

## Introduction

“I just want to get better and make cool stuff.”

This was the 60th interview I had conducted with an Australian game-maker. My participant was Nicole Williams, a 23-year-old artist who had, three weeks prior, become the fourth employee at an independent game studio in Melbourne. We were sitting on brightly colored beanbags in the common area of The Arcade, a coworking space in Melbourne’s inner south, housing many of the city’s growing number of videogame companies. Williams and I had already discussed their background and education, and what they found challenging and enjoyable about being involved in videogame production. Then I asked the dreaded question: “Where do you see yourself in five years?” Previous responses had, regardless of the discipline or seniority of the gamemaker being interviewed, typically included nervous laughter, blown raspberries, semi-joking accusations that it was a cruel question, reinterpretations of the question to be about “dream jobs,” and, on two occasions, tears. Williams spent some time in silence, thinking about their answer, before shrugging and waving off the careerist pretensions of the question: “I just want to get better and make cool stuff.”

This response stayed with me in the subsequent years of the research project that has led to this book. In lieu of any access to long-term job security or predictable career trajectories, more young workers are joining the ranks of what Silvio Lorusso (2019) has labeled the *entreprenariat*, focusing on investing in their own skills and networks—“getting better”—and on the intrinsic reward of creative fulfillment—“making cool stuff.” Williams’s vague but intrinsic ambitions highlight the increasingly individualized focus of young workers in the cultural industries who, confronted with increased precarity and decreased long-term employment prospects,

are conscious that they need to build portfolio careers by “becoming [their] own enterprise” (McRobbie 2016, 20).

But Williams’s response stuck with me for contrasting reasons too. It captured an aspect of making videogames that was ubiquitous across my interviews but which academic, popular, and industrial discourses rarely consider in detail: that those who create videogames—those I am calling “gamemakers”<sup>1</sup>—often have working lives and subjectivities that are structured less like tech workers and more like cultural workers—that is, artists, musicians, actors, writers, and so on. They are driven by cultural and creative desires to express themselves and improve their craft, and they often accept situations of extreme job precarity and low (or no) pay in order to achieve this. At the same time, they are often conscious and articulate of the notorious work conditions within videogame companies such as excessive and unpaid overtime, misogyny and harassment, and aggressive individualization (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Legault and Weststar 2017). Many gamemakers I interviewed expressed, on the one hand, a deep political consciousness of how the rhetoric of passion and creativity have long been used to exploit and underpay professional gamemakers and, on the other hand, a strongly articulated desire to nonetheless prioritize improving their craft and making good art over obtaining financial security.

It’s become common practice, to the point of cliché, to begin any piece of writing about videogame production by proclaiming that “the videogame industry” generates over a hundred billion dollars every year—perhaps more than any other entertainment sector, depending on what revenue sources you include or omit (Kerr 2006, 51; Hesmondhalgh 2018, 316). This total generated revenue has become a reactionary shorthand in journalism articles, policy documents, academic research, and trade association reports for the economic and cultural significance of videogames. Once relegated to the sidelines of cultural relevancy at best, actively excluded at worst, champions of the videogame medium now hold up the revenue generated by the top videogame firms as proof that videogames do, in fact, matter.

But this financial measurement of videogames’ worth is far removed from the individual ambitions and work conditions of a 23-year-old Melbourne artist working in a four-person team who wants to “get better and make cool stuff.” Indeed, this is true literally in a geographic sense: the top 25 global companies in terms of revenue generated from videogames all

have ownership concentrated in North America, western Europe, or East Asia (*NewZoo* 2020). But it is also true in terms of what we imagine “the videogame industry” to be, how we imagine it to operate, and who we think belongs to it. While videogame production is most commonly imagined as happening in large, multinational corporations with campus-sized studios producing Hollywood-quality blockbusters for home consoles, today there are just as many gamemakers working in teams smaller than five people as there are working in teams larger than 250 (Game Developers Conference 2021, 22). The majority of gamemakers now use preexisting technological frameworks and software tools, such as the Unity and Unreal game engines, and produce much smaller videogames for digital platforms, such as Apple’s App Store or Valve’s Steam marketplace. Instead of relying on resources supplied by a publisher in exchange for copyright ownership, more and more gamemakers fund their work with their own savings (albeit sometimes subsidized by government grants, private investment, or a partner’s income), hoping against hope that the investment will pay off—even though it rarely ever does. Just like most musicians, most actors, most writers, and most painters, most gamemakers won’t make much money from their gamemaking activity, if they make anything at all. But most gamemakers know this. They nonetheless want to get better and make cool stuff.

The central claim of this book is that a disconnect exists between the diverse range of lived experiences, identities, ambitions, work conditions, communities, and skills of videogame makers, and the ways in which videogame production is typically understood and depicted by researchers, journalists, policymakers, education institutions, and gamemakers themselves as narrowly happening within the domain of a lucrative and centralized videogame industry. “The videogame industry” as a concept, as a defined and distinctive area of commercial activity, only accounts for a small, particularly lucrative, and geographically concentrated aspect of gamemaking activity while failing to account for a much broader and complex range of gamemaking identities, cultures, and sites. This did not happen by accident. After the first videogames were created by hobbyists, students, and tinkerers in the late 1960s, commercial firms and entrepreneurs emerged through the 1970s to “privatize the cultures of games and play” (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 8; see also Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 10). What we call the videogame industry has “convinced its employees”—and to this

we could add legions of aspirational students, as well as researchers and policymakers—“that [the industry is] the only gateway to videogame creation” (Anthropy 2012, 18). In this book, I want to undermine this conviction by paying close attention to other sites of videogame production and to other ways of being a videogame maker.

In doing so I’m indebted to the growing, nebulous, interdisciplinary body of research elucidating the realities of videogame production—a subfield of game studies that Olli Sotamaa and Jan Švelch (2021) have fruitfully called “game production studies.” Political economic approaches to understanding the flows of capital and extractions of surplus-value across transnational value chains have provided insights into how global videogame markets are unequally shaped (Kerr 2017; Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009; Nieborg, Young, and Joseph 2020; Jiang and Fung 2019). Similarly, researchers of the governance logics of dominant digital platforms have not only revealed how videogame production and consumption have been restructured in the networked age but also provided insights into the expanding reach of what Nick Srnicek (2017) has called platform capitalism (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Jin 2015; Chia et al. 2020; Boluk and LeMieux 2017; Joseph 2021). Most extensively, and most relevant to this book, ethnographic and qualitative approaches to studying the cultures and labor practices of studios and creators in specific local contexts have increased greatly over the past decade, from the still-rare ethnographies of larger studios (Banks 2013; O’Donnell 2014; Bulut 2020), to a number of empirical studies of independent and smaller-scale studios and communities (Whitson 2018; Parker and Jenson 2017; Jørgensen, Sandqvist, and Sotamaa 2017; Banks and Cunningham 2016; Ruberg 2019; Young 2018; Ruffino and Woodcock 2020), to the invaluable historical analyses of local gamemaking cultures of previous decades that directly challenge the “global” videogame industry’s hegemonic origin myths (Swalwell and Davidson 2016; Švelch 2018; Fiadotau 2019; Nicoll 2019; Nooney 2020; Swalwell 2021; Garda and Grabarczyk 2021).

I wish to bring this emerging subfield of game production studies and the work of videogame history into closer conversation with the rich body of critical work on the cultural industries. Cultural industries as a research focus refers to “those [industries] involved in the production of ‘aesthetic’ or ‘symbolic’ goods and services; that is, commodities whose core value is derived from their function as carriers of *meaning* in the form of images,

symbols, signs and sounds” (Banks 2007, 2; original emphasis). As a theoretical allegiance, cultural industries signals “a lineage from the Frankfurt School and Adorno in particular through to the Birmingham [Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies]” and a “Marxist legacy” that risks being defanged by “more pragmatic ideas of creative industries” (McRobbie 2016, 10).<sup>2</sup> As for Kate Oakley and Justin O’Connor (2015, 10), I find that the component words *culture* and *industry* provide a “productive juxtaposition not just of culture and economy but more particularly the traditional artistic-centred mode of cultural production with that of mass-industrialised production.” Yet, while David Hesmondhalgh (2018, 316), in the fourth edition of *The Cultural Industries*, calls videogames “without doubt the most important new cultural industry . . . to emerge since 1980,” videogame production and videogame makers are only visible in limited ways in cultural industries research to date. The sheer economic value of videogame companies, their early adaption of platform-based and digital distribution models, and the perpetually unrealized promise of videogame technologies to usurp all other modes of storytelling are mentioned frequently throughout this literature. The lived experiences of videogame makers—themselves cultural producers with relationships to creativity and commodification no less ambivalent and complicated than those cultural workers in any other discipline—remain underexamined.

Put simply, while the ways in which videogame production is industrialized have been well articulated, the ways in which videogame production is *cultural* production, remains underexamined. Casey O’Donnell (2012, 21) made a similar point when he argued against videogame production being understood—as it still pervasively is—as a software industry, arguing instead that “video game production viewed as an art world, rather than ‘industry’ constructs a much more critical and nuanced perspective” of videogame production. Thus, while cultural industries research has fruitfully articulated juxtapositions and tensions as they have emerged in other cultural fields in their industrialized state (the music industry, the film industry), that videogame production has only ever been understood as an industry makes the term prematurely limiting for understanding the broader experiences and contexts of videogame makers.

This isn’t just true for the semantics of scholarly debate but is felt acutely by gamemakers themselves. For instance, 26-year-old Georgia Symons works primarily as a playwright but also contracts as a writer for the small

Melbourne game studio Ghost Pattern. When I asked Symons if she would consider herself part of the videogame industry, she reflected:

We talk about “the theater industry” all the time and people are aware that industry isn’t quite right, but we don’t really know what is the right word so people just say the theater industry and get on with it. . . . But when people say “the videogame industry” I think of more like triple-A games and big companies that repeatedly churn stuff out. . . . It feels weird to say you’re a part of the industry when in the videogame sector specifically those things seem to be kept quite consciously apart: the industrial production of games and then the local, independent games that might still be sold and might still turn a profit but seem to really resist some of the ethos of the industrial companies.

For Symons, despite accepting the use of “industry” when discussing theater work, she feels that when one invokes “the videogame industry” they are not referring to her own independent and locally situated practice.

This was a common perception among videogame makers marginal to the most dominant and commodified sites of videogame production, even though such videogame makers account for the majority of videogame production activity. The limited sites of videogame production that are often conceptualized *as* the videogame industry, I argue throughout this book, are a misrepresentative synecdoche for a much larger space of cultural and economic activity that includes hobbyists, artists, gamemakers with day jobs, gamemakers working in non-entertainment sectors, modders, and students. As will become clear over the coming chapters, these alternative and marginalized sites of videogame production do not simply *also* exist alongside the videogame industry. They instead form the foundations of skills, cultures, genres, communities, technologies, and aesthetics that are a necessary precursor for any industrialized videogame production to occur. For videogame production, as with all forms of cultural production, “industry produces culture” but also “culture produces industry” (Negus 1999, 14).

With this book, I want to comprehend a broader range of sites and subjectivities that in turn allow us to understand videogame production as a cultural, social, *and* economic phenomenon. I draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on fields of cultural production to theorize, holistically but not homogeneously, *the field of videogame production*—or more simply, *the videogame field*. I am far from the first researcher to apply Bourdieu’s concept of the field to the cultures of videogame play and production (e.g., Consalvo 2007; Kirkpatrick 2015; Parker 2013). Nonetheless, as chapter 1 will detail,

articulating videogame production as occurring within and as a field of cultural production expands our conceptual frame to consider cultural and social forms of capital (prestige, awards, acclaim, scenes, etc.) and a broader range of positions occupied by competing agents. The videogame field—as a space in which cultural, social, *and* economic values flow between differently positioned producers—remains largely unarticulated in conceptualizations of videogame production, yet it is this much broader space of activity from which videogame industries emerge in specific local contexts. Just as one could not hope to understand the global music industry without first situating it within the broader music field—accounting for Taylor Swift, the countless anonymous Sunday pub cover bands, punk subcultures, and everything in between—here I want to seriously investigate the ramifications of truly considering videogames as a field of cultural production constituted by a vast range of competing positions, just like any other cultural field.

In fact, researchers in other cultural fields have similarly denounced the “industry” framing as conceptually limiting. In a 2014 article, Jonathan Sterne (2014, 50) critiques popular music scholarship for considering the music industry as too narrowly “the monetization of recordings.” For Sterne, to speak of a music industry “crystallizes a particular historical formation of music production, circulation, and consumption as ideal-typical” (51). Ultimately, he argues, “There is no ‘music industry.’ There are many industries with many relationships to music” (53). Likewise, I find the notion that a singular videogame industry is the sole site of all forms of videogame production activity to be both reductive and obfuscating. As such, underpinning this book is a similar provocation: a singular videogame industry, as it is typically and narrowly imagined, does not exist. The videogame industry is a selective and limited framing that excludes all but the most commodifiable gamemaking activities. There is no videogame industry; there are many industries, many communities, many creators, and many audiences with different relationships to videogame production. With this provocation I want to clear a conceptual space that allows us to more adequately account for the broader, more varied field of videogame production from which any commercial videogame production necessarily emerges. I want to shift the focus away from the traditional geographical centers of the videogame industry of a select few North American, western European, and East Asian cities to instead understand how commodified videogame production *emerges from a*

vast range of local, political, cultural, educational, and economic contexts. Effectively, this book is an attempt to more holistically and less selectively articulate videogame production as *cultural* production.

I strive to do this through firsthand accounts of videogame makers themselves: from those employed in massive blockbuster (or “triple-A”) studios and indie start-ups, but also those videogame makers we less frequently hear from: artists, hobbyists, students, part-timers, educators. I have found ethnographic methods of semistructured interviews, surveys, and observations to be—as Sarah Thornton (1995, 166) notes—“best suited to emphasizing the diverse and the particular,” and to allow me to challenge the often too-simple, top-down, triumphalist trade association and press reports that obscure at least as much as they reveal in their reduction of a vast range of gamemaking experiences to “full-time equivalent” employee numbers. Between 2018 and 2020 I conducted 205 interviews with videogame makers, educators, students, curators, and relevant government officials. Interviews were conducted primarily in Australia’s capital cities (162 across Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart, Adelaide, Canberra, and Perth) but also in regional Australia (5), Seattle (6), Montreal (12), Berlin (3), the Netherlands (15 across Amsterdam, Utrecht, and Rotterdam), Jakarta (1), and Singapore (1).<sup>3</sup> Further, in 2018 I ran a survey for “people who are involved in the making of videogames in Australia” that received 288 responses. I also attended a range of videogame production events such as A MAZE Festival (Berlin), Freeplay Independent Games Festival (Melbourne), Melbourne International Games Week, and the Game Developers Conference (San Francisco). Of the interviewees, 72 percent were cisgender men, and 78 percent of survey respondents identified their gender as male. While this imbalance is unfortunate and inevitably influences the analysis that follows, it also aligns with trade association reports that consistently put the gender (im)balance of videogame production at around 70 to 80 percent male (e.g., Game Developers Conference 2021; Interactive Games and Entertainment Association 2019). Fieldwork was conducted solely in English, and this of course further limits the representativeness of the collected data. For the most part, and where consent was provided, I have attributed quotes to my participants. Occasionally, quotes are anonymized where requested by my participants or where I have determined topics to be of a particularly sensitive nature.

Gamemakers from all my fieldwork sites make appearances on the following pages, but it is Australian gamemakers who are my primary focus. As



chapter 2 will describe in more detail, Australia provides a case study that is at once exceptional and exemplary for making sense of the videogame field. In the early 2010s, Australian videogame production was radically altered as events surrounding the global financial crisis (GFC) saw extensive studio closures and wiped out two-thirds of gamemaking jobs across the country. Through the decimation of Australian videogame companies and their subsequent regrowth in a radically different form, we can see the field of videogame production that is typically hidden from view. Australian videogame production is exceptional in its unique history of a work-for-hire industry collapsing to be replaced with a dispersed community focused on small-scale independent production. But it is also exemplary in that small-scale independent production is the dominant mode of videogame production in most local contexts today. Australian videogame makers are physically removed from the field's dominant sites but remain subservient to the North American, western European, and East Asian publishers, platforms, and investors through which the field's economic capital is overwhelmingly concentrated. Just like all gamemakers outside of the field's dominant sites, Australian gamemakers have little hope of obtaining employment at a large, well-known, lucrative company like Ubisoft, Nintendo, BioWare, or Activision, any of which would require moving one's life halfway around the world. Instead—again, like most of the world's gamemakers—most rely on small, entrepreneurial, start-up approaches much closer to home, with the hope that digital distribution platforms will allow them to reach global markets. Australia's liminal circumstances between center and periphery provide an opportunity to start seeing more clearly what else exists but remains largely invisible in the field of videogame production around the world.

However, importantly, this is not to imply that the experience of Australian videogame producers is identical to those of videogame producers globally. Australian gamemakers still possess many privileges not available to gamemakers in much of the world. Indeed, as we will see especially in chapter 6, even within Australia each city I visited had its own distinct communities shaped by geographic, infrastructural, and political landscapes. Videogame production requires approaches and conceptualizations that are pluralist and scalable, that can focus on not just “the field” but on local fields, national fields, regional fields, global fields, and translocal fields. Each exists as a subset or superset of the others. This requires us to not just pan our focus across the field, as one might do with a paper map, but

to zoom in and out as necessary, as one might do with a smartphone map application, to bring in and out of focus different struggles and positions and relationships. By focusing on the diverse experiences of Australian game-makers, supplemented by those gamemakers from my other fieldwork sites, I don't intend to suggest there is a globally uniform experience of making videogames. Rather, I wish to argue quite the opposite: that a broad, pluralistic, sometimes contradictory range of gamemaking experiences and identities exists, mediated by both local and global economic and cultural conditions. Through my Australian case study, I am confident the non-Australian reader will find insights, dynamics, and questions just as applicable to gamemaking in their own local context, even as the exact layout of the terrain will surely differ.

### Book Outline

The goal of this book is to articulate the broader videogame field that exists before, beyond, and beneath those dominant positions of the videogame field that have historically been perceived as the sole site of legitimate videogame production. Chapter 1 begins by shifting the conceptual frame of reference from a singular videogame industry to a videogame field working at a plurality of scales and sites, driven by a variety of markers of success. It introduces in more detail Bourdieu's key concept of fields of cultural production and demonstrates its relevancy to the contemporary state of videogame production. Central to Bourdieu's theory is that a cultural field is, cyclically, the collective struggle to define the cultural field such that one's own position is legitimately within it and others' positions are not. In this sense, "the videogame industry" itself can be understood as one particularly dominant and narrow conceptualization of the field that has ensured all nondominant positions are delegitimized. This chapter demonstrates how such processes of legitimation and disavowal are playing out in contemporary videogame production within the context of platformization and creative entrepreneurship, where professional and amateur game-making identities are increasingly blurred. In chapter 1's final section, we will hear how videogame makers themselves, like Symons above, articulate their position within this videogame field in terms of whether or not they consider themselves to be "videogame developers" working within "a videogame industry." Many, despite making videogames, do not.

Chapter 2 then introduces Australia's videogame field as the main case study for the chapters that follow. It traces the transitions undertaken by Australian gamemakers and companies through the seismic restructure brought about by the GFC in the late 2000s. If the titular claim of this book is meant primarily as a provocation to jolt us into thinking about the limitations of our current frames of reference for videogame production, it has a much more literal meaning in Australia where, following widespread studio closures brought about during the GFC, many videogame companies literally ceased to exist. The decimation of Australian videogame companies revealed a much more complex and far-reaching field of videogame production that includes independents, artists, students, and activists.

If the field of videogame production in Australia looks radically different from the ways in which the videogame industry is traditionally conceptualized, then chapter 3 asks what this means for how we understand the politics of making videogames as cultural work—or “gamework” as it is increasingly being called by the field's burgeoning unionization movements. The gig workers of the “creative precariat” (Arvidsson, Malossi, and Naro. 2010, 296) are often seen to be role models of late capitalism and neoliberalism (de Peuter 2014), showing managers in other sectors of the economy how to structure their own workers' lives around individualized goals and piecemeal careers while lowering expectations of job security, explicit work hours, or other entitlements hard-won by workers of previous generations. Videogame makers are no different, and the exploitation of an intrinsic passion or desire to be creative are pervasive throughout the videogame field—leading to what Ergin Bulut (2020, 166) has called videogame production's “governmental logic of precarization.” In the context of contemporary videogame production in locations such as Australia where, as one participant explained to me, “everyone is indie,” there are particular instantiations of precarity and self-exploitation that look less like those of start-up tech companies and more like the vocations of musicians and writers. This, then, raises other challenges for articulating gamework. Few would consider four young friends trying to start a band in their garage on the weekend as “self-exploiting,” but what of the same four young friends trying to produce their first videogame under similar circumstances? Ultimately, this chapter strives to paint a picture of videogame-making work that is far removed from popular stereotypes of a lucrative and growing industry and instead more aligned with what we would typically expect to

see in other cultural fields: precarious, unpredictable, and driven by symbolic aspirations at least as often as by economic ones.

If the realities of working within the videogame field are drastically different from how the field is typically imagined by those outside it, this has ramifications for how newcomers enter the field—and which newcomers are most able to enter. Chapter 4 thus examines the role of formal education in both sustaining and potentially challenging the dominant configuration of the field. Only a handful of researchers have looked directly at the cultures and structures of game development education (e.g., Harvey 2019; Zagal and Bruckman 2008; Ashton 2009), even as many game researchers themselves teach such courses, and as videogame producers endlessly debate the efficacy and relevancy of formal education. In Australia alone, by one trade association's estimation, there are thousands of students studying in game development programs even as only one thousand people actually possess jobs in videogame production companies nationally (*Game On* 2016, 3). For many, this is a sign of a clear oversupply of students for an industry that doesn't need them. But one rarely discusses an oversupply of music students, creative writing students, or acting students—or, rather, graduate oversupply in such fields is seen less as a problem to solve and more a simple reality of studying a cultural practice. Through an examination of what students, educators, and gamemakers have to say about game development education, and an analysis of the advertising and student-facing material of courses available from Australian institutions, chapter 4 shows that more than a straightforward “pipeline” priming junior workers to be pumped into videogame companies, different institutions are differently focused on enrolling junior videogame makers into the field varyingly as artists, entrepreneurs, or potential employees.

Crucially—and again, just like practitioners in every cultural field—many videogame development graduates find pathways to employment other than through the autonomous creation of new intellectual property, instead finding other ways to deploy their skillsets for a financial return. Indeed, some researchers argue that cultural industries' perspectives overstate the precarious nature of creative work, as they often ignore those creative workers embedded in noncreative sectors of the economy (Hearn et al. 2014): filmmakers employed to produce television ads; artists who become graphic designers; poets who become PR agents. Those with creative skillsets might not find full-time employment pursuing their vocation, but they take these

skillsets into other sectors of the economy. Chapter 5 explores a common yet unromantic strategy of small-scale independent videogame production teams seeking financial sustainability: undertaking contract work for clients in other economic sectors. The past decade has seen increased enthusiasm for the educational and advertorial potential of videogames from a range of sectors, and some independent teams hire out their services to meet these needs. These gamemakers are a type of embedded creatives (Cunningham 2011): creative workers deploying their skills beyond the cultural industries traditionally defined to instead provide creative services. For gameworkers in this space, client work poses an alternative to self-funded passion projects but often fails to meet the creative ambitions of the gamemakers involved. Instead, for many, it provides a carrot-on-a-stick hope that, one day, they will have done enough client work to have accumulated enough funds to undertake their desired passion project—a goal that is rarely realized. Together, chapters 4 and 5 beg the question: Just what are the skills that constitute videogame production? What do these independent game studios offer their clients that an IT professional or a graphic designer does not? Embedded gamemakers regularly felt that their clients misunderstood their skills as being primarily technical in nature, when they saw themselves as offering more creative and design-oriented approaches to a problem. Chapter 5 concludes with a consideration of what it means to consider videogame production as being constituted of skills that can be transferred out of the field.

Embedded gamemakers hold a peripheral position in the videogame field, often not knowing exactly where they fit as videogame makers. Some have offices in videogame coworking spaces, and some attend local gamemaker meetups and community events. Others, however, feel detached from their local videogame production communities due to the fact they don't work on original intellectual property. When looking at videogame production in specific local contexts, we must be careful not to homogenize those local contexts that are themselves experienced in a variety of ways. Chapter 6 considers the local and translocal contexts in which the gamemaking field is constituted through personal relationships, socioeconomic and politic contexts, collaborations and competition, coworking spaces, parties, festivals and conferences, public infrastructure, and private property. Far from homogenous, every city where I interviewed gamemakers—both in Australia and elsewhere—had overlapping and competing gamemaking cultures, each of which was influenced by employment opportunities, government funding programs (or lack

thereof), student cohorts and curriculums, coworking spaces, and broader cultures and politics. While several cities are discussed throughout chapter 6, the chapter directly compares the gamemaking cultures of the two southern Australian state capitals of Melbourne and Adelaide, looking at how funding opportunities, public infrastructure, studio sizes, and informal communities shape each city's field. Chapter 6 draws from popular music theorists such as Will Straw (2004), Holly Kruse (2010), and Sarah Thornton (1995) to consider how a "game scene"—or perhaps even multiple competing game scenes—takes root in particular locales. Game scenes and communities aren't just local, however; they are also intricately *translocal*, with social media and software platforms not simply globalizing the videogame field but intimately connecting disparate geographic contexts of videogame production.

By chapter 7, the book will have disassembled conventional understandings of videogame production by exposing the broader field of videogame production cultures, identities, and contexts that "the videogame industry" fails to represent. Crucially, however, this broader field of videogame production does not simply exist parallel to the companies and games we are more familiar with. Rather, it provides the skills, communities, and activities that form the foundations of and are exploited by the field's dominant videogame companies. Building off Karl Marx's theory of surplus-value and Maurizio Lazzarato's theory of how the immaterial labor of consumers builds brand value, here I propose the notion of *surplus cultural value* to understand how the videogame field's dominant players have come to rely on the precarious, informal work of those at the field's margins to build their own cultural and economic value. On the flip side of this, as the dominant players of the videogame field increasingly rely on the cultural labor of a broader field of gamemakers while, at the same time, refusing to directly employ them, the potential exists for the videogame field's current power hierarchies to be disrupted. What we see in Australia, and indeed around the world, is extensive precarity and exploitation but also an opportunity to reimagine videogame production as communal and collaborative, rather than competitive and secretive. Unionization is becoming an increasingly hot topic among videogame workers since the birth of the grassroots Game Workers Unite (GWU) in 2018. As more and more GWU chapters around the world formalize into actual gameworker unions, it bears remembering that the GWU movement began with outsiders on the field's margins. Among the creative precariat at the periphery of the videogame field, there

is a political consciousness emerging that, if organized, could shift the balance of power in the field.

Finally, the conclusion turns to the future of videogame production. By considering the full field of videogame production in all its complexity and plurality, and not just the dominant subset known as the videogame industry, we are able to reimagine just how formal, informal, and embedded sites of videogame production interact and coconstitute the field. If local and national videogame fields beyond the dominant global sites of production are to build more sustainable businesses and careers, the conclusion argues, it will occur not solely by attracting the field's dominant triple-A companies to parachute large studios into cities but by fostering robust, grassroots local ecologies. The videogame industry does not exist before the skills, identities, tastes, communities, and resources fostered by the broader videogame field. By shifting our conceptual frame, from a top-down global videogame industry toward a bottom-up videogame field emerging within local and global contexts, videogame makers have an opportunity to imagine a different, more collaborative and collective politics of videogame making that might eventually allow them to "get better" and produce "cool stuff" in more sustainable and less precarious circumstances.





This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14513.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14513.001.0001)

# **The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist**

## **Why We Should Think Beyond Commercial Game Production**

**By: Brendan Keogh**

### **Citation:**

*The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist: Why We Should Think Beyond Commercial Game Production*

**By: Brendan Keogh**

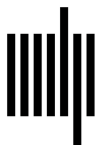
**DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14513.001.0001**

**ISBN (electronic): 9780262374132**

**Publisher: The MIT Press**

**Published: 2023**

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



**The MIT Press**

© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.

Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Keogh, Brendan, author.

Title: The videogame industry does not exist : why we should think beyond commercial game production / Brendan Keogh.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022030010 (print) | LCCN 2022030011 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262545402 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262374149 (epub) | ISBN 9780262374132 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Video games industry. | Video game designers—Interviews.

Classification: LCC HD9993.E452 K46 2023 (print) | LCC HD9993.E452 (ebook) | DDC 338.4/77948—dc23/eng/20230120

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022030010>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022030011>