Dear Dr. Whitson,

Thank you again for the wonderful feedback you gave me on this. Your guidance was integral to getting this piece where I wanted it to go without the larger borg of my dissertation to help it stand up. I’m going to address the bulleted points you gave me point by point, and then at the end, I’ll give a summation.

* **The author spends some time at the beginning discussing the importance of not having “preconceived notions” of the bodies of their informants. I think it’s a powerful and important paragraph, and links to their previous research. At the same time, I feel the undertheorizing of bodies in the piece is somewhat problematic. How do we fully bracket assumptions about other bodies?**

I ended up getting rid of this paragraph because, in revising my dissertations, there were more eloquent ways for the same general sentiment to come across without sounding as haughty as this reads to me now. I also reconsidered my use of the word ‘body/bodies’ as a stand-in for ‘people.’ In making the pivot from bodies to people, I felt it was important to highlight some of the things that you mentioned in your third point: namely, I wanted to make sure that I was acknowledging that, when I say ‘embodied’, I *am* talking about gender, class, labour, etc. Alas, having a really thorough discussion of those entwinements is outside of the scope of *this* project, but it is 100% something I dedicate a lot of time and effort to in other pieces that I’m publishing alongside this from my dissertation. I did, however, bring some discussion of Grosz (*Chaos, Territory, Art*) into this piece as a way to talk about how the ideas that I’m thinking through with this ‘crossfertilize’ with the art piece and both imbue each other with senses, sensations, and affects.

* **There are a few places where the discussion the author provides would benefit from having a few examples. For instance, I don’t quite understand why or how they’re implementing free-indirect discourse, unless it’s a reference to the informant interviews. But does that mean that any reporting of interviews is an example of free-indirect discourse, and for what purpose?**

In finishing up my dissertation and defending it, I was able to come back to the free indirect discourse part of this and provide some theoretical couching as well as an example from *Sense and Sensibility*. Also in rehabbing some of the front matter and the conclusion, I pulled in more concrete examples that I *think* better characterize what I’m talking about.

* **What does it mean to be embodied? I suspect the author means physical bodies interacting with the installation and then engaging in their experiences. But an awful lot of the respondents discuss gender identity (there’s a nonbinary person and a woman in the piece, for instance), class (there’s a union organizer), industries (AAA vs. indie games) etc. I get not wanting to let those identity categories subsume what the informants actually say about their experiences, on the other hand, it seems some discussion of the connection between gender identity and labor is screaming to be articulated.**

So, circling back to this. You’re 1000% right in making this callout. I created two companion pieces to *Passion Traps*, and one of them does dive way more in depth regarding how passion can be filtered through identity, class, and ability. For this piece, I expanded upon how I was approaching identity’s entanglement with passion, though, in the introduction, artist statement, and again in the **Parting Shots and Final Thoughts**section.

* **What does ‘passion’ mean? I’m not entirely sure it means the same thing for all of the informants. Given that the author cites Berlant, I’d love some discussion of the intersection between affect and politics. Is passion a version of cruel optimism, in which Berlant says, “names the relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility?”**

Again, you’re 1000% right in making this callout, too. For a project with ‘passion’ in the name, I really didn’t do a good job initially of explaining what the heck the concept means. So in going back through, I cleaned up some language around what passion means and why passion can’t be understood to be one static term meaning one static thing, as my informants’ experiences point out really well.

* **I think the conclusion should be worked out. The author says they have no interest in “sweeping discussions” of passion, opting instead to “creat[e] a platform for videogame production workers not only to share their own experiences, but also to take solace in the fact that they are not alone in how they feel.” That is all fine and good, but what’s the purpose of publishing a piece about the project in Hyperrhiz? Implicitly, the argument is that “Passion Traps” is only for videogame workers, so what about academics? A more developed understanding of purpose and audience would help the conclusion.**

I took your advice and I linked this back to some of my own experiences with cruel optimism in academia and as a scholar. I dedicated a good portion of the **Parting Shots and Final Thoughts**section to wrestling with why the implications for this don’t just stop at videogame production, and why we, as scholars, need to be paying attention to the types of operationalization happening in ‘passion’ driven types of work like the one we’re embedded in.

So again, thank you for the feedback you gave me on this. It was incredibly helpful, and you actually helped me work through some stuff I was doing with my dissertation. A lot of this project that you reviewed was a test-bed for those companion pieces I mentioned earlier, and this feedback was really instrumental in how I ended up constructing and writing about those pieces, too.

Let me know if I’ve missed the mark on any of this, or if I need to go a little bit further with anything!

Best,

Joshua

**Passion Traps**

**Abstract:** *Passion Traps* is a project that seeks to highlight how the concept of ‘passion’ interacts with people in videogame production. Passion as a concept has a curious entanglement when thinking about videogame production: it lures workers to production, energizes them to make systemic changes, and can take them to the edge of complete burnout and back again. This project stands as a physical reminder that totalizing methodologies about how to characterize a group doesn’t get at the heart of the issue – especially in videogame production. Without the embodied, experiential knowledge of the people who labour to create the games that we enjoy, both scholarly and activist intervention into videogame production lack a critical understanding of how affect plays into the creation of games. By highlighting how passion functions as less of a binary and more of an entanglement that is unique to the people experiencing the entanglement, this project highlights how critical methodologies that empower and highlight embodied, experiential knowledge are necessary parts of game studies, and social science writ large.

**Keywords:** critical making, videogame production, passion, precarity, methodology

**Bio:** Joshua Jackson is a lecturer in eSports at Staffordshire University. His research centers on gender and labour concerns in videogame production.

**Acknowledgements** I want to acknowledge my friends/owners of transient gallery *Le Office de Douceur Radicale* in DC for working with me on this project. They provided the room where the photos of this project were taken, the camera, and the backdrop. The photographs used in this paper, and the videos as well were mine, but they assisted me in framing and shooting. They also provided a special one-night interaction session (complete with wine!) for this project.

**[[PICTURE OF ‘Passion Trap – Professional Picture’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

**Introduction** *Passion Traps* seeks to draw attention to how passion functions in relation to videogame production by creating a physical, interactable representation of what six current, working videogame production workers had to say about their experiences with the concept of ‘passion’. This piece stands as a reminder that there is much work still to be done in accommodating personal, embodied experiences in critical scholarship, and accommodating those experiences in a way that empowers the individual instead of singling them out or characterizing them as an outlier in a dataset.
 *Passion Traps* foregrounds the importance of understanding how passion and precarity intertwine to create the material discursive situations that these informants experience and discuss. Each informant has their own specific embodied experiences within videogame production that shape and contour their relationship with passion. For some of this project’s informants, passion encompasses different subjects. Some informants see passion as a point of contention. Some talked about passion being used as a reason for them to work harder, longer, and quicker. They also talked about passion in regard to feeling burnt out by the rigor of videogame production. Other informants see their entanglement with passion as being a necessary and integrated part of videogame production: passion, for them, is a catalyst for, as one informant says, “doing better and being better”. Regardless, though, my informants’ passion mimics, at least in part, how Lauren Berlant characterizes cruel optimism as a set of attachments to objects of desire. For my informants, their passion acts as connective tissue between themselves and the object of desire: success and fulfillment in videogame production.
 This work is contextualized in a standing rectangle of eviscerated books that create two ‘windows’ that users can see through. Within the window, there is an old Super Nintendo controller perched precariously at the intersecting point of four 8-inch wood screws. Above the controller are two more 8-inch wood screw which form an ‘X’. This structure makes use of conductive paint and a Bare Conductive Touchboard to create seven interactable nodes on various parts of the controller where, where users press them, quotes play that I have gathered from interviews with current, working videogame production workers about their experiences with videogame production. The three major themes that have come out of this work are: what is passion, how passion for videogaming is exploited into creating precarious working conditions, and how passion interacts with upward movement; burnout and frustration towards stagnation and the inability to move up; and the acknowledgement of the necessity of new ethics of care to account for and offset a growing sense of precarity. The nodes are connected to Touchboard via banana clips, and a small set of speakers are attached to the Touchboard to play the clips. This work requires 110-volt AC electricity to function.

**[[PICTURE OF ‘Passion Trap – Top of Box’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

**Artist Statement**

*Passion Traps* utilizes free indirect discourse to draw attention to the personal narratives of videogame workers I have interviewed in my fieldwork about passion’s role in forming who they are today. Fletcher and Monterosso in “The Science of Free-Indirect Discourse” say that free indirect discourse in literature allows readers to seemingly read the minds of characters (85). Readers can examine the dreams, inner-monologues, and machinations of characters without ever having to read them speaking. In Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, free indirect discourse is used to characterize Mrs. Dashwood’s actions towards her son-in-law and daughter, stating that she is “indulging herself in the pleasure of announcing to her son-in-law and his wife that she was provided with an house, and should incommode them no longer, than till everything were ready for her inhabiting it. (20)” Free indirect discourse in a non-literary sense allows for a way of (re)telling stories that is both sincere to the person telling the story while also allowing for characterization of events and circumstances that are important to know. Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, says that free indirect discourse “performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body and therefore forces the [interactor] to transact a different, more open relation of unfolding to what she is reading, judging, being, and thinking she understands. (26)” *Passion Traps* stands as a reminder that there is more to a story than what we read. The continual trend in social sciences towards totalizing ‘understandings’ of groups of people fail not just the most marginal people in those groups, but also people that appear ‘normal’ but may not be. There is no perfect fit, theoretically, systematically, or anthropologically for describing how a body encounters, interacts with, and parses precarity in videogame production. With that knowledge, *Passion Traps* embodies what Haraway talks about in “Situated Knowledges” about feminist objectivity in place of objective truths: “Feminist objectivity makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world. (594)” Prior to trying to establish culture-wide praxis around issues of discrimination, sexism, racism, homo/transphobia, and hypermasculinity in videogames overall, it is necessary to understand the very personal, very embodied contours of those issues, especially when those issues are *imbricated* in, and characterize, our embodied experiences of the world. Additionally, this project means to focus attention on videogame production as a labour issue because if scholarly and activist progress is to be made in understanding design choices of games, and implementing new ways of designing that are not beholden to the stranglehold that capitalism has on knowledge production, it is *imperative* to understand the conditions, subjectivations, and motivations happening in production.
 But, these ideals are not easy to execute precisely, nor is precise execution altogether a desirable outcome when considering the subjects that I’ve talked about throughout this project as a whole. These ideals can easily get far ahead of themselves instead of examining brick-by-brick the circumstances that build a single narrative where precarity can be talked about. As Whyman characterized with the rise of cupcake fascism, these ideals can easily start to seek not to sit with the problem, be uncomfortable, and be vulnerable, but can instead start to favor buzzwords and generalizations instead of being in the trenches and building hyperspecific and hyperfocused understandings of what *actually* is occurring and what *actually* workers are experiencing. Thus, with that in mind this project embraces what Matt Ratto talks about in “Critical Making” and what Santoso et al talk about in “Researchers as Makers”: iteration, the act of continually tinkering, fixing, taking apart, rebuilding, and working through a problem. Not being afraid to be wrong, or to retool an approach, or take the whole thing apart and start over. *Passion Traps* presents an imperfect project that wrestles with ideas of aesthetics, ‘messiness’, and bricolage as ways of taking what is already a multifaceted concept (precarity) and representing it and my informants experiences with it, as disparate but somehow cohesive elements. Within the affective, physical, and psychical cacophony that these iterations represent, I take solace in what Elizabeth Grosz says in *Chaos, Territory, Art*: “[art] comes from the excess, in the world, in objects, in living things, that enables them to be more than they are, to give more than themselves, their material properties and qualities, their possible uses, than is self-evident” (63). *Passion Traps*, like my informants, like this project as a whole, takes from excess to try and represent something bigger than itself both materially, artistically, affectively, and psychically. Sweeping generalization about what is bad in videogame production, industry-wide demographic information that somehow is supposed to paint a picture of precarity and inequity without any context, bold and audacious claims of allyhood with no plans in place. *Passion Traps* *must* extract meaning from these excesses for it to be successful in presenting a truthful (re)presentation of what precarity is, has been, does, and has affected my informants.
 Like I said previously, precarity is not a static ‘thing’. Precarity is multifaceted; a noun, verb, adjective, affect, and attribution sometimes individually, sometimes all at once. To further drive home the importance of the embodied, experiential accounts I’ve taken for this project, it becomes integral to think of a new way of representing these ideas, inviting others to interact with them, and accounting for those interactions while also driving the point home of what one of the root causes of all the types of precarity that I’ve gone through in this entire project is: hearing without understanding and touching without feeling. I created a meta example of what my informants were experiencing in real time: people heard what was being said, but were too wrapped up in optics and aesthetics to get down to brass tacks for what this meant. With this critical making project, I strove to create a physical representation of precarity that informants had describe to me by way of vocalizing their stories. Their stories were recontextualized into physical, interactable nodes and into robotic-voiced sound-bytes. Those voices became aesthetic instead of informative – users were *listening* to the problems being communicated, but not *hearing* what was being talked about. The nodes were simply a means to an end: users were *touching* the representative parts of this project, but they were not *feeling* the impact of what these things represented.
 The informants that so graciously shared their experiences with me represent a wealth of diversity within videogame production, but their experiences, tied to their bodily characteristics, also present some of the more insidious aspects of videogame production that this project cannot fully articulate. Still, these issues circle back to passion. Issues like gender heterogeneity and labour struggle in videogame production all hinge on passion being a readily exploitable and operationalizable resource. Since videogame production has been and continues to be largely male dominated[[1]](#footnote-1), the perpetuation of hypermasculinity and the necessity of dominance within videogame production spaces creates an environment, as D’Anastasio says of Riot Games, ultimately built for a male gaze and only concerned with male advancement: both of people into positions of leadership, and of male-coded ideology. The industry itself subsists off of and depends upon the operationalization of workers’ passion to obtain the object of attachment that brings them to production in the first place: videogames.
 *Passion Traps* offers a material way of interacting with stories from people in videogame production, or as Grosz says in *Chaos, Territory, Art* “[a] becoming-sensation of materiality, the transformation of matter into sensation, the becoming-more of the artistic subjects and objects that is bound up with the subject’s crossfertilziation with the art object” (75). By offering a physical (re)mediation of stories from people that are embedded in this work, *Passion Traps* provides an embodied, intimate space to interact with, understand, and rethink our relationship with videogames, videogame culture, and how we perceive videogames being made. The installation also offers a way of bridging our own experience with ‘passion’ towards videogames: playing videogames, interacting with the culture around videogames, making videogames, the list goes on. My informants’ stories all revolve around how passion does not operate on a good/bad binary but is an entanglement whose contours are not the same for any two people. Passion acts as not only a driving force in my informants’ commitment to producing quality products that they are proud of, but also drives them to the brink of burnout and back, and has sparked new ethics of self-care and new ethics of radical softness towards themselves and their coworkers.

**[[PICTURES OF ‘ Passion Trap – Game Devs and Others Side’ AND ‘Passion Trap – Other Book Side’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE, SIDE BY SIDE]]**

**Interacting with *Passion Traps***

Interacting with *Passion Traps* involves touching the controller that is held by woodscrews while avoiding the possibly injurious and sharp edges of the area’s construction. The area has seven pressure sensors that are painted with conductive paint and linked to a Bare Conductive touch board. When one of these nodes is pressed, it plays a voice clip associated with that section of the project. Users are invited to interact with the top of the installation. I cut windows in two books to create a ‘window’ that is approximately 5 ½ x 8 inches in the back covers of both books. The two books are Tanya DePass’ *Game Devs and Others: Tales from the margins* and Jennifer Brandes Helper’s edited volume *Women in Game Development: Breaking the Glass Level-Cap*. The books were adhered together with industrial adhesive to form a box where both front covers of the book are visible. Inside the window, there is an old Super Nintendo controller that is seated precariously on four 8-inch wood screws. The screws pierce both front covers and the heads meet in a sharp intersection below the controller. Above the controller, two more wood screws form an ‘X’ above the controller. One person is “meant” to interact with this piece at a time. With more than one person interacting and pushing the nodes, a cacophony of experiential knowledge comes cascading out of the speakers.
 DePass and Helper’s work were chosen specifically to ‘frame’ this iteration because of the work both books do of highlighting positive experiences and achievements of women and queer people in videogame production. Each book discusses types of abuse and marginalization that the authors’ informants have experienced, but there is a deeper issue at play that neither fully explore: how passion has created a feedback loop for these people where their passion for videogame production has put them in contact with precarious circumstances where labour alienation, psychical and affective abuse are more likely to occur. The physicality of this iteration is intended to create an antagonistic environment where users are invited to interact with something that is easily recognizable (the controller) as a source of ‘passion’, but in a new material discursive situation (‘passion’ being on display in an antagonistic environment). Interactors may have childhood memories of playing old game systems and may have affective attachments to those times. *Passion Traps* is interested in challenging users’ truths about their experiences with videogaming and asking them to contextualize those experiences in light of current, working videogame production professionals’ experiences with *making* the games that we enjoy or have enjoyed.
 The workers whose quotes have contributed to this project represent seven granular, embodied instances of a person talking about intimate, experiential knowledge. Their voices and stories contribute to how passion has been framed for them in their time in videogame production. Some felt frustration at certain aspects, while some felt dogged determination that, regardless of what gets thrown at them, they *will* succeed. For all of them, though, passion for playing, creating, and problem-solving videogames brought them to videogame production in the first place.

**[[PICTURES OF ‘Passion Trap – Straight On’ and ‘Passion Trap – Straight on 2’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE, SIDE BY SIDE]]**

**Touchpoints, Material Discursivity, Context**

*Select Button:* **A Time to Choose:**

**[[VIDEO FOR ‘A Time to Choose’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

*The architecture, the feel, of where you work doesn't just affect you. It can ruin things. But it can also create a second home.*

 Part of my conversation with this informant revolved around how their passion for knitting as a de-stressor ended up fundamentally changing how they set up their workspace. They worked at a company where open floor plans were the norm, and that meant that ‘personal space’ was a bit of a premium, as was private space. Their solution to this at their first job was to knit a sorting system for tasks, notes, and design specs. Their creative process was what they described as “out of the box”; they doodled pictures as notes, created pictographs of what type of work had to be accomplished that day, and re-drew concept art to better fit the section of an environment they were designing. This informant described their relationship with their boss as ‘tenuous, at best.’ Due to how they chose to organize their workspace and to draw their process over writing it out, their boss took this as them wasting time and laziness. Their boss also discounted their ability to organize since this informant was not keeping log books or process notes, which was standard operating practice at this company. They said that, due to the mounting pressure being put on them by their boss to stop ‘doodling’ and conform to standard operating procedure of keeping written notes and records that their boss could check in on them through, this informant came up with a strategy that involved knitting color-coded ‘paper cozies’ which helped them to better process written communications. Once they convinced their boss (through HR) that this system of organization fundamentally met company policy because it was an “actual system of organization that I could show him and he could get inside my head better,” my informant said that their relationship both with their office space and their boss improved.

*Back Body (Middle of Controller Body):* **Material Discursive:**

**[[VIDEO FOR ‘Material Discursive’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

*Sometimes you have to make the hard call. Is it worth it anymore? You're on a fucking select screen, it feels like, deciding whether to save and quit or slam your head against the wall some more.*

 My conversations with this informant revolved mostly around burnout and how passion, as they put it, “was a fishing hook in my cheek.” This informant talked about how, every day for a solid 6 months when they were working on a high profile title, they would come in, put their stuff down, and ask themselves if they really wanted this; if they could handle it anymore. The inevitable answer for them was “yes, because I need to support my partner and kid.” They said that when they joined videogame production, everything seemed renegade; they could do what they wanted, pitch ideas as an equal, and get real work done in real time. As videogame production corporatized, my informant started to see where the passion they had grown accustomed to interacting with was being snuffed out by talk of shareholders and safe development strategies. But still, they stayed in videogame production because they are good at what they do, and they are known for creating engaging material. They rarely ever experienced the type of precarity I have outlined in other work; they were always part of a core development team, often were project leads, and always highly thought of by peers. But as the ‘renegade’ feeling of development started to go away, this informant’s passion for creating and pushing the envelop started to dissipate. When they felt that corporatization had completely eaten the soul of the company that they were working for (around the time they were working on the high profile title mentioned earlier), they realized that, even though they were still passionate about videogames, they weren’t passionate about the new structure of production. By the end of the aforementioned project, they had already created an LLC and had money from investors to start “reliving their renegade days” by becoming a single-person indie developer.

*B Button:* **Cancel:**

**[[VIDEO FOR ‘Cancel’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

*I've almost quit so many times. Long hours, massive miscommunications between workers and management. No amount of passion can cancel out that kind of abuse.*

 This informant detailed a past of working in very gender-imbalanced production houses, and as a non-binary person, was exposed to unremitting abuse from bosses and management. They made sure that I was aware that their coworkers were some of the most supportive people in their lives; their coworkers would often stand up for this informant when work was divided unfairly, or this informant was made fun of out of their earshot. This person spoke at length about how videogames had played a huge part in shaping their gender identity; from not seeing themselves represented to finding radical developers who helped them learn to code and learn how to alter, cut, and remix games to show queerness. Throughout high school they were unable to be themselves; due to family pressure and the pressure of growing up in a small-to-medium town in the Rustbelt, videogame and videogame production not only became a passion, but an escape mechanism as well. They saw formal videogame production as a way to escape out of their current repressive environment and move to a big city where they were more free to explore their identity. They moved to Los Angeles and were offered a job at a fairly new production house run by “a bunch of tech bros”. After a few months of work, their studio was bought out, and they were combined with another project that was, basically, a competitor in idea. This informant worked on that game for 8 months and talked about how, in the span of that 8 months, they saw their direct boss once and were expected to communicate problems, courses of action, etc. via email or text message. Poor management, in addition to working with a rather clique-ish group after the merger, created an environment of complete non-communication where this informant was referred to as “it” in memos and emails that did not involve them. This non-communication created prolonged crunch (“about 5 months of it”). Even through they were subjected to precarities that characterize videogame production, they never encountered burnout. They are still working in the industry somewhere that appreciates them.

*Front D-Pad (Down Directional):* **Moving “up”:**

**[[VIDEO FOR ‘Moving “up”’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

*You can move up. It's not easy, but you just have to grind and show you're passionate.*

This informant talked at length about meritocracy and how “moving up” was basically a sham in videogame production. This informant worked as a contractor at a medium-sized production company at the time of our interview, and recounted their work history as “always being ‘the most promising, but most unhirable contractor ever.’” They had worked on five AAA titles and three or four indie titles, and every single time, they were passed over to be brought on board. They firmly believe that this is due to their appearance (self-described as “alternative as fuck and kind of scary to be honest”). They showed me examples of their specific contributions to projects, code that they wrote, systems that they programmed, and characterized their work as “work of passion; no person who wasn’t in love with videogames would do this shit to themselves.” They said that they exposed themselves to extreme overwork at every juncture that they could because they didn’t really have any social or familial obligations; “it was just more fun to work, you know? Lose yourself in something.” This informant also hoped that, by showing their sacrifice and their clear drive to make the things they were responsible for work, that someone would give them a chance and let them on a development team. This informant also talked at length about how they saw people who hadn’t done a fraction of their work, or had tried to actively sabotage them, be brought on or have their contracts renewed multiple times. They said that this was the most heartbreaking part; they knew that their level of commitment and drive for making good videogames should be the only piece of evidence considered in meritocratic advancement. But, yet and still, their passion wasn’t considered as valid as others because of how they looked, and what games they chose to play. They said that they constantly felt like carrots got dangled in front of them because they were very clear with their intention: make it out of contracting and bring their drive to a grounded team.

*Cord:* **Don’t Get Caught Up:**

**[[VIDEO FOR ‘Don’t Get Caught Up’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

*Don't get hung up on negative stuff. Yeah, it can be bad, but it gets better. When? Eventually.*

 This informant talked at length about their journey to being an indie developer, echoing many of the sentiments of other informants of this project: long working hours, massive miscommunication between management and their teams, their passion for videogames being exploited (“The most fucked up thing was when my boss told my entire team we had to stay even *later* than usual because ‘the project needs some TLC and we don’t have a more passionate team than you all.’”), weird meritocractic structures that weren’t clear, so on and so forth. They talked about their experience in working in corporate videogame production as being one where all the fun was slowly squeezed out of working there, and where the cache of working in games meant nothing:

“It doesn’t matter if you can say to someone on a date ‘Yeah, y’know, I work at X Videogame Company. I said it so many times, and the only responses I got were things like ‘Oh really? Can you help me get past this really glitchy part’ or ‘Oh neat, I don’t really play videogames, though. I’m just bad at them I suppose [fake laugh].’ Ultimately, the cool factor of working for X Videogame Company really only meant anything to other videogame nerds. And even then, not really because we were all trying to one-up each other.”

They reported that their time in corporate videogame production caused them severe depression, and it was only after they left did they start to feel passionate about videogames again. They still suffer from anxiety, but they are trying “not to get hung up” on small failures.

*Back Body (Button Pad):* **Coming Circumstances:**

**[[VIDEO FOR ‘Comnig Circumstances’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

*Unions are 100% the future. Without a union stance, we're all going to either burn out or get ground to dust for products that, ultimately, we aren't proud of.*

 This informant is a now-part-time developer who is working extensively with videogame production unionization efforts in Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Austin, Boston, and surrounding areas. They are working actively in those areas trying to find people who are amenable to unionization efforts in videogame production. They hope that, through outreach and a careful contextualization of why unions are necessary to videogame production, that they can assist groups in starting the proceedings to forming unions at their own studios. They acknowledged that, even though they are still employed at a triple-A videogame production firm, and they have started unionization proceedings there, they have been met with more set-backs than successes. From HR to state government, to not enough pro-union peers to outright threats from upper management despite having the support of their immediate bosses, they characterize their experience in trying to create a union-friendly environment as one that is both harrowing and immensely gratifying when they manage to finally convince a peer that unions are integral. This informant’s stance on unions “borders on obsession. Obsession not only for fair working conditions for myself and my friends, but for taking the bad bosses we’ve all had to task.” This informant talked at length about how miscommunication between their peers and “stockholders and whoever else funds this circus” have resulted time and time again in hundreds of hours of hard work both of theirs and their peers, ending up on the cutting room floor because it wasn’t appealing, or upper management didn’t agree with design choices. They talked about how their passion for videogame production has manifested in wanting to change the fundamental system of videogame production instead of just plodding along. They believe that unions are the key to reformulating workplace conditions from oppressive to friendly.

*Back Body (D-Pad):* **Change is Slow:**

**[[VIDEO FOR ‘Change is Slow’ GOES ROUGHLY HERE]]**

*Change is slow. But care is inherent in change.*

 This informant spoke at length about how their own models of praxis have changed from working in triple-A videogame production to owning their own studio. When asked about the state of their production house’s work culture and how they handle crunch, this informant said that, over the life of their studio, that they’ve had to crunch once, for about a week due to unforeseen illness. Aside from that, not only have they never crunched, but their workers are actively discouraged from crunching. They talk about their company’s workplace culture being

“way more professional than anywhere else I’ve worked. I’ve fought really hard to keep a 45 hour work week at max, and that has manifested in people not really doing the industry-standard ’45 minute to an hour break to play a game, back to work for an hour or two, back to break’ because I think they know that I value work-life balance more than playing videogames during work.”

They say that, of course, this did not happen overnight. From their previous experiences working in large production houses, they noticed that ‘care’ is an underrated concept. This informant fosters not only an inclusive working environment, but one that emphasizes self-care and saying ‘no’ when there is already enough work on someone’s plate. They said that they understand that videogame production is not ready to take the dive towards an entire industry full of 40 to 45-hour work weeks, and that their company is somewhat of an anomaly. But, this informant hopes that, as their company grows, and as, inevitably, workers leave for other opportunities, they take with them the seeds of care that they have sewn in this company.

**Parting Shots and Final Thoughts**

 *Passion Traps* recontextualizes the embodied experiences of the people informing this project into a physical, thoughtful piece of media that challenge interactors to consider their own passionate entanglements. *Passion Traps* presents timely, important context for a subject matter that has, to this point, been disconnected. There are people working in the videogame production industry that are experiencing problems, experiencing forms of precarity, and problem-solving these issues that neither scholarship or popular press address *could* address due to the hyperspecificity of each instance of workers’ lives. *Passion Traps* provides a textual element that is not simply academic in nature; it is not *just* quotes pulled from a lived experience. *Passion Traps* takes that a step further and instead provides material contextualization that participants can interact with and be challenged in a variety of ways to a variety of depths that traditional academic texts cannot so easily evoke. *Passion Traps*, as a critical making project, foregrounds the importance of iteration: learning, growing, assembling, reassembling, breaking down, tearing apart, starting over. These themes are present for all the informants that are a part of *Passion Traps*. They have all experienced iteration and growth that has pushed them beyond what they initially thought that their capabilities, wants, or needs were. This connects to the nature of precarity not being a uniform thing. It does not manifest uniformly across the industry. There is individual nuance that must be contoured. *Passion Traps*’ iterations signal the need for more connective tissue between the lives of the people working in the industry, feeling these feelings, dealing with these problems, and the writing being done to profile the problems in the industry and effective ways of challenging those problems. As the industry shifts, as unionization and collective action gain momentum in videogame production workplaces, and as late-stage capitalism and neoliberalism saturate the industry further, our understandings of passion will shift. *Passion Traps* intends to shift with the industry to continue to provide physical connective tissue between the people working in the industry and the scholarship being undertaken to assist those people.
 Though this piece focuses on what may seem to be a niche entwinement between groups that may not enter into our scholarly consideration on a daily basis, the implications for the types of passion I talk about in this project does not stop simply at videogames. As academics, we see the same types of operationalization of our passions. If we want to ‘succeed’, we just have to publish harder, research harder, get more and better grants, pay our dues – which is used, in turn, to measure our passion and commitment towards the job that we are so often reminded how lucky we are to have. Seemingly, the same types of nepotism that operate in videogame production re: advancement operate in academia as well. We can never truly be sure why we do not get a grant or receive rejection after rejection when trying to publish work we *know* is right and good. In much the same way that I, myself, have dug my heels in and refused to give up a videogame production project because I *know* it is important only to have it blow up and exact an even more damaging toll down the road, we run the same type of risk when we become deeply and passionately imbricated with our own research. Each academic’s passion is wildly different, too. My passion is not yours, nor is yours someone else’s. Nor are our ways of *approaching* our passions the same. They may have similarities that provide us with understandings of each other, but they are not carbon copies, just like my informants for this project. Their passions are not each others’. It is impossible to distill down the suite of affects and entanglements that I’ve experienced in my academic career and compare it objectively and computationally to yours, similarly to the experiences that my informants have gone through. Passion does not quantify easily. Passion is dangerous. Passion is cruel. But the promise of what passion can bring us is sublime – if we can *just*… stick with it a little longer.

**The Future of *Passion Traps*** This project, as it stands, represents very specific embodied knowledge and experiences from a select group of people. This project, and my corpus of work, has no interest in creating or facilitating a sweeping explanation of how passion interacts with videogame production at a systemic level. It is simply interested in creating a platform for videogame production workers not only to share their own experiences, but also to take solace in the fact that they are not alone in how they feel. The future of this project follows that same trajectory. This project stands and will stand as a very specific reminder that embodied experience is integral for understanding not only motivation that generalizations miss, but also the granular needs, affects, and dreams of the people in question.
 In future additions to this project, I want to keep expanding it to embody other forms of passion and other places in videogame production where passion lives. The quotes for this project all come from triple-A videogame production workers. This presents embodied experiences from a specific, common working environment. What this project’s expansion will do is accommodate embodied experiences from multiple modes of production: indie developers, hobbyists, hackers, modders, community managers, writers, translators, quality assurance workers. The ways that passion for videogames functions as an attractor within each of these groups could be vastly different, and they need to be represented in different ways that respect the affective conditions of those experiences. While this project is appropriate for how this set of informants has felt about videogame production (prickly, not easy to navigate, but alluring), the material discursive environments for how passion interacts with workers and manifests needs to be tailored *specifically* to those experiences.

Works Cited

Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2012.

D'Anastasio, Cecilia. “Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games.” *Kotaku*, Kotaku, 14 Aug. 2018, kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483.

DePass, Tanya. *Game Devs and Others: Tales from the Margins*. CRC Press, 2018.

Fletcher, Angus, and John Monterosso. “The Science of Free-Indirect Discourse: An Alternate Cognitive Effect.” *Narrative*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2016, pp. 82–103., doi:10.1353/nar.2016.0004.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. Columbia University Press, 2020.

Hepler, Jennifer Brandes. *Women in Game Development: Breaking the Glass Level-Cap*. CRC Press Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Johnson, Robin. “Hiding in Plain Sight: Reproducing Masculine Culture at a Video Game Studio.” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2013, pp. 578–594., doi:10.1111/cccr.12023.

Ratto, Matt. “Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life.” *The Information Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2011, pp. 252–260., doi:10.1080/01972243.2011.583819.

Visweswaran, Kamala. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Weststar, Johanna, et al. *Developer Satisfaction Survey 2017: Summary Report*. International Game Developers Association, 2017, *Developer Satisfaction Survey 2017: Summary Report*.

Whyman, Tom. “What Is Cupcake Fascism?” *Full Stop*, 2014, www.full-stop.net/2014/04/03/blog/tom-whyman/what-is-cupcake-fascism/.

1. according to the IGDA 2017 members’ survey, roughly 80% of respondents were male, and 20% of respondents were women [Westarr et al, 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)