

2 Videogame Production in Australia

Melbourne, the capital of the southern state of Victoria, is one of Australia's largest cities and is home to many of the country's most vibrant scenes in music, theater, comedy, art, screen, and videogames. Late every year since 2015, Melbourne hosts Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW). Organized and subsidized by the Victorian government agency Creative Victoria, MIGW operates as an umbrella over a cluster of small and large, public and private, producer- and consumer-oriented events connected in one way or another to the cultural field of videogame production. At the start of the week is Games Connect Asia Pacific (GCAP), a producer-facing conference where gamemakers share practical insights, network, and present awards to their peers. In the middle of the week, the long-running Freeplay Independent Games Festival presents *Parallels*, a one-night showcase of alternative and experimental videogames made by Australian (and a handful of Asian Pacific and New Zealand) students, artists, hobbyists, and independent commercial creators. At the end of the week is the Australian Penny Arcade Expo (PAX Australia), the self-claimed largest consumer-facing pop culture expo in the Southern Hemisphere, where local gamemakers and international publishers present upcoming games to the public. PAX is the lynchpin of MIGW, drawing the national and international consumers, creators, publishers, and investors to Melbourne that the other events held during the week then take advantage of.

Later in the week, typically once PAX Australia is over and all the meetings with potential investors and publishers are wrapped up, various social events are held for the local, national, and international gamemakers in town. The biggest of these is the Megadev party, a massive, semipublic event with corporate sponsors and organized by the International Game Developers Association's Melbourne chapter (IGDAM). This party functions as a

networking event for Australian commercial gamemakers, many of whom only get to see each other in person this one week in the year, and as an opportunity for a professional community to let off steam after not only a massively taxing week but also after months of frantic work ensuring demos are ready, talks are prepared, pitch decks are designed, and investor meetings are scheduled. A very different party I attended during 2018's MIGW was the “arty after party,” which took place in an empty, graffiti-covered warehouse in the inner-east suburb of Richmond. This party was public and free but only advertised through personal social networks of those affiliated with local, in-the-know gamemaking fringe communities. LCD projectors sat precariously atop milk crate pillars to project bespoke art-games onto the walls of the gutted shop (see Figure 2.1). Cash was traded for beer on an old counter. Some attendees were employees, contractors, or founders of local game companies, but just as common were attendees who were primarily artists or hobbyist creators, or creators from other disciplines entirely.



Figure 2.1

Partygoers of the 2018 arty after party play *Need 4e+9 Speed* by Kalonica Quigley and Jason Bakker, projected onto the wall of a warehouse from a pillar of milk crates. Photo by author.

Others had simply heard about the party through a mate and had no professional interest in videogames at all; they were just attending a cool party. One of the party's organizers later told me that the 2018 arty after party was the first that continued to its scheduled end time, rather than being shut down early by the police for their lack of liquor license.

Large events such as MIGW or the annual Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco have traditionally been where researchers and observers can most clearly trace the full range of positions that constitute the videogame field. Within a few city blocks one can find suited investors, government representatives, hardware manufacturers, cosplaying fans, ambitious and entrepreneurial indie developers, esports teams, venture capitalists, celebrity triple-A auteur creative directors, PR firms, queer communities, livestreamers and influencers, and fringe arty types who otherwise have little to do with each other. Visible during MIGW is the truth of videogame production globally: videogames are made at a range of scales, in a variety of contexts, across different networks of people whose relationship with others in the field may be positive, antagonistic, or indirect.

Historically, this full range of positions in the field has been obscured by the dominance of the largest, most secretive companies and publishers. But in Australia, the complexity of the field exemplified during MIGW now remains traceable throughout the year as such secretive companies are almost entirely absent. At the time of writing, there are three, perhaps four, studios in all of Australia that employ more than 100 gamemakers. Instead, the vast majority of gamemakers across the country are working in smaller teams (on average in teams of nine but in the majority of cases in teams of five or fewer), sometimes in formal companies but just as often not. In most Australian cities, established development studios, entrepreneurial coworking spaces, artist collectives, student cohorts, bedroom coders, countercultural scenes, government funding bodies, pubs and bars, and slick consumer expos all interact within and as the local videogame field. Indeed, many of these are no longer discrete positions at all, as a gamemaker at a commercial studio may also work on a side-project with a local art collective, and a small team of friends may, as Melbourne four-person team House House did in 2019 with *Untitled Goose Game*, produce a cultural and commercial phenomenon. In Australia, without the veneer of stability provided by massive blockbuster studios, the intense in/formalization of videogame production is explicit and felt keenly by the everyday experiences of local gamemakers.

This chapter maps the transition that videogame production in Australia undertook through the 2000s and 2010s from an aggressively formalized network of commercial videogame firms largely detached from a fringe of new media artists and hobbyists, to a diverse and dispersed in/formalized field in which just who is or isn't a "professional game developer" is no longer clear. As a case study of a site of videogame production, Australia is both exceptional and exemplary. It is exceptional in its specific history, as will be detailed in this chapter, that saw established companies and their workforce crumble in a few short years following the global financial crisis (GFC). As studios closed, employment opportunities dried up, and a deep cynicism toward the commercial publishers that abandoned local gamemakers during the GFC took root; scenes and collectives and alternative ways of being a videogame maker emerged and restructured the field and its flows of both symbolic and economic capital. But despite these unique conditions, Australia's videogame field is also exemplary of contemporary videogame production globally in the way that, like most sites of videogame production, it is physically removed from the field's dominant sites (North America, western Europe, East Asia), yet still subservient to and dependent on the publishers, platforms, and investors located therein. Australian gamemakers have little hope of obtaining employment at a large studio. Instead, the majority of Australian gamemakers, just like gamemakers residing in most parts of the world, now rely on entrepreneurial start-up approaches in lieu of external support, with the hope that digital distribution will allow them to reach global markets. Ultimately, the historical dominance and more recent absence of larger studios make Australia a valuable case study through which to expose more clearly the frontiers of the videogame field more generally as it transitions from aggressively formalized to intensely in/formalized modes of production. From this chapter's history of Australia's field, the sorts of overlapping spaces and networks of videogame production that constitute the positions and dispositions of the videogame field globally will be made apparent.

First, the chapter provides a brief history of videogame production in Australia, with a particular focus on the seismic restructuring that occurred in the late 2000s as midsized work-for-hire companies shut their doors and their workforce dispersed, in part, into a wide range of small indie teams producing original intellectual property (IP). The second section turns to these indie firms as they are shaped by specific sociopolitical, economic, infrastructural, and geographic conditions to consider the changing nature of

professional videogame creation in local contexts, where teams are much more likely to consist of fewer than five employees (by the broadest definition of “employee”) than more than 100. What will become apparent here, and which underpins the next chapter’s analysis of videogame production labor, is that these conditions have shaped the ways Australian gamemakers understand the structure of the local field, their own craft, their identities, and ultimately their position-taking in ways that significantly jar with how commercial videogame production is traditionally imagined. Next, the chapter sticks a spanner into this too-neat depiction of a videogame field of large firms fragmenting into a videogame field of small firms by considering the other forms of gamemaking that have been occurring at the margins of the Australian field since at least the mid-1990s, more aligned with new media art and cultural institutions than with commercial videogame companies. Looking particularly at cultural clashes around the Freeplay Independent Game Festival in 2013, this section shows how the Australian “videogame industry” has not simply rebuilt itself, but how the Australian videogame field has been reshaped—and intensely in/formalized—by global shifts in capital and power brought about by the struggles between dominantly and marginally positioned gamemakers.

The Other Game Industry Crash

Videogames have been made in Australia since at least 1980, with parallel histories of commercial, hobbyist, and artistic gamemaking having been well documented by local researchers through these times (see, for instance, Wilson 2005; Stuckey 2005; Swalwell 2007; Banks 2013; McCrea 2013a; Apperley and Golding 2015; Swalwell 2021). Narratives of this history begin, most commonly, with Melbourne House. Founded in 1977 by Naomi Bensen and Alfred Milgrom as a book publisher and distributor, they expanded into videogame production with the founding of Beam Software in 1980, releasing successful microcomputer games including *The Hobbit* (adapted from the novel) in 1982 and *Way of the Exploding Fist* (an early entry in the one-on-one fighting game genre) in 1985. Documented most exhaustively by the Play It Again¹ project run by Melanie Swalwell, Helen Stuckey, and Angela Ndalians, and Swalwell’s *Homebrew Gaming and the Beginnings of Vernacular Digitality* (2021), through the 1980s Australia was home to an eclectic range of independent game “companies” (sometimes simply the name under which

an individual or a group of friends chose to release a game, more like a band than a company) such as Strategic Studies Group (SSG), HoneySoft, Micro Forté, and Armchair Entertainment. Through the 1980s, Australian teams were primarily producing games for microcomputers such as the Sega SC3000, the ZX Spectrum, the Commodore 64, and Amstrad CPC.

However, throughout the 1990s, the aggressive formalization of the videogame field took hold, and the necessary resources, team size, and funds required to undertake commercially feasible videogame production increased dramatically. To stay in the game through this period of drastically increasing costs and consolidated audiences, Australian videogame production through the 1990s and 2000s coalesced into larger and larger studios, typically either owned by or reliant on the investment from a small number of foreign, risk-averse publishers such as EA, Activision, Sega, and Ubisoft. While studios in some nations were able to build more collaborative relationships with North American, Japanese, and European firms in large part thanks to proximity, Australia's geographic and temporal displacement from North America and Europe, and its cultural displacement from Japan, hindered these relationships. Australia still produced several successful new intellectual properties during these decades with foreign publisher assistance, such as racing game *Powerslide*, created by Adelaide studio Ratbag Games in 1998 and published by GT Interactive, and real-time strategy game *Dark Reign*, created by Gold Coast studio Auran (later N3V) in 1997 and published by Activision. However, increasingly crucial to the survival of Australian videogame firms through the period of aggressive formalization was less the original creative ideas of Australian gamemakers and more the relative low price of Australian gamemaking labor for North American, European, and Japanese publishers, making Australian studios an attractive site for outsourcing.

Outsourcing has a long but rarely visible history in videogame production, with large multinational publishers such as EA, Ubisoft, and Rockstar regularly subcontracting lower-level aspects of videogame production—such as porting existing titles to new platforms, the more tedious programming work, or producing lower priority art assets (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter 2009, 50; Chia 2022). Australia, geographically located in proximity to Southeast Asia while primarily culturally identifying with North America and Europe through its colonial history, for a time provided videogame publishers an ideal site of cheap, highly skilled, and English-speaking labor. Locally owned studios such as Krome (Brisbane, Adelaide, and Melbourne), Torus

Games (Melbourne), and Big Ant Studios (Melbourne) occasionally produced original IP, but primarily worked with a variety of existing videogame, film, or sport franchise licenses to fill the catalogues of foreign publishers. Other foreign-owned companies such as Pandemic (Brisbane), THQ Australia (Brisbane, Melbourne), Sega Studios Australia (Brisbane, formerly Creative Assembly Australia), and 2K Australia (Canberra, formerly Irrational Games Australia) contributed extensively to blockbuster games such as *Bioshock: Infinite* and *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*. Team Bondi (Sydney) meanwhile, produced detective title *LA Noire* for publisher Rockstar Games under an exclusivity deal with Sony. In many of these examples, Australian gamemakers were responsible for a wider range of high-level design decisions than we would typically associate with “outsourcing,” and Australian gamemakers themselves more typically refer to this relationship as one of “work-for-hire.” Nonetheless, the term remains apt as the work was conducted for and controlled by overseas companies that chose Australian companies to conduct the work, mainly, because of the affordability of Australian gamemaking labor.

The Australian videogame field through the 1990s and 2000s was driven disproportionately by the principle of heteronomous hierarchization, at the expense of the principle of autonomous hierarchization. Or, in plainer language, Australian gamemakers at the time were necessarily driven by the economic requirements of success in the broader field of class relations rather than by the symbolic requirements of success internal to the field such as crafting novel or experimental experiences. Consequentially, as the studios that populated the Australian field in the 1990s and 2000s were increasingly funded to work on preexisting franchises rather than to conceptualize new intellectual property, over time they became richer in technical skills and knowledge but poorer in design skills and knowledge. This is reinforced by John Banks’s (2013, 40) sustained ethnography with Queensland studio Auran, which heavily invested in not just videogame production but in “[becoming] a technology provider” through its bespoke game engine software.

The more heteronomous a cultural field (that is, the less autonomous), the more tied to and dependent it becomes to external economic and political conditions. Thus, the GFC of 2008 had a particularly crippling impact on Australian videogame studios. While Australia was spared the worst of the GFC’s economic fallout due to a mining boom sustaining a strong trade partnership with China, alongside extensive stimulus packages from the Labor federal government, Australia’s economic resilience and America’s

economic collapse saw the usually disparate exchange rate between the two countries' currencies hit parity. In late 2010, for the first time since the Australian dollar was floated in 1983, it cost more than one American dollar to buy one Australian dollar, and this significantly impacted Australia's export-oriented manufacturing sectors, and likewise Australia's outsourcing-focused videogame studios. Abruptly, Australian game studios were no longer a cheap source of labor for American publishers—publishers that were themselves undergoing financial hardships during the GFC, as Nick Dyer-Witford and Greig de Peuter (2009, xviii) have detailed. The business model of most Australian game studios rapidly became untenable.

As Christian McCrea (2013a, 204) summarizes, Australian studios' learned dependency on foreign publishers that viewed them as cheap and disposable outsourcing labor rather than vital creative partners sparked an "inexorable vicious cycle" that devastated the national field once the cost of this labor rose:

The lack of Australian games publishers isolated the production system from the decision-making process, especially in the United States and United Kingdom. As other Western centers of production bolstered their industries with tax incentives, and others were able to undercut on labor costs, Australia became part of a crowded global game production system, beset by the tyranny of distance. With the increasing desperation of the work-for-hire system, the lack of original intellectual property meant that experienced developers—especially artists and designers—were moving overseas to further their careers, leaving local production bereft of talent or creative assets.

By 2011, "nearly all the companies that were focusing on work-for-hire console games were bought, shrunk, merged, or closed—often all four in that order" (McCrea 2013a, 204). The studio closures hit the Australian videogame field hard and fast. Pandemic shut in 2009; Krome in 2010; THQ Australia's Brisbane and Melbourne studios, EA's Visceral Games, and Team Bondi in 2011. Sega Studios Australia closed in 2013; 2K Australia held on until 2015. Between 2007 and 2012, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the official number of Australians employed by digital game developers shrunk by 60 percent, from 1,431 to 581. As something of a punctuation mark on this dark period, in 2014 the newly elected Liberal-National Coalition government, led by conservative prime minister Tony Abbott, introduced a brutal austerity budget that included the dismantling of a fledgling federal funding scheme for Australian-owned videogame companies, immediately

removing \$10 million of previously earmarked funding that local studios were at the time finalizing their applications for (Hopewell 2014).

The impact of this crash on the collective psyche of contemporary Australian videogame makers cannot be overstated. Some Australian gamemakers I interviewed who had been around since the 2000s (now considered “veterans” of the community less than 20 years later) told stories of surviving consecutive redundancy rounds, continuing to work under conditions of extreme uncertainty, finally losing their job in the next round, being hired by another studio, and having the same process happen all over again several months later. The emotional trauma wrought on the workers at the time remains vivid when they speak of it more than a decade later. One anonymous Australian expat gamemaker who now works in a triple-A studio overseas explains what happened after their employer in Brisbane shut down:

My first move was to Sydney because there wasn't much work in Brisbane. . . . But there was always this feeling of just like treading water. You're always on a four-month contract, maybe six months if you're lucky, and then nothing. That's quite a stressful way to live. . . . After [Sydney studio] shut down I got contacted by a recruiter for [European studio]. . . . We were pretty tired of the situation [in Australia] so we decided let's go work on real triple-A games at a reasonable steady country.

This same gamemaker remembers their time working in Australia bitterly as “one of backstabbing and hissing and jealousy” in stark contrast to their later work in North American and European studios, which were “nothing but experiences . . . of people trying to help me succeed and propping me up.” Like this gamemaker, many Australian gamemakers left Australia in the late 2000s and early 2010s to seek employment overseas, where many still remain. Many others left videogame production for good, finding work in adjacent fields such as software development, engineering, VFX, web design, or retraining into entirely different fields.

The crash is fundamental to the ways in which contemporary Australian videogame makers talk about their careers, craft, and community. At the time of my interviews, the GFC provided the contemporary Australian videogame field a foundational myth and identity of having “done it tough” and “come through the war together.” For instance, Leena van Deventer, a 33-year-old writer, educator, and community organizer in Melbourne, explained that “after the decimation of the industry that happened after the GFC . . . I think there's an attitude of collaboration and helping each other out that you only get out of adversity and everyone kind of panicking about

survival.” For trade association lobbyists, game journalists, students, and aspiring gamemakers, this foundational myth of economic crisis and government abandonment often sees the pre-GFC era of Australian videogame production framed as the time when Australia had a triple-A industry that no longer exists but, with the right tax incentives, could perhaps return. Here, the larger studios that collapsed during the GFC paradoxically symbolize a more prestigious, legitimate, and secure mode of videogame production than the smaller scale independent teams (detailed below) that are now the field’s bread and butter. This story is told formally by the Australian videogame trade association, the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association (IGEA),² which has long advocated for tax breaks for its member companies, and regularly holds up Montreal, home to 10,000 gamemaking jobs, as an exemplar of what Australia could and should imitate (Walker 2018). In early 2021, the IGEA made the dubious but emotionally charged claim that “Every other developed nation in the world has government incentive packages in place for game developers. Everywhere except Australia” (Biggs 2021). It’s unclear what is counted as a “developed nation” here, but the strategic point for the IGEA is to connect the collapse of Australia’s large videogame companies with the lack of financial support provided by the federal government.³

I, too, understood the history of Australian videogame production as the collapse of triple-A before speaking to several disillusioned gamemakers who had lived and worked through the crash—such as the above anonymous gamemaker who left Australia to work on “real triple-A.” In Melbourne, one of my first interviews was with Trent Kusters, the 31-year-old director and cofounder of independent studio League of Geeks. Before helping to found League of Geeks in 2011, Kusters worked as a designer at Torus Games, a larger studio specializing in work-for-hire production. When I casually referred to the collapse of Australia’s triple-A studios, Kusters interrupted me to note:

Australia never had triple-A development. Apart from 2K [Australia], maybe, and they were developing American triple-A games for Irrational in Boston. But we had that traditional publisher-studio model and I think . . . triple-A has kind of become a catch-all for before when everything was just the traditional studio-publisher model.

For those developers who were there at the time, the fact that Australia functioned under a studio-publisher model did not necessarily mean everyone

was working on the most prestigious and legitimized triple-A titles. Instead, this revised version of history retroactively broadens the concept of triple-A in a way that exemplifies aggressive formalization's gutting of the middle ground of videogame production—if it wasn't triple-A, it's difficult to imagine what other form of legitimate videogame production it could possibly have been. In Australia specifically, the retroactive application of the triple-A label romanticizes what was largely thankless outsourcing or contract work. Game-makers from this time derisively refer to the games they and their peers produced as either “shelf-fillers” or “shovelware” (labels that imply a title only has commercial value and no intrinsic creative value). Further, they express how foreign managers rarely acknowledged the gamemakers of Australian studios as themselves creative contributors to the games they produced. When Australian studios *were* working on high-budget triple-A titles such as *Bioshock Infinite*, gamemakers saw this primarily as unrecognized technical—as opposed to creative—labor. Indeed, very few people globally would consider *Bioshock Infinite* an Australian-made videogame, despite the significant amount of labor gamemakers at 2K Australia contributed to the game. Generally, commercial Australian gamemakers in the 1990s and 2000s were producing not prestigious, original titles but cookie-cutter genre games for specific franchise licenses. The work of these studios was not particularly high in cultural capital, and their economic capital was on loan from offshore publishers who themselves would leave once it became too expensive to stay.

Thus, the foundational narrative of the GFC destroying Australian videogame companies only tells part of the story, and by itself obfuscates the shape and nature of videogame production that was occurring in Australia at the time. Issues among Australian studios prior to the GFC—poor working conditions, fraternal and secretive cultures, excessive crunch, and managerial incompetence and corruption—have been well documented by local journalists and researchers. As McCrea (2013a, 204–205) summarizes the pre-GFC period of Australian videogame production:

some companies were overcommitting to projects of little potential value, had entirely rotten work cultures, or were run in semicorrupt conditions. Interzone, a medium-sized games company in Perth, was withholding pay and benefits from staff for 18 months when it suddenly closed doors one morning, locking out staff. Melbourne-based Transmission Games was suddenly closed with some staff reorganized under Trickstar Games, leaving some employee entitlements

unpaid. Working conditions across the game industry internationally are notorious, but Australia's precarious position left it more open to the consequences of poor management.

To this list we could add the extensive issues that plagued Team Bondi during *LA Noire's* production, including hundreds of contributors to the game going uncredited—a major hinderance to finding future employment (McMillen 2011); the extended development hell of 2K Australia's *The Bureau: X-Com Declassified* (Plante 2013); the collapse of Australian distributor Red Ant alongside questionable loans from the company to its own managing director (Lien 2010); or the surreal mismanagement that led to the planning, production, and eventual cancellation of an *Avengers* game at THQ Australia that would have coincided with Marvel's 2012 eponymous film (Serrels 2020). My interviewees recollected consistent tales of extensive crunch, unpaid overtime, sexual harassment, bullying, and mismanagement across Australian studios in this time.

The narrative, still popular with younger Australian gamemakers and players, that the GFC destroyed the Australian videogame industry actively frustrated veteran developers, who saw it as allowing incompetent managers off the hook for poor business decisions. In Seattle, I interviewed Dan Teasdale, 38, who left Australia in 2005 after working at a number of larger studios. As Teasdale saw it, "The GFC was just an excuse to buck everything off . . . in terms of like studio leadership and emphasis. . . . There was no management sense at the top of how to maintain a studio through that time." Jon Cartwright, 47, in Brisbane, also spoke of jumping rather than waiting to be pushed at the large company he worked for due to concerns around mismanagement:

I left a bit before the studio shut down. The writing was on the wall. [Management] were wanting to spend more money on the projects than I knew we could make back. . . . The amount of money they paid for the license for [animated film franchise] was just insane. And then when we were doing [blockbuster film franchise], we were like "How much did [management] pay for this?" None of it added up from a profit point of view. It was not going to go well.

For Morgan Jaffit, 41, also in Brisbane, the state of Australian videogame production before the GFC was a squandered "golden age" that could have been better used to grow a resilient, self-sustaining local field instead of the learned dependency on easy foreign contracts that ultimately fell apart when the economic situation changed:

I think we squandered it. We were Western, English-speaking, technologically literate. Australia's uptake of the Internet and programming were very, very high

compared to the rest of the world, and we had a cheap dollar. If you were going to outsource, Australia actually was great through the late '90s up to the GFC mark. And then we blew it.

It's undeniable that the GFC was a formative, destructive event for the Australian videogame field and that its effects were amplified by the subsequent stripping back of government support. But it's important that this narrative doesn't erase the shortsighted managerial decisions that prioritized profit over worker well-being or long-term sustainability that ultimately ensured the GFC was such a formative, destructive event for Australian videogame makers in the first place.

Economic factors, management factors, skills factors, government factors, geographic factors all converged to prove, abruptly and traumatically, that the pre-GFC model of Australian videogame companies providing cheap labor for foreign publishers through the studio-publisher model was not sustainable. It was Australian videogame workers who suffered the brunt of this as jobs were lost, wages and entitlements went unpaid, contributions to games went uncredited, senior talent moved either overseas or to other sectors, and skills and institutional memory were lost. Australian commercial gamemakers suffered financially, mentally, and physically at the hands of Australian and foreign management alike. Even as some Australian gamemakers today lament the absence of triple-A from Australian shores—and its perceived prestige and employment opportunities—many others hold a deep-seated cynicism and skepticism of the studio-publisher model and its reliance on foreign companies and relationships that they feel were responsible for the destruction of the local field in the late 2000s.

Forced Autonomy

As Australian videogame companies were decimated at the start of the 2010s, over a thousand newly unemployed Australian videogame makers—along with an indeterminate number of now unemployable graduates from the nation's many game development tertiary programs—were faced with one of three options: leave Australia to find gamemaking work overseas, leave commercial gamemaking entirely, or find alternative means of commodifying their gamemaking skills other than employment within the studio-publisher model. As we saw in the previous chapter, they were not alone in this predicament as, at the same time, the organization of the videogame field globally was undergoing major, deeply interconnected changes.

The parallel platformization of both videogame distribution and development shattered the distribution bottlenecks that the dominant firms used to perpetuate their dominance in the period of aggressive formalization. Valve's Steam and Apple's App Store and, later, Microsoft, Sony, Google, and Nintendo's own digital storefronts shifted the console business model of editorial regulation and forced scarcity to a platform business model of maximum royalty capture. Whereas the Nintendo Seal of Approval was all about building consumer trust that a game released on a Nintendo console had been through particular editorial oversight and thus deserved its premium purchase price (O'Donnell 2014, 198), digital platforms instead promised audiences maximum access to a maximum quantity of content. ("There's an app for that," as Apple's marketing promised.) Platform owners take a cut from every purchase of a product while under no obligation to invest in the product's development or marketing costs or the employment of its producers (Nieborg, Young, and Joseph 2020; Srnicek 2017; Whitson 2019). The subsequent normalization of high-powered 3D game engines available at no upfront cost through Unity and Unreal would further open up videogame production to the broader field. A broader range of gamemakers no longer had to rely on personal programming skills, amateur tools, or modding preexisting corporate games. Instead, they now had access to comparably sophisticated development tools as the larger firms and distributed their products on the same platforms (Nicoll and Keogh 2019).

In public discourses, these shifts are discussed most directly as the rise of "indie" videogame development, beginning in the mid-2000s, as an entrepreneurial and romanticized alternative to working in the larger, risk-adverse videogame firms. Early publicized successes such as *World of Goo*, *Braid*, and *Cave Adventure* inspired videogame makers to go it alone. At the same time, toward the end of the 2000s, the "casual revolution" (Juul 2010) started on social media platforms and Nintendo's Wii console but came into its own with the ubiquity of high-powered, Internet-connected smartphone devices. If independent developers were already primed to make smaller videogames for digital distribution, targeting demographics typically ignored by the triple-A publishers, then the burgeoning casual market, looking for cheap, small games for their smartphones, fitted these developers perfectly. This is the essence of the field's shift from aggressive formalization to intense informalization: a blurring of formal and informal means of production and distribution, an opportunity for a wider range of producers to make claims to a legitimate presence within the field.

While many unemployed Australian gamemakers and unemployable graduates left the field entirely or sought employment overseas, many others thus “went indie,” forming independent small businesses producing smaller games, with fewer resources, for digital distribution on social media platforms or smartphone devices (and then, in later years, console and PC). In the same 2007 to 2012 period in which the Australian videogame workforce shrunk by 60 percent, from 1,431 to 581, the number of registered videogame *businesses* nearly doubled, from 45 to 84. Put another way, in 2007 Australia was home to 45 videogame companies that employed, on average, 32 workers; in 2012 Australia was home to 84 videogame companies that employed, on average, 7 workers. This signifies the Australian videogame field’s almost exhaustive transition to indie modes of production.

A number of these studios were highly successful in their readjustment to the new realities of Australian videogame production. Halfbrick, in Brisbane, had been producing licensed titles for foreign publishers since 2001, but then in 2010 saw huge commercial success on the iPhone with their own game *Fruit Ninja*, and again in 2011 with *Jetpack Joyride*. Firemint, in Melbourne, had been producing games independently since 1999, and had been one of the few Australian studios focused on producing mobile games for Nokia mobile phones before the advent of smartphones. Their early iPhone success with *Flight Control* saw them bought by EA and merged with fellow Melbourne studio Iron Monkeys to form EA Firemonkeys, which is now one of Australia’s largest studios at approximately 150 employees. Back in Brisbane, Defiant Development, formed by Brisbane industry veterans from Krome and Pandemic in 2010, had a breakout hit in 2012 when they published *Ski Safari* for iPhone, originally a hobbyist project of one of their contractors, allowing the studio to grow dramatically and bankroll the much larger *Hand of Fate* project for PC and consoles (Serrels 2012). Today, with both PC and console platforms embracing digital distribution and relying on indie gamemakers to fill out their digital catalogues, a large number of small teams have moved beyond the now-crowded and devalued casual mobile space to produce larger-scale, narrative- or systems-driven titles for console and PC with titles such as *Necrobarista* (Route 59), *Assault Android Cactus* (Witch Beam), *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry), *Golf Story* (Sidebar), *Hand of Fate*, *Satellite Reign* (5 Lives), *Webbed* (Sbug), *Unpacking* (Witch Beam), and *Untitled Goose Game* (House House).

While the number of gamemakers formally employed in Australia is still smaller than it was before the GFC, it is steadily growing; IGEA surveys

estimated 1,300 full-time equivalent positions in 2021. Studios remain small, at an average of nine people per company, with this number still blown out by a small handful of 50 to 150 person studios, such as EA's Firemonkeys in Melbourne, Wargaming in Sydney (born after Belarusian company Wargaming Group acquired Australian middleware firm Big World Technology in 2012, itself having grown out of early Australian studio Micro Forté), and Mighty Kingdom in Adelaide (founded in 2010 by former employees of Midway Australia and Krome Adelaide). While data on the median Australian studio size is unavailable, I would suspect it to be much closer to five. Most Australian studios now primarily work on original intellectual property, as opposed to outsourced work-for-hire, but as chapter 5 details, some find more economic stability in contract work for the professional sector, producing serious games, advergames, or training simulations. Meanwhile, the attendance numbers of national industry events such as GCAP (over 1,000 in 2019), and the registered number of people in the various local game development Facebook groups (6,200 members of the IGDA Melbourne group alone), point to a much greater and unmeasured local field of game-making activity beyond that captured by formal employment statistics.

John Banks and Stuart Cunningham (2016, 130) detail this national transition to indie development as one of "creative destruction" that indicates "a major restructuring of the core of Australia's videogames development industry." As Thomas Apperley and Dan Golding (2015, 61) observe in their own overview of the Australian videogame field, the entrepreneurial startups and small companies that "would have once been labeled 'indie' or at least as outside the mainstream for the Australian industry . . . now form the backbone of Australian game development." The politics of indie game development and how it fits within broader shifts in the cultural industries will be unpacked in the following chapter. For this current chapter's consideration of the structure of the Australian videogame field, it suffices to say that in the same period that many Australian gamemakers and graduates found themselves confronted by a videogame field providing no employment opportunities, they also found available for the first time feasible alternative ways of making and distributing commercial videogames beyond the traditional employment contract with a larger studio dependent on the resources of a foreign publisher or console manufacturer. Here, going indie is less a romantic, countercultural alternative to "working for the man" and more the only viable option remaining after "the man" has packed up and

left. Australian videogame makers were thrust into a disposition through which the only available positions in the field required them to prioritize and reevaluate the field's autonomous principles of hierarchization as the heteronomous principles became increasingly unobtainable with the withdrawal of foreign investment and contracts.

In Australia, and indeed in much of the world, “indie” does not define a single mode of videogame production so much as it defines a range of videogame production contexts that are *not* American and *not* triple-A. As will be investigated in much more detail in the following chapter, this reshaped field is defined by small teams, high personal risk, small budgets, intense volatility, heightened self-exploitation, greater creative freedom, strengthened interteam community and solidarity, and boom-or-bust economics. Echoing a broader rhetoric of entrepreneurship that has become “a commonsense way of navigating the inevitable, irreproachable, and apparently unchangeable reality of global capitalism” (Szeman 2015, 473), Australian gamemakers I interviewed regularly offered the satisfaction of being their own bosses as a positive spin on the country's mass studio closures and the loss of steady employment opportunities—especially in the context of the poor and often impersonal management of those studios. As Bourdieu says of how one's dispositions inform one's position-taking within cultural fields more generally, Australian indie developers made a virtue out of necessity.

We must thus be careful not to frame the transition of Australian videogame production to indie as too simply a redemptive narrative of the creative and entrepreneurial phoenix rising from the corporate ashes. Of the above examples of early Australian indie success stories in Australia, Halfbrick has undergone a series of restructures after failing to replicate their successes of the early 2010s, EA Firemonkeys fired approximately 50 staff in early 2019, and Defiant Development ceased development and effectively let go all of its staff in mid-2019. According to an IGEA survey, in 2019 55 percent of Australian studios were less than five years old, and 23 percent of Australian studios were still working on their first title (International Games and Entertainment Association 2019). On the one hand, this potentially suggests the field is growing rapidly; on the other hand, the fact that the number of new studios does not align with a significant increase in the number of workers in the sector suggests that few independent ventures in the field successfully gain financial sustainability. The transition to indie has not reduced the volatility of making a career of videogame production—if anything, as

the following chapter will show, it has only intensified the precarity felt by Australian gamemakers.

Further, while the entrepreneurial nature of indie development might seem to break down systemic barriers of entry into the videogame field, the high risk, necessary personal investment, unclear career trajectories, and persistent misogynistic cultures perpetuate entrenched inequalities. Gender diversity remains poor, with approximately 20 percent of the nation's game-makers identifying as other than male in both industry surveys and my own survey; however, this is nonetheless a significant improvement from 2012, when this number was only 8.7 percent (Serrels 2013). The field remains even more homogenous when it comes to race, with over 90 percent of respondents to a GDAA survey in 2017 identifying as Caucasian—a shocking statistic given both Australia's geographic position near Southeast Asia and 2016 national census data showing that a quarter of Australia's population have Indigenous or non-European backgrounds. Age, too, is a major area of concern. Of the respondents to my own survey, 61 percent were under 30 years old, and only 11 percent were over 40. This replicates well-trodden patterns across the cultural industries that suggest the precarity and unpredictability of independent cultural work can only be tolerated for so long before workers leave for more reliable and less risky work elsewhere.

So far, this chapter has outlined the historic shifts in formal Australian videogame production from primarily large companies dependent on foreign publishers to smaller companies focused on producing original IP for digital platforms. However, this narrative is currently too straightforward and economically deterministic. Long before Australian gamemakers were forced to go indie in lieu of any other employment options, a rich parallel history of independent videogame production existed in Australia, and the following section turns to this.

How to Destroy Everything

In 1992, VNS Matrix, a feminist artist collective based out of Adelaide, launched *All New Gen*, a new media artwork using the language and aesthetic of videogames to “disrupt the machismo world of video games with a female non binary centric computer game” where “an omnipresent supershero collaborates with her band of DNA Sluts to bring down Big Daddy Mainframe” (VNS Matrix 1992). This project formed part of VNS Matrix's broader cyberfeminist

efforts to “hijack the toys from technocowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent.” Very few contemporary Australian gamemakers have any knowledge of VNS Matrix or *All New Gen*—the majority of them were not even born in 1992. I am only aware of VNS Matrix due to a passing reference in Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s *Games of Empire* (2009, 18).

Peripheral and parallel to the dominant historical narrative of Australian game companies growing through the 1990s, being obliterated in the late 2000s, and restructuring through the 2010s, other modes of videogame production were happening across the Australian field. While the aggressive formalization of the 1990s and 2000s did indeed make it harder for small independent teams to release and distribute videogames without the support of a large publisher and the blessing of console manufacturers, this does not mean that large-scale videogame production is the only kind that happened during this time. A rich underbelly of homebrew and artist-gamemaking scenes persisted in Australia through the 1990s and early 2000s. Much of this history remains, sadly, unrecorded or unacknowledged (see Wilson 2005 for one exception).⁴ These alternative modes of videogame production relied on close collaborations and connection with (and ambiguous borders between) informal gamemakers and the field of new media art. While Australia’s videogame companies in this time largely focused on shelf-filler commercial titles most able to sustain an ongoing company, cultural institutions, particularly in Melbourne, such as the Australian Centre of the Moving Image (ACMI), Film Victoria, and the Freeplay Independent Games Festival helped to instill early and radically political approaches to crafting and comprehending videogames as culture.

Under Helen Stuckey’s role as games curator, ACMI became home to the Games Lab from 2003 to 2008, providing an early institutional home to artistic videogame production, including the development of the “virtual public space” of AcmiPark, created by artist collective SelectParks (Stuckey 2005). Elsewhere, artist and SelectParks member Julian Thomas and game developer Katharine Neil (working anonymously at the time) produced the acclaimed and notorious *Escape from Woomera* with funding from the Australia Council for the Arts, now widely viewed as one of the first political or “serious” games. The *Escape from Woomera* team worked with refugees detained in the Woomera detention center to provide a virtualized firsthand account of Australia’s refugee imprisonment regime after journalists were banned from entering the center (Swalwell 2007; Golding 2013). A deeper

investigation of these pre-GFC movements are, sadly, beyond the scope of this book. Nonetheless, the fact that independent videogame production at artistic, hobbyist, personal, and otherwise noncommercial scales persisted in Australia peripheral to the rise and fall of formal outsourcing-dependent companies—and also peripheral to indie videogame development—reminds us that the videogame field's period of aggressive formalization was not a period in which *only* commercial videogames existed but a period in which other positions struggled for legitimacy at the field's border.

Independent videogame production existed long before the increased visibility and necessity of indie development—both in Australia and elsewhere. Indie developers, in taking alternative commercial positions within the field, built upon established cultures, skills, aesthetics, and movements of independent videogame production that persisted in the shadows of the aggressively formalized field. At the same time that the label of indie games “valorize[s] only certain kinds of precarious labor practices—the ones that paid off” (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 33), it also relies on and obscures all the other forms of independent videogame production in the field that are unable to speak directly to the most dominant commercial positions. Thus, as indie development became more common, and as the autonomous principles of hierarchization became more valued in the Australian videogame field (with original IP becoming prioritized over work-for-hire contracts), the once peripheral informal and artistic gamemakers suddenly found their practices and positions newly legitimized by and in conversation with a field that instilled them with new amounts of cultural (if not economic) capital.

The tensions between Australia's long history of independent videogame production and the formal field's transition to indie modes of production are most vivid in the long-running Freeplay Independent Games Festival, an explicitly political and fringe countercultural festival for independent videogame producers. Freeplay was founded by Katharine Neil and Marcus Westbury in 2004 as a satellite event of the Next Wave arts festival. Instead of a typical games conference with talks about monetization strategies and opportunities to network with publishers and investors, Freeplay was a coming together of interdisciplinary creators to discuss craft and politics around videogame production. In its first year, held at the World Wing Chun Kung Fu Association's dojo on Flinders Street in central Melbourne, the festival banner included the dramatically crossed-out words “Innovation in the Field of Excellence,” which Neil notes was “a dig at the bullshit corporate themes



Figure 2.2

Festival banner for the inaugural Freeplay Independent Games Festival (2004). Photo by Katharine Neil (used with permission).

that the Australian Game Developers' Conference used to go with" (Neil 2020). As Mark Gibson (2018, 6) notes in his own detailed account of Freeplay as part of Australia's contemporary fringe culture, "[Freeplay's] founding aspiration was to stake out a different kind of space, a space in which conversations could be developed not about games as a business, but about their aesthetic, political, and social dimensions—their status as cultural forms" (see also Hardwick 2023).

Freeplay persists to this day as a beacon for countercultural videogame producers in Australia, and I have personally been attending its events since 2010. It provides a particularly visible site in which to articulate the struggles of differently positioned gamemakers at the field's frontiers. Here, I want to focus on a presentation given at the 2013 festival by two gamemakers, Marigold Bartlett and Sam Crisp (using the pseudonym Stephen Swift for the talk), who at the time were game design students at a local university. Bartlett and Crisp's talk "How To Destroy Everything, Or, Why Video Games Do Not Exist (And How This Is Great For Everyone)" connected the Australian context with major shifts taking place in the early 2010s within independent game discourses in North America, centered on figures such as Anna Anthropy, Liz Ryerson, Porpentine, merriit kopas, and Mattie

Brice. As part of the process of intense in/formalization outlined in the previous chapter, these marginal game creators had begun to draw attention to the ways in which popular constructions of indie games, far from being countercultural or politically radical, centered on the same limited and hegemonic understandings and values of videogame production as did triple-A. Through a number of manifesto-like publications and explicitly queer and subversive games, such gamemakers worked toward a reclaiming of the countercultural nature of independent videogame production that indie was swiftly gentrifying (Anthropy 2012; kopas 2013). In a lecture theater at the State Library of Victoria, to an audience of Australian indie videogame makers, Bartlett and Crisp brought these debates home to the Australian field with a far-reaching, globally connected, incendiary indictment on the contemporary culture of indie gamemaking. To illustrate, it is worth quoting several segments of Bartlett and Crisp's talk at length:

What is considered "good aesthetics" in indie game circles carries discriminatory undertones of class, race, and gender. When indie culture is Western-centric, when major events take place in only certain cities, when festival award ceremonies or online marketplaces require arbitrary entrance fees of up to \$100:⁵ All these barriers inform what we perceive as a body of work. It paints an image of video games in our mind that is dictated by the privileged. And this happens, most of the time, without us realizing it. . . .

As young, impressionable game students, we're sold these narratives of success stories in the indie games scene. *Indie Game: The Movie* encourages us to lock ourselves into a room for months and months on our own and express ourselves through the language of the games we played in our childhood. Or there's the idea that maybe one day we, too, can run a successful Kickstarter or get our games on [Steam] Greenlight. . . . But what we see as the state of games today didn't arrive simply from a series of successes, even though those are the stories we are most exposed to.

By celebrating failure, we can shift our perception, and instead of looking at games which don't sell or don't get critical acclaim as games which must be doing something wrong, we can realize that these games are the only ones which can truly offer us emancipation. From a certain perspective, they're the only games doing something right. Voices that are queer, feminist, or trans, who are implicitly seen as failures by society's notion of success, are on the forefront of transgressive game design and criticism. . . .

"Games are art" means listening to voices of dissent. It means engaging in these discussions about what our culture and our games say. That collection of words, as a predicate, is not a belief. It is a practice. It's something you do, not

something you say. Seemingly innocuous opinions on what constitutes a video game, or how polished a game should be, or what aesthetic fits in to your taste: All these things are politically charged, whether you think they are or not. They're all informed by a culture where certain parties control the means of production, who control the conversation. (Bartlett and Crisp 2013)

Many in the audience, including myself, found the talk to be an energizing, invigorating call to arms for a new generation of Australian gamemakers to take new positions and redefine the field and its possible values and modes of expression. Others, especially those newly indie gamemakers of the nation's many burgeoning start-ups, found it alienating and patronizing—heretical, Bourdieu might say. Here were two young undergraduate students—Bourdieu's classic “newcomers to the field”—lecturing a room of professional videogame developers, proud of their resilient pivot to indie following industrial collapse, about political discourses in videogame creation. In one of my interviews, an older gamemaker employed at a larger Melbourne studio noted to me that it was political talks such as Bartlett and Crisp's that saw them stop attending Freeplay. The festival's countercultural politics felt disconnected to their own interest and identity as an indie gamemaker trying to make a living in the field.

Yet, at the same time, it is the artistic and countercultural peripheries of videogame production that Bartlett and Crisp's talk alludes to that assisted the transition of the formal sector through its period of “creative destruction” (Banks and Cunningham 2016). While entrepreneurial videogame businesses took advantage of new digital platforms and broader consumer markets to go indie, they also relied on the cultural capital of institutions such as Freeplay, ACMI, and Film Victoria, and the creative and artistic skills of the new media arts movements that found their way into local gamemaking communities and classrooms. Bartlett and Crisp's talk specifically, and the Freeplay festival in the early 2010s more generally, signifies a moment when a field exclusively populated by gamemakers that identified as independent or indie had to come to terms with the fact that those terms did not mean the same thing to all of them, and that there were conflicting markers of legitimacy circulating the now intensely in/formal, and increasingly autonomous, field of videogame production in Australia. What this situation most explicitly exposed in the restructured Australian videogame field is the perpetual “struggle between the established figures and the

[socially] young challengers” (Bourdieu 1993, 60) that is core to any field of cultural production but which has long been difficult to trace in videogame fields due to the exhaustive dominance of the established figures.

This is the current shape of the Australian videogame field: a nebulous range of creators and companies with varying values and goals, many of whom self-identify as indie or independent, very few of whom are working with the resources or scale traditionally considered to be available to videogame companies, even fewer of whom are making a living wage from their gamemaking work. For those readers more familiar with cultural industries literature, none of this should seem particularly exceptional. However, as videogame production has historically been understood first and foremost as occurring within a formalized videogame industry—as an economic and technologic field and not an autonomous cultural field—this field’s diffuse agents and their diverse activities remain difficult to account for. Thus, the creative destruction that Banks and Cunningham recognized among Australian videogame firms following the GFC, inflected by the calls from the countercultural fringes of the local field to “destroy everything” and “dethrone the technocowboys,” doesn’t point to a new monolithic position emerging out of the ashes of the old. Rather, through the disappearance of those companies and actors that enforced the field’s aggressive formalization, alongside the emergence of new avenues and identities and business models that encouraged the field’s intense in/formalization, the Australian videogame field was drastically reshaped so that a much wider range of videogame-creating positions became legible, legitimate, and able to contest just which autonomous and heteronomous markers of success the field would abide.

Conclusion

The dramatic restructuring of the Australian videogame field exemplifies how intense in/formalization blurred any clear distinction between professional videogame developers and amateur hobbyist, but similar transitions were occurring across the field globally. In the Nordic countries, a range of grassroots hobbyist activities and government funding programs have given rise to a range of homegrown videogame production cultures primarily constituted by small teams surrounding a few larger companies such as Supercell and Rovio (Jørgensen, Sandqvist, and Sotamaa 2017; Sotamaa, Jørgensen, and Sandqvist 2019). In the Netherlands, a small number of

triple-A studios exist, including Guerilla and Nixxes, alongside the entrepreneurial coworking space of the Dutch Game Garden and vibrant independent communities such as the Sokpop Game Collective working out of Utrecht. In Southeast Asia, countries including the Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Malaysia are each in different ways working to transition videogame fields, not unlike Australia's, from a focus on outsourcing for Northern Hemisphere companies to entrepreneurial start-ups focused on original IP for digital distribution (Chung 2016; Fung 2018). In Iran, teams of gamemakers work in semiformal environments—sometimes privately, sometimes with government support—to produce a range of videogames that counter dominant Western narratives about the region, but struggle to access professional-standard US-owned software such as Unity or Unreal (Šisler 2013; Daiiani and Keogh 2022). Even in North America, home to some of the largest studios and most powerful publishers in the videogame field globally, informal scenes and collectives abound, such as the Twine scene, which emerged in 2012, primarily driven by trans women gamemakers working out of Oakland (Harvey 2014), or the vibrant independent scenes of numerous Canadian cities such as Toronto and Montreal (Joseph 2013; Young 2018; Parker and Jenson 2017; Rocca 2013).

What the highly particular tale of construction, destruction, and fragmented reconstruction of the Australian videogame field allows us to see more broadly is the wider range of videogame-making positions struggling, with increased success, to have their position-taking recognized as legitimately within and as the field of videogame production. As employment opportunities disappeared and were replaced with the tools, cultures, and rhetoric of entrepreneurial and independent development, Australia transitioned across and after the GFC from a homogenous videogame field of commercially focused companies and excluded artists to a diffuse and contested field of differently positioned gamemakers struggling to define the field through different markers of success, quality, and legitimacy. The particulars are unique to Australia, but they nonetheless give us insights into what the videogame field now looks like globally. While each local and national videogame field of course has its own political, economic, social, and cultural conditions, the vast majority do not have a major presence of large triple-A studios and publishers. We can go so far as to say that large-scale triple-A development is something of an anomaly in videogame production, both currently and historically. It's time we account for everything else.

By outlining Australia's rocky journey from an aggressively formalized cluster of videogame companies to a contested and dynamic, intensely in/formalized videogame field, this chapter has also highlighted the need for a similar conceptual shift in how we understand the sites, identities, and ambitions of videogame makers. The shift to intense in/formalization through digital platforms and the obliteration of job opportunities, especially in a context such as Australia with a large existent skill base, exposes the struggles that continuously define and redefine the field of videogame production. They demonstrate a clear need to expand how we consider the videogame field, who we consider to be a part of it, which works and markers of success we consider to drive it and, consequentially, what this means for our attempts to understand the experiences of videogame makers in terms of labor, education, creativity, community, and value generation. The remaining chapters of this book look to each of these issues in turn.

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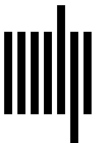
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