



WHY SHOULD YOU CARE  
ABOUT **UNIONS IN GAMES** &  
HOW CAN THEY HELP YOU?

**Here's a story here that many of us can relate to. This is from writer and former game industry employee Ian Williams, in an article of his called "You Can Sleep Here All Night" for Jacobin magazine**

"I came into the video game industry in 2007 through working at Funcom. I entered as a blank slate, not knowing what to expect or why I did it other than the fact that I liked video games and it seemed like a cool job.

I was a QA engineer, and a QA's job is to break things in-game, record how the things were broken, and then pass the information to the content creation team, who would hopefully fix them. It's a common entry-level gig in the industry, one which gives you a broad knowledge of how things work to eventually launch something more specialized.


Most of my coworkers viewed their gigs at Funcom as having "arrived." Almost all of them had come through Red Storm, one of the most respected studios in the country and an industry linchpin in North Carolina.

**THE STORIES THEY TOLD  
WERE GALLING:  
GROSS UNDERPAYMENT,  
SEVERE OVERWORKING,  
AND MIDDLE  
MANAGEMENT TREATING  
THE CUBICLE FARM AS A  
LITTLE FIEFDOM OF  
THEIR OWN.**

Red Storm at the time employed the bulk of their QAs as temps. Lured in by promises of working their way up the ladder, scores of college kids and young workers would come in, ready to make it in the new Hollywood of the video game industry.

The pay was minimum wage. The hours were long, with one of my immediate supervisors casually stating that he regularly worked at least 60 hours a week during his time there. Being temps, there were no benefits.

This would go on for the duration of a project, usually the final four months or so. When the temps weren't needed anymore, it was common for groups of them to be rounded up, summarily let go without notice, and told that a call would be forthcoming if their services were needed again.



There were other stories – strange and mean ones, like the producer who waltzed into the QA office and asked if anyone was heading for the dumpster. When no one answered, she dropped a big bag of garbage in the middle of the floor, snarled, “I guess I’ll just leave this here, then,” and stalked off; the QA lead chewed them out since the woman was a producer, a project manager.

Everyone who came through related the same story of QA’s complete sequestration from the development team; nobody was allowed to speak to a “dev” directly, only through intermediaries, nor to enter the dev side of the building. The QA temps were a clear underclass on one floor, while full-time “real” video game workers occupied the other.

At the time, I didn’t understand why someone wouldn’t leave such a situation. The pay was awful, the hours too long, and it sounded like a rotten place to work if even a fraction of the stories I’d hear over lunch breaks were true.



**But everyone kept returning to some variation of the same theme:**

**IT WAS THEIR DREAM TO  
WORK IN THE VIDEO GAME  
INDUSTRY.**



# Let's talk about Passion

It is incredibly empowering to actually have the ability to do a job making what you love, and it absolutely feels like a privilege. Just being able to attend an event like GDC and connect with so many like-minded people is a blessing to many of us.

We often think of creative and artistic mediums like our own as some kind of sacred space, where our job is to capture an indefinable "magic" - a magic that also can be reduced by too much bureaucracy and micro-managing. We feel like putting too many boundaries in place will ruin that passion, that magical spirit. We need to be flexible, we feel, and that can lead to odd schedules and life-styles and us working ourselves to death sometimes.

**But it's all okay because it's a personal choice that we're making to let ourselves be taken over by the passion of our work.**

# **That idea of personal choice is a crucial one**

It's what fuels our culture - you might end up not liking the exploitative business practices of a particular company, but you have the personal choice not to purchase their games as a consumer. **You may end up in an abusive or exploitative job situation, but you have the personal choice to go work somewhere else as a worker.** Organizations like the International Game Developers Association, or the IGDA, often emphasize this idea.

**But the problem here is a lack of understanding of how this choice actually works out in reality for the majority of people.** You can work for an employer who gives you decent benefits, who treats you and your fellow workers relatively well and doesn't force you to crunch. **But you could just as easily lose all of that in a heartbeat.**

With no safeguards in place, you're basically depending on the whims of your employer, which can just as easily change when situations change - like your employer being bought out, or unexpected changes in the financial situation of the company. One shift in the company's management and you could be easily out of a job. And those of us who are less likely to have the resources to weather this kind of disaster, this can be absolutely devastating to our future careers and livelihoods

TO SUMMARIZE:

**OUR CURRENT CULTURE PUTS ALL OF THE BURDEN ON WORKERS TO WORK ALL OF THIS STUFF OUT OURSELVES.**

**And what recourse do most of us workers in the videogame industry have if we have complaints about being treated unfairly in the industry?**

Usually, it's something like the IGDA.

We should talk about what the IGDA is and what it isn't.

First of all, **the IGDA is not a union, nor has it ever been intended to serve that purpose.**

From the IGDA website, FAQs:

"Q: Is the IGDA a union or guild?"

A: No. The IGDA is an independent non-profit membership association. As a 501(c)6 non-profit, **the IGDA cannot become a guild or a union."**

So what does the IGDA do?

Again, from their website:

**"Mission: To advance the careers and enhance the lives of game developers by connecting members with their peers, promoting professional development, and advocating on issues that affect the developer community."**

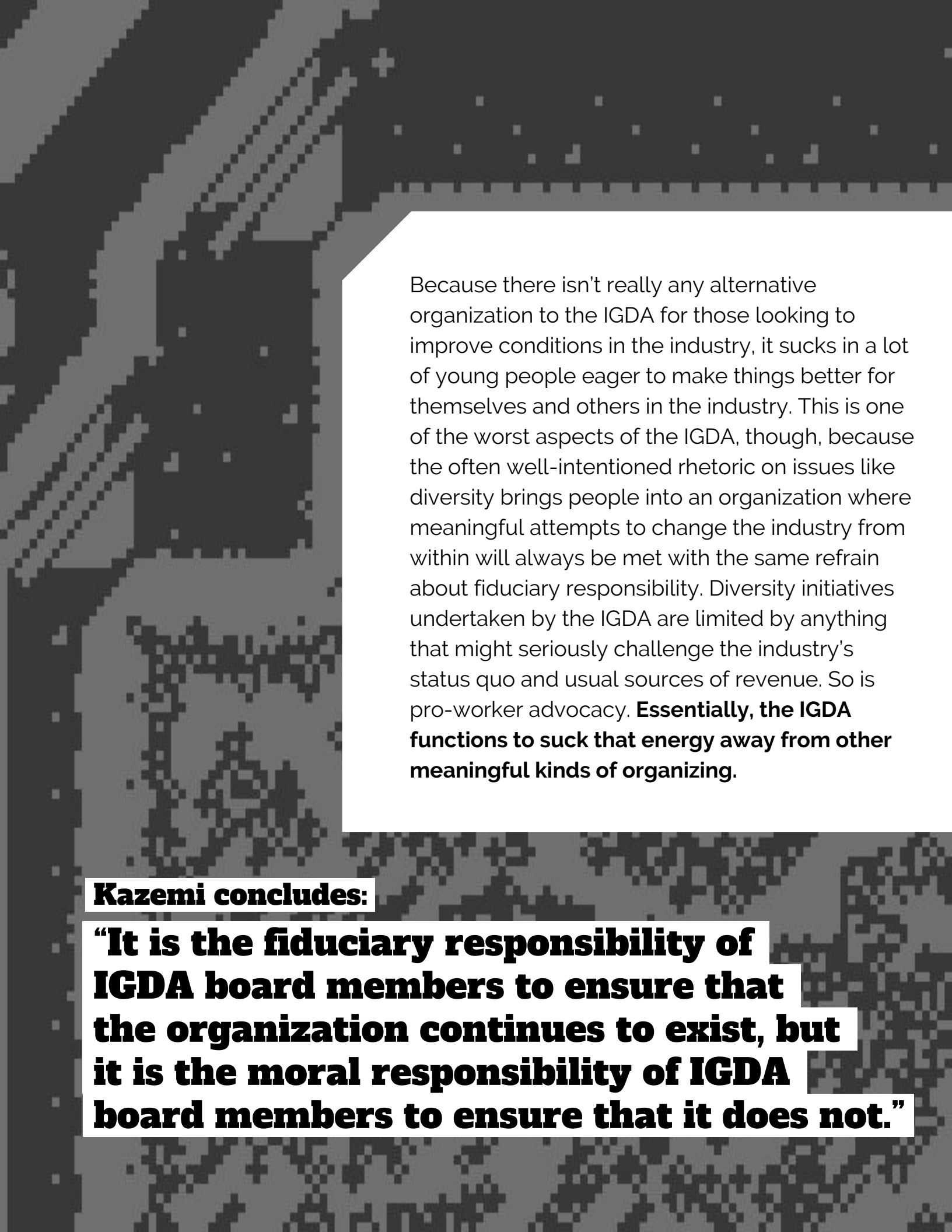
# Let's talk about the IGDA

IGDA's current director Jen Maclean, the former Vice President and GM of Games at Comcast, regularly advocates for more gender and racial equality in the videogame industry, for example. Keep this in mind when you read this account from Darius Kazemi, who has written several guides about effective networking at GDC, about his time serving as part of the IGDA's Board of Directors from 2010-2013:

"During my board member orientation in March 2010, the absolute first thing I was told was that as a board member, my primary duty was my fiduciary responsibility to the organization. It seemed reasonable at the time: don't spend the organization's money irresponsibly, right? This is standard operating procedure for nonprofits in the United States...

**"Here is the problem: fiduciary responsibility as a number one priority means that the most important thing for the organization is the continued existence of the organization.** This means that any action we could take as an organization that carried any sort of significant risk of us losing a chunk of members (or god forbid, our corporate sponsorships) would be immediately shot down by a majority of board members with some variation of the refrain, "My fiduciary responsibility to the organization prevents me from supporting this." What this translated to: anyone with an agenda that promoted anything but the status quo would be heavily challenged. Even something relatively innocuous like, "Instead of pointing out bad studios to work for, let's highlight some good studios to work for!" was cause for alarm because it would surely alienate a never-specified number of people whose memberships we couldn't stand to lose!"

**"Financial stability is always chosen over the material interests of the individual developers the IGDA is supposed to represent."**



Because there isn't really any alternative organization to the IGDA for those looking to improve conditions in the industry, it sucks in a lot of young people eager to make things better for themselves and others in the industry. This is one of the worst aspects of the IGDA, though, because the often well-intentioned rhetoric on issues like diversity brings people into an organization where meaningful attempts to change the industry from within will always be met with the same refrain about fiduciary responsibility. Diversity initiatives undertaken by the IGDA are limited by anything that might seriously challenge the industry's status quo and usual sources of revenue. So is pro-worker advocacy. **Essentially, the IGDA functions to suck that energy away from other meaningful kinds of organizing.**

**Kazemi concludes:**

**“It is the fiduciary responsibility of IGDA board members to ensure that the organization continues to exist, but it is the moral responsibility of IGDA board members to ensure that it does not.”**





And the picture from within the IGDA continues to be dire.

Kenji Ono, IGDA's chapter coordinator for Japan in an interview with journalist David Wolinsky in 2016, said that **his organization has had “no victories”** and that **“Unfortunately, we don’t have much power in the game industry.”**

**Ian Williams echoes this conclusion in his aforementioned article, stating that the IGDA is**

**“...bluntly, a sham, a sop given to the workers in order to let them feel that change is imminent through quiet debate — a classic “company union,” for and by the gaming companies.”**

# **So the question is: what would a more effective alternative to the IGDA look like?**

That's a complex question. But here are some things that a more effective version of the IGDA could provide:

- Legal resources for contractors to look over contracts and hiring agreements, and make they're not getting into unfair or exploitative plans.
- Ensuring that no workers have to be victim to mass layoffs
- Ensuring paid sick or parental leave
- Narrowing the gender and racial wage gap
- Leverage for talking to publishers, dealing with certification to getting on consoles or other platforms
- Health insurance plans
- A social support network and an environment that actively advocates for a healthier lifestyle and realistic expectations. In short: an organization that primarily concerned with advocating for the mental and physical health and well-being of the workers, not protecting itself as an organization.
- Standardized practices for indies so that workers are not suckered into exploitative situations
- Pipelines and venues for promotion, particularly for struggling or smaller time devs who might lack the resources or be marginalized

**These are all things that, coincidentally, a UNION could provide.**

**Let's bust a myth right now:**

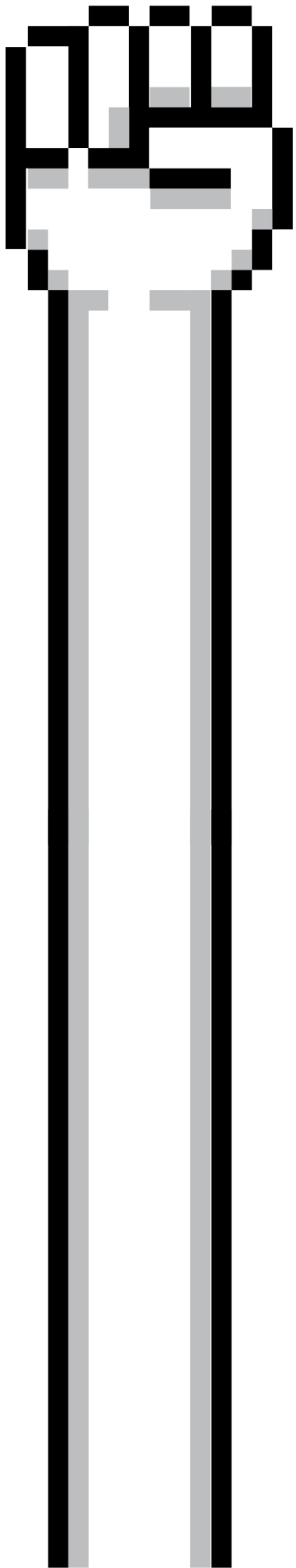
**UNIONS ARE NOT A RADICAL  
IDEA.**

This is from David Wolinsky's article "The Game Industry's Invisible Workforce".

"Marie-Josée Legault, professor of labor relations at ESA-Teluq with University of Quebec and Johanna Weststar, associate professor in the department of management and organizational studies at Western University gave a presentation at GDC in 2015 titled **"Do Game Developers Want a Union?"**

**According to their findings, 64 percent of industry workers polled said that, yes, they do want a union, but didn't know how to start organizing."**

So we know that many of us in the industry support the idea of unions, but that leads the question: What, exactly, is a union...?



# **What is a union?**

A union is an organization of workers dedicated to improving wages, hours, and working conditions within their workplace or industry through collective bargaining. Unions leverage the collective power of workers to balance out the power held by bosses and shareholders.

# How do workers benefit from unions?

Unions can also help reduce inequality. While all workers benefit from having unions, those who benefit the most are typically the people who are the most disempowered or in the most precarious positions.

**Unionized workers have higher wages on average than workers who are not unionized, often between 15 to 25% more.**

**Here are some things that unions have fought for and won in the past:**

- Health care insurance
- Ending unpaid overtime
- Protection from mass layoffs
- Anti-harassment policies
- Closing the wage gap
- Paid sick leave
- Paid parental leave
- Pensions
- Week-ends

Unions even benefit workers who are not unionized by raising the bar for everyone. For example, a high school graduate whose workplace is not unionized but whose industry is 25% unionized is paid 5% more than similar workers in less unionized industries.

In both games and tech, the relationship between you and your boss can be complicated and doesn't always feel strictly hierarchical. Maybe you work for a small independent company, or you're a contract worker who only has a "boss" insofar as you have different people who pay you. The division between worker and boss can be especially complicated if you're working for a friend, like many in the independent game development community often do.

**The problem is that the job of a boss, even if they are your friend, IS TO ALWAYS PRIORITIZE PROFIT AND THE CONTINUED EXISTENCE OF THEIR ORGANIZATION OVER THE CONCERNS OF THEIR WORKERS - that's how our economic system works.**

Bosses might not be exploiting on purpose - they might not even know they're exploiting their employees! So even if you have a perfectly harmonious working situation, the door is always opened for exploitation of workers. **In fact, sometimes it is necessitated to keep your business afloat.**

To be honest, we have some serious cultural barriers to overcome in games. There has never really been a major push for unionization within the industry because many feel like it will stifle the creative energy of the industry. It's been very hard for us to understand that human beings only have so much capacity for productive work, and more work simply does not = more value. It doesn't necessarily mean better games either. Especially when the most talented and experienced workers often burn out after years of employment.



This summary from David Wolinsky in his aforementioned article goes a long way towards explaining why this exists:

**“(Bioware co-founder) Dr. Greg Zeschuk says (that) so many office culture habits were born from the “self-destructive management of a lot of young dudes that were super-passionate, trying to get things done at all costs.”**

This was back before the game industry could even be considered an industry at all, but instead a smattering of small groups of friends in garages pulling all-nighters for the thrill of creating.

These origins have become the stuff of corporate folktale wet dreams. As a result, games employees work in environments where badges of pride are awarded for hollow accomplishments that actually drag productivity down — **often motivated by the illusion that pulling longer hours somehow equals getting more work done.**

# So where do we start?

As many of you probably know, advocating for unions is tricky and can put your job security at risk. But we also live in a culture that many have referred to as “the second Gilded Age”, where a handful of billionaires own a disproportionate amount of the wealth and resources, and where public infrastructure is being mercilessly cut and privatized for profit. So these problems are not going away any time soon.

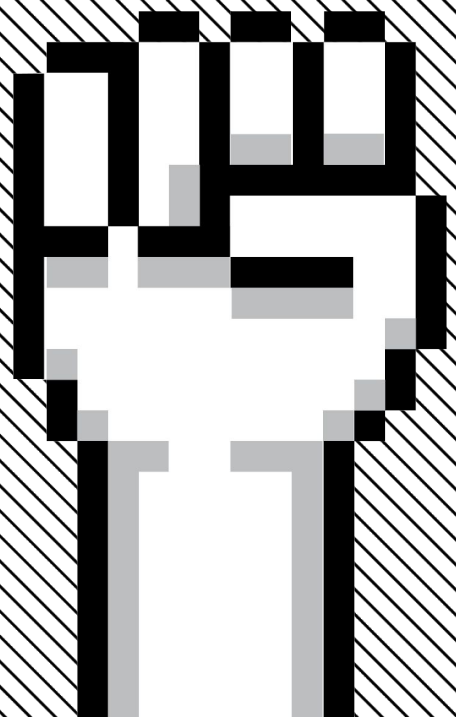
The first thing to be done is to help friends and co-workers to train themselves out of some of the unhealthy habits that this culture has driven into us. It's important to note that the way the game industry operates is not some fact of nature, but is formed around our current economic system, which inevitably favors profit over workers. We don't need to make a radical shift in our understanding of the world to advocate for fair treatment of all workers: it is a moral right and something we all deserve!.

Start sharing your concerns (outside work) with people you trust. On our website at [gameworkersunite.org](http://gameworkersunite.org) we have a form where you can share your stories of exploitation in the game industry anonymously. Also consider getting in contact with some local organizations. In the US, we have the DSA or Democratic Socialists of America which has many local chapters across the US, as well as the PSL and the IW/W or International Workers of the World. These organizations regularly deal with people who have no other place to go about abuses at their job, and nobody to reach out to.



The game development sphere is often filled with a lot of positivity that masks a much larger fear. We love to develop games and are excited about the medium's potential, but we're terrified of speaking out and putting our livelihoods at any risk. We need to create that space for everyone's stories to be shared. We need to join together and use the massive amount of creativity in our industry towards creating a better, more just world. And we can!

**Videogame  
workers of the  
world, UNITE!**





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