

Game Development - Report



UNIVERSITY
OF SKÖVDE

SPELKOLLEKTIVET: A COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

Game Development - Field Studies
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Ziwen Song

Abstract

This study reported the researcher's two-month mini-ethnographic field study at Spelkollektivet to explore the working and living experience of the residents. Several forms of data were collected including documentation, observations, and interviews. The findings of the working and living experience at Spelkollektivet suggests a large possibility space for lifestyles and experience, a vibrant collection of social activities, and a mutually supportive working atmosphere.

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1 Introduction

Imagine living in a community where tens of indie devs would work and live together 24/7 with rich and diverse activities put together by the house or other Homies (A name the residents in the house like to refer to each other as), plus having food and everything else covered by the house at an indie-friendly price of 600 euros a month. Sounds heavenly for indies right? Indeed, that is also the reaction from the well-known game designer Jonathan Blow when he heard about it (see Figure 1). And the same utopian idea also drove me to spend two months there at Spelkollectivet to see what life there is really like.



Figure 1 A Tweet Exchange Between Jonathan Blow and James, the manager of Spelkollectivet

This report resulted from my two-month research at Spelkollectivet, an attempt to describe and understand the general working and living experience at Spelkollectivet. The research seeks to answer a central question:

- What is it like to work and live at Spelkollectivet?.

This central question could be further broken down into several subquestions for a refined understanding of the experience at Spelkollectivet:

- What is the working and living experience of a designer/programmer/artist/non-game-dev people at Spelkollketivet?

2 Positioning Myself in the Research

Before we begin to discuss the research, I would like to give some contextual information about myself because it inevitably shapes my view on things and how I interpret them.

2.1 Cultural Background

Spelkollektivet is much more international than any other place you would find in Sweden, with people from many different countries. However, the demographics are still largely dominated by the white male from Europe. Fortunately, the proportion of females is higher than that of the Swedish Game Industry, the latter being 23% (Grafström, 2020). But it still has some distance to a more equal distribution. Coming from China, a culture that is barely represented in Spelkollektivet, I paid more attention to the power struggle and imbalance in the community and tried to give voice to those likely to be drowned out by the dominant force.

2.2 Industry and Academic Background

I worked as the PR for two Chinese indie studios before and my interest is mainly in the game design, game production, and the business aspect of game development. I am currently studying Game User Experience Track in the Game Development master's degree program at the University of Skövde. All of them direct what areas of game development attract me and my perspective on them.

2.3 Interpretive Framework Used in the Research

This study uses a social constructivism interpretive framework. A clear-to-follow explanation comes from Creswell (2012):

individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the research to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. (p. 24)

However, this explanation seems at odds with the ethnography methodology that this study also uses. As a research method, ethnography is described by Harris (1968) as a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group. Social constructivism seeks difference and nuanced understandings while ethnography looks for the common. This dispute could be resolved by looking for the common on a higher abstraction level and then exploring the variances below this higher level.

3 Related Research

Spelkollektivet is unique. There is the traditional studio way of having a bunch of devs crunching in a large space. There is also the indies' way of soloing in their bedrooms. There is even the fashionable way of gathering many small studios in an incubator. But nothing comes close to Spelkollektivet, where you spend nearly all your waking time with other indie devs and making games.

Consequently, there are so many questions you can ask about this community: What is the general experience of making games and living here? What is the difference between working in a AAA environment and here? What is the difference between soloing at home and here? and so many more. This uncharted territory posed serious challenges for me as to what research question to ask. After discussing it with Homies (residents at Spelkollektivet) and factoring in my own interest as well as the time frame available, I decided to go with the most general question exploring the working and living experience at Spelkollektivet.

There are multiple studies on the creative clusters or cities of the game industry from a high-level perspective (Chaminade et al., 2021; Lehtonen et al., 2020; Siemiatycki et al., 2016). But for the sake of exploring a community centered on making games, there is nearly nonexistent research on it. Nevertheless, it is hardly surprising considering the novelty of combining commune living and game making. If a different and more targeted question were to be asked, there would be more related research to draw a comparison on. Some possible future directions are discussed in the Further Research section.

4 Method

A mini-ethnography was conducted to study the target field Spelkollektivet. The mini version differs from the regular ethnography in that it is generally conducted in a much shorter period, lasting several weeks to months rather than at least half a year in a regular ethnographic study. This compression of time puts more weight on already difficult tasks such as building trust inside the community as well as collecting enough data.

Several forms of data were collected, which fall into three main categories: documents, observations, interviews.

4.1 Documents

First of all, the media coverage of Spelkollektivet was collected, providing a public impression of the community. This sets a reference point for comparing the actual living experience. The schedule of the activities in the community was also collected and analyzed. Another discovery is The Indie Quest, an education program at Spelkollektivet aimed at teaching the necessary skills to develop games. More detail about this program is discussed in the Data Collected section.

4.2 Observations

During my stay at Spelkollektivet, I did not actively participate in any game project except for helping to conduct several playtests. Also, the vast majority of the developers there are soloing or working in a small group of 3-4 people, which makes it even harder for a non-participant to gain first-hand observation of their working activity. Thus, the opportunities for directly observing the developers are very limited. Coupled with my inexperience with ethnography, the resulted observations are all made on the events and activities happening during the off-work time. These observations cover the conversations during a certain event or activity, or just casual mealtime talks.

4.3 Interviews

A two-section interview is designed to ask the residents at Spelkollektivet about their working and living experience. The first section asks about the general background information of the interviewee for contextualizing the answers in the second section. They involve the interviewee's experience in making games, their perceived role of themselves in making games as well as how long they have stayed at Spelkollektivet. These questions match the sampling strategy the study uses, which groups the residents by several characters such as gender, nationality, game/non-game developer, role(s) in development, time spent at Spelkollektivet, and their experience level in game development. The goal is to collect participants from as diverse combinations as possible.

The second section asks the participant to draw a picture as a response to the question "What is the working and living experience as a game/non-game developer at Spelkollektivet?"

Using drawings to elicit responses is also used in another research (Lehtonen et al., 2020) where the game developers in Helsinki and Tokyo were asked to draw their view of the ecosystem of the local game companies. The method received revealing results and mitigated

some common issues plaguing traditional interviewing such as the innate power imbalance between the researcher and the interviewee that limits and suppresses the freedom of expression from the interviewee.

After the interviewee finished their drawings, I decoded the drawings with clarification from the interviewee when deemed necessary.

5 Data Collected

5.1 Documents

A handful of media coverage of Spelkollectivet can be found via Google News (Griffiths, 2020; Magnusson, 2019, 2020). Apart from one report (Magnusson, 2020) talking about The Indie Quest, the others (Griffiths, 2020; Magnusson, 2019) usually stay on the surface having a common theme of Spelkollectivet being an affordable place for indie devs as well as a place to meet other talented peers.

The Indie Quest (*The Indie Quest*) represents one of the many special things from Spelkollectivet. The program is structured as a school for indie game development where students will be taught the necessary programming and art skills to kick start their indie game development career. It is completely free and open to applicants from any background.

Considering the infamous crunch culture of the game industry as well as the largely passion-driven nature of indie games, it is surprising and heartening to see the amount and the variety of the activities taking place throughout the week.

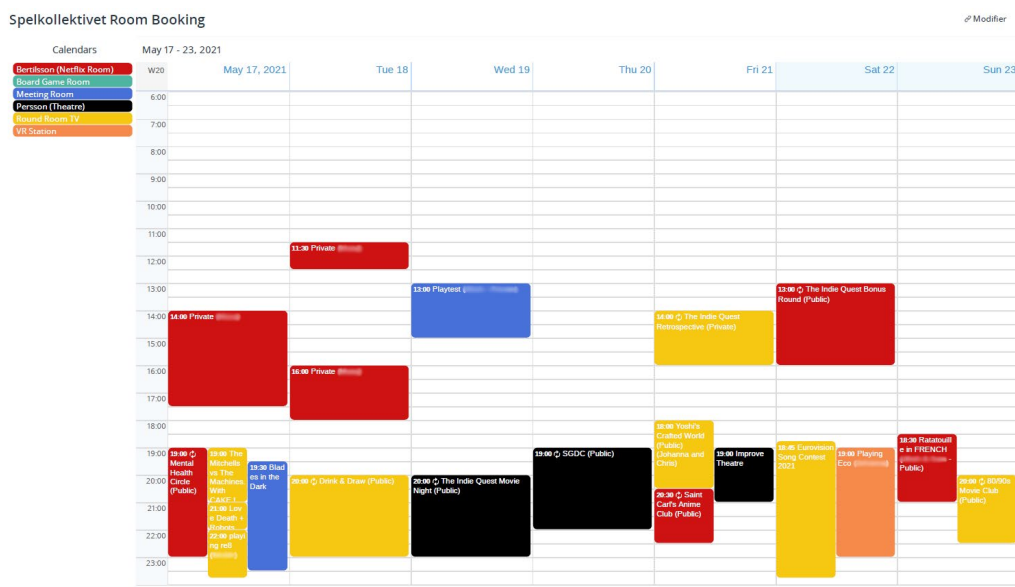


Figure 2 A typical week of activities at Spelkollectivet

Figure 2 shows the schedule of activities in a typical week at Spelkollectivet. The activities are color-coded according to the room location. And they are mostly happening after dinner around six, which signals the end of the daily work period.

The schedule may seem overwhelming but the activities are completely voluntary. The vast majority are also organized by self-formed subcommunities among the residents. They range from acting out your true self in a theater group to drinking, drawing, and chatting with others on cozy couches. Besides all the Homie-arranged activities, there is also a daily opt-in stand-up meeting for the daily dose of peer pressure for progress and the weekly Spelkollectivet Game Developers Conference (SGDC) where you are encouraged to share anything you are working on not only for the feedback but also the entertainment for other Homies.

5.2 Observations

The observations look at the conversations during activities and meals with the researcher being a participating observer. The game-related topics vary from brainstorming new game ideas to technical problems encountered in projects to the business and the current scene of the video game industry.

A homie working as an artist expressed the impression that the programmers like to talk about their technical problems more often whereas the artists prefer not to talk shop off-work. This coincides with my impression that the programmers are more likely to dominate the conversation when a group of people is talking and this may relate to their nature of work which is using an abstract language and easy to communicate with words compared to the work of the artist.

5.3 Interviews

Two Homie participated in the interview and created their drawings.

5.3.1 Participant One

Role: Non-Game Development

Time Spent at Spelkolektivet: Less than six months

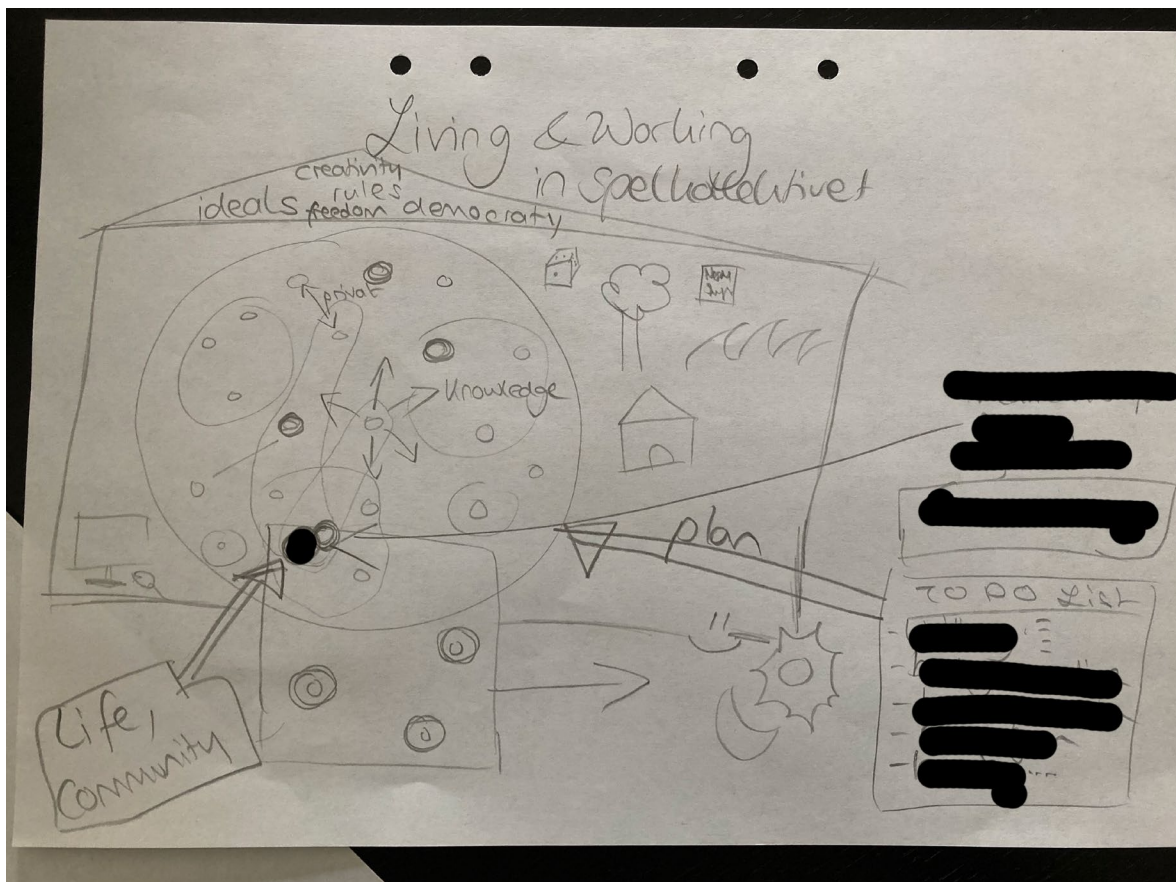


Figure 3 Drawing from Interviewee One

The most obvious element in this drawing (see Figure 3) is that almost all the other elements are framed inside the house structure. The dots indicate the residents living in the house and

the ones circled together imply a subcommunity. The dot in the middle with radiating arrows suggests that there is also a person in the house that is sharing knowledge with others. This knowledge can be of any kind from rules of the house to professional knowledge in making games. Note that some trees and grass are also framed inside the house as the respondent explained that going to the wild is also consider a part of the experience living at Spelkollektivet.

On the right side is a to-do list of what the respondent planned to do before coming to Spelkollektivet. Above them are several lines of text unframed indicating what actually is happening after the respondent arrived. Things didn't strictly follow the plan but in a good way, as the respondent explained. The square crossing the boundary of the house and outside shows a subcommunity of the respondent offering freedom to the outside world.

The dice and the computer indicate that there are always gaming activities going on in the house, be it board games or pc games. On top of the house are several words of perceived guiding principles in the house such as "creativity rules", "ideals", "freedom", and "democracy".

5.3.2 Participant Two

Role: Full-stack with more experience in programming

Time Spent at Spelkollektivet: More than six months

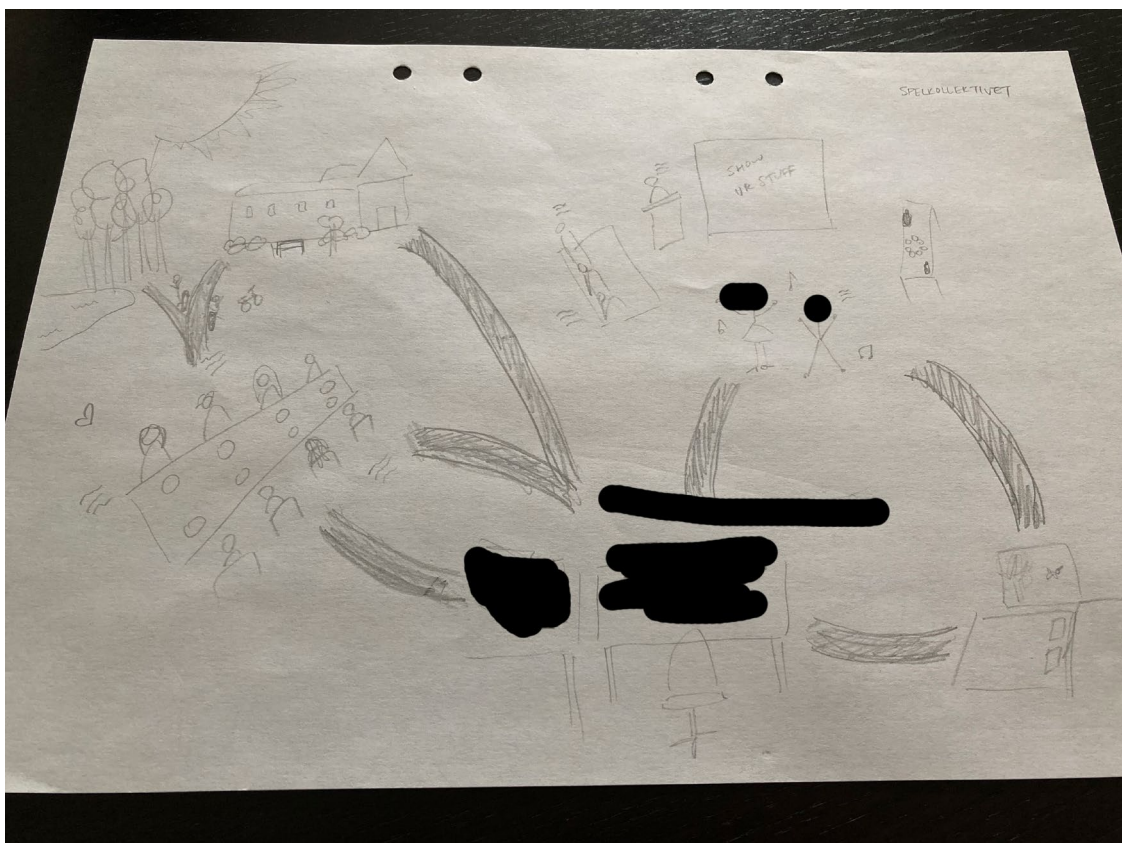


Figure 4 Drawing from Interviewee Two

The drawing from the second respondent (see Figure 4) has a programming flavor to it. The black thick lines represent connections and they connect different activities/locations or "nodes". The nodes include the working activities at the bottom, the bedroom to the bottom

right, the dining hall to the bottom left, the outside activities on the top left, and SGDC and other entertaining events in the house on the top right.

As the respondent explained, the work takes up a central role of all these nodes as there are connecting lines that connect the work to almost all other nodes. Despite working being the center of the experience, as the respondent explained, it is not the whole picture as it only occupies a small fraction of the drawing. The rest are filled with non-working experience that together with work represents the complete working and living experience at Spelkollektivet.

6 Findings

The drawings from two participants suggest disparate experiences at Spelkollektivet in terms of the work-entertainment balance as well as the perception of the community. But on a more abstract level, there are some common traits to be found in the community.

6.1 Same Roof, Different Life

Despite sharing the same working and living space day and night, the residents at Spelkollektivet seems to have the freedom and rich options of activities to organize their living style. It is possible to be a workaholic or a party queen or both. This is in stark contrast with what Jonathan Blow probably had in mind: “a dystopian communist” commune lack of color and variety.

6.2 Steps Away from Social Life

One thing that stands out to me the most is the overwhelming amount of activities in the house. Indie devs always give me the impression of working alone in a bedroom, completely stripped out of social life like Eric Barone did when making Stardew Valley (Schreier, 2017) or the life of devs documented in *Indie Game: The Movie* (Swirsky & Pajot, 2012). Thus, my natural thought was everyone would work as much as they can and only have some leisure over mealtime, maybe occasionally throw a weekend party but that is as far as it could go. Instead, plenty of people have chosen to organize or participate in various interest groups and events. There are indeed Homies who prefer to go full throttle at work. But even some of them would also show up at special events such as a live-action version of Baba is You. These activities are foundational to the vibrant atmosphere at Spelkollektivet and simultaneously cultivating a sense of community. At Spelkollektivet, being alone is no longer essential for being indie.

6.3 Supportive of Each Other

If you ask an indie what is the upside of doing design, programming, and art all in one, they would probably tell you that they don't have the communication cost and the confusion and friction between team members that come with it. Indeed, the disagreement and conflict inside the team in an AAA studio is a recurring theme presented in the insider stories of what went wrong inside the studio.

Spelkollektivet, on the other hand, not only houses the indies looking to get away from that trouble but offers an easy environment to get all the supportive input from other creative minds. Having their own project takes away the conflict of interest between them while living in the same space increases the opportunities for supporting each other. As a result, they are regularly inspiring and sharing feedback with others at SGDC and daily conversations.

7 Validity and Reliability

7.1 The Perspective on Validation

There exist manifold perspectives on the definition of validation for qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). This study took the perspective Creswell (2012) proposed that the validation in qualitative research is “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (pp. 249-250). This one is also the easiest for me to understand among all the perspectives presented in the book.

7.2 The Strategies of Validation and Limitations

This study engaged in several validation strategies to improve the accuracy of the research. In the beginning, the position and background of the researcher have been detailed to provide a context for the bias the researcher holds, which would shape his observation and interpretation in the study. It gives a reference point for evaluating the research. The study also employed several data collection methods including documents, observations, and interviews for triangulating the results. Finally, the report will be shared with all the participants and informants for member checking, hoping to gain their views on the data analysis, interpretations, and findings.

A major limitation to the validation comes from the lack of observation data on the working activities of the residents. In addition to the researcher being inexperienced in conducting ethnography, that limitation also comes from the researcher not working on any projects in the house. Another limitation concerns the number and the variety of the interviewee. The ideal pool of candidates should cover all the character dimensions discussed in the Method section for a comprehensive view of the working and living experience at Spelkollectivet. But only a portion of that pool was collected in the end.

7.3 Reliability

There is always a backup recording device recording at the same time during interviews. It turned out to be life-saving because one of the interview conversations was not picked up by the main recording device, which was suspected to be muted on the pc all the time from the later investigation. The backup recording worked as intended and saved the interview.

No intercoder agreement was performed on the data analysis and the interpretation. The major motive for not using it is that the whole research is conducted in an external field and only a single researcher is involved throughout the whole process. It would likely be of little use to bring in another researcher only for intercoding without all the first-hand experience.

8 Societal and Ethical Aspects

Ethical issues occur in every step of the research from before conducting the study all the way to publishing the study. The permission to conduct a field study at Spelkollektivet was granted beforehand by the gatekeeper. The research purpose was not disclosed at that time, however, because at that time I was not sure about the research question.

The interview candidates were fully informed of the research purpose and the usage of data before they decide whether they want to participate in the interview. Possible attempts have been made to keep the pressure on the candidates to join the interview minimum such as using a less-confrontational way with Discord message reactions to get their response for the interview.

During the interview, the drawing method was adopted to minimize the power imbalance that commonly presents in the verbal interview. It is an attempt to give the interviewee more freedom to express their opinion on the topic.

At the data analysis phase, the sensitive information was all masked out to prevent potential harm to the participants.

The findings of the study turn out to be all positive experiences about living at Spelkollektivet, which certainly cannot be the whole picture. But because of the lack of enough interview participants and the foreseeable concerns of the complex ramifications from sharing negative experiences, no negative experience was collected.

The report will be shared with all the participants and informants to check any breach of confidentiality as well as their take on the report. The whole study is self-funded with no clear faction other than the researcher with an invested interest in it. However, if the report reaches an audience of a certain scale, Spelkollektivet would possibly benefit from the advertising effect.

During my stay in the field, there was always a concern and doubt about the ethicality of ethnography. The concern and doubt grew stronger as I spent more time in the field. The core of this disturbing feeling, I believe, stems from the troubling nature of ethnography being voyeuristic and colonialistic: the ethnographer is encouraged to go to someplace afar and exotic, “new and strange” (Wolcott, 2008, p. 45) and bring back a story that reveals the common behaviors, beliefs, and values of a group. However, this presents the risk of stereotyping the group studied by reducing the complex cultural phenomenon in the group into several common “themes”. Second, it is often the case that the researcher and the readers would benefit the most from the research at the cost of creating a disturbance at the group and even damage them by intentionally or unintentionally exploiting their vulnerability. I believe the issues can and should be addressed by having the people of the community initiate the research, in other words, telling the story of them only when they have the urge to tell it, and having the researcher being a supportive role throughout the whole process.

9 Further Research

There are several unanswered sub-questions such as the experience of the indie devs from different roles such as designer, programmer, artist, and audio at Spelkollektivet, which could be a direction for further research.

A more constructive question to ask about Spelkollektivet concerns the “missing producer” in indie game development. The missing producer (Whitson et al., 2021) refers to the phenomenon that during the shift to small-scale game production, the indie devs parted way with the idea of producer because it represents the traditional industry way of efficiency-oriented game production management, which, to indies, carries the subtext of suffocating creativity for efficiency. However, the work of the producer did not vanish with the shift. Instead, it is redistributed back to the indies. This redistribution has overloaded the indie’s already heavy workload demanding them to cover every aspect of the development. It could also cause friction among team members regarding the distribution of responsibilities. Thus, it would be beneficial to see the role Spelkollektivet could play in taking this missing producer job and taking some pressure off of indies in any way possible.

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