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## Playing alone? Interest representation in the videogame industry in Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands

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### Abstract

This article presents a comparison of interest representation in the videogame industry in Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands. While traditional industrial relations actors play a minor role, interest representation is far from absent in this creative industry. Interest representation is, however, dominated by other actors that often cut across the employer–employee divide. This article argues that the specific features of interest representation in the videogame industry

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can be explained by the characteristics of employment in the sector. The presence of fluid labour markets, the strong importance of intrinsic motivation in workers' attitudes to work, and the presence of groups of workers willing to pursue individual strategies, contribute to distance the industry from the collective identities of traditional industrial relations actors and to strengthen the appeal to occupational identities developed by professional organizations, trade associations and informal communities.

### **Keywords**

Creative industries, informal communities, interest representation, professional organizations, trade associations, videogame industry

## **Introduction**

The literature on creative industries, their characteristics and their role in the economic development of advanced capitalist societies has been booming over the last two decades. Within this literature, several important contributions have focused on creative labour (e.g. Christopherson, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McKinlay and Smith, 2009), starting from pioneering work in the late 1990s and early 2000s (McRobbie, 2002; Ross, 2003; Ursell, 2000). These studies have shown some common traits of working in the creative industries and the existence of a tension between relatively poor working conditions and a high emotional attachment of workers to their work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010).

What remains rather marginal in the literature has been the issue of interest representation and collective organization. Only a few studies, in fact, have addressed this issue. These studies can be broadly grouped into two streams of research. A first line of enquiry focused on the way in which workers in creative industries articulate their collective voice. This literature highlights the obstacles to collective action experienced by creative workers, focusing on how the specific characteristics of work and of labour markets in these sectors reduce their likelihood of acting collectively (Saundry et al., 2012; Umney and Kretsos, 2014). A second stream of research looks at the characteristics of interest representation, analysing the types of collective organizations active in these industries and the particular strategies they develop to organize creative workers (Benner, 2003; Heery et al., 2004). Both streams of research, however, show significant limits. First, they tend to adopt a partial approach to the issue, predominantly focusing on the labour side of collective organizations, largely neglecting the role of other types of organizations, such as professional organizations and, in particular, trade associations. Second, the literature has looked separately at the obstacles of collective action in creative industries and at the characteristics of interest representation, without exploring their mutual interaction and, in particular, how the characteristics of employment in creative industries influence the type of organizations present in these industries. Lastly, the literature has predominantly focused on single national cases, rarely attempting cross-national comparisons.

This article aims to contribute to this debate by looking at a specific creative sector – the videogame industry – in three countries belonging to three different models of capitalism: Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands. By adopting a sectoral focus, we address the following research questions: how is interest representation articulated in the videogame

sector, what characteristics do collective organizations active in the industry have and what type of interests do they promote? How do the defining features of the arena of interest representation relate to the predominant forms of employment and organization of work in the videogame industry? We answer these questions by means of document analyses and 73 in-depth interviews with trade unionists, officials of professional organizations, employer organizations and trade associations, and individual workers and managers within the videogame industry.

While the videogame industry has recently been subject to increased scrutiny, in particular with regard to recent unionization attempts (Keogh and Abraham, 2022; Legault and Weststar, 2015; Ruffino and Woodcock, 2021), these studies have been mostly limited to Anglo-Saxon countries. Hence, this article adds to this new stream of literature by broadening the geographical scope of exploration to three continental European countries. In particular, we will focus on three countries that belong to different models of capitalism and labour regulation, namely the Scandinavian model (Denmark), the Continental one (the Netherlands) and the Mediterranean one (Italy). By taking a cross-national sectoral approach, we are able to analyse how features of the national and sectoral context affect both the characteristics of work and collective interest representation in the industry, highlighting that similarities between the same sector in different countries are stronger than the institutional differences between countries. This finding corroborates recent calls for questioning the ‘methodological nationalism’ of traditional comparative industrial relations literature, and highlighting the importance of sectoral characteristics and dynamics in shaping employment relations processes.

The argumentation set up in this article starts with the assertion that traditional industrial relations (IR) actors and practices, such as collective bargaining, play a rather marginal role in representing workers and in regulating wages and working conditions in the sector. The dominant interest representation actors are professional and trade organizations and informal networks, which often cut across the employer–employee divide and represent the interests of the industry as a whole, focusing in particular on services and lobbying activities for its growth and success. This has profound implications for the type of interests that receive representation. The dominant collective actors in the videogame industry, in fact, predominantly aim at ensuring the best conditions for competing in the market, while the power relations within the market and their consequences in terms of employers’ behaviour and working conditions are largely outside their scope of action. The predominant focus of interest representation in the sector on strengthening individuals’ competitiveness and capacity to stay in the market is problematic, as it does not address issues connected to working conditions and thereby does not contribute to their improvement. Interestingly, this is remarkably similar in all three countries, independently of the differences characterizing national industrial relations systems, pointing to the relevance of sectoral dynamics even beyond national-institutional ones.

Second, we argue that the specific features of the interest representation arena in the videogame industry can be explained by the characteristics of employment in the sector. In particular, the presence of fluid labour markets, with people frequently moving across and/or combining different employment statuses (employee, employer, self-employed), the strong importance of intrinsic motivation in workers’ attitudes to work, and the presence of groups of workers with strong bargaining power willing to

pursue individual strategies, contribute to distance the industry from the collective identities of traditional social partners and to strengthen the appeals to occupational identities shared by the whole industry developed by professional organizations and trade associations, and by informal communities. This feature is also reinforced by the possibility of ‘exit’ of some workers (the strongest in the videogame industry’s labour market, e.g. programmers), a possibility that limits the impact of some problematic aspect of working in the videogame sector without the need to rely on unions and industrial relations practices (voice).

To set up this line of argumentation, this article has the following structure: in the next section, we will present a review of current literature on industrial relations and interest representation in the creative industries, followed by the presentation of our argument and contribution. The third section is devoted to the case selection and research design and the fourth presents the videogame industry’s most relevant characteristics. The next two sections present the empirical analysis: specifically, the fifth section describes the characteristics of actors and forms of interest representation in our three countries, while the sixth section formulates our explanations. The seventh and final section discusses our empirical findings and concludes.

## **Creative industries’ interest representation between obstacles to collective action and new types of organization**

As highlighted above, the creative industries have not been a strong focus of research in the industrial relations literature and few IR contributions have examined these sectors. The few existing contributions have addressed two distinct issues.

A first issue is the individual attitudes towards interest representation of workers within the creative industries. This stream of research emphasizes the obstacles to collective action experienced by creative workers. In this regard, several authors highlight the presence of tensions between artistic and economic goals of people in the industry, which translate into a tension between trade union membership and career aspiration (Saundry et al., 2012, Umney and Conderre-LaPalme, 2017). In particular, creative workers’ strong intrinsic motivations towards their work and their related desire to express their creativity ‘can inspire a fatalism about material conditions . . . which severely limits the organizing potential of unions’ (Greer et al., 2018: 167). Accordingly, workers in these industries seem to focus largely on individual rather than collective coping strategies, trying to ensure acceptable working conditions by individually striking a balance between different types of jobs (such as well remunerated, but creatively poor jobs, and more artistically satisfactory, but badly paid jobs) (Umney and Kretsos, 2014). The need to ensure employment in a highly competitive and insecure labour market has been found as another obstacle to the expression of labour-related grievances, strengthening workers’ readiness to accept poor working conditions (with the idea that today’s sacrifices are an anticipation of future rewards; Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2013) and lowering their likelihood to question these conditions. This tendency is further reinforced by the centrality of personal reputation and social networks in securing employment (Antcliff et al., 2007; Gandini, 2016), which increases workers’

fear of being labelled as ‘troublemakers’ for joining a union and, therefore, being sidelined from the labour market (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). Moreover, a key issue is the entrepreneurial orientation characterizing many workers in these industries, which often makes workers regard seeking help from trade unions as a sign of failure and of the incapacity to successfully operate in the market.

The other issue that has been examined in the literature is the characteristics of organizations for the representation of collective interests, and particularly of the interests of workers. The body of literature taking this approach often does not specifically focus on creative workers per se, but takes creative subsectors into account as examples of ‘new worlds of work’ and where ‘new workers’ (such as self-employed and non-standard workers) are employed in significant numbers. Hence, it usually overlaps with the literature discussing trade union and other actors’ strategies aimed at representing self-employed and non-standard workers. A part of this literature highlights the difficulties for traditional trade unions to represent a highly fragmented and diversified workforce and, in particular, the need to develop new forms of representation in order to deal with demands that are different from those of the workers they traditionally represent. Focusing in particular on trade unions’ initiatives aimed at representing freelance workers, this literature emphasizes how they have developed a stronger focus on services that strengthen workers’ capacity to navigate the market, and devote less attention to collective bargaining and the definition and enforcement of minimum standards (Heery et al., 2004; Saundry et al., 2007). A distinct part of this body of literature focuses on the emergence of new actors that take up interest representation, sometimes called quasi-unions (Heckscher and Carré, 2006) or proto-unions (Sullivan, 2010). Such organizations have been said to be characterized by liquid, loose and informal membership, a lack of hierarchies and an occupational focus, which make them more attuned to workers outside traditional unions’ strongholds (Benner, 2003; Saundry et al., 2012). Similarly to trade unions in these sectors, these organizations also tend to pay limited attention to collective bargaining and predominantly focus on the provision of services and lobbying activities (Semenza and Pichault, 2019).

While these literature streams have started opening up the black box of employment relations and interest representation in the creative industries, their capacity to provide a complete understanding of how these sectors are represented and why is still limited. This is mainly due to the focus on organizations of the labour side – trade unions and informal, network-based organizations – combined with a tendency to focus on single national cases. Even though some contributions highlight the presence of occupational organizations (Benner, 2003), they rarely address the role of business organizations and, in particular, trade associations. In order to acquire a good understanding of interest representation within the creative industries, it is therefore necessary to widen the observation window and take up a broader sectoral approach, which takes into consideration all actors involved in interest representation. Furthermore, it is important to take the context into account: by taking an international comparative approach, it is possible to disentangle sectoral and national influences, contributing to discussions on the role of sectoral dynamics in shaping employment relations, even over national and institutional specificities (Bechter et al., 2012; Keune and Pedaci, 2020).

## Case selection and methods

This article tries to address these gaps by analysing the forms of interest representation developed in a scarcely explored segment of the creative industries – the videogame industry – in three different national contexts: Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands. This sector is often considered a key component of creative industries, but until recently it was largely overlooked by the literature on creative labour (Thompson et al., 2016). More recent contributions have explored this sector (Deuze et al., 2007; Johns, 2006; Teipen, 2016), highlighting the existence of problems related to working conditions, particularly for what concerns working time and work–life balance (Legault and Weststar, 2015), and recently focusing also on workers' collective organization (Keogh and Abraham, 2022; Legault and Weststar, 2015; Peticca-Harris et al., 2015; Ruffino and Woodcock, 2021). However, these studies mainly focus on a specific subset of countries, mostly Anglo-Saxon ones. Other national contexts and cross-national comparisons are, instead, largely absent, raising questions as to the generalizability of these findings.

Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands were selected because they are all characterized by relatively strong IR actors and practices in regulating employment relations. Thus, they represent cases in which we can also expect to find a stronger role for IR actors and practices in new sectors, compared to countries characterized by a more limited role of associational regulation, such as the Anglo-Saxon countries. However, they differ remarkably with regard to the characteristics of industrial relations institutions, thereby allowing us to potentially explore the role of institutional factors in also explaining differences in industrial relations in creative industries. In these countries, four metropolitan areas were studied: they are Copenhagen in Denmark, Utrecht and Amsterdam in the Netherlands and Milan in Italy. The focus on metropolitan areas is justified by the fact that the videogame industry is strongly urban based. Hence, this selection should not produce particular bias.

Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews at multiple levels conducted between April 2016 and September 2017. First, 30 interviews were conducted with collective organizations active in the industry, including: trade union representatives at local and national level; representatives of associations of freelance workers; officials of business organizations (both employer organizations and trade associations) active in the sector; representatives from professional organizations; and organizers of web-based networks. The interviews aimed to explore the activities of these organizations in the sector, the strategies they adopted and the perceived representation demands they aimed to answer. In a second phase, the research team conducted 43 interviews with individuals in the sector, comprising employees, freelance workers and employers, often combining several positions at the same time. These individuals were selected in order to have the broadest possible representation of different types of businesses and employment in the industry, including different sectors of activity, different types of companies, workers employed with different contractual forms and in different activities. While employees are more numerous in Italy compared to Denmark and the Netherlands, the analysis of their interviews did not indicate substantial differences in the three countries, thereby suggesting that no significant bias was associated to this feature of the interview panel. Interviews aimed to explore both the characteristics of their work experience (working

conditions, activities, orientation to work) and their inclination towards interest representation and collective actors active in the industry, together with their relevance for their working life. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, were conducted in the interviewees' native language and fully transcribed.

Interview data were supplemented with various publicly available documents, such as legislation, policy statements, campaign material, newsletters, social media and web pages produced by organizations and individual workers.

Each country team analysed the empirical documentation thematically, identifying key concepts and themes related to the characteristics of interest representation in the country and their relationship with the employment experiences, the orientation towards work and towards collective action of individuals. Findings from this first step of the analysis were condensed in three national reports (Been et al., 2018; Bellini et al., 2018; Larsen et al., 2018). The characteristics of interest representation in the three countries were subsequently compared, and similarities and differences across the three countries were identified. Lastly, the analysis aimed to connect these characteristics to the characteristics of employment in the videogame industry in the three national settings. The thematic analysis proceeded in different phases. In the first phase, the three national teams worked on each country's material in order to develop interpretative categories, which were grouped into a thematic coding framework based on first-order codes (created using informant-centric terms and expressions). The categories were then compared and contrasted in the search for similarities and differences. These discussions led to the creation of a common coding template, based on the three thematic areas (labour market fluidity, role of passion and portfolio, labour market position) reported in the findings section, which constituted the common interpretative framework for all three cases.

## **Industrial context**

As a background for understanding many of the dynamics related to employment regulation and interest representation in the videogame industry, it is important to have a clear picture of the sector and its organization.

Over the past two decades, the videogame industry has become a global industry with rapidly growing revenues. The European videogame industry grew at an estimated annual rate of over 15% over the 2018–2020 period, with an annual increase of 22% in revenues in 2020. In terms of employment, the European games market employed 86,953 people in 2019, compared to 77,916 the previous year (EGDF and ISFE, 2021). The development of a videogame can be divided into three segments: two related to entertainment games, namely console games and mobile games (both directed at individual customers as recreational activities); and one related to applied games. Console and PC videogames constitute the traditional product of the videogame industry and the most remunerative. However, access to this type of business is relatively demanding, since the development of a console or PC game requires substantial investment (particularly in terms of human resources). This is because it takes a long time (from 6 months to 2–3 years) for a game (especially premium games for PC or consoles) to be developed, and revenues covering the costs are only made when the final product is sold. Moreover, videogame development requires relatively large teams, usually composed of more than



10 people. This segment is dominated by large, often multinational, companies, which often have development studios across the globe.

However, technological innovations and the diffusion of mobile devices (like tablets and mobile phones) have made the development of videogames shorter and less demanding, both financially and in terms of needed competences, fostering the growth of new, smaller companies, start-ups and informal teams (Parker et al., 2017). This development has made videogames a much less remunerative market, since mobile games are available for a few euros or even for free on online platforms, and competition has become extremely fierce, with high failure rates of both products and companies.

Applied games include games with the aim of informing, educating or training end-users. In particular, applied games are developed and distributed across several sectors such as education, health, transport, marketing and defence. They are a relatively secure source of revenue for game developers, because they do not have to face the market but are directly commissioned (and paid) by another organization (public or private), independently from the commercial success of the product.

The range of business models and activities in the sector shows that videogame development workers and organizations may either work independently, developing their own products, or 'work for hire' (i.e. working as subcontractors providing services for other firms engaged in the production of final products, producing elements like graphics, animations, programming and music pieces) – or be active in both activities. Generally, 'work for hire' is considered to be less prestigious, since most videogame developers perceive this type of work as less creative. However, only few videogame development companies, usually the largest ones, can avoid 'working for hire', since it constitutes a more secure and continuous stream of revenues than developing their own game. Hence, most developers engage in both, sometimes using the earnings derived from their 'work for hire' projects to fund the development of their own games. Moreover, videogame developers may be active in just one of the three segments we have highlighted above or they may combine the different types of businesses. Again, most videogame developers perceive applied games to be less prestigious, but this is generally considered a more secure business.

The videogame industry employs different occupations, such as programmers, game designers, artists and animators. Next to these more 'creative' occupations, we can also find other professions, such as managerial positions and administrative staff. The videogame industry is organized as a project-based industry, with every game or part of a game constituting a project, and work is organized around project teams, which combine the different professional figures. However, in larger companies, teams are mostly internal, with freelance workers hired for specialized activities. Smaller companies and individual freelancers, instead, while also in some cases employing internal staff, are more likely to develop temporary coalitions, which are often abandoned at the end of each project. Still, freelancing is less dominant than in other creative industries.

Although difficulties in demarcating the industry means that statistical information should be used carefully, it is fair to say that in our three countries, the videogame industry is relatively small.

The Netherlands has the oldest and most established industry, with the highest number of workers (around 3,850) (Games Monitor, 2018), followed by Italy (around 1,600) (IIDEA, 2021) and Denmark (850, full-time equivalents) (Producentforeningen, 2021).

However, videogame production is expanding in all three cases. The number of workers in the sector quadrupled in Italy over the past 10 years (increasing from around 400 in 2011 to 1,600 in 2021), and grew by over 10% per year in the Netherlands between 2015 and 2018 alone (Games Monitor, 2018). In Denmark, the videogame industry expanded rapidly in recent years with a turnover increase of 335% between 2009 and 2019 (Producentforeningen, 2017, 2021).

Our three countries share a significant set of similarities concerning the characteristics of the videogame industry. Everywhere, the companies are very small and generally very young: in the Netherlands, the average size of companies is about seven employees due to the large number of self-employed workers and small companies in the sector (Games Monitor, 2018). In Italy, 66% of the companies count less than 10 workers, and 62% of Italian videogame development firms are younger than 7 years of age. In all three countries, companies' turnover is reported to be very high. In Denmark, for example, the average time span of companies in the sector is 5 years. Freelancers represent 40% of the videogame developers in Italy, 51% in Denmark and 35% of the videogame companies in the Netherlands are one-person companies (Games Monitor, 2018), although their share in total employment in the sector is much smaller, with 70% of jobs located in companies larger than 10 employees (Koops, 2016). Videogame developers are also very young: in Italy, 79% of the workers are younger than 36 years old, and two-thirds of them are between 26 and 40 years of age; in the Netherlands, the average age of the workers is around 22–25 years old.

As we will show below, these features are crucial to understanding the structure of interest representation in the three countries.

## **The structure of interest representation in the videogame industry**

Various types of organizations representing the interests of actors in the videogame industry can be found in Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands. First of all, traditional industrial relations actors play a role, although to a limited extent. In addition, professional organizations and trade associations partake in interest representation, which works well for the sector especially because they are not founded on a class divide but rather on a shared professional basis. Finally, informal on- and offline communities are important for this sector. We will now discuss these three varieties of interest representation in detail.

### *Traditional industrial relations actors*

The role of traditional industrial relations actors, i.e. employers' organizations and trade unions, is limited in the videogame industry of all three countries. In none of them is there a sectoral employers' organization in place. Moreover, few companies opt for the possibility of becoming a member of a national employers' organization and if they do, they usually go for the 'light option'. For example, in Denmark employers in the videogame industry that are a member of an employers' organization agree to only opt for the business services package rather than the full package, which would also include services as an employer organization, including collective bargaining.

In addition, the role of trade unions is restrained. Trade unions themselves give as a reason for this that it is very hard to recruit members in the sector. However, the extent to which they try to get a hold of the sector varies between the countries. For example, in the Netherlands trade unions are not actively aiming to organize the videogame industry, and membership is close to zero. The situation in Italy is complicated, because companies in the videogame industry apply collective agreements of various other sectors in the economy, such as the metalworking collective agreement (which in Italy is widely applied by IT companies entering the software business as a legacy of former hardware companies), and the collective agreement of the retail sector. As a result, various unions are involved indirectly in the sector, but it is unclear which one is supposed to organize it. However, none of them is really targeting the videogame industry directly and no real attempts are made to organize it, resulting in a very low membership. In Denmark, however, an array of unions organizes specifically videogame developers. The result is a union density within publishing of software games of around 50%, although it is estimated to be lower in other parts of the videogame industry. This number is higher than in other parts of the creative industries, but is still significantly lower than the national average of 67% in 2019, illustrating that it is indeed a hard sector to organize. Moreover, the trade union presence in terms of members does not seem to spill over to any notable trade union activities. Hence, while higher in terms of density in cross-country comparison, trade union presence in the Danish videogame industry does not show remarkable differences with the situation in Italy and the Netherlands.

Apart from the between-country variation in trade union activity, the extent of regulation by means of collective agreements also varies. The situation in the Netherlands is most straightforward, in that there is no collective agreement in place either at the national or company level. This means that individual level negotiations determine the definition of wages and working conditions. The centrality of the individual level means that the main coordination mechanism here is the market. Also, the Danish and Italian videogame industries operate on the outskirts of the traditional collective bargaining models. In Denmark, multi-employer bargaining is absent within the sector, while company-based bargaining regularly takes place. In Italy, single employers in the sector decide unilaterally to apply collective agreements developed for other sectors in the economy (mostly those of retail and the metal industry), which then set the minimum standard of working conditions. On top of these collective agreements being applied, there is often individual level bargaining taking place. This means that although social partners have some hold over the videogame industry in Italy through the application of collective agreements, companies and workers in the sector still do not have their interests specifically represented within the process of collective bargaining as they are not part of the negotiation process. Finally, it should be mentioned that collective agreements do not apply to self-employed workers in any of the three countries. Hence, a significant share of the sector's workforce, which, as we have seen, is constituted by self-employed workers, is not covered by collective agreements.

### *Professional organizations and trade associations*

As we have seen, the traditional industrial relations actors play a fairly limited role in the videogame industry. In all three countries, sectoral professional organizations (i.e.

organizations focusing on specific professions) and trade associations (i.e. organizations focusing on companies' 'product market interests'; Traxler, 2008) play, instead, a more significant role. These organizations are based on a shared professional identity that often cuts across the employee–employer divide (Benner, 2003).

The sectoral professional organizations and trade associations in the three countries mostly focus on fostering the maturing of the videogame industry. The organizations, for example, develop activities aiming at supporting the capacities of videogame developers to stay on the market – such as the organization of fairs, programmes of internationalization, skill support initiatives – and on representing the interests of the sector towards public institutions, trying to influence public policies that have or might have an impact on it. In contrast to traditional employers' organizations and trade unions, they are thus not involved in collective bargaining.

Game professionals, regardless of whether they are employee, self-employed or employer, tend to look at the sector-specific professional organizations and trade associations as the representative bodies of the industry. This is especially the case in Italy, where AESVI – a trade association affiliated to the national business organization Confindustria – is viewed not only by employers, but also by workers as their representative even with regard to some of the problematic aspects of their own working conditions. In the Netherlands, the professional organization the Dutch Games Association (DGA) is less well established, as it struggles to attract members. Nevertheless, workers still see the DGA as the main representative body of the industry, albeit they see no use in becoming individual members because there is little advantage for them personally to do so: at the time of the interviews, the organization did little to represent the interests of individual workers through service provision. The organization is reconsidering this approach, however, and states that it is searching for the best formula as it is a starting organization in a young industry. The DGA as it sets itself up has been supported by the government, mainly in the form of subsidies to organize events and to increase the organization's visibility in this capacity. Also in Denmark, the government is supporting the development of the sector, as both public funded and non-public trade associations are active in the sector. Important examples include CAPNOVA, which is a public–private investment fund that assists and invests in new start-ups within the gaming industry with the potential to make investments of up to 1 million euros. CAPNOVA has a specific focus on innovation and entrepreneurship and supports, among others, the videogame industry. The Danish Film Institute is a solely public funding organization, which has a funding programme for Danish videogames with the aim of strengthening the cultural dimension of videogames, as well as securing the development and growth of the industry in Denmark by funding videogame development companies. Finally, Interactive Denmark is a non-profit and partly publicly funded organization that specifically targets the gaming industry. It offers free tailor-made services to Danish videogame companies, particularly new start-ups, assists with different funding applications, and facilitates various professional networks within the gaming industry.

A specific kind of professional organization is constituted by those focusing on specific groups within the videogame industry. For example, the Dutch Game Garden (DGG) in the Netherlands is a hub focusing especially on start-ups and starting indie videogame developers. They offer an incubation programme for promising young videogame studios. Within this programme, participants are coached in setting up a videogame company: they

have a mentor, can follow classes on business topics and participate in team training. Moreover, the DGG organizes events and projects and provides a place where videogame developers and companies can meet. On request, the DGG can also negotiate with publishers on behalf of the companies housed by the DGG or go over contracts to check the content. Finally, the DGG acts as a mediator between companies that want to contract a videogame studio and the (often small) videogame studios.

### *Informal on- and offline communities*

A final form of interest expression and organization is participation in professional networks and communities, i.e. informal collective structures that provide different forms of support and voice to actors in the industry (Antcliff et al., 2007; Saundry et al., 2012). These communities can be found on- and offline. Like professional organizations and trade associations, they cut across the traditional employer–employee divide by appealing to different types of workers in the videogame industry, ranging from solo self-employed and freelancers to employers and employees. These alternative forms of representation seem to be more frequently used by actors in the industry to air their voice and push through demands, than the traditional channels for negotiations and social dialogue. Moreover, they seem crucial for building and sustaining a sense of professional community within the sector, as most workers participate.

The networking within these communities aims mostly to share a common passion for videogame development and videogames in general, but also at being updated on current market trends (titles, distribution platforms, pricing policies and commercialization of the products), at identifying potential business partners, and at strengthening participants' skills through peer-to-peer support. Hence, they have an important role in strengthening the position of individual workers as well as the development of the industry as a whole.

Informal on- and offline communities can be locally- or nationally-oriented, as exemplified by Game Development Denmark or the Copenhagen Game Collective in Denmark, or Sviluppартy in Italy and the associated Italian Party of Indie Developers. However, these communities can easily cross borders as well, fostered by platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Imgur, making international collaboration and information exchange easy.

## **Explaining the characteristics of interest representation**

We argue that the described characteristics of the interest representation system can be explained by three different, but interrelated factors: the structure of the videogame industry's labour market, where individuals often perform different roles over their life course or even simultaneously; the attitudes towards work expressed by workers in the industry; and the labour market power of workers in the sector. In the next subsections we will explore each of them separately.

### *Fluid labour markets, multiple roles and informal networks*

One important factor that helps to explain the characteristics of the interest representation arena in the videogame industry is the fluidity of employment relationships and the fact

that workers in the sector often combine several roles over their life course or even at the same time. For example, they may start out as freelancers, and in a later stage become employees, to then subsequently establish their own company. Moreover, it is common for employees to have their own side-projects, which they develop independently alongside their job. They may work four days a week for a company, but work the rest of the week for themselves, on the development of their own videogame. This combination provides them with the possibility to develop their own project relatively risk-free. As argued by a Dutch employee of a videogame company,

Besides the three, four days a week I am employed here, I have one day a week that I work on my own project. I like this balance. In this way, I can safely try it out without running too much risk. (Employee, NL)

Freelance workers often divide their time in a similar way: they work for hire during the majority of the working week but do their own projects in the remaining time. Freelancers state that this is what they like about being self-employed: they feel more freedom to develop their own projects. Such a fluidity in the employment relationship and the fact that workers undertake different roles during their working life make it difficult to identify different types of interests and requests for representation according to the type of employment contract.

Moreover, this small and relatively new sector is characterized by dense and tight networks of personal relationships among managers, employees and freelancers, who frequently have known each other personally for years, often since university or college.

Lastly, work organization in the industry is often characterized by informal relations and flat organizational hierarchies. Both managers and employees described the management–employee relations in relatively positive terms and consider them to be dominated by high levels of trust and of mutual understanding. As argued by both an Italian and a Danish employee,

[Name of the company] is like a big family [. . .] I don't feel this need to join a union to protect my rights [. . .] it is a very quiet environment and the company policy is clearly to ensure that people working here are at ease. (Employee, IT)

The hierarchy is very flat. These three guys who own the company started it right after school [. . .] The transparency is total, everybody knows how much money we have left. . . and there is no such thing as 'you have to leave now, this is a management talk'. . . I think the idea about trade unions is important, but it is maybe not so relevant for me. (Employee, DK)

All these three factors connected with the industry's labour market and model of work organization – simultaneously or subsequently performing different roles; presence of tight personal networks; and informal and flat organizational structures – lead to a blurring of class identities and to the development of a common occupational identity between employees, employers, freelancers and entrepreneurs in the sector. Employment status plays a minor role in the individual's identity formation, as people tend to identify

more strongly with the sector itself and with its shared culture of games and gaming, than with being a worker, employer, freelancer or entrepreneur. Hence, no specific difference could be identified in the orientation towards interest representation among our interviewees according to their employment status and employment contracts. The shared perspective was of a minor role for traditional class organizations and a greater role for professional organizations and trade associations – which cut across the traditional employer–employee divide – in the representation of the sector’s interests. As argued by an Italian employee,

The point is that from this point of view, those who work and those who manage basically have the same problems, so in reality nothing can be solved through a trade union discourse. It is not that managers exploit the situation to underpay workers [. . .] the issue is more to make a common front towards the public administrations to try to have support for the sector. And this is more or less what AESVI is doing, and it slowly seems to me to be having results. (Employee, IT)

Differently from what emerged in other studies on the sector (Legault and Weststar, 2015), what seems to be lacking is an attribution to management of the responsibility of working conditions in the sector, which are, instead, attributed to the fact that the videogame industry is relatively new and needs to grow.

### *Passion, portfolio and working conditions*

The topic of ‘passion’ plays a very important role in how interest representation is articulated in the videogame development industry. Workers seem to be highly committed and passionate about their work and there is a clear overlap between their social and professional identity; they *choose* to work in this sector because they appreciate the contents of daily working activities, the possibility to take part in projects they value and to express their creativity. Many interviewees reveal that it is mainly their passion towards a specific project rather than the wages and working conditions tied to a specific job that is decisive for them opting for a particular project. To be able to work in the industry, interviewees declared themselves also willing to accept sometimes difficult working conditions and, more generally, a penalty compared to working in other sectors. In some cases, workers expressed a feeling of resignation concerning working conditions in the sector, seen as the price to pay for being able to work there. It was rather common during interviews to get comments like ‘That’s simply the way it is if you want to work in the sector’ (Employee, IT). In addition, the strongest occupations in the videogame industry – the programmers – were well aware of the existence of (and willing to pay) a price for staying in the industry. In all three countries, in fact, programmers working in the videogame development industry are penalized in terms of remuneration compared to programmers working in other (non-creative) industries, such as banking and insurance, or ICT.

This strongly resonates in the words of a Danish employer:

People are still paying a ‘fee’ to be allowed to work with games. People accept the fee, and they say: ‘OK, I can get a job at Novo Nordisk [large medico company] for 38,000 a month, but if I work here I will only get 33,000.’ (Employer, DK)

Workers' willingness to sacrifice working conditions to participate in specific projects is also related to a specific characteristic of the labour market in this sector, i.e. the weight that 'portfolio' plays in workers' careers and employment opportunities: many consider it pivotal to be able to participate in a project relevant to their portfolio, also at the expense of poor working conditions.

I think that at a company like [name of a large videogame company], it was more important for me to be able to put that name on my portfolio than to be able to get a certain amount of money. (Employee, NL)

Workers were well aware of this inherent ambivalence of passion and of the fact that companies sometimes take advantage of workers' high intrinsic motivations. Below are the points of view on this of an Italian freelance worker and a Dutch employer:

Many companies also take advantage of this thing, because you are so passionate and therefore you do it because you like it, so they think they can also pay you little, never mind if you do not get [much] at the end of the month. (Freelancer, IT)

I felt guilty at first that everyone had to take a step back, but at the same time it was convenient, because I want the intrinsically motivated people that really, really want to do something for our target groups. It became a kind of test or check to see whether someone is willing to give up earnings by choosing this job. (Employer, NL)

Still, the strategies developed by workers in order to cope with these contradictory pressures are of an individual nature. First, as in other creative industries, we found instances of workers striking a balance between well remunerated, but boring jobs (usually working for hire) and more satisfactory and creative, but poorly paid ones (see Umney and Kretsos [2014] for a parallel in the music industry). Some interviewees reported that they decided to work in other sectors (usually considered less creative and appealing) in order to be able to economically sustain their passion, and thus videogame development was a secondary job, often undertaken during weekends. Second, the interviews pointed to the predominant role of 'exit' over 'voice' in workers' management of unsatisfactory working conditions.

This has also to do with the fact that workers in the industry are generally young. Indeed, the way in which workers strike a balance between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic elements of work might change over the life course. While the possibility to do the job they love might be the dominant concern for younger workers, other variables – such as wages or working conditions – may become more central in assessing the quality and desirability of work for more adult workers, leading to the decision to leave the sector.

Passion for our work is here and will always be, but when the time comes when you have to choose whether to start a family or to buy a house, etc., and to remain here in the sector [. . .] then you may also take the decision to leave the sector if things do not change. (Employee, IT)

Hence, while, as we have seen, the industry in all three countries is currently staffed with young workers, the more established companies, especially in the Netherlands and in



Denmark, are starting to discuss the issue of retention of employees. Most Danish companies offer pension schemes, sick pay, full pay during maternity, paternity and parental leave as well as other benefits, which at least in some companies seems to be a way to attract and retain qualified and skilled labour with some seniority.

While it needs to be carefully considered and not essentialized, the centrality of passion in these workers' attitude to work seems to be strongly related to the low level of interest they show towards unions and industrial relations practices. Indeed, by now, workers' predominant interest revolves around the symbolic dimension and the content of work, which is generally difficult to represent by collective action. Moreover, their willingness to compromise on other aspects of the employment relationship – such as wages or working conditions, which represent the main issues traditionally advanced by trade unions – severely limits unions' appeal and their organizing potential, as argued by a Dutch trade union representative:

It is more essential to produce work, to develop a game or to make animations, to draw, than to earn money. And that's the tricky part. It makes our position relatively weak because [. . .] well, people tend to take the job anyway. (Trade union, NL)

It can therefore be argued that passion-based work is characterized by the predominance of different interests to those traditionally represented by trade unions. On the contrary, these workers are strongly interested in measures helping them to navigate the market and/or aimed at promoting the development of the sector, because these measures enable them to work in the sector they are passionate about. These are also the activities provided both by professional organizations and trade associations and by informal networks, and this helps to explain why these actors are seen as comparatively more relevant by workers in the sector.

### *Labour market power and individualized orientations*

A last aspect contributing to explaining the characteristics of interest representation in the videogame industry relates to the sector's labour market. There is some variation in the market position between occupations in the industry – with programmers being the strongest and artists and animators the weakest workforce segments of the sector. Programmers are in high demand in the industry, but are able to find even better paid jobs outside the videogame industry, because their skills are also valuable in other sectors, which, as we have seen, often offer higher wages.

Programmers can find work everywhere, whether it is game-related or not. Programming is a valuable skill. They can get paid well. (Freelancer, NL)

There are variations between the occupations with regard to how difficult it is for the employers to get good employees. There are enough game-designers out there, whereas there are not so many programmers [. . .] The programmers can find jobs in several other industries and for higher wages. (Employee, DK)

These workers' (relatively) strong labour market position reduces the likelihood of developing collective strategies and favours the development of individual ones. This could take the form of both individual bargaining, but also of exit (over voice) behaviour in the case of undesirable working conditions. Indeed, leaving for another studio, in the context of a favourable labour market and high mobility possibilities, is seen as the most straightforward way to improve their working conditions.

In my opinion, unionization makes sense for some groups of workers, especially workers who are more precarious and who have more difficulty finding jobs [ . . . ] When things go wrong, when you have people who cannot find a job any more, it makes sense to have a union [ . . . ] But if the market situation does not present any problem, I am not in favour of creating a structure on a problem that does not exist [ . . . ] If you are in an industry where you have 20 companies looking after every person working in the sector, the worker already has weapons that are sharp enough to assert him/herself. (Employee, IT)

Besides leaving for another studio, another form of 'exit' response to undesirable working conditions can be seen in the aspiration to build one's own independent studio. Favourable labour market conditions and the sustained economic growth that the sector experienced in all three countries over the last decade have in fact tended to foster the development of a strong entrepreneurial orientation among some workers. This is particularly evident among founders of new small studios, who are often willing to accept intensive working conditions as an investment in future success prospects. While most interviewees shared the idea that videogame development is a risky business with scarce success rates and that, therefore, one needs to be cautious in investing personal money and effort in this sector, the idea that (a well-taken) risk will eventually be rewarded was deeply held among interviewees. Within this narrative, good working conditions are the result of the individual capacity to stay in the market and to develop a successful business. While this rhetoric is more common among company owners and freelancers, a slightly different version was also diffused among employees. In this case, key for working conditions will be the development of the sector itself, which, while growing, in the three countries is still in its infant phase.

The centrality of this entrepreneurial discourse and the glorification of risk-taking – which, as highlighted by Neff (2012) is part of a more general shift in the social representation of risks away from collective and towards individual responsibility – reduces the propensity of individuals to organize collectively. Instead, it favours those organizations that focus on the provision of services to surf the market and improve individuals' opportunities to successfully compete in it.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This article explored the characteristics of interest representation in the videogame industry in three national contexts. Our analysis offers a contribution that goes beyond extant literature analysing the sector, which has, by now, mostly focused on collective actors of the labour side, and has rarely focused on comparative studies. By taking into consideration a plurality of organizations and ways of representing interests and

adopting a comparative perspective, this research allowed highlighting important aspects regarding the way interests are organized in this sector. First of all, although the three countries are characterized by different industrial relations institutions, interest representation in the videogame industry is characterized by remarkable similarities. In all three countries, the organizations representing traditional interests play a minor role and have a membership that is either moderately lower than the national average – as in the Danish case – or decidedly lower, as in Italy and the Netherlands. The observed variation, e.g. in membership rates across the three countries, does not translate into significant differences in the relevance of trade unions in the sector. Moreover, collective bargaining does not play a significant role in the sector: in Italy, companies adopt collective agreements from other sectors, while in the Netherlands collective bargaining is almost absent. Hence, despite the different traditions of industrial relations characterizing the three countries under investigation, what emerges from our analysis is the remarkable similarity of the interest representation arena. This confirms the findings of other studies that have shown that industrial relations might be more similar within sectors than within countries (Bechter et al., 2012).

The limited role played by traditional industrial relations actors and processes in representing interests in the industry, however, does not mean that forms of interest representation are absent. On the contrary, our research shows the importance of specific organizational forms, such as professional organizations and trade associations, and informal communities. As regards the first two organizational forms, these cut across the classic division between employer and worker representation, representing the interest of the industry as a whole, with a specific focus on market competition. Neither of these two types of organization moves in the typical realm of industrial relations associations: they do not deal with collective bargaining or other work-related aspects, while they try to offer services or influence politics through lobbying activities, always with the main purpose of supporting the competitiveness of the sector. Also informal communities – which constitute less institutionalized mechanisms of interest representation, but play a significant role in the sector – do not usually focus on working conditions, but rather on individuals' professional status and values within the sector, contributing to strengthening the position of both single workers and the development of the industry as a whole. This means that only specific types of interests are represented in the industry, mainly those connected to business development, while others, those connected to working conditions, remain neglected. Hence, the type of interest representation that dominates the industrial relations arena in the three countries' videogame industries is not likely to be conducive to changes in terms and conditions of work in the sector, thereby leaving those critical aspects unchallenged, something which is particularly troublesome for the weakest segments of the sector's labour market, such as artists and designers.

The research shed light on the factors that favour the emergence of these particular ways of representing interests. The three main factors we have identified all have to do with the peculiar characteristics of employment in the videogame industry. The first concerns the presence of 'fluid' labour markets and work patterns: over the same period of time, workers in the videogame industry often cover different positions – sometimes taking up the role of employee and of employer at the same time – and frequently switch between these positions depending on the type of project they are involved in. This

specific feature favours the emergence of an occupational identity between all the figures operating in the sector (employees, employers, freelancers, etc.) and reduces the importance of class identities, hindering the role played by traditional class organizations and reinforcing the appeal of professional organizations and trade associations. A second important feature of the sector that influences interest representation is given by the role played by intrinsic motivations in orienting workers' attitudes. Our empirical evidence shows that workers are often disposed to sacrifice working conditions in order to be able to work in a sector they are very passionate about. At the same time, the structure of the sector triggers the importance of a portfolio: in order to reinforce their position in a very competitive labour market, workers are particularly interested in participating in projects that are relevant assets for the CV, even if they are characterized by low-quality working conditions. The importance of passion and portfolio and the willingness to accept low wages or difficult working conditions weaken the type of appeal often raised by trade unions. In this sector, this impact is even more reinforced by a third aspect, namely a process of individualization of bargaining in a context of favourable labour market conditions that reduce the propensity to collective action, especially for some segments of the workforce.

Our analysis contributes to the literature on collective action in the creative industries in two ways. First, by taking a broad sectoral approach we have been able to appreciate the variety of actors active in the videogame industry, which go beyond trade unions and network-type organizations mostly examined by previous literature (Antcliff et al., 2007; Heery et al., 2004) and also include professional organizations and trade associations, whose role has been mostly neglected by extant literature (Benner, 2003). We showed that the importance of these organizations is strongly connected with the peculiar characteristics of work and employment in this industry, which, in turn, influence the interests expressed by workers. The fluidity of the videogame industry's labour market, the centrality of passion and the predominance of individualistic attitudes all tend to reduce the appeal of collectivist and class-based approaches typical of traditional industrial relations actors, such as trade unions and employer organizations, and reinforce those of other organizations, such as professional organizations and trade associations, and informal networks, which focus on common sectoral identities and on the provision of resources strengthening individuals' capacity to stay in the market. The predominance of these types of actors has significant implications for the types of interests that are represented and risks leaving issues connected to working conditions unchallenged. Secondly, our comparative approach let us appreciate the importance of sectoral characteristics, even beyond national institutional ones, in accounting for the landscape of interest representation in this industry. Indeed, remarkable similarities were identified across the three countries despite their different institutional configuration, reinforcing calls to avoid methodological nationalism in industrial relations studies and to strengthen analysis based on common sectoral features (Bechter et al., 2012). What seems to be particularly relevant in all three countries for explaining the characteristics of interest representation are the relatively limited development of the sector and the characteristics of its labour market. As highlighted by Keogh and Abraham (2022), in contexts in which small-scale videogame development predominates and employment is fluid across different contractual forms, traditional forms of interest representation are more difficult,

and unionization more limited. This final observation is important for not essentializing the findings of our research. Extant literature on the videogame industry has, in fact, shown that the obstacles to traditional, class-based collective action that we have highlighted in our study, particularly those connected with passion, might be overcome and that organizing into trade unions might also be feasible for workers in the videogame industry (Legault and Weststar, 2015; Ruffino and Woodcock, 2021). However, we would suggest that this strongly depends on the specific characteristics of the industry in each national context.

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