bulut, 2020; Kerr, 2017). On the other, it's shaped by particular and geographically situated factors underlying different national/local industries, with diverse funding and business models, relations to platforms and involving a variety of actors and institutions (Keogh, 2023; Sotamaa & Švelch, 2020). In this context of multiple competing game production hubs, with different histories, trajectories and economic resources, migration has played an important role in this global labor market, since migrant workforce, as showed in many researches and reports, is considered a strategic resource for Global North economies (Park, 2023). This migration scenario differs from that described by Aneesh (2006) in relation to "virtual migration". In the case of games sector, work can be conducted online and often remotely, but it needs to be performed from the locations where the companies are located. This is a different marriage of code and capital (Aneesh, 2006).

Our case of study is analyzed through the lens of LPT, dedicated to understanding how labor, a human and living force, is set in motion in the capitalist labor process, raising issues around control, refusal, consent, resistance and organization (Braverman, 1974). Updating it according to the new complexities of digital economy, the paper proposes a geospatial approach to LPT that introduces the concept of "double indeterminacy" of labor (effort and mobility power), thinking how factors beyond the point of production can affect it (Rainnie et al., 2010; Smith, 2006).

Findings

Brazilian game industry is characterized by a precarious, fragmented and informal labor market, with many game companies dedicated to outsourcing and services outside the game industry in order to survive (Fortim, 2022). Considering labor mobility as the result of personal choices interacting with structural factors that differentiate national labor markets, it's showed, through the voices and accounts of the interviewees, that Brazilian game workers have a strong incentive to migrate and work for foreign companies located in the Global North, which offer better salaries and are more attractive in terms of career advancements - for instance, by offering opportunities to work in big projects of famous games played by millions of people around the world (Nieborg, 2011).

However, due to its special legal status this migrant workforce tends to suffer with more intensity the uncertainties and insecurities of an unstable labor market, marked by constant waves of layoffs. This mobility/immobility dynamic, as referred by LPT, shapes

the *differential inclusion* of this workforce (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013); under sponsorship contract regimes and dealing with visas, when unemployment could mean a deportation risk, this skilled and desirable workforce for host countries is subjected to some hardships usually attributed to the most precarious sectors of so-called *gig economy* (Dorschel, 2022).

The paper also shows the multiple ways these workers circulate in the global labor market, emphasizing the importance of corporate social media LinkedIn with its algorithmic regime of labor recruitment and some state-led recruitment initiatives, like the *Quebec en tête* from the Canadian province of Quebec, demonstrating how governmental institutions shape the territorialities of contemporary digital economy.

Moreover, the paper addresses communication and cultural problems that emerge in such an internationalized work environment, comprising workers from many cultural backgrounds, as well as emphasizes the importance of territories to better understand unionization and work organization in tech industries, in general, and in the game industry, in particular.

Discussions

In addition to contributing with discussions of the relation between labor process, migration and digital labor, this paper addresses the old problems of "brain drain" and the "unequal exchange of labor in global economy" (Hickel et al., 2024), but also argue with new theoretical contributions to the field of digital labor in game industry. Following the hype of Keogh's book (2023), *The videogame industry doesn't exist*, there have been a wave of studies that underestimate the centralized and monolithic game industry in favor of small and medium-size enterprises that have emerged along with new production tools and new channels of digital distribution (Daiiani & Keogh, 2022; Poell et al., 2022), guided by social values and orientations beyond the commercial realm.

Far from ignoring the importance of this debate, this paper discusses in which sense the centralized and monolithic game industry still exists by showing how structural economic inequalities between different national game industries shape expectations, concrete life chances and professional choices of young tech workers from a peripheral country who try to get by in the neoliberal global market.

Finally, it emphasizes the importance of circulation of struggles among these workers to deal with the challenges of labor in the industry, especially taking into account the advancement of generative AI's (Dyer-Whiteford, 2015).

References

Anderson, B. (2010). Migration, immigration controls and the fashioning of precarious workers. *Work, Employment and Society, 24*(2), 300-317. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017010362141

Aneesh, A. (2006). *Virtual migration: The programming of globalization.* Durham, London: Duke University Press.

Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century.* New York: Monthly Review.

Bulut, E. (2020). *A precarious game: The illusion of dream jobs in the video games industry.* New York: Cornell University Press.

Daiiani, M., & Keogh, B. (2022). An Iranian Videogame Industry? Localizing Videogame Production Beyond the "Global" Videogame Industry. *Media Industries*, *9*(1), 37-66. https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.89

Dorschel, R. (2022). Reconsidering digital labour: Bringing tech workers into the debate. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, *37*(2), 288-307. https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12225

Dyer-Whiteford, N. (2015). *Cyber-proletariat: Global labour in the digital vortex.* Pluto Press.

Fortim, I. (2022). *Pesquisa da indústria brasileira de games 2022.* São Paulo: Abragames.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2013). *The cultural industries.* London: Sage.

Hickel, J., Lemos, M.H., & Barbour. (2024). Unequal Exchange of labour in the world economy. *Nature Communications*, *15*. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-49687-y

Keogh, B. (2023). *The videogame industry does not exist: Why we should think beyond commercial game production.* Cambridge, Massachussets: The MIT Press.

Kerr, A. (2017). *Global games: Production, circulation and policy in the networked era.* New York: Routledge.

Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as a method, or, the multiplication of labor.* Duke University Press.

Mirrlees, T. (2013). *Global entertainment media: Between cultural imperialism and cultural globalization.* Routledge.

Nieborg, D. (2011). *Triple A: the political economy of the blockbuster videogame.* [Doctoral Thesis, University of Amsterdam].

Park, S. (2023). To Become a Cultural Fit, or To Leave? Game Industry Expatriates and the Issue of Migration and Inclusivity. *DiGRA'23 - Proceedings of the 2023 DiGRA*

International Conference.

Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Duffy, B. (2022). *Platforms and cultural production.* Polity

Rainnie, A., Mc-Grath-Champ, S., & Herod, A. (2010). Making space for geography in Labour Process Theory. In P. Thompson, & C. Smith (Eds.). *Working Life: renewing labour process analysis* (pp. 297-315)*.* London: Palgrave.
Smith, C. (2006). The double indeterminacy of labour power: labour effort and labour mobility. *Work, Employment and Society, 20*(2), 389-402. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017006065109

Sootama, O., & Švelch, J. (2021). Introduction: Why Game Production Matters? In O. Sootama, & J. Švelch (Eds.). *Game Production Studies* (pp. 7-25)*.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.