Chapter 14
Emotional Journeys in Game Design Teams

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ABSTRACT

There is little research into the emotional dimension of creative industry personnel, such as computer game designers, and how emotions relate to their creative practices and work-related events. Such socioemotional work is the focus of this chapter. There is a practice-centered relevance to this topic too – it is reported that there exists a poor quality of life in many global game studios. Given our deficient knowledge of emotions in computer game development, and the practical resonance of this topic, our key research question is: What emotions, creative practices and work-related events characterize emotional journeys in computer game design teams, and how do these characteristics inter-relate? To explore and answer this research question, we draw on an in-depth field study of a computer games studio in Singapore. The chapter offers a theory of emotion-mediated improvisation as a coping model for the tumultuous emotional journeys that game developers endure.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely held in the creativity literature that being 'well' and feeling 'good' is fundamental to being creative: "The results indicate that positive affect relates positively to creativity in organizations and that the relationship is a simple

linear one." (Amabile et al, 2005:p.367) Despite the voluminous research that connects positive emotions to creativity (e.g. Amabile et al, 2005; Bartel and Saavedra, 2000; Vosburg, 1998; George and Zhou, 2007), there is little research into the emotions of creative industry personnel, such as computer game designers. There are studies of the social practices of designers (e.g. Cross 1994) but little or no understanding of their emotions

and how these relate to their creative practices and work-related events. Such socioemotional work life is the locus of this chapter. There is a practice-centered relevance to this topic too; in 2004 emotional quality of life (QoL) became an important topic in discourses on computer game development. That year the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) released the results of its first global survey, which found poor QoL in global game studios on account of impossible deadlines, peer pressures and lack of concern and support for the family unit, leading to early departures to rival industries. In April 2009 Develop Magazine conducted a similar survey of QoL which supported the 'impossible deadlines' facet which respondents referred to as 'crunch', or "the industry's dirty secret." [1] Furthermore, management "sociopathy" was highlighted, i.e. producers and others exhibiting anti-social behavior towards their team members with little regard for their feelings or emotional well-being. And yet, research posits that being 'well' and feeling 'good' is fundamental to being creative. Focusing on this topic is therefore timely for both scholarship and practice.

Given our deficient knowledge of emotions in computer game development, our key research question is: What emotions, creative practices and events characterize emotional journeys in computer game design teams, and how do these characteristics inter-relate? This is important given the concern over emotional well-being in computer game studios around the world[2], and its potential threat to the economic contribution the computer games industry makes. For example, according to the UK's National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), the industry contributes £1 billion to the GDP - equivalent to the size of the UK's film industry. Therefore, our research has potentially useful implications for game industry organizations, i.e. means by which they can improve their emotional well-being, enhance their creative efficacy and protect their economic well-being too.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows: Firstly, we impart a framework for theorizing about the emotions, creative practices and events that characterize emotional, well-being journeys in computer game design teams, and their inter-play. In doing so, we show the pertinence of drawing on Giddens' stratification model of the agent as a means of conceptualizing the links between these characteristics. We also refer to literatures concerning software development and demonstrate that such approaches fail to take account of developers' inner-life. Secondly, we present data drawn from an in-depth field study of a computer games studio in Singapore, which highlight the above three characteristics of such journeys. Thirdly, we analyze the data using the Giddensian lens, and, fourthly offer a theory of emotion-mediated improvisation as a coping model for the tumultuous emotional journeys that game developers endure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We commence this section by referring to literatures concerning software development, to demonstrate that there are few frameworks in the field of IS that address the emotional journeys and needs of developers.

Related IS Development Research

Traditionally, structured software methodologies have been advocated as a means of making the development process smoother and controlled (Nandhakumar and Avison 1999). However, they offer limited guidance when unexpected, emoting challenges emerge during the software development process. Agile methods such as eXtreme Programming (XP) (Beck 1999) and the Rational Unified Process (RUP) (Kruchten, 1996) have been proposed as more responsive approaches to software development. However, it is debatable just how distinct from traditional approaches some of these really are (Paulk 2001).

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