



Creative knowing, organisational learning, and socio-spatial expansion in UK videogame development studios



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ABSTRACT

Dominant theories of creativity and innovation in economic geography do not seem to apply to the UK videogames development sector, because it does not exhibit strong tendencies to cluster in urban areas or organise production through systems of horizontal inter-firm relationships. This paper explores alternative explanations of learning in this knowledge-intensive sector by focusing on work practices within development studios and projects. The research focuses on the related issues of growing team sizes and the international outsourcing of some production as trends that are transforming the context for knowing-in-practice in these organisational settings. In the cultural–historical activity theory conceptual framework used for the study, this change is framed as a form of collective learning requiring new intermediary design and project management tools. The spatiality of this process is interpreted as a dynamic formed by the dialectical tension between the situated and distributed elements of knowing in videogames development as a creative practice.

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1. Introduction

The longstanding interest in knowledge, innovation, and learning in economic geography has included an empirical focus on what can broadly be called the creative industries. A generalised understanding of these industries as exhibiting strong tendencies to cluster in urban centres has meant that explanations of their creativity and innovativeness have mainly referred to social and organisational features of this type of environment that are conducive to the generation and sharing of new knowledge and ideas. The videogames industry,¹ given its mix of elements found in other areas of media, software, and cultural production, may be expected to affirm this perspective. However, in the UK at least, videogames development has not yet conformed to the received creative sector norm: previous research has clearly indicated that development studios are relatively dispersed throughout both urban and non-urban areas of the country with no dominant regional cluster. Accordingly, while UK development studios may have significant external (often international) relationships with videogame publishers and outsourcing suppliers, they are not reliant on being embedded in a local production system of dense horizontal relationships, or in a vibrant metropolitan cultural environment. Hence, existing theories of innovation and learning in economic geography do not have much conceptual purchase when applied to this clearly creative and

knowledge-intensive industry. This paper aims to engage with this apparent anomaly by adopting a theoretical and methodological focus on the work practices through which knowing is enacted in the immediate organisational setting of videogame development studios, rather than the kind of relational networking practices located in a wider cluster or city environment (Vallance, 2011).

The paper is based on mainly ethnographic research undertaken during a period (2005–2007) when movement to a new more powerful ‘generation’ of hardware console was driving increasing project team sizes and the outsourcing of some production in the videogames industry.² Informed by cultural–historical activity theory, the particular knowing-in-practice approach employed, this expansion of team sizes is interpreted as a transformation of the organisational context through which knowing occurs and therefore the basis for collective learning processes within the studios. Specifically, the paper shows how ‘contradictions’ in the activity, caused by growing financial risk and need for coordination with larger teams, forced studios to develop new work practices that involved increased use of intermediary design and project management instruments. The greater planning and structuring of the development approach associated with these tools, however, forms a further tension with the iterative nature of creative practice in videogames development. This is interpreted in terms of a dialectical

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¹ This paper will use videogames rather than computer games, digital games, or any other alternative as a general term for all varieties of interactive leisure software.

² The empirical focus is on the generally larger studios that developed games for home and handheld console or equivalent PC hardware platforms. Hence, alternative business and development models that have particularly grown over recent years with new platforms (e.g. mobile, online) are only discussed briefly in the concluding section.

relationship between the situated and distributed elements of knowing-in-practice that, it is argued, shapes the spatiality of learning in the industry. Here, with the expansion of development team sizes and the introduction of outsourcing, knowing is spatially and temporally distributed across a wider group of people and set of intermediary tools, whilst also still spatially and temporally situated in the specific circumstances of unfolding development projects. This perspective provides insights about the practice of creative knowing in structured organisational settings that is of wider relevance in economic geography.

The paper has seven further sections. Section 2 briefly reviews economic geography literature on learning and innovation in the creative industries. Section 3 outlines geographical and organisational features of the UK videogames development sector. Section 4 introduces cultural–historical activity theory as the conceptual framework for the study. Section 5 is a brief methodology. Section 6 explains issues relating to growing team sizes as a research focus. Section 7 explores how the use of design and project management instruments in the fieldwork studios allowed practitioners to understand and participate in games development as an activity involving more planning and coordination. Section 8, the conclusion, discusses the preceding account in terms of the tension between distributed and situated knowing, and highlights wider implications for the study of creative industries in economic geography.

2. Learning and innovation in creative industry clusters

The economic geography literature on creative industries locates processes of innovation and learning primarily in extra-organisational place-based environments. Developing from classic work on vertically-disintegrated cultural and media production, “mutual learning and cultural synergies” have come to be recognised amongst the external economies gained by agglomerated firms in creative industry districts (Scott, 1997, p. 333). These collective learning effects, as a property of the local production environment rather than individual firms, are often related to the kind of socio-cultural milieu of the cities where major creative industry clusters form. Recent theories of innovation in urban economies have emphasised the related factors of concentrations of workers in creative occupations and a socially diverse and tolerant population (Florida, 2003). The non-workplace meeting spaces and social events that are a feature of metropolitan cultural centres also provide opportunities for informal contact and formation of the inter-personal professional networks that are seen as central to the flexible business and working practices of creative industries (Currid and Williams, 2010). According to this viewpoint, these practices of sociality aid the generation of tacit knowledge in the form of local ‘buzz’ (Storper and Venables, 2004; Pratt, 2008). Economic geographers have argued that these different factors – creative production systems, local labour markets and social networks, the wider urban environment, and institutions of governance and collective action – combine to form locally-specific ‘creative fields’ (Scott, 2010). Hence, in an age when the distribution of cultural goods has become increasingly global, the place of production is still seen to have a distinctive influence on the creative process, and in some instances even to be manifested in aesthetic or semiotic qualities of the commodity itself (Molotch, 2002; Drake, 2003).

A slightly different emphasis in recent work has been on how patterns of interactive learning are shaped by organisational architectures in local creative production systems. For instance, in research on the design industry in British cities, Sunley et al. (2008, 2011) argue that firm relations, particularly those of ‘mid-strength’ between design consultancies and their clients, have in comparison to the wider cultural environment been neglected as a crucial influence on innovation. For them designers:

connect flows of knowledge and ideas between various sites and domains ... [which are] are recombined and synthesized to produce new emergent designs. What this means is that innovation cannot be simply understood in terms of the consequences of any one site ... [instead] it is necessary to examine the interactions between the key sites including the urban location, the design firm, design teams, the market and clients and customers.

(Sunley et al., 2008, p. 682; emphasis in original).

A similar perspective has been developed in a literature that recognises projects as the main way of organising flexible production in creative industries including film and television, advertising, and software development. While individual projects are defined by their temporary nature, economic geographers have been concerned with positioning them in the wider and more permanent settings of the different firms and networks that make up ‘project ecologies’ at the cluster level (Grabher, 2002; Ibert, 2004; Johns, 2010). These ecologies are the source of diverse human, social and organisational resources that allow teams to be assembled that can accomplish the often complex task of individual project collaborations (Grabher, 2002, 2004). In some industries, this is facilitated by geographically-concentrated specialist labour markets for temporary or freelance labour (Ekinsmyth, 2002). The resultant high frequency of movement of individuals between different firms and industries, it has also been argued, can increase the circulation of knowledge throughout a locale (Vinodrai, 2006). This dominant view of projects in the economic geography literature as fluid vehicles for novel inter-firm and inter-disciplinary collaboration means that they are seen to promote creative practices and innovative solutions that can disrupt and alter the standard organisational ‘routines’ of more rigid and hierarchical firms (Ibert, 2004; Von Bernuth and Bathelt, 2007).

The links between firms, teams, and professional knowledge communities in project ecologies are underpinned by inter-personal networks of different types of social tie in terms of strength, duration (long-lasting or ephemeral), and medium of contact (face-to-face or virtual), which vary depending on the dominant mode of learning (focused on the accumulation of knowledge or path-breaking innovation) in the industry in question (Grabher, 2004; Grabher and Ibert, 2006). This perspective leads Grabher (2004) to advocate a topological view of knowledge spaces, which seeks to supplant ‘essentialist’ pre-given categories such as firms and clusters as the unit of analysis in favour of communities or networks of practice that are actively produced through relational connections and can transverse multiple spatial scales (also Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Amin and Roberts, 2008; Jones, 2008). Similarly, Faulconbridge (2006, 2010) has shown that professionals in advertising and architecture are connected into global as well as local spaces of learning. This theoretical alternative to exclusively localised accounts of learning is potentially of particular relevance to cultural and media industries in which creative production may be concentrated in certain clusters, but is also linked into global business networks often dominated by large multinational corporations (see Coe, 2000; Power and Hallencreutz, 2002; Nachum and Keeble, 2003). As the next section outlines, the videogames industry also follows this broad global political economy. However, an understanding of the creativity and innovativeness of UK developers needs to consider the influence of these external relationships in connection to work practices that are firmly situated in the organisational settings of studios and projects.

3. Background: UK videogames development

The videogame studios included in this study are those that develop software for console or equivalent PC hardware platforms.

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