

# Game Design for a Fiverr: Precarity, Regionality, and Platform-Mediation in the Gig Economy

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## Abstract

*In this article, we investigate users who sell complete design services (i.e., ostensibly creating a full, original game for a client) on the gig economy platform Fiverr. By studying the platform's affordances and analyzing user profiles, we construct two central arguments: First, we contend that gig economy platforms facilitate, shape, and moderate labor in ways that vary from more commonly discussed models of game design. Second, we push back against Fiverr's claims of a boundaryless workforce by analyzing local conditions that concentrate labor in particular jurisdictions. After briefly reviewing the history of gig labor, we use the walkthrough method to analyze Fiverr: reviewing registration processes, protocols between buyers and sellers, and platform governance structures. We then survey fifty seller listings to determine what services are available, how much they cost, and how they are clustered geographically. Next, we address the prevalence of Pakistani users among our sample of sellers by scrutinizing global wage inequities and regional initiatives that may push workers toward the gig economy. To close, we reflect on Fiverr's place in the game design ecosystem, investigate how gig economy labor is framed in educational institutions, and touch upon our research limitations. While gig economy platforms are often critiqued for labor exploitation or mocked for providing poor-quality services, these are both oversimplifications of complex economic, institutional, and policy assemblages. Ideally, this article will serve as a first step in better understanding game development on gig economy platforms and their power to reshape geographies of game development.*

**Keywords:** Platform, Labor, Gig Economy, Game Design, Fiverr

## Introduction

A subgenre of YouTube video has emerged that involves soliciting labor on the gig economy platform Fiverr. BadGameDev, who claims to make “high-quality YouTube videos and low-quality games” on his Patreon,<sup>3</sup> is perhaps the most prominent internet personality to make light of this phenomenon in the context of game development. In his video, *I Paid Game Developers on Fiverr to Make the Same Game*,<sup>4</sup> he solicited a game pitch entitled *Gunner Runner* to three Fiverr sellers at the price point of US\$10. After receiving the completed games—and haggling with one of the sellers, who negotiated a pay raise to US\$25—he judged them on their overall quality and adherence to his criteria. The results were somewhat startling: While the games were not particularly original or polished, they were fully playable (and surprisingly fun), belying their shockingly low prices. While meant to be irreverent, BadGameDev’s video raises a number of interesting questions: Who are these sellers? Where are they located? And, more pertinently, how do they go about cultivating a game development practice on Fiverr?

Like many gig economy platforms, Fiverr is designed to connect buyers and sellers from across the globe to facilitate services ranging from proofreading to voice acting. There is no shortage of studies on the growing gig economy,<sup>5</sup> but there is a dearth of literature that considers how these global outsourcing practices have created alternate game production and distribution markets built on Fiverr and similar gig economy platforms like Freelancer and Upwork. While unlikely venues to sell complete digital game design services, these platforms have become strategic hubs between buyers and workers, the latter of which are primarily located in the global South. By focusing on these dynamics as they relate to game development, we show how Fiverr’s affordances tie into long-standing outsourcing practices to foster a digitally mediated venue for games labor. The lengthy development cycles and diverse teams that make up indie games are seemingly antithetical to the individualistic, fast-paced gig economy. However, regardless of these common beliefs, numerous freelancers are generating an income selling games on these platforms, ranging in price from “lunch money” to thousands of dollars.

In this article, we analyze Fiverr as an online game development venue and investigate users who sell complete design services (i.e., ostensibly creating a full, original game for a client) on the platform. By studying the platform’s affordances and analyzing user profiles, we construct two central arguments: First, we contend that gig economy platforms facilitate, shape, and moderate game labor in ways that vary from the more commonly discussed models of game design. Second, we push back against Fiverr’s claims of a boundaryless workforce by locating sellers and analyzing local conditions that concentrate labor in particular jurisdictions.

Our analysis builds upon growing literature on the variety of platformed game design processes—from game engines like Unity to digital marketplaces like Steam—to illuminate a somewhat neglected but active market of gig-mediated game makers. We begin by grounding our analysis in both the “gig” industry and digital game development practices. After laying out our research methods, we conduct a succinct platform analysis of Fiverr using the walkthrough method<sup>6</sup>: reviewing registration processes, communication and payment protocols between buyers and sellers, and platform governance structures. We

then analyze a sample of fifty seller listings to determine what services are available, how much they cost, and how they are clustered geographically. Next, we address a key trend that emerged in our study—the overwhelming prevalence of Pakistani users among our sample of sellers—by scrutinizing global wage inequities and regional initiatives that push workers toward gig economy labor. In our closing discussion, we reflect on Fiverr’s place in the broader game design ecosystem, investigate how gig economy labor is framed in Canadian and Pakistani educational institutions, and touch upon research limitations and possible future avenues of study.

While gig economy platforms are often critiqued for facilitating international labor exploitation or mocked for the alleged poor quality of their services, these are both oversimplifications of complex economic, institutional, and policy assemblages. Ideally, this article will serve as a first step in better understanding game development on gig economy platforms and their power to reshape geographies of game development.

## The Gig Economy and Games

Despite Fiverr’s persistent narrative of “revolutioniz[ing] how the world works,”<sup>7</sup> the gig economy is not a novel phenomenon. Studies on gig economy platforms<sup>8</sup> often begin by recounting well-trodden tales of 1900s dockworkers lining up to see what short-term employment was available for the day.<sup>9</sup> While these anecdotes offer valuable historical parallels, they fail to address the role of digital technologies in creating “boundary troubles”<sup>10</sup>—where labor is dispersed across culturally and economically distinct jurisdictions—and usually perceive such practices through a Western lens. Thus, before we begin our analysis of Fiverr’s diverse game designers, it is necessary to visit historical accounts and modern studies to flesh out the characteristics of the modern (global) gig economy.

The contemporary definition of *gig* has roots in the music industry and refers to labor that is “short, temporary, precarious, and unpredictable” and requires “good performance and reputation”<sup>11</sup> to secure successive gigs. The term has long transcended its musical roots, however, with gigs now including requests for yardwork on the venerable classifieds website Craigslist, fragmented and cheaply distributed jobs on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, and proofreading services advertised on Upwork. While this definition of gig is serviceable, it is worth noting that the *gig economy* does not simply refer to a sub-section of the labor market. Rather, it points to a growing trend in which workers spend less time at a single job while taking on multiple employment opportunities simultaneously, often at the risk of unemployment, underemployment, and economic precarity.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly a central feature of the modern economy, platforms such as Fiverr have helped position gig labor as “a growing paradigm where short term contracts replace permanent and stable employment.”<sup>13</sup> Kate Oakley refers to this trend as “forced entrepreneurship,”<sup>14</sup> in which previously secure employment has been casualized, forcing workers to adopt increasingly precarious labor arrangements. Pawel Popiel verifies these patterns, noting that “54 million Americans, or 34% of the US workforce, freelance in some capacity,”<sup>15</sup> with roughly half of those workers struggling to secure a stable income and find work.<sup>16</sup> Workers did not necessarily flock to the gig economy

in search of greener pastures but, rather, have adapted to a shifting labor paradigm in which piecemeal work has supplanted full-time employment.

It is worth briefly noting the relationship between gig and freelance labor. Freelancers are typically self-employed and work independently, without direct supervision. However, freelancing is not antithetical to gig economy labor, as freelancers can easily enter labor arrangements on gig platforms.<sup>17</sup> The divide between a freelancer and a gig worker has become increasingly blurry, especially as gig platforms have moved beyond the monotonous tasks shaped by Mechanical Turk to encompass a great deal of labor in the creative industries.

Early gig labor websites, notably Craigslist, were more-or-less remediations of newspaper classified sections, dividing users into geographical regions and requiring in-person payment. The proliferation of the internet, paired with the capitalist impulse to control production and consumption, has transformed gig websites from simple remediations to dynamic platforms that reconfigure how labor is conducted.<sup>18</sup> Mark Andrejevic argues that platforms such as Fiverr and Mechanical Turk have greatly contributed to worker alienation—geographically dispersing laborers while subjecting them to digital monitoring and moderation.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Poell et al. apply a similar lens to the effect of gig labor in the cultural industries, emphasizing the double-edged blade that such platforms provide to cultural producers. On one hand, gig labor websites open “new opportunities for cultural producers to find audiences and generate revenue,”<sup>20</sup> creating the potential for them to shed dependency with legacy media companies and structures. Conversely, despite its claims of meritocracy, platformization effectively centralizes power in new ways. Once a platform has secured a foothold in the market, it will “alter pricing models and platform regulations on its own terms,”<sup>21</sup> immediately impacting thousands of users and their livelihoods. Before we return to Fiverr, then, we must first take a step back to discuss how the emergence of complex globalized platforms has shifted labor paradigms.

First, gig economy platforms contribute to larger labor trends *that separate workers in space and time*. Despite the emphasis on flexibility, efficiency, and opportunity in their advertising verbiage—and the downplaying of global wage inequities—gig economy platforms thrive on a displaced workforce. Ramon Lobato keenly notes how displacement allows various stakeholders to access cheap labor, citing a study from the freelance platform Elance: “while the US is Upwork’s top employer, India is the highest earner.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Kylie Jarrett documents these trends but highlights that, for some workers in the global South, gig work can pay more than typical service jobs—complicating claims of exploitation by acknowledging local opportunities and conditions.<sup>23</sup> Lobato characterizes these overarching labor shifts as part of broader outsourcing trends, where companies create “lower paid, more flexible labor markets outside institutional structures.”<sup>24</sup> Lobato describes outsourcing as a corporate practice where the increasing sophistication and reach of digital platforms have made it possible for anyone to access, and potentially exploit, labor across the globe.

Second, *the current paradigm of gig labor is heavily shaped by digital intermediation*. Digital platforms track labor and render it visible in new ways, in what Woodcock and Graham refer to as “digital legibility.”<sup>25</sup> Participants in the gig economy must contend with rating systems, automated moderation, and enforced response times that reward participation and punish inactivity. Despite claiming to be open marketplaces free of institutional barriers, these

platforms manage labor in technologically complex ways. This is part of what Jeremias Prassl refers to as a platform paradox, in which “platform economy operators present themselves as marketplaces even though in reality they often act like traditional employers.”<sup>26</sup> Since the host platform automatically takes a cut of all transactions—and precludes off-platform communication with clients—this mediation acts as a form of management that pushes users to be as productive (i.e., profitable) as possible. Speaking to games, Ergin Bulut argues that their underlying systems are entwined with these spaces and practices in a unique way, as platforms both create new venues for game development services and beget a “ludic contract”<sup>27</sup> where users are asked to optimize their labor and achievements in a game-like fashion. Users must “game” the platform in order to thrive.

Finally, gig economy platforms are *designed to circumvent worker rights and foster harmful labor ideologies*. In addition to evading labor protections, such as minimum wage, they enforce the idea that “there’s always a sense that someone else somewhere else will do the work for less money.”<sup>28</sup> It is no surprise, then, that games work is present on gig economy platforms, as media professionals, including game developers, have long accepted “poor work conditions and low (or no) pay as a seemingly crucial part of the romantic pursuit of becoming a creative worker.”<sup>29</sup> Akin to Angela McRobbie’s creative despotism,<sup>30</sup> this type of self-regulation fosters ideals of self-development and meritocracy in pursuit of personal development. Combined with the digital regulation of labor, this lowers work standards and diffuses solidarity—dividing users in ways that geographically clustered workers are not. Jarrett has pointed to the difficulties gig workers face in mobilizing, as they are “quite literally scattered across the globe”<sup>31</sup> and lack the ability to organically share their experiences. However, she does emphasize that labor organization is not entirely out of the question. Informal gatherings and online forums have served as useful connective tools for gig economy workers to initiate labor reform in various regions.<sup>32</sup>

But where do games fit into the gig economy? Keogh notes that there has been an aggressive deformalization of the videogame industry in recent years, spurred on by an “emerging, decentralised nebula of localised studios and individuals creating and distributing videogame works in a much vaster range of socio-economic contexts.”<sup>33</sup> Following Lobato’s definition of formal economies as “industrially regulated” and informal economies as “[operating] without or in partial articulation with regulatory oversight,”<sup>34</sup> Keogh contends that formality and informality are not oppositional forces but are instead integral to the day-to-day operations of the videogame industry. Large tech companies often turn to gig economy platforms to source labor and value while, simultaneously, profiting from the policy gaps (wages, benefits) that they exploit. AAA publishers have long capitalized on informal game modding, encouraging Steam to formally monetize such practices in 2015—allowing users to sell their creations on their platform (while taking a 30 percent cut).<sup>35</sup> Small developers similarly take advantage of highly formalized game engines to create what many would consider to be bootlegs or reskins, “offering up, for example, an endless runner game they’ve made which can have its art assets switched out to suit the approximate needs of the buyer.”<sup>36</sup> Importantly, even at the most formalized end of the spectrum, regionality still plays an enormous role in game development ecosystems. Casey O’Donnell recounts that large publishing companies commonly establish third-party game studios in India, China, and Vietnam, treating them as controllable content churns that remain distant from the view of a North American audience.<sup>37</sup>



Even when acknowledging rapid industry changes and global wage inequities, it is still somewhat of a shock to see complete videogames for sale on Fiverr for a price well shy of even an unambitious indie budget—which, while difficult to discern due to the opacity of industry budgets, may range from US\$50,000 to US\$750,000.<sup>38</sup> This surprisingly robust market is one of the key drivers of this research and led us to numerous questions about the motivations of Fiverr sellers and the circumstances (both personal and systemic) that brought them to offer game design services on the platform. Keogh notes that there are many reasons someone may work outside of the core game industry, including a need for a secondary income, the urge to create games that do not revolve around financial viability, and a desire to work outside strict industry schedules and deadlines.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the International Game Developer's Association (IGDA) 2021 industry report showed that 15 percent of freelancers had previous employment within the games industry and another 23 percent had worked at game-related companies, suggesting a growing fluidity between different game labor paradigms. Applying the IGDA findings to a platform like Fiverr is challenging, as “gig worker” is not present in their survey criteria and the employment backgrounds of Fiverr sellers are hidden behind their profiles. In fact, as we will discuss in our methodology, Fiverr strongly discourages the sharing of any information outside of well-moderated interactions.

## Methodology

### *A Short Walkthrough of Fiverr*

When we began this research, while we were aware of the phenomenon of complete game development services on Fiverr, we lacked insight on the motivations of the sellers who facilitate them. In order to determine how sellers and buyers engage with Fiverr, we adopted the walkthrough method.<sup>40</sup> This method “provide[s] [a] foundational analysis of an app, which can be combined with content analysis or interviews to gain further insights into users’ application and appropriation of app technology to suit their own purposes.”<sup>41</sup> The walkthrough method conceptualizes an app or platform by discerning its environment of expected use (i.e., its vision, operating model, and modes of governance) and documenting its day-to-day use.<sup>42</sup> Although initially designed for the study of phone apps, subsequent projects have leveraged its versatility to evaluate video-hosting websites<sup>43</sup> and software applications.<sup>44</sup> While our content analysis would eventually let us interrogate the underlying numbers of user profiles (e.g., prices, sales, ratings), we felt it was important to first gain an understanding of how Fiverr facilitated and mediated interactions.

Between December 2021 and February 2022, we conducted two walkthroughs of Fiverr—first as buyers, then again as sellers—engaging with Fiverr through a browser (rather than an app), where the platform’s affordances are more robust and the interface is easier to document. Our primary data gathering was facilitated via a “technical walkthrough,” where we engaged with the platform’s core features and interrogated registration processes, dashboard functions, and what it meant to leave (or get kicked off) the platform. Through written and visual documentation, we developed a general understanding of the app that we used to guide our content analysis. Practically, this meant documenting registration processes through

screenshots and written notes and, more broadly, evaluating the platform's regulations and affordances. As sellers, we made an account, completed the required tests, submitted the necessary documentation, and created a public-facing page. We offered game design consultation services with intentionally overpriced listings to discourage buyers. Despite this, we did have two different parties contact us for our services during the research window—one asking us to work for free on a project that held “promise” and another who attempted to haggle down our price. We informed both about the research project and withdrew our services. As buyers, we utilized the same account as sellers, following the platform's recommendation and simplifying the process through seamless profile swapping. We evaluated the different options and features available to buyer and seller pages, essentially peering into both facets of the transactional landscape. While one researcher had personally used the service two years prior, we did not purchase any products from the site during this study's period.

We initially intended to accompany our walkthrough with interviews but encountered several roadblocks and ethical considerations when reaching out to Fiverr freelancers. We requested interviews from a pool of thirty candidates but were only able to interview a single user. We suspect this unresponsiveness is due to three factors. First, our interview requests were flagged as spam by Fiverr, as we repeatedly used iterations of the same text for recruitment. Second, while our ethics department required us to conduct interviews through Zoom, Fiverr's terms of service forbade all off-platform communication, discouraging interested participants from speaking to us outside of permitted channels. Third, participants requested that we offer compensation through the platform, treating the research as a gig, but we could only offer remuneration through gift cards (which, once again, clashed with Fiverr's terms of service). Importantly, the latter two issues made us concerned that asking freelancers to participate in the study could put their livelihoods in jeopardy. As this method proved untenable, we adjusted our study to lean more heavily into content analysis.

### *Content Analysis of Gig Workers*

For our content analysis, we sought out Fiverr sellers who were actively involved in the development of full games and who had two or more reviews (or ratings) of their work. We decided upon these criteria to ensure that sellers had completed jobs on the platform and were recently, or currently, active in the market. We collected fifty Fiverr seller profiles using category and keyword search results for “game” and “videogame development,”<sup>45</sup> archiving them in Zotero, chronicling the content of their profiles, and seeking out commonalities and divergences. While our list is not exhaustive, especially considering the fluid nature of Fiverr's user base, as we approached fifty sellers, we began to notice repetitive structures, styles, and services—indicating we had reached saturation with the sample. Our initial documentation focused on services (what sellers offered, costs, packages), regionality (where sellers were situated), and engagement (personal description, popularity, reviews). Once compiled, we analyzed the contents of each page—comparing the languages and regions presented on user profiles, the variance of game development packages and services, and the popularity of users based on reviews and completed sales. We also conducted brief internet searches to see if seller profiles were cross posted to other gig economy platforms or

advertising services. We annotated our spreadsheet with screenshots of the seller's profile, individual reflections on our findings, and reviews of page content to better identify trends, patterns, and outliers.

Given the fractured nature of gig labor, Fiverr's protection of user identities, and our struggles in soliciting interviews, we were unable to determine the buyers of these game products. While our content analysis—through review comments and profile features—did provide glimpses of who these buyers might be and what services they are interested in, a full political-economic study of the Fiverr market is beyond the scope of our study.

## Discussion and Analysis of Findings

We divide our discussion and analysis of game development on Fiverr into two broad categories. First, we analyze the findings of our small-scale platform study—identifying the digital affordances that shape creative labor on the website. We take on the role of both buyers and sellers in this analysis to observe how gigs are negotiated between the platform's two key stakeholders. After establishing the platform's underpinnings, we then dissect trends in seller profiles, game pricing, and regionality to gain an understanding of who is creating games on Fiverr and how development practices unfold. Although our research is primarily focused on sellers, we close our discussion with a few thoughts on potential buyers and audiences.

### *A Micro-Platform Study of Fiverr*

Fiverr mediates relationships between buyers and sellers and profits by taking a 5.5 percent service fee from each buyer's purchase and 20 percent of a seller's earnings.<sup>46</sup> These fees are important to consider as they are transaction-based, meaning the platform's overarching goal is to facilitate and foster as many sales as possible. In our walkthrough, we summarize the core features of the site for sellers and buyers to understand how Fiverr shapes labor through a series of digital affordances and constraints.

### Sellers

It took us about 45 minutes to register as a first-time seller on Fiverr. The process requires that users submit a personal information form, verify their identity, and complete a language test (ours was English, as determined by our language preferences). Once account creation is completed, the platform wastes no time in encouraging sellers to interact with buyers. Fiverr heavily promotes the need for reviews and customer loyalty, quantified through customer analytics that include a dedicated section outlining why customers did (or did not) come back.

Despite Fiverr's ostensible work-at-your-own-pace mentality, efficiency is central to the platform's machinations. The digital intermediation of labor in the workspace tracks active work hours and aggressively reminds us of our slow response time (12 hours) by flagging performance statistics in red. While Fiverr promotes the idea that freelancers can make their own schedule, it also fulfills the role of a middle manager who keeps workers on task, reminding us of Prassl's warnings that gig economy platforms "actively shape the entire transaction by

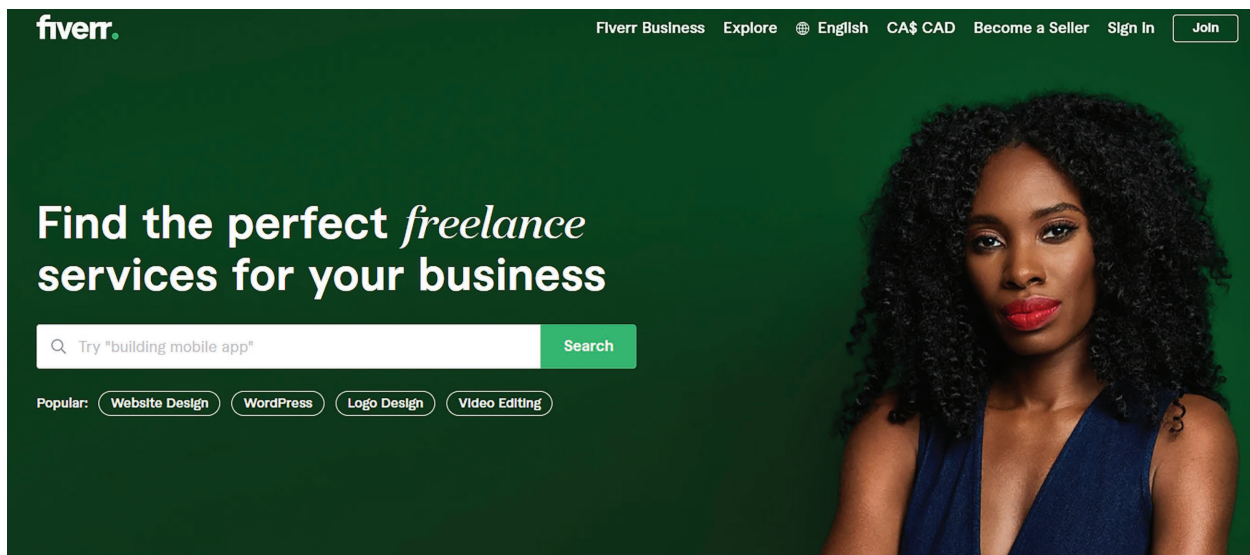


means of close control over the workforce.”<sup>47</sup> This was felt both on and off the platform, such as when Fiverr “checked in” with us after not logging in for ten days. Fiverr made it eminently clear that seller freedom is beholden to buyer demands with ratings, scores, and reviews that are based on buyer feedback and pivotal to a seller’s visibility on the site. The buyer became a platform-mediated boss, controlling the labor of the seller through their purchasing decisions and influencing a seller’s livelihood through the power of their feedback.

## Buyers

Fiverr proclaims that it helps guide buyers to the “perfect freelance service for your business” (see Figure 1). While buyers can use keyword searches to scour the platform for a specific type of service or seller, they can also announce what they are looking for and have sellers reach out to them directly. To help facilitate frictionless transactions, Fiverr offers services like a watermarked logo maker that allows buyers to visualize their potential product before choosing which seller to purchase from.

The platform encourages repeat customers and offers user-specific recommendations and options for organizing freelancers on the site. The “lists” section allows users to curate and organize sellers to “easily access and share with your team.”<sup>48</sup> Repeatability is valorized through badges presented on a seller’s page, including rhetoric such as “People keep coming back!” or “This seller has many repeat buyers.” Coupled with tags that will suggest “Top Rated” sellers or seller pages that showcase past clients, these features suggest that companies are a core part of Fiverr’s user base and may use these services to find cheaper labor by outsourcing work to international markets. These practices mirror what gig services like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk have been promoting and hint at the outsourcing of global North labor to global South workers (and the cost-savings this entails) through the platform.<sup>49</sup> However, while Mechanical Turk focuses on connecting companies to workers through a task board, Fiverr offers anyone access to an enormous marketplace of sellers.



**Figure 1** Screenshot of the Fiverr Homepage.

## User Profile Trends

Fiverr's highly standardized profile template creates a formula, of sorts, for selling game design services, with each gig beginning with a pre-scripted heading (i.e., "I will. . ."). Most sellers defaulted to offering either a short description of their game design services or a bulleted list of options for what they could provide (see Figure 2). This repetition suggests that Fiverr's algorithms reward users who read and mimic successful profiles or, alternatively, that third parties are helping users craft their pages following a similar procedure.

A typical seller page begins with a generic title such as "I will develop a game in Unity" followed by a diverse listing that may include asset creation, coding, sound design, and narrative construction. This array frames sellers as jack-of-all-trade designers rather than the specialists that tend to be more common within AAA game studios.

This variety results in the generation of multiple services, with some sellers simultaneously offering upwards of seven different jobs on the platform. Many same-seller gigs were similar—such as creating different types of games around a central engine—but, in some profiles, games were but one service among a large subset of programming-related jobs (see Figure 3). Despite

### About This Gig

Please discuss the requirements before placing the order to avoid any confusion/cancellation.

Hi, I will develop **2D mobile games** for you using **Unity**. EXPERT in making Clones of popular games like flappy bird etc. Lets discuss your game idea and start the development.

Supported Platforms:

iOS  
Android  
WebGL  
MacOS  
Windows  
Linux

And If you have an already developed unity game, I can add features or reskin it.

I will do:

ACTION Games development  
ADVENTURE Games development  
RACING Games development  
HYPER-CASUAL Games development  
Educational Games development  
Music Games development  
Platformers Games development  
Puzzle Games development  
Role Playing Games development  
Shooter Games development

**Figure 2** A screenshot from a seller's gig, describing the services available.

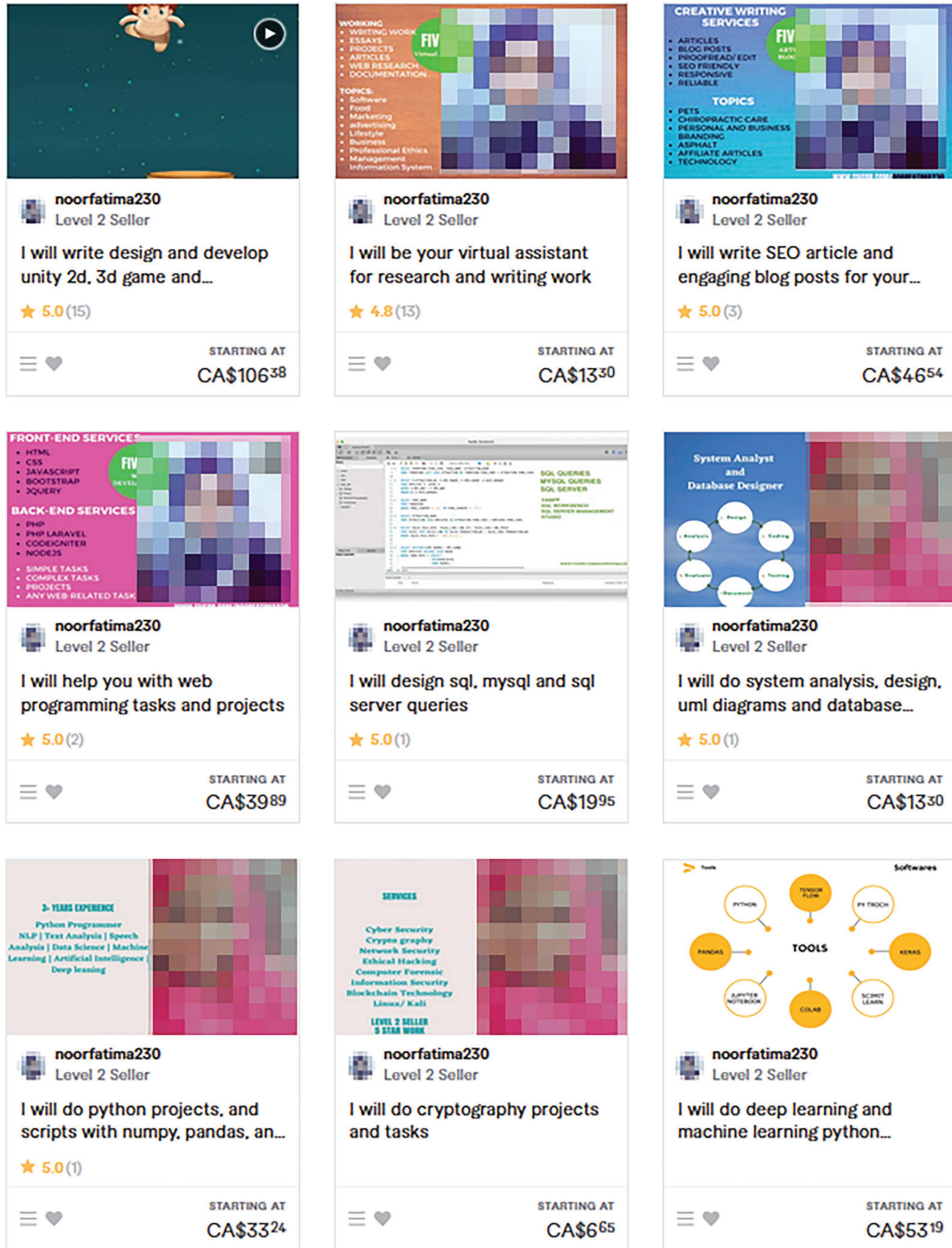


Figure 3 A screenshot of a single seller's set of offered gigs. We have blurred out photographs of the seller's face from the listing.

this array of promoted skills, there were strong seller trends regarding tools. Unity was listed in forty-one of fifty profiles and design services were more commonly geared toward mobile and PC than videogame consoles. This shift away from specialist roles in seller listings reflects platform pressures, as being good at one task is simply insufficient. More services equate to more gigs and, hopefully, more revenue. It was common to see “Top Seller” accounts that had a queue of jobs or even temporarily closed due to orders. By diversifying services, targeting certain price points, and appealing to varied buyers, sellers can make headway within Fiverr’s highly competitive environment. Game development becomes one piece of a larger set of skills, blurring labor across traditional industry lines.

This “do everything” attitude is also evident within single services, as sellers often advertise various types of games (i.e., platformers, first-person shooters, puzzle games) as interchangeable in their game design pitches. This creates an ambivalence toward more established ideals of expertise in game design, in which studios and developers are typically known for their expertise with a single genre. Of course, our inability to determine the “who” behind the profile means that some of these sellers could belong to a larger team. This was hinted at in some profiles that referred to themselves as a “studio” or used pluralistic language like “we,” which suggests a larger collective (or, perhaps, a language misinterpretation on our part).

One possible point of resistance to price point competition is the common inclusion of tiered packages, where sellers provide a low-end package to attract buyer interest before upselling them into more expensive services. While the efficacy of such efforts is hard to gauge—outside of our YouTuber’s anecdote of paying an additional US\$15 for game design services—this practice shows an ongoing negotiation between sellers and Fiverr’s affordances. As this negotiation may require a reduction in upfront pricing, it raises questions about the perceived-versus-actual costs involved with purchasing game services on Fiverr.

### *The Price of a Game*

Given these pricing demands, it is unsurprising that Fiverr’s game development costs are below North American studio standards that range from thousands (for bare-bones efforts) to hundreds of thousands of dollars (for more complex indie endeavors).<sup>50</sup> The promise of a completed game for a few hundred or thousand dollars is especially cheap when compared to AAA studio budgets that average 60 million dollars,<sup>51</sup> although the size of such projects completely dwarfs what is available through Fiverr. While we did not analyze the games themselves, we can presume their quality and scope—as seen through secondary sources, such as YouTube videos or comment section screenshots—is below most of the games that grace players’ hands. This variance in cost also points to unequal global wages that drive down platform pricing. Our sample, while flush with diverse skillsets, consisted primarily of sellers from Pakistan who typically have lower working wages than North Americans.

In addition to low prices spurred on by wage inequities, sellers also reduce their costs through repetition and reuse. Some sellers offer licenses to already-completed games, whereas others provide full creative packages that omit access to unique intellectual property such as game assets. Based off the few visuals on these profiles, we suspect that sellers freely recycle assets and files between games as part of rapid reskinning processes (visual or thematic



changes made to a generic game template). The type of labor required for full game design projects heavily influences their price, with reskins beginning at CAD\$6.63 and full games costing upward of CAD\$6,000. The disparity in cost is, in part, explained by Fiverr's proclivity toward tiered packages. For many sellers, the Basic packages focus on game reskins, asset sets, single-level design, or games with very simple mechanics and affordances. Standard packages primarily offer simple games, featuring only one or two levels, or full game prototypes. Finally, Premium packages were almost exclusively full games, albeit with some limits on how many levels or characters they were willing to design. Here, sellers are coaxed to entice buyers with cheap Basic packages while requesting pre-sale communications to upsell or negotiate services and payment. Cheap packages and rapid negotiations are a natural reaction to Fiverr's overwhelming desire for speed. According to the most expensive full game in our sample, an entire game with ads, in app purchases, multiplayer capabilities, and more may only take 45 days to develop (see Figure 4).

From a North American perspective, gig economy game development clearly falls into a very low, arguably precarious, price point. The high end of our sample aligns with shoestring industry budgets, with the CAD\$6000+ dollar game being a clear outlier. Across our dataset, the average cost of a Premium package was CAD\$750, and the average cost of all design services was CAD\$388.70. These already scant prices are further reduced by taxes, Fiverr's transaction fee, and a 20 percent sales cut, making it likely that sellers earn well below Canadian minimum wages (our point of reference as Canadian scholars). While an untenable wage

Basic	Standard	Premium
<b>Elite Plan</b>		<b>CA\$6,727</b>
A high quality game with ads , in app purchase , multiplayer , social platform integration , nft		
🕒 45 Days Delivery 🔄 5 Revisions		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Upload to app store</li> <li>✓ Include design</li> <li>✓ Includes animation</li> <li>✓ 5 plugins</li> <li>✓ Include source code</li> </ul>		
<div style="background-color: #28a745; color: white; padding: 10px; display: inline-block; border-radius: 5px;">Continue (CA\$6,727)</div>		
<a href="#" style="color: #28a745; text-decoration: none;">Compare Packages</a>		

**Figure 4** A screenshot of a gig's cost tier list on Fiverr.



for North American labor, this pricing helps clarify why our sample was saturated with sellers from regions where such earnings align more closely with living expenses. Pakistan, a country that dominates our sample, has an approximate minimum wage of CAD\$194 dollars per month,<sup>52</sup> suggesting that these low prices still allow Pakistani sellers to make equal to or above their national minimum wage (although it is difficult to determine without knowing how many hours are required to complete each gig). Such pricing structures highlight how seemingly global gig platforms produce and tap into situated game production ecosystems. Fiverr's 20 percent profit cut from sellers, push for templated profiles, and emphasis on low price points all help us understand why the platform's labor is only viable, and desirable, in certain regions.

### *Regionality*

Fiverr touts itself as providing “a whole world of freelance talent at your fingertips,”<sup>53</sup> building on well-trodden imaginaries of the internet as a virtual realm unrestricted by jurisdictions or borders. Despite this promise of boundaryless work, Fiverr's highly mediated approach clusters labor around regions rather than fully dissolving jurisdictions. In our sample of fifty profiles that offered full game design services, thirty of them were situated in Pakistan. Five were in India, and the rest were scattered primarily within the global South, with a few outliers in Eastern Europe, France, and Israel. Clearly, there are systemic factors at work, whether due to a willingness to work for lower rates than Western standards<sup>54</sup> or regional pushes for deformed labor practices.

Fully determining why Pakistan is so overrepresented in our sample is beyond the scope of this article,<sup>55</sup> but it is worth considering why it is currently the preferred locale for game development labor on Fiverr. In addition to wage inequities, one factor that came to our attention was the e-Rozgaar Program. A joint initiative between the Youth Affairs and Sports Department, the Government of Punjab, and the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB), the program claims to “[empower] the unemployed youth of Punjab by giving them free of cost training in Digital Skills and Freelancing that make them capable of earning online.”<sup>56</sup> Facilitated online and in-person through numerous educational institutes, e-Rozgaar offers programs ranging from Mobile App Development to UI/UX Design with the goal of preparing students for digital freelancing—explicitly gesturing toward websites such as Upwork, Freelancer, Fiverr, and PeoplePerHour as avenues for success. A report by Payoneer notes that e-Rozgaar's offerings were greatly expanded following the onset of the pandemic and touts the success of its program's graduates. In a testimonial, Fiverr user Kashi Taj makes the to-the-point claim that the “freelance industry is booming,”<sup>57</sup> echoing the institutional viewpoint that frames digital freelancing and gig work as a panacea to Pakistan's labor woes, which have seen the youth unemployment rate soar to 31 percent.<sup>58 59</sup> Whether due to wage inequities or attitudinal factors, Fiverr is still bound to local conditions despite its claims of a global workforce.

However, this broader employment strategy only partially explains the prevalence of Pakistani game developers on Fiverr. While e-Rozgaar's offerings are diverse, they do not explicitly mention game design or include programs geared toward working with game engines such as Unity or Unreal. Perhaps our mistake is approaching game development as a delineated

profession—an attitude that is starting to fade, even in North American creative industries—rather than one of many avenues of income for gig economy users. As the array of skills, genres, and gigs offered by sellers in our profile point to this industry bleed, we see how local labor practices and costs of living impact the offerings of game production on Fiverr. For example, Fiverr user aliayyaz offers services in game design, graphic design, app store optimization, UI/UX design, HTML/PHP customization or repair, and more.<sup>60</sup> While this is an extreme example, we can speculate that game design is viewed less as a singular vocation on Fiverr but, rather, one of many aspects of a broader gig economy mindset.

As a final note on regionality, it is important to remember that gig economy platforms commonly change their structures to maximize profits—often without considering the effects these will have on their sellers. Users and regions may fall out of favor based on platform updates, quickly shifting the regionality of the platform. Jarrett describes this as part of the overarching tendency for digital media industries to regard labor as “cheap . . . disposable and treated with contempt,”<sup>61</sup> particularly in the context of Asian workers. Aleena Chia similarly discusses the outsourcing of asset creation to South Asian game developers, whom Western developers derisively regard as constituting “artistic but not creative”<sup>62</sup> labor mills. Even in cases where a digital platform may offer higher wages than local opportunities, the platform still does not provide career stability, future employment pathways, or benefits to its workers<sup>63</sup> and treats them as replaceable cogs in the larger game development context. Thus, a local clustering of labor could be disrupted after a single change in a platform’s algorithms and policies—who knows if Pakistan would still be the dominant region if our research was conducted even a year later?

### *Buyers and Audience*

Knowing who is selling games and how their labor is shaped is crucial for understanding Fiverr’s game development ecosystem, but we also want to better understand who is procuring these services. Buyers are difficult to discern on Fiverr, but comments and tags found within seller’s stores provide hints about who is making purchases. Earlier we discussed the platform’s push for repeat customers, as Fiverr presents the site as a venue for repeatable gig labor. Affirming this, some “Top Rated” sellers in our sample mentioned companies they had worked with, including names like MSI Gaming, Yap Books, and Gulf Oil. All three of these companies are situated in higher-income countries, tying gig labor into a broader outsourcing mentality that is prevalent in numerous industries.

However, buyers are not just large companies. In examining transactions and comments, we found an array of different services being offered: products designed for marketing purposes, small projects made for the (at the time) burgeoning NFT market, and asset contributions to larger-scale games. One of the more popular sellers in our sample made a series of comments that showcased project screenshots, featuring a set of very simple mobile or browser games focused on gambling or mini-games (e.g., bowling). The availability of seller skills and products suggests that buyers desire anything from complete promotional games to relatively niche design tasks, a facet of subcontracting trends that Keogh showcased in the Australian Indie game industry.<sup>64</sup> These groups might not want full games but use the cheap labor of Fiverr sellers to create specific sets of assets for their needs. Since seller services

are hidden to us, it is impossible to fully know how often complete games (as opposed to assets) are being designed, but our sample suggests that game development on the platform is multifaceted and begets deeper consideration of how gig labor fits in the growing space of freelance game design.

## Reflections and Limitations

### *Reflecting on Fiverr's Game Design Ecosystem*

Fiverr certainly has its own unique affordances and peculiarities—particularly the ease of switching roles between buyer and seller—but we believe our findings are semi-transferable to similar gig economy platforms such as Upwork and Freelancer. Game design on Fiverr flirts with the idea of a self-empowered workplace where workers are self-directed and have agency over what tasks they do and when. Additionally, harmful labor practices associated with the game industry are not left behind on the platform but, rather, have been replaced with an endless stream of digitally mediated labor, echoing claims of digitized management by Prassl and Bulut. Top sellers face high demand for their services, and the desire for a one-stop-shop often results in the labor of an entire game company being compressed into a single gig, forcing sellers to rapidly create products of passable quality for buyers with varied needs and timelines.

Success on Fiverr is far from universal. For each successful seller there are numerous less engaged (and less profitable) ones. The crunch often associated with the game industry—excessive overtime undertaken to meet strict deadlines<sup>65</sup>—does not disappear on gig economy platforms but is instead transformed into a daily digital grind. This has some commonalities with Weststar et al.'s discussion of servitization within the games industry, where game development is predicated on continuously reacting to customer demands under the GaaS (games as a service) model.<sup>66</sup> Our analysis shows that this continues to gig platforms, where Fiverr requires sellers to rapidly interact with buyers and turnaround projects—all in pursuit of better review metrics, repeat customers, and new business opportunities. The flexible hours promised by the platform further remind us of the crunch labor associated with professional game development, where employees are forced to work excessive overtime to meet deadlines,<sup>67</sup> as well as self-exploitative freelance paradigms. Fiverr sellers may be on-call and on-task for most of the day, a fact exacerbated by the globe-spanning interactions enabled by the platform and the quick message responses it requires.

Game development on Fiverr shares similar patterns with labor practices found across the game industry, but it is made unique through platformization. Sellers offer skill sets that span across numerous professions, eroding the walls between what are often imagined to be distinct professions, and our sample suggests that sellers reuse assets, code, and graphics within, and across, various types of gigs. There is a necessary versatility to these laborers, as low prices and high competition demand that they become jacks-of-all-trades rather than specialists. Thus, Fiverr sellers often take on the pressures and responsibilities of an entire game company for only a few hundred dollars per project. To maintain some control in this

working arrangement, some sellers refuse to share the underlying data behind a project, providing buyers with non-editable files unless they upgrade to a higher-tier package.

### *Educational Framings of Gig Economy Labor*

Returning to a point we broached in our regional discussion, it is worth considering how the Pakistan-based e-Rozgaar's attitude toward digital freelancing compares to the promises of North American institutions. While freelancing has long been a part of the Western labor landscape, universities and colleges typically advertise their programs as avenues toward full-time employment rather than piecemeal labor. Even in an increasingly deformed game labor market, the default employment path presented in game design programs tends to be the AAA pipeline.<sup>68</sup> However, alternative career paths are starting to creep into course descriptions at many institutions. The offerings from Toronto universities and colleges show a growing emphasis on entrepreneurship<sup>69</sup> and freelancing,<sup>70</sup> especially in industries where informal labor practices have long been the norm, such as digital media and journalism. McRobbie has documented similar trends in the UK fashion industry, elaborating that students of these programs have reluctantly taken up self-employment in hopes of more productive and exciting career prospects.<sup>71</sup>

However, even the most pessimistic of these programs eschew discussion of gig economy platforms and instead focus on contract work and entrepreneurship—standing in stark contrast with e-Rozgaar's explicit emphasis on gig economy platforms. Like Fiverr's meritocratic claims, Centennial College's *Personal Branding and Freelance* course describes the current employment landscape as “a Darwinian world where competition for jobs is ruthless and only the best rise to the top”<sup>72</sup> but still frames such efforts as overtures to local media industries such as broadcasters, newspapers, and advertisers. As higher education is subtly framed as a method of reproducing class status,<sup>73</sup> which has long been associated with stable full-time employment in North America, these institutions are likely hesitant to explicitly gesture toward long-term freelancing as a potential career outcome. Such framings also highlight tensions between offline and online labor paradigms, tying into discussions of global wages, precarity, and class. Fulltime in-person labor is still considered aspirational in North America, while e-Rozgaar presents gig economy work as a path to earning “an honorable living”<sup>74</sup> rather than a secondary option.

### *Research Limitations*

Fiverr is a sprawling, dynamic platform, which was highlighted by the ephemerality of our seller listings. Even during our relatively brief data-collection phase, many users significantly altered their profiles or disappeared from the platform entirely. Finding ways to speak with users would be particularly valuable in grounding platform and content analysis,<sup>75</sup> and we hope future research can navigate ethical and logistical concerns to provide greater insight on local labor conditions. Such efforts could also help verify whether some Fiverr users are real people or facades for companies and collectives.

This project also made us woefully aware of our limitations as Western researchers studying sellers from Pakistan (and other regions) of which we have little firsthand knowledge.

Although we did our best to educate ourselves on local social and labor conditions, we are limited to English-language resources and sorely lack the tacit and embedded knowledge of those who live and work in these jurisdictions. We recommend that further studies on Fiverr game development be undertaken in collaboration with, or fully under the purview of, local scholars.

## Conclusion

Our objective with this article is to provide initial insight into how Fiverr shapes game design labor in terms of both day-to-day engagement and the reshaping of existing industry geographies. Our findings show that buyer demands on gig economy platforms exacerbate existing practices of overtime, precarity, and crunch that are pervasive in the North American game development industry. Fiverr expects its videogame laborers to be available, working, and productive at almost all times. However, the compensation for their design activities is generally quite small, even when compared to modest employment in more formalized videogame industries. Gig workers are providing a product and skillset at a price point that seems unfathomably low when compared to both the indie developers and AAA giants. Fiverr's promise of freedom seems more of a myth wielded to attract users, as intense digital intermediation pushes sellers to lower their prices, appease customers, and endlessly take on new gigs. This article provides new perspectives on yet another aspect of how platformization contributes to self-exploitation<sup>76</sup> and forced entrepreneurship<sup>77</sup> in other creative industries, where workers engage in increasingly precarious labor conditions aligned with meritocratic ideals.

Importantly, while Fiverr's games may not match the quality of those produced by larger studios, they do not greatly differ from many titles available through online game marketplaces. Although we did not conduct game analysis ourselves, having mainly relied on second-hand accounts such as videos and reviews, it appears that Fiverr's premium sellers produce games that are comparable to the endless runners and *Flappy Bird* clones that are ubiquitous in the Apple and Android stores. As BadGameDev noted in his humorous YouTube review, the games he commissioned from Fiverr users were playable, if not the most creative or unique.<sup>78</sup> Thus, it would be unwise to separate games created on Fiverr from the industry at large when they match many trends and features common in the mobile games space. Additional studies focused on the content of games designed on Fiverr and similar platforms could be interesting avenues to explore design trends in freelance and gig economy spaces, as well as the influence of popular engines such as Unity and Unreal in small-scale game development.

Finally, as our exploration of regionality shows, Fiverr should be considered less of a locale in and of itself and more of a mediator that funnels labor to certain jurisdictions. It would be folly to consider Fiverr as solely responsible for this displacement of labor, as it is part of a larger constellation of platforms, attitudes, and economic realities. The circumstances that guide sellers toward these types of platforms—such as global wage inequities and Pakistan's e-Rozgaar program—suggest that Fiverr's regionality may shift over time in reaction to educational and industry trends, indicating a highly sophisticated synthesis of freelancing and



outsourcing. Fiverr is another space for game design, one that both mirrors and builds upon industry precarity. Examining Fiverr's gigs encourages us to think about the shaping of game labor beyond platforms, reflecting on new types of mediation brought about by digital technologies and older forms of outsourcing that are common in the creative industries. As gig labor continues to entrench itself, Fiverr's sellers offer a glimpse into how game labor can be absorbed and mediated by gig economy platforms and, importantly, how a seemingly global industry is shaped by numerous local circumstances.

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