The Cultural Field of Video Game Production in Australia

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Abstract
Beyond the blockbuster studios and multinational publishers of North America, Western Europe, and Japan, videogame production happens in a range of contexts, at a variety of scales, and for a number of reasons. While “the videogame industry” as a sector of the economy accounts for the flow of capital between corporate actors and global markets, as a concept it is insufficient to account for the spectrum of cultural activities and identities that constitute videogame production. In this article, I instead follow Bourdieu to consider videogame production as a cultural field. The videogame field is locally situated and constituted by a contested range of activities and identities implicated in interrelated economic, cultural, and social forces. Drawing from empirical research with videogame makers in Australia, this article’s conceptualization of the videogame field provides ways to better account for the plurality of ways videogames makers navigate economic stability and creative autonomy.

Keywords
video game industry, cultural field, labor, precarity, creativity

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Introduction

The global videogame industry is now worth in excess of US$100 billion dollars. That is the statistic wheeled out to introduce countless journalistic articles (and no shortage of scholarly ones) as a shorthand for the medium’s cultural relevancy and ubiquity. Less often cited is the fact that over a third of this market is accounted for by only 5 companies and over two thirds of it is accounted for by only 25 companies (Kerr, 2017, p. 55). Talking about the videogame industry in terms of profit, market share, and employment numbers is of course useful for comprehending and tracing the movements of large multinational corporations such as Nintendo, Ubisoft, or Rockstar. It is less useful, however, if we wish to understand the cultural, social, and political context within which the overwhelming majority of videogame production activity happens: precariously, locally, at a small scale, and at a financial loss at least as often as at a profit. Many videogame makers do not consider themselves a part of “the videogame industry” at all.¹ These should hardly be radical claims; they reflect very common and well-cited experiences of most “cultural workers”:

[they] are not stars, nor are they rich or even particularly successful—in fact, the majority of cultural workers toil in relatively anonymous enterprises, either living off the erratic incomes from ‘projects’ or more conventionally on low or subsistence-level wages. (Banks, 2007, p. 10)

Yet in the cultural industry of videogames, decades of “aggressive formalization” (Keogh, 2019) mean that the largest corporations and most successful “indie” millionaires cast a long shadow that obscures a much broader field of cultural activity and struggle. As artist-gamemaker Robert Yang (2017) notes, “game dev culture has a specific idea of success that involves astronomical blockbuster commercial success, and most of us will always fall way short of it, in ways that often feel out of our control.” The videogame field is increasingly “in/formalized” (Keogh, 2019) in the way formal and informal sites of cultural work are converging. Where once there was a relatively clear divide between the high-fidelity products of the blockbuster “triple-a” industry and the amateur “mods” of the bedroom coder, today the hobbyist is just as likely to be using the same game engine as the blockbuster developer, just as likely to distribute through the same platforms and consoles, and just as likely to be written about by the same critics. This has led to fears among some sectors of the industry of a looming “indiepocalypse” and oversaturation of the market and the increased impossibility of commercial success (Wright, 2018). For others, this situation is merely videogames becoming more like every other cultural field. As Yang (2017) notes sardonically, video games must be art because “there are so many of us and we are all stressed-out and poor, and the world oppressively devalues our labor, just like all the other artists in other fields. Welcome to the club! It kind of sucks!”.

Just like in those other cultural fields, many videogame makers are not necessarily making (or even trying to make) a living from their craft but must still navigate ways
to undertake their craft sustainably and still contribute to the shape and legitimation of the field. As such, alternative means of understanding how and why different people make videogames, and in what contexts, is required.

This article draws from empirical research with Australian videogame makers to explore what it means to consider videogames seriously as a field of cultural production. Here I use “field” straightforwardly in Bourdieu’s (1980) sense of a space of connected, contested positions across which the distribution of different forms of “disavowed” symbolic capitals are translated with varying degrees of effectiveness into economic capital (p. 262). In particular, I am interested in how differently positioned gamemakers with varying amounts of power within the field deploy their cultural capital (education, taste, background, etc.) and social capital (class, relationships, networks, etc.)—or feel hindered by their lack thereof—in either pursuit or disavowal of economic capital. In other words, I am interested in the constitution of the habitus occupied by differently positioned gamemakers: the ways that “necessity [becomes] internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). Just as “the established definition of the writer may be radically transformed by an enlargement of the set of people who have a legitimate voice in literary matters” (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 323), the explosion of more accessible tools and platforms for videogame production and distribution in recent years, and the parallel rise of “videogame zinesters” (Anthropy, 2012) or “everyday gamemakers” (Young, 2018) point toward new dispositions within the videogame field, and new structures to the struggles for legitimation and capital. To adopt Bourdieu’s (1983) words (p. 323), the field of videogame production can be understood as the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of videogame maker and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the legitimate videogame maker.2

The videogame maker, like all cultural workers, “exists at the very axis point of political struggle between the forces of art and commerce [and must] balance the desire to indulge in disinterested, creative self-expression against the necessity of accumulation” (Banks, 2007, pp. 8–9). At a time where the realities and variances of gamework in various contexts is coming under closer scrutiny (Crogan, 2018; Whitsone, Simon, & Parker, 2018), just how gamework is positioned discursively (as cultural work, as software development, as entrepreneurism) has tangible ramifications on government funding models, game development education curriculums, and the canonization or marginalization of different genres and communities. This article thus follows Banks’s (2007, p. 8) call for more empirically grounded investigations into the lives of cultural workers by demonstrating the contexts and identities of the broader range of videogame makers that constitute the videogame field, of which the videogame industry is but a dominant subset. It aims to provide a better understanding of just who makes videogames, in what contexts, and for what reasons.
Doing so contributes to a growing recognition within game studies that more empirical, locally grounded work is needed in the area of what is coming to be called “game production studies”. In *Global Games*, Kerr (2017) provides an extensive analysis of the political economy of the global games industry and demonstrates how this “global” videogame industry is intrinsically and intimately *trans-local*, arguing that to comprehend global videogame production is to understand videogame production in specific local contexts and local-to-local interactions (p. 201). Other researchers have been applying this local lens in a range of contexts such as Canada (Joseph, 2013; Whitson et al., 2018), the Nordic countries (Jørgensen, Sandqvist, & Sotamaa, 2017), and (historical) Czechoslovakia (Švelch, 2018). Australia is an ideal case study through which to further develop these understandings of localized videogame making activity. While the history of Australian videogame making has been told in a number of places (Apperley & Golding, 2015; Banks & Cunningham, 2016; Banks, 2013; Swalwell, 2012), it is sufficient to say here that around the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008, an industry of midsized studios dependent on U.S. investment and contracts was obliterated. Between the 2007 and 2012 national censuses, the number of Australians working in the videogame sector shrunk by 60% from 1,431 to 581, but during the same period, the number of registered videogame *companies* in Australia grew by 87%, from 45 to 84 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Taking advantage of increasingly accessible development tools, the increased normalization of digital distribution storefronts, and the ubiquity of smartphone devices, both unemployed industry veterans and game degree graduates facing a shrinking job market increasingly began to create their own small studios. While a handful of these studios have grown to sizes between 20 and 50 employees (and one, EA Firemonkeys, to approximately 150), as of 2017, the average size of an Australian game studio company was only nine people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), with many others working in much smaller and informal teams, solo projects, or flitting between projects as a contractor. The vacuum created by the Australian industry’s collapse in the late 2000s has rendered visible a nascent and varied ecosystem, where a vast range of cultural workers encompass a diverse range of values and activities that can’t be adequately accounted for if one only considers the Australian “videogame industry”. Instead, we must discuss the Australian videogame field.

The research for this article was undertaken as part of an Australian Research Council grant to study the sustainability of Australian videogame production. Crucial to achieving this was to account for the actual lives and ambitions of Australian videogame producers, rather than relying on those purely economic and industrial metrics that often have little connection to the lived experiences of those within a field. Thus, throughout 2018, I conducted 150 in-person semistructured interviews in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart, and Adelaide, primarily with videogame makers in varying socioeconomic contexts but also with game development students and educators, cultural intermediaries such as representatives of funding bodies and cultural institutions, and representatives of industry advocacy bodies.
An online survey that requested participation from “people in Australia who contribute to the making of videogames” was also released, and this received 288 responses. What was striking across the responses was an articulation of videogame making as primarily an act of creative expression but one which also requires a consideration of economic feasibility and local, global, and trans-local sociality. In the sections that follow, I thus take seriously Banks’s (2007) argument that comprehending cultural work requires the adopting of a more open view that accounts for how cultural workers are “implicated in an array of economic, cultural, and social forces” (p. 184) that are interrelated, contested, and irresolvable. Through the often-contradictory articulations of different Australian videogame makers, I focus on how gamemakers navigate this field of economic, cultural, and social forces and how the videogame field functions as a field of struggles to either “transform or conserve” the current flow of these forces (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 312).

The first section considers the economic situation of Australian videogame makers, revealing a range of contingent and precarious means of existence that are often hidden behind the romanticized language of “entrepreneurism” and “going indie.” The second section looks at the other side of this coin: the “creative control” that seemingly justifies such precarity. Thirdly, the article turns to the social context of these art–commerce struggles, highlighting how the different dispositions within the videogame field ultimately demonstrate the irresolvable heterogeneity of the field. Throughout this analysis, my goal is not to claim some grand new theory is required to comprehend the unique context of videogame production but, rather, that videogame production needs to be made mundane and understood more banally (but more complexly) as not a grandiose global industry but simply as just another partially commodified and perpetually contested cultural field alongside many others, within which a range of cultural workers interact.

**Gamemakers and Economic Sustainability**

Videogames, like many cultural productions, are both project-driven and hit-driven. Creating a videogame has many upfront costs (labor, workspace, hardware, software) with little predictability as to when (or if) sales will ever recover these costs. Traditionally, such risk was covered by a publisher’s investment in exchange for a share of the profits. For most independent gamemakers such as those that dominate the Australian field, however, a publisher is not an option. Even those few teams that sign with a boutique “indie publisher” such as Devolver Digital (see Vanderhoef, 2019) have typically already invested significant personal resources and “sweat equity” into the project before any external injection of funds. Independent gamemakers are instead dependent on a range of distribution and development “platforms” such as the Steam marketplace and the Unity game engine. These platforms take a cut of the sales, regulate terms of service, but offload much of the responsibilities of development and distribution back onto the gamemakers themselves (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Whitson, 2019). Thus, for
gamemakers working beyond the dominant videogame industry, there is little choice but to become a self-invested “entrepreneur”—or, in the language more commonly used by videogame makers, indie.

The overwhelming majority of videogames produced in Australia are publicly framed as indie games, from narrative-driven experiences such as Mountain’s Florence and Ghost Pattern’s Wayward Strand, to experimental puzzle games such as Ian MacLarty’s Disassembler and The Voxel Agents’s The Gardens Between. Indie as a category of cultural production has many contested political and ideological connotations. In videogame production, indie grew to prominence in the mid-2000s to give cultural credibility to a range of independent modes of production that were explicitly not the dominant blockbuster industry (Lipkin, 2013). But as Apperley and Golding (2015) note, the studios that “would have once been labelled “indie” or at least as outside the mainstream [now] form the backbone of Australian game development” (p. 61). In a local context such as Australia, the “mainstream” industry is absent, and consequentially, going indie is the necessary taking up of a disposition within the videogame field of cultural entrepreneurism where one “accumulate[s] specifically cultural capital, albeit at the cost of temporarily renouncing economic profit” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 268).

In their own research, Whitson, Simon, and Parker (2018) find that independent Canadian gamemakers “increasingly leverage techniques of entrepreneurship without sharing its end goals” (p. 6). While on the surface many independent videogame makers look like—and publicly adapt the language of—tech startups and entrepreneurs, their self-stated end goals as cultural producers are typically less defined in terms of “growing a studio in scale or profit” and more “with the simple capacity to ‘keep on keeping on’” (p. 7). As one of my own participants put succinctly: “survival and success often look awfully similar when you’re trying to run an indie games studio.” Even this modest goal—economic sustainability, rather than profitability—is a yet-to-be-obtained long-term goal for many Australian videogame makers, with no clear or certain path forward to reach it. Others had achieved a level of sustainability and are, as one participant put it, “more than one flop away from failure,” but rarely felt they had any sort of long-term security in their videogame making work. Economic sustainability was rarely a checkpoint that had been reached but instead a consistent struggle to maintain.

Participants deployed a range of precarious and contingent means of staying afloat as they worked on their videogames, from living off personal savings or a partner’s stable income, unemployment or student government welfare, a “second” job that was their primary source of income,3 government funding that often covered costs but rarely salaries, or finding creative ways to do the accounting so as to pay themselves below minimum wage:

The first year and few months I was entirely full-time on this project and just living off savings and my partner’s support . . . I think I’m pretty close to having put in two years of unpaid work into it so far.
If we don’t have the money then we can start to be like alright I’ll make a personal loan to [our company] and then [the company] can pay me back when [it] has money. . . . We’re just waiting for that hit to then be like alright we have enough to pay back all these loans and then start paying wages but probably that will never happen.

To stress, such responses are not just typical from those gamemakers creating videogames in an informal setting but are also true of studios and groups producing commercial titles that have received international press attention and awards, and which are being produced for dominant platforms such as Nintendo’s Switch and Sony’s PlayStation 4. Such scrappiness speaks to just how entangled formal and informal settings of gamemaking practices have become in local videogame fields.

Indie game development is thus exemplary of what Oakley (2014) notes is the increasingly common “forced entrepreneurship” (p. 149) of cultural industries workers taking up self-employment and contract work as the only opportunity to adapt to worsening and more contingent work conditions. Similarly, Lobato and Thomas (2015) differentiate between “opportunity entrepreneurs” who “are the classic self-starting go-getters” and “necessity entrepreneurs” who find themselves barred from this kind of action because they are locked out of certain markets or lack the required capital to get a conventional business set up, or as a result of some kind of discrimination. They improvise and get by however they can. (p. 49)

For those forced into the disposition of indie game entrepreneurism, traditional support structures are dismantled as the individual becomes responsible for fronting the costs of every project, and thus “everyday work takes on a quality of individual, ad hoc enterprise, whether they like it or not” (Lobato & Thomas, 2015, p. 49). McRobbie (2016) sees this as a process of individualization that is endemic to neoliberal societies generally but which is especially visible in the cultural industries. People are forced to “become their own micro-structures[,] they have to do the work of the structures by themselves, which in turn requires intensive practices of self-monitoring, or ‘reflexivity’” (p. 19).

This was most vivid among Australian videogame makers when I asked what I thought would be a very simply introductory question: “What is your job title?” Rather than responses like “senior gameplay designer” or “junior programmer” or “associate producer,” I received responses such as:

I guess I’m most comfortable calling myself a designer. I’m currently cross-discipline, but in terms of a business title I’m a creative leader at a very tiny indie partnership.

At the moment my job title is a lot of little things. I guess primarily game developer but for this current project it’s creative director, lead designer, and producer.

We don’t particularly have job-titles.
Rather than the specialist nature of industrialized videogame production, in these small (and often overlapping and fluid) teams, individuals take on a wide-reaching and ambiguous range of creative and business responsibilities that do not easily fit within the accepted categories provided by the field’s dominant industrial dispositions. This echoes findings by Whitson et al. (2018) among Canadian indie development teams that often forgo hiring an explicit producer to instead distribute (unevenly) the producer responsibilities across the existing team. In small teams, individual creators take on more of the responsibilities, cost, and risk of production.

Thus, indie videogame makers are exemplary constituents of what McRobbie (2016) identifies as the creativity dispositif: a wide-reaching structure of (self-)governance that harnesses the positive and individualizing language of “following your dreams” and “being creative” to offer “a future template for being middle class and learning to live without welfare protection and social security” (p. 11). Crucially, however, gamemakers spoken to for this project often articulate that as volatile as their current situation is, it is better than being a part of the dominant industry’s larger studios, with their well-documented issues of crunch, unpaid overtime, and sexual discrimination (see Banks, 2013; de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005; O’Donnell, 2014). This is especially true of those older gamemakers who had lived through the extensive studio closures of the GFC, but younger gamemakers, too, were articulate on a range of industry issues such as crunch, unionization, and discrimination. However, the same gamemakers making these critiques of the industry are also often underpaying themselves or working extensive hours so as to be able to continue making their own games. One participant, when asked why he was willing to take a massive pay cut to work on his own game out of his bedroom, despite his insistence that all his contractors should get paid fairly for their labor, justifies it thus:

It’s difficult because like I am very tired and I’ve been working six or seven days a week pretty much all year and yes it’s quite upsetting not being able to say yes to go to a friend’s wedding or not being able to save money or even think about buying a house or anything like that. The way I can justify it is that I’m still contributing to an IP [Intellectual Property] and that IP is owned by the company that we own, so we’re still building something that has value. That’s the way I justify it in terms of commercial living expenses.

At first glance, this situation seems indistinguishable of the crunch conditions experienced in large studios. But for the gamemaker in question, their ownership of the fruit of their labor goes some way to justify their circumstances or at least to distinguish it from the crunch of larger firms. Here, we can see clearly how a determinate habitus facilitates particular dispositions toward the videogame field by its constituents, with values and ambitions shaped, in part, by necessity.

Other participants, however, take a starkly opposite approach to economic sustainability as autonomous cultural workers. In each city, I found small studios (many
of whom still identified themselves as indie) outsourcing their gamemaking skill sets to clients beyond the entertainment sector: marketing firms, educational institutions, architecture firms, hospitals, and the military. These studios were taking advantage of an increased enthusiasm for the pedagogical potential of videogames being applied as training simulators, advergames, and serious games in exchange for a fee. Such work replaces the volatility of creating original cultural works for an unpredictable and crowded marketplace with the certainty of a clearly articulated project and a predetermined fee. Such videogame makers fit squarely within definitions of embedded cultural workers (Cunningham, 2014): A significant but often ignored sector of cultural workers working beyond the traditional borders of the cultural sphere, using their skill sets for instrumental or applied—rather than symbolic or aesthetic—intentions.

Overwhelmingly, when asked why they had chosen to work in such a sector instead of producing more traditional videogames, embedded gamemakers referred to the stability and predictability of income but also caveated that they do want to create their own original intellectual property “one day”:

Three months of dev work for us with the defence sector generally averages around $350,000 worth of contracting. So that eclipses what a lot of the indie dev teams here have to work with for even a 12-month period... So when we look at defence contracts we’re looking at what the margins are so that we can actually put them into a big chest somewhere and then maybe bankroll our own game... Like everyone [here] wants to be working on games for a consumer audience but you know we don’t have the war chest right now to be able to facilitate that.

There’s a lot of frustrations in working with clients and not getting to express your sort of creative flair a little bit. I think we’re all hoping to head toward that direction. We just need to figure out how to do it while still paying the bills and keeping clients on.

Whereas many Australian gamemakers are willing to make financial sacrifices to “do what they love”—to make games for games’ sake—the embedded gamemakers alternatively make creative sacrifices in order to achieve financial sustainability. The economic realities and strategies of these varied videogame makers also point to the fact that gamework cannot be reduced to purely economic realities. As one participant put it: “if we were more in it for money we would probably not have picked games as an industry in the first place.” We must then take seriously the question: Why else do videogame makers undertake this work if not for a stable income?

**Gamemakers and Creative Expression**

Whether they were programmers or designers or artists, solo-developers or part of a small team or employed in a 10-person studio, creating original IP or undertaking
client projects, participants were near unanimous in their articulation that their main driver for creating videogames was for some sort of creative fulfillment or creative control—in short, to express themselves. The economic struggles detailed in the previous section might suggest that this broader field of gamemakers, shouldering the responsibilities and costs of cultural work so as to pursue their passion, are being exploited or are even self-exploiting. However, such an assessment reduces a wide range of reasons cultural workers undertake cultural work to purely commercial ones and, in doing so, risks embracing the same neoliberal structures that the gamemakers themselves are seemingly oppressed by. Indeed, some participants had consciously decided to not commodify their gamemaking activities at all, instead choosing to undertake it in their free time around other work. For these participants (who still distributed their work publicly and directly contributed to the cultural capital of local scenes), this was articulated less as a form of necessary self-exploitation and more as a way to consciously avoid the self-exploitation and precarity demanded of commodifying one’s cultural work:

I feel really lucky that it’s not my job. I can do it on the side at my own pace and I get to enjoy it more. I’m worried if it was a full-time job maybe I wouldn’t enjoy it and... I would be more a cog in the machine than have any real creative control and I definitely like games as a creative outlet.

I enjoy the lack of stress and emotional investment that comes with publishing free-ware. I also believe there’s something to be said for exploring games that don’t have “financial viability” as a core design pillar. On the other hand, I’d like to be able to find more time for game dev. It’s somewhat of a trade-off.

I came into game design through art firstly, so in the most pretentious way I’m happy to keep this as my art and I don’t mind if it’s not [making money]... My plan is not necessarily to charge for games or make them specifically for the goal of making money.

Other gamemakers, especially those who saw their gamemaking as a small part of a broader cross-disciplinary creative practice, saw the struggles of making money nonchalantly as part and parcel of doing cultural work: “if you’re doing any other creative field the baseline is that the thing you make won’t make you money.”

This is a crucial reminder that videogames are not exclusively an industry themselves, nor are they exclusively a part of a “tech” or “software” industry, even if that is how studios are commonly positioned in popular discourses. Instead, making videogames is cultural work and is primarily undertaken by gamemakers to pursue some sort of symbolic or aesthetic expression, even as they must negotiate how to make ends meet at the same time. It is the range of different positions and identities held by different gamemakers in the negotiation between economic sustainability and creative autonomy within a social context that constitutes videogame production as a cultural field.
Making sense of participants’ justifications of uncommodified gamemaking work is complex and sensitive. On the one hand, such quotes feel like textbook examples of the fetishization of “creativity” that individualizes cultural work as a means of disassociating creative labor “from traditional notions of what might make a good workplace (order, planning, efficiency, democracy, mutuality, security and stability)” (Banks, 2007, p. 92). As McRobbie (2016) notes, even the supposedly independent choice to opt out of the need to commodify one’s cultural craft is itself one of “the stealthy ways in which the new capitalism seems to absolve itself from responsibility by creating invisible structures” (p. 23). A clear example of this in the videogame field is Ruberg’s (2019) analysis of how the videogame industry directly extracts the cultural capital generated by the precarious labor of marginal queer indie gamemakers. As scholars, taking claims of desire for unremunerated creative expression at face value risks further reinforcing such exploitative structures.

But on the other hand, as McRobbie (2016) recalls from a conversation with her own student who worked as both a DJ and a club promoter,

entrepreneurial activities could be seen as a form of “making do,” a means of creating a space within a system that is so all-encompassing that it is difficult to imagine an alternative [, to] have seemingly circumvented unhappy work and to have come upon a way of earning a living without the feeling of being robbed of identity or of ability. (pp. 22–23)

Similarly, Banks (2007) sees within cultural work not only the nexus of soft capitalism’s individualizing forces but the potential to “furnish workers with opportunities to pilot or recover ‘alternative’ forms of production that prioritize aesthetically directed ‘artistic,’ ‘practice-led,’ or ‘ethical’ values alongside, or in advance of, the pursuit of profit” (p. 183). Such contested perspectives on whether the dispositions of these videogame makers is one of either being exploited by or finding ways to escape from the invisible structures of contemporary capitalism is not just a scholarly question but one hotly contested by Australian videogame makers themselves, who were regularly articulate and self-reflexive on their own position-taking within the videogame field. For those participants consciously choosing to create and circulate videogames beyond the commodified, formalized videogame industry, the sense of creating alternative, ethical, and artistic modes and spaces of gamemaking was explicit.

Demonstrative of this are the following two quotes from different Melbourne-based participants, with directly conflicting articulations on the different positions they hold within the same local field:

I’ve found that before the industry and the scene decided to be friends the arts people were really happy hanging out making cool shit, talking about cool shit, pushing really hard for gender diversity. We were all around Melbourne doing our thing and having a
good time. And then only in the last year or so the industry has sort of opened up to us and I think the scene has kind of opened up to the industry . . . The wants of that scene were to make good art and to make stuff that was very ethically considerate and inclusive, genre-defining, medium-pushing shit. When that stuff started to become commercially viable, which it has in the last two years, and we found people with money and people with studios coming and saying oh shit this is cool, this has an audience, this is hip, we want to make this stuff, [they broke] up that scene with their money and their opportunities. I feel like that’s when it’s become political and that’s when it’s become really difficult to enjoy it. When it wasn’t surrounded by money and we were all still able to get by, it was a delight.

It’s always really interesting finding that kind of pressure between creative and commercial. I think it’s the biggest sticking point with games and I get very excited when you can combine the two, but obviously that’s not always going to be the case. [Some people say] ‘I’m interested in it purely for a creative side’ and, bless you, that’s wonderful, I’m glad you don’t have a mortgage, good for you. Like if you can just make games for the fuck of it what a position of privilege are you in! . . . If you don’t have to commercialize it then all power to you but you know if you want to keep talent that’s got the skills then you need to commercialize it. The older we get the more we cost to run, and we have families we need to support.

These two positions exemplify Bourdieu’s (1983) point that “the history of [a] field arises from the struggle between the established figures and the [socially, not necessarily biologically] young challengers” (p. 339). Whereas the former participant articulates how a dominant videogame “industry” (itself an industry of self-identifying indie developers) appropriated the energy of a videogame “scene,” the latter perceives that scene as itself hegemonic in its youthful members’ supposed ability to disavow the accruement of economic capital in the pursuit of cultural capital. Each articulates a specific position in tension with the other, and it is at that tension, at the intersection of artistic and commercial concerns, that the videogame field is constituted. But each draws attention, too, to a third force: the social. As “the cultural dimension of cultural work . . . cannot be understood in isolation from the social context that significantly (if not absolutely) defines it” (Banks, 2007, p. 385), the final section of this article turns to the social contexts within which my participants navigate the art–commerce tension as Australian videogame makers.

**Gamemakers and Their Social Context**

Gamemaking has been conceptualized as requiring narrowly disciplined workers collaborating in large, interdisciplinary teams (Banks, 2013) and as demanding an intense level of secrecy and self-censorship so as to protect a firm’s intellectual and technological properties (O’Donnell, 2014). Such understandings remain accurate for how the large blockbuster studios and publishers of North America, Japan, and Western Europe function. In Australia, however, small, often overlapping, teams;
shoestring budgets; and a general lack of access to resources have radically restructured the formal videogame industry as one more porous with the broader informal field. This social context was central to how participants talked about their own craft, situation, and daily practice.

Particularly formative, appearing repeatedly in interviews was “the crash” that decimated the Australian industry after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. This crash functions as something of an origin story for the Australian’s field’s current shape, struggles, and successes:

After the decimation of the industry that happened after the GFC, there’s definitely not that [secretive culture] anymore. I think if you tried to do that here, you’d be laughed at […] I think there’s an attitude of collaboration and helping people out that I think you only get out of adversity and everyone panicking about survival.

Everybody here is making different games. There’s no concept that we’re stealing users from one another. Like, all of us want to steal users from Supercell or Valve, but there’s no sense of personal stuff. Whereas before [the GFC] a publisher would have one deal to hand out and they’d be talking to the four Australian studios and one of them would get it. That’s a way different competitive environment.

While the Australian videogame field is certainly comparable to the many other gamemaking regions not populated by large blockbuster studios, it also possesses its own unique social contexts that mediate how its constituents position themselves. While in Canada, for instance, Parker and Jenson (2017) identified no real sense of national identity among independent developers who instead prioritized local and trans-local communities of practice, the devastation of the GFC provides Australian videogame makers a joint narrative and a sense of shared struggle—a collective sense of having survived the war together and being closer for it.

This solidarity as Australian videogame makers primarily comes to fruition in the form of a “club-culture” or “networked” sociality that McRobbie (2016) identifies as a core aspect of “the new relation between art and economies [that] marks a break with past anti-commercial notions of being creative” (p. 22). Club-culture sociality refers to the informal labor markets that grew out of dance/rave culture to evolve into “more hard-nosed networking” and “selling the self” (p. 22). Here, a very explicit (and explicitly commodified) form of social capital becomes important in the absence of economic capital. When asked how they got into gamemaking, participants regularly told stories of chance encounters and connections at social gatherings or networking events. For small, ad hoc teams often hiring people on fixed-term contracts or informal profit-share arrangements, existing personal relationships are often more important than the qualifications on a curriculum vitae, and so for the contemporary gamemaker, always seeking the next project for their “portfolio career” (Kerr, 2017, p. 186), participating in out-of-business-hours socializing and devoting time and effort to one’s social media presence become crucial means of picking up new projects.
More than personal branding and gig acquirement, this networked sociality is vital for sharing resources and skills. In each city visited for this research, there existed at least one coworking space for small teams and individuals dedicated to game work, and these coworking spaces often became social and professional hubs for the local field. Participants occupying these spaces often told stories of opportunities and collaborations emerging from proximity, such as one team obtaining a client contract due to the neighboring team needing to offload work, or an individual with experience of a specific platform being subcontracted to port an existing game from a different platform. A team hoping to achieve that vital day-one front-page feature on a store website might acquire contacts at Apple or Valve from a team with a preexisting relationship. A more experienced gamemaker might offer advice to a more inexperienced team in terms of implementing a specific technical feature or, more mundanely, how to do their company taxes or apply for government funding. If, in an increasingly contingent and individualized project-based workforce, “there can be no workplace politics when there is no workplace” (McRobbie, 2002, p. 522), then coworking spaces offer one site where cultural workers can rebuild solidarity and social ties (de Peuter, Cohen, & Saraco, 2017; Gregg, 2018). While many coworking spaces are run for profit and potentially intensify the effects of entrepreneurial precarious labor they ostensibly work to address, or risk physically defining an “in” and an “out” crowd of a local scene, they are also regularly held up by Australian gamemakers as crucial to their work and for them to feel part of a broader community or scene.

While this collaborative and open nature of the videogame field in Australia seems to have potential to dismantle the “developer dilemma” imposed by top-down secretive corporate firms that O’Donnell (2014) identifies as preventing workplace reform across the global videogame industry, it is once again crucial we do not romanticize it. The specific social context of the Australian videogame field and the contingent nature of its workers as described in the above sections of this article pose their own challenges and potentially hegemonic forces. The quotes at the end of the previous section, for instance, point to the ageist nature of independent videogame making, and the impossibility of sustaining such work as one gets older or wishes to start a family or buy property—never mind those who even at a young age cannot afford to take such financial risks or commit the time required by a club-culture sociality. Meanwhile, while the destruction of the old industry in Australian tellingly saw gender diversity among Australian gamemakers more than double from 8.7% in 2012 to 20% in 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Game Developers Association of Australia, 2018), women and gender diverse people remain disproportionately disadvantaged by the contingent nature of videogame production in Australia. As one participant actively involved in advocacy groups for gender diverse gamemakers articulated, even if the local field is ideologically more progressive and less explicitly misogynistic and fraternal than the dominant industry:
There’s other ways to be hostile to women that aren’t about someone twirling their moustache and being an evil misogynist. There’s just ways that people don’t really think about until someone on the team gets pregnant or until they hire their first woman and go ‘What? you need three days leave each month because you have endometriosis and really debilitating periods?’ . . . A lot of other disciplines and art industries are introducing stuff like menstrual leave and we look at games and, oof, we haven’t even figured out maternity leave yet or childcare? Why doesn’t The Arcade [coworking space in Melbourne] have a childcare in it? Or subsidise it on behalf of people? They’re things that contribute to a hostile community to women without actually hating them.

What are we to make of a diversifying, more self-assuredly progressive, political, and accessible videogame field that also disproportionately disadvantages older workers, nonmale workers, and other marginalized groups? Ultimately that in this intensely in/formal field of increased opportunities but drastically decreased structural support, the embodiment of specific social capitals is still very much privileged and is more likely to generate the legitimized habitus that stabilizes a gamemaker’s disposition within the field. More Australian gamemakers are able than ever before to get a foot in the door but lack either the financial or the structural support to advance much further than that.

Conclusion

This article contributes to ongoing efforts to localize analyses of the ostensibly global videogame industry with empirically grounded observations of specific gamemaking regions. In particular, by focusing on how Australian videogame makers articulate their own navigations of economic sustainability, creative freedom, and social context, this article has complicated what I believe are too-narrow understandings of videogame work and identity as, simplistically, commercial work and identity. Instead, I have drawn attention to a much broader cultural field of videogame production within which a diverse heterogeneity of makers persistently struggle to define just what it means to be a videogame maker at all.

In doing so, it has not been my intention to simply romanticize videogame making work at the field’s fringes as more “creative” or “artistic” but to provide an account that more accurately reflects the (often contradictory) range of reasons why people pursue videogame making in the first place that are not accounted for when one considers videogames as solely an industry of centralized “professionals” and peripheral “amateurs.” To paraphrase Banks (2007, p. 8) as cited in this article’s introduction, if we are to understand the videogame maker’s work as work, we must empirically understand their working lives—their struggles, their motivations, their position within and disposition toward the broader field. If we are to fully understand videogames and their creators’ labor in relation to the cultural, political, and social capitals generated and exchanged, we need to understand how videogame makers, like all cultural workers, navigate art–commerce tensions in particular social
contexts and how, in doing so in a range of different ways, they constitute videogame production as a cultural field.

Perhaps the greatest limitation on this current article is that it remains focused at the national level. Australia is a large country. While there are clear commonalities and a sense of national identity among Australian gamemakers as detailed, there are also local variations and specificities to different cities and states that have not been explored here. For instance, the state of Victoria offers extensive cultural funding through the Film Victoria agency that is not matched in any other state nor at a federal level. Further, there are drastic differences in digital access and literacy between Australia’s dense urban centers and extensive rural areas that have not been touched upon here. Little attention has been paid here also to the “trans-local” (Kerr, 2017) fields of digital networks that connect a Melbourne-based videogame maker to a London-based or New York-based videogame maker as readily as to a Sydney-based maker. Any one of these scales of analysis—a local field, a regional field, a national field, a trans-local field, a global field—would offer its own unique insights, complexities, and contradictions. But in this article, in focusing on a national framing, I hope to challenge and destabilize nominally global accounts of the videogame industry that have only ever applied to a select few cities in North America, Western Europe, and Japan.

The goal, ultimately, is to account for different dispositions toward gamemaking as all specifically positioned within, and in turn constituting, a videogame field. One participant captured both the need and the urgency of this task with an analogy that has stuck with me throughout this project:

Being in it for the money isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Look at the market on a Sunday morning, right? You look at all the jewellery stores. Some of the people make everything from scratch themselves, by hand. And then some of them buy it all from overseas and sell it on. They’re both making jewellery; they’re both in the jewellery making business; they’re both in the jewellery selling business; they have the same kind of market that they’re pushing towards. . . . And I think people understand very clearly the difference between the handmade bespoke thing and the mass-produced thing. In games we don’t really have any way to differentiate the support that is available to each one . . . And if you don’t want to pay 80 bucks for that necklace that has semi-precious jewels in it, and you’d rather pay 15 bucks for the plastic one, no one is forcing you to buy the other one. Just go to that store over there. Like there’s room for each and I think the whole ‘for profit’ and ‘not profit driven’, ‘art games versus not art games’ discourse within games is really really toxic because it means we’re fighting with each other instead of getting shit done and also trying to think of best practices and trying to help each other as well . . . . So I think if we look at analogies like the jewellery thing, that’s a more productive place to have a conversation than bringing values into it, by associating like a profit motivation as being inherently bad. It’s not . . . . So it’s just a matter of finding a new way to discuss things and having that space.
Just as one easily understands both the differences and similarities of the two jewellery sellers, we need ways to understand the different positions and dispositions of videogame makers as all sharing—all constituting—a cultural field of videogame production.

In Australia, in the absence (or indeed the vacuum) of those large multinational firms that commonly stand in for a synecdoche of a much broader videogame field of different positions and struggles and identities, the economic, cultural, and social forces underlining videogame work are much more vividly visible, and much more hotly contested. Looking at and taking seriously the lived experiences of videogame makers within a videogame field across economic, artistic, and social axes provides an opportunity to consider the fuller range of dispositions held by videogame makers within a videogame field and to ask what a cultural field of videogame production might look like beyond the extractive and top-heavy paradigms of the videogame industry as it has been traditionally structured since at least the mid-1980s.

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Notes
1. Throughout this article, I use the general terms “videogame maker” and “gamemaker” interchangeably in lieu of the more narrowly defined and more technologically connotative “videogame developer.” While “developer” is widely used in the industry, many game-makers I spoke to did not feel such a term accounted for their work, and so I have avoided the term here.
2. Others have also used Bourdieu’s concept of the field in relation to videogames. Most notably, Graeme Kirkpatrick outlines the constitution of what he calls “the gaming field” (2012). Importantly, Kirkpatrick is more concerned with a field of videogame consumption cultures, whereas here I am concerned with a field of videogame production. While the two
clearly interrelate and overlap in a range of ways, Kirkpatrick’s “gaming field” and my “cultural field of videogame production” or “videogame field” are not interchangeable.

3. Just as a number of participants referred to their main source of income as their “second” job (with their primary job their videogame making activity), Bourdieu (1983) notes that “The ‘profession’ of [the] artist is one of the least professionalized there are . . . . This is shown clearly by . . . the problems which arise in classifying these agents, who are able to exercise what they regard as their main occupation only on condition that they have a secondary occupation which provides their main income” (p. 324). This problem of classification speaks directly to the intensely in/formal nature of contemporary videogame production and the limitations of only tracking formally employed gamemakers in order to surmise the constitution of the videogame field.

4. A secondary contribution to this sense of shared struggle was the sudden axing of the Australian Interactive Games Fund in 2014 by the new conservative government only 12 months after its implementation. Not just ignored by the Federal Government, many Australian videogame makers felt directly targeted, thus strengthening a national narrative of “doing it tough” without external support.

5. I am indebted to my reviewer for providing the way of making sense of this particular quote in relation to this article’s broader theoretical argument.

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