



HAL
open science

Collective modes of research and creation: Acting for inclusiveness in a video game studio

Hélène Sellier

► **To cite this version:**

Hélène Sellier. Collective modes of research and creation: Acting for inclusiveness in a video game studio. Canadian Game Studies (CGSA 2022), May 2022, Online, Canada. <halshs-04615232>

HAL Id: halshs-04615232

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04615232v1>

Submitted on 18 Jun 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

**Collective modes of research and creation:
Acting for inclusiveness in a video game studio**

Hélène Sellier, The Seed Crew

Hello everybody, I'm really glad to be able to take part in this conference. I will be talking about actions for inclusiveness in a video games studio, and I'll focus on what is done in the studio I work in. We're called The Seed Crew, and it's a small indie studio located in Toulouse in France. It was founded by marginalized creators and people who decided to be allies. We create narrative games about cultural diversity, inclusiveness of different identities, and social diversity in order to increase awareness and develop constructive dialogue regarding those issues. But, our engagement for an inclusive society is not only present in our games, but also in our collective modes of operation.

First of all, I use the term "inclusive" here, but as a team, we are very much aware of the issues of the word. Talking about inclusivity assumes the possibility of its opposite, which is exclusion. David Gunkel also explains another issue with the word. For him, every inclusion implies that there is a foreign element that needs to be integrated, and therefore mean to erase differences and strive for similitude above all else. Those issues are the reason for two stances we have in regard with inclusivity. Firstly, we try to always keep in mind the social and systemic nature of the problem, that is to say to remember the fact that we are only a small cog in a big machine. Secondly, rather than only taking action to include marginalized people, we aim to take into account everybody according to their individuality without asking them to come out.

We have numerous paths of action in order to be inclusive, and some of them are very much public. For example, we have a gender equality plan as part of a European requirement, and we aim to be as unbiased and open as possible in our recruitment methods. However, today, I would like to talk about actions for inclusiveness for which are not overtly shown and not always conscious.

I would like to argue that, in a video games studio, there is a link between being inclusive and acting against logics that are very much anchored in the video game industry and value results and productivity over personal needs and living together in harmony. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, and more recently Alpha Kerr, explain how the video game industry is tied with capitalism and globalization. Other authors point out the link between the neoliberal logics of video game industry and the toxicity of the culture. For example, Jennifer Witson demonstrates how mobile production for digital platforms intensifies game labour and reinforces existing market and gender inequities. She argues that "data-driven design for digital platforms introduces new gatekeepers and literacies of exclusion".

That's why I think that our most meaningful action toward inclusiveness can be understood as everyday resistance. Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen call "everyday resistance", the area of resistance in which people engage with power relations in their daily lives. They argue that everyday resistance is oppositional to dominant power and a particular way of acting. For example, they mention the practice of "talking back" described by bell hooks. This is "defined as an act of resistance as black women and women of colour refuse to stay voiceless and silenced by the politics of domination of racism, sexism and classism".

Everyday resistance is thus not measured by its impact, it's a mundane kind of practice, and it's not planned or conscious at first. For us, in the studio, everyday resistance against a cultural framework and marginalizing economical and societal logics happens in our collective practices of research and creation, that is to say the spatial, temporal, and material organization of the workflow.

In order to reveal and reflect on our everyday resistance, I'll use methodology that comes from the field of research-creation. Indeed, I will use an autopoiesis approach which consists in examining our practices: the methods and conditions of our creative work. Particularly, I will tell the story of our practice using documentation and significant events in the creative process, as Louis-Claude Paquin advises. Each anecdote about a spatial, temporal or material organization will be associated with an idea coming from a theoretical text. This way to intertwine a particular experience with a more general comment is inspired by the feminist practice of autotheory. Studying the work of Susan Sontag, Lauren Fournier explains that: "The act of citing theory becomes a way to better understand one's experience in the world and, at the same time, to provide insights gained from that experience into sexuality, politics, art, family, community, and other topics." This methodology is useful for us because it values practical knowledge and thus resonate with the premise of research-action which is one of the pillars of our work. I will also use quotes from members of the studio. Those reflexive sentences were said during a meeting we had for the preparation of this talk. This assembly of anecdotes, theories and sayings will guide us to propose general strategies of everyday resistance and inclusivity. Those ideas don't pretend to be comprehensive or to be useful for every context, but to give food for thoughts, in the same way Eric Manning and Brian Massumi's book gave us things to ponder. The two researchers and artists give advice on how to reject the capitalist capture of research and creation, such as "Attend to the body" or "Practice letting go" and they draw from their own experience in the SenseLab collective to come up with these general ideas.

The first thing about our collective creative work is that everyone chooses what they are doing. We have common goals and collective planning, but we each create our own work and we decide when we have to do them. This way of working is obvious when hearing the daily meeting at 10 am -ish. Those who attend (I usually don't) are saying what they are choosing to do in the day, according to what needs to be done in priority but also their mood, their working conditions and their interests. This may seem very trivial, and it is, but I think it's a way to resist a logic anchored in the creative industry of video games which considers people as executing tools that carry out predetermined tasks. In the meeting we had to prepare for this talk, Anna said "Faut pas forcer les gens" (don't force people) and this value can be seen in our everyday collective work. So the first strategy of inclusivity and resistance that we use is to respect consent in every situation, as insignificant as it seems to be. In queer games, consent is essential in the design, as Mattie Brice explains, and we also use this value in the design process. We talk a lot to understand what is ok and what isn't for each of us, and we make plans based on what is possible for everybody, even if isn't sometimes the ideal planning from a business perspective.

The second thing that we often do is to support each other, taking over for somebody else when needed. This may seem a very common practice, but it's not, because of the fluidity of the process. We don't wait for someone to be unable to complete a task, to fail to do it properly, or to ask for help. We are attentive to the abilities of others and their workload, and

we try to relieve them whenever we feel it's necessary. For example, even if they are a game and narrative designer and not a programmer, Alex recently picked up something Lucas was slated to do about the development of UI features because they had the skill and the opportunity to do so and knew how much Lucas, our programmer, was busy at that time. Other examples can be found when Jérôme or Chabane or Béranger shield me from talking to external partners because I don't always have the resources to do so. This way of working is both a way to be inclusive, because it follows everybody's possibilities, and a way to resist a capitalistic division of labour. This means that we each have our own specialities, but we don't stop ourselves from doing something which corresponds in theory to someone else's job. This may be possible only because we are a small team. Jennifer Whitson, Bart Simon and Felan Parker in their study of indie studio write: "For the developers we talked to, 'success' was not vested in the game being produced, nor in individualized metrics of success (critical acclaim, audience reception, sales numbers, average play time and net profit), but in the ability to sustain ongoing creative and collective processes – the social engagement related to both making games together as a team and sharing them with others." This is very much true for us too. Jérôme told us: "La plus grande réussite, pour moi, c'est qu'on puisse bosser ensemble." (The main success, for me, is that we can work together.) Working together is not only working on the same project, but this intermingling of our creative actions which implies that we support each other.

The third action for inclusiveness that our collective practice of research and creation show is considering our co-workers as equals. This seems ordinary at first, but it's not that easy and obvious when taking into account our cultural frameworks which urge us to consider that some type of knowledge, such as technology or data, are more important than others. The trend consisting in labelling and dividing creative skills also often implies a kind of gatekeeping. On the contrary, we aim not to rank different expertises, but rather to favour collective construction and sharing of knowledge. One of the best example for this is how we do the research part of our work, which is very much inspired by the principles for research-action. In order to explore a conceptual field (for example empathy or learning with games), instead of me, as a researcher, doing all the reading and establishing a state of the art in order to explain it to my co-workers, we start by relying on everyone's ideas. We often use the glass panels of the studio to write our intuitions, our experiences, and our questions. This is the starting point for me: looking at theoretical works and selecting them for us to talk about. Then we build our research work thanks to the dialogue between the scientific texts and our practice. This means that while I am the person who has the researcher title, we are all doing research. In the meeting for preparing this talk Lucas told us: "Personne n'a jamais mis de mur." (Nobody has ever put a wall.) Even if this organization of work doesn't seem to be directly linked with preventing discriminations in relation to gender, race or ability, its inherent principle avoids acts of marginalization.

Based on our experience, the fourth strategy that could be used to be inclusive is to accept idleness and daydreaming as a way to be together. I can't find the right word in English, but there is a word in a French dialect "bouiner" which fits perfectly our practice of not actively doing things together. This is materialized in the spatial and temporal organization of our workflow. In the middle of the studio, in front of the main door and in the central room, there is a sofa. When we don't feel like being at their desk, for example because we need a break from what they are doing or because we need to discuss something openly, we sit here. Sometimes (often), other people join us. It's an informal place where conversations about

work or leisure can take place and are often intertwined. It's also a place for chatter, but also for hesitations, boredom, waiting, and laziness. There is not a defined and allowed time in the day when we use the sofa. It's often occupied in the lunchtime, but people use the space according to their mood. When reflecting upon our workflow, Martin reminds us: "Les pauses ne sont pas timées." (Breaks are not scheduled.) The free use of time and the possibility of a collective reverie is what Yves Citton calls "des-occupation" in French (un-occupation) and it contradicts the capitalistic imperative of productivity. Paradoxically, it's often in those blurred moments that we share that are solved our creative problems. But, this practice is also a way to be inclusive since there is no pressure for each individual to conform oneself to a time structure that doesn't suit themselves. This is also inclusive because "bouiner" together means to allow for a collective time which is not necessarily productive, but creates social links.

Acting for inclusiveness also means that our research-creation practice is very close to tinkering. Rather than being a well-defined technical or scientific practice, it's rather a "bricolage" according to Claude Levi Strauss and Henry Bazin's concept. This means that we make do with what we have, what we know, and what we want in order to produce an assembly of heterogeneous elements. We gather concepts from different scientific fields and ideas from different media and genres and blend it together. Jérôme explains: "On ne va pas suivre leur modèle s'il ne nous convient pas, on va faire à notre sauce." (We won't follow their template if it's not a fit for us, we'll do our way.) For Henri Bazin, what he calls "bricolage" is a way to refuse to "adhere to programmed and programmable artistic intent". This is particularly true in our collective practice. For example, when we answer a call for a project, always partly for financial reasons, we do so as we see fit, even if it means proposing something quite different from the established pattern. Recently, the French administration La Caisse des Dépôts sent an open call for serious games for educating on disability. We made a proposition for a game whose aim is to raise awareness on ableism. In this case, the result of our interpretation and the "bricolage" from ideas and material that we had was successful, but it's far from being always the case. However, I think that we constantly choose to do things this way even when it is maybe not the most obvious viable studio management practice because it's fundamentally inclusive. Rather than to conform ourselves to pre-existing models and follow established patterns in the video game creative industry, we work with what we know and what we believe in. According to Henri Bazin, the "bricolage" practice is characterized by "placing the human at the heart of things".

Finally, another inclusive action that we noticed in our reflection on our practice for research and creation consists of an improvisation based on unexpected events. For example, several months after participating in a conference on research-creation in France, one artist I met there asked me if someone in the studio could help with the implementation of an element related to the research project Performance Lab in the game engine Unity. This was completely unpredictable, and it disrupted our production planning. But we decided to do it anyway, partly because we were glad to support an interesting project, partly because it was a paid assignment. This is only one example of a collective organization which leaves room for the emergence of unforeseen events. This may seem very much aligned with the standards of the video game industry, which favours agile modes of production and flexibility. However, the versatility in our workflow allows individual expression to take place. It doesn't mean asking a person or a team to necessarily adapt to an external constraint, but rather to adapt our work according to personal or collective initiatives which are impromptu. This is a

way of working which welcomes the uncertainty which is essential to artistic work, according to Pierre-Michel Menger. In order to describe our mode of operation, Béranger often uses the French slang word “Zbeul” which comes from the Arabic language and means put a mess, create chaos. In our daily work, one of the ways to summon this chaos is to use laughter. Embracing disorder in our creative practices is one of our way to try and reduce the power of norms which exclude individuality and which prevent people to express themselves. Refusing to be stuck in an immovable organization and welcoming the improvisation triggered by unexpected events also have the benefit of urging us to reconsider how we work, to correct our mistakes and to try to do better. As he usually does, during the meeting we had to prepare this presentation, Chabane said: “On avance au fur et à mesure.” (We do it as we go).

To sum up briefly, acting for inclusiveness in our research and creation practices is first and foremost an everyday resistance from oppressive logics anchored in the video game industry. From our experiences, day-to-day actions that can be taken are: respecting consent in every small situation, taking over for someone, not ranking types of knowledge, appreciating collective idleness, favouring tinkering and bricolage, and finally accepting improvisation and chaos. Actually, all those strategies consist of adapting the organization of work to the people working and creating social links. As the different quotes I used tend to show, we're far from being the only ones that use these strategies, and those actions are very much linked to our material conditions. We are a small team and an indie studio. We are more and more aware about the fragility of our conscious and unconscious strategies to be inclusive, but we are very happy that we can share our experience, hoping that some of our practices can be used in other contexts.