



Screen Industries
Growth Network

CREATIVITY UNLOCKED?

VIDEO GAMES AND TELEVISION
WORK IN YORKSHIRE DURING
AND BEYOND THE COVID
PANDEMIC

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About SIGN

The Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) is a unique, business-facing initiative supporting the TV, film and games industries in Yorkshire and the Humber. SIGN aims to make this region the UK's centre for digital creativity, and a model of diverse and inclusive activity. In order to do this, SIGN connects companies, support agencies and universities through a programme of training, business development, research and evaluation.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

“Covid-19 is a mass trauma the likes of which we’ve never seen before. Our most complex social extensions, and the building-blocks of our personal realities, have been coloured indelibly. The ways we live and work together, and view each other as common citizens: everything means something different in the viral era, and with potentially traumatic effect” (Prideaux, 2021).

How have creative workers experienced the pandemic? And how are they re-adjusting to life ‘post-pandemic’, in an altered cultural, economic and social landscape? Given the substantive and ever-growing body of work that has evidenced the inequalities and pressures of cultural work (Banks, 2017; Brook et al, 2020), along with its many attractions (Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2002; McRobbie, 2018), how has the pandemic impacted on the nature and experience of creative work? Has it intensified the pressures of precarity and the mental health challenges attendant to this area? Has it accelerated or modified inequalities? How has the rapid move towards remote working in both sectors played out over time, and what has the lived experiences been of those caught up in this shift?

In order to begin to explore these questions, this project focuses on twelve individuals working in the television and video games industry in Yorkshire. The report addresses a number of research questions:

1. How have working lives of creative workers in the television and video games industries been impacted by the pandemic, and with what implications?
2. Has the pandemic affected the mental health and wellbeing of creative workers in these industries, and if so, how?

3. How are these creative workers adjusting to working life post-lockdown?

To address these questions, the research explores the rapid shift to work patterns caused by the acceleration of the pandemic in March 2020 and the subsequent series of lockdowns through 2020 and 2021. The dislocation caused by the movement towards home working and the costs and benefits of that shift are investigated. To explore the impact on wellbeing and mental health the research utilises and develops work on burnout and psychosocial work on the affective dimensions of creative labour to explore this area. Video games and television were chosen as comparator industries because they are of significant cultural and economic and significance within the Yorkshire region and beyond, and as key sectors within Yorkshire’s creative economy (Chamberlain and Morris, 2022), the experiences of workers in these industries provides us with insights of relevance to the wider creative and cultural industries (CCIs) and beyond.

This report tells the story of creative work within two vibrant and commercially successful areas of the CCIs in Yorkshire: television and video games production, during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. It seeks to address the questions posed above, through the lens of lived experience, using the tools of qualitative research. As such,

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it aims to address these critical questions within a specific time and a specific place – and hopes to contribute to the growing focus on place (or the ‘spatial turn’) within the sociology of creative and digital work (Pratt, 2012; Will-Zocholl and Roth-Ebner, 2022). It also makes recommendations for the industry and for workers about how to support workers during times of crisis, in particular how to recognise and support mental health within these sectors in an intersectionally sensitive and trauma-informed manner (Becker-Blease, 2017).

As we move beyond the initial shock of the pandemic into the new accommodation of ‘living with Covid’, it is vital that knowledge is gained about the experiences of creative workers during this period, given the economic and cultural significance of the CCIs regionally, nationally and internationally (Gov UK, 2022). But it is perhaps even more important that we are able to look forward with this knowledge to consider afresh broader questions of labour, care, fairness and diversity in the wake of the pandemic (Banks, 2020).

1.1 Method

Twelve semi-structured qualitative narrative interviews with video games and television workers in the Yorkshire and Humber region of Northern England were carried out during the initial wave of lockdowns in 2020, with follow up interviews conducted where possible in early 2022. Six of those interviewed worked in the video games sector, six in television. They were recruited through industry networks, social media and personal contacts. The interview sample attempted to generate a balance of gender, age, industry position and race, where possible. While the sample is not meant to be demographically representative of the industry, the report aims to generate a balance and incorporate a diversity of perspectives, but ultimately the project offers a qualitative snapshot of the lived experiences of creative workers during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore it seeks to understand the lived experience of creative workers during and beyond the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic.

VIDEO GAMES				
Name	Gender	Age	Role	Location
Daniel	M	40	Principal Programme	Sheffield
Jordan	M	28	C++ Games Programmer/Senior Programme	Leeds
Alice	F	28	Games Scout	Wakefield
Amir	M	30	Programmer	Leeds
Amy	F	32	Senior Producer	Sheffield
Andy	M	28	Designer	Sheffield
TV PRODUCTION				
Name	Gender	Age	Role	Location
James	M	32	Assistant Producer/PD	Leeds
Nina	F	25	Production Manager	Leeds
Fred	M	27	Researcher	Leeds
Hayley	F	33	Producer	Leeds
Kevin	M	40	Head of Development	Leeds
Hannah	F	26	Researcher	Leeds

Table 1: Interview Sample (all names have been changed)

2. CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, CULTURAL WORK AND THE PANDEMIC

This report summarises research on the effects of the pandemic on the creative industries, with a focus on television and video games. It covers the economic impact of the pandemic on the creative and cultural industries in the UK, specifically focusing on the impact on the video game and television sectors in the Yorkshire region. The report also discusses the economic impact of the pandemic on these sectors at the national level. This report also explores the social and cultural impacts of the pandemic, including changes in work practices, mental health, and sociality. The focus is primarily on the national (UK) context, with reference to international research.

2.1 The economic impact of the pandemic on the creative industries

The pandemic has caused an estimated loss of 10 million jobs in the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) and a reduction of \$750 billion in the sector's value worldwide (UNESCO, 2022). In the UK, the creative workforce has been significantly impacted, particularly among freelancers who made up 62% of the core creative workforce before the pandemic but only 52% by the end of 2020 (O'Brien et al, 2020). In the UK, 55% of jobs in the CCIs were furloughed at some point during the pandemic, the second highest of any sector, compared to the national average of 16% (ibid).

Some creative sectors have been more affected than others. Sectors that rely on live "creative experiences," such as music, theatre, opera, and the performing arts, have been particularly hard hit due to the closure of venues. After the first lockdown in 2020, 30% of workers in the music, performing, and visual arts sectors lost their jobs, with higher-than-average numbers

of people leaving creative occupations compared to previous years (O'Brien et al, 2020). However, sectors that focus on "creative content" that can be consumed in the home environment, such as streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, have experienced significant growth. For example, in the first six months of 2020, Netflix added 26 million new subscribers worldwide, almost as many as in all of 2019 (Vlassis, 2021). The video game industry, which was already thriving, has also experienced exponential growth during the pandemic as more people have turned to domestic entertainment. It is estimated that the global games industry grew 23% in 2020 from the previous year, with revenues projected to reach \$219 billion by 2024 (Williams, 2022).

2.2 Regional economic impact

There is currently no comprehensive data available on the impact of the pandemic on video games and television production in the Yorkshire and Humber region as a

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whole. However, data is available at the city and local level. For example, a survey conducted by Leeds City Council in May 2020 found that 87% of respondents in the region's creative sector had suffered financial losses due to the Covid-19 crisis, with 12% reporting that their business had closed or would close within a month (Leeds City Council, 2020). Researchers at the University of Sheffield also examined the impact of Covid on the creative and cultural industries in South Yorkshire (Chamberlain and Morris, 2022). They identified regional inequalities in policy responses, noting that South Yorkshire received relatively little support compared to other parts of the country, receiving £13.56 per head of population from the Cultural Recovery Fund compared to £20.44 per head in Newcastle. Additionally, no organisations in South Yorkshire received a grant or loan of over £5 million, despite the region's CCIs being among the hardest hit by the pandemic.

The Sheffield report shows that the output loss to the CCIs in South Yorkshire as a result of the pandemic was 22% – 5% more than the UK average. Interestingly, the report also looked at mental wellbeing and of those surveyed, shows that three quarters of those who responded to the survey reported that their mental health was worse since the start of the pandemic, with male respondents, under-30s and respondents with a diagnosed mental health condition particularly hard hit. 53.8% of event crew, lighting and sound engineers in the county said their mental health was “much worse”, compared to an average of 25.5% in the wider population.

2.3 Creative work and cultural production

The production processes for video games and television differ, though both involve a project-based approach and are collective, team endeavours with permanent and freelance staff working together and

building towards a “crunch” period of production and post-production. However, there are significant differences. Games production projects often last for years, much longer than television projects. For example, AAA games can have production cycles of 3-5 years with huge budgets. Much games production work can also be done remotely. Television on the other hand, (especially factual television) – often has much shorter production cycles, around 3-6 months for factual depending on the size of the production, and relatively lower budgets (Oliver and Ohlbaum, 2015; Smith, 2019).

Some aspects of television production can be adapted for remote working – research for example can largely be done on phone and via video call, and post-production is also increasingly able to be done remotely, although many directors still prefer to be in the room with the film editor. However, filming requires production staff to be on set or on location working in teams. In the case of factual television production, it is often the case that members of the public need to be involved as participants. The television industry therefore struggled more with production continuity during lockdown due to the highly mobile nature of factual television production and the difficulties of production within the current restrictive environment. There is evidence that production cultures in television – a sector widely regarded as based on high levels of team socialisation and emotional labour – were particularly hard hit during the pandemic, as have the livelihoods and wellbeing individuals within the sector (Wreyford et al, 2021).

Conversely, on the surface at least from a practical perspective, commercial video games production has until now experienced a high level of production continuity and even thrived during lockdown, and my research shows that in Yorkshire at least companies were able to easily shift to a working from home (WFH) distributed production model. In particular, aspects of games production such as software engineering were able

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to shift fluidly to remote production, due to the way in which coding can be done simultaneously by teams operating in different locations.

2.4 Emotional and affective impact on creative workers

This research also focuses on the psychosocial impact of the pandemic for creative workers, as there remain significant gaps in our understanding of the psychological and affective impact of the pandemic on creative workers. This echoes a wider gap in our understanding of the mental health impacts of precarious creative work and the intensification of that labour within the field of media industries research. There is an important (if relatively small) body of research on cultural work that attends to issues of affect, sociality, and subjectivity (Gill, 2010; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Researchers influenced by cultural studies, feminism, organisational studies and social psychology have given attention to the intense affective pressures of cultural work for over thirty years. However, more psychologically-informed work is to be done. For example, despite the popular usage and prevalence of terms like ‘burnout’ in recent years (Mangen, 2022; Tavella et al, 2021), there is a lack of understanding of what this actually looks like and is experienced in creative labour, and the analysis below seeks to provide a more detailed account, given the strong reporting around feelings of apathy, cynicism and detachment from work that my participants reported, all of which are key clinical features of burnout (Maslach et al, 1997). While phrases such as ‘burnout’ become prevalent during the pandemic and beyond in mainstream commentary and analysis of work, it’s worth noting that research on this was already being undertaken before the pandemic within creative labour research, alongside work looking at mental health in creative occupations (Gross and Musgrave, 2020;

Lee, 2018).

A growing literature has explored the pressures of work and life during the pandemic. For example, Wreyford et al (2021) have explored the impact of lockdown on female screen industry workers. This study explores working life in the round, but there is some attention given to wellbeing and mental health. Other research has focused on the experiences of theatre workers during the pandemic in 2020-21 (Maples et al, 2022). This revealed the anxiety, frustration and marginalisation that theatre workers felt as the pandemic wore on, exploring how an initial sense of energy and passion to ‘keep theatre alive’ diminished over time. More broadly, work from management studies and organisational psychology has examined the impact of home-working on wellbeing and mental health (Wang et al, 2022; Wels et al, 2022). Key themes that have emerged include feelings of dislocation and alienation; perceptions of impacts on physical and psychological health; burnout; as well as positive feelings of autonomy and freedom. This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the psychological impact of the pandemic on a specific group of cultural workers in Yorkshire by examining their affective and psychological experiences.

2.5. Sociality and networking

The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted on creative work through the shift towards remote work and the reduction of in-person social interactions and networking opportunities. The importance of a network culture within the CCIs as a means of finding work, mitigating risk and precarity and developing social and cultural capital is well documented (Lee, 2018; Randle et al, 2015; Gandini, 2016). Social and cultural capital plays a key role, determined often by social class, education and economic capital

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– resources which are highly unequally distributed within society. In such a context, creative work is a sphere of work that is dominated by a ‘reputation economy’, so the presentation of the self in reflexive ways and through events, after hours networking and digital networking through social media is crucial (Lee, 2018; Gandini, 2016).

The shift towards remote working has accelerate these trends, and this is explored in greater detail in the interviews carried out and analysed in section 3.1.2 of this report – where digital networking and reputation management becomes critically important. The question of how to build reputational capital in an unequal society may be more challenging during the pandemic, when there is no regular physical co-location or workplace. At the time of writing, this issue has not been examined in relation to the pandemic and creative work, and this report will explore it further.

3. LIVING THROUGH AND BEYOND LOCKDOWN: THEMATIC FINDINGS

The research explored a number of themes that emerged from the interview data, examining the interrelated impacts of the pandemic on the working lives of the participants. The themes are explored chronologically, starting with the experiences of lockdown in 2020 and 2021 and then focusing on the partial return to hybrid and office work from autumn 2021 onwards. The analysis investigates the emotional and affective effects of the pandemic on creative work for the participants during lockdown, as well as the long-term impact on production processes, networks, and mental health after the initial crisis.

3.1 Affective experiences of lockdown in games and television

As the spread of Covid-19 began to accelerate in February into March 2020, the messaging from the British government increasingly pointed towards social distancing and ultimately the implementation of the first lockdown on 23rd March 2020.

subsequent lockdowns had an intense impact on the affective experiences of television and games workers. In this qualitative research, key themes emerged around loss of sociability, anxiety and depression.

Given the existing psychological pressures of creative work outlined above, it is unsurprising that the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns had an intense impact on the affective experiences of television and games workers. In this qualitative research, key themes emerged around loss of sociability, anxiety and depression. While there are similarities in the experiences of these individuals, there

are also differences due to the unique production cultures and economies within each sector. The aim of this analysis is to highlight both the commonalities and distinctions in the lived experiences of lockdowns on creative work in these two industries.

3.1.1 Socialisation, isolation and lockdown – initial experiences

Interviews with workers in both the gaming and television industries revealed their challenges with isolation and a lack of social contact. James, a 32-year-old assistant producer in factual television production based in Leeds, shared the negative psychological impact of his initial experiences with lockdown:

‘As a sociable person in a sociable industry, I really struggled with lockdown, especially last year [2020]... I found myself getting quite depressed, I guess. I was drinking too much each night, getting through a bottle of wine or more. I wasn’t sleeping. I was out of work as a freelancer, and not

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on furlough, yeah - so I was kind of stuck at home... not sure what to do with myself.'

He then continued to discuss how he tried to mitigate against the impacts of lockdown, professionally, through social and professional networking sites, and also in terms of finding other sources of work:

I kept in touch to some extent with contacts – people I have got work from in the past. Also I was on forums for freelancers trying to source other work. And I started doing other work too – so I got into doing transcription work where I could which I've done before, although the pay is shit. But yeah – it was really tough. I also found myself getting quite scared and weird about going out – you'd think with all that time to kill I'd be out there getting fit, cycling etc – all those things you saw other people doing right? But I found that... and especially, right, as especially as time went on, I couldn't be bothered. I didn't really see the point. So I put a lot of weight on too, all that drinking and eating!

Asking James to reflect back on this period, it is described as something traumatic, an event that has not been fully processed, if at all:

So yeah, I'm not back to 100% no way for sure. I am still quite up and down. I'm working again so that's good. But I'm definitely a bit traumatised by it all I think.

Andy, a 28-year-old game designer from Sheffield who was interviewed in early 2022, shared his experiences of how the lockdown periods had impacted his working life:

We've all been working remotely since late Feb/early March 2020, which feels like a lifetime ago now for sure. We're just starting to go back to the office now, although I've been in a few times to use the systems there as my set up at home isn't always fast or powerful enough for the work I need to do. We're based in Sheffield, and I live in the city, so it's been fairly easy for me to pop in, and I've been doing more of that.

The office has been open – some people have needed to connect to their desktop systems in the office, so things have kept running, but it's been very much bare bones if you like. As I say, we're starting to all go back in now, which is something of a relief as it is hard to communicate in Teams.

Games production, like many CCIs, is a highly social industry based on the exchange of tacit knowledge and a 'bleeding' between leisure and work time (Pratt, 2012). Andy reflected on the loss of this sociality and 'being there' – something that was less noticeable for the television workers I spoke to:

Games production is about teamwork and you really miss those informal conversations and chats you have with colleagues – I've also really missed the social side of work too – there are a few of us who like to go out to do stuff after work, and I've missed that a lot.

Generational differences were also discussed. As a younger member of her team, Hannah (28, TV researcher, Leeds), interviewed in 2021, reflected on a generational distinction in the workplace:

There's definitely been quite a split if you like, a difference, between what lockdown was like for those of us who are younger and generally are living near the office, and older colleagues with children and those kind of responsibilities who commute in. They've pretty much worked from home all the way through, but I've always been keen to get back into the office.

She described a partial return to work – where people are coming in occasionally and in unpredictable ways. This mode of hybrid working is perceived as liminal, and unusual:

Anyway, yeah, we're back, although it's not quite the same. It's like we're all having to learn to be with each other again you know? We've all got a bit weird! And I think some people have been finding it harder

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than others, to be back amongst people. It's a weird time isn't it? Like some people are wearing masks, some aren't - and sometimes they're doing that in a fairly aggressive way! It's not like there here, but everyone has had different experiences. And some people have lost someone in their family – maybe an older relative or something. So it feels strange for sure.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was an initial excitement about 'getting things done' and adapting; however, as time went on during the lockdown, depression, isolation, and apathy emerged as strong emotional responses. For instance, Nina, a 25 year old production manager based in Leeds, shared:

To start with, I think we were all quite excited! It felt like something really exciting was happening, quite scary too, but you felt like you were in a disaster movie.

However, that dissipated significantly over time and was replaced by depression, fear, apathy, and anxiety. For Nina, this was intensified by being on furlough and also feeling anxious about the future and the sustainability of her financial situation:

So, like yeah, that buzz went away, didn't it? Then I was furloughed, stuck at home, worried about whether or not I was going to work in the industry again. I mean, you know, I live in a flat share so it was pretty grim – I ended up going back to my parents' because I didn't want to be stuck in the city doing nothing day in day out.

This was also evident for Amir (30, games programmer, Leeds):

Sometimes I've found it really difficult to get out of bed. To you know like to go on. I've just had this feeling of 'fuck it I can't be bothered', so much of the time. The thing I've missed is chatting to other people, having that focus of going to work, of leaving the house. So when the lockdown first happened, I got really into keeping fit, doing housework, doing DIY that sort of thing.

However, he told me that this initial enthusiasm and energy soon departed:

But as things went on, I've just become more and more lethargic – like a total slob! Not sure why – I think it must be some kind of feeling low vibe – but the thing that's interesting is that it hasn't left me, not now things are slowly going back to normal, or you know a slightly different normal. I don't know. But yeah, I'm still feeling crappy, bored, tired and lacking energy.

He located some of the challenges he has faced within the culture of the gaming industry:

It sort of helps to talk about how you're feeling. And I suppose thinking about games and the games industry, it's not a very supportive culture to be honest. I mean, lots of folk are nice enough, don't get me wrong, but like they're not touchy feely people. Going back to what I was saying earlier, you know, they're a bit odd, a bit lacking in people skills. So nobody is really going to want to ask you how you're doing, how you're feeling. That would really freak them out! And of course it's still a very male world, which doesn't help with that.

Why not?

Well yeah I mean obviously men tend to bottle things up more don't they? I mean even though we're all meant to be much more in touch with our emotions these days haha, but yeah have you met many gamers?

3.1.2 Anxiety, networks and precarity

One of the major themes that emerged from the interview data was anxiety about job security, particularly due to feelings of being disconnected from the physical spaces where work typically takes place and where decisions are perceived to be made. This physical and perceived sense of dislocation from a central point of power and authority at work was experienced differently by individuals in different positions of seniority.

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Junior workers in both the video game and television industries seemed to experience a cognitive dissonance between the experience of being remotely connected but not knowing where power (such as the ability to hire and fire or determine project teams) is located. This was exacerbated by the attachment that many junior workers had developed towards working from home due to various reasons explored in the data. In contrast, more senior workers, particularly those with family commitments, were more welcoming of remote work practices and the lack of physical proximity, as they appreciated the freedom and flexibility it provided.

Alice (28), a junior games scout at a medium-sized games company in West Yorkshire, told me:

I think one thing that's been tricky has been that you feel out of it, in terms of not going in and seeing people, so it makes you feel much more vulnerable in terms of your job. Games has done really well during this [pandemic] so you know you're in a booming industry. But gaming can be very much about whether or not your face fits, whether you get on with key people, that sort of thing. So if you're hidden away at home then you don't get a chance to make those connections and to be part of it all.

However, the paradox for many knowledge workers of which games and tv workers are a part is that while this insecurity, anxiety about reputation and advancement are intense, equally intense are the attachments that they have developed in favour of the flexibility and autonomy of home working. This leaves a sense of confusion. For example, Daniel (principal programmer, Sheffield, 40) told me that 'it's been great to be able to work from home and have a bit more flexibility in my schedule.... For one thing, I don't have to worry about commuting, which saves me a lot of time and stress. Plus, I have a bit more control over my working environment, which can be really helpful for my productivity'. However, over time he also came to reflect on the

potentially professionally detrimental lack of sociality:

I live out in the sticks really – so for me I haven't had the opportunity to meet up with colleagues outside of work. Yes, that's mattered a bit and added to that feeling of dislocation of course. Definitely. I think that as the lockdown has gone on, and those initial social things we all did like pub quizzes online, Zoom drinks yeah? That all stopped kind of dried up and then people just went into themselves. So that's sort of connected to that issue around connection and lack of security. Cos you feel like if you're not there then really anyone could do your job from anywhere.

This quote highlights broader concerns about the importance of reputation and networking in the creative and digital sectors, where one's reputation and ability to network are crucial for career advancement. The loss of in-person networking opportunities, or "network sociality," is a significant issue, as research has shown that networking culture in the media and CCIs (creative and cultural industries) can exacerbate existing inequalities based on factors such as class, gender, age, and race (Brook, et al, 2020). However, the disappearance of a physical networking culture during the pandemic has also had negative consequences, leading to feelings of disconnection and isolation for those who are unable to participate in virtual networking opportunities.

The kind of disconnection from networking brought about by the pandemic is somewhat distinct from findings in earlier research studies (Lee, 2011; Randle et al, 2015): rather than being something that is experienced unhappily as a result of being 'outside of the loop' or the 'inner circle', this is about those who are geographically disconnected, and those who have chosen to disconnect and for various reasons choose not to return, or express an unwillingness to return to the office networked culture. The aspect of choice is fundamental to this – the sense that those activities potentially perceived unpleasant to a particular

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individual (for example, the ‘grind’ of daily commuting, the stress and exhaustion that can accompany compulsory sociality in the workplace) have been readily left behind, and the proposition, or injunction that it needs to return, forcibly, to people’s lives is very difficult and is rejected where possible.

This speaks to a wider lack of happiness and belonging at work, which the pandemic exposed and which people do not want to return to. So revealing the paradox of remote work for many knowledge workers where ‘comfort’ can also lead to a deep-seated unease, as well as an insecure feeling of being ‘left behind’. For example, Jordan (28, games programme, Leeds) told me that despite liking remote work, he also felt he had lost motivation:

It can be a bit isolating at times, and it’s not always easy to separate work and home life when they’re both happening in the same place...To be honest, I’ve been struggling a bit lately. I’ve been feeling really burnt out and uninspired, and it’s been hard for me to stay motivated and focused on my work.

One feature of the rise of home working has been an increase in the amount of time spent on social networking a trend already hugely on the rise (Statista, 2017). The physical isolation of home working seems to be accelerating the trend towards digital networking, especially on platforms such as the business networking site LinkedIn. This is an intensification of labour market trends already at work, whereby “‘Productive’ activity has been dispersed outside the workplace into society at large, via mobile ICT and online social networks” (Dinerstein

& Pitts, 2021).

Speaking to this, Kevin (40, Head of Factual Development, Leeds) discussed his digital networking in the following terms:

I’ve always been very active on social networking sites, but the lockdown definitely made me even more obsessed with them. It was a way for me to stay connected with my professional network and to continue to build relationships and learn about new opportunities, even when I couldn’t physically be in the same place as other people...LinkedIn has been an absolute lifesaver for me during the lockdown... I’ve been able to connect with people I might not have otherwise been able to, and I’ve learned about new job opportunities.

The findings above raise the question about how reputation can be managed completely outside of physical co-location and interaction. Knowledge workers such as television and games professional rely on their reputation to find work, and to gain visibility within a labour market – however, without face to face interactions, it is very difficult if not impossible for those without pre-existing social capital and reputation to prosper. This leads to interesting strategies and reactions to this conundrum. Some would double down on building their digital presence, but others less so, and seemingly gave up on the whole process to some extent – what we might relate to as the ‘quiet quitting’ phenomenon of recent discourse in a post-Covid labour market (Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

3.2. Post lockdown and the ‘new normal’ of creative work

As we have moved into a post-lockdown context for creative work since early 2022, terms such as ‘new normal’, ‘hybrid working’ have become widespread, alongside a pervasive ideology from right wing

commentators and politicians demanding a full return to the office and lambasting so-called ‘snowflakes’ who continue to work from home, supposedly at the expense of national economic growth and their own

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personal development (Littlejohn, 2021). A high profile political example of this have been the attacks on the civil service by members of the Conservative government, epitomised by Jacob Rees-Mogg MP who put stickers on the desks of civil servants who were not at their desks saying ‘I look forward to seeing you in the office very soon’ (Waterson, 2022). Such divisive discourses have brought debates about remote and hybrid working firmly into the terrain of contemporary ‘culture wars’.

However, the reality of the post-Covid context in relation to work has been much more complex than such polarising and populist positions allow for. Long Covid has been a reality for many, with a multiplicity of physical and mental impacts, including extreme fatigue, mental health problems, and a host of physical ailments (NHS, 2022). Long Covid centres have been set up around the country and it is currently estimated that over 2.3 million people had long Covid in September 2022, with over 1 million people in the UK reporting long Covid symptoms more than a year after being diagnosed (Davis, 2022). Meanwhile, increasingly little accommodation is made in the workplace for those who continue to suffer from the effects of the virus or from the anxiety and depression that has accompanied the pandemic (and is a feature of long Covid itself) (Sample and Davis, 2022).

Meanwhile, increasing numbers of people are working from home, or in a hybrid fashion, and want to continue to do so (ONS, 2021). Creative workers, often freelance, precarious workers, have suffered economically through the pandemic and are often under great financial pressure to return. This pressure to return is taking place in industries already known for poor mental health conditions and working cultures that too often include bullying from senior management (van Raalte et al, 2021).

This section of the report examines the experiences of workers in the post-lockdown context, looking at the long-term challenges and benefits of remote and hybrid working,

the forms of inequality that the pandemic has revealed and exacerbated, the long-term affective consequences of the trauma of the pandemic, and the way the experience of new modes of working is differentiated through age and gender.

3.2.1 Practical challenges and benefits of remote working

This research connects with other work that has highlighted some of the individual benefits of changes to work because of the pandemic, in particular the rise of home-working and hybrid working for knowledge workers. Reflecting on this shift, Hannah (26, TV researcher) told me about her experience:

I was out of the office for months, so my work shifted. As a researcher, I was able to continue to find contributors. That’s fine, no problem. Yeah... but on the other hand, you miss that connection, that chat with colleagues. So it was easier to concentrate in some ways – and to work. I think we all get that right, you can work work work. And that really worked in some ways – I could get on with it.

She, and other respondents, valued the flexibility that remote working brought to their working lives, and continues to. Although she is now back in the office 2 days a week, she told me that she was much better able to balance her work and personal life.

Games workers in particular have retained remote working arrangements more than television workers in many companies. For example, Daniel told me that in his company, hardly anyone had returned, and as above that there was a generational split with the younger workers who lived in the city centre using the office, while those who commuted further and lived further away from the city – often in commuter towns and villages – were much more reluctant to come back. This is a national trend, and is driving a debate in the games industry at the moment about a four-day week amongst many other sectors.

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However, in television, this seems to be much less the case – with hybrid working being more common across the range of roles and seniority. There is more home-working, but there is an expectation of office. There was also evidence of pressure to return to the office from management, as Hayley explained:

My boss really doesn't like the whole WFH thing at all. Thinks it's for slackers. He's a bit old school, you know, likes to see people sweating away in front of him. I know of someone who's left because they didn't want to be back in every day, for good reasons to be honest, she had her kids to pick up from school, and really her job could be done quite easily from home – with the occasional meeting to discuss things. But, you know, it's not easy to say no in television as you know – especially when there are so many other people who will quite happily do your job.

Others talked about the benefits for creativity in seeing each other in person again. James, for example told me:

I came in... one time during the first lockdown back in April last year [2020] as I needed to collect some gear and it was like the zombie apocalypse – partly because our office is out of the city centre so there was no one around, it was like *The Walking Dead*. And there was only one person in, who'd I'd arranged to meet here, so I could get some kit. I mean, it's normally so busy here – lots of people working in teams on different projects. So from the work / production side of things it worked fine – we got the work done and carried on working on and completing projects. But it really impacted on the whole creative process, just not being able to chat to people, not having a break from work, missing out on the banter, the chat, you know what I mean? I couldn't wait to get back in to be honest.

The situation is fluid, and contradictory. Discourses of mandatory return to full time presence in the office come up against

the realities of what people want, and the practicalities. In games, for example, there is a lot of flux and confusion – some large Yorkshire games companies are advocating a complete return to the office for all whereas others are looking towards a more hybrid model. The research suggests that some city centre companies have largely kept more of an office culture going (Weaseltron; Red Kite), while others that are on the outskirts of town in an office park (Sumo Digital) have had less hub-like attractions to entice workers to return. In television, many companies let leases go during the pandemic and are not able to facilitate hybrid meetings when some are in the office and some are at home (Aust, 2022).

Discourses of mandatory return to full time presence in the office come up against the realities of what people want, and the practicalities.

What does this mean for the respondents? Some are keen to return, framing this around skills development; tacit learning opportunities; networking and reputation building. Others are much keener to keep a remote or hybrid. Others have gone to the office and found there is no-one there, or that there is no predictability about the experience, so have largely given up, except when they really feel the need.

3.2.2 Burnout and exhaustion

Perhaps one of the most pernicious and debilitating emotion that was revealed for some of the participants was a deep seated sense of exhaustion and cynicism about work. This is a mental state that is widely recognised as 'burnout' (Maslach et al, 1997). Moreover, because creative work is so passionately undertaken and is deeply connected to the workers' sense of self, there was a huge loss of self-identity, echoing Maples et al's (2022) findings who describe the anxiety of theatre workers about the future of their industry and their

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livelihoods as having an ‘existential’ quality. Burnout and exhaustion was revealed in the interviews as my respondents talked about how they were relating to work after over two years of the pandemic. Amy (Senior games producer, Sheffield, 32):

It’s been really tough. I’ve been experiencing burnout, depression, anxiety, and cynicism as a result of the pandemic. It’s been hard to stay motivated and focused when I’m stuck at home all the time and don’t have the same level of social interaction that I’m used to... I think it’s just the overall sense of uncertainty and lack of control. I’m used to having a certain level of structure in my work and personal life, but with the pandemic everything has been so unpredictable. It’s been hard to plan for the future or know what to expect.

Four out of a sample of twelve interviewees were considering leaving their jobs to do something ‘less stressful,’ similar to research in other sectors that has shown that two-fifths of education leaders were planning to leave the profession after the pandemic (Thomson et al., 2021).

discourses such as burnout also do emotional and cultural work – shaping common perceptions about work.

But as Feldman-Barrett (2017) argues, emotions are not naturally occurring phenomena but are to some extent constructed through social, environmental and individual experiences and contexts. Read this way, discourses such as burnout also do emotional and cultural work – shaping common perceptions about work. This means that the term ‘burnout’ is also deeply embedded in contemporary understandings and experiences of contemporary knowledge work. Recognising the prevalence of discourses within the labour market and beyond around ‘burnout’ also suggests a much wider affective resistance to exploitative labour markets – alienation from work not

only in the traditional Marxist sense, but also in an affective, psychosocial form. Moving from ‘burnout’ to active resistance, mobilisation and change is a huge challenge for creative workers, and beyond the scope of this research, but the research indicates that a space for change within the highly exploitative context of creative work may be located most effectively within the affective landscape of post-pandemic discourses around burnout, cynicism and melancholy which this research has identified.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research above, while a snapshot in space and time, indicates how the Covid 19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief and intensified long-standing inequities within cultural and creative work, as well as acting as a catalyst for change. In particular, the research highlights existing tensions and psychological challenges of cultural work. It also offers spaces for change. More broadly, the pandemic has provoked a moment of critical reflection within society about how the current capitalist conjuncture is organised across a wide terrain, from education, healthcare, increasing inequality

in society, and of course work. In this latter category, by focusing on the experiences of a cohort of workers in games and television in Yorkshire during the pandemic, this research also hopes to speak to some of the wider issues in creative work, and offer some recommendations for change, and an urgent opportunity to re-think the conditions of creative labour from an ethical and ‘careful’ perspective (Alacowska & Bissonnett, 2021).

Three key areas emerge from the research that require attention and change:

1. The need for greater workplace flexibility

The CCIs, including television and games, have seen a growing demand for increased flexibility in the workplace at an organisational level. While some companies are returning to more traditional office cultures, others have embraced a hybrid form of work that allows for remote work and flexibility. This shift towards flexibility offers numerous benefits, including reduced commuting times and improved work-life balance, as well as potential environmental benefits.

However, the adoption of a more flexible work environment also presents challenges. One such challenge is the potential impact on skills development and opportunities for socialisation and networking, which are widely recognised as crucial for advancement in the CCIs. To address these challenges, companies and individuals may require support and guidance on how to adapt to a more flexible work environment, alongside training and diversity initiatives (BFI, 2022). Skills providers such as Screen Skills and industry training schemes like Channel 4’s Production Trainee Scheme

may be able to help prepare entrants for the evolving and rapidly changing hybrid creative workplace of the future.

Another important area of focus should be the development of better structures and reporting mechanisms around working time, as well as greater recognition and support for alternative work arrangements such as part-time work and job sharing (Swords and Ozimek, 2020; Wreyford et al, 2022). This is particularly relevant in the screen industries, where long working hours, or “crunch,” are still too often the norm (Weststar and Dubois, 2022). The discussion around the potential implementation of a four-day work week, which has gained traction in various industries, is also relevant to the games industry, but there is evidence that companies are resisting.

Ultimately, addressing these issues is not only important for the well-being of employees, but also for promoting diversity and preventing exclusions from the industry, particularly for those in caring roles who may be unable to work excessive hours. By

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addressing the need for greater workplace flexibility, the CCIs can create more inclusive

and sustainable work environments for all.

2. Recognition and support for mental health challenges of creative work

The research also highlights the need for greater recognition of mental health concerns and challenges in the games and television industries, again especially for younger workers who have been most affected by the pandemic. This needs to take the form of more support for mental health issues, working with industry and healthcare partners.

In the workplace, it is essential to adopt a psychologically aware approach that takes a trauma-informed approach and offers support for common mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, which are prevalent in the television industry (as demonstrated by the recent State of Play report (van Raalte et al, 2021). This approach should also recognise the risks of burnout in creative and digital work.

Trauma can occur in creative work in a vicarious manner (such as through

journalism or content moderation) or as a result of working conditions and the pandemic. A trauma-informed approach, for example, could include the four Rs of trauma-informed practice: realisation, recognition, a system that can respond, and resistance to retraumatisation (Goddard, 2021). This approach should also prioritise safety, trustworthiness, transparency, peer support, collaboration, mutuality, empowerment, and giving workers a voice and choice.

To support workers in the sector, it is necessary to have greater workplace recognition and support for mental health. This could involve providing resources and support for workers to manage and address mental health issues, as well as promoting a culture of understanding and care within the workplace. There is also a vital need for more data on mental health and wellbeing in the television and games industries.

3. Developing a culture of care in the creative sector

The research also highlights the urgent need for an ethics of care in the cultural and CCIs (and more broadly). Recent research has articulated the need for a 'care manifesto' across society, looking back to pivotal work carried out by feminist scholarship in the 1970s and beyond on an 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1982). The care manifesto stresses the importance of care in a broader sense in our contemporary society, and the need for it be valued, and recognised socially, economically and politically.

The Covid pandemic exposed the crisis of care in our society, and this is also prevalent in the screen industries labour market, where it is clear that a stronger culture of care for workers is required. This culture of care needs to be about individuals,

supporting each other and caring for each other in mutually supportive ways, but it also have wider ramifications – connected to debates about who gets to work in the CCIs, who takes on caring responsibilities, the need for that caring to be shared.

The Covid pandemic exposed the crisis of care in our society, and this is also prevalent in the screen industries labour market, where it is clear that a stronger culture of care for workers is required.

Care is still largely hidden labour, and of course capitalist expropriation is based on the accumulation of wealth at the expense of large reservoirs of hidden labour. That

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labour as Nancy Fraser has recently argued is not just the more 'visible' labour of workers, but also the hidden emotional and caring labour which supports capitalist accumulation. Nancy Fraser has recently argued is not just the more 'visible' labour of workers, but also the hidden emotional and caring labour which supports capitalist accumulation: 'wealth appropriated from nature and subject peoples; multiple forms of carework, chronically undervalued when not wholly disavowed; public goods and public powers, which capital both requires and tried to curtail; the energy and creativity of working people' (2022: 10).. In thinking about the need for an ethics of care in our CCIs, we also need to think much more broadly about how care (for each other, the planet, our communities) offers hope in a context of a rampant capitalism leading to intense individual psychosocial damage as well as global environmental and social degradation.

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