Joshua Jackson | Research Statement

There is a growing body of scholarship on the unequal treatment of non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male, and differently-abled bodies in ludic spaces such as gaming conventions (N. Taylor, de Castell, Jenson, 2009), eSports (T. Taylor, 2012 and 2018; Jenson and de Castell, 2018), and general games culture (Harvey and Fisher, 2013; Grey, 2012a, 2012b, 2018; Salter and Blodgett, 2013). Further, there is a growing body of scholarship regarding queer, feminist, and intersectional interventions in videogames, such as modding (Sotamaa, 2007; Lauteria, 2012; Kuchlich, 2005; Gallagher, 2017), creating specifically queer games (Anthropy, 2012; Brice, 2017), and creating games that defy the formulaic production (re)cycle of current game design (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2016; Isbister, 2017; Rusch, 2017). What current game studies scholarship is lacking is a cohesive understanding of the labour conditions, recruitment methods, and business culture of the places that are *making* the games that undergird these structures. My research is focused on understanding videogame production spaces from an intersectional, feminist, and queer perspective. First, to establish embodied, intimate (re)tellings of the stories of production workers to understand where and how precarity has manifested for them, and second to understand the institutional structures of videogame production that have allowed for and exacerbated the precarities that workers face.   
 One key aspect of my research deals with the concept of ‘passion’ as a recruitment method for videogame production workers (Kerr and Kelleher, 2015). I have chosen Berlant’s (2012) concept of cruel optimism as an initial way of describing the enticing promises of videogame production: cultural cache, working while you play, and doing what you love. Cruel optimism provides a grounding for examining embodied, personal experiences responsibly while also being able to interrogate structural and institutional power relations without overshadowing the importance and granularity of embodied experience. I am currently modifying cruel optimism to put more emphasis on the autonomy of the bodies in question instead of assuming that those bodies are trapped with no way out. Interviews I have conducted with videogame production workers have revealed that the bodies labouring understand the potential negatives or possibilities of abuse, account for those things through support networks that cruel optimism cannot accommodate without modification, or even relish the challenges that they present.  
 Another key aspect of my research is how ‘passion’ is utilized as a control mechanism institutionally. By linking the cultural cache of working in videogames (and being able to frame this as a ‘cool job’ where ‘everyone plays videogames and hangs out [Bulut, 2014]’), often, production companies are able to prey on the passion for videogames that workers display. This exploitation takes the form of workers working grueling hours under poor working conditions, while offsetting the blame for periods of extreme overwork, or ‘crunch,’ by saying that “the project” requires this labour. This bypasses the understanding that most workers have regarding capitalist regimes of subjectivation as being seated with management: management, in the case of videogame production leverages passion as a methodology to not be The Bad Guy. By calling on the passion of the workers in videogame production, management is able to strongarm workers into accepting these precarious labour conditions, while suppressing workers’ ability to unionize (Wester and Legault, 2017; Pettica-Harris, Westar, McKenna, 2015; Deuze, Martin, Allen, 2007; Llerena, Burger-Helmchen, Cohendet, 2009; Williams, 2018) for fear of further outsourcing (Hyman, 2008) or further entrenchment of precarity (Bulut, 2015; Johnson, 2013; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Williams, 2013).   
 My other research interests center on citational politics and critical making. I am currently working on a project funded through ReFiG about citational practices in game studies classrooms. The project is a student-focused, folksanomically tagged, open-source database of scholarly work from queers, women, and people of color that have gone overlooked and have been erased in the highly gendered and racialized history that current historical or definitional game studies scholarship tends to perpetuate. The product of this work can be interacted with and contributed to at diversegamestudies.com. This project will be ongoing for as long as I am involved in game studies scholarship, and as long as citational inequality occurs.   
 My scholarly-activist scholarship takes the form of critical making projects that center on different ways of thinking through the entanglement of ‘passion’ with the material discursive conditions of the spaces and apparatuses that exploit that passion. One current project involves running wood screws through two feminist game culture books by Tanya DePass, and seating a classic SNES controller on the point where the screw heads intersect. The screw placement is flipped and mirrored to create a sharp, stark enclosure around the controller. This piece endeavors to represent how marginal game developers, who are adhering to counter-capitalistic logics to try and upset, sometimes become “trapped” by the prickly contours of capitalism. This piece, and all of my critical making pieces rely upon free indirect discourse (Berlant, 2012) to allow participants to explore the contours of the embodied experiences of participants I have interviewed in regard to citational inequity, precarity in videogame production, and affective attachment to workplace architecture.   
 My future research interests include further delineating and accounting for what bodies make up ‘videogame production’. Currently, there is not a clear picture of who would and wouldn’t qualify for protection under a union because there isn’t a clear understanding of where bodies start to be considered ‘videogame production workers’ rather than contingent labor. My dissertation and accompanying scholarship have made footholds into this work, discussing who could be affected or left out of unionization discussions, and who precarity and cruel optimism specifically affect in videogame production. Once my dissertation is done, I plan to continue exploring the contours of a what a cohesive, wide understandings of who does and doesn’t qualify for protections in vidoeogame production labour would look like. As with any rapidly advancing production sector, I anticipate this project to be highly iterative and highly subjective, thus requiring frequent revisits with new labour, new bodily understandings, and new concepts to better describe conditions of existing.   
 Due to the continuing casualization of labour in videogame production through contracting and outsourcing, what constitutes ‘a union’ in current media production spheres may not even prove to be viable. If unionization continues to gain traction as an option for labour disputes in videogame production, some believe that videogame production houses will become almost totally contract-labour based. This, then, creates new contours that must be explored regarding exploitation protection for workers. I see the trajectory of my work wrestling with these issues for the foreseeable future, and I foresee myself in a scholarly activist role supporting these labour struggles and assisting in academic, official, and unofficial capacities to support and advocate for fair working conditions for videogame production workers.   
 My work has been accepted to or published in game studies journals, media studies journals, critical making journals, theory journals, and digital humanities journals. This is due in large part to my training as an interdisciplinary scholar. The program I am graduating from is housed in both English and Communication. Due to the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of game studies, and due to the non-ludic specific focus of my work in game studies, I see my work continuing to have far-reaching implications that are not just specific to game studies. Labour studies, workplace culture studies, media theory, and intersectional, feminist, and disability theory continue to offer new approaches and ways of interrogating hard questions in my work. I intend to continue borrowing from multiple disciplines to create work that is applicable across media production and technology, both in traditional scholarly ways and in activist/interventionary ways.