



GAMES AND THE FUTURE OF OUR MEDIUM
A manifesto of proposed change

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Abstract

From fears of issues with potential problematic consequences in the gaming industry stemming from a perceived power-disparity between the industry's two defined "categories" (*AAA* and *Independent*), a study was made to investigate. This qualitative study was made to investigate whether or not certain perceived issues in the industry exist, and whether or not they are problematic (and in what way, if any).

After interviewing four industry professionals of varying industry experience, it was determined that there are indeed issues stemming from a power-disparity within the industry. Furthermore, these issues can cause problems regarding the safety of the industry's workers both physically and financially, the artistic and cultural development of the medium, and that some parts of the industry (mainly the independent-part of it) may be in danger should the AAA-part of the industry become too difficult to compete with. This has a host of consequences, such as marginalized developers and cultures being unable to compete and express themselves, and many independent developers losing financial support.

This data and the conclusions drawn from them were then used to shape a manifesto with the intent to be used as means to inspire change within the industry and to rally up the medium to unionize and act to counteract the problems presented.

Conclusively it seems that there is a power-disparity issue in the gaming industry. Furthermore, it seems that the more experience a worker of the industry has, the more in-depth they could argue and discuss issues and the problematic consequences of them within the industry. Due to this, it is concluded that new workers of the industry may be unaware of many of the problems and issues mentioned by the participants and discussed in the manifesto. This brings a sense of urgency to the manifesto's spread. To help this, the manifesto is meant to be unveiled at the Sweden Games Conference of 2021, should the logistics go according to plan.

Key words: Manifesto, Games Industry, Gaming, AAA, Indie game, Power-disparity, Development, Growth.

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1. Introduction

The creative medium that is the games medium is an incredible tool for us people to immerse ourselves in complete fantasy. To be able to create worlds that an audience can interact within and completely immerse themselves in is astounding. Looking back a hundred or so years, seeing the state of other creative media, reading André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) (although not a surrealist, Georges Méliès is also worthy of mention for his work in bringing fantasy and dreams onto the big screen) and seeing how our acceptance and adaptations of surreality and fantasy changed over the years is indeed and utterly, for the lack of a better word, astounding. The way we tell stories and perceive alternate realities has changed over the past century, and has grown alongside the technological revolution – so much so that a new medium of creative expression and storytelling has taken shape: the video game.

Games are nothing new, as Roger Caillois (1958) writes in his book *Jeux et les Hommes* (en. *Man, Play and Games*). People have throughout time always created games of different kinds to facilitate different needs and to provide entertainment to players, audiences and sometimes to create an even ground for competition. What makes the modern games medium (particularly video games, with certain board games fitting in as well, such as the definitions-wise edge-case *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014)) so interesting is that we have the technology to facilitate entire worlds and their history, workings, and mythology. This to the point where we can for brief moments in time let the audience “escape” our real world and situate themselves inside fictional realities (escapism). According to Gordon Calleja (2010), this view of video games' escapism as inherent was (and perhaps still is) negative. However, it is difficult to see why – or rather, it is strange that this could be the case. Whilst a subjective opinion, the world is a very dark and scary place – it only makes sense to want to escape it, at least momentarily, and this medium is a perfect way to do so.

Through embracing the imaginations and fantasies brought to us, as an audience and players of video games, we abide by André Breton's (1924) wishes to cast away the real in favour of the fictional. Not to ignore reality, but to understand the impact of fantasy as a part of our basic human nature; understanding that dreams and fantasies are part of what makes us human and that embracing them is not childish or ignorant, but rather what lets us create our bonds to reality itself. Video games facilitate this human need through being a creative, interactive medium capable of conveying stories and narration not unlike how André Breton describes dreams and imagination in his manifesto. However, compared to the dreams inherent within us, video games have to be made and distributed – the medium has to be industrialized. And this it is. The video game industry is in many ways a department of the medium, both necessary for many jobs around the world to exist, as well as necessary for people to engage with this escapist, creative and culturally resonant medium. It has been observed however, that there are problems within the industry that may come to impact the medium. Are these problems real, and if so, is there any way to solve them?

2. Background

Although jargon will be avoided throughout the report, some concepts are important to understand before one could truly understand both the contents of the report, as well as the contents of the manifesto.

2.1. Definitions of company sizes and their names, AAA, Indie and Hobbyists

Triple-A (referred to as *AAA*) companies are large companies often made up of hundreds of developers and workers each, working on developing or publishing games with budgets of millions of US dollars. Often viewed as the “blockbusters” of games, these companies have the power and money to create very large-scale games and to market them appropriately (How-To Geek, 2020). Company structure often consists of many layers, with junior (or new) developers at the bottom, lead positions in between, and the directors and management (and their bosses) at the top (Gomila, 2016).

Independent (also referred to as *indie*) companies work differently, according to interviews held with industry professionals, and their definitions have changed over time. Historically, indie developers used to be developers working on games without outside financial support, often consisting of teams of only one developer (sometimes more), examples being Studio Pixel (2021) and Team Shanghai Alice (2015). As time and the industry progressed, the definition of indie changed with it. Nowadays, indie game studios are studios consisting of a few developers relying on independent game publishing companies to fund their projects, with examples like Dodge Roll Games (2021). Hobbyists are what are now referred to as those developers that work either alone or in small teams, with little or no budget that work solely in their free time, with examples like Team OneShot (2016). Hobbyists are, according to some interviewed industry professionals, part of the indie sphere in the industry, but rarely directly compete with more established indie studios and instead focus on creative expression.

2.2. What manifestos are and how they work

A manifesto is, according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary “a written statement declaring publicly the intentions, motives, or views of its issuer” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). They also seem to inspire change, or attempt to push some future ideal. While sources on what a manifesto *is* may be scarce, by reading them some insight into their function and workings can be gained. For instance, in André Breton’s *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) the author tried to push forth his beliefs and his way of handling everyday life in hopes of making a statement opposing the very realistically-inclined society of his time. This is a common theme in manifestos – to express one’s views and intentions in hopes that these are adopted by others, that may together start a movement that could change the chosen landscape accordingly. In André Breton’s case, he wished for his manifesto to persuade the readers to let loose from their strictly realistic views and let their dreams and fantasies impact them, instead of ignoring them. Looking at the societies of today, it seems to have worked, to some degree. For the purposes of this paper, this characteristic is part of the definition of the manifesto. The

manifesto written as part of this paper (Addendum #2) aspires in a similar manner to cause change within its field, namely the video game development industry.

Through writing a set of points stating problems of the industry in a context of the current industry state, it is hoped that the manifesto points will cause change in a similar manner that André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) and Lars von Trier's *Dogme-95* (1995) did. *Dogme-95* (von Trier, 1995) was a manifesto in cinema written by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, which aspired to change the industry towards creating something real instead of fake, meaning no external lights, produced music or sounds, no filters or lenses, and no stability-assisting tools (amongst other things) (von Trier, 1995). This manifesto was very short – it consists of ten (10) bullet-points, each with a demand similar to a check-list – and was unveiled during his speech on the *Le cinéma vers son deuxième siècle*, a commemorative conference. Compared to André Breton's manifesto, *Dogme-95* is very short and concise, focusing on delivering its points quickly as they get to the point and was complemented by his speech at the conference. Furthermore, considering it seems that manifesto unveilings should be part of some larger event, possibly to emphasize the points and drive of the manifesto, efforts to unveil this paper's manifesto (Addendum #2) at a conference of remarkable impact in the industry should be taken. This is a method some authors use to ensure traction of their manifesto (notably the *Dogme-95* manifesto) (von Trier, 1995), and taking inspiration from this work will be beneficial for the potential of success for manifestos independently of their field, given that this method brings the manifesto to field audiences (the main audience and consumers of a manifesto). Independently of which field the manifesto is hoping to inspire change, this method brings the author's views to where they are intended to be seen, which ensures that the manifesto's audience consumes it which may create the movement needed to do so.

3. Problem and hypothesis

Movie director J.J. Abrams mentioned in a TED talk (Abrams, 2007) about the availability of materials and tools for creation within the film medium, that he wondered “what comes next”. The media had become “democratized”, and the opportunities to create had become so immense in comparison to a decade or so earlier when film production was strictly handled by professionals. “Go make your movie, there’s nothing stopping you” (Abrams, 2007).

While Abrams (2007) is talking about the film industry, something very similar has happened during the last fifteen or so years in the video game industry as well. Digital tools are widely accessible, so there’s no need for expensive hardware and large offices to create games. While this has always been the case, some parts of the industry have been less prevalent and thus been taken less seriously – these “classes” of the industry are nowadays very distinct and carry with them different dynamics. The *AAA (triple-A)*, the industry’s equivalent of the “professionals”, are large companies with great capital allowing for products with great production value. The *Indies* are in comparison independent developers with little or no capital, creating games often on a much smaller scale, most often with very little production value making the most of what there is. Abrams (2007) named an interest in what new can be made when the independent creators get to participate in the medium, as “no community is best served when only the elite have control.” Why is this? If the AAA has the capital to fund research and experimentation, and are in a position of a comparably lower risk in comparison to those without said capital, how come the community of film-making and video game development alike are not best served when the elite has the control of the medium?

3.1. Anecdotal evidence to support a potential power-disparity

While anecdotal, these stories told by developers reaching out to the press makes an effort to shed light on their experience with different AAA-companies, mostly concerning publishers. Publishers are rarely developers themselves, and are known to therefore have less leniency and be more predatory in their approach to their contracts – their goal is to maximize profit whilst avoiding risk above all else. On top of this, in the gaming industry the AAA has much more control over the industry than the indies do due to their available capital. It is a known fact within the video game development community that the AAA for instance patent certain gameplay elements and creative decisions, often with the only goal to bar the indies with no capital from participating in the industry or risk getting punished (Yin-Poole, 2021; Gamemakerstk, 2021). As an industry that depends on experimentation, iteration and creative thinking to move forward and survive, wouldn’t the AAA benefit from more unique and experimental design, enabled by the experimental nature of the indie game market, making this predatory behaviour counter-intuitive? Or, perhaps, they need not forward the medium to ensure monetary gain, and the predatory behaviour of the elite is simply to prevent competition?

Another example backing this is the history between Slightly Mad Studios (SMS) and Electronic Arts (EA)(Walker, 2017). According to SMS CEO Ian Bell, EA had paid a large sum to their company as part of an agreement that the developers of their two games, Need for Speed: SHIFT and SHIFT 2, were not to talk to, or work for, any other publishers. In their agreement, EA had ensured that not only do the products developed by the studio belong to them, but their technology (not counting third-party technology owned by other companies) as well. Later on, shortly after their deal, EA went through with announcing an end to their cooperation and cancelled their scheduled project, which SMS were supposed to be developing. By stopping their cooperation, EA ensured the developers' technology would end up in their hands, effectively leaving the independent developers of SMS with nothing left. This very predatory move turned out to have failed, as the developers luckily had written off their technology to another company, legally making it "third-party". This, whilst EA's plan failed, is part of an incredibly predatory behaviour that shows its face on multiple occasions within the (relatively, but ever present) recent history of the gaming industry, seemingly exclusively originating from AAA companies with great capital.

3.2 Problem and hypothesis

While there is nothing wrong with creating products without the prospect of creating art in mind, ignoring (and enabling) predatory behaviour benefiting great production value and alienating those without it from competing in the industry, is. While not an immediate danger to the games medium, if problems like these would indeed be proven to exist in the industry the very freedom of creative expression within it may be hurt in the long-term. Patents to creative decisions in creative media serve only to prohibit development and exclude profit, rather than allow for the media affected to develop through creative iteration. If indies can not get the capital to compete, a lot of voices in the industry would be lost and the industry would lose valuable assets and voices because of it. In fact, this has happened before, with the rise of console gaming and decline of profitability of "bedroom coding" in the 1980s (Kirkpatrick, 2015). During this time, the "revivification" of the industry led to the norm of greater production value with the introduction of licensed hardware and consoles that became the new standard gaming platforms. This barred many of the independent developers – then called "bedroom coders" – from competing, limiting (or prohibiting) the creative, cultural and artistic impact they had (Stuart, 2010). While this could be unlikely in the present due to the presence of the internet, the industry has no regulations in place to stop companies with enough capital from exercising predatory and prohibitive behaviour – such as the described patents and contracts. Whilst it is not against law to patent technology, it is arguably predatory (and morally questionable) to patent creative decisions executed in creative media. Considering the costs companies have to pay to ensure they do not encroach on legal patents, and the low (or non-existent) capital of the indies, these practices essentially alienate only indies from competing and could pose as long-term dangers for the industry as the indies have a great creative, artistic and cultural influence on the medium.

This is not the only potential issue pertaining to the current state of the video game industry. For instance, the increased presence of marginalized actors in the industry (marginalized developers, such as South America, South Asia, Africa and the Middle East) is nothing to scoff at, even though they've been told that games based on their culture are not profitable. This means that there is reason to be afraid of their creative impact and expression, and their emotional and cultural resonance. In turn, this might lead to marginalized developers being assimilated into the AAA-industry, meaning that they will contribute to already prevalent cultures and their audiences, instead of promoting their own. While it is only hypothetical, being able to theorize about such a future and what that could mean for the industry's marginalized workers is alarming enough to put it to question. A power-disparity within the industry would therefore not just affect the monetary gain of actors in the industry and affect the potential jobs within it, but could come to harm many aspects of it. Especially the medium of video games, which lives in symbiosis with its industry. Hurt one, be it through negligence of their emotional, creative and cultural impact or through ignoring the economical aspect of them, and both can suffer greatly. It is therefore imperative to investigate whether or not issues like these exist in the industry and medium, so that they could be dealt with before they cause permanent harm to either industry or medium.

And so this potential power-disparity is the main problem to be investigated through this thesis. Below is a hypothesis stating concerns of power-abuse in the hands of the AAA and the potential consequences this could have. With this hypothesis in mind, a questionnaire will be written, sent to industry professionals, who's opinions and observations will be the foundation of a manifesto. This manifesto's purpose is to convey the current state of the gaming industry pertaining to the potential power-abuse problems to the public. Hopefully, should there prove to be such problems, informing the industry and the rest of the public should help mitigate the consequences of them. The hypothesis to be investigated is as follows:

There is an issue within the gaming industry where some parties have greater capital and power over the games medium than others. This is used to exercise predatory and prohibitive behaviour, excluding low-capital actors from competing fairly. This can and will lead to developmental, creational and expressional issues which pose great danger for the games medium in the long-term.

4. Method

Whilst a manifesto is to be procured, the process can not be as simple as writing a manifesto and seeing what occurs. In order to succeed in investigating the previously mentioned hypothesis, the work will have to be split into four parts, ending with the confirmation and release of the manifesto.

4.1. Process

The process will be as follows:

- First, a qualitative questionnaire will be written, and later sent to the study's contributors (professionals from different places in the industry). The questionnaire will provide the contributors with questions pertaining to the current state of the industry. The contributors will be given free range to express their concerns (or lack thereof) about potential problems, explain their personal observations, and provide insight into their view of the industry.
- Secondly, the data will be analyzed to see whether a general consensus can be found or not. In addition, the data will be analyzed to see if there are any apparent patterns or connections between certain answers, for instance if perhaps a AAA-professional thinks something could be less problematic than an indie developer might think. Comparing the data to the participant and what/who they are to see if this had an impact can give important insight into what the different types of developers think and why.
- Thirdly, the manifesto will be written based on the collected observations. The manifesto's purpose is to present the current state of the industry, whether or not there is a perceived power-disparity issue, and suggest changes that can be made to mitigate this potential issue if need be. Its purpose is therefore to raise awareness, so that any potential issues posing any threat to the games medium's development, inclusivity and freedom will be:
 - A) understood and known, to the extent where such problems can be mitigated or prevented, and/or
 - B) dealt with.
- Finally, the manifesto will be sent to the contributors interviewed in step two, in order to make sure nothing was misunderstood and that they agree with what is written (it is to be a documentation of *their* opinions and observations, after all). When given the "all-clear", the manifesto will be released to the public in order to both fulfill its purpose and to receive public perception and/or criticism.

Whilst the hypothesis-style of research is a more hard-science approach, and the manifesto and the sheer subjective and qualitative qualities of the approach is that of an approach similar to that of art studies (VIS, 2018), this blend of styles is very fitting for the research. Not only will it be much more valuable than the pure hard-science approach of being quantitative considering the more insightful answers, it will allow for a more subjective product to be created from it as well, meaning the paper is on the fence between the two extremes, rather than leaning to one side. This fits in the context of video games very well as well, since the medium relies heavily on mechanics and functionality as a combination with the creative and free. To work with games as one or the other would be to disregard its status as the other, potentially leaving important information or perspectives out of the equation. It is hoped that this mixed approach will lead to more insightful and useful data that can be used in a more effective way. In addition to this, it allows for researcher input and presence in the work, as while the work will be based on the interviews, researcher perspectives will be valuable for the manifesto as well. The method is in this sense quite anthropological – by making observations and questioning different people from different angles of the phenomenon (in this instance professional game developers being the people, and the games medium and industry the cultural phenomenon) it is possible to draw conclusions as to how something may be, and why. The ambition and intent behind the work is as mentioned earlier to inform the collective community of the games medium and industry of the industry's current state, with focus on major issues, with the goal to unionize the community and work to fix said potential issues. A researcher's presence in the work, especially since the researcher in this case has a background in the community being researched, has value that can add to the work in much the same way as the study participants can.

While it is difficult to plan considering the logistics that go into such events, a goal is to unveil the manifesto at the Sweden Games Conference of 2021. Having a large audience consisting of both professionals and press in the game development community attending will help ensure the spread of the manifesto and in turn increase its chances of impacting the community. This plan is inspired by the creators of the Dogme-95 manifesto in cinema, who also revealed their manifesto at a conference in Paris in 1995 (von Trier & Vinterberg, 1995). Because no action from those suggested and urged in the manifesto will be possible for isolated voices to push, a movement will need to be created that involves the industry and the creative medium as a whole, together. A conference like the Sweden Games Conference will be perfect for this endeavour.

This method was chosen simply because it made the most sense. Before designing the study more in-depth, there was a lot of thought going into what method to use and why. It was then understood that because I need the insight of industry professionals, it only made sense to interview them. The anthropological aspects of the study came naturally as the researcher in this case also has a background in game development, meaning they are part of the community. The structure of the paper was very well defined because of this design as well: because what was to be researched and what background was

needed was only possible to ascertain after the results of the study had been recorded, a lot of the background depends on the interviews made during it. After all, it is impossible to know what is to be researched and what background information is vital to mention before the content of the study is understood. Therefore, yes, perhaps there are other methods that are more or less applicable for this study, such as a more quantitative-approach, or that used some other form of artefact, for instance a case study. However, since change is desired, a manifesto made the most sense – and since the industry professionals know best, they were asked (in depth) so that the information laying the groundwork for the artefact (and the report itself) is reliable.

4.2. Study/questionnaire design

First and foremost, one of the most important parts of the study design was to ensure that each participant was aware of their rights and freedom. This meant writing an extensive disclaimer of sorts before the study and recording started, which included an explanation of the extent of the study, its scope, what its contents were and that the participant was being recorded. The participant also agreed to their anonymity in the study, as well as how the data was being handled given that it was being recorded. All of this is available in Addendum #2, where the questionnaire and its disclaimer can be found in full.

Before going into detail about how and why the study was designed, it is important to mention why it was not designed differently. The most likely way the study would have been designed would it not have been as described in this chapter was the quantitative route. While this would have allowed for a much larger sample size, it would have been much more difficult to get the qualitative answers wanted because of the limitations of quantitative data. Some of the interviews of the study took over an hour to perform: this not to any negative extent, as the information was very useful, however it means that there was a lot of data to parse. A quantitative study would circumvent this, however because of the sheer density of the data and the kind of data wanted from the study, a qualitative study was the way to go. Other factors played into this as well, as a quantitative study would require a much larger sample size, the size of which was unrealistic to achieve given the time the study was given to be held. In addition to this, a quantitative study would not be able to give the kind of data wanted, meaning that more in-depth and elaborate answers were wanted. When writing a manifesto it is important to have clear points and arguments, none of which you can base on simple graphs and math – it was clear that asking the professionals directly what they felt the arguments were was the right way to go.

Knowing this, the study was designed with keeping certain characteristics in mind. Firstly being that there are multiple perspectives to every problem, meaning that every participant may have a different view of a potential problem and that the questionnaire should account for this. Secondly, the questions had to pertain to the problems suspected to impact the industry and its workers and medium, and any question that did not had to pertain to data-analysis. Thirdly, because the manifesto was meant to be written with the

study as its base, the questions had to give deep insight into what each participant's thoughts and opinions are when it comes to these industry issues. This means that a lot of questions didn't directly ask about issues within the industry, but rather asked about thoughts around statistics, other studies, and anecdotal evidence of problematic events within the industry. And such, a question like "If you could change one thing within the industry, what would that be?" is very insightful as it gives way for what the participant fears might impact the industry negatively, which correlates with the study goal.

The study was supposed to be bias-free, as any scholarly study should be, however because of the difficulty of mentioning fears of potential problems without having a fear of such potential problems, some bias found its way into the questionnaire. Some questions may ask things such as "Is the potential death of the indie games industry something you have considered or thought about lately?" which suggests that the indie games industry is in danger, which does not necessarily correlate to the participant's personal beliefs. However, this bias was commented on by several of the participants, all of which mentioned it was a good thing. They mentioned that they were important questions to ask, and even though they didn't agree with their bias it let them explain why their own beliefs didn't coincide with the question, further passing down their opinions and insight – which was what was wanted from the study. Therefore this bias is not seen as a problem, but rather part of why some of the answers were received, when otherwise they may have been left out, or have been less elaborate or expanded upon.

4.3. Data collection and analysis

The participants were all contacted through social media, and their interviews held through a service of the participant's choosing (for instance, most interviews were held using *Discord*, and one using *Google Meet*). The interviews' audio was recorded through *OBS Studio*. The interviews spanned different lengths depending on the participants' answers, ranging from around forty minutes to the longest of around one and one half hour. The sole contributor to this difference was the length and elaboration of each participant's answers.

The data collected was immense, partly due to the long and elaborative answers given from the study. This resulted in the scrapping of the planned transcription of the interviews, and data-analysis was instead performed by cross-referencing the recordings. This is essentially very similar and gave very similar results (as part of the data was transcribed before the effort was given up on), resulting in no loss of insight without spending an ostentatious amount of time transcribing it.

While the participants were generally quite clear on what their opinions and views were, and their answers were well elaborated and easy to follow, their answers weren't all that was wanted from the study. As mentioned in the study process, by cross-referencing the data it's possible to gain an understanding on what kind of developer might think what. For instance, a more experienced developer might think something may be more or less impactful than what a less experienced developer thinks, and similarly a AAA-developer

might have other concerns than what an indie developer might have. Therefore – by having this in mind whilst cross-referencing the data by listening back and forth to recordings – connections to the type of developer, their experience and the like and their opinions and concerns can be made. While these potential connections' impact on the conclusion and manifesto is uncertain, perhaps it is that more experienced developers find certain things problematic due to their experience, which less experienced developers do not. This could mean that new developers might be taken advantage of, as they do not know of said things their superiors might find problematic. In short: new workforce comes in oblivious to potentially harmful problems, these problems affect them, and the young workforce might get burned out, or worse. This underlines just how important this manifesto is for our industry – if the medium workers are unaware of its problems and workings, people might get taken advantage of, or worst case scenario get hurt, perhaps through crunch (a well-known problematic phenomenon within the industry). This would give an understanding of the scope of the potential issues as presented from the study, who is affected and in what way. This could come to form arguments that help drive the points of the manifesto, and could help push the changes that may be suggested with them.

5. Execution

A draft of the manifesto has been procured, and following is an explanation of how the project was executed. This includes what the questionnaire contained, how the interviews were planned and held, how the data was parsed and what it showed, and how the manifesto was written.

The questionnaire made for the interviews was written during a two week long period with careful consideration of its contents. A draft-questionnaire was made consisting of a couple less questions than the finalized version, which was used during a pilot-study consisting of one participant who is a junior-developer in a AAA-company. After the pilot-study, the questionnaire was further developed, with some questions added, many rephrased and the entire questionnaire restructured. This new structure allowed a smoother gradient of weight in the questions asked, as well as it categorized the different questions allowing the participant to more easily follow and understand the flow of the interview. The questionnaire in its entirety can be found in Addendum #1. It is important to note that follow-up questions and rephrased questions or examples given by the researcher are absent from the addendum, as they were not originally part of the questionnaire unless otherwise stated, and were thus left out.

The interviews were semi-structured and questions were added as follow-ups and/or rephrased as necessary. The intent of the interviews was to attain as much information about the participants' perspectives and opinions of the video game industry and medium as possible, and this semi-structured method worked very well for this. A purely quantitative approach was considered but ultimately rejected due to the low reach of the research in combination with the amount of participants needed, as well as the qualitative nature of the desired data. A semi-structured interview was then decided upon to be the better method.

The interviews were preceded by a disclaimer (also a part of Addendum #1) containing information about the interview, its contents, how it was to be recorded and why, and the status of the participants' anonymity during the study. The interviews had to be recorded to preserve the data within, and therefore consent to record the participants' voices was required. After a spoken agreement, the recording was initialized and the interview began. The disclaimer was, for each participant, read aloud verbatim to ensure their complete understanding of the study's purpose and their rights.

The participants were contacted via social media where they agreed to participate, as well as provided a time when the interview could take place. The interviews were held on either *Google Meet* or *Discord* depending on participant preference, and the audio was recorded using *OBS Studio*. The data was transcribed and the manifesto was written using *Google Docs*.

6. Results and Artefact Creation

The study gave a lot of information regarding the potential of a power-disparity and subsequent problems of one in the games industry. Aside from clearly confirming the hypothesis as described in chapter three (3), the data is described in more detail. Furthermore, each part of the artefact is explained alongside what information was used to shape them, what parts are backed up by the study and what parts rely more on anecdotal evidence from other sources. These manifesto-chapters are discussed in length to give more insight as to why each chapter was written and what it means to accomplish.

6.1. The participants

There were four participants total in the study, three of which were independent developers at the time or that have worked mainly in the independent side of the industry. The other participant was a AAA-developer. Their experience and time in the industry varied, from a junior-developer with little professional experience to industry experts with over a decade of professional experience.

The first participant was a junior AAA-developer, who felt that the industry had few problems and that it is a very welcoming and kind industry. They could not argue in depth about the prospects of problems pertaining to that of a power-disparity in the industry, unlike the other participants.

The second participant was a hobbyist, working a day job and making games on the side. They had worked in the industry, both as part of an indie-publisher and as hobbyists, for more than half a decade (exact time was not determined). They could argue that there are problems in the industry, and that they may derive from a power-disparity issue between the AAA and the indies, as well as between the industry and the medium.

The third participant was an independent solo-working developer, having worked in the industry for over a decade. They had a lot of industry experience from working with it first-hand. They mentioned many problems they perceived as threatening to the industry and medium of games and could talk about them in great detail, even being able to discuss potential solutions and developments to help diminish the effects of them.

The fourth participant was someone who had co-owned an independent game-studio, had spent many years publicly speaking and lecturing about games and game development, and is currently working as a consultant or councillor for independent game developers. They had spent many years in the industry at the time of the interview, and they spoke in depth about not only the current state of the industry but also the industry and medium historically. They spoke in great detail about issues they felt were problematic for the industry and the medium much like participant two and participant three, and was like participant three able to discuss potential solutions and ways the industry could grow to diminish their effects. Due to their work with other developers, they had many stories to tell of how these problems affected several of the clients they had worked for, one especially worth mentioning being that of a studio having to change

their game's story's location from Jakarta, Indonesia to Seattle, U.S.A. because of ways the industry favours its western primary audience.

No one participant's words were solely responsible for points of the manifesto, but rather the participants' accounts of issues they had perceived to be problematic in the industry were used together to base the points of the manifesto. More in-depth coverage of the data collected and how they shaped the manifesto can be found in the following sections 6.2. And 6.3..

6.2. The data

The interviews gave a lot of valuable information pertaining to industry and medium issues and problems. While all of the interviews gave important perspectives, some were seemingly much more well-informed of the industry's workings and could give much heftier answers to all questions in comparison to some other participants. The one defining factor to this was that the longer the participant had worked in the game industry and with the game medium, the deeper an understanding they had of its workings and issues. While the participants that had worked in the industry for a relatively shorter time had no fears regarding certain issues, these issues were rather problematic for the participants that had worked in the industry for a longer time. Due to this, it became very apparent that future participants would be best suited to have worked in the industry for a long time. However, considering a few factors – the independent-industry leaning nature of the manifesto, the previous interviews, the difficulty of finding a suitable, accessible AAA-participant – it was decided that further interviews would be unnecessary.

After analyzing the interviews, mainly through listening to them to compare answers, as well as by the act of transcribing them, there were two connections found to have potential significance in the study, although only one of them had much weight. One is that the AAA-developing participant without long-time experience in the industry seemed to not think of any problems the way that the independent-developing participants did. While they mentioned that potential problems as those mentioned in the interview were not largely of any issue, the other respondents thought the opposite. It is unclear whether this has to do with lack of long-term experience with the industry in general or if it is because of their AAA-position in the industry. However, since the question of whether AAA-developers think of problems in a different manner than what independent developers do is not part of the hypothesis, and because of the sheer amount of data gained by other participants, this has not been further investigated. The other connection found was that the longer term the experience of a developer is, the more insight they seemed to have of potential issues and problems in the industry. This might come off as obvious, however it's important to note because the industry isn't solely made up of senior developers but rather a great mix of people with all sorts of experience and competence. Therefore it may be even more important to procure this manifesto, as it can stand as a clear explanation of the industry's current state for those that may lack the wisdom long-term experience can give.

The interviews also confirmed the hypothesis as defined – there is definitely a power-disparity in the industry that could have the potential to hurt the medium in the long-term. The data speaks of predatory behaviour at the hands of the high-capital actors, the under-representation of marginalized voices, platforms that ignore the prevalence and presence of independently developed games and the mention of prevalent crunch. There is also a complete understanding across all participants that games are a cultural phenomenon and a creative, artistic industry much like cinema and written works – yet there is evidence that it is not being legally considered as such. The data confirmed that this is a problem, and that the medium is being treated unfairly by its correlating industry.

If the problems found are to ever have the potential of being relieved, the entire community of the medium has to work together. If a large portion (perhaps even the vast majority) of developers within the medium do not have the experience and wisdom to themselves grasp the issues underlined by those that have said experience, the medium stands no chance of working together to solve them. It is therefore, as understood by the data gathered and the connections made with it, imperative that this manifesto is procured and released publicly so that the creative, cultural and artistic medium of games and its correlating industry may work together to solve its issues. Failure to solve these issues are theorized to have consequences including, but not limited to the stunted growth of the creative and artistic medium, its cultural and emotional impact and resonance, the health and financial stability of the workers within the industry and the continued (if not worsened) under-representation of marginalized voices and cultures.

6.3. The manifesto

The manifesto was written in a few stages, which are explained in the following section. The finished manifesto can be found attached as Addendum #2. In this chapter there will be a detailed explanation of each manifesto chapter and what data backed each chapter up and how and/or why.

The first stage of writing the manifesto was to write the issues pertaining to the data gathered, along with potential solutions to them in a listed format to act as “punchy”, attention-grabbing statements. This was done in order to make sure that even those that might not intend to read the entire manifesto can quickly and in a forceful way understand the points and arguments within. The second was to write the manifesto, one chapter at a time, with each chapter beginning with a question or statement pertaining to the chapter’s argument and statement, which is written in bold at the end. These chapters are structured in a way to problematize the issues as understood by the data gathered from the study, and to continually beat their importance into the reader’s face. This was done in order to assure the reader of the importance of the issues as mentioned, and to inspire a lust for wanting to participate in the process of solving them. In order for the manifesto to have any sort of impact and to lead to any kind of change, it is important to create as large a movement as possible with as many actors of game development as possible. It seems very clear from the gathered data that the industry

completely ignores the voices of the medium, and since this seems to be causing some (if not all) of the problems written in the manifesto, unionizing the medium's voices is imperative to enforce the changes as necessary. The third stage was to write an inspiring introduction to the manifesto that fits the top of the front page, before the listed statements.

The "final" step is to (after ensuring a high standard of quality is reached throughout the document) contact each participant and ask them to read through the manifesto, just in case there has been some sort of misunderstanding during writing. At this stage they are to also be asked if they wish to sign the manifesto as collaborators, an important step in raising awareness to the work. Their signatures would let future readers know that prevalent voices in the industry believe in the manifesto and its statements – incentivizing them to do so as well. This would act as an effort to increase the believability of the manifesto, as only having the name of some unheard-of developer (its author) as the sole driving force of the work could be detrimental to its influence.

Following is a look at each of the five chapters/points of the manifesto, and an explanation as to why those particular points were written and how they are backed up by the data collected and analysed.

6.3.1. Games are an artistic medium and a cultural phenomenon, and we need to understand and accept it as that and nothing else. Legally consider games as art.

This point was one of the easiest to write, mainly because the data was so overwhelmingly supportive of it. Every participant had no doubt that games (in this case video games specifically) is an artistic medium, and one with cultural impact at that. Some participants also mentioned that the medium is viewed in a different light by other parties, and acknowledged that it is not legally considered art juristically. While technology is an important part of video games, it was agreed that video games are, despite its use of technology for its function, an artistic and creative medium much to the likings of literature and cinema. As it stands, video games can have their content worked juristically as if it were technology in the same sense as other software (like websites, computing systems and other code-based software), meaning that it is subject to patents and classifications that may prohibit its growth in the future. Even ignoring that particular issue, this classification of the medium means that it is not accepted as an artistic medium, essentially blatantly ignoring its cultural and emotional prevalence and importance. Every participant mentioned how the games medium has a cultural significance and an emotional impact, comparing it to cinema and other artistic media, and so ignoring this means that a large part of the influence the medium has could be ignored. This simply because it does not have to be cared for, because it on paper does not have these qualities – it is technology, information, not something that in technicality has any meaningful impact. This argument was then made to prove this mentality wrong, and to strive to correct this mislabeling.

6.3.2. The industry has shifted and we need to differentiate AAA and indies to ensure that the medium does not become undemocratized and inaccessible to any party. An indie-tag on store-platforms is not enough.

When asked whether or not the potential death of the independent games industry was a concern or recent thought of the participant, most (four out of five) said no. However, this gave great insight into what other problems might be. One participant mentioned that the greatest threat is not the growth of the competing AAA-games itself, but rather the product of what will happen in case storefronts and similar platforms disregard indie games in this context. If AAA-games are more profitable for the storefront owners (such as Valve's *Steam*), they are inclined to favour these games in order to maximize profit. This means that indie games would get disregarded for the favour of AAA-games, and thus cement AAA more into the industry whilst the independent department gets left behind. If AAA-games grow into Free-to-Play, and indie-games stay premium products (indie-games do not possess the capability to become Free-to-Play to the same extent that AAA does), the market will grow to favour AAA-games more. This is not the problem in and of itself, the participant argued, but rather is in the hands of storefronts. If storefronts do not differentiate AAA and indie, despite the increased profitability of AAA games in comparison, the sales and economical sustainability in the indie games industry may very well be impacted negatively. The participant mentioned *Game-Pass* solutions to be part of a remedy here, as it allows premium products to be part of a subscription-based service, which would keep indie-games in-line with AAA-games.

One participant said that yes, they have worried about the potential future death of the indie games industry. They mentioned that the games industry goes through life-cycles, and every so often "dies". However, it was mentioned that it does come back, often stronger, to sustain itself against the growth of the AAA industry. The participant mentioned that there is a struggle to ensure that the indie games industry will be strong enough to survive its next potential "death", which is evident given the exponential growth of the AAA industry and the capped size and capital scale of indie games. AAA industry has an infinitely tall ceiling and an uncapped growth, only limited by the economics of the world around them – the more time that passes the more the industry grows, much to the liking of "Moore's Law". The indie games industry has a very limited ceiling, often capped at a few hundred thousand U.S. dollars, compared to the AAA industry's hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars. Any greater growth means that the indie company would grow into a so-called "B-game studio", something in-between AAA and independent, and eventually grow into a AAA-company. This means that the indie games industry has to work in other ways to survive other than simply growing economically, as their economic growth cannot compete with the AAA industry. This point of the manifesto is therefore quite important – we indeed need to differentiate the AAA and indie games industries, and allow them both a part of the market where they are given equal exposure, so that neither of their impact on the medium is lost.

6.3.3. Marginalized developers must be given equal opportunities to work independently as they will be given to work in AAA as their presence in the industry grows. Their cultures and voices are already under-represented and an assimilation of them will further this.

This point in particular was mainly based on one particular participants' discussion on the topic of marginalized developers. This participant is an expert on the industry, and spends a lot of time counseling and consultant-work for game studios, which includes a lot of work with said marginalized developers. They mentioned that whilst the marginalized devs of the world are growing their influence, whether it be by local game jam sites, an influx in studio and game development, or a "unionization" like that of the south americas, these regions are gaining industry influence slowly but surely. However, they also mentioned that this may not be in their best interest – at least that is not the full story. The participant mentioned explicitly that these regions will prove to the world that there is a market by creating their own spaces in the industry, but that they then "will get wrecked by the western companies moving into those spaces to make more money. So they will be assimilated, effectively." This is concerning because this would mean that there is a real possibility of the future holding more exploitation of these marginalized regions of the industry at the hands of richer, more influential western companies – meaning that their ability to create art will be inhibited. If the marginalized regions all get exploited to work for the already influential western companies instead of creating their own art, the resonance and influence of their own culture will diminish as their work will instead go towards actively increasing the influence and resonance of their assimilators' culture instead. Thus, as far as the artistic expression and art-aspect of the medium goes, their contributions would become very limited/inhibited. It is therefore very necessary to ensure that no assimilation occurs that does not give these marginalized regions equal opportunities to contribute to both the global and local gaming spaces; while increasing profit for the AAA-industry would increase funding for games in general, stunting the growth of their artistic influence (or outright returning their artistic influence on the industry to what it has been before, which is more likely the potential outcome) is not worth what gain the assimilation would give, especially the economy of the industry which would liken the assimilation to that of exploitation. This in combination with the probable outcome of their own local cultural and artistic expression being disregarded as it is not as profitable means that this should not happen. Games are an artistic medium, as explained many times before, and thus denying them the possibility to profit off of their own art is not right. And considering this study's purpose – other than having determined that there are indeed issues in the industry pertaining to a power-disparity – is to produce an artifact with the intention to aspire change, this point fits well within the manifesto.

Marginalized regions' cultures, such as middle-eastern or south-east asian culture is not profitable, this participant said, because of its vast differences with western/north-western culture which is one of video games' main target audiences (because of these regions' vast influence on the market). This led to, in their words, one

of the most heart-breaking stories of game-dev they had come across in their career, where an Indonesia-based game development studio had to change their game's location from Jakarta, Indonesia to Seattle, U.S.. This meant leaving out a lot of cultural aspects such as customs, economy and currency because the game's intricacies would be "too other", when its premise of running a coffee-shop was already a bit "other", and as such in order to not limit their market potential the developers had to cut a lot of their culture out of the game. While it makes sense that, in the industry, niche cultures do not promote sales for the more prevalent audiences when they favour their more prevalent culture, it is sad to see artists having to cater to other cultures rather than promoting and expressing their own. Multiple participants mentioned that marginalized developers are being taken advantage of in this regard, yet that their influence is growing and may lead to more freedom in the future. However, this freedom could potentially be taken away from those developers should they be assimilated, and thus taking care to ensure that there is equal opportunity in both their own art and culture as there would be in working with the more prevalent ones will be very important.

6.3.4. Publishers should under no circumstance bargain for more than money and must not receive IP-rights and/or technology they themselves did not develop. Publishers and developers alike must not take credit for work they did not do.

This is one of the points in the artefact that are not heavily based on the interviews, but instead on the anecdotal evidence from the problem identification-chapter – stories and posts by developers that talk about harmful and predatory relationships/deals with publishers. This builds upon the first point of the manifesto, about the classification and definition of what games are. For instance, EA (Electronic Arts) tried to scam SMS (Slightly Mad Studios) out of their "technology", meaning essentially everything they had developed for the game they were contracted to make (Walker, 2017). This meant that they would be cut out of the deal they had with EA, their work taken away from them, essentially leaving them with nothing. Luckily they worked around it by creating a second company to "host" their "technology", turning their "technology" into "third-party technology" – something EA could not take and essentially abusing a loop-hole in their contract. If a company is contracted by a publisher that employs these kinds of tactics, and said company is unable to either hire the legal help needed to dissect the contract, or maybe cannot feasibly create such a daughter-company, they are almost guaranteed to be swindled in similar ways. This makes the games industry a very predatory and unsafe place to work, as you as a company or employee never know if you will be taken advantage of only to be left with nothing.

It is very important for the industry to stop employing these tactics as it as previously mentioned contributes to a very predatory and toxic environment that simply should not exist. One can argue that these companies are only "doing capitalism right", and while that is true, it is morally wrong to take advantage of hard-working creatives and developers, leaving them without work or funds. While it is true that removing competitors is profitable, it does not make it more "right", especially in a creative industry where each individual art piece matters for artistic expression, and both

emotional and cultural resonance. Not to mention that the industry is already one of (if not the) riskiest industries of the world, where no effort is ever guaranteed success (especially for smaller companies without established audiences), making it predatory and unsafe because the smaller companies have to – as mentioned in the study interviews – rely on publishers to compete is unnecessary and exploitative. We should focus on furthering the medium and allowing this emotional and cultural resonance the medium is capable of, rather than extorting smaller developers of either their individual property or technology.

Wanting to make the industry a safer place in terms of stability is a noble goal, although quite naïve considering that it has earlier been established that the industry generally does not listen to the medium. However, hoping that the medium bands together to make the industry listen, it is hoped that change can be brought upon the industry enough to persuade corporations to listen to the artists for once. However unlikely it may be, on the off-chance that it is actually successful this point has a comfortable place on the manifesto.

6.3.5. Time is never a resource to bargain with. Art takes time and crunch is not part of any decent future ideal. Prohibit crunch.

This final point was the second one to not necessarily be reliant on the interviews. While it does take some information from for example the seventeenth question of the questionnaire (Addendum #1), which asked for the participant’s opinion on outsourcing and crunch in the industry, it is mostly based on the documented phenomenon of crunch in general. Crunch, a concept of working overtime on projects during great stress, and often without compensation, is a common occurrence within the games industry (ea_spouse, 2004). Crunch has a variety of consequential effects on a worker’s health as it is a form of occupational stress, including ulcers and worsening or limiting the recovery from diseases such as cancer (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Quick and Henderson (2016) recognize three types of demands as causes of this harmful stress, each of which are present in the game industry’s crunch. They include lack of employee decision latitude, which they mention is especially harmful in contexts of high-strain jobs where employees lack control over the work situation, which the games industry fit into quite perfectly given the working-environment of crunch. The second aspect they mention is the uncertainty of workplace aspects. Not knowing one’s actions’ consequences are among the stress-factors here, which also fit into the model of industry crunch. And, considering other consequences of stress includes an irritable mood and the consequences of that (amongst other things), and the fact that crunch-time itself is a poorly managed conflict at work, the third demand can be assumed as well. This third demand is described as a “poorly managed conflict at work” (Quick & Henderson, 2016).

The anecdotal evidence (ea_spouse, 2004; Hall, 2020) along with the consensus from the study that crunch exists and is a problem, as well as the corporate side of the industry neglecting the artistic aspect of games confirms that crunch is a very toxic and dangerous part of the industry. It is no joke, and considering the health-related

consequences (Quick & Henderson, 2016) of it, it should be abolished. Considering this issue of crunch stems from mismanagement and utter corporate negligence and insolence, it is very much unnecessary and due to its consequences a very important issue to remove from our industry. Thus it warranted its place in the manifesto.

7. Conclusions and Future Studies

Conclusively, the study definitely supports the hypothesis and there is definitely a power-disparity issue within the gaming industry that causes several problems, related to workers' well-being, the development of the medium, marginalized developers and cultures' limited expression, as well as the future development of the industry. Through the study it could also be determined that the more experience a developer has, the more in-depth they could discuss issues pertaining to their workplace and the industry at large. However, due to the small sample size (albeit the large size of the questionnaire and the amount of data gathered from each participant) there might be some bias. Five developers were interviewed, where only one was from the AAA-side of the industry. This sampling-bias was because of the difficulty of contacting AAA-developers, leading to a majority of participants hailing from the independent part of the industry. However, the support the hypothesis received from each participant from the indie-side of the industry was immense. Since there was only one participant that did not support these issues that the other participants mentioned in great detail (the AAA-participant who also could not discuss their reasoning in great detail), which was also the participant with the least industry experience, the general consensus is that these problems do exist in the industry and that the conclusion is valid. The fear here is that the connection between low industry experience and less of an understanding of the issues industry veterans have could mean that new industry workers do not know of many industry issues when they start working in it, yet are still subject to their consequences. This, if true, could mean that there is a need to express and advertise these issues so that everyone working in the industry is aware, especially if it can come to cause them harm (be it physically, from stress, or economically from an unstable workplace). However, future studies would have to be carried out to determine whether this is the case or not, as the low sample-size in this study merely shows its possibility.

Further research with a larger sample size could therefore be beneficial in this study, as more AAA-influence could, possibly, contradict the current results and as such provide different conclusions. However, the support received during this study along with the very in-depth answers given means this outcome seems very unlikely, and the types of response received seems to rely more on industry experience in general rather than what type of experience (AAA or Indie, specifically). Participants with a lot of industry experience could talk about experiences they and others they had worked for had had, their effects and causes, and many of these issues of the industry as though they had prepared to talk about them many times before. In fact, considering one participant's status and current work in the industry, this seems to be the actual case. The AAA-participant was the one with the least industry experience of all participants, which would most likely be the reason they could not discuss things as in depth as other participants. It was notable how much industry experience mattered in the study. It could therefore be suggested that it was a question of experience rather than perspective

in this case, but the only way to confirm it would be to interview more AAA-developers with more industry experience.

The manifesto was, with the plan described in chapter 4, quite simple to write, being guided by the study and the anecdotal evidence used for some of the points as described in depth in chapter 6.3.. Should this study be retried with a larger sample size in the future, it would seem from this study as performed that writing a manifesto in that instance would be just as simple, if not even simpler given the greater amount of information the increased sample-size would give.

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Addendum #1 - Interview Questionnaire

Disclaimer before recording:

Before we begin I have some things I need to go through. Some things about the interview, and some things about research ethics and the like. But I would also like to first of all thank you so much for choosing to participate in this study, it means a lot.

I must also mention that I cannot comment or add my own opinions or perspective of things as it can be leading, so please forgive me in case you would ever want me to.

You have chosen to take part in my work by participating in this interview. There are quite a few questions, regarding both work in the games industry, the game industry itself, and questions relating to the people within it. You are not at all forced to participate, and if you wish to skip a question that is okay. If you become uncomfortable, or otherwise do not wish to continue, simply say so (or leave instantly) as there is no obligation for you to continue. The interview will also be recorded, although it is completely anonymous – nothing will be connected to you as a person. After the manifesto has been written, the recordings themselves are removed. Is this okay with you? After I'm done writing, I'll also have to reach out to you again to ask you to read it, in case something has been misunderstood or misinterpreted. Is this okay with you?

Initial questions for data comparison:

1. What gender do you identify as, if any?
2. What country are you from and do you live in, and are you part of any minority group?
3. Do you or have you worked within the game development industry?
 - Do you work in indie, AAA or somewhere inbetween?
 - What is your position, and have you had different positions in the industry?
 - In which country is your place of work situated?

If no: What is your current type of work?

Interview start:

Category 1: Your work

1. What is your dream job within the industry?
1. Do you work with high or low budget titles?
 - How do you feel about competing with other companies?
2. Do you feel that you get to express yourself creatively in the work that you do?
3. Do you feel that other industry workers can express themselves creatively more or less than you?
4. Do you feel that your voice has an impact on your workplace?
5. What is your passion when it comes to game development?
 - Do you feel the games industry is fueled by a passion to make games?

Category 2: The industry

6. Can you describe to me what you feel the differences between AAA and indie are?
7. How would *you* describe the industry's room for creative expression?
8. Does reach play a part in creative expression?
9. Do you feel that your voice has an impact on the industry as a whole?
 - Do you feel that other industry voices have more or less impact than yours?
 - Do you feel that the voices of developers in general have an impact on the industry?
10. In your eyes, what direction is the industry growing in?
11. More and more games are released free-to-play as time goes on, and service-based monetization is expensive to start and uphold.
 - If the industry and the overall audience will favour these kinds of games, do you think indie developers will be able to compete with AAA?
 - Do you think this would affect the room for creative expression in games? Especially indies in this case.

12. Describe to me how you think the room for experimentation and medium development is in game development.
 - Do you feel that there is a lot or little effort put into the development of the medium today? (if mentioning technology: “and if we’re not talking technology?”)
 - What actors (AAA, indies, devs or publishers) contribute more or less to this development?

13. What do you think the indie game market will look like in 5 to 10 years from now?

14. The norm for storytelling in games is high production value and this average production value keeps increasing, with new methods for monetization emerging as a result.
 - Would you say that this increase of average production value is good or bad? How come?
 - What would this mean for indie games?

15. In the 80s, bedroom coding was the "indie market" of the time. This market died when high production cost became mandatory with the reintroduction of home consoles. Do you think the indie market is in danger now like it was back then?

16. Is the potential death of the indie games industry something you have considered or thought about lately?

17. With the increase in production costs comes the increase of working developers and outsourcing. A recent study by People Make Games revealed that many AAA-publishers outsource work overseas to keep production costs down, resulting in unpaid overtime for overseas workers. These workers mentioned that the industry is taking advantage of their passion.
 - How does this make you feel?

18. When you think of video games as a product in the industry, would you say they are strictly software and technology, or works of art?
 - While all video games make use of technology, and no video game can be one without it, do *you* think games should be considered to be software and technology *or* an artistic medium like how movies, books, etc. are?
 - How do you think the high-capital actors of the industry view video games in this sense?

Category 3: The industry and the world

19. Following the patenting of games and predatory behaviour at the hands of publishers, as well as the Six Days in Fallujah controversies, do you think the normalization of high production value will harm the industry?
- Do you think this could harm the *developmental* and creative efforts from the indies that would not be able to financially compete?
 - Do you think this could harm the creative and artistic expression, as well as limit the voices of marginalized developers?
20. According to statista.com, Latin America and “Middle East and Africa” held 3.8% and 3.4% of global revenue in games respectively.
- What do you think may be the reasons for these regions’ low contributions?
 - Do you think these regions’ visibility in the west/far east is related to this?
 - Do you think this limits these culturally rich regions in their creative expression within the medium?
21. *If* the norm for storytelling is the high production value offered only by the AAA, and the industry is heavily prevalent in the northern west (and south-east), the political and artistic reach of many might be impacted. Do you think marginalized voices in the industry will have increased reach in the future?
22. Do you believe that the high-capital actors of the industry (AAA publishers and the like) care about the medium or its artistic and cultural potential and impact?

Final Question:

23. If you could change one thing with the industry, what would that be?
- Why?

Addendum #2 - The Manifesto

Our industry and its creative, artistic medium is developing in a way most unsustainable. It is one of the riskiest industries in the world, and it comes packaged with poor working conditions, uncertain futures, and predatory and unhealthy practices. In fear of what the future might hold for our developing medium of interactive art, I took it upon myself to write this manifesto outlining its current state and ways we need to change it to ensure its sustainable growth. This is based on interviews with industry professionals – artists of passion with their own perspectives of our industry. May we together bring a future of games that is sustainable, accessible and welcoming.

1. Games are an artistic medium and a cultural phenomenon, and we need to understand and accept it as that and nothing else. Legally consider games as art, just like cinema, graphical art and literature.
2. The industry has shifted and we need to differentiate AAA and indies to ensure that the medium does not become undemocratized and inaccessible to any party. An indie-tag on store-platforms is not enough.
3. Marginalized developers must be given equal opportunities to work independently as they will be given to work in AAA as their presence in the industry grows. Their cultures and voices are already under-represented and an assimilation of them will only further this.
4. Publishers should under no circumstance bargain for more than money and must not receive IP-rights and/or technology they themselves did not develop. Publishers and developers alike must not take credit for work they did not do.
5. Time is never a resource to bargain with. Art takes time and crunch is not part of any decent future ideal. Prohibit crunch.

Christopher Robin Liljenström 2021

1. What are video games?

When I first entered this industry, or rather when I began being a creative in the medium of video games, I had a perception of what the medium and its industry was like. I was of course naïve, and my perception of it was flawed. The more time I spent trying to understand it and the more I tried to make myself work in it many things became apparent to me:

I thought the games industry was a passion-driven and creative space. **It is not** – it is a money-driven industry where conforming to tested methods and reiteration of the same core ideas paves the way for the vast majority of titles.

I thought it was an industry where everyone's voices were heard – again, **it is not**. Marginalized voices in the industry have to constantly work in the favour of the more prevalent audience (north-west and south-eastern audiences) in a way where their culture is being set aside because it is not profitable.

I lastly thought the industry was a safe and stable place to work. **It is not** – the industry as it stands today is one of the riskiest industries in the world, with unstable jobs depending on crunch and a very toxic gaming community working against the safety of many of the developers working for them.

While this is all true, it's not the full truth. The industry is indeed a harsh place to be, with AAA leading with a wagon fuelled by cash, narrowing the road the further it goes. But the medium itself is not like this. The creative medium of games – video games in this case – is one of the most creative, endearing, interesting and fun places to be and work in. Nobody working with the medium is not passionate about their work, and millions of developers get to express themselves creatively every day. But sadly the industry around the medium is very different. I've talked to many developers, and they've all mentioned the same: video games are an artistic medium, much like movies, books, paintings and the like. Yet, they are not considered by the industry to be more than software, giving our artistic medium the same legal treatment as web-browsers, music-playing apps and chatting systems. While software is an undeniable part of video games and no game can be one without it, video games are so much more than systems with user interaction. Video games are works of art with a great demand for cooperation and communication in order to come to fruition, with the result being emotionally resonating pieces of living art. Entire worlds are contained within code filtered through a screen and their stories have great emotional and cultural impact, especially today where digital culture has been largely assimilated into our real culture.

You don't feel the same when watching the *Warcraft* movie as you do when you play *Warcraft*, despite them telling the same (or a similar) story. That's because both movies and video games are artforms with cultural and emotional impact, even though they

work differently and give way to different emotions. Much like how reading *the Hobbit* and watching the movies are different experiences, even though you can derive much of the same from them. Like other cultural and creative media, games need to be considered one for the industry to move forward in a sustainable and healthy way all around the world. This means:

Games are an artistic medium and a cultural phenomenon, and we need to understand and accept it as that and nothing else. Legally consider games as art, just like cinema, graphical art and literature.

2. The indie games industry is dying, and this is nothing new.

The indie games industry is very much a living part of the medium, thriving in lower production value with a drive to innovate as competition is rough due to the saturated market. This is soon to change, although hopefully not for long. During the ages the indie games market has been killed off several times, only to reappear stronger, much like a legendary phoenix. Be it due to the resurgence of home consoles in the 1980's or its decline in the 2010's, indie games have died off only to resurface again, stronger. Or rather, we work to ensure it does, as with the growth of AAA the pressure on the indie games grows as well. But this isn't a sustainable relationship. **Eventually the AAA might branch out enough to never provide a clearing for indies to shine through.**

While both AAA and indie games alike are enjoyed many times by the same audiences, they are very different. We live in a spreadsheet society, where we know what works and what will not sell. When you work in the industry like that you don't work with games in the same way, and the indie industry was made to be the punk teenager standing out against the strictly capitalistic industry. No spreadsheets, only a creative mind with a story to tell and no suit-clad boss to tell you what the charts say. However, AAA games and independent games are considered one and the same. This is a huge issue, especially when AAA is growing exponentially when indie games aren't growing at nearly the same pace, if at all – and those that do grow become B-game- or AAA-studios instead. This leads to a large gap between the two, where indies cannot compete with AAA and will eventually become obsolete once again until something resurrects it. **If something resurrects it, which is never a guarantee.**

The economical growth of the industry the last few years has been no joke. Games are bigger than ever, costing more and giving more in return each year and the path we're heading in is one like the concept of Moore's Law and its cousin, *Moore's Wall* – we're growing so much that we cannot grow forward anymore, but rather have to grow sideways. AAA is branching out into free-to-play and service based monetization, and while this ensures continued financial growth (to some extent, perhaps not infinitely) it means a large threat to the indie market as it is impossible for independent studios with low capital to compete. There will always be a market for indie games, so this in its own right is not the problem itself, but rather the problem is how the industry will conform to the large gap between the AAA and indie we're about to see. The largest store-platform for games is undeniably *Steam*, and Valve's efforts to promote less profitable (in comparison to AAA) indie games are next to none. While this makes sense from a capitalistic and industry standpoint, that is exactly my point. We're working with a culturally significant creative medium that is ruled solely by capitalistic endeavors, where the money talks louder than the art itself. While money makes the world go around, **the cultural, creative and emotional significance of the games medium is too great to not care for.**

There is therefore a need for platforms to cater to these different types of games – not because they are very different in terms of the medium, but because they work so differently in the industry. AAA competes against itself, while independent studios compete with indie publishers that work to create a market need for themselves. Not to mention hobbyist developers that don't compete at all, but instead focus on their creative expression (which is just as important). Indie was never meant to compete directly with AAA, but rather to stand out against it, and due to shifts in the market it very often has to rely on funding from third parties as costs to promote and stand out has become too high without it. With the estimation that about fifty thousand dollars is an appropriate amount of money to spend on advertising an indie game, it quickly sinks in that the dream of a sustainable job as a solo indie game developer is rarely achievable in the industry of today. This isn't necessarily bad, as it provides sustainability for those who seek it (albeit in the riskiest industry on earth) and a ground for relatively even chance of reach for hobbyists that don't seek to compete but share the same audience.

This isn't only for the benefit of indies either – many (some may argue *most*) new unique ideas and solutions come from indies and hobbyists, and AAA has shown to often take these creative solutions and improve them and iterate them into their own titles, if they are proven to work. Separating the markets will therefore not only give indies the light they need to survive, but also give them and hobbyists the light they need for AAA to notice them more, further developing the medium. It will also help both focus more on their respective markets, which can help provide financial growth for both without the sacrifice of the other. AAA would continue to compete against itself, and indies would compete against itself to create more unique and experimental products to see who gets the publishing contract – and their forced experimentation is very necessary for our medium to develop. **Indies are an established market and part of the industry with their own audience and their presence on platforms should reflect that.**

There is a need to differentiate the AAA games industry and the indie games industry on a consumer level as they do not function the same and catering to only one of them will have dire consequences. Catering only to the AAA industry will consequently hurt the medium, whilst catering only to the indie industry will consequently hurt the commercial aspects of the industry. Indie is taken much more seriously now compared to a decade or so ago, and we should therefore take its place on the market much more seriously too. This is not something developers can do, but something we need to push platforms to do *together*. Only together will the industry listen to the medium and right now we need to tell the industry of the indie's significance to the health of the medium at large. Indies will never stop being indies neither in spirit or craft, but **:The industry has shifted and we need to differentiate AAA and indies to ensure that the medium does not become undemocratized and inaccessible to any party. An indie-tag on store-platforms is not enough.**

3. There are marginalized developers, and we are largely ignoring them.

Take for example South America. Many countries that weren't visible at all in the industry suddenly start showing up on social media, establishing a presence in the industry that seemingly wasn't there before. South America isn't the only region like this, and their presence isn't something new either. Many places in the world, including South America and Asia, the Middle East and Africa all have developers working on games just like the industry's more prevalent countries. While games might not have as large a presence in their regions as they do in the northern west/south-east, there are still tons of creative minds working to create emotionally resonating and impactful experiences just like anywhere else. In fact, Cairo is the largest game-jam site in the world by a *huge* margin. About three times the amount of registrations as the second-largest site, it would seem. Yet, these marginalized regions do not have the largest presence in the industry – rather the opposite, they don't have much of a presence at all. **This needs to change.**

Many, many devs all around the world work to create emotionally resonating experiences through games, and each of them have great cultural and emotional impact even though many are deemed “unfitting” or “nonsense” by the most prevalent audiences. This means that it is not profitable for them to make the games they may want to make – for example the game *Coffee Talk* by Toge Productions, a Jakarta-based game development studio where the player is a bartender in Seattle. This wasn't their intention from the start, as they intended to base the game in Jakarta, where the developers live and work. However, because of the cultural nuances and what it would entail for the game's more prevalent audience (the northern west) they had to change where the game's narrative took place to make the game more relatable to them. This means they purposefully left a lot of their own culture out of the game specifically to cater to their prevalent audience, because **their own culture is not profitable.**

This being necessary to produce profitable games is not okay. We need to understand that every voice, every culture and every developer has their own perception of the world and ways to live, and ignoring one just because it is different from what we are used to is idiotic. There are many cultures in our world that hold so much wisdom, and there is so much we can learn from understanding them. It's dreadful that we ignore so many when there is so much to gain from partaking in their art.

However visibility isn't the whole story. Economics plays a large part in the industry, as one could assume, and when it comes to marginalized areas and less prevalent countries this is especially true. In one of my interviews, the participant mentioned that they had never purchased a legal copy of a game or console in Egypt. Not because they themselves were cheap, didn't want to contribute or anything of that nature, but because games are expensive. Especially in a country where gaming isn't nearly as prevalent as in the northern west/south-east, and *especially* when games in general are

not targeted for their demographic – partly because it's not profitable for it to be. And, should it be targeted to them, it may not be marketed or visible enough for the audience to be able to contribute. Some countries are starting to push for a community- or union-approach, like in South America, where the developers banding together is causing their presence in the industry to grow fast. As games and global affairs slowly knit the world together more as time goes on, so will marginalized regions make sure to make their presence in the industry known. China, once a country way behind on technological advances, closed off their imports of many products from overseas, including video games. This made their local developers push to create their own games, and this eventually led to China's incredible impact and prevalence in the video game industry. While not all countries will do the same or get the same prevalence, many will try, be it intentionally or naturally. The most important thing to keep in mind here is that the industry will capitalize on every opportunity it gets. There are way too many accounts of large companies taking advantage of passionate developers – be it by predatory contracts from publishers or cheap, crunching outsourcing – and this is simply not okay. As these countries grow, the western industry will try to assimilate them into the industry. We must make sure to let their development scene get equal opportunities to profit off of independent work as they will to join AAA-efforts, as taking independence from their scene will stunt their growth and potential, reducing their cultural and creative impact in the industry.

There is more at stake here than personal or economical gain, and while letting them partake in AAA-efforts might seem like a good idea for both parties, the risk that they get taken advantage of is very real. Especially in this industry where marginalized countries are largely ignored, assimilating them and taking advantage of them without giving them equal opportunity to express themselves independently will lead to fewer possibilities for them to grow their presence in the industry. Being used to increase the growth of the already large AAA and ignoring their own cultural and creative expression will not increase their own presence, but rather increase the presence of the AAA and keep their presence as marginalized as ever. Therefore:

Marginalized developers must be given equal opportunities to work independently as they will be given to work in AAA as their presence in the industry grows. Their cultures and voices are already under-represented and an assimilation of them will further this.

4. The predatory behaviour by the hands of publishers must stop.

The industry is as mentioned earlier fuelled by money, and so it's understandable that publishers would want to profit as much as possible from the developers they fund, especially when great risk is involved. However sometimes this is taken too far, where developers have been given contracts that – either unknowingly or knowingly – give the publisher rights to things that they should not attain. For instance, it's not unheard of for publishers to attempt to gain the rights to the intellectual property of the game they are funding, essentially locking in the developers to work under that publisher should they want to expand their IP again. This kind of behaviour is greedy, but of course understood considering it's a form of compensation for the publisher's risk. However, considering the publisher isn't the only one with risk on the table in any situation, this kind of IP-theft – especially when it's in the fine print, intended to be sneaky or unseen by hasty or poor developers – is unnecessary and predatory. The publisher of any game is not the game's developers. The publisher has no right in a creative medium to take credit for, or to own, an intellectual property they did not themselves create. Or rather, they have the right to, but *shouldn't* have the right to.

The publisher's role in the industry is to risk capital on products and teams they deem have the potential to succeed on the market, in hopes that they live up to their potential resulting in net profits for the publisher and the developers alike. It is important to understand that the developers are risking quite a bit as well; oftentimes start-up companies have worked on their game for extended periods of time without pay, and when given funding may quit old jobs and focus on the game development full-time to ensure the potential quality is lived up to. At this point, should they fail, they may have no security net to fall back on. This means that they are risking their financial stability and potentially their houses and homes, especially in areas where unemployment rates are high or some jobs may be inaccessible, not even mentioning marginalized devs that might have nothing to turn to. So while publishers' jobs in the industry are to risk capital, the developers' jobs are to deliver on their potential or risk losing financial stability, at least concerning low-capital developers. In the medium however, the developers' jobs are to create interactive art. The publishers have no part in the medium, only the industry, as they are not developing the art. Publishers may have demands as to what can and can not be in the art they pay to have made, but must not take credit for art they themselves did not develop. This means that publishers should under no circumstance be allowed to claim ownership of intellectual property and/or the technology associated with the game development funded from the developers that made them. Unless of course that work is *outsourced* and not *funded*, but funding a game is not the same as outsourcing a game.

One instance of clever thinking on both parts was the debacle between Slightly Mad Studios (SMS) and Electronic Arts (EA), where the publishing contract EA handed the developers stated that eventual technology developed for the games was to be given to

the publishers at the end of the cooperation. This means that EA attempted to claim ownership of the work that they didn't develop themselves. EA proceeded to cut off SMS later on, in hopes of not having to work with the developers yet keeping their technology to use for their own development. While it isn't legally wrong to do so, this kind of predatory behaviour (along with many other instances and kinds of it) is negatively impacting the industry and making it a very unwelcoming and harrowing place to work. SMS, the developers, reached out to streamers of their games and press to comment from their side, as from their perspective EA tried to steal their work and leave them with nothing, effectively financially ruining them and ensuring bankruptcy (and decreasing EA's amount of competitors in the respective genre). Luckily SMS had bypassed a technicality in the contract and survived, but the potential impact contracts like these have on the industry (especially when they aren't bypassed) is very real. Developers may risk everything and lose, simply because the publisher took advantage of them and their potential. If the industry is to continue its development and become a more welcoming and stable place to work, predatory behaviour like this has to cease. It is not sustainable and it is not fair for the publishers (especially if they risk much less than the developers do) to take advantage of developers' lust to make art in a creative medium.

Movies are creative products made for financial reasons, yet they are art. Books are written partly for financial reasons, yet they are art. Paintings are oftentimes painted for financial reasons, yet they are art. Games are made by passionate and dedicated teams wanting to make art, yet are not considered by the industry to be anything more than personalized paper cups, spat out from a conveyor-belt. Games are a creative, artistic medium. Games are made for financial reasons, yet they are art. The industry should work to ensure financial success **as well as** ensure safe creative expression. A medium driven by an industry that cares not for the artistic, emotional and cultural impact of the medium is not an industry, **it is a scam.**

Luckily, the amount of predatory publishers are heavily outnumbered by those that do in fact pay respects to the cultural and artistic impact of the games medium. These publishers are oftentimes developers as well, although this is not always the case. This is not a saving grace however; if the industry is to become a safer place to work and to develop sustainably, this predatory behaviour has to be abolished. While we can work to simply not accept contracts that do include predatory terms, the industry is growing by the day, especially in indie, and developers may be desperate to sign contracts that let them develop their art. This to the degree that they may sign a predatory contract unknowingly, especially if they lack the financial ability to contract a legal advisor and lack the know-how to dissect the contract themselves. The point here is that there will always be desperate developers and therefore there will always be (unless prohibited) predatory publishers to take advantage of them. Even if the developer isn't necessarily desperate, a predatory contract could seem mutually beneficial whilst hiding terms that put the developer at way greater risk than the publisher. Whilst the key to signing a

contract is to understand who is making what risk, and who is risking the most, this isn't always easy, or the ease may be financially unavailable.

We need to make sure that the industry moves forward sustainably, for all actors in it. This is not possible when the industry has no regulations as to what a publisher may ask of a developer, especially when there is nothing stopping them from taking advantage of them. Therefore, since the risk associated with publishing and funding games should be strictly capital, and include no other forms of compensation, then:

Publishers should under no circumstance bargain for more than money and must not receive IP-rights and/or technology they themselves did not develop. Publishers and developers alike must not take credit for work they did not do.

5. Overtime work is generally common, but crunch in the industry is rough and working conditions are unsustainable in some places (most notably the U.S.).

Whilst mostly (if not only) a problem with AAA, this manifesto would simply feel incomplete without a point about abolishing crunch within our industry. Something everyone hates, yet never ceases, is the obscene overtime developers often have to do before an early deadline. Oftentimes because of poor planning, or because of budgetary constraints or time constraints, management of development may set a deadline too early for the work that has to be done before it. A recent example is *Cyberpunk 2077*, by CD PROJEKT RED. Their developers had worked on the game for many years, only to have their management enforce a deadline a few years too soon. After several delays, it was released in a very unfinished state, with many bugs often causing crashes or breaks in immersion. Even though it was launched unfinished, the developers were pushed to work many, many hours overtime to ensure the quality of the game was acceptable before release. Another example is the open letter written by the so-called “ea_spouse” regarding their significant other’s workplace and obscene working-conditions during their time at EA. This time was very stressful and hurtful to both their family and the worker in question, enough so to warrant such an open letter. This practice is called *crunch*, as many are aware, and leads to poor health for those working with it, and a poor product for those that enforce it. The open letter by “ea_spouse” was written in 2004, yet we still see this practice today.

Crunch in the industry is nothing new, and is a sign of poor management. Instead of scheduling for the game to take enough time to develop, management pushes the developers to do much more work in less time. Simply negotiating a five percent shorter development time can result in weeks if not months of crunching overtime, depending on the game and schedule. This is to save money – shipping the game sooner means paying fewer monthly wages, and means more projects can be done in a shorter time. However, art is not something that can be rushed. Pay an artist to paint a tree, and you will get a tree. Pay an artist to paint a tree within a few minutes and you’ll get something unpolished, sketchy and generally not worth the effort. Pay an artist to paint a tree that would take a week to paint, and sell their painting after a day, and you’ll either have a very exhausted painter and a slightly polished tree, or an unfinished piece. You can not rush art, and you can not rush quality. Yet in our industry, management often seems out of touch and abuses their developers to make unfinished pieces that sell fast rather than ensure the health of our workers. Many developers aren’t even asked to work overtime but do so because of passion, as they are passionate to finish their art. No matter why they are crunching or working overtime, this should never occur and strict working hours should be enforced. Such is already legally enforced in Sweden, for instance, and it should be everywhere. The industry cares very little about the people working with the medium, and overworking developers to the point of stress-related diseases (where even hospitalization isn’t unheard of) is absolutely unsustainable, not to mention horrid.

It really should go without saying (even though our industry isn't alone when it comes to this) – crunch should be abolished and no management should ever bargain with intent to shorten deadlines without shortening the scope of a project. Pushing developers to attempt to finish a game before the game can realistically be finished is not healthy nor profitable. The art of the medium has to be developed with care and expertise, crunching and rushing a project will lead to failure. The emotional, artistic and cultural impact of an art-piece can only resonate with an audience if it is properly developed, and developed with care and passion. Care and passion can not exist under crunching circumstances, as care and passion requires a space that stress and pressure eliminates.

Furthermore, crunch is the one most pressing issue in our industry because it correlates directly to health and sickness. We can not allow this and we must abolish it, be it by prohibiting excessive overtime (like Sweden generally has), or by setting standards or regulations in place to prevent abuse of worker passion in correlation to worker health. To reiterate:

Time is never a resource to bargain with. Art takes time and crunch is not part of any decent future ideal. We need regulations in place to prohibit crunching.

To add to this, the american disdain for any type of unionization is to me (a Swede) impossible to comprehend. Worker health and safety is very important, and any disregard to it is frankly abhorrent. Sweden has laws to prohibit crunch in place and frankly these laws (or iterations of them) should be internationally accepted and adapted.