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International Solidarity Between Game Workers in the Global North and Global South: Reflections on the Challenges Posed by Labor Aristocracy

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Abstract: This article advances the research on unionization and collective organizing in the games industry by highlighting potential future challenges of international solidarity as identified by the Marxist concept of labor aristocracy. While much of organizing and unionization in the games industry are in their nascent stages by focusing primarily on the national question and the nature of work in the games industry, the nature of global supply chains, and free flow of capital emphasizes the importance of global perspectives on how game workers can organize. Primarily, this article is concerned with the material effects of 21st century imperialism on collective organization, where the Marxist concept of labor aristocracy identifies the privileged strata of game workers in imperialist countries who benefit from exploitative international relations between core and periphery economies through higher wages, positions of power, and affordable access to commodities. As a result, these groups of game workers should, according to the implications of labor aristocracy, hold a material investment into maintaining the exploitation of game workers in the periphery. This means that the current social movements to organize and unionize in the games industry potentially encounters the challenge of international solidarity with workers whose exploitation those in the imperialist countries benefit from. This article identifies such challenges through interviews and an online survey with game workers, organizers, union representatives, and leaders of international organizations. The findings reveal the international character of game work and the challenges of national legislation; the importance and challenge of building solidarity between game workers in the core and periphery; and finally, the potential strategies for unions and organizers to cultivate international solidarity. Thus, the article clears a forward path for both production research in game studies and labor organizing in the Western games industry through a global perspective on international material relations and historical materialism.

Keywords: Unionization, Unions, Labor, Labor Conditions, Production Studies,

Background

Over the last decade, issues of poor labor conditions in the western games industry have increasingly fermented into larger and more explicit calls for collective action by game workers (Kinema 2021). While topics such as crunch, exploitation, burnout, and discriminatory harassment of marginalized groups have been addressed in both media and among game workers for a while (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2006, Rockstar Spouse 2010), we see a relatively significant amount of effort and explicit demands for unionization and collective organization to achieve better and healthier working conditions, democratic input, and non-discrimination in how games are made. This tendency is perhaps best exemplified by the grassroots organization Game Workers Unite that promotes and calls for workers to organize within their workplaces through agitation and information material (Logic Magazine 2019). It has also become common and even popular for gaming journalists to cover harsh and exploitative working conditions in an otherwise secretive industry (Serrels 2015, Schreier 2020, Bailey 2022) to such an extent that popular books have been published on the topic (Schreier 2017, Schreier 2021). The confluence of social media campaigns and hashtags as seen with #MeToo and #1reasonwhy (Blodgett and Salter 2013) sometimes result in actual material changes as these social pushbacks highlight the collective and bottom-up effort (Schreier 2020). At the same time, we have historical landmark cases of game worker unions being formally established, such as *Le Syndicat des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo* (STJV), *Solidaires Informatique,*

Game Workers of Australia, and *IWGB Game Workers*, and more recently the QA testers in Raven Software under the thumb of Activision Blizzard (Paul 2022).

This means that issues of labor in the games industry have coalesced into more collective efforts and more widespread support among not only game workers, but also game consumers and journalists. The fight for more equitable working conditions, different company structures that avoid exploitation such as worker co-ops, and simply more attention and power given to game workers are significant developments that the game industry companies, media, and academia are focusing on (Weststar and Legault 2017, Woodcock 2019).

In this new territory of game worker unionization, it is also important to perhaps predict or account for future challenges for building collective power and organization. For even if or when large parts of the Western game industry unionize and build solidarity with each other along worker lines, the transnational flow of capital and globalized labor markets present the problem of labor arbitrage by, for example, moving production to non-unionized labor markets usually located in the so-called Global South. To collectively build solidarity it should not only be across Western borders, but also North-South borders. As such, what Torkil Lauesen (2016) calls *the global perspective* needs to be applied when addressing the challenges of worker power in the global games industry (Kerr 2017). The primary research question focuses on the challenges associated with international solidarity between workers in the Global North and the Global South through Marxist theory on labor aristocracy as well as interviews and surveys with organizers, union representatives, and organization leaders. The hypothesis to be tested is that lines of solidarity between workers in the Global North and the Global South can be established and cultivated despite the material self-interests of those whose living standards and

wages are dependent on the exploitation and immiseration of workers in the Global South.

As part of this *global perspective* approach, I address the organizational and material challenges when collaborating and standing in solidarity between those in the Global North and Global South. This argument takes its point of departure what is called labor aristocracy, which serves as a guiding concept that reveals the privileges from the unequal exchange between North-South. These privileges potentially ram international solidarity between privileged workers in the Global North and those in the Global North. By applying labor aristocracy, this article highlights some of the major challenges for the worker movements we are seeing in the games industry and elsewhere. If the collective efforts to unionize and build worker power are relegated to chauvinistic tendencies, such movements run the risk of succumbing to the global stratification of labor and uphold the status quo where unionized workers in the Global North profit from super-exploiting those in the Global South.

To elaborate on this analysis, I primarily complement the conceptual analysis with interview and survey data from a very small sample (N = 5) of organizers, union representatives, and organization leaders who work with organizing worker power in the games industry in the Global North and international collaborations more broadly. I use the qualitative data to identify how those working to build worker power reflect about the challenges of labor aristocracy based on their own experiences, knowledge, and historical lessons. Moreover, the statements by the respondents illustrate the tensions and potential strategies for overcoming the challenges of labor aristocracy. Thus, the article advances the research on the growing movement to collectively organize and unionize by applying the global perspective through the concept of labor aristocracy, as well as including qualitative

research to help identify potential reflections and strategies to overcome the challenges of imperialism and chauvinism in the organizing workers in the Western games industry.

Prior Research

In tandem with the efforts to organize game workers in the games industry, research have followed and addressed the tendencies regarding labor conditions and efforts by game workers to improve them. Kline et al (2003) notably covered how precarious, underpaid, and overworked game workers are, which results in intense burnout and therefore a relatively younger workforce (Cote and Harris 2020) as also seen in the constant age groups in IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey reports throughout the years (Edwards et al. 2014, Weststar and Legault 2015, Weststar, O'Meara and Legault 2018). Casey O'Donnel (2014) highlighted the ways that developers are likewise exploited and mistreated through their passion of being able to work on something they love. Mia Consalvo (2008) showed how the grueling labor conditions in the Western game industry affect women, while (Harvey and Shepherd 2017, Johnson 2018, O'Reilly and Garrett 2019) highlighted the patriarchal and misogynist nature of male-dominated game development cultures. Ergin Bulut (2018) showed the imposition of the Marcusean *one-dimensional creativity* on game workers' cultural output, mirroring Sam Srauy's (2017) findings on the tendency of producing problematic racial representations in digital games. This means that working on making games professionally, or what Chris Young (2018) aptly terms game makers, is marred by poor working conditions in terms of sustainability, discrimination, inequality, and overall reproduction of dominant-hegemonic cultural products that favor whiteness, masculinity, anglophonic perspectives on the world (Fron et al. 2007, Malkowski and Russworm 2017, Mukherjee 2017, Murray 2017, Hammar 2020c) and

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modes of interaction through domination, imperialism, and primarily violence (Leonard 2016, Patel 2016, Pötzsch 2017, Hammar 2019, 2020b, de Wildt 2020).

This critical state of the industry has historically motivated conversations around working conditions in media (Williams 2013, 2015, Walker and Williams 2014), and increasingly we have seen a larger tendency to suggest organization and collective action as one solution. This proposal has also been reflected in the research on work in games, where especially Jamie Woodcock (2019) has addressed the efforts to organize game workers in the Western game industry and in independent game productions (Woodcock 2020). Elsewhere, research foci have dispersed around questions of national contexts, such as game workers in the UK (Ruffino and Woodcock 2020, Ruffino 2021), Ireland (Moody and Kerr 2020), South America (Penix-Tadsen 2016), to some extent India (Zeiler and Mukherjee 2021), and Australia (Keogh 2019). Anna Ozimek (2019a, 2019b) and Jaroslav Svelch (2021) have advanced the under-researched area of outsourcing in the Central and Eastern European labor markets that the Western game industry so heavily relies on. More recently, Keogh and Abraham (2022) conducted interviews with primarily Australian game workers on challenges with the nature of small-scale production in local contexts, such as in Australia, and likewise with research on organizing game work in Canada (Weststar and Legault 2019).

Thus, the existing research on game workers and collective organization identifies the challenges of organizing the games industry with specific accounts of national questions given the way that labor markets work, but at the same time, we also see some researchers locating the discussion on labor within global contexts of imperialism (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2020, Hammar et al. 2021). Unfortunately, there is also a systemic lack of addressing game workers in the periphery (Penix-

Tadsen and Frasca 2019) and their efforts to organize or resist the exploitative nature of the games industry. The Anglophonic literature that focuses on game workers in countries such as China, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam, is still not prevalent or at the forefront in the existing research that I am aware of. Mainstream coverage in Western media has made some specific advances on the topic of those in the periphery (Thomsen 2018, Kinema 2021, Bratt 2021), but it is also an under-covered topic despite the massive importance that such cheap labor markets hold to the profitability to the game industry (Kelly et al. 2020). Others have paid attention to critical questions of the dynamics of race, and gender, situated in global capitalism (Bulut 2020b, Hammar 2020a, Jong 2020) with Bulut (2020a) breaking new ground by contextualizing labor conditions in the Western game industry within in an international perspective on how global supply chains, patriarchy, and exploitative imperialist relations factor into who actually gets to make their dream game come true, while Carolyn Jong's (2020) Ph.D. thesis covered how the intricacies of fascism and imperialism surface in the digital games culture and the industry.

This global perspective as already advanced by Jong and Bulut is what drives this article's focus on how global relations of production might potentially affect efforts to unionize and act collectively. While the research about challenges to unionization details the local contexts and the fragmented nature of work (Weststar and Legault 2019, Keogh and Abraham 2022), I inversely proceed from the global perspective (Lauesen 2016) towards the particular statements by union representatives, organizers, and organization leaders. To develop the analysis of the challenges of unionization in the games industry imposed through global relations of production I now proceed to define the concept of labor aristocracy.

Labor Aristocracy

Broadly considered, labor aristocracy refers to "a privileged group a privileged group of workers" who are "prone to conservatism because of said privilege and thus unlikely to support movements towards socialism" (Kerswell 2019, 71). Engels is attributed to introduce the term to address an opportunist and conservative stratum within the 19th century English working class, who were bribed with the plundering by British colonialism (Marx and Engels 2010, 301) to uphold the status quo and refuse to adopt a revolutionary position against the British ruling classes. Because England had attained a global industrial monopoly due to the abolition of the Corn Laws (Marx and Engels 2010, 295), the economic benefits stemming from this free trade regime were unequally divided among the English people with two sections of the working class – namely factory workers and skilled workers who were predominantly adult men profiting the most, thereby excluding the labor competition from women, children, immigrants, and machinery work (Nicolaus 1970). This stratum of workers was what Engels called the labor aristocracy that provided them "a relatively comfortable position" (Marx and Engels 2010, 299). England's surplus profits "from its domination of world industry and its colonial supremacy" (Foster, Clark and Valle 2020) resulted in surplus wages for this privileged segment of workers who thus became materially invested in the prevailing relations of production. This dynamic was perhaps best encapsulated by the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes in 1895 as quoted by V.I. Lenin:

> "In order to save the forty million inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists." (Lenin 2017, 94)

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Lenin's use of Rhodes' quote is illustrative of the bribing of a stratum of workers in the so-called imperial core through the super-profits from the colonies (Smith 2016), because Lenin would apply this observation to explain the collapse of the Second International when the European socialist parties supported their national ruling classes in going to World War 1 (Lenin 1959, Hobsbawm 1970). Like Engels' observation of England's colonialism bribing the English labor aristocracy, Lenin's analysis of imperialism looked at how certain workers in the imperial European countries became complacent and ultimately supported by the capitalist system to ally themselves with their own national bourgeoisie (Lenin 2017). This means that these classes did not hold revolutionary capacity, and that made it difficult as a collective movement, if not impossible, to overthrow or oppose the ruling classes in the imperial core countries.

Kerswell points out that Lenin's concept of labor aristocracy is vague and does not provide a quantitative measurement of how large these upper strata of workers are, nor how many different job sectors labor aristocracy refer to. However, the root of the analysis reveals a tension between "social-chauvinism and genuine socialism social-chauvinism and genuine socialism" (Kerswell 2019, 73) and that "opportunism, social chauvinism and imperialist economism" can be traced back to "capitalism's trend towards parasitism" (Kerswell 2019, 75). This tension is also reflected in the qualitative research, as I will show later.

The labor aristocracy theory as advanced by both Engels and Lenin has since been debated by Bukharin (2017), Eric Hobsbawm (1970), Martin Nicolaus (1970), J. Sakai (2014), and most recently Zak Cope (2015, 2019). Cope (2015,140) argues that contemporary forms of racism and chauvinism between racialized people and nations are not due to some false consciousness, but rather the result of global stratification

and domestic hierarchy between for example men and women, unionized and non-unionized workers, and adults and children. At the global level, through their national, gendered, and racial privilege, labor aristocrats in the imperial core hold a material investment in the racialized division between Western countries and those in the so-called Global South, as well as domestically between other more exploited classes. A similar argument has been advanced with regard to the white indentured workers in 19th century USA by W.E.B. Du Bois who were bribed through their white "public and psychological wage" (Du Bois 1935, 626). As John Smith's (2016, 230) analysis of 21st century imperialism also affirmed, the super-exploited labor results in higher wages to those workers in the imperial core, as well domestically within stratified classes (e.g., gender, age, union vs. non-union) and therefore they are materially motivated to maintain the imperialist exploitation of those *non-Western*, gendered and non-unionized workers, similar to the skilled English workers in Engels' analysis.

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Labor Aristocracy in the Games Industry

While there is no direct data on the salary levels and transfer of wealth through super-exploitation of workers in the peripheral labor markets, the research literature does affirm that the major profitable game companies are primarily located in North America, Europe, Japan, and increasingly China (Kerr 2017). Likewise, the stratification of labor in the games industry does illustrate that the game industry relies on cheaper and more affordable labor through outsourcing when developing games (Thomsen 2018, How Game Publishers Buy Crunch Overseas 2021), in addition to the super-exploited labor involved in the extraction, smelting, and assembly of minerals into console, phone, and PC hardware used for playing digital games (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and Peuter 2003). This means that the surplus profits that game companies enjoy are derived from a parasitic relationship between imperial core countries such

as the US and peripheral labor markets in Vietnam, Malaysia, DRC, Taiwan, Bulgaria, Poland, Rumania, and so on. At the same time, the games industry has worked closely with the US military on a number of productions (Schulzke 2017, Hammar and Woodcock 2019), as well as more broadly reflected the same militaristic ideology of *Western interventions* (Payne 2016, Pötzsch and Hammond 2016). Finally, the production and consumption of game consoles and the resulting e-waste that is offloaded in West Africa and East Asia follows 21st century imperialism (Hammar 2020a).

This claim is also what Bulut (2020a) establishes in his research at a larger game company where its higher-echelon workers can fulfill their *dream job* and receive wages derived from these imperialist super-profits and domestic patriarchal relations. Jong (2020) has similarly affirmed the imperialist nature of the games industry, as well as the chauvinism between racialized and gendered workers that justifies this global stratification in the games industry. Thus, certain segments of workers within the games industry form up a privileged strata that form up a labor aristocracy in terms of received wages from super-profits, chauvinist relations between other racialized and gendered workers (Johnson 2018), and in some cases a tendency to produce chauvinist games (Srauy 2017). Yet even though they might be *bribed*, large parts of Western workers in the games industry are nevertheless still exploited, discriminated, and live under incredible precarity by owners and bosses of game companies. As such, while there is no hard data to prove the discrepancies between imperial core and periphery in the games industry, there are labor aristocratic tendencies with how certain strata of game workers have racial, gendered, national, and economic privileges compared to other workers, as well as the observable imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2021) with how games are made and consumed for those groups with disposable income and benefitting from imperialist relations of

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production, but still be exploited and work under grueling conditions underneath bosses and owners of game companies.

The upshot of the observations by invoking labor aristocracy is that unionizing in the games industry makes international solidarity between game workers in the imperial core and those in peripheral countries troublesome or difficult. If both the salary levels, position of power and influence, and overall living conditions of game workers in the core are dependent on the exploitation of others in the periphery and domestically, then from a materialist view this demotivates solidarity and, in some form, justifies chauvinism against the exploited (Cope 2015).

These two concepts serve as the motivation for the interviews and survey I have conducted. If the challenges of material investment into global relations affect international solidarity between exploited workers in the games industry, what does this mean for those working with organizing and collectivization? What special insights and experiences do those who study and work with the day-to-day work conditions of game workers and the increasing movement towards unionization have regarding the challenges of imperialism as highlighted by labor aristocracy? Below, I account for the interview and surveys that I conducted to grapple with these questions.

Methodology and Data Analysis

For this research, I targeted people who work with organization, unionization, and workers' rights in the games industry from both a local, national, and international perspective. This meant that I contacted union representatives, union leaders, representatives of labor grassroots organizations and organizers within or outside

game companies, and leaders in non-union international organizations. I focused only on such groups who operated in imperial core countries, meaning North America, Western Europe, and Australia. I did not contact anyone located in the peripheral industries due to my focus on labor aristocracy, as these two concepts emphasize the disposition and political potential for organizing those in the imperial core countries. I located potential contacts through my own professional network, social media, organizations covered in media reports about unionization in the games industry, tech unions dealing with in the respective countries, and internationally oriented organizations. In each contact I used snowballing to get referrals for additional contacts. Out of the 21 cold calls for participation, five responded with three of them being online interviews and two of them being online questionnaire. The low response rate is possibly due to the nature of cold e-mails, as well as the potential dangers that organizers and unions face making them more reluctant to discuss unionization strategy with a stranger. Nonetheless I do think better preparation and a more exhaustive use of my professional network in academia and the games industry could have been utilized to increase the sample size. Given my own work conditions in academia with severe precarity, lack of stable contracts, and juggling up to five different universities at the same time may have resulted in less focused engagement with pressing potential informants on answering the call for the interview and/or survey. Nonetheless, this small sample size also means that the findings are incidental and limited in their account of the challenges of organizing workers in the so-called imperial core.

For the investigation, I decided for a two-pronged approach where the informants could have a personal online interview with me and/or the option to answer an online survey with written, full-text input. I selected these two methods to widen the number of responses I would receive from the potential respondents I had contacted.

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Additionally, the combination of both qualitative interviews and survey result in different results given their different settings and contexts. On one hand, qualitative interviews provide closer (May 2001) This means that the results I summarize below are divided between summarized quotes from the interviews, versus written responses in full through the survey. All the informants were briefed over e-mail or online messaging about the purpose of the investigation and data collection by only me. All informants were told that it would not be recorded but written down and that their statements and potential organizations, company, or union would be anonymous.

The personal online interviews functioned as semi-structured interviews where I had prepared an initial outline of the questions that I wanted to cover, but otherwise the structure of each interview was open-ended. At first, I outlined the background for the research in terms of the increasing prevalence of unionization and collective action against the labor conditions in the games industry. Then I referred to the global perspective and the differences between different labor markets. I did not necessarily invoke the terms of labor aristocracy since I was more interested in the informant's own experiences and reflections on the challenges of international solidarity rather than the intricacies of esoteric academic concepts. In contrast, the online survey was formulated in Microsoft Forms with 5 different open-text questions about the challenges of international solidarity with explicit mention of concepts such as imperial core and periphery. This decision was to emphasize the challenges of the material investments that workers and people in the imperial core countries have. The text box did not have any constraints in terms of length of a respondent's answer and all the answers were anonymous.

In total, the three interviews were conducted and then summarized and approved by

the respondent *Tom*, *Carl*, *Ivan*, and the two online survey responses were included more fully into this article as *Magnus* and *Natasha*. This division hopefully also indicates the qualitative differences in responses in my analysis. For the analysis of the data that I have collected I identified key trends (May 2001, 150) between the informants and grouped them into specific themes that highlighted how union representatives, organizers, and game workers think about the challenges of fostering international solidarity. These themes were the international structure of the industry; national division and chauvinism; legal and repressive challenges; lack of resources; strategies; and finally, the importance of international solidarity.

Analysis

The International Structure of the Games Industry

One of the key themes emerging from the answers was the international character of how game workers work in the companies. The union representative Tom stated that all their members and non-unionized game workers they deal with collaborate and work internationally on the games that they produce. There are multiple instances of cross-country collaboration in both smaller and bigger companies given the way that globalized cultural production functions, as well as the international conferences and industry conventions, such as the Game Developer's Conference in the US. To Tom, globalization of production meant that game workers in Western countries take part in a very minuscule part of the global supply chain, which Tom found interesting "to ask how unions are best equipped to deal with this" (Tom, Personal Interview, 18 February, 2022). For example, Tom wonders how game workers in, for instance, Sweden are able to organize their workplace when they work with someone in Bulgaria and in Vietnam at the same time?

Thus, the internationalization of game work also presents a few challenges. According to Tom, the classic manufacturing processes gathered all the workers physically at the same workplace, which allowed them to organize and strike together due to simple physical proximity. Tom referred to this as "the social points where capital met its counter-powers" and stated that with modern labor phenomena such as the gig economy, outsourcing, and freelancing, these social points have become fragmented and scattered. Tom thought that the individualization and atomization of the labor force have enabled "a purer and less contested form of exploitation by capital" (Tom, Personal Interview, 18 February, 2022). Put simply, remote work, gig economy, platformization, and freelancing have weakened labor power and it makes it more difficult for union movements to organize. While labor power is atomized, Tom aptly pointed out that the employers or bosses organize themselves internationally through globalization of supply chains and free flow of capital. This is also why the trade federation leader Carl believed international solidarity is the key issue for the whole trade union movement, because the "decision-making goes further and further away" (Carl, Personal Interview, 25 February, 2022), as they put it.

Another specific challenge to internationalization and organizing is the cultural and national differences. Ivan, who is an executive director of an international game company organization, reflected that there is difficulty in the international context because there are so "so many considerations to take into perspective, such as culture, ties to your vocation, spiritual values, and work ethic" (Ivan, Personal Interview, 13 March, 2022), while the organizer and game worker Natasha mentioned that "working across language barriers and time zones" can be demanding when organizing across different countries. As they stated

> "Translating documents is time-consuming and often meetings end up defaulting to English, which makes it more difficult or impossible for people

who do not speak English as a first language to participate. Finding a time to meet can also be hard when workers are spread across multiple time zones." (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022)

The game worker and organizer Magnus shared a different opinion by stating that "language barriers have not been a major obstacle" because English is "the de-facto language of the game industry at the international level, thanks to imperialism and the position of our industry within it" (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022). As Magnus proceed to state, it is rare for someone to become a programmer without learning English, for example.

While internationalization can be challenging, Tom also mentioned that there is a much larger ability to communicate with each other "due to the proliferation of internet communication technologies" (Tom, Personal Interview, 18 February, 2022). They went on to highlight the advances of organizing and unionizing that social media and online fora have enabled, stating that "these are some communication opportunities that unions could also take advantage of more." They found that this online dissemination and agitation is best shown with how Game Workers Unite just started out as a grassroots collaboration and then spread the message and encouragement to unionize across the industry.

National Divisions and Chauvinism

The role of the games industry in international relations was also a key observation by Natasha who stated that the game companies enjoy the large tax breaks offered in Canadian provinces like Quebec, which instead of being "spent on things like public housing, education, health care, and social services", is "siphoned into the hands of the shareholders and business owners who benefit from these subsidies" (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022). Magnus levelled the same criticism towards

the public funding of the military industrial complex which could instead be used to improve the social safety net, from which particularly low-income workers who make up a substantial portion of our industry would benefit from. Natasha observed the siphoning of money from the public good towards private companies and the fraying of the social safety net meant that low-income workers in particular are more precarious and have less leverage to demand better working conditions, as there are fewer options to fall back on if they are fired or turn down a job offer. For example, Magnus pointed out that many game companies in their region hire immigrant workers who rely on their work visas, which companies can use as leverage or threats against the immigrant workers, in case they make demands to their bosses. As Magnus states, "This creates a lot of fear and anxiety, and can heavily discourage involvement in union organizing for fear of retaliation from management, even in workers who would otherwise be very engaged" (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022). Here, the role of unions and organized collective solidarity could mitigate such forms of repression against racialized, immigrant workers through the help of non-immigrant workers. In turn, this would not only benefit immigrant workers in their precarity, but also the non-immigrant worker in terms of not having their position and wages threatened by immigrant labor that otherwise serves to press down on wages.

The internationalization of game work and national borders is thereby inversely used by game companies to their own benefit. Natasha claimed that "strict border regimes that put migrant workers in a very precarious position, where they're dependent on their employer in order to stay in the country" is incentivized by the exploitative relationship between core countries and the periphery. The global stratification of labor with work visas and precarious foreign workers is thus reflected in relations between core and periphery countries to instantiate chauvinist divisions between

workers. These divisions also surface in work relations, where Natasha stated that "many of the struggles' workers I organize with have faced have related to racist treatment at the workplace." To them, a major challenge of working and organizing in the games industry is "combating white supremacy and chauvinism within our own ranks." As they themselves put it:

> "While [chauvinism as a union-busting tactic] seems to be less effective these days than it has been historically (at least in its most explicit forms), the racist mistreatment of racialized workers by white workers and bosses definitely makes organizing harder by eroding solidarity and trust between workers and obscuring shared class interests." (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022)

At the same time, Natasha also suggested that organizing efforts should not be relegated to only in the core, as there is "a risk of creating a kind of echo chamber where we lack direction and guidance from workers in the periphery who are directly impacted by imperialism" (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022).

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Legal and Repressive Challenges from Country to Country

Despite this internationalization of game work, all the informants stressed the challenge of differing national contexts between workers. For example, Tom wondered about the role of the existing national collective bargaining agreements in Nordic countries when faced with other labor markets, such as India who "have a highly skilled tech workforce". On the other hand, Tom also stated that the existence of tech workforces in peripheral countries makes it possible for unions and organizers "to reach these tech workers who face similar challenges of precarity" as those in the imperial core countries" (Tom, Personal Interview, February 18, 2022).

Along the same lines, all the informants mentioned the specificity of national labor

laws. For instance, Magnus pointed out that labor laws in North America differ from other imperial core countries:

> "In the US and Canada, a union cannot legally be recognized unless there is a majority vote within a specific bargaining unit (a workplace or department for example), and the union is limited to that bargaining unit only (with the possibility of federating alongside other units). In other countries, unions can be formed easily, come with some basic protections, and are not limited to a bargaining unit, but the challenge comes after official recognition to build the leverage needed to successfully negotiate with employers." (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022)

This difference in labor laws and history of labor movements meant that early in the movement to organize and unionize game workers in North America "led to a lot of confusion and misunderstandings" and instead organizations that are not unions but work to support union organizing campaigns, such as "Game Workers Unite (GWU) Montréal, GWU Toronto, or Game Workers of Southern California.", in addition to union federations such as Communications Workers of America (CWA). Despite these limitations in North America, Magnus pointed out that there are examples of unions being formed in other countries, such as *Le Syndicat des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo (STJV), Solidaires Informatique, Game Workers of Australia*, and *IWGB Game Workers*.

Additionally, the differences in national labor laws between countries means that unionizing certain game companies with workers in different countries can result in problems where, as Magnus mentioned, a US-based company hires Canadian workers, who are then not recognized as workers by the *National Labor Relations Board* (NLRB) "as part of the bargaining unit, so forcing voluntary recognition of our unit was our only option". At the same time, those Canadian workers were

miscategorized as freelancers because the company "has no official presence in Canada", thereby not being eligible for government benefits in Québec. Such international complications result in difficulties in unionizing, especially across borders. Natasha pointed out that the different rights and freedoms within labor movements also differ, such as the "right to strike between contracts or the ability for individual workers to join a union without first winning a majority vote in their workplace" (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022). Similarly, to the challenge of language and culture, this difference in legal frameworks and national contexts also means that it takes "to build a shared vocabulary and understanding" and thus "increases the barrier of entry for workers who want to get involved in these discussions", Natasha revealed.

The particularities of national contexts do not only refer to legal troubles, but also the concerted attempts to dismantle efforts to unionize, usually called *union busting*. Carl points out that some countries differ in the severity of the reaction by the government and the companies in which workers try to unionize, where in Columbia and India, workers, organizers, and agitators risk losing their lives or being threatened with violence, while in the US, people risk losing their jobs or not getting promoted or losing their work visas. This means that establishing international collaboration can might result in dangerous if not lethal ramifications for game workers across the world. For mitigate this danger, Carl suggested using different backchannels to organize and communicate with workers in more dangerous contexts (Carl, Personal Interview, 25 February, 2022).

Lack of Resources

In addition to the barrier of entry, informant Carl similarly objected that a lot of the organizations and unions in the games industry are simply immature and "we are at a

very early stage", as they put it. This claim was qualified that "there are simply no international campaigns to unionize or work together", because game workers are still establishing their organization to facilitate their collective power. At the same time, organizations and unions federations require funding and money to collaborate internationally, especially with hosting events, yet "accepting money from other parties can complicate matters and create a conflict of interests" (Carl, Personal Interview, 25 February, 2022). This means that the issue of funding and lack of personnel in internationally oriented union federations make it more difficult to organize internationally and cultivate solidarity.

Carl also thought that because a lot of larger companies are buying up smaller studios and the industry consolidates through mergers and acquisitions, now is an opportune moment to organize and form unions to hold more collective bargaining power against larger companies who have more resources to oppose the demands of the workers.

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Strategies

Given the ways that the informants discussed the different conditions and challenges of establishing international solidarity, many of them also proposed both specific and general strategies for organizing. Natasha stated that one strategy for international solidarity and working against the conditions that give rise to a labor aristocracy would be to connect labor organization with anti-war movements in order to combat the constant bombardment of propaganda "teaching us to fear and hate people living in the periphery and cheer on imperialist interventions overseas, while ignoring our shared interests as workers" (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022). Natasha suggested examples such as the *U.S. Labor Against Racism and War* and the *Canadian Peace Congress* as templates to look towards and simultaneously "promote

internationalism within our own unions". Third, Natasha stated that reaching out and collaborating with unions and labor organizers in the super-exploited periphery to work together in order to more effectively "take on these large multinationals". Similarly, Carl mentioned that one way to achieve such collaboration and cultivate international solidarity is through a union federation or a collective of unions that works across borders.

Another strategy that was mentioned was using education within unions and organizations to promote internationalism. Magnus mentioned that those who have "especially advanced politics" can help educate and identify "opportunities where, in their struggles, workers come into contact with issues that relate to imperialism and internationalism, but might not necessarily draw the correct conclusions from that immediate experience". To compliment this educational strategy, they also recommended parallel organizations where:

> "experienced organizers from among the ranks of the industry's workers can be trained, develop a more advanced analysis, and educate themselves on theory relating to a broader understanding of class consciousness and to the questions of imperialism and internationalism, then bring this analysis back into their union work. Historically this role has been played by communist parties, for example." (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022)

This also reveals that chauvinism is not simply an issue of material relations, but also of being aware of shared common struggles that go against the supposedly *false consciousness* that imperialist relations cultivate. By invoking the example of experienced organizers more familiar with theory to help facilitate broader understandings of how capitalism operates, Magnus reveals the dual nature of how capitalism can be overthrown. Both materially and socially.

Tom also talked about the opportunity of game workers locating themselves in the global supply chain to see what happens if they withhold their labor and that asked that "a strike does not have to be international, so maybe there are some opportunities here?" (Tom, Personal Interview, 18 February, 2022). Carl echoed a similar sentiment by suggesting that unionization strategies could distinguish between regional companies, national companies, and international companies to identify their role and status in the supply chain.

One interesting note that Tom brought up was that disagreements between workers in the imperial core versus the periphery can actually sometimes result in the latter forming a union to have them represent themselves. To them, this was a positive thing, because "now there was a union organizer representing hundreds of thousands of people to talk to and foster a collaborative relationship with" (Tom, Personal Interview, 18 February, 2022).

Similarly, one of the recurring trends in the statements of the informants was that workers across the world share many of the same challenges. They want to not be afraid of getting fired and be without money to support themselves; they struggle with acquiring funding to survive; and many want "to have a say in the workplace some control or power at their workplace" as informant Ivan put it. Tom exemplified this with how workers in India in the IT sector have become highly skilled and relatively well-paid and part of the *global elite*, but then "they also talk about the danger of getting fired and having no security. There is a bit of convergence in this group." And they look towards how other IT workers are managing in other countries. In this way, Tom meant that people reflect themselves in each other and share the same may of the same challenges and this can be used to establish solidarity and international collaboration. Carl stated that

"everywhere the issues are the same. Sexual harassment and bro culture with Ubisoft and we have seen this in Singapore, Sweden, Canada, Japan where it is the same thing. So, the issues are interlinked and intertwined, and there is a need for much more solidarity and campaigning to garner interest." (Carl, Personal Interview, 25 February, 2022)

This means that here is a *chain of equivalence* between workers and that issues such as sexism or racism highlight the initiatives to collectively organize workers to ensure better working conditions and democratic influence and less exploitation by capital. In this sense, like Carl points out, the issues are interlinked as many game workers have already realized. To Carl, this was the key solution to the challenge of establishing international solidarity between imperial core and periphery.

The Importance of International Solidarity

Natasha stated that international solidarity is important because labor power is 165 weaker without it where "[...] employers will always have the option to undermine union organizing efforts by outsourcing or relocating their businesses to countries with fewer protections and lower wages" (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022). Magnus stated similarly that "the leverage of workers in the West is undermined by the super-exploitation of workers in the periphery." Magnus identified a similar trend with how global class relations is predicated on how "employers will often encourage an attitude of competition between workers of different nationalities, including encouraging racist attitudes and seeing fellow workers as threats and enemies instead of the bosses" (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022).

Natasha revealed that the issue is not just the labor conditions in the games industry that are at stake, but also "existential threats posed by climate change, a global

pandemic, and imperialist wars." And that there can be "no real progress on these issues [...] without international solidarity and organizing" (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022). Magnus started that it is important for labor struggles to include anti-imperialism in their program "as the sanctions, wars, and regime change interventions of the West are the main factor in maintaining the super-exploitation of workers in the periphery" (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022). Thus, the conversation around organizing and improving labor conditions in the games industry can take a much broader form and link the struggles with global crises that the games industry is part of. In this way, Natasha would highlight the role that game workers in the imperialist core can and should play:

> "As game industry workers in the imperialist core, I believe we have a responsibility to our fellow workers in the Global South to resist they ways that our medium has been used to whitewash imperialist wars and dehumanize racialized people. In order to do that effectively, however, we need to build collective power, which is why I see labor organizing work as a critical component of anti-imperialist struggle." (Natasha, Online Survey Response, 05 March, 2022)

Magnus would likewise state that we are in an era of imperialist crisis where the fruits of imperialism are no longer guaranteed for workers in the imperial core. Magnus claimed that "the most basic of social democratic compromises and reforms are being rolled back, and the most conservative and conciliatory of unions are being met with full antagonism from capital." This has resulted in workers in the imperial core to become "closer and closer to the conditions endured by workers in the periphery, and the promise of escaping the proletarian condition no longer seems as realistic as it used to be for the parents of today's game workers in the West." To predict what the future of union movements and collective power reveals, Magnus considers two possible paths:

"We could see a reactionary response where, through white supremacy, patriarchy, and imperialism, the labor aristocracy seeks to reassert itself at the expense of the world's oppressed majority. Or, we could see a renewal of internationalism where the workers of the imperial core finally learn to understand their struggle as being the one and same shared struggle of all workers under capitalism. The workers of the game industry might have a special role to play in the struggles of the future, as, being the major entertainment media industry of our century, the game industry is now also a major part of the propaganda machine, and therefore involved in the reproduction of the imperialist world system at the level of ideology as well." (Magnus, Online Survey Response, 10 March, 2022)

Magnus' observation is illustrative of the challenges and also opportunities that the game workers face in the future and how the power of their labor can be applied.

Discussion

The research findings from the interviews and survey reveal the tendencies in themes between the different respondents. Most mentioned is that the game industry is highly internationally minded both in terms of language, work collaborations, and professional events, yet at the same time labor regulations are dependent on national legislation that present challenges for organizing and bargaining to improve the conditions of workers in both the imperial core and peripheral countries.

The notable tension in the data appears to be between the respondents who state that workers between core and periphery share the same struggles and worries, and the points that Magnus and Natasha point out regarding the cultivation of racism and chauvinism in the imperial core to justify the super-exploitation of workers in the periphery and domestically. This goes to the heart of the labor aristocracy. While workers across the world may share similar challenges at their workplace like Carl and Tom pointed out, they are differently invested in the prevailing global stratification of

labor, where those in the core do receive some privileges at the expense of those in the periphery. This can potentially discourage international solidarity. Yet as Natasha and Magnus point out, the strategy to educate and run in parallel organizations with theory-oriented groups could potentially reduce the risk of such forms of union-busting. Similarly, Carl points out that international collaboration is possible through union federations and in some cases "even desired by some workers" in the imperial core.

Another interesting revelation emerging from the data is how labor unions in the games industry can connect themselves to anti-war, anti-racist, and anti-sexist organizations to precisely combat the chauvinism and military maintenance of 21st century imperialism that feeds the existence of a labor aristocracy. This ties into Carl's point about how issues of sexism are similar across the international games industry that in turn give rise to workers coming together to air their grievances and organize collectively to obtain influence and rights at their workplace. This means that struggles for better labor conditions is tied into broader societal problems that can help mitigate or reduce the risks identified by concepts such as labor aristocracy. Through these bonds, education and parallel organizations can play a significant role, as Natasha and Magnus also emphasized.

This means that while concepts such as labor aristocracy reveals a tension between workers at both a global and domestic level, the observations that workers do share the same struggles and worries should prove to be an organizing nexus from which organizations, agitators, and unions can emphasize when they are met with challenges that the concept of labor aristocracy identifies. Similarly, Natasha's important point about workers in the core listening to and learning from those in the periphery would likewise be an important organizational principle that could also

help mitigate the ruling classes' attempt at sowing division and calling for war and super-exploitation. The point should above else emphasize the shared mutual interest between workers across the globe and collaborate together to stand in solidarity with each other, rather than fall prey to the bribes of imperialist relations.

In sum, the respondents showed how game workers and collective organizing in the imperial core face challenges posed by capitalism and imperialism, but that there are strategies and solutions in place to implement in the different contexts in which game workers find themselves struggling in. It is therefore important the efforts at organizing and unionizing in the ambition to promote international solidarity between game workers recognize the pitfalls and challenges that imperialist capitalism poses.

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Conclusion

In this article I have advanced the research on the increasing call to organize and unionize in the Anglophonic Western game industry. While we are seeing the significant trends towards unionization and collective bargaining from game workers in these contexts, as well broader media coverage and support by consumers, Marxist concepts such as labor aristocracy complicates matters. As I showed how labor aristocracy affords game workers and consumers in the imperial core countries certain privileges dependent on the super-exploitation of those in the periphery, this poses some potential challenges for organizers and union leaders by overcoming the material investments that potential union members have into the prevailing imperialist system. For if salary levels and access to affordable commodities and luxuries are dependent on the exploitation of the peripheral countries, then such it goes against the interests of these privileged game workers to combat or oppose the

system that provides them with these privileges. To shed light on how workers, organizers, and leaders reflect on these challenges, my interviews and survey helped draw out overarching themes of the international character of game work; the challenges of national legislation and its particularities that make it difficult to organize; the impact of chauvinism; the shared bonds between workers across the core and periphery; and finally, the importance of and the different strategies for cultivating international solidarity. While labor aristocracy is a debated topic within Marxist research, it is useful to identify potential challenges for collective organization. To further augment the insights by labor aristocracy in the sphere of games, economic research on the surplus value transfer between core and periphery and the wages derived from this parasitic relationship would be crucial for future insights into how game workers in the core benefit from and are materially invested in the prevailing economic system.

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