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MAKING A NAME IN GAMES

Immaterial labour, indie game design,
and gendered social network markets

This article explores the development and implementation of a Toronto-based incubator supporting local women in developing their own games. The incubator was created to help change the current (male-dominated) status quo of game production, promising participants skills sharing, support for the development of a new game, and entry into the local community of indie games developers. It was at the same time part of a large network of commercial and non-commercial interests with a shared agenda of promoting the local digital innovation scene. These different motivations and actors are considered to understand the nature of this complex social network market and the circulation of particularly feminized affective labour therein, detailing how value, reward, and benefit are conceptualized throughout this network. The article focuses on how and where these understandings are in alignment and where they fall apart, revealing problematic structures of power and control linked in particular to gender and entrepreneurialism in the area of digital innovation.

Keywords independent game development; social network markets; gender; immaterial labour; feminism; digital innovation

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Introduction

An International Game Developers Association's (IGDA) report on the demographics of the video game industry describes the average developer as a 31-year-old, college or university-educated, able-bodied, heterosexual White male (IGDA 2005).¹ As this indicates, there is a paucity of females in this workforce – women constitute, at most, a mere 10 per cent across all divisions and are mostly employed in non-development roles such as human resources,

communications, or marketing (Shirinian 2012). Such homogeneity contributes to a ‘hegemony of play’ that has

systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to ‘minority’ players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds.

(Fron *et al.* 2007, p. 1)

Those working within the industry recognize that greater diversity is important for its future successes (IGDA 2005). At the same time, though, continuous indictments of the sexist, racist, and otherwise discriminatory content and practices of digital games culture in both news media and scholarly research highlight the challenging working conditions for those who do not fit the typical game developer profile. Gender and games have been a topic of academic interest for over a decade, linking stereotypical representations (Kennedy 2002), notions of gendered preferences (Carr 2005), the limited role of women in public gaming spaces (Taylor *et al.* 2009), and the constrained nature of women’s leisure time (Bryce *et al.* 2006) to provide a portrait of a culture of gaming that is closed to or exclusionary for many players. Popular attention has also recently focused on a number of key events related to sexism in game culture, including the vitriolic harassment of blogger Anita Sarkeesian after she publicly sought funds to subsidize a proposed project on gender tropes related to female characters (for more details, see Lewis 2012), as well as discussion of the Reddit and Twitter attacks on game writer Jennifer Hepler when it surfaced that in the past, she had commented that childrearing made it difficult to enjoy long games (see Polo 2012).

The masculinist character of video games culture broadly, and production specifically, has prompted the creation of several initiatives to attract, support, and retain women interested in the game industry. Examples of these initiatives include women-in-games groups (such as Women in Games International, Women in Games Vancouver, and The Women in Games Special Interest Group of the IDGA), scholarships aimed at female students enrolling in game design programmes (such as the Game Industry Scholarship for Women offered in partnership with WomenGamer.com), and low-cost or free-to-join workshops to encourage previously marginalized new designers in the development of their first video game (including the recent XX Game Jam in London).

In this article, we report on one such project, the Difference Engine Initiative (DEI), run in Toronto, Canada in 2011. The DEI was funded by the provincial government, managed by a cultural organization, organized by prominent community leaders, researched by academic institutions, and sponsored by large, for-profit computer technology and new media companies. In other words, the DEI was not simply a workshop to help women create their first game, but was one

actor in a much larger network of commercial, cultural, non-profit, for-profit, governmental, and educational interests and organizations where relations, and in particular envisioned goals were not always clear (or even known). Within this context, we argue that monetary, social, and cultural value circulated in a manner that reinforced a specific vision of the function of women in digital games production. In particular, the role of the participants entering this domain (interpellated as aspiring young female indie developers) was to contribute affective, immaterial, and other value-creating labour for more established agencies to promote the image of a dynamic local context of digital innovation. In exchange, these women were able to access a number of important benefits and resources, including a supportive cohort, visibility and a sense of membership within the local independent games community, networking opportunities with other like-minded individuals and potential collaborators, experience with design tools and promotional practices, and other intrinsic rewards such as feelings of accomplishment. Using Potts *et al.*'s (2008) 'social network market' concept, we trace the circulation of values, the alignments and misalignments of agendas and priorities, and the emergent relationships within DEI and its broader cultural and institutional background. By looking at these moments of conflict in DEI around the framing of gender equality and the simultaneous dismissal of systemic (and thus normalized) inequities, we underscore the relationship between precarious labour conditions and discourses of innovation within this local context of production. Through this consideration, we hope to highlight the broader significance of diversity measures in growing and emergent social network markets in order to demonstrate the increasingly important role of unpaid, immaterial, affective, and largely female labour therein.

Methods and approach

For this analysis, we draw on a range of data we collected in two roles. First, as participant-observers within the DEI, we administered short questionnaires to initiative applicants about their motivations and video game play experiences, observed weekly sessions and distributed journals for participants to use throughout the study. We also conducted approximately 12 interviews with participants, organizers, collaborators, and stakeholders, in large-sized group debrief meetings as well as in private, individual settings. Second, we acted as what the organizers termed 'embedded academics', and became part of the local independent game development community through our attendance of and participation in socials, meetings, networking events, and public presentations. As a complement to our immersion and ethnographic methods of studying this initiative and its context, we tracked the promotional materials related to the DEI as well as discussions of its contributions, shortcomings, backlash, and ripple effect, in and across media publications, blogs, social networking sites (Facebook and

Twitter), and at conferences and presentations. We expressed to all participants that our approach was feminist and interventionist in nature² (see Frisby *et al.* 2009; Krumer-Nevo 2009; Jenson & de Castell 2010) and that our intention from the outset was to participate in direct action within our local community to address the lack of diversity within Toronto's indie scene to help foster a more welcoming and inclusive domain. Through this action-based research, we observed the centrality of a neoliberal and postfeminist ethos within the community as well as in the broader discourses of women in games. In what follows, we explore how this is linked to the creation and movement of value in what can be understood as a social network market.

Social network markets, co-creative labour, and the circulation of value

Potts *et al.* (2008) developed the concept of the 'social network market' to more accurately describe what was previously theorized under the more linear understanding of a 'creative industry' (see, for example, Caves 2000). Theorizations of this sort focus on a production/consumption model based on creative inputs and outputs of copyright and intellectual property, employing the same terms as industrial sectors such as agriculture or manufacturing, which Potts *et al.* (2008) argue are insufficient for the categorization of creative and cultural activities and goods. Instead, they argue, the economics of creative production should be understood as an 'emerging market economy' (Potts *et al.* 2008, p. 169), wherein it is the demands of the social network that shape production, influenced by non-market factors such as the affordances of online spaces that allow for rapid feedback regarding tastes, popularity, and reputation. The 'social network' component of this concept draws attention to the connectivity of individual agents and the importance of communicating information about both consumption and production choices based on feedback within the network. Thus, tracing the circulation of value and activities within social networks moves away from understanding creative production as an industrial sector of one-way flows from producer to consumer. Instead, this conceptualization acknowledges the social component of a market that emerges from the creation of non-market cultural and imaginative goods by many kinds of producers, including amateurs and independent artists (Potts *et al.* 2008). Within such a conceptualization, 'the interrelationship among agents, networks and enterprise is dynamic and productive; all are engaged in the mutual enterprise of creating values, both symbolic and economic' (p. 170), thus challenging the hierarchy of the producer/consumer model.

This conceptualization is particularly relevant in discussions of innovative, experimental, and entrepreneurial enterprises, such as independent game design, as it addresses areas and goods of unknown value that have yet to

mature as markets. Rather than tracing economic growth exclusively in terms of monetary value, in what follows we foreground symbolic value in the social network market of indie video games production in Toronto. In this analysis, we are inspired by Banks and Humphreys' (2008) conceptualization of co-creative labour as not simply exploitative but as part of a complex circuit of value exchange, wherein non-monetary and emerging social economies link commercial and non-commercial enterprises.

Recent literature considering the question of user production and agency tends to challenge binaristic conceptions of producer and consumer (and the attendant neologisms such as 'produser') and to ask instead how within media environments the lines between commerce, content, and information become blurred as the roles for users are multiplied (van Dijck 2009). A focus on this blurring is particularly relevant in the contemporary context of independent game design, as within this domain the transitions and distinctions between 'amateur', 'indie', and 'professional' are oblique. This is partly because, as van Dijck notes, the oppositional positioning of 'hobbyists' and 'unpaid labourers' against 'paid experts' and 'professionals' is increasingly troubled within the context of commercialized user-generated content, wherein 'the sliding scales of voluntarism are inversely proportional to the sliding scales of professionalism, resulting in new mixed models of labour' (van Dijck 2009, p. 50).

For this reason, understanding the DEI participants through the lens of co-creative production activities, particularly given their position as least able to shape the official structure, objectives, and distribution of the project, is fitting. Indeed, as participation within various spheres of independent, unpaid, and venture labour (Neff 2012) grows both in terms of its scope and significance in the digital economy, the boundaries between user, amateur, indie, and professional only become blurrier. It is here that the social, non-monetary, and affective value within and of these markets becomes an important area of analysis, as it is this value that troubles the exploitation model of understanding these relationships. Participants can and do find a great deal of value within these emerging social network markets, and their unpaid labour (material and immaterial) is a source of power for them (Banks & Humphreys 2008). Simultaneously, the time and effort they expend to derive the outcomes they seek from the network through their own professionalization activities are beneficial to the more powerful actors within the network, demonstrating the complexity of the flows within this innovation sector.

As Banks and Humphreys (2008) note 'the intersection and co-evolution of these two economies (the social/affective and business) produce not outright exploitation of unpaid labour by capital, but a terrain of negotiation and power relations quite different from those of industrial era production' (p. 142). While Banks and Humphreys consider the relationship between the community of active, co-creating users of a video game and the official

development team of this game, our analysis considers the labour of amateur female game designers working independently (unaffiliated with professional studios) within a network of more established actors.

Tracing the circulation of value within the social network market, with an eye to power and its movements throughout the network through interactions between actors allows for a consideration of the shifting terrain of independent game development, and marginalized groups therein. This entails the introduction of the network of actors that supported the DEI. Importantly, the DEI was part of a very large, provincially funded, commercially sponsored venture with powerful, well-established partners as well as expected outcomes that were not immediately visible to the participants (or researchers). In the next section, we briefly introduce the central nodes in this social network economy and their links in order to begin to identify the flows of value. We differentiate these nodes based on Potts *et al.*'s (2008) distinction that some of these services create and sustain infrastructure for the social network whereas other services are built on it in order to produce value through content and creative works. First, we consider infrastructure-providing entities (including the funding agency, the initiative at the core of these activities, and the local games collective) and then introduce those who created content based on this foundation (the participants of the DEI). Through these introductions, we highlight the power dynamics shaping interactions between each entity, and in particular, their shared visions and differing motivations for funding, organizing, and participating in the DEI.

Key nodes in the social network market

Building infrastructure: the Hand Eye Society (HES), TIFF Nexus, and the Ontario Media Development Corporation (OMDC)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the DEI was part of a large network of partners, each of which had a designated function, and importantly, their own agendas for what they could and sought to derive from their participation in this partnership. In what follows, we highlight the ways in which such a wide range of collaborators allows for dynamic and unpredictable exchanges to potentially occur, in modes that are more fluid and flexible than the notion of top-down exploitation suggests.

DEI was primarily run under the auspices of the Toronto-based HES, a not-for-profit collective of self-organized indie game designers that connect largely through game-themed socials and special events. This group's short history involves running educational workshops around game design and development for people who do not consider themselves to be independent game designers. In 2011, HES officially became a not-for-profit, primarily due to conditions imposed by other collaborators within the social network market. TIFF Nexus

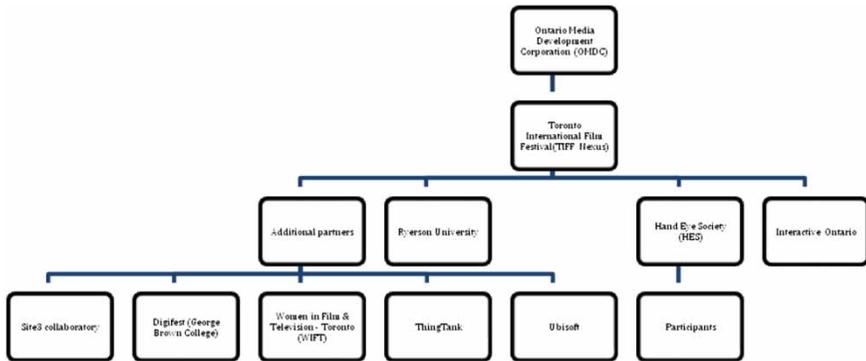


FIGURE 1 Key actors in the social network market.

stated that it was necessary for HES to take the significant step of changing its formerly casual collective approach to incorporate and engage in the attendant activities of a recognized organization, such as holding annual general meetings and elections for board members, in order for them to receive funds to run funded incubators, including the DEI. As this demonstrates, HES was subject to the will of another actor within the network, and as demonstrated below, was placed between the participants and the larger funders, answering to two very different sets of priorities.

The DEI call for participation and application were hosted on the HES website, and both documents noted that the incubators were a part of the TIFF Nexus initiative, linking to the former's main page. At the top of the form, the DEI was explained as being one of several TIFF Nexus events that was being financially supported by the OMDC Partnerships Fund. The short marketing text that was included stated:

Supported by the OMDC Partnerships Fund, the TIFF Nexus Event Series is the connection of the existing and emerging media sectors of Film, Gaming and New Media, designed as a catalyst for collaboration between them. TIFF Nexus is a series of activities and discussions at TIFF Bell Lightbox, where culture, learning, technology and industry intersect.

(TIFF Nexus 2011)

While TIFF Nexus played a central role in coordinating the activities of the social network market, the funding for all elements of the initiative was awarded by the OMDC. The relations between HES, TIFF Nexus, and OMDC (as well as other partners, such as Women in Film and Television – Toronto) was not immediately obvious to potential applicants as the above information was not prominently featured on the HES website (when applicants clicked on the link to apply, this text

did not appear on the screen, and was only visible if the visitor decided to scroll up rather than down).

To determine the entire range of partners on this project, and the relations between them, one had to seek out the portal to the Entertainment and Creative Cluster Partnerships Fund on the OMDC website.³ The mandate of TIFF Nexus is also more clearly articulated here, along with the proposed outcome of the ‘creative jams’, including the DEI, intended to result in innovative game prototypes. This mission aligns directly with Potts *et al.*’s (2008) description of an emerging social network market: ‘accelerating creativity as teams of media-makers and business management professionals conceive and prototype new ideas/products’ (OMDC 2011).

As this indicates, at the level of the provincial funding organization, a social network market approach is at play, wherein the emphasis is on balancing the risks and rewards of developing the infrastructure and opportunities for innovation, focusing on ‘an ongoing process of adapting existing institutions and developing new institutions (e.g. in media, communications)’ (Potts *et al.* 2008, p. 180) for experimentation and entrepreneurial activity. In its implementation, TIFF Nexus and the HES targeted a range of media creators and innovative collaborations, such as comic book artists and game designers, emphasizing with the DEI the lack of gender diversity in the industry. Along the way from funding application to disbursement of funds, however, what was lost in translation, importantly, was the funders’ original goals related to prototyping a final product. For all intents and purposes, it seemed as though this was a project being run by HES under the guidance of two experienced local game designers to address an under-represented group in game design. Media attention related to the DEI was focused on the issue of creating a diverse and inclusive industry, and interpreted as the desired outcome of the initiative – more people, including women, making games ‘to keep this industry fresh!’ (Metanet 2011), in the words of one of the indie game designers leading the first incubator.

This demonstrates that within this network, the actors had, and were pursuing simultaneously, several agendas that did not necessarily easily or clearly align with the goals of other partners. The freedom to pursue one’s particular agenda was directly linked to that partner’s degree of power within the network; there was definitely a hierarchy amongst the partners, as evinced by HES incorporating at the urging of TIFF Nexus. DEI was marketed as an equality-focused initiative, yet ironically, the female participants are positioned at the bottom of the network, with the least amount of power to shape the project, outcomes, or expectations. Moreover, unlike many partners in the network, including the two HES members that ran the first iteration of the DEI incubators, the women were not monetarily compensated for their participation in DEI. The participants did, however, capitalize on their efforts whenever and wherever they could, creating as much value as possible for themselves throughout their

TIFF Nexus experience. Nevertheless, this creation of value was, at times, contested, as well as subject to negotiation with organizers at HES and TIFF Nexus. In the next section, we introduce those who created content within this infrastructure and examine how operating from the bottom of a hierarchal structure enabled and constrained the agency of the DEI participants to capitalize on opportunities for advancement in the social network market in exchange for their immaterial labour as game-makers.

Creating content: DEI participants

As noted, the DEI incubators were envisioned and structured with the intention of helping Toronto-area women create their first digital game. Twelve participants were selected by HES coordinators based on their responses to a competitive application process that received interest from 65 women. These women were assigned to participate in either the first incubator (DEI1) in August to September 2011, led by members of HES, or the second iteration (DEI2) in November to December 2011, which was intended from the outset to be organized and coordinated by two female participants from the first incubator. In both incubators, the participants met once a week for three hours. The actual game development labour (including conceptualization, concept art gathering, programming, drawing, and animating) was completed outside of these meetings, which were understood as opportunities for participants to show their weekly progress, troubleshoot technical issues, provide and receive feedback, and discuss other topics related to game development. As a complement to this, organizers arranged for local female mentors and role models, including indie and triple-A programmers and game studies academics, to speak about their experiences of achieving success in a male-dominated domain. At the end of their incubation, participants had an additional 2–3 weeks to finalize their games, which were then debuted to the general public at well-promoted showcases.

In their responses to the entrance questionnaire, participants indicated that they were primarily interested in making contacts, meeting supportive like-minded individuals, learning new skills, and further developing their creativity and media production abilities. As an example, to the question ‘what do you expect to get out of this incubator?’, one participant responded, ‘a game. Ideally completed, but any kind of start would be nice. Networking and conversing with other ladies who are interested in games would be nice too’. These professional development and networking goals could arguably be achieved on their own time or through existing groups such as HES, however, in other parts of the questionnaire, participants indicated that they were attracted to DEI because it was focused on improving conditions for women within games industry and culture: ‘The focus on gender diversity in the video game industry was a topic that was important to me’. On the surface, it appeared that

participants shared the same dual vision as HES organizers for DEI: independently skilling up and developing a game while addressing the lack of diversity in the industry. However, the implementation of these two goals at various nodes in the network resulted in divergences between these two groups regarding the creation and circulation of value in the social network market, stemming from at times different visions of the organizers and the participants about the benefits of this experience. As the following sections demonstrate, where approaches diverged, participants performed additional immaterial labour to achieve their goals.

Circulation of value

Gender equality – quantity vs. (e)quality

We understand the following misalignments as stemming from different perspectives between participants and organizers on how to address gender inequality, and differing outlooks on the value of the DEI as an intervention into a problematically homogenous community of practice. As feminist researchers of gender and games, we were invited by HES to participate in the incubators to provide feedback for improving their model. From the outset of this particular collaboration, however, there were some tensions around the organizers' reluctance to identify the project as feminist work. For example, they did not see the value in acknowledging or discussing the barriers that the female participants identified as preventing them from achieving (or at least feeling a sense of) success in this industry. Although the research component of the DEI spurred discussions of exclusionary spaces and practices among participants during the first session, the coordinators emphasized that these face-to-face meetings would adhere to the pre-planned curriculum (e.g. time would be spent testing levels mods and games-in-progress, not impromptu discussion). This was partly because, for the coordinators, the solution to gender inequality was identified as the creation of products – more games made by women to balance the scale. Here, increasing diversity was viewed as a matter of increasing the number of women who make games – a numbers game – rather than engaging with the underlying issues that keep women away and out of this community. As one coordinator said at the end of the first incubator, it is 'product' not 'process' that is the key to 'undoing' marginalization. This vision of the best method to address inequality was evinced throughout the first incubator through HES's emphasis on developing competencies and the creation of final products (skills development and a completed game), rather than working with the people involved. While participants were encouraged to form relationships by talking about playing and making games, bonding over experiences of marginalization or exclusion was devalued by organizers, who characterized these discussions as 'off

topic' and irrelevant to the game design process. As one participant noted, when a programme is envisioned based on identity, and exclusion based on this identity, the discussion that emerges around it can lead to a sense of camaraderie and, potentially, the growth of a supportive network. The organizers recognized this work as important, however not appropriate at this time. In other words, building a support system was not a 'wise' (or, efficient) use of their limited incubator time, and suggested that participants instead 'use the time to finish the game'.

Clashes between the organizers' approach to equality as a matter of numbers and the everyday, lived realities of the DEI1 participants as visible female game-makers operating in an exclusionary culture led to a palpable tension between the groups that intensified over the course of the first incubator, and especially during moments where participants felt that organizers were holding them back from achieving their goals as feminist/activists (for themselves and others). By refusing to engage with the question of structural impediments to female participation in the game industry, the HES coordinators became an unintentional barrier to creating conditions to do feminist work, despite their articulated desires for such a benefit.

A public affair – visibility, promotion, and value

Another moment where perspectives differed can be observed in how actors in the network used channels of communication to promote the initiative as well as the actors within the project. A major benefit of participating in the DEI was that it provided the means to publicize the resulting games broadly as well as to help participants make connections within the local community. The games were to be hosted on the HES and TIFF Nexus websites as well as showcased at HES socials and the TIFF Nexus-run WIFT-T conference. These socials and conferences put participants in the spotlight, both as official events (such as a panel on their experience at WIFT-T and lightning rounds describing their games at the DEI2 social) and also impromptu attention from small media (such as blogs including Torontoist and Button Mashers) and large outlets (such as network television programmes including CBC National and Electric Playground). Moreover, use of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook by participants as well as interested members of the community increased the circulation of information about the women, their games, events related to DEI, and coverage of these activities.

Being part of a network that contained some very powerful partners gave the participants, all first-time game developers, an unprecedented advantage in terms of garnering publicity for themselves and their games, as gaining this level of visibility is particularly challenging for indie game designers (Guevara-Villalobos 2011). However, the expectation was that in exchange, partners could use or position participants to advance their own agendas through methods that, as noted above, did not always align with participants'

expectations and goals. For example, several disagreements emerged between DEI1 organizers and participants about what or who was the focus in HES-created public promotions. In alignment with the original intention of the OMD, the HES focused on the product (the games) instead of the participants or their experiences when promoting DEI1 on their website, through their list-serve, and during the social where the final games were to be showcased. This privileging of product over people was also observable during the DEI1 showcase, where participants were denied the opportunity to introduce either themselves or their games, and were spoken about as a cohort (a ‘working group’), and not as individuals even though each participant produced their own game. Organizers rejected the proposal that the participants present their own games based on a rationale that players (the audience) ‘do not care about the person behind the game’. Their perspective was that issues of gender inequality would be implicitly addressed through the creation of a finished product, a playable game, which would speak for and to the technological capabilities of female developers. Because independent game development was a viable career option for these participants, being recognized and known as an individual game-maker was viewed as extremely valuable, not only because it contributes to an activist goal of fostering diversity through visibility, but also assisted in achieving their personal goals to ‘make a name in games’.

The misalignment between HES and the participants’ expectations and value of what counts as suitable publicity (as per their own agendas) resulted in a shifting of relations within the network for the second incubator. Continuing to use HES as a ‘middle man’ was not seen as valuable to DEI2 organizers, and they chose to rework the programme so it was a participant-centred experience and they were able to communicate directly with TIFF Nexus about activities, events, and opportunities.

Publicity surrounding DEI was beneficial for all members of the social network market. It provided visibility to the game-makers, highlighted the role of each partner in fostering a vibrant digital innovation scene, and communicated an overall message of the value of this social network market as mutually beneficial for all involved. However, while the more powerful HES and TIFF Nexus had access to infrastructure and supports in place to implement what they saw as valuable publicity that served their agendas, as the unpaid labourers in this network, the participants had to work to create the type of publicity that they valued and preferred for themselves and their games, which at times differed from the vision of the other actors. This vision and the labour required to actualize it would eventually be put to work by some of the participants to change the landscape of Toronto’s indie game scene for women.

Connective tissues

One of the most important components of the social network market, according to Potts *et al.* (2008), is the connections provided by those that enable and sustain

the market, who are typically those providing infrastructure. Significantly, in the case of this social network market, the participants took on a great deal of unpaid labour to derive the benefits they desired from the project. When it became clear that there was a difference between the HES organizers' and participants' approaches to fostering diversity in the local community, the women from DEI1 took it upon themselves to bring their own ideas to fruition. The second incubator, which was run by two participants from DEI1 (for a very minimal honorarium), was revamped as a participant-centred game-making experience – one that centred the needs, concerns, opinions and knowledge of the participants and considered them as fundamental to a dialogue about achieving inclusivity, and did not prioritize the product over the process. The questions that framed the second incubator were 'what do you want to get out of this?' and 'what do you think?' about particular options proposed to organize the sessions and plan the showcase, representing a major departure from the formalized curriculum of DEI1.

As a result of these changes to the programme, participants from DEI2 reported fewer frustrations and a greater degree of satisfaction with their experience. Whereas the DEI1 cohort characterized their experience as 'problematic', 'sexist', and 'patriarchal' in their debrief group interview, the DEI2 group were so overwhelmed with gratitude that they took a break from their debrief to call the organizers and thank them for their 'amazing work'. Interestingly, discussions about the systemic inequalities and discriminatory practices of the gaming industry and culture occurred less frequently in DEI2. We suggest that this may be because inclusion was intentionally built into the structure of this incubator and created conditions that temporarily suspended participants from their default, subordinate positions.

In addition to taking on the labour of reorganizing the structure of the incubator to better suit a feminist approach to address gender inequality, after the two DEI incubators several participants mobilized their knowledge and experiences to promote the project and their collaborators in ways that they saw as valuable. Through this process, they began to build a community of like-minded people who wanted to address the indie scene's lack of diversity. One participant initiated the creation of a radical game-makers group that brings together game-makers seeking to make non-traditional games, often critical of hegemonic power structures, and several others joined together to found the women-focused community group Dames Making Games. It should be noted again that these groups of women did not always share or necessarily share a vision of how to address inequalities in the industry, and this is indicated in the divergent paths of the above groups (the former focuses on disruptive forms of game design, whilst the latter has incorporated and become a membership-based organization). It is also exemplified in the wide range of games produced in each incubator, from one that makes a parodic commentary on prison exploitation films of the 1970s to another

short game that was picked up by a major recording artist as a promotional tool.

What is important about the above, however, is that the participants engaged in these activities in order to get what they had not received in their DEI experience, and their labour makes a major contribution to the overall objective of the Cluster Fund – the creation of voluntarily-founded and organized infrastructures to support the diversification of the local market and provide the basis for more digital games development, which bolsters the image of a vibrant digital innovation scene.

While neither the researchers nor the participants derived what they expected from the DEI in its first iteration, both actively sought to generate value for themselves in new and unexpected ways through novel partnerships. It was the immaterial labour of women working together – connecting existing and new groups of people together through shared objectives – that facilitated more effective operations in the social network market. These contributions were very much facilitated by the participants' involvement in the social network market. For example, participants would leverage their status as TIFF Nexus participants to access networking events to meet others interested in women-focused initiatives who would become future collaborators and participants. Their TIFF Nexus status also provided them with the needed credibility to legitimize their claims of being able to create a women-focused organization to run socials and future incubators. While this work was largely uncompensated, it proved to be generative of significant symbolic value in that it provided the grounds for a vibrant relationship between the participants, researchers, and other supporters.

These moments of misalignment demonstrate not only how the participants at the bottom of the rung had to invest additional time and effort in the form of unpaid labour to derive value from their participation in the project, but the central role of distinctly feminized immaterial and affective labour – building community, creating new networks and connections, fostering a safe environment for collaboration – in creating value in this emerging economy. In the next section, we explore this gendering of the social network market more closely.

(Post)feminism in this social network market

The case of the DEI and its role within a broader funding initiative comprising various partners with vested interests in the growth of local and provincial digital innovation represents a situation similar to what Banks and Humphreys' (2008) considered in their analysis of content-producing video game players. In this case, the participants were addressed as producers instead of user-creators, however the labour was still unpaid and cast as a beneficial opportunity enabled

by the infrastructure. While the participants did indeed find value in the initiative outside of a wage, including professional development, connections to other female indie designers, and visibility within the local community, many of these benefits were the site of tension, demonstrating the different ways that actors in this network chose to pursue and actualize the overall mission of the funder to foster innovation within the social network market and the promotional packaging of DEI as a project related to gender equality.

In doing the work to generate value for themselves, the participants also contributed to the emerging local market of digital games through promotions and publicity as well as the creation of community groups and new networks. This value creation entailed a great deal of immaterial, affective, and unpaid labour on the part of these women in the positions of the least amount of power in the social network market, an enterprising approach that is characteristic of the politics and economics that underlie it. We argue that these misalignments are fuelled by the fundamental dominant ethos related to gender within this social network market, a postfeminist vision wherein, as one DEI1 coordinator stated, those who want to make games ‘only need to motivate themselves to learn and seize the opportunity’ (Goodyear 2011). In this articulation of gender within digital games production, the work of feminism is complete and women operate on a level playing field. All that is needed is to put in the effort, and success will follow. Aside from ignoring the systemic inequalities that pose a barrier for many people, including women, this neoliberal vision positions it as the task of the individual to overcome any challenges rather than focusing on the culture and structure of the community. In turn, this puts the onus on the game designer to engage in the many unpaid duties required to even become part of the scene – training in the range of software tools, largely solitary programming and design, self-promotion through social media, and entrance into numerous festivals and competitions in the hope of winning some recognition, awards, or legitimacy. All of this labour contributes to a vibrant market of ideas, producers, and games, reinforcing a portrait of a city and province with vibrant digital innovation. In return, a lucky few will make a name in games.

What this reveals is not a straightforward relation of exploitation of amateur designers by a power elite, but instead, the formation of a unique emerging market wherein novice and even more experienced indie game designers embrace the culture of entrepreneurialism as well as the unequal power positions as part and parcel of the process of working in game design. In many ways, this ethos remains an accepted component of the scene, despite the critiques of the structure of the industry, because the postfeminist neoliberal rhetoric does not entail an intersectional analysis of the precarious labour condition at play, only the induction of more types of people into the workforce. In sum, what is sought is more diversity of those working in the industry, not a shift in how games are produced. What this represents is perhaps the most significant

misalignment with many of the participants and the researchers, who identified in various ways as feminist, and thus sought not to add women to business as usual, but a more radical re-visioning of the context of production.

Conclusions

While the promotions around women-in-games projects such as DEI can suggest an underlying critical perspective on the hegemony of play, the funding agency as well as the affiliated agencies and organizations involved in this social network market focused on the development of the ideal worker, fully amenable to the flexible, under- or non-paid labour conditions of these industries, particularly the digital games industry in not only Southern Ontario or Canada but North America generally (Dyer-Witheyford & de Peuter 2009). Packaging this as a matter of gender equality and, in particular, as an inclusive intervention into a previously exclusionary field, does not only indicate a desire to spread the weight of precarious labour conditions across more working-age individuals. Rather, in its use of the immaterial and affective labour of female participants, it demonstrates the expansion of traditional feminized labour – affective and immaterial – into fields of digital innovation. This work is the connectivity of the social network component of the social network market; women willingly, and necessarily, take up the uncompensated task of self-promotion, as well as advertising and supporting the initiative and the funding body, in order to try to foster great equality for other women to participate and to fight against delegitimizing comments.

Through these moments of conflict and growth, we can observe the significance of postfeminist rhetoric in the production of digital games, a context of new media labour that has been cited as exemplary in its emphasis on precarious and flexible working conditions (Kline *et al.* 2003). We suggest that this shift towards unpaid game development in the form of incubators and jams targeted at women and other under-represented populations may indicate another permutation in how these sectors of innovation and creativity may profit from those that have traditionally been unpaid and undervalued. Further research into other new media industries and emerging social networks premised on connectivity and communication should consider the role of immaterial and affective labour therein and their links to diversity initiatives in order to detail whether these postfeminist positionings are becoming commonplace. While mission statements of the necessity for more women-in-*anything* might seem immediately laudable, we need to account for how initiatives that aim to do so understand and engage with questions of equality and equity, and how participants work with, subvert, and move beyond them. We must also remain focused on how women's work is taken up and understood in digital labour, in games production and beyond, remaining attuned to the important connection between the value produced in

this affective and immaterial labour, gendered power relations, and the changing nature of digital innovation where the significance of voluntary production only increases.

Notes

- 1 Please note that this is the most recent report on game industry demographics from the IGDA and as such may not fully reflect the current state of workplace diversity.
- 2 Feminist theories aim to understand the nature of gender inequality and have a social change goal to promote women's rights, interests, and issues. Participatory Action Research involves relevant parties in actively examining current situations which they experience as problematic in order to change and improve it. Both are concerned with challenging systematic subordination such as power arrangements and mechanisms that are enacted in everyday relationships, organizational and economic structures, and cultural and institutional practices. This applies not only in the 'field', but also to how the research is carried out or conducted.
- 3 The full list of partners can be found here: <http://www.omdc.on.ca/Page5409.aspx#2011-2012%20Recipients>

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