

Leora Kornfeld ([00:08](#)):

Welcome to Now & Next, it's a podcast about innovation and emerging trends in the media and entertainment industries. My name is Leora Kornfeld. Now, do you ever remember saying to yourself, if only I could work from home when I want it to I'd get so much more done, I could skip the commute. I could save so much money on lunches and coffees, and then there's the ultimate end work goals. I could wear sweat pants all day, but as with so many things, be careful what you wish for. So on this episode of Now & Next, we're looking at an industry that was one of the first to go full work-from home mode, the game industry. In some ways it was a fairly straightforward transition because everyone was already working on screens with headphones on most of the time. But is it really as straightforward as just taking people from an office environment and then plugging them down at home? No, no, it is not.

Jim Munroe ([01:09](#)):

Yeah. One of the things that people might be surprised to see in this resource is how much of it is focused on self-care. But one of the things with a passion-driven industry like video games is that that enormous drive to finish the project and to make it as good as they can, and to do something completely new and different and unique that comes at a cost. And when we are working from home, a lot of that cost can be hidden from the managers that are responsible for the people that they're employing.

Leora Kornfeld ([01:40](#)):

That's Jim Munroe. Jim is a long time game arts professional, who has been finding out just how hard the shift to working from home has been. Right now Jim and his research partner, Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan are putting the finishing touches on a research report about the GAIN industry's transition from studio-based work to home-based work. That report is coming out of an organization called GAIN as in Game Arts International Network, both Marie and Jim have traveled the world for years as artists, and writers, and game community builders and their work on this research project blends those experiences with the findings from dozens of interviews to come up with a vivid picture of the realities of working from home as a digital creative during these let's just call them uncertain times. That conversation is coming right up.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([02:36](#)):

Isolation Nation is a research project. We spoke to around 70 game studios across Canada through interviews and surveys. And the goal is creating a free resource for game developers and game studios by gathering tips and best practices for game creators who are working from home right now.

Leora Kornfeld ([02:56](#)):

How did this whole research project come to be? How did it start?

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([03:00](#)):

Well, as you know, people are really isolated right now, and I'd say that's more the case in some ways, for people making games, especially small studios. And we thought, life is easier when people can solve problems together and share knowledge. So the goal of this project is really to gather knowledge from people all over Canada, making games, small studios, people working alone, larger studios, just gather these tips and these tricks and this knowledge base that people have been building over the last few months and share it, just put all that knowledge together into one resource so that people can share the

things that they're struggling with and how they're getting past them. And what are the unsolved problems?

Leora Kornfeld ([03:46](#)):

And when COVID hit, how did the game industry respond in terms of getting people set up to work from home? That's a big transition because in offices they have the most state-of-the-art equipment and at home, most people have their laptop, that's it. So how did the industry respond?

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([04:04](#)):

In interviewing people, I was very surprised to hear that studios responded really quickly. I think even the studios themselves were surprised to find how quickly they were able to get people together and get people home. There are still unsolved problems for example, anyone who's working in VR has this issue that they don't have 20 headsets to send to people in their homes to test. But in general, almost all the studios I spoke to said that they on a dime, made a plan and people home and working, they responded quickly and efficiently. And they said that that was actually one of the easiest parts of this entire process.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([04:44](#)):

Getting people home was okay because people knew, everyone knew and everyone kind of banded together over this, over this anxiety and over this fear that was going on at that time with COVID, I think it was smoother than it would have been in a normal circumstance when you're trying to just get people to work from home. So people moved really quickly, they moved really well. There are some outstanding problems, but in general it was very smooth and very fast.

Leora Kornfeld ([05:08](#)):

And once people were set up with the right machines, and headphones, and desks at home, and I'm guessing you talked to them about this, did they just kick right into that mode of working nine to five? Or all of a sudden did things become a bit more freestyle? Because we also have the issue that people are kind of their own boss now when they're working from home. And I think that's the case for all of us. We have nobody looking over our shoulders, literally. So what have you heard from the game industry about how people are basically policing themselves?

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([05:36](#)):

There have been a lot of changes that people have had to make around their own work style at home. People have inherited some of the hardest parts of being a boss with none of the perks. The bosses themselves, or the managers, the people who are overseeing the work also have new unique challenges. They have very little visibility into the work, they have very little visibility into people's emotional state and they're trying to manage people. But on the other side, people also are suddenly realizing that they have to do all this work themselves. They have to set their own schedules. Some studios still have schedules of nine to five or completely these are our open hours you need to be online for this time.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([06:23](#)):

Many of them have just little buffer periods of two or three hours a day where you're expected to be online and the rest of the time you can do yourself. And some of them have complete freedom where you can work your hours whenever you want to work them. And I think this is the hardest situation.

People with complete freedom to work whenever they want have to work completely on their own in terms of motivation, in terms of scheduling and structure, all of these skills which are very hard for people, especially right now in the time of a pandemic where people are dealing with other stressors. People have small children running around and they don't have healthcare. People have elders staying with them. There are a lot of unique challenges right now. So on top of that for people to have to set their own schedules, and motivate themselves, and report their own work, and importantly tell people about the value of their own work. I think it can be quite exhausting.

Leora Kornfeld ([07:21](#)):

And in terms of productivity, I mean, I know it's early to assess that, but Jim, are you getting a sense from people how productivity is affected?

Jim Munroe ([07:29](#)):

For the most part while there's anxiety I think amongst some owners and managers about the velocity sort of, in some cases, it seems overall that people have adjusted pretty smoothly and the productivity has remained high, but there are other problems around communication and maintaining morale. There's also some issues around just the economic downturns of the general economy and how that's affecting different studios in different ways. So there's a lot of stressors

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([08:02](#)):

When people work from home, overwork is a real concern. People work longer hours. If they do take a break during the day, they have a tendency to make it up even more. And so this is something to think about when we're thinking about productivity in a game studio when people are working from home, is keeping an eye on how long hours the staff are working and making sure they stop at a reasonable time. This is an ongoing concern for a lot of people.

Leora Kornfeld ([08:24](#)):

That must have been surprising to learn.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([08:26](#)):

Personally I was very surprised, but when I heard it the third or fourth time, I realized that actually in my own experience it's also true. When I'm working from home and when the boundaries become a little bit permeable between work and home, and when my machine, my computer is work and also home, it really starts to blur. And it's very easy to just keep working, especially right now, especially in the time of a pandemic when things are closed and there's very little to go and do it's very easy to overwork. The biggest challenges that people reported to me were motivation, isolation and team health. And when I say team health, I mean this feeling of resiliency and trust that people have when they're working together. So when you get bad news, a business opportunity didn't work out. Some funding didn't come through anything like this. Someone's leaving the team.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([09:22](#)):

When you get bad news and you work together in an office, you have a stronger net, or you have a stronger like team health resiliency to bounce back on. And one of the challenges studios face when working from home is that this resiliency or this team health has been a little bit eroded and we're still figuring out why, I think in general, anyone working from home, all companies are trying to understand

why, why does this happen? And so far people seem to understand that this team health, this resiliency, it really seems to come out of these daily repeat interactions.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([10:01](#)):

So just showing up every morning and saying good morning to people, having a feeling for the people in the office and this slow relationship building, the slow trust building that happens just by proximity and chance interactions, that in combination with this experience of feeling like people have your back, when deadlines come, when things are going wrong and the people who you work with are supporting you. These two things fit together to form this resiliency and trust. And when you're working from home, I mean, you can have the latter, but the former is very hard. You don't have this small circumstance of repeat interactions every day. And this is a real challenge and an ongoing challenges for studios right now.

Jim Munroe ([10:43](#)):

The teams that have had an in-person connection prior to doing work from home. And those relationships translated a lot better to an online context. When people have been sort of hired post locked down and they have been mostly kind of in touch with people virtually that connection is a lot weaker. When we talk about the possibility of work from home as like an ongoing thing, that needs to be taken into account, because a lot of the success, I think the continued functionality of the work from home situations to some extent, have to do with the fact that there has been like a baseline of trust and connection that was established in person.

Leora Kornfeld ([11:27](#)):

Yeah. And how do you bring the new people into the fold? The people that you haven't said good morning to, you haven't spilled coffee on, you haven't broken pizza with, because people often talk about game companies as families, right? With all the good and the bad and everything that comes with that. So I imagine that that is going to be a challenge if this type of working or the hybrid working with partly in studio or in office and partly at home continues. Are you hearing or seeing anything about like ways that studios are trying to integrate people who joined more recently?

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([12:05](#)):

Yeah. Well, when studios are trying to integrate people who have joined after in the aftertimes and the aftermath, there's been mixed success. So some people who join a team and have never met anyone in person do really well if they have certain skills around internet use. So if you can jump into a shared discord, for example, and chat with people, and jump in on jokes, and jump in on storytelling in these channels that are reserved for this kind of informal conversation, it's a lot easier. But if you don't have those online skills, other tactics have to be tried. I think it's important for studios to invest in this, to invest in other tactics, even though we're still learning what they are.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([12:52](#)):

So a couple of examples of tactics, definitely game studios have been playing games together. This is one thing they do to try and build comradery and build trust. One studio I spoke to, for example, they have been experimenting with buying every single employee, a copy of a game once a month and setting up a room and then they all play the game together. Studios have also experimented with movie nights, they've experimented with coffee breaks, where employees are mashed randomly together to have informal little chats with each other. One studio I spoke to did a socially distanced hike with masks.

Leora Kornfeld ([13:26](#)):

That's very cool. With people on their phones or how did they do that?

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([13:30](#)):

No. So it was a very small studio and they all lived in close proximity. So they actually went outside and walked around in one of the times when this was permitted, they went and walked around, outside with masks far apart from each other, not really able to talk, but just being in proximity with each other, they felt that it was meaningful. And they said that when things are better with COVID, that's definitely something that they would continue to do is in-person meetups. But yeah, I also wanted to say, I mean, I think that this idea of a game studio was a family is a good one.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([14:00](#)):

I also think it's a dangerous model sometimes to think about in this way, just because with some of the issues that are happening right now with game studios and have always been happening around sexual harassment and around exploitation of people, game studios are like families, but also I think it's important to keep in mind that they are families that pay each other and with power dynamics. And this is a real challenge. These power dynamics, I think specifically are a real challenge when you're trying to organize team-building events, because some people don't really like team building events. Like for some people, the idea of going with their colleagues to like an online website where you're just chatting, chit-chatting together is harder work than normal work, is more stressful than normal work, or they don't want to go on a Zoom call and drink beers together. And so employers in studios right now have to find ways that work for everyone.

Leora Kornfeld ([15:01](#)):

Yeah. I know people for whom that would be considered punishment, that wouldn't be considered recreation. They don't want to do that stuff. And what about staying sane during shutdown, which is a very real thing for all of us, but especially I think in a line of work that where you spend most of your time staring at your screen, you've got your headphones on you're in your own little world there. How are people coping?

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([15:24](#)):

I'm glad you asked about staying sane because I was amazed in my interviews with how candid people were about mental health challenges. I was so happy to hear how proactive and candid people have become compared to let's say 20 years ago, where a lot of there was a lot of stigma, things were very hidden. I found a lot of studio leads, communicating and proactively working with their teams on mental health. I spoke to one studio where they had someone who was specifically working on these skills around resiliency, around people understanding when they need to take breaks, the way that this person described it was unpacking the collective trauma of work. So that's pretty powerful, but-

Leora Kornfeld ([16:12](#)):

It sounds like a book some people will look forward to reading.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([16:17](#)):

Yeah. It really is wonderful that we're talking about mental health. I don't see a lot of clear solutions. I mean, there are the obvious tips around mental health. They do work. I mean, they do help people be a

little bit better tips around taking care of your sleep, taking care of your foods, getting movement or exercise if you can. Meditating and journaling like these tips that people have known for a very, very long time. Also of course, like seeking professional help, if you can afford it. But I think that this is a real, like a real challenge. Everyone kept saying in my interviews the word came up over and over again, isolation, disconnection, loneliness, anxiety. These are problems people are facing right now and absolutely resources are needed because I think as winter comes on right now, it's only going to get worse.

Leora Kornfeld ([17:10](#)):

Oh, I know. And Jim, when you were talking to people, did you get a sense that there were things that were real lifesavers for people? I'm thinking that right now, things like the discord channel or the Slack channel, that's a real lifesaver, because it's this thing that's alive. You can always go to and you don't even necessarily have to have something big to say, but you can just go there to sort of check in and see yeah, yeah. There's somebody out there. Are you hearing them?

Jim Munroe ([17:34](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I would say one of the things that outside of those types of resources, in terms of like socializing and such one thing that we found was people trying to sort of keep active physically also kind of makes a big difference in terms of their mood and such. So it's kind of counterintuitive in terms of connection is kind of maybe the main problem, but there are all these other things around the issue that put people in a state where they're not really at their best. A lot of that has to do with physical and non-social things like how their workspace is set up and all that kind of stuff.

Jim Munroe ([18:10](#)):

So there's no sort of one size fits all when it comes to these things. So if people are social, they might want to do things like soccer or baseball. If people are more solitary then they might want to go for a walk. But the key thing is that there's no one size fits all kind of solution for these things because of course, game studios are made up of a diverse range of personalities and things that motivate them.

Leora Kornfeld ([18:35](#)):

Here's something for both of you. What would you say was the most surprising thing that you found from doing this research, that thing that you went in with. One assumption about, and then when you started talking to people, you found out it was something else entirely.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([18:49](#)):

One thing that I found very surprising and a little anxiety inducing was how many people I spoke to, who had RSIs so repetitive, stress injuries. People who work in games spend a lot of time on computers. And when you spend a lot of time on computers, there's a real danger that you will damage your body sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. And it was shocking to me, how many young people I spoke to who had lifelong problems with their bodies, from being hunched over a laptop. Everyone I spoke to had strong opinions on equipments and really strong opinions on making time for stretching, making time for breaks, making sure your workspace is ergonomic. And most importantly, continuing to move throughout the day. The urgency that people spoke about health was shocking. I thought I would meet a lot of people who were excited about crunch, who really wanted to get things done. And I actually met a lot of people who had lived experiences of health and lived experiences of debilitating issues with their bodies.

Leora Kornfeld ([19:58](#)):

Hm. And Jim, what about you?

Jim Munroe ([20:01](#)):

Yeah. Well, one of the interesting things that feels a little counter intuitive in a time when we're trying to not overextend people, is that sometimes assigning tests like stretch tasks is actually a very positive thing. In other words, tasks that aren't required, but would be a nice add to whatever feature or element that people are working on. As much as that can be seen as asking too much of people, if you do it in the right way, it seems that it actually has a positive benefit for fox.

Leora Kornfeld ([20:36](#)):

It's interesting both are about stretching. One is about stretching your body and the other is about stretching your capabilities. Yeah.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([20:44](#)):

When I think about the amount of people who reported RSIs repetitive stress injuries, I'm filled with a lot of concern. I don't think the way that we work right now is sustainable and this is video game specific, but I think it's also relevant to anyone working in any industry. We work these very long days and it's not healthy. I recently myself went to go buy a chair, got special chair for sitting. I was sitting on a stool that was pretty much falling apart. And I was doing these interviews with people where they were telling me over and over again, don't hunch over a laptop, don't hunch over a laptop.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([21:24](#)):

And I was listening to these interviews while hunched over a laptop and feeling the irony. And I went to go buy a chair. I realized that in share shopping, I realized that there is no perfect chair that when we're contorting our bodies and contorting our lives around a system that doesn't work, the thing that needs to change, I mean, the chair does need to change. I got a new chair. It's no longer a stool falling apart, but the thing that needs to change, isn't the chair. There's no amount of monitors in the world, and mice, and keyboards that are ergonomic that are going to help. We need to have a different balance in our work and our life.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([22:02](#)):

And this is a major change that needs to happen. It needs to happen structurally and societally, I don't think the video game industry can be the only leader in this, but absolutely things are not working. And we're only now realizing the backs of hunching over a laptop for five years, 10 years. It's definitely going to be both physical health and mental health are definitely going to be major issues in the coming years, unless we change the way we work.

Leora Kornfeld ([22:31](#)):

And both of you have spent many years specifically creating community for gamers and artists all over the world. I'm wondering what you've learned from those experiences, things that are relevant and important when we're all stuck at home, mostly alone, but we still have to get not just work done, but creative work done.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([22:50](#)):

I had no idea when I was running a nonprofit with 600 volunteers, all of us online, maybe six, seven years ago, that this was going to be one of the most relevant lessons for now for 2020 that working with people creatively online is a unique challenge. It's very hard and I think the biggest lesson, the biggest takeaway I got from working with people online, hundreds of people on creative work was that the people part really matters. The storytelling part, the people part, the feelings part, all of that is a priority. And it can be very easy to focus on the work. So we need to get this game done. We need to get these bugs fixed. We need to get this artwork done. It's very easy to focus on this game has to get done and we want to make the meeting short.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([23:46](#)):

So we'll cut all the niceties or we want to make our week short. So we'll just focus on these priority tasks and not think about anything that's a nice to have, but it's really like the interactions between people, the relationships between people, the way that people feel that makes the work happen. And it's a huge mistake to focus on the work. This is a mistake I have made in the past, focusing on to-do lists, focusing on structure, focusing on systems and forgetting that it's really people that do the work and that when you reach people on an emotional, personal level and on a level where they can actually understand you, the work gets done. And this is the lesson that I learned.

Leora Kornfeld ([24:27](#)):

So more than ever, the nice to haves are actually the need to haves.

Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan ([24:33](#)):

Absolutely the nice to haves are the need to have.

Jim Munroe ([24:35](#)):

One of the things that I've learned from sort of working with a variety of artists and creators and in a collaborative sense is of course the projects are important and you want to finish them and get them out into the world and connect with an audience and all those things, those are very valid kind of goals, but in some ways the more important kind of focus is the collaborative dynamic, is kind of making sure that that people feel valued and that people are enjoying themselves and having a good time along the way, because it's very easy to get so driven, especially in a passion driven industry to get so driven that you lose sight of the fact of how important it is to kind of enjoy the process.

Jim Munroe ([25:22](#)):

So more than ever in this unusual sort of circumstance, when there is kind of the opportunity to kind of to step back and to say, okay, what's really important. Yes, the milestones are important. Yes, finishing the game is important, but not at the expense of relationships and making sure that people are treated kindly and respected and valued through that process.

Leora Kornfeld ([25:49](#)):

And that's it for this episode of Now & Next, this podcast is brought to you by the Canada Media Fund, thanks to today's guests, Marie Claire Leblanc Flanagan, and Jim Munroe. As they mentioned, keep your eyes out for their Isolation Nation Report. You'll find it on the CMF Trends website, same place where you can find a transcript and show notes for this episode and all the episodes of this podcast. And don't forget if you're lacking what you've been hearing, you could help us out with some word of mouth

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