From hobbyist to professional : the identities of esports and game development professionals in Singapore

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**NANYANG
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SINGAPORE

**FROM HOBBYIST TO PROFESSIONAL:
THE IDENTITIES OF ESPORTS AND GAME
DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS IN SINGAPORE**

**VICTORIA CHUA PUAY RU
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

2021

**From Hobbyist to Professional: The Identities of
Esports and Game Development Professionals in
Singapore**

School of Social Sciences

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

2021

Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

22 January 2021

.....
Date

.....
Victoria Chua Puay Ru

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I have reviewed the content of this thesis and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain plagiarised materials. The presentation style is also consistent with what is expected of the degree awarded. To the best of my knowledge, the research and writing are those of the candidate except as acknowledged in the Author Attribution Statement. I confirm that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

22-Jan-2021

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Date

.....

J. Patrick Williams, PhD

Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis contains material from **ONE** paper accepted at conferences in which I am listed as an author:

Parts of the contents of Chapter 3 and 4 were presented at:

Chua, Victoria Puay Ru, and **J. Patrick Williams**. 2020. "From the Magic Circle to Identity: A Case Study on Becoming a Videogame Designer in Singapore." In *Proceedings of the Digital Games Research Association 2020 Conference*. <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/from-the-magic-circle-to-identity-a-case-study-on-becoming-a-videogame-designer-in-singapore/>

The contribution of the co-author is as follows:

- Assoc. Prof Williams revised my initial draft to improve the clarity of the analysis and literature review
- I made improvements to the paper based on Assoc. Prof Williams' recommendations.

22 January 2021

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Date

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Victoria Chua Puay Ru

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I look at identity work as a generic social process through studying the identities of esports professionals and game designers as they emerge in the process of professional socialization. In a Singaporean context, aspiring games professionals are undertaking games-related careers against a backdrop of instability, uncertainty, and stigmatization, with the hopes of continuing their gaming hobbies and engaging in enjoyable, meaningful work that simultaneously legitimates their gaming practices. I adopt a symbolic interactionist perspective to study the social and role identities of these games professionals and their associated meanings, which are interactionally constructed with their peers and instructors. I collected data about these two professional groups through participant observation and semi-structured interviews at two field sites: a local esports association (“LEA”) and a local tertiary institution (“LTI”) for game development. I find that games-related work is also about processes of identification: professionals construct “hobbyist” and “professional” identities in their talk, and the work of esports or game development involves socialization in which aspiring games professionals construct and internalize meanings, expectations, and obligations as part of adopting their new professional identities.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Games Industry in Singapore

In 2019, Singapore's Trade and Industry Minister highlighted state efforts to grow the local games industry through a combination of financial and non-financial support measures. These took the form of support for gaming startups and the building of a "robust talent pipeline" to supply skilled Singaporean workers to the videogames industry (Tang 2019), suggesting that Singaporeans who wanted to pursue games-related careers locally now had access to more state-provided resources that would support their chosen careers. In particular, the state's focus on providing resources to grow the game development industry implies that Singaporeans should find that game development careers have become more accessible than before.

At the same time, the pursuit of games-related careers remains fraught with challenges that are not easily resolved by increased access to state resources. The stigmatization of games-related identities, such as that of "gamer", is an issue that aspiring games professionals must grapple with. Historically, local media have played a key role in constructing mainstream narratives around videogames, where videogame players were expected to be productive and responsible in their gameplay. Specifically, videogames were emphasized for their potential to generate economic gains for the nation, while at the same time, exposure to videogames appeared to involve some form of risk: videogame players had to be responsible for mitigating the detrimental effects that videogames might have on their social life. News reports cautioned against the negative consequences of

videogames, such as increased aggression against family members and peers, neglecting of responsibilities at school and work, and committing crimes in order to sustain one's videogaming hobby (Williams and Chua Forthcoming). Thus far, the increase in state resources has yet to directly address the barriers that such narratives might pose to individuals keen to pursue games-related careers.

Current state efforts to increase support for the games industry can still be seen to coincide with such narratives of productivity, as well as with ongoing state interest and investment in the games industry in Singapore. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong argued in his National Day Rally address in 2006, the videogames and new media industries are of economic consequence for Singapore:

“Interactive and digital media. What does that mean? It means computer games, it means making movies, animation, cartoons. Very competitive business, but one where maybe we have a chance and we can't afford not to be there.” [PM Lee Hsien Loong, National Day Rally, 2006]

Therefore, by investing resources in the game development sector and the games industry in general, Singapore stands to participate in a highly competitive and profitable business that could potentially result in significant material gains for the nation. Meanwhile, the state's increased support for the games industry takes place against a backdrop of decreasing work security under the current stage of late modernity and advanced capitalism. This has resulted in work conditions that have negatively impacted workers, such as the limitation of wage growth, decline

in forms of collective bargaining and resistance, and adverse changes in welfare regimes (Fine and Saad-Filho 2017). The accompanying spread of neoliberal ideology shapes individuals into becoming self-responsible, entrepreneurial, and competitive subjects (Burchell 1996:23; McNay 2009; Brown 2015).

Youth labor markets have been similarly affected by these transformations, since calls for increased labor flexibility have resulted in the growth of insecure and non-standard forms of employment as well as fewer benefits provided by employers (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). Work, and life in general, has come to be characterized by diversity, unclarity, and insecurity. As the prevalence of stable, salaried work decreases, work becomes “nomadic multi-activity” instead (Beck 2000). Confronted by such conditions, youth have turned to non-traditional forms of work to make sense of their circumstances. In search of meaning in their work and lives, they engage in work that allows them to perform affective and creative labor, even as such work is insecure and frequently excluded from social welfare benefits (Zhang 2015).

Games-related work could serve as one such new form of meaningful labor for youths who are less interested in pursuing traditional forms of employment. Many games professionals starting out in the industry approach it with a strong passion for and a long personal history of playing games; careers in the game industry therefore provide opportunities for games professionals to sustain their leisure practices in their work and blur the lines between labor and leisure (Chua and Williams 2020). Such a blurring creates opportunities to experience work that could be both enjoyable and meaningful. While games-related work takes

diverse forms, some examples being live-streaming gameplay on online platforms like Twitch (Woodcock and Johnson 2017; Taylor 2018; Woodcock and Johnson 2019), real money trading involving practices such as gold farming (Tai and Hu 2017) or serving as community managers for games-related websites or forums where gamers congregate (deWinter, Kocurek, and Vie 2017). Out of the many types of games-related work, I have chosen to focus on esports and game design, given that there are local institutions catering to the training of aspiring esports and game design professionals.

Esports constitutes an example of an industry that is characterized by uncertainty, vulnerability, and insecurity throughout one's entire career trajectory (Lin and Zhao 2020), but at the same time, offers opportunities for participants to achieve self-actualization (Seo 2016). Working in esports provides an avenue for gamers to continue their leisure gaming practices and might be thought of as a form of "serious leisure", becoming an "improvement over work" that allows for self-fulfillment (Stebbins 1982). Working in the game development provides similar opportunities, since the promise of enjoyable work draws individuals who have played games for a long time and enjoy the prospect of developing games as a career (Cote and Harris 2020). The "work as play" ethos within the game development industry is especially attractive as it seems to offer workers flexibility, autonomy, and of course, the opportunity to play games as part of their work (de Peuter and Dyer-Witthoford 2005). Altogether, this makes careers in game development a form of pleasurable work (Dyer-Witthoford and de Peuter 2006).

With this in mind, the decision to pursue a career in esports or other games-related work in Singapore is likely not merely a result of increased resources to achieve one's career ambitions, but also the pursuit of fulfilling, enjoyable work within structural conditions that have made the stable employment of earlier times a distant possibility.

1.2 Identity in Games-Related Work

My own interest in games different from those seeking games-related work, as in the case of esports and game development, but was nonetheless significant. I was relatively new to videogames, having only started playing them at all just before I commenced my undergraduate studies in sociology. At the time, I was surprised at the hostile attitudes some had towards videogames. Their perception of videogames as a detrimental practice, and gamers as deviants, was greatly at odds with my interactions with many other self-identified "gamers" online, who were, for the most part, unlike stereotypes of online gamers that cast them as individuals who were unpopular, unattractive, and socially incompetent (Kowert, Griffiths, and Oldmeadow 2012). These hostile attitudes, however, clued me into the stigmatization that gamers are likely to face. After an undergraduate class on the topic of Media and Society, I became greatly interested in the sociology of media, particularly games, which had become an enjoyable part of my life. This was instrumental in shaping my interest in studying identity construction within games.

The identities of gamers, I would soon notice, were slowly changing in Singapore. Esports was a fast-growing phenomenon and would similarly serve as an

interesting site to study identity construction and transitions. Indeed, there has been much interest in esports, both as a topic of research and within everyday life. Some of this interest perhaps stems from the expectation the esports will become a massive source of revenue globally, drawing on a report by Newzoo (2020) estimated that global esports revenues would surge to \$1.1 billion in 2020, marking 15.7% growth from 2019. The growing interest in esports was also not confined to its business prospects, but also its viability as a career coming into the popular imagination. In Singapore, esports events began to occupy prominent spaces in daily life, with esports events and competitions being run at public spaces like community centers or commercial spaces such as shopping malls. This was a far cry from its origins in the time of LAN shops (i.e. cybercafés or gaming arcades) and skeptical coverage by traditional news media. Popular social media accounts such as SGAG contributed to the phenomenon by posting memes that joked about the viability of esports as a career, while on the other hand, articles on gaming-related websites like *Kotaku* also featured industry insiders who were skeptical of the perceived boom in esports (D’Anastasio 2019a). Regardless, both negative and positive coverage brought esports into the limelight. Comparatively, the game development industry received less media coverage locally, although the prevalence of game design courses at local educational institutes, including the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), polytechnics, and universities provided avenues for those interested in becoming game designers or developers. Yet while news coverage on game development in Singapore was relatively scarce, interest in the game development industry certainly existed, albeit for less “positive” reasons: a series of complaints and protests by employees of well-known international game studios such as Riot and

Rockstar also brought the plight of game development workers to mainstream attention on a global scale. Sexism, unpaid work and excessive overtime ran rampant and were framed as endemic issues within the game development community (D’Anastasio 2018; Schreier 2018; D’Anastasio 2019b).

A screenshot of a meme posted by SGAG, which jokes about parents now giving children tuition classes in gaming since esports might become a lucrative career.

This thesis combines both my past and present interests by looking at identity and its relevance to those who work with games. It is an investigation into the kinds of identity work involved in the pursuit of careers in esports and game development, discussed together as “games-related work.” Beyond a career choice, individuals pursuing careers within the esports and game development industries are a site of study into how social-psychological processes of identification and meaning-making become salient in thinking about the practice of playing and working with videogames across different contexts. Particularly, I am interested in investigating two questions: (1) What identities are constructed

in the process of becoming a games professional? (2) What identity transitions may be involved as one starts to work with games for a living rather than merely playing games as a leisurely pursuit? To address these questions, I will be adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective.

1.3 Symbolic Interactionism and Identity

Symbolic interactionism (SI) is a micro-sociological and social psychological perspective (Williams 2008) pioneered by the American sociologist Herbert Blumer, who put forth three premises about the nature of human life: the first, that human beings act towards things based on the meaning those things have for them; second, that meanings arise from, and are learned through social interaction; and third, that meanings are modified through an individual's interpretive process (Blumer 1969). In these three premises we see symbolic interactionism as a perspective that emphasizes the importance of social interaction and the centrality of meaning to social phenomena. Such a focus aligns with my interest in investigating the meanings that identities and gaming practices have for would-be and current gaming professionals. Furthermore, these premises shape my understanding of identity as socially constructed and interactionally achieved, rather than static objects that individuals possess. Given this focus on intersubjective meaning and its emergence in everyday experience, my work is aligned with an interpretivist approach, in which the study of human behavior is understood to be "the study of human lived experience and that human experience is rooted in people's meanings, interpretations, activities, and interactions." (Prus 1996) Given that this is also a study of the careers of games professionals, symbolic interaction is also a useful paradigm given its perspective

on careers, which are conceptualized in terms of two interrelated notions: the first is objective careers, where individuals make objective movements through a social structure, which then produces subjective careers, referring to changes in self-perceptions that accompany these positional relocations (Lindesmith and Denzin 1999). Since the “self” can be thought of as sets of identities that may be situationally invoked (Turner 2012:331), the study of careers may also be compatible with studies of relevant identities.

I am focusing on identity because I see it as a fundamental process in everyday life. It is a process that is crucial to our ability to understand the human world and our place in it (Jenkins 2014). Identity is “the human capacity — rooted in language — to know ‘who’s who’ (and hence ‘what’s what.’)” (ibid). Given its socially constructed nature, we can understand identity as an active process through which we categorize ourselves and others, allowing us to locate both ourselves and others in our interactions. My focus on identity also stems from its interest to symbolic interactionists, who consider the identification of self and other as a key feature of social interaction (Blumer 1962; Cooley, 1902; McCall and Simmons 1978/1966; Mead 1934 as cited in McCall 2003). Hence, identity has been argued to be a generic social process, which are “transsituational elements of interaction... denoting parallel sequences of activity across diverse contexts.” (Prus 1987:251) Identity work constitutes one of five processes, the others being acquiring perspectives, being involved, doing activity, and achieving relationships. Since identity is thought of as something that individuals do across multiple situations in everyday life and facilitates successful social interactions, I anticipate that identity work will also be an important social

process within the everyday lives of aspiring and current esports and game development professionals. I will focus in particular on two conceptualizations of identity to analyze the experiences games professionals: social identity and role identity, which I will elaborate on in the final section of this chapter.

Since my emphasis is on how identity is interactionally achieved in games-related work, I am foregoing a thorough investigation of other factors that might also be of importance in a study of gaming professionals. An example of such factors might be questions of gender, which have been the subject of much research within games studies and a major concern for sociologists. On the topic of gender within the game development industry, prior research has discussed issues such as the underrepresentation of women (Haines 2004), high barriers to entry experienced disproportionately by women (Consalvo 2008), and exclusion from higher-paying and leadership roles (Bailey, Miyata and Yoshida 2019). Within esports, the combined pressures of sexist stereotyping, negative attention, and harassment contribute to male competitors outnumbering female competitors. Second, ethnic diversity is also uncommon in esports, since most successful professionals are white or Asian (Li 2017). While categories such as race, class, and gender may contribute to one's participation and success within the videogames industry, I chose to turn my attention to identity processes that are likely relevant to the esports and game development communities as a whole. However, such factors of gender and class may certainly account for the trends in my respondent demographics, which skew overwhelmingly Chinese and male.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organized into five chapters. In Chapter 2, I describe the methodology used for this study, including a discussion of data collection methods which are best appropriate for research that relies on the symbolic interactionist approach. Instead of setting aside a dedicated chapter for literature review, I have decided to integrate reviews of conceptual and empirical work in identity and games so they can be woven into discussions of my own findings. Chapter 3 is the first of two empirical chapters, in which I focus on “social identity” as a key concept to understand the process of becoming a games professional in Singapore, where social identities are identities based on one’s membership within social groups or categories (Owens 2006:224). As aspiring esports and game design professionals transition from playing games as a hobby to working with games for a living, they must find ways of organizing their past and present gaming behaviors in ways that will be congruent with their emerging professional identities. Encountering games in a professional context involves a changing relationship with videogames (Ashton 2010) and thinking about the self in terms of hobbyist and professional identities serves as one way to navigate these changes. Chapter 4 is the next empirical chapter, where I rely on the concept of “role identities” to focus on the roles that games professionals adopt within their respective fields of esports and game development. Here, role identities refer to self-definitions that incorporate the meanings and expectations associated with a social position (Stets 2010). Becoming a games-worker is not merely about distancing oneself from prior hobbyist identities and practices, but also about making sense of one’s professional self in terms of new expectations and obligations that emerge through one’s membership within professional esports and game development circles. This process sees the individual gaining new

reference groups to understand the professional self and behaving in ways that are consistent with their professional role. The concept of reference groups refers to the social-psychological concept of social groups whose perspectives are assumed by an individual and play a role in shaping behavior (Shibutani 1955). Finally, I will conclude the thesis with Chapter 5, in which I will provide a discussion of this study's contributions to existing work on identity and games-related work, as well as the study's limitations and potential directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

2.1 Choice of Methods

Aligned with the symbolic interactionist perspective, my research is concerned with the kinds of meanings and interpretations that arise around professional identities as games professionals interact with each other. To this end, interpretive approaches such as participant observation and in-depth interviews are most suitable as they recognize the intersubjective nature of human life and are concerned with the meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to themselves and their experiences (Prus 1996:19).

2.2 Selection of Field Sites

I chose two research sites to conduct participant observation and recruit interview respondents: a local esports association (referred to as “LEA”) and a local tertiary institution teaching game development (referred to as “LTI”). My supervisor recommended both sites as he was familiar with key informants within these organizations; they could provide insight into the experiences of different facets of games-work in Singapore.

The first site, LEA, is an esports association founded by a group of gamers and ex-esports professionals. It offers resources to support both current and aspiring professionals within the esports industry, with the broader goal of growing the local esports ecosystem. Mostly, these resources take the form of classes conducted by professionals in different roles across the industry, who offer their guidance and expertise to individuals who might be interested in pursuing careers

within their fields. Such classes usually do not run on regular schedules, as they are subject to the availability of the industry professionals who teach these classes. As mentioned earlier, esports as an industry that makes for precarious work, and part of the organization's interests is to prolong the careers of esports professionals, since the physical demands of the sport means many competitive players are unlikely to retain their competitive edge past the age of thirty (Woodcock and Johnson 2016 as cited in Brock 2017). To this end, the classes serve an additional purpose of retraining current professionals for other roles still within esports, helping to alleviate some of the precarity that competitive players experience. Lastly, LEA conducts outreach efforts, both within and without the industry; it connects with other professionals in search of potential opportunities for cooperation, as well as non-gaming institutions like schools. In their latter function, they conduct classes that aim to teach local students soft skills through games, offer various workshops, or support esports- and gaming-related activities and groups within a number of educational institutions.

On the other hand, LTI provides a structured environment within which individuals can begin to pursue careers in game development. According to its instructors, it has a stellar reputation within the game development field, owing to its extensive connections with the industry, the rigor of its curriculum, and its track record of producing highly employable students. Many of these instructors are themselves veterans of the game development industry, hailing from some of the most prominent game companies in the world. The school offers a four-year degree program across different fields in game development, allowing students to specialize game design, computer science, or art. LTI favors a hands-on

approach, training its students mostly through interactive “lab” classes, where students work on assignments with the guidance of instructors during class time, as well as team-based game projects every year. These game projects require students to produce actual games of their own, while giving students a high degree of freedom in creating products that align with their own creative visions.

2.3.1 Methods: Participant Observation

I relied on participant observation as the first method for collecting data. Given that I was adopting an interpretivist approach, a naturalistic context was ideal to study how esports professionals and game developers learned to construct their professional identities in their everyday work settings. Some of the esports classes I attended covered were information sessions on related industries, such as journalism, some were focused on helping aspiring professionals sharpen their gameplay skills in specific games, while others touched on strategies to help individuals be better competitive players, covering topics as diverse as goal setting and sports science. At LTI, I was granted permission to attend classes conducted by game design instructors I interviewed. These included semester-long classes on developing games in different genres as well as a user interface and user experience (UI/UX) class. I obtained schedules of upcoming classes from key informants at both sites before planning classroom visits over a period of five months.

As classes were conducted, I took fieldnotes that attempted to capture details about what instructors were teaching their students, as well as noting student-peer and student-instructor interactions and behaviors where possible. I intended

for these details to encompass the expectations, meanings, and skills that instructors intended to convey and impart to their students, as part of preparing them for the life of an esports professional or game designer. Additionally, participant observation served as a form of method triangulation, a validation strategy in which researchers adopt different methodological approaches to obtain data about the phenomenon under study (Flick 2004). Outside of semi-structured interviews, which rely on a respondent's ability to recall and reflect on their experiences, participant observation offers the opportunity to study identity work through participants' everyday interactions.

Conducting participant observation at LEA posed its own set of challenges owing to the irregular nature of events or classes that were relevant to the study. In contrast, LTI held weekly classes given that it was a structured degree program. This allowed for regular and frequent opportunities to study how students were learning to be game designers, whether through instructors' materials and teaching or interactions with peers and instructors. As a result of these arrangements, I was able to acquire significantly more data from LTI than LEA.

2.3.2 Methods: Semi-structured Interviews

My research was facilitated through key figures at both LEA and LTI, who had the authority to grant access to both sites and additional respondents. Given their positions of authority within their respective organizations, they were also able to make recommendations or introduce me to other individuals who might be able to contribute to the study, simplifying the process of looking for interviews. At LEA, key informants circulated information about my study to their staff,

resulting in all respondents from the esports pool being part of the professionals who had worked at or with the LEA. The mixture of respondents with different professional roles in esports was an opportunity to learn more about various careers available in the industry, rather than competitive play only. However, since my interview questions had been clearly separated into the hobbyist and professional categories, they had to be modified during the course of the interview to cater to the multiple roles that some respondents had within the industry. For example, Ryan, a competitive player, was also in the process of becoming a live streamer on top of preparing to coach classes in esports. In this sense, he was both an aspiring and current professional, and the original interview schedule did not adequately capture this in-between state.

At LTI, my key informant, Chester, was head of the game design department, and he introduced me to two other game design coworkers, who then granted me permission to visit their classes and interview them. While there were certainly instructors from other departments, such as computer science and art, Chester had limited authority over them, and could not grant access to respondents from those groups. Though I was not able to contact instructors from other departments, I interviewed two computer science students who had heard about my study from game design friends. From this small sample, it was clear that they had rather different experiences, skills, and training than their game design peers. It is likely that including respondents from other departments would have necessitated separate questions and a discussion of additional identities that are outside the scope of this study.

I also relied on the distribution of flyers [Appendix A] as another way of recruiting interview respondents. The flyers contained information about the study, but also laid out criteria to increase the likelihood of meeting individuals who self-identified as gamers. This was to ensure that respondents would be able to describe their work and gaming experiences in a way that invoked not just professional identities, but also their hobbyist (“gamer”) identities. To this end, all respondents that I contacted for interviews had to have a history of playing games, as this increased the likelihood of respondents thinking of themselves as gamers. At times, my own gamer identity proved to be helpful; some students at LTI granted an interview because I responded that I played games myself, and furthermore, shared similarities in taste.

I also made use of snowball sampling in search of interview respondents, relying on respondents who had agreed to an interview recommending that their friends or classmates also grant an interview. This proved to be crucial to the recruitment process, as respondents at LTI mentioned that the lack of incentives or direct benefits was a significant barrier to participation in the study. When some respondents brought up the study to friends or classmates and recommended granting an interview, these friends and classmates answered that they were aware of the study from seeing me in their classes, but had decided not to participate given the perceived long duration of the interviews, which I had mentioned tended to range from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. The long interviews coupled with the lack of incentives resulted in fewer respondents overall. At LEA, snowball sampling was of paramount importance since all respondents were members of their professional network. It was especially challenging to recruit

aspiring professionals outside of LEA staff for the study as the classes offered were diverse in their objectives and material, so it was unlikely to find participants who attended regularly. This made it challenging to establish rapport. Furthermore, as mentioned by an individual I approached, the lack of direct benefit to respondents was another significant barrier to participation in the study. Before I commenced research, I had chosen to restrict my participants to LEA and LTI. Given the unexpectedly low number of respondents for the esports group, future research would likely benefit from an expanded pool of respondents that spans the myriad esports teams and organizations in Singapore.

In total, I interviewed 20 individuals, with 14 respondents coming from LTI and 6 respondents from LEA. Additional information about the respondents is summarized in the following table:

Affiliation	Pseudonym	Gender	Role
LEA	Marcus	M	Management role at LEA, retired competitive player
LEA	Jason	M	Logistics intern
LEA	Ryan	M	Esports coach and competitive player
LEA	Terrence	M	Aspiring coach, competitive player, founder of his own esports team

LEA	Sirius	M	Shoutcaster
LEA	Aidan	M	Shoutcaster
LTI	Judith	F	Game design freshman student
LTI	Olivia	F	Game design freshman student
LTI	Astrid	F	Game design freshman student
LTI	Brian	M	Game design sophomore student
LTI	Benjamin	M	Game design sophomore student
LTI	Chris	M	Computer science third-year student
LTI	Eugene	M	Game design senior student
LTI	Isaac	M	Game design freshman student
LTI	David	M	Game design sophomore student
LTI	Mike	M	Game design freshman student

LTI	Eric	M	Game design senior student
LTI	Chester	M	Game design instructor
LTI	Raymond	M	Game design instructor
LTI	Jake	M	Game design instructor
LTI	Kyle	M	Game design instructor, marketing manager

As can be seen from the table, most student participants from LTI come from game design. Although LTI offers degree programs in art and computer science as well, only two participants came from a computer science or programming background. This difference across different categories of students is partially accounted by key informants, who had only granted access to game design classes and respondents. Furthermore, the original focus of my research was on game design rather than game development as a whole. Bearing in mind the two students who hail from computer science backgrounds, I will be referring to the respondents from LTI as “game development professionals.” Another prominent difference is the large number of freshman students interviewed. At the time of data collection, most sophomore students were unavailable as it was common for them to be overseas on an exchange program. As mentioned earlier, many third- or fourth-year students were also reluctant to participate in interviews. This could be due to many senior students being preoccupied with internships or final game projects. While this sample is not as representative as I would like, the perspectives of game design novices as compared to that of their instructors still proves valuable by providing sites of contrast.

The interview schedule included questions that ask about gaming practices, gaming history, motivations for pursuing a games-related career, responses from significant others about their career choices, the skills acquired through playing and working with games, as well as their definitions of success in their respective fields. By tracing gaming practices over time, I hoped to identify a connection between one's gaming practices and how changes in these practices might shape the meaning of one's hobbyist and professional identities. My questions about skills, definitions of success, and one's work or training experiences were intended to discover the kinds of expectations and obligations attached to games-related work; looking at how respondents differentiated their past and present selves allowed me to see the categorical work that is a large part of social identities, while learning about expectations and obligations were essential for understanding the kinds of role identities that emerged.

I intended for such open-ended questions to be give respondents freedom in answering however they saw fit, rather than restricting the experiences that they wanted to discuss in the interview. However, some respondents felt that these questions were "very broad" and required further elaboration or clarification for how best they could answer these questions. While it became apparent that additional questions (i.e. "How do you define success?") should be added to prompt respondents for these broad, open-ended questions, the interviews were already lengthy and thus, the interview schedule remained largely unchanged.

2.4 Analysis and Coding

Coding is an important step in making sense of qualitative data, and “code” in this context simply refers to “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.” (Saldana 2012). Coding is therefore useful for organizing the data into coherent themes that are likely to be relevant to the research. I transcribed each interview after it was concluded and proceeded to code transcripts and fieldnotes in Nvivo. I approached coding as an iterative process, and in the early stages, relied on in vivo coding to get a grasp of emergent themes. In vivo coding refers to the practice of labelling sections of data with words or phrases taken from respondents’ speech, with the aim of staying close to the descriptions and experiences of my respondents (King 2008). The codes that emerged revolved around different skill sets and gaming histories and practices. As I familiarized myself with the data and identity literature, I returned to the transcripts with a more focused approach, looking for examples of identity talk where games professionals were invoking social or role identities. I then organized the earlier themes under the framework of social and role identities.

2.5 Research Ethics

While I anticipated that my research would cause no harm to respondents, privacy was a central concern, and so different measures were taken to protect it. First, I avoided collecting identifying information that was not relevant to the study, for example, their age and ethnicity. Second, pseudonyms were provided for all respondents, including for various game-related entities that were discussed in interviews. This was an important step since most, if not all respondents

anticipated eventually pursuing careers in the esports or game development industry, and I did not want their views to compromise any future employment opportunities. Where necessary, names of locations and companies were completely removed or made ambiguous, such as replacing studio names with “a game studio” or replacing game titles with “a MOBA game” instead. This was helpful in obscuring the work history of my respondents and making it more difficult for individuals to be identified through their affiliations with various organizations. All transcripts, audio recordings, and fieldnotes were stored on password-protected accounts and devices, inaccessible to other parties outside of myself and my supervisor.

CHAPTER THREE: SOCIAL IDENTITIES

3.1 Theorizing Social Identity

In this empirical chapter, I will be discussing two contrasting identities that respondents from both LTI and LEA frequently invoked: that of the hobbyist and the professional. These respondents were constructing their professional identities through their talk, emphasizing their current status as professionals or professionals in training as distinct from their earlier hobbyist selves. To understand these identities, I will be applying the concept of “social identities” to analyze how respondents from LEA and LTI come to think of themselves as esports professionals and game developers respectively. Becoming a professional could either be about rejecting one’s previous hobbyist identity and thinking about the self as a member of a professional circle, or it could be about reconciling both identities as being salient to games-work.

I use the term social identities to mean self-definitions that are predicated on group membership (Owens 2006:224) and one’s position within a social structure (Vryan, Vryan and Adler 2003:371). Individuals are not simply defined by their membership within socially constructed categories, but also in terms of the meanings and expectations associated with such categories (Vryan 2007). Since group membership is central to social identities, claiming a social identity involves seeing the self as a member of one group, positioned against others, who are viewed as members of out-groups. Some common examples of categorical social identities are race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality (Tajfel 1982 cited in Serpe, Stryker and Powell 2020:17; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995).

The social psychologists Tajfel and Turner (1979) pioneered Social Identity Theory, in which they proposed mechanisms central to categorical social identification. Of particular interest is how cognitive simplification results in stereotypes of groups and their members, a process that exaggerates both similarities among group members and differences from out-group individuals (Jenkins 2014:115). The boundaries between categories are socially constructed rather than ontologically real; groups are not formed based on the discovery of inherent similarities that precede group formation and identity construction, but rather, involve an active process of inventing similarity and downplaying differences between members of the in-group that renders social groups and categories as distinct (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). Thus, we can understand social identities as ideal-typical categories that possess criteria for membership (Williams and Khoo 2020; Brekhus 2003) and imply different sets of characteristics associated with each identity (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998:4).

Since all my respondents had a history of playing games and were likely to identify as hobbyist and professional at different points in their lives, they had to engage in processes of similarity and difference to distinguish between their present professional selves and their prior hobbyist identity. In some cases, this was to abandon a stigmatized gamer identity connected to a hobbyist past, while in other cases, hobbyist identities were seen as incompatible with professional work. The practice of playing videogames is common to both work and leisure practices; therefore, exaggerating one's similarities with other professionals while emphasizing differences from hobbyists is a main way through which

professional identities achieve their distinctiveness. In describing the criteria that made someone either a professional or hobbyist, my respondents were actively constructing their own professional identities.

As a whole, social identities are a way for individuals to categorize both themselves and others, and through that process, locate each other in social interactions and social structure. Their importance lies in their potential to motivate and rationalize behavior (Jenkins 2014); studies within structural symbolic interactionism, in particular, have focused on how identities can affect or even predict behavior (Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000). These causal models of identity argue that people act to “verify or confirm currently held persistent self-views” (Burke and Stets 2009). In that case, we can expect that games-workers are likely to engage in behaviors that align with their identities as games professionals while working to distance themselves from their hobbyist identities.

To understand the kinds of identities that emerge through working in esports and game development, I interviewed respondents from LEA and LTI to gain insight into the meanings of their professional identities. While I focused only on game designers within LTI, the diversity in the backgrounds of respondents from LEA allowed me to focus on individuals who work on a variety of roles within the esports industry, rather than only those who engage in competitive play for a living. Such diversity of roles within esports implies that there are many ways in which one can identify as an esports “professional,” but in the absence of a common professional identity, respondents described skills, experiences, and

attitudes that suggest a shared esports professional identity. In discussing their experiences with me, respondents were engaging in a form of identity work, more specifically, the verbal construction and confirmation of their identities through talk (Snow and Anderson 1987). Because social identities are made meaningful through the processes of establishing similarity and difference, we can look for instances of social identity by examining the criteria that games professionals talked about in their interviews. Games professionals hold themselves and each other to sets of criteria to determine their membership as members of a professional category; these criteria allow them to differentiate themselves from the hobbyists they used to be, while sharing certain similarities with other professionals. Through the lens of social identity, I see descriptions of similar skills, experiences, and attitudes that professionals possess — or should possess — as constituting the membership criteria of the professional category. Since esports and game development professionals focussed on different aspects of their relationships with games and had different expert skillsets, I will be discussing the criteria for esports and game development professional identities separately.

3.2.1 Membership Criteria: Productive Play

When I spoke to respondents within esports and game development, I found that both groups constructed their professional identities through the process of establishing how different they were from hobbyists. In the case of esports professionals, hobbyists were sometimes also described as “casual” gamers, suggesting that esports professionals engage in an intensity of play that is unmatched by hobbyists. Although esports professionals had developed a close

relationship with games from childhood and had started out as hobbyists themselves before pursuing an esports career, the meaning of this relationship was contested by professionals themselves as they sought to distance themselves from the stigmatization associated with gamer identities. Instead, esports professionals emphasized productivity, responsibility, and the development of skilled expertise to differentiate themselves from hobbyists. Since videogames retain their central focus for both hobbyists and professionals across both groups, how the latter define their relationship with videogames is a crucial way through which they construct their professional identities as separate from that of other “casual” gamers or from their own earlier hobbyist practices and identities.

“[The esports professionals I know] all had troubled— not troubled, but... were excluded when they were growing up. ‘Cause they were like the nerds or the geeks, you know? Because I’m at the younger end of the spectrum for shoutcasters, the average age is about... 26 to 30. Yeah, so 26 to 30, maybe... born in 90... 89 to 93? These age groups were the ones that grew up when tech wasn’t cool. When being into videogames wasn’t a cool thing. People were [criticized] for it.” [Aidan, interview]

“My parents kind of know that I’m good at games, but they didn’t know to what extent. And then because of that, they used to ridicule me about gaming... It’s just that, friends... you tell them you wanna do esports, and then esports is like, not even, some people don’t even see it as a legit thing, and then yeah, there is a... problem.” [Ryan, interview]

In the above extracts, identifying as a gamer was likely to be met with sanctions from significant others, whether it was one's peers or parents. In Aidan's experience, he believed that the perception that videogames were uncool led to peers criticizing videogame hobbies. However, the punishments that parents meted out could possibly be attributed to broader discourse about the perceived harmful effect of videogames. Given that Ryan, Marcus, and Terrence recalled weaker performance in school while demonstrating an interest and aptitude for playing videogames, family members might have assumed a connection between their academic performance and gaming habits. Parental responses, such as confiscating gaming hardware to deter one from playing games are likely representative of the great emphasis on academic merit in Singapore (Tan 2008). As such, parents placed much less emphasis on game-related achievements as compared to grades, and possibly even saw gaming as having a detrimental effect on schoolwork. Whether or not significant others accepted one's choice to pursue a games-related career was highly conditional; when Aidan signed a work contract agreeing to take on an esports-related role, he recalled the following response from his mother:

“My mom hated it at first. My mom was like, ‘What are you doing? Why you anyhow sign contract? Why you—’ [...] And then after a while, she saw that, not only was I making use of my time constructively, I was also getting paid for it, and it was also something I really enjoyed, right? I wasn't hating my life, washing dishes somewhere, or working really bad hours at a bar, like my peers were at the time. So she was like, after a

while she started to accept it. And then after I started casting for real, the pay increased a lot more, and she was like, ‘Oh, good job.’ [clapping]”

Gaming was only perceived as a legitimate endeavor by significant others when gaming practices could be seen to provide tangible material benefits, whereas conventional videogame play was still likely to be connected to deviant gamer labels and connected to irresponsible and unproductive play (Williams and Chua Forthcoming). Reactions towards non-remunerated gameplay were much less warm. An example of some of the negative perceptions of videogames can be glimpsed from a quote by Terrence, who said “Everybody said [playing games would] rot your brain, you’ll go nowhere in life, blah blah blah.” Of course, even as Terrence describes some of the negative consequences of playing videogames, such as “[rotting one’s] brain” and the perception that videogames would lead one “nowhere in life”, his own attitude towards such perceptions are clear in his dismissive phrase “blah blah blah.” In response to such negative perceptions of videogaming, some esports professionals preferred to focus on the benefits that videogames had brought to them:

“I feel that, games are a very good source of enjoyment, and a very good place to learn a lot of things, provided you put your mind to it. You can compare me and another person. For example, we both play games for 15 years. I take away so many things: I know how to lead, manage, all that kind of thing. That guy might not know jack shit, because he’s just playing games.” [Terrence, interview]

Thus, even if esports professionals could not point to salaried work as a source of productivity, they were quick to point out the numerous “products” of their play in terms of beneficial skills that could be applied to other areas of life. For Terrence, this is likely of particular importance because he has yet to find employment within the esports industry and is unable to rely on the prestige of paid work to support his identity claims. Esports professionals thus tended to measure their play in terms of its productivity; even if they could not name specific skills at the time of the interview, they were confident that their play had been productive in that it had helped them to develop as individuals and gain advantages in other areas of their lives.

3.2.2 Membership Criteria: Instrumental Play

One of the ways in which games professionals articulated their professional identities was to separate the practice of playing games in professional versus leisurely contexts. This served as a way of establishing differences between one’s hobbyist and professional practices and rendering one’s professional identity as distinct from a hobbyist past. When asked about how playing games might be a part of his work, Aidan responded:

“When I play the game I just jump in and have fun. I wouldn’t consider that work at all because when you work, you’re not— my idea of work is starting with a goal in mind and saying ‘By the end of today, this is what I want to learn...’ And if I haven’t met those, then I’m not successful, I didn’t do it well. But I wouldn’t jump into a game and say, ‘Hey, I learned this! That’s work.’ [laughing] That’s just sort of... cheating myself. I’m

not gonna say I learned a new thing in the game today, and I worked.”

[Aidan, interview]

In her study of esports, Taylor (2012) argues that esports professionals engage in instrumental play, “in which gamers will dynamically set goals and create scenarios that allow them to refine their skills while exploring the contours of the system.” Indeed, both esports and game development professionals described the importance of instrumental play to their professional identities. Here, Aidan distinguishes himself from hobbyists by distinguishing working with games from playing games to “have fun.” Instead, games take on the meaning of work for him only when he is able to meet goals that he has personally set for the day. The element of instrumental play is central to the training regimes of other esports professionals as well and marks the beginning of thinking about games as a “serious endeavor” (ibid). For example, in talking about his training regimes, Ryan describes a similarly instrumental approach to playing games:

“Nowadays, I approach games in the sense that I don’t want to waste time just playing for fun, like I got to learn something and everything from [playing games] ... We would casually try to push our rank... Maybe at the end of this week, I want to be at a certain rank, and then throughout the week, I just try to push towards it ... I believe as a competitive player, you need to set strict goals for yourself, what you want to learn that day, what kind of improvement you want to make that day, and then you push forward.” [Ryan, interview]

The inability to approach games in any other way but instrumental play marks a departure from the hobbyist identity and a transition into professional identity. Because work practices must involve goal setting and achievement of said goals, “just playing for fun” becomes categorized as a hobbyist practice, and furthermore, is perceived to be lower in value since it is “[wasting] time.” A respondent from LTI, Chris, also demonstrates similar attitudes about the relatively lower value of the hobbyist identity now that he has dedicated himself to pursuing a career in programming, saying “[I was playing] Thirty-two hours a week! When I was in JC and in secondary school, I was completely wasting my time.” Such categorizations of videogames as unproductive “wasting [of] time” is interesting to note because many respondents were also quick to point out that playing videogames had once been crucial to their personal and professional development, and that the videogames had much to offer people in terms of allowing one to develop various skills. In describing themselves as professionals, respondents were engaging in distinction, a process of social differentiation in which similarities that might undermine differences are suppressed (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). This process is particularly prominent here, since respondents are recounting past experiences in which they were themselves hobbyists but are now making effort to verify their professional identities instead. Now professionals, they describe the transition to a professional identity as dependent on the ability to categorize and transform play into work through instrumental play, and distancing oneself from playing games for fun, in which the hobbyist is seen as achieving nothing from videogames. As Ryan mentions, “The people I’m gonna work with in the future, some of them are going to be people who are just addicted for nothing.” In his work as a coach, Ryan expects to meet students

who play games in their everyday lives, but without being able to set and achieve goals, their play is categorized as a practice that runs the risk of the player becoming “addicted for nothing.” Instead, the internalization of instrumental play as central to one’s gaming practices and the categorization of leisurely, unproductive play as low value “wasting [of] time” marks the categorization of self as a professional rather than a hobbyist.

3.2.3 Membership Criteria: Non-Addictive Play

A topic that surfaced in most of the interviews with esports professionals was the issue of videogame addiction. Videogame addiction is a topic that has been studied extensively, although the focus has been on the psychological and pathological aspects of videogame play (Griffiths and Wood 2000; Khoo, Hawkins and Voon 2005). Local traditional media outlets problematized videogame addiction, with newspapers connecting a host of issues, such as increased aggression, poor work or academic performance, and an inability to maintain relationships, with videogame addiction. Since gamers are exposed to the risk of suffering videogame addiction through their gameplay practices, the gamer identity is one that can be thought of as stigmatized, where stigma refers to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman 1963:3). Because videogame addiction is described as affecting one’s social relationships and performance in other spheres of life, being a gamer may involve a deviant label that remains significant across different social contexts.

Although videogame addiction is connected to a stigmatized gamer identity, my respondents did not deny the reality of videogame addiction but recognized it as

a problem of playing “too much.” By setting up what constituted addictive or “unhealthy” behavior, they demonstrated that they were professionals precisely because they had developed strategies to mitigate the risk of becoming addicted to videogames. Therefore, one of the criteria of becoming a professional is to develop a sense of “balance.” The concept was introduced by respondents as a way of “balancing” one’s gaming practices with other obligations in life:

“Balance [is important]. Way too many people just play the game too much. I think it’s almost unhealthy. It’s fine if you’re a pro player because it’s your job. But if... you like to play a game for fun, don’t play like, eight hours a day.” [Aidan, interview]

Aidan’s quote also implies a division between playing games “for fun” and playing games as “your job”, and accordingly, a separation between hobbyists and professionals. Playing games is contextualized: one might play “too much”, but such excessive play is only problematic for the hobbyist, whereas playing for one’s livelihood as seen as a legitimate practice. It is difficult to tell what “playing too much” means in terms of the number of hours played, but professionals distance themselves from problematic hobbyist identities by framing hobbyist play as excessive and unhealthy. This suggests that games professionals rely on the concept of balance to mitigate criticism from significant others who might otherwise be concerned about their gaming practices. In this extract, Sirius provides the following response when asked how he drew boundaries between presumably healthy or normal play with playing “too much.” Rather than suggest a specific amount of time that he construes as normal, Sirius mentions the ability

to fulfil one's obligations outside of games, i.e. household chores and maintaining relationships as an indicator for whether or not one's gameplay habits are normal or deviant.

“I would want my kids to play games. But not too much! How much is too much? To the point of... every week, you stay at home to play games, you have no friends to go out with... just [staying] whole day at home, your room's a mess, your food is everywhere, that kind of slob lifestyle. That is too much. Or skipping school for games? Yeah, that is too much... [I would] whoop [my children's] asses!” [Sirius, interview]

In a study of internet-hobbyist game workers, Lee and Lin (2011) found that they relied on a variety of discourse strategies to navigate stigmatized work and professional identity. One of these strategies was to identify with social values and norms by reframing their work activities according to socially recognized values about “real” work (ibid). I see esports professionals as applying a similar strategy in framing *their* play as non-addictive, and thus relatively less problematic and unhealthy. Such a strategy is partially enabled by the framing of their play in terms of work. Since the risk of addiction constitutes part of the stigma of identifying as a gamer, rejecting addictive play helps esports professionals distance themselves from such stigma. The attempt to find balance between gameplay and other obligations could be one way in which esports professionals navigate negative discourses around games. Since news reports focus on how gamers fail to meet social obligations, such as expectations of academic performance and the maintenance of one's relationships, esports

professionals attempted to demonstrate that they were unlike such gamers and were able to fit play amidst other obligations. They seemed to suggest that they had developed a sense of balance in their professional lives and in contrast, hobbyists were described as people who were suffering the consequences of failing to find balance. “Most youths” are presumed to be likely to demonstrate aggression by “[lashing] out” at people who interrupt their gameplay, coinciding with narratives about addiction and its connection to violence and aggression:

“Obviously having balance is very important, because I think most people are not aware of addiction, videogame addiction. It’s a real thing, and people think, ‘I’m able to control it, I’m not addicted, I’m just playing because I want to play it.’ But in real life... at the moment where [someone is] in a 4-hour or 5-hour [gaming] session, if you were to cut short that period immediately without warning and just turn off the [gaming] system, get them out, I don’t think most youths these days would be able to handle it. They’ll probably lash out, take some time to readjust from online to offline.” [Shaun, interview]

Compare this to an earlier quote by Ryan, where he mentions that he anticipates he will meet people who will be “addicted for nothing”; by contrast, because gameplay is part of his work, he can escape discourses of unproductivity and irresponsibility around addictive play because he is engaging in a form of productive work. Navigating discussions of addiction serves as an important strategy for esports professionals to legitimate their work through their professional identities.

Alternatively, esports professionals' concept of "balance" can also be seen as a response to identity conflict, that is the behavioral and/or cognitive dissonance that individuals experience when they belong to multiple identity categories with competing or incompatible norms (Hirsh and Kang 2015). Should esports professionals find themselves unable to meet the expectations of both identities, they may experience identity conflict. The hobbyist and professional identities are associated with different norms: the former with unproductive, irresponsible, and fun play, and the latter concerned with productive play that focusses on the achievement of set goals. As socialization progresses, esports professionals may find that their professional identities increase in importance to them. However, they have also not relinquished their hobbyist identities completely, and they find that playing video games for fun after they have dedicated themselves to an esports career results in negative feelings that arise from failing to meet the expectations of their professional identities. In framing even their leisure gaming as "balanced", esports professionals are also verifying their professional identities since the ability to balance one's gaming practices and personal obligations is seen as a skill that was developed through professionalization.

3.2.4 Membership Criteria: Skilled Experts

The development of skills in one's role as an esports professional is crucial to the emergence of one's professional identity. Where identity has been a point of discussion in esports, scholars have recognized the centrality of knowledge, skills, and expertise to esports professional identities. As Taylor (2012) argues, the professionalisation process is heavily dependent on the active socialization into a professional identity. Of particular relevance are her descriptions of the

components of professional play, such as the development of different skillsets and mastery in relation to gameplay, savviness in navigating career and institutional opportunities and challenges, as well as social and psychological skills crucial to cooperative play in team-based games. Gamer selves rest on discourses of knowledge and expertise, with professionals being expected to possess such expertise or “prowess” in videogames (Seo 2016; Xue, Newman and Du 2019). Since the construction of social identities relies on the establishment of criteria to differentiate members of the in-group and out-groups, the acquisition of such skills could be considered one of the criteria through which esports participants come to categorise themselves as professionals rather than regular gamers, i.e. professionals are skilled experts, whereas hobbyists lack the skills necessary for them to be recognised as professionals.

However, though the emphasis in prior studies has been on technical skill with respect to gameplay, only one of my respondents, Ryan, prioritized what he called “mechanical skill”. Other respondents focused on the importance of different social skills, which Ryan did not completely neglect either:

“When I was playing competitively, everything rises and falls on leadership. Leadership is a very important aspect for me. A good leader can turn a team [around], can really make a difference.” [Ryan, interview]

“I think [leadership] is very important too ... When you’re playing videogames, [it’s] not every time you’re playing with someone you know, someone you’re accustomed to ... Often it calls for someone to take that

leap of faith, stand forward, to take charge of everything, and only from there can you proceed with things.” [Shaun, interview]

“Communication. I figured out how to talk to people, like... how do I talk to [different kinds of people] to get their attention, talk to them to get what I want from them. To get them to do what I want them to do.” [Shaun, interview]

Here, Shaun and Ryan mention two social skills in particular that they developed to navigate the challenges of playing games in teams. The ability to communicate with team members and to lead when necessary align with some of the skills that constitute the “basic learning curve” (Taylor 2012) for esports professionals. Taylor notes that skills such as “learning your role, how to work together as a team, how to listen to directions or give them, how to handle criticism and arguments, and other basics of being a member of a squad of people” are crucial to professionals who play in teams. This suggests that acquiring such social skills are a baseline requirement of the esports professional identity and serve as a criterion through which esports participants identify themselves and others as occupants of a professional identity. Such social skills support mastery and expertise in one’s gameplay by facilitating proficient play particularly in team-based games.

3.2.5 Neoliberal Play and Identity

I introduced neoliberalism’s influence on career choice for games professionals in Chapter 1, but the effects of neoliberal ideology are not confined to structural

changes that have encouraged hobbyists to begin making a livelihood of their leisure practices. Rather, its effects can also be felt through the ways in which esports professionals have chosen to construct their professional identities.

Of the four membership criteria that I have identified as being crucial to the esports professional identity, the first three in particular: productive, instrumental, and non-addictive play can be recognized as a product of neoliberal ideology. Put simply, neoliberalism involves “the marketization of everything, the imprinting of economic rationalities into the deepest recesses of everyday life” (Mould 2015). Young people are expected to become self-reliant, entrepreneurial citizen-workers, with the responsibility of achieving one’s aspirations being placed firmly on individuals (Pimlott-Wilson 2015). The entrepreneurial self is one that engages in personal investment with the hopes for maximum returns (Brown 2015:31; Peters 2016)—every action that the self-disciplined entrepreneurial worker takes contributes to the end of building any type of capital (Guarriello 2019). This theme of enterprise sees individuals shape their own lives through choices that they make and among the forms of life that are available to them (Rose 1999:230).

For esports professionals, time and money are certainly some of the investments they make as they pursue their careers. Respondents like Ryan are not just playing competitively but attempting to extend the longevity of relatively short esports careers by diversifying into livestreaming and coaching. Livestreaming in particular demands not only monetary investment in equipment but requires a strategic investment in time. Time is seen as a resource that must be used

entrepreneurially; regular broadcasting maximizes the visibility that one has as a streamer and generates returns in the form of viewership (Johnson, Carrigan, and Brock 2019).

Ryan is an example of how esports professionals transform play into an instrumental, productive activity that will generate returns by allowing them to remain competitive within the esports industry:

“If I do well in [a tournament], [it] means I put another game on my resumé. I’m good at *PUBG*, *DoTA*, *Clash Royale*, [and now] I can say *Auto Chess* as well. I’m trying to be the guy who’s good at everything ... I’m doing this [to] get as many games under my resumé as possible, so that next time, when I’m a trainer for LEA, I appear to be legit. If somebody [criticizes] me for one game that I don’t play very well, I can say ‘I actually perform [well] on so many games, you really want to criticize me for one game?’ ... I hate *Mobile Legends*—not hate, I don’t really like the game. But then I push myself to play until the highest rank possible.” [Ryan, interview]

Ryan’s experience with playing multiple games competitively epitomizes the instrumental, competitive attitude that he takes on towards his participation in the esports industry. Play is directed towards specific ends: by investing his time and skill even in games he dislikes, he is able to grow himself as an esports professional. His expertise will be valued and viewed as “legitimate” by others within the industry, who will then presumably look to give him more work,

bringing him tangible benefits. This legitimacy is achieved by ensuring that one remains competitive within a small esports market. Unlike hobbyist play, which is driven largely by the pursuit of fun, esports professionals organize their play along neoliberal logic. Any time invested in learning and playing a game at professional levels is done so that the returns from gameplay can be maximized.

In addition, Ryan made the following comments about the esports industry and how he participates in it:

“I try to stabilize myself first [in the esports industry], so [I can] make sure when the pie is actually big, only I can eat the pie, am I right?”

“So sometimes I feel a bit sad for [players who couldn’t make it in the industry], but it is how it is [laughing] Well, Darwin, you know? Only the strongest survive.”

Ryan’s metaphor of the industry as a pie he would like to consume by himself and a Darwinist approach to surviving in the industry also speaks to the individualizing forces of neoliberalism. As Wrenn (2014) posits, the neoliberal project prioritizes meanings of individual responsibility and an accountability to the self in all his activities. Despite the relative lack of support for the esports scene locally, failures to achieve success within the small industry are dismissed as an outcome of a survival of the fittest mentality and its consequences are borne entirely by individuals. Esports professionals in the industry must learn to play productively and strategically to ensure that they remain competitive and

attractive in a market that is not yet able to support all hopefuls. In this venture, professionals are responsible for the measures they take to succeed, as well as their own successes and failures.

In sum, ensuring that play is productive and instrumental rather than addictive support esports professionals in ensuring that they remain as competitive as possible. This aligns with general practices within the esports industry at large, where players are encouraged to play and behave in ways that will maximize their chances of victory, as well as develop an instrumentality that will support them in navigating the precarity of the industry (Brock 2017).

3.3.1 Professional Identity in Game Design and Development

While comparing the interview data from LEA and LTI respondents, it was clear that although both groups distinguished between their hobbyist and professional identities, the context and experiences of LTI respondents meant that their professional identities held different meanings and made use of different criteria. Even if esports and game development are both parts of the gaming industry as a whole, game development is also an industry on its own. The demands it places on professionals within the field are therefore also different and result in the shaping of professional identities unique to game designers and developers.

Existing research tends to adopt macro-level perspectives in studies of the game industry, examining the structures and institutions that sustain it (Kerr 2006). For example, in a study of the professional identities of game developers, Deuze, Martin, and Allen (2007) adopted a production of culture framework and focused

on five domains of work in cultural or creative industries: technology, law and regulation, industrial and organizational structure, occupational careers, and markets. The focus is much less on the kinds of meanings that game workers develop interactionally in everyday contexts. Building on Deuze et al.'s (2007) study, Wimmer and Sitnikova (2012) studied the professional identity of game designers using social identity theory and the concept of mediated identity. The result of their work is some insight into the meanings that game developers attribute to their work and profession by looking at their work biographies, media experiences and preferences, work life, professional orientations, and their influence on game developers' self-concepts.

The experience of becoming a game development professional involves a changing relationship with games. In his study of students in a higher education game design program, Ashton (2010) argues that the process of learning and practicing game design results in the emergence of three distinctive social identities among students: that of player, student, and designer. Quotes from respondents who have had considerable industry experience describe the experience of playing games in such terms as, "I can never play the game like someone who hasn't done can play it" and "You are less of a player the longer you spend in the industry" (ibid) suggest that social identities are at work: as game designers undergo continuous processes of socialization, they commit more to their game designer identities and their hobbyist identities become much less salient in their everyday gaming experiences, whether in the workplace or outside of it.

3.3.2 Membership Criteria: New Sources of Fun

As part of navigating one's changing relationship with games, game development students learned to reinterpret what "fun" meant in the context of game design work.

"The first thing that one of my lecturers told me while he was here, he told me, 'Making games and playing games are very different.' I was like, 'Yeah, I would expect so.' But I had no idea how different. It's really computer science, it's not games." [Chris, interview]

Previously, fun in the context of videogames referred to the enjoyable experience of playing games, described by one student as "pure, brain chemical fun." It appeared that the pursuit of playing games for fun also served as a motivating factor for some students who decided to study game design; Isaac, a freshman student who had been studying game design even before LTI, mentioned that some of his peers had assumed that a game design degree program would be "an easy, play-every-day course of study." As Isaac recalls, these peers "signed up for games [design] because [they] thought [they] were just gonna play games." However, in the process of becoming a game developer, such notions of fun had to be abandoned, a process that was encouraged by instructors. As a result, one of the patterns that emerged through interviews with both game development students and game design instructors was how they consistently categorized their experiences of fun along hobbyist and professional lines. Both groups used the terms "gamer" and "hobbyist" to describe a category of people whose relationships with videogames revolve around the fun and enjoyment of playing

videogames. Instructors tend to assume that the hobbyist identity is what students start out with when they first begin their training at LTI:

“Almost all students who come into LTI come from the mindset of a gamer: ‘I play games, I really like games, and this is what games are about.’ There’s a very gamer mindset. But a game developer is not necessarily a gamer. A game developer is somebody who understands how games are made, how meaning is created through games, stuff like that.” [Raymond, interview]

Congruent with such expectations, when asked about their history with videogames, most students described their relationship in terms of the enjoyment or nostalgia of playing videogames and the great amount of time spent on their gaming hobby:

“And [the Game Boy] was fun. You know, old times, you needed to switch [cartridges] to change games.” [Eric, interview]

“Before I entered LTI, I spent a lot of time playing games. I really can’t tell you how many hours per week, but it was quite a lot.” [Olivia, interview]

For instructors, an approach to games that centered on the experience of playing games for fun was problematic because it was incompatible with the demands of game design work. As Jake, a game design instructor describes, students who

entered game development expecting the familiar pleasures of playing games for fun would be sorely disappointed:

“Occasionally, in fact not infrequently, we get students who, when they come to LTI — this probably happened more in other schools, but it does happen in LTI — we get students who really love playing games. But when they come to discover what design of a game is, uh... there is a lot of number-crunching, it’s a lot of testing, it’s a lot of failure, it’s a lot of ideas that turn out to be terrible. They find they enjoy that process a lot less. And so they realize, ‘I like playing games, I really don’t want to make them.’ It’s tedious and frustrating, and I don’t enjoy it. So you have to like both. You have to like games, that gets you in, but you have to like analysis and critique and have a very thick skin and have a lot of endurance for failure, because that’s going to happen a lot. If you don’t have that, you’re not going to be very successful.” [Jake, interview]

Instructors problematized hobbyist notions of fun because of pragmatic reasons: there would be consequences for failing to transition into a professional identity during one’s time at LTI. Without internalizing new metrics of fun, aspiring game designers risked not only a lack of enjoyment in their professional roles but were likely to be unsuccessful within the industry as well. In describing these notions of fun, instructors were segregating hobbyist and professional experiences into distinctive categories and constructing “hobbyist” and “professional” as ideal types (Weber 1949); they were abstract identity categories that assumed certain generalized traits which did not fully represent the reality of game designers;

instead, they were a stereotype of ideal hobbyists and game designers. Such ideal types, however, could serve as standards that aspiring game designers aspired to.

Even if instructors did not explicitly lay down a set of expected characteristics that game designers should have, they persuaded students into adopting professional identities by cautioning them of the consequences of failing to perform. A student, Brian, provides the following account of freshman orientation at LTI, giving an example of how instructors attempted to prepare students to transition into their professional identities:

“In LTI [...] on your first day as a freshman, and during orientation, the first thing that you will be told is to look to your left, look to your right. You might not see one of these two people at graduation, or you might not be at graduation. That is the reality of how LTI is from even the heads, from the president of LTI. That is the reality.” [Brian, interview]

Since instructors assumed that new students at LTI were likely to be hobbyists, their attempts to professionalize students were intense even from the beginning. In his interview, Brian had also discussed the harrowing experience of watching his close friends at LTI drop out, describing it as a memory that “[burned]” and using it as an example of “the degree of pain and fear” that had formed part of his journey at LTI. The threat of dropping out served as an omnipresent warning of the need to learn one’s role as a professional. As Raymond put it, instructors frequently try to “catch” students at risk of “flunking out” so that they do not fail

out of their programs only in the final year. Failing to perform one's role as a professional meant the possible loss of one's position at LTI altogether.

Instructors did not always use tactics that were similarly intimidating. Jake, for example, did not mention dropout rates, but cautioned students of the need to adjust their expectations towards videogames as a professional:

“It’s something I always tell early students when they go into their first game design modules: ‘We’re here to ruin games for you.’ That is actually true. When you’re playing naïvely, there’s a mystery about games, you don’t really know how it works, you just know it’s fun and it makes you feel good, and that’s it.” [Jake, interview]”

In the process, instructors made clear distinctions between hobbyist and professional identities. Even though many students continued to play games both for fun and for work or research, instructors marked boundaries between one's hobbyist past and their professional future. As a result, they seemed to actively encourage students into adopting a game designer's perspective and approach to games. This was a change that came at the expense of the hobbyist identity on one hand, as seen in the example of Jake stating that the “tedious” task of “playing for research [...] kinda ruins the fun,” while on the other hand, presenting new opportunities for enjoyable work:

“That side of [videogames], the naïve experience, is ruined. But at the same time, I find the game analysis really, really interesting, so it’s

replaced by a more technical and... design-centric view of games. And so, I still like that. I like it more actually.” [Jake, interview]

In the following extract, Jake describes some of the intended outcomes of an education at LTI:

“*After* [emphasis his] LTI, you should never be able to do that again. Every time you look at a game, it should be: Interesting. Look at those transitions. Interesting - the metrics on that jump from platform to platform. The arc is slowed down programmatically so as to make the jump easier. The progression system is using this model of progression as opposed to something else. Oh! They’re using a freemium monetization system. They have in-game currency, but they don’t have a premium currency. That’s interesting. You look at it in a more clinical and objective way, and so you can no longer look at a game as just a toy. You now see it as a series of very cleverly built, manipulative tactics that are there to entertain, but they probably aren’t going to entertain you as much anymore, because you know what’s going on. You’ve seen behind the curtain. It’s kind of like magicians — professional magicians watching other magicians. You can’t watch and go “Wow! He pulled a rabbit out of a hat! I don’t know how he did that.” You’re like, “Interesting. He has the rabbit hidden in this secret compartment. I know what that trick is, that was originally developed in the 1700s.” You’ve ruined it. You know now the secrets. It’s kind of like that. Still interesting,

but you're no longer a naive user— player. You're... educated beyond the ability to just happily enjoy.” [Jake, interview]

On one hand, Jake discusses the knowledge and skills that aspiring game designers should acquire and their effect on one's future gameplay. On the other hand, quotes such as “they probably aren't going to entertain you as much anymore” and “educated beyond the ability to happily enjoy” describe how games become “ruined” for hobbyists-turned-professionals. Such descriptions imply that the hobbyist identity is extinguished for good, and with it, part of one's ability to enjoy games. Respondents like Chris provided similar responses, lamenting the loss of their hobbyist identities and associated experiences of fun, even if programming, which is part of his role as a computer science student, was “something [he had] learned to love.”

“At the same time, when you start developing games, you lose this— games don't seem as fun anymore, because the illusion is broken... It used to be magic before I joined LTI. I was just like, ‘This is so cool, the graphics are so cool, the animation is so slick.’ But now that you've seen the ugly side of games when they're still in pre-production and they're still buggy and messy, you know how they do it now, so the magic is gone. It's not magic anymore, it's just a lot of math and a lot of [sigh]. Work.” [Chris, interview]

Most students talked about how their training allowed them to look at games in terms of their constituent components. Chris and Eric, though from different

disciplines, found that their education at LTI helped them to focus on different aspects of games; they were no longer “just [playing]” as a hobbyist might, but had developed additional insight by virtue of their “mathematical” and “game design”-oriented ways of playing and understanding games.

“Now I find myself noticing issues [in games] more and more. For example, when I used to play competitive games... I used to just play the game. But now that you sort of know how the game works, you look at it in a more mathematical way, and you start to notice things, like when your skill doesn’t hit— you’re like, ‘What the heck? Whoever programmed this is nonsense.’” [Chris, interview]

“Gaming... now when I play games, I can’t help but to look at them from a game design point of view at times. Like, why did they put this here? Oh, I understand. Then when I sometimes see a new map, I will analyse the map. Like line of sight, the characters’ mobility and feel, quite analytic at times” [Eric, interview]

Of course, students did not just passively receive instructions from their instructors on how best to think and behave as a professional. As ideal types, social identities are conceptualized as having clearly defined boundaries, but individuals do negotiate their categorical membership in different ways as well (Brekhus 2015; Schwarz and Williams 2020). For game design students, the negotiation process involved the degree to which they could retain the ability to play games for fun in the face of their new professional identities and affected

how they felt about relinquishing their hobbyist identities. For example, some students were quick to insist that their education at LTI had actually helped them enjoy games more and emphasized the positive aspects of merging hobbyist and professional definitions. These were students who had become sensitized to the design elements of playing games but found that this newfound sensitivity was a source of more enjoyment. For these students, socialization at LTI had been successful in the sense that they had learned the meanings of fun that their instructors were trying to impart, even if they resisted the rigid delineations between their professional and hobbyist identities:

“I would say I enjoy [games] more because I can see how... I can start analyzing on a professional level how the players are interacting with the game on a design level, and how that design interacts with the art and the music.” [Olivia, interview]

“I guess I’ve become more critical of games I play. I can identify a bad game and a good game, but it doesn’t mean that I don’t— it doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy them as a whole.” [Astrid, interview]

At the same time, such quotes show that the training students receive at LTI creates persistent changes in the way that they view games. Having learned to understand games through their technical and game design expertise, students were likely to continue viewing games through this lens, which was also behavior that instructors like Jake encouraged. Even if students were to encounter games in a leisure context, such as playing for enjoyment, they were likely to relate to

games professionally by evaluating the game with game design criteria. This suggests that their professional identity becomes more salient overall.

Identity salience refers to “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations” (Stryker and Burke 2000) and can be observed in the quotes above. Having been socialized into their game designer identities, students and instructors invoked their professional identities with increased probability and frequency. Whether they encounter games in a work context or a leisure context, and whether games are played for “research” or played for leisure, the professional identity has a higher likelihood of being invoked. Meanwhile, the hobbyist identity becomes less salient as students progress further along the professionalization process. The salience of identities is related to commitment, that is, the “social and personal costs entailed in no longer fulfilling a role based on a given identity” (Stryker 1980). The consequences of failing to enact one’s professional identity was made clear in both instructors’ and students’ talk. Students who failed to present their hobbyist identities ran the risk of being labeled by their schoolmates. One way in which students might be perceived as being insufficiently professional would be when their teammates felt they were not putting in the work they should. As an instructor, Raymond sometimes found himself mediating the conflicts that arose within student teams as a result, and described the situation as follows:

“It’s not two people who work very hard and have differing visions [that causes the fighting]. People who work very hard generally find ways to compromise, in my experience... It is the slackers that always get the

trouble, because they try to coast on as little work as possible, but it catches up to them because everyone has to churn out the same amount of work and then you bring it all together.”

If one’s professional identity was not sufficiently invoked at school, a student ran the risk of being labelled a “slacker.” In some cases, where school had fallen so low on a student’s priorities that they were invoking the professional identity infrequently, there was even the risk of “[flunking] out.” [Raymond, interview]

Since students worked closely with each other in teams for game design projects, being viewed as someone who did not dedicate themselves sufficiently to their work also meant that word would get around about how “difficult” it was to work with them. Eventually, said student might find themselves not being able to find teammates for upcoming projects. Thus, we can see that the high social costs of failing to invoke the game designer identity increases its salience.

Other students insisted on maintaining some aspect of their hobbyist identities by continuing to emphasize the “playing games for fun” quality of their gaming practices. For example, Isaac resists defining games in work terms and instead frames his obligations at LTI as fun:

“It’s like doing homework, but this is the best homework in the world [laughing] [...] I never really consciously [play games as research]. Imagine if I did. Then I would never enjoy games as much anymore [...] It suddenly becomes a duty, and it won’t be as fun. [...] I never really see

it as a... it's not work. I don't think I should ever really see it as work, because it would shatter the illusion for me. A little bit of ignorance is okay. [laughing]"

There were also students who felt that while their approach to games had changed because of their education at LTI, were dissatisfied with how their enjoyment had become overshadowed by the proximity of games to work:

"I hate games. I hate and love games at the same time a lot more. [laughing] In the past, when— okay, when I say I hate games, before LTI, it would be the frustration of losing and not doing well. When I say I hate games now, it's when I look at the game and I go, 'Hmm. I think I know how this is made,' or 'Hmm, I know what are the tricks they used here.' That kind of spoils the game for me. For me, playing games is a sort of escapism, and a way to relax. But when you look at your enjoyment, suddenly that veil is torn away and you're looking at work again. It's not pretty, it's not pleasant at all." [Brian, interview]

Students like Brian intensely felt the presence of boundaries between their hobbyist and professional identities, because the inability to confine one's game designer sensibilities from one's hobbyist gameplay resulted in detrimental effects on one's enjoyment. His education at LTI had so blurred the boundaries that he no longer purely experienced playing games either for fun or for school, but because games had been a source of "escapism" previously, the loss of his hobbyist identity was a source of distress to him. Since he valued his hobbyist

identity considerably, this resulted in him “[not enjoying] one bit of [his] time at [LTI].” Brian’s experience is also an example of identity conflict, which results from perceived incompatibilities between multiple identities and their different normative standards (Hirsh and Kang 2016). Since instructors at LTI were concerned that hobbyist attitudes were incompatible with professional game design work, they had established different sets of norms for each category and advocated for students abandoning their hobbyist identities in favor of a professional identity. Even as students find the loss of their hobbyist identities an unsatisfactory prospect, the contrasting meanings associated with opposing identities can make it difficult for some to negotiate a professional identity that integrates both hobbyist and professional attitudes and practices.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the kinds of criteria that both aspiring and current esports and game development professionals utilized to construct professional identities. Although both groups did make distinctions between their hobbyist and professional identities, they made use of separate criteria that each of their professional identities somewhat different meanings. Regardless of the content of each, professional identities as a whole bring esports and game developers a sense of legitimacy that their stigmatized gamers identity lacked. In this context, the process of social identification emphasizes not only the kinds of criteria that are conveyed through professional socialization, but also the agency involved in learning and reproducing those criteria in understanding one’s own hobbyist and professional identities.

CHAPTER FOUR: ROLE IDENTITIES

4.1 Theorizing Role Identities

Ashton's (2010) work looked at three social identity categories that emerged from the experiences of higher-ed game design students: that of player, student, and designer. However, these social identities can also be thought of as role identities, where membership criteria also form the expectations for role identities. Games professionals did not only think about themselves in categorical terms, where their professional identities arise through processes of establishing similarity and difference. While the concept of social identity describes how games professionals think of themselves as members of the "professional" social category, the concept of role identity is more appropriate to discuss how games professionals understand the obligations and expectations which guide their behavior (Stets 2010) or which are internalized as role expectations (Stryker and Burke 2000) associated with being an esports or game development professional.

In sociological terms, the concept of "role" refers to "positions in the social structure, to which behavioral expectations, including reciprocal rights and obligations, are attached." (Thoits 2012). Individuals know how to act in different situations based on these social positions that they hold (Coutu 1951:180; Dolch 2003). Drawing on identity theory, the self is seen as an occupant of a role, and role identities involve the incorporation of the meanings and expectations associated with the role into one's self-definitions (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). Role identities also do not make sense in isolation, but rather, form reciprocal pairs with other roles known as counter-roles. For

example, the role identity of “husband” presupposes and relates to the role identity of “wife.” (Burke and Tully 1977).

Three prominent role-pairs emerged in this study: that of developer-developer, developer-player, and developer-employer. Game developers’ role identities were especially prominent in how game design instructors and students described what they felt made a “good” or “successful” game developer. First, they had to understand themselves in terms of being a team member to other workers on a game development team. Second, they had to understand themselves as developers making games for consumers. A “good” or “successful” game developer made games that consumers would want to purchase and enjoy and would also be able to collaborate successfully with one’s peers to ensure a smooth production process. Each role involved expectations that respondents associated with eventually becoming a game developer in the employ of a game company. Third, when students were able to imagine what players wanted from their games, they would be able to make games that people wanted to consume, and in turn, produce games that would sell and perform well commercially, thereby fulfilling their obligations as salaried employees. The “game developer” role identity thus serves as a guide for the behaviors of both students and instructors, since they worked to incorporate the expectations of being a game developer into their game design practices. For students, learning to become a professional game developer was not merely about abandoning their hobbyist identities, but about learning to make sense of their emerging professional selves in terms of how one should go about being a game developer.

In this chapter, I discuss some aspects of role identity that students and instructors communicated in interviews and in the classroom. While many students had chosen to pursue a game development career because of its proximity to previous pleasurable experiences of playing videogames, the process of undergoing training was far from a passive one; rather, students had to negotiate what it meant to be a professional by learning the expectations communicated by their instructors and peers and reconciling these with their own expectations of games-work.

4.2 Developer-Employer Role Relations: Passionate Labor as Profitable, Exploited Work

The first role-pair that emerged from interviews with instructors was that of the developer-employer role-pair. Because instructors “want [students] to be employees,” LTI training involves socializing students into this particular role. LTI maintains close links with the games industry in a variety of ways: instructors are encouraged to remain up-to-date on the latest developments and to share their expertise, such as through talks; instructors themselves boast extensive work experience in major game development studios; and listens to feedback from employers about how their students fare as current and prospective employees. According to Raymond, LTI was sometimes also described as a “feeder school” for AAA game studios in Singapore, providing a steady stream of graduates as future employees:

“The cream of LTI students are normally taken up by AAA studios. They want a lot of people, and they’re quite impressed by LTI students. Some

people complain LTI is just a feeder school for these studios. In a way, we are, because they pay good salaries, so students like to work for them.”

[Raymond, interview]

The high demand for LTI graduates at these studios implies that by the end of their training, students become well-socialized into their roles as employees. This is likely facilitated by the experiences of instructors, who are industry veterans themselves, and the practices at LTI of maintaining close connections with current employers, which culminate in the reproduction of employer expectations by instructors. One example is the theme of “passion” that emerged through instructors’ and students’ talk. The centrality of passion to games-work is seen not only in the following extracts, but also in claims that most would choose to exit the games industry altogether if they no longer enjoyed playing or making games. As Wimmer and Sitnikova (2012) note, a passion for playing and making games seems to be an essential component of games-work. Although students did not specify what aspects of their gaming experiences they were passionate about, it was clear that they felt strongly and positively about videogames, and they communicated that “passion” was a cornerstone of working with videogames.

“You can tell when something is made for passion, rather than something that is made for a paycheck [...] I know audiences can detect it. When you see something, and you feel that passion, and somehow you get caught up in that passion, versus something that you see, [where] obviously, whoever made this couldn’t give two shits about whatever

they were making. They're just doing it for the paycheck. You can tell, that guy is just phoning it in. As a result, your interest in whatever it is that you're watching or experiencing, it drops because of that." [Raymond, interview]

In the above extract, Raymond describes passionate labor as one of the expectations he has of good game designers. He places relatively high value on passion and its role in making quality products, believing that games made with passion are more likely to satisfy audiences. Raymond has a specific vision of how his students can convey their passions through their work, emphasizing the meaningful aspect of making games by encouraging students to apply their personal beliefs into their game design and transforming their games into personally meaningful products. Therefore, if students wanted to live up to their instructors' expectations of being good game designers, they had to approach game design work with passion.

However, passionate labor has been problematized for the ways in which it enables the exploitation of cultural workers who may find themselves in circumstances of precarity, underpaid or unpaid labor, and the compulsion to work persistently long hours (Sandoval 2018). The game industry has achieved some notoriety in the press, given the work conditions that employees are subject to. Game developers experience crunch time (Consalvo 2008), which refers to a "period of extended working hours to speed up lagging projects"; it is frequently extensive and unpaid though it is a practice that is endemic to the game development industry (Cote and Harris 2020). On the one hand, passion

supported game designers in making meaningful products. On the other hand, game developers also find themselves subject to neoliberal ideology: amidst the challenging working conditions of their industry, there is perhaps an understanding that it is one's personal responsibility to find satisfaction in one's work, reinforcing notions of individual sovereignty and personal freedom (Cockayne 2016). In this way, passion for one's work normalizes exploitative working conditions and is a site for exploitation by one's employers. The pursuit of work satisfaction becomes the responsibility of the individual rather than the employer, and employees may often overlook unfavorable work conditions because the prospect of passionate work is seen as sufficiently satisfying and reward enough.

Most students reproduced these perspectives on passion in how they anticipated that they would be expected to be passionate about games in their line of work:

“I’m not sure what the recipe for success is in general, but I just say, if you have the passion for it, don’t do it lightheartedly, just be sincere in what you wanna do. So maybe you wanna code or you wanna do art, you should know there are sacrifices to make, so maybe fun times or family times [must be sacrificed] for you to do your work and build on your skills.” [Judith, interview]

“[To be a successful game designer] You need to have the passion, first and foremost. Definitely. If you don’t have the passion for it... you need the passion. If you don’t have the passion, you’re not going to go very far

with it. You need, first and foremost, to learn that... you need to discard the thought that you're going to make money out of this. You need to... you just need to learn to love what you do. But don't ever let money get in the way of what you think. That's what I think. If you want to be a game designer, a successful game designer, you need to have the passion and love for games, first and foremost." [Astrid, interview]

"Passion. Must have. It's a must-have thing. Without that, you cannot push yourself. That's what it is... So that's passion in some sense, you're driving yourself, you cannot— this industry is tough, I can say. A lot of long hours, sleepless nights, so what is driving you is your passion." [Eric, interview]

For students, their passion for games in general was what drove them to pursue training at LTI, but beyond that, they seemed confident that it would also be passion that helped them endure the difficulties or disadvantages of their profession: namely, the long working hours and low pay. The taken-for-granted attitude that students seemed to take towards the expectation of passionate labor suggests that they have internalized this particular aspect of games design work. The process of learning their social roles involves internalizing the attitudes of others (Stryker 1972), in this case, the expectations of their instructors that they be passionate about the products they produce. Good game designers should work for passion, not wages. At the same time, their idealism about the nature of the game development industry and how passion enables and makes tolerable

personal sacrifice also makes them vulnerable to exploitation by future employers.

Many students downplayed financial gains both as a motivating factor and measure of success; they were pursuing careers in game development being fully aware that it was a job that was likely to pay less. Passion is seen as an important mediating factor that compensates for the low pay and long working hours of the games industry and served as an important resource for aspiring professionals, especially when significant others expressed skepticism about their low salaries or when unexpected overtime dictated that games professionals had to sacrifice commitments with people outside of work. Drawing on their passion as a resource also helped them normalize the experience of crunch and internalize expectations of unpaid overtime as a part of the game development industry.

Although instructors expected passion from themselves and their students, they had also come to be more critical of the role of passion in their work, especially when they considered their personal experiences of working at major game development studios which had exploitative working practices. For some professionals, passion was not only seen as something that all game designers were expected to have as a prerequisite of entering the industry, but rather, something that had to be managed if one were to successfully navigate the risks of working in the game industry. While students expected that they would draw on passion as motivation to overcome issues such as crunch and low pay, some game instructors were wary of the consequences of being blindly passionate and

instead, called out the role that passion played in masking “exploitative” practices within the game industry. As Jake puts it:

“You get people who are really, really passionate, but to be honest, within the industry that passion can be manipulated into getting people to work for ungodly hours. Definitely, there were projects at various companies I worked where I [went] through a project that was a year long and [when] I calculated my actual hour to hour salary, I was earning less than minimum wage, because I was there from 9:30 in the morning until 10 at night, every night. I was there all Saturday; I was there Sunday afternoon until 7 or 8 at night. They bought food for us, they bought pizza for us, they encouraged us to *work, work, work, work, work, work, work*. People slept under their desks. All the time. All through our projects. You’ve got people who love games *so* much that you can effectively trick them into killing themselves making games, so there’s a lot of exploitation within the game industry, and some people exploit themselves.” [Jake, interview]

“I think generally I find the people [in the game industry to be] very passionate. [The] game industry, like movies, is a passion industry. It works both ways. It’s good because you get people who— even now, I meet people who are fifty, who are so passionate about what they are making. But the downside of it is that it can be very prone to exploitation, because when you’re very passionate, it’s easy to do overtime all the time, just to crunch all the time, which is being addressed by the community right now, that crunching hours have to come down.” [Chester, interview]

Jake paints a bleak picture of the “exploitation” that goes on within the game development industry, describing an extractive relationship between employers and game developers that may be intensified by passionate game developers themselves, simply by virtue of their deep passion for videogames and games-work. One’s professional role as a game developer comes with new vulnerabilities, in this case, the risk of being “exploited” by one’s employer. Even though a passion for one’s work is expected within the game development industry, its role has become increasingly problematized. For one, the larger concerns of a game development studio, such as its budget, deadlines, and product specifications, dictate the production process (Peticca-Harris, Weststar, and McKenna 2015; Legault and Weststar 2016), with individual developers possessing comparatively less agency. Cote and Harris (2020) argue that this makes for a “soft-coercive system” that is further exacerbated by passionate individuals themselves; since many in the game development industry love being able to develop games as a career, their passions appear to trap them in “unhealthy relationships with work.” Within such a context, passion can result in “complete and uncritical commitment to an employer” (Kerr and Kelleher 2015), at the expense of an individual’s wellbeing. By mobilizing passion, employers benefit from employees who serve to “exploit themselves” by virtue of their affective attachments to their work. There is a noticeable difference in how Chester describes crunch as an issue that game development communities are confronting and the way students raise the issue of crunch — for them, crunch seems to have become a taken-for-granted feature of the game development landscape (Cote and Harris 2020). The problematizing of passion and learning

how to manage it is something game development professionals learn through socialization; the divergence between instructor and student attitudes suggest that the internalization process is incomplete and given that most students at LTI are neophytes to the industry, it is unsurprising that they have only adopted some attitudes around game design work but not others.

The developer-employer role pair is attached to expectations that the developer will make games that sell. Since game development companies invest capital into making games with the anticipation of turning a profit, game developers should design games that will be commercial successes. Failing to design a game that a player will purchase is, in Kyle's words, "unforgivable." Kyle used the example of a student turning in a "beautiful" game project for his class. Despite the project being aesthetically pleasing, Kyle failed the student because the game had severe bugs that led to it being unplayable. This was not merely an incident about a bad grade, because Kyle reiterated the importance of designing with players in mind by reminding the student that "'When [their] game is really buggy, it's unforgivable. Nobody's gonna buy your game.' Then all the investment, you spent hundreds of millions to make your game, [it's all gone] down the wire." In such an incident, the student had failed to meet multiple sets of expectations: they had not made a game that players would want to play, and in the process, they had also made a game that resulted in losses rather than profits for their employers.

4.3 Designer-Designer Role Relations: Designing as Collaborative Work

As a school that focusses on game development, one might expect that instructors would emphasize the development of technical skills so that one can be

competent at making videogames. Yet when asked about the skills that he tries to teach his students, Raymond gave the following reply:

“LTI tries to teach people teamwork, first and foremost [...] Game design— or media design, media production in general, it’s multidisciplinary, which means you’ll be working with people with a lot of very different skill sets [...] You have people who are programmers, and you have people who are artists in games. Programmers do not speak the same language as artists, because their worldview is different, the entire culture in which they thrive is different, and so there’s a lot of cross-disciplinary communication that needs to be done. The ability to not just work in a team— it’s clichéd to say, ‘work in a team,’ but it goes beyond that. It’s about how do I make sure that the artists understand what I am trying to do? And vice versa, as an artist [...] how do I explain [as] a designer to an engineer, what I’m trying to achieve?”

Elsewhere, Raymond had downplayed the difficulty of learning technical skills, noting that the ubiquity of the internet had made it so that most amateurs could learn the necessary technical skills through YouTube tutorials. Instead, the emphasis at LTI was for students to learn how to work effectively in teams. In his interview, Raymond mentioned that he was aware of comments that LTI was a “feeder school” for local AAA studios, that is, that many graduates from LTI had been hired at the few major international game companies left in Singapore. Raymond acknowledged the truth behind such comments, suggesting that one of the outcomes and objectives at LTI is to produce students who are suited to work

as employees of game development studios. Within such a professional context, game development is never a solo endeavor, and game developers are thus expected to work as members of game development teams.

Instructors communicated the importance of cooperative and collaborative work through a variety of avenues. The following is an example of how Raymond encourages his students to be better classmates by supporting them in becoming better game designers. During one of his classes, Raymond presented the following slide to his students:

“Notes on Playtest:

- Play a DIFFERENT MAP from last week! [emphasis in original]
- Fill in the feedback forms!
 - Last week, some levels only had 2-3 feedback.
 - Not cool!
- Don’t put “Nil” for the comments!
 - Also not cool!
- You’re one of 7-9 playtesters giving feedback.
 - Help your classmates improve their levels.”

[Field notes, 19 July 2019]

For context, Raymond was providing feedback following a playtesting station the previous week. Students had been asked to design a game level and have their peers play the level to test it for bugs and design flaws, a process termed

“playtesting.” Following playtesting, students were expected to fill up an online form that would provide feedback on the designer’s game level so that they could make improvements. The form asked the following questions:

1. How do you feel about the time from SPAWN to COMBAT? [Too Fast/Too Slow/Just Nice]
2. Were there adequate pickups? [Too few pickups/Too many pickups/Just about correct number of pickups]
3. What was your primary weapon during the match?
4. Identify the main combat areas.
5. What were your main tactics/strategy during the match?
6. How can the combat experience be improved?

However, as can be seen from the slide, Raymond noticed that both the quantity and quality of feedback was low, and quickly set forth to correct the behavior of his students. By discouraging his students from remaining reticent after playing each other’s game levels, Raymond was communicating to his students that their behavior had fallen out of alignment with the expectations that game designers had of fellow game designers: that they be supportive, constructive coworkers. Instead, in encouraging students to be more thoughtful and diligent in their feedback, Raymond was reminding them to think of their obligations to other game designers by being a good teammate through helping them improve their own work. The explicit meaning of his statements was that game designers should share their expertise with others and improve on each other’s work through a collaborative process, rather than engage in game design work

individually. Through such interactions, instructors were building up habits of mutual reliance and cooperation among their students and helping shape their identities as professionals who understood what was expected of them.

As Raymond mentioned in the first extract of this section, the presence of team members from different disciplines is very likely in game development companies. The division of labor in game development teams results in mixtures of professional roles such as artists, engineers, and game designers. With different perspectives at play, smooth collaboration within game development teams requires that its team members engage in two reciprocal processes: that of role-playing and role-taking. As mentioned earlier, roles refer to internalized sets of expectations and obligations attached to social positions (Coutu 2012; Hewitt and Shulman 2010; Thoits 2012). Role-playing refers to the enactment of the role, or the performance of behaviors in line with the expectations of the role. Since role identities exist in relation to their counter-roles, the successful performance of one's role relies on a cognitive process: the ability to imagine how another would act in their counter-role (Coutu 1951). The concept of role-taking originates from Mead (1934:68), who described an imaginative process known as "taking the role of the other", in which the individual imagines themselves through the "perspectives, viewpoints and outlooks" of another. These imagined perspectives, viewpoints and outlooks shape role-playing, which is "to regulate one's behavior by the imagined judgments of others." (Baumann 1975) The process of role-taking is how individuals are able to regulate their behaviors in accordance with their imaginations of what others expect of them, allowing them to play their roles appropriately.

For game designers, how one might play the role of a “good” team member would involve role-taking by imagining how others would do their jobs. A game designer can then be a good team member by anticipating the needs or expectations of others and acting in a way that meets those needs. As an example of this process, Kyle, an instructor, thought about his own training as a game designer and described what he felt made one a successful designer:

“Open-minded [...] I guess the biggest misconception is that you come up with the idea and someone else will code it [for you]. Frankly, that was my first impression. Then I realized I was wrong. You have to have very good technical skills, you have to be open-minded, being good at working with people from different disciplines... [...] I should be empathizing with everyone. To me, empathy goes different ways. Obviously, you have to empathize with your end-users, but more importantly you have to empathize professionally. As a game designer, you have to come up with the concept. If you don’t write your concept, your brief, as detailed as possible, and then pass it to artists or engineers, you don’t empathize with what they need to know from you. [emphasis mine] You’ve kinda failed as a designer, meaning that there [will] be a lot of questions back and forth.”

Kyle provides a succinct example of the requirements of playing the role of a successful game designer: game designers are responsible for the overarching concept of a game but are also expected to be able to communicate that concept

effectively to other members so the game can be brought to fruition. In “empathizing” with artists or engineers, Kyle puts himself in their shoes and imagines what they need to contribute effectively to a game project. He imagines that turning in concept briefs that lack details would result in “a lot of questions back and forth” because his team members are unable to understand what he requires of them. This imaginative process in turn shapes Kyle’s behavior, in that he strives to create detailed concept briefs for the benefit of his team members. In order to support role-taking processes among the LTI student population, students had to participate in yearly game projects where they were required to recruit team members from other disciplines, such as computer science or animation. These projects served as opportunities for students of all disciplines to practice role-taking. Given that these were major game projects that were large in scope, team members would have to learn to collaborate optimally to ensure that they turned in their best work. Additionally, LTI students from every discipline took classes from each other’s disciplines to build up imaginative resources for their role-taking. In particular, game design students required knowledge of both art and programming, because they were frequently tasked with providing a creative vision for the team and guiding it to its execution. As Isaac says:

“In order to know what we can demand of other people and what we need to make this a reality, we need to be fluent in everything. I would say that game designers are the jack of all trades of the game development pipeline. We need to know a little bit of everything. I think the teachers

also emphasize it sometimes. You need to know a bit of everything so that you know what to ask of your team.”

Isaac’s comment also highlights how social and role identities may sometimes intertwine. His training at LTI, where he must take a mix of classes from the game design, art, and computer science disciplines, equip him with knowledge that serves to help him construct his identities on two fronts: first, his expert technical knowledge differentiates him from the average hobbyist and allows him to think of himself as belonging to a group of “game designers,” and secondly, provide him with imaginative resources for him to role-take effectively, allowing him to anticipate his teammates’ expectations of him as a game designer. This anticipatory, imaginative act supports him in fulfilling his obligations to his teammates so he can play the role of game designer and leader effectively.

4.4 Designer-Player Role Relations: Making Games for Players

The game designer role identity is also meaningful in relation to a player role identity. The importance of considering what players want from games was a concern that both game design instructors and game development students were familiar with. In particular, game designers had to grapple with the fact that they were no longer relating to games as objects for their own enjoyment, but as products intended for consumption by various audiences. Ashton’s (2010) study noted a similar point, where a game design course tutor comments: “If you’re going to be a designer in the games industry you might actually have to design something like that for somebody like that [a forty year old woman] and they look appalled and terrified. So, of course, that is one of the first things I make

them do; design something for somebody different.” Similarly, the importance of learning to design for somebody else was underscored by most of the instructors:

“The number one [skill] I think [is]... the ability to objectively distance yourself from your product [...] The natural setting for humans is to create for ourselves. When you’re doing product design, whether it’s a game, or a blender, or a chair, or a piece of software, very rarely are you creating a product for people that are like you. In fact, like I said, once you’ve gone through the design education experience, almost certainly you’re not creating games for people like you. Game designers know so much more about how games fundamentally work, that they can never again represent the standard player. They’re educated beyond imagination as compared to the average game player. You can never make games for itself.” [Jake, interview]

Jake’s comment implies that rather than being able to naturally design for others, the ability to design products for other people is a learned skill. The ability to design for someone else involves imagining the perspectives of other people, and in the case of the developer-player role pair, the developer is expected to imagine what players will want from a game, a goal that is facilitated by one’s ability to take the role of different player groups.

“This is something that’s especially important, especially if you’re indie — having the business acumen to know what people want. The last thing

that I feel is super important is empathy. At the end of the day, when you build something, you create something, you build it for other people, so you have to empathize with them to know what they want [emphasis mine], not just for the sake of a challenge. Some people design a level just to make it super tough. My reply to them is, ‘You guys just suck. You don’t know how to play it.’ That’s what struck me as I learned.” [Kyle, interview]

Kyle’s description of “business acumen” brings role-taking to the forefront once again, when he highlights the importance of “empathy” in order to know what players want from their games. Since designers are not making games for their own amusement, they must constantly rely on their imagination to consider what might persuade consumers to buy their games. The perspective of other players is something that game designers must continuously imagine, and in their professional role, the category of “player” becomes a new reference group for game designers.

The concept of “reference groups” was refined by Shibutani (1955) and refers to groups whose perspectives are assumed by the actor in the process of role-taking. In assuming the perspective of a given group, said perspective serves as a frame of reference and organizes one’s perceptual field (ibid). In speaking of role-taking, Mead (1934) had originated the concept of the “generalized other,” where role-taking is internalized and enables us to imagine the perspectives of our particular culture. However, as Shibutani pointed out, the concept of the generalized other has been challenged due to the nature of modern mass societies,

which are diverse and pluralistic in nature. As in the case of game design students, they are not already equipped with the resources to role-take as necessary when they first set foot in LTI with the intent of becoming game designers. Instead, they learn to vicariously view games from the perspective of an abstract “player” group, internalize these perspectives, and rely on them to guide game design decisions.

Despite the importance of learning to design for other people unlike themselves, instructors like Kyle, Raymond, and Jake considered this one of the greatest challenges to overcome in teaching local game design students. Jake and Raymond in particular felt concerned that their students were poorly equipped to successfully design with others in mind. Much like taking the role of another game developer requires imaginative resources that are supplemented by a range of LTI classes, taking the role of various audiences also requires that students have sufficient resources at their disposal to imagine the perspectives of possibly limitless groups of people. Instructors expected that students would bolster their knowledge of various forms of media, both traditional and new, because such media content gave students material with which to imagine the perspectives of those so unlike themselves and produce games that would suit their tastes. Yet a significant barrier for some instructors was how many of their new students seemed to have severely limited media consumption habits, an issue that frustrated both Jake and Raymond:

“One thing I find that is disheartening... and maybe it’s just a youth thing. [sigh] I don’t know— damn kids. Especially with the bunch of freshmen.

I'll ask them "Who has seen these movies?" And I'll just list off a bunch of movies — and books — and comics that are fundamentally important and have informed games for years. Like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is the basis of RPGs. If you haven't read it, you can't really understand why RPGs and things like *World of War*— because it literally, *World of Warcraft* was based around the designers reading *Lord of the Rings* and wanting to create a game version of that. *Doom*... a ton of movies, everything by Kurosawa, they just... [pause] They don't know anything. They just don't know anything. They haven't seen anything, they don't know anything, they just... they just... they have consumed so little, such a tiny fraction of popular culture and media that sometimes I'm just like "How are you guys— how is this gonna work?" [Jake, interview]"

"It's tough when people's — let's use 'media knowledge' — is so limited. It's like, 'Okay, what movies have you watched?' And everyone just watches Marvel movies. I enjoy Marvel movies as much as the next person, but there's more to life than that. 'What books have you read?' 'I haven't read books since secondary school,' when they were forced to read. To be fair, some of them do other things, like manga and all that. But all the manga and anime are all the same type. They always go for the mass consumption stuff." [Raymond, interview]

Another point of concern was how indifferent some students seemed towards current affairs:

“If I ask my students what’s going on in Hong Kong now: some people will know, and some people will have opinions about it, and that’s fair. But some people will be blissfully unaware about it. ‘Oh, there’s something going on in Hong Kong?’ That worries me, because a lot of the things we produce are also a product of the times we live in. If you have zero interest in the world around you, not even say Hong Kong, let’s just say in the region, Singapore, Malaysia, and all that, then it becomes... what is your product going to be?” [Raymond, interview]

Instructors were concerned about the limited knowledge that their students had because of its implications for role-taking. The limited range of students’ media consumption led to a narrow group of resources that students could draw on to inform their game design decisions and were likely to result in homogenous products. Consuming media products enabled students to vicariously experience the perspectives of other people — Raymond used the example of *That Dragon, Cancer* to explain how it was a game that could teach its players to be more compassionate by portraying the realities of paediatric cancer. Even if students could not gain more experience in person, as some did through travel, they were expected to expand their possibilities for role-taking by consuming media products that supplied them with information about other lived realities. The lack of interest in current affairs posed a similar point of concern, in that good game design is frequently rooted in meaning and aims to create meaningful experiences for its players (Salen and Zimmerman 2005:60). If game designers fail to ground their games in relatable experiences, it may be difficult for players to connect to their games because they fail to grasp their meaning.

When students fail to demonstrate sufficient and appropriate cultural knowledge, their social identities also run the risk of non-verification. Their membership in the “game designer” category comes into question because they lack fundamental knowledge that most, if not all, game designers are expected to possess when making and playing games, such as when Jake highlights specific examples of media that he expects students to consume because they have “informed games for years.” The consumption of such popular media constitutes some of the expert knowledge that game designers are expected to cultivate. When students do not possess the shared knowledge that established game designers have, their social identities as game designers are not verified by instructors.

Since role-taking is a skill of paramount importance to game designers, instructors made pedagogical choices so as to impart the importance of role-taking to their students. I glimpsed some of these choices during fieldwork, such as in Raymond’s choice to use a “good” movie to teach his students the three-act structure of combat scenes in movies and games. If students were unlikely to encounter examples of “essential” media, instructors were likely to recommend them to students or play them in class. As Chester, the head of the game design department at LTI mentioned, frequent presentations were a staple at LTI. These served a dual purpose: students practiced communication skills by offering their ideas up to peer and instructor critique, and also served as an opportunity for instructors to mandate research:

“I make them do research. I make them do playtesting. They have to find real people that represent who they think their game is for, and they have

to test their game with those people, not with themselves.” [Jake, interview]

While peer review was certainly a common practice at LTI, Jake made it clear that it was an insufficient basis for role-taking. The process of research helped students articulate reference groups, specific but imagined categories of players that were likely to purchase their game because the student had focused on making a game that would meet their specific set of expectations. Students’ ability to role-take was frequently tested during classes and presentations. During one of Jake’s classes, a student had wrapped up his presentation, during which he had pitched ideas for a dating simulation game. In the Q&A session following his presentation, one of the student’s classmates immediately asked, “What is the theoretical target audience of the game?” The presenter, a male student, responded, “20 to 22-year-old girls. I couldn’t find a nice photo of men, so now I’m only targeting lesbians.” The student’s game ideas had made use of copious amounts of pink and many heart-shaped icons, an idea that he had arrived at from researching other dating simulation games on the market and noticing the prevalent use of pink hearts. Although the student’s response was likely tongue in cheek, Jake provided encouragement by acknowledging that, “It’s a very niche market, but I like that you’ve chosen something very specific.” Such processes of peer and instructor review allowed students to refine their role-taking abilities, involving them in processes of research, role-taking, and role-playing that were supported by other professionals. Ultimately, this resulted in verification of their professional identities.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on the meanings of games designers' identities in terms of the expectations and obligations attached to their professional role identities. Part of the socialization process involved students learning to think about themselves in relation to other groups of people: other game designers, as well as players who would be consuming their games. Each role-pair comes with different expectations, with the designer-designer relationship emphasizing the expectations surrounding collaborative work and how game designers should meet their obligations by being "good" teammates. The player-designer role-pair, meanwhile, requires that students learn that they are expected to design for other consumers rather than themselves. Meanwhile, the designer-employer role-pair is closely connected with the player-designer role-pair, and sees designers learn to role-take and make games in ways that allows them to maximize profits for their employers. The ability to role-take is critical in allowing game designers to behave in ways that meet their professional obligations, and game design instructors had to work at improving their students' role-taking abilities. In conclusion, role identities are another facet of game designers' professional identities; learning the professional expectations and obligations of their game designer roles is another form of work in addition to the criteria work of social identity.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

5.1 Significance and Contributions

In this study, I have attempted to examine the experiences of games-workers in Singapore. Locally, aspiring and current professionals find themselves situated in a cultural context that has “an obsession with paper qualifications” and credentials, while placing relatively low value on technical and vocational skills. Career choices are arranged in a hierarchy where students who are academic high performers become elite “leaders and thinkers”, while weaker students are expected to acquire basic technical skills to make a living (Tan 2016). On one hand, some of my respondents felt that they were “being different from the mould” [Marcus, interview]: as he said, he “[did] not excel at textbook stuff” and thus did not fit in, describing himself and other less academically-inclined students a “round nail” being fit into a “square hole.” For him, conventional life and career trajectories are merely “structured or templated pathways” that he has chosen not to follow. On the other hand, individuals at both LEA and LTI likely still feel the pressure of these conventions: LEA has made efforts to offer students certification for participating in their classes, and LTI serves as a site of formal education through which students can graduate with a degree—the “paper qualifications” that will grant them status within Singaporean society. Thus, although games professionals may in some ways challenge the status quo, they find themselves conforming in other ways.

The above also prompts a further discussion of how aspiring games professionals reproduce existing social dynamics. The drive to professionalize one’s leisure

practices is also driven by the pursuit of conventional markers of status; even though esports and game development are somewhat marginalized professions within Singapore, individuals still hope for the recognition and financial reward of more conventional careers. At the same time, esports professionals and game designers have unequal levels of institutional support. Where game designers have the option of pursuing formal education at a number of recognized tertiary institutes in Singapore, esports professionals do not have such options. One might make a case for the establishment of similar accredited institutions in which esports professionals can receive certification for their work, although this is capitulating to the widespread credentialing that is common in professional circles.

Through my research, I have investigated how the professional identities of games professionals are social constructs that arise through and become imbued with meaning through interaction. I have studied identity as a generic social process that facilitates social interaction in everyday life. While this study serves as a case study of one generic social process, that of identity work (Prus 1987), it also provides some insight into the changing nature of work that young professionals confront in contemporary society. As Williams and Smith (2007:2) noted of the early 2000s, videogames were “an embattled cultural phenomenon” globally, and almost two decades later, Singaporean game workers are still feeling the weight of game-related discourse through their professional careers. Such discourse, coupled with the sweeping effects of neoliberalism, have created ripple effects in game professionals’ decisions to pursue a career working with games despite running the risk of being labelled and stigmatized.

I have attempted to bring sociological inquiry into game studies by turning a symbolic interactionist lens to the phenomena of games and work, with the hope that my theoretical focus will bring greater attention to how games professionals actively navigate and negotiate their professions and professional identities in everyday life. I believe my work partially extends studies by Ashton (2010) and Wimmer and Sitnikova (2011), both of whom highlighted the importance of professional identity to the work of game developers and designers. By investigating the kinds of meanings that aspiring and current games professionals attribute to their work, play, and selves, I hope to provide an additional, micro level of detail into the kinds of identity work within the game industry.

Lastly, since esports is a relatively new phenomenon, research on its emergence and impacts have been relatively scarce, more so in Singapore, where esports is only beginning to surface in the mainstream consciousness. I hope my research serves as an exploratory study into the unique challenges that esports professionals face in trying to pursue their ambitions locally, with limited support from the state and sometimes, significant others.

5.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

Although I have organized my research under the broad umbrella of sociology and symbolic interactionism, I have focused mainly on how professional identities emerge through small-group interactions with a limited range of significant others. More could be done to connect my current findings to larger structures that are traditionally of interest to sociologists, such as the relationship

between ethnic, class, and/or gender categories and one's professional identity. As Mead (1934) theorized, self and society shape each other, and the connections between games professionals and broader society can certainly be expanded by investigating how small groups of games professionals negotiate the effects of issues like power, globalization, and the economy (Kerr 2010) within their everyday lives.

As a female researcher myself, what was immediately apparent to me in the process of conducting this study is how thoroughly male-dominated games-work appears to be. However, I had decided not to focus on gender as I was more concerned with the SI concept of generic social processes. Furthermore, only three of my respondents were female, with two expressing some concerns about gender and representation in videogames and the game development industry. Their concerns are represented in prior studies by scholars such as Consalvo (2008), who focuses on the unique experiences that women face in their game design careers. In addition, women esports professionals were conspicuously absent. Esports has been described as a "male-dominated sphere" within which women are a minority, facing discrimination and higher barriers to entry (Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski, and Otten 2018; Schelfhout, Bowers and Hao 2019). These reasons might partially account for the lack of women I encountered during my research.

Since female respondents formed a minority among my research respondents and within both research sites, it is possible that individuals participating in the esports and game development industries in Singapore may end up reproducing

gendered social dynamics. This is not merely about the sexism that women games-workers might be subject to, but also about the relative lack of representation that women will face within the industry. Though some of my respondents had personal goals to advance women and minority representation through the games that they make, their relative lack of numbers possibly makes these efforts less effective than they could be. In comparison to the games that will no doubt be produced by Chinese, heterosexual male game designers, efforts made to represent minority voices and experiences risk being drowned out. Given my limited sample size, I am hesitant to come to any conclusions about the relationship between gender and a games professional identity in this study. Future research could consider oversampling for women esports professionals or game designers, such that their experiences are not overshadowed by those of the majority male population.

As mentioned, the popularity of esports in Singapore is a relatively new phenomenon, and all my respondents grew up experiencing some ambiguity in perceptions of videogames. As esports becomes a more commonplace feature within the mainstream and younger professionals come into the spotlight, it is worth examining whether they continue to experience stigmatization of their gamer identities, and to what extent. Though I have mentioned the stigmatization of gamer identities as part of the backdrop to games-work in Singapore, I have paid scant attention to the discourses that circulate regarding games and games-work, relying mostly on a small selection of news articles and one prior study (Williams and Suhaimi 2014) to form my perceptions of how gamers might be labelled in Singapore. Further research could make more extensive studies of

historical and contemporary discourse about games, expanding across multiple media formats such as social media and government bulletins. Such studies might adopt a framework that clearly connects discourse and identity (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), rather than my focus on social and role identities as they arise through interaction.

ANNEX A – RECRUITMENT FLYER

IDENTITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES: A STUDY OF "AMATEUR" AND "PROFESSIONAL" IDENTITIES AMONG PEOPLE PURSUING GAMES-RELATED CAREERS IN SINGAPORE

WE ARE CONDUCTING A STUDY THAT LOOKS AT YOUR GAMING EXPERIENCES, WORKING IN A GAMES-RELATED CAREER, OR TRAINING TO WORK IN A GAMES-RELATED CAREER.

IF YOU MEET THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA, WE WOULD LOVE TO INTERVIEW YOU ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES:

1. ARE A HEALTHY INDIVIDUAL AT LEAST 16 YEARS OF AGE
2. IF BELOW 21 YEARS OF AGE, PARENTAL CONSENT IS REQUIRED
3. HAVE A HISTORY OF PLAYING GAMES FOR FUN
4. HAVE A CURRENT OR PAST AFFILIATION WITH SCOGA ESPORTS ACADEMY OR DIGIPEN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
5. BE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE AS A VOLUNTEER AS THERE IS NO DIRECT BENEFIT OR COMPENSATION

VISIT
<https://bit.ly/2WqMdle>
OR SCAN THE QR CODE
FOR MORE INFORMATION
AND TO CONSENT TO
PARTICIPATE. THANKS FOR
YOUR TIME!

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This project has been reviewed by the NTU Institutional Review Board (IRB-2019-03-022). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you can contact NTU's Institutional Review Board via IRB@NTU.EDU.SG or call 6592 2495.

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