

## 5 Embedding Gamemaking Skills

In 2019, in the Netherlands, I spoke to an educator teaching in a game development program at a vocational college in Rotterdam. Just like the Australian educators in the previous chapter, this educator was preoccupied with just what sort of graduate identity they were fostering for their students, and what sort of employment opportunities awaited them. Their program, the educator told me, was considering a strategic name change from “bachelor of game development” to “bachelor of Unity development,” spotlighting the specific Unity software that graduates would have expertise in rather than the genre of cultural work they would be skilled at producing. This surprised me. I had always personally considered it important to be “software agnostic” in the classroom. If one were to teach students how to become gamemakers, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it was more important, I thought, for students to learn basic principles and learn *how to learn* a new software framework than to learn the specific software that happens to be the standard at the time of their studies.

Yet I saw the logic in this starkly opposite approach. Rather than a narrow expertise in developing videogames, it was hoped this potential name change might increase graduates’ employment opportunities in the broader range of sectors that increasingly rely on game engine software such as Unity to produce interactive 3D simulations, such as marketing, education, architecture, manufacturing, and freight logistics. While the students were primarily interested in the creation of videogames for entertainment or cultural purposes, educators at the institution were conscious that for most students, employment would most likely come from deploying their skills in another sector beyond videogame production. As we saw in the previous chapter, this college was hardly alone in this concern: Australian game development

programs regularly advertise the “transferability” of game development skills—an implicit admission that obtaining employment to produce original videogames full time is unlikely for many students.

As videogames become increasingly normalized as popular culture (that is, as they become recognizably autonomous as a cultural field), and as the number of videogame enthusiasts gradually begins to outnumber the naysayers, videogames are finding themselves in demand across more sectors of the economy and society for reasons other than entertainment. Where once the supposedly highly persuasive nature of videogames was cause for extreme levels of concern among researchers, the press, and the public, today we’re told in countless TED talks, education conferences, and morning news segments that playing videogames can change the world. Whether or not videogames truly are more persuasive or educational than “noninteractive” media is beyond the scope of this book.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it is uncontroversial to note that the excitement and enthusiasm for videogame products, design methodologies, and technologies have risen dramatically over the past decade. Their combination of (supposedly) highly persuasive interactive design and (relatively) easy-to-use tools for producing real-time and responsive 3D environments have made videogames newly attractive as both texts and technologies to a wide range of sectors. Videogame makers are now in high demand beyond the videogame field.

The demand for skilled gamemakers in a range of sectors beyond the cultural industries has grown alongside the number of aspiring gamemakers and graduates seeking alternative ways to sustain themselves through independent gamework. Consequentially, a common trend across my fieldwork sites was small, independent game production studios contracting out their skills to commercial clients. Perhaps they would produce a videogame to be played on displays in a shopping mall to advertise a new food brand, a VR simulation for a logistics company to train new employees in workplace health and safety protocols, or perhaps just a minimally interactive corporate webpage for a local small business. While producing an original videogame for the entertainment market is highly fraught and requires large investments of time and money with no guarantee of any return or recognition in a crowded and unpredictable marketplace, taking on contract work for a client provides specific objectives, a concrete scope, and, typically, a predetermined financial return. If autonomous cultural work requires a (partial) disavowal of economic capital in pursuit of the field’s symbolic

measures of success, such client work represents the other end of the field: work that requires a (partial) disavowal of symbolic capital in pursuit of economic capital. As one gamemaker we'll hear from below told me, "It's a lot less creatively fulfilling, but it does keep the lights on."

As is a common mantra throughout this book, this situation is hardly unique to the videogame field; producers exist in most if not all cultural fields who use their skills for "noncultural" purposes in other sectors to achieve a reliable income while also—or instead of—undertaking autonomous creative work. A musician may produce their own original music while also undertaking contract work producing commercial jingles. Those same commercials might be directed by film school graduates applying their cinematography knowledge. Illustrators and artists become graphic designers; new media artists design corporate websites; professional copy is written by creative writing graduates. Actors and models appear in TV and print ads while hoping for a breakthrough in their theater and runway work. Cultural workers, and their creative skills, have long been embedded within and providing service to a much wider range of sectors of the economy than the cultural industries narrowly defined.

While a field of cultural production strives for complete autonomy from market forces through its internally consecrated markers of success, demanding an "interest in disinterestedness" (Bourdieu 1993, 40) from its constituents, Bourdieu also reminds us that "there are economic conditions for the indifference to economy." A cultural producer's striving for autonomy always occurs within the context of the broader field of power, never fully detached from the forces of economic and political profit. That is, the heteronomous principles of hierarchization persist as cultural producers find themselves to be still subservient to the field of power even as they strive for autonomy. Very few cultural producers in a field can ever afford to become fully disinterested in economic success, to focus on producing "pure" culture. The autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchization are a formative tension in any cultural field—the "art versus commerce" struggle of the individual creator played out on a structural level. Bourdieu goes so far as to say that the cultural field "is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchizations" (1993, 40). If this book is to delimit the frontier of the videogame field, then those videogame makers working beyond the entertainment context, prioritizing the heteronomous principle over the autonomous principle, represent a crucial site of struggle where

the very boundary of the field is constituted. Put simply, we cannot adequately explore the cultural field of videogame production as a field striving for autonomy (art for art's sake) without also accounting for those videogame producers driven by heteronomy (making a living from their art skills).

This chapter considers the creative-commercial tensions of these game-makers who contract out their videogame production skills. While cultural industries research often focuses on how autonomous cultural production differs from other economic sectors (Banks 2007; Oakley and O'Connor 2015; Hesmondhalgh 2018), *creative* industries researchers and policymakers account for heteronomy by investigating the creative workforce and skillsets that exist beyond the cultural industries strictly defined (Hearn et al. 2014; Cunningham 2014; Bridgstock and Cunningham 2016). Such researchers might argue that the situation of extreme precarity outlined in chapter 3 is a selectively pessimistic view of the conditions of *creative* work. It's certainly true with the gamemakers we will hear from in this chapter that those who decided to pursue client-based work typically felt less precarious than those trying to make a living solely from the production of original intellectual property. However, at the same time, client work was not typically the form of videogame product they wanted to be focusing on but simply what they felt they *had* to do in order to get by. Many articulated desires to move away from client-based work in the future once they had saved enough of a "war chest" for an original venture to not be a massive financial risk. In other words, they desired to be driven more by the videogame field's principles of autonomy but were unwilling to make the extreme financial and personal sacrifices that independent developers make to do so. In Bourdieu's terms, they do not possess the economic capital that would allow them to be disinterested in the accrual of economic capital.

The first section situates Australian gamemaking teams working in this space within broader debates in cultural and creative industries research as to just which industries—and just which workers—should be accounted for by researchers and policymakers when evaluating the size and quality of cultural or creative work. If it is true, as Stuart Cunningham (2011, 32) claims, that "there are more creatives working outside the creative industries than inside them," what does this mean for how we articulate and demarcate the videogame field? This section works toward an ultimate understanding of such gamemakers as *embedded within* and providing a *creative service* for other sectors. The second section, then, looks at how the gamemakers who have

chosen to work for clients in other sectors articulate the creative sacrifices they have made for financial security. Most see their client work as a stopgap to returning to eventual creative autonomy rather than a long-term solution, and this complicates more positive evaluations of creative service opportunities for cultural workers. Finally, the fact that gamemakers are employed by clients in other sectors suggests that there are (or at least, are perceived to be) particular or unique creative skills associated with videogame production that such gamemakers “transfer” into other fields. The final section of this chapter thus asks just what, exactly, are gamemaking skills, and are they truly as transferrable as the education institutions of the previous chapter claim them to be?

### Gamemaking as a Service

In chapter 1, we were introduced to Chaos Theory Games, a small studio in Sydney started by four young friends initially hoping to produce the large-scale blockbuster role-playing videogames they themselves loved to play growing up. It didn’t take them long to realize, however, that the scale of videogame they could feasibly produce with their available resources would have to be much smaller and would have much lower chance of a financial return large enough to ensure the company’s sustainability. As 24-year-old managing director James Lockrey told me, “It became very obvious to us very early that we weren’t going to hit fantastic success and build a stable career out of this reliably.” Instead, because they wanted to “actually earn a salary,” it was a “natural evolution” to begin using their game development skills “in the capacity that we do now, which is building games for business and working for the education and advertising sectors.” The Chaos Theory Games website lists a wide range of previous projects, including a water management simulator produced for a local council, entertainment games produced for private clients, and games and augmented reality apps for marketing campaigns for brands such as M&Ms and the Natural Confectionery Co.<sup>2</sup>

In Melbourne, Opaque Media Group works on a range of high-fidelity simulation and training software for a wide range of military, government, and private clients, predominately for virtual reality (VR) platforms, and predominately made with the Unreal game engine.<sup>3</sup> Also in Melbourne, GOATi Entertainment has been working on a long-term original project, *22nd Century Racing Series*, while also deploying their proprietary game engine

technology originally developed for this project, RevGen, through contracts for government and private clients. They also undertake outsourcing work for other game development companies.<sup>4</sup> Bondi Labs, with a team split between Brisbane and Melbourne, produces training and assessment simulations for logistics companies, providing expensive commercial licenses for their “software solutions.”<sup>5</sup> In Hobart, Secret Lab—who we will learn more about in the following section—splits their time between specialist technical support of independent videogame studios, open-source tool development, writing software guidebooks, and client contracts.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these teams came to their current work through an initial ambition to pursue autonomous videogame production; each primarily works with videogame development software and deploys videogame design philosophies; many work from within videogame coworking spaces, attend videogame production conferences, and are otherwise involved in their local gamemaking communities. Yet they are selective about when they publicly present themselves as “videogame development” companies to prospective clients. At Bondi Labs, 30-year-old customer solutions manager Josh Hall explained to me that “probably a few years ago we would have [called ourselves] a ‘serious games’ company, [but] more recently we pulled back a little bit and just say ‘software solutions’ or ‘technology.’” GOATi describes themselves on their website as “a Melbourne-based entertainment company” that specializes in “real-time rendering engine technology, accurately simulated vehicle physics, real-time traffic AI simulation and the building of bespoke vehicle-based projects.” Opaque, according to their website, is “a software development and consulting team dedicated to emerging digital technology.” At the time of writing, Chaos Theory’s website describes the team as a “game and app studio.” But according to 24-year-old creative director Nico King, the team is considering removing the word “Games” from their company name entirely since “for the work that we do, it can be a sticking point for some clients.” Secret Lab is “an independent games and creative technology studio.” While those members of these teams that I spoke to agree that it is their expertise and skills in videogame production that they primarily offer their customers, the work being produced by these companies is just as often not videogames: sometimes it’s VR or augmented reality (AR) projects, sometimes it’s web design, sometimes it’s writing books.

How are these gamemakers positioned within the videogame field? Are they in the videogame field at all? Similar questions are being asked more

broadly in debates around how best to count the size and economic contribution of the cultural or creative industries. At the turn of the twenty-first century, while game studies was deadlocked in a debate as to whether or not games were stories, another debate over terminology and disciplinary remit was unfolding in the broader area of cultural production between “cultural industries” and “creative industries” approaches. The battle lines and stakes of this debate have been more comprehensively outlined elsewhere (O’Connor 2009; Turner 2012; Hearn et al. 2014; Oakley and O’Connor 2015; McRobbie 2016; Hesmondhalgh 2018, 175–182; Cunningham and Flew 2019; Mould 2018). Suffice it to say, “cultural industries” speaks to a defined range of industries that “deal primarily with the industrial production and circulation of texts” and which are “most directly involved in the production of social meaning” (Hesmondhalgh 2018, 14–15) and a cultural studies concern for the distributions of power and wealth therein. “Creative industries,” meanwhile, tries to measure in economic terms the broader significance and innovations of creative work so as to translate the significance of this work to neoliberal policymakers increasingly disinterested in the intrinsic value of the arts or humanities. In a 2019 reflection on the much-cited initial definition of “creative industries” provided in 1998 by the UK’s Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS)—to which he contributed—John Newbigin (2019, 21) candidly admits, “The term ‘creative industries’ was as much a branding exercise as an attempted definition; it was a political initiative, aimed at raising the profile of an eclectic jumble of generally IP-based, culturally rooted businesses that governments and banks had conspicuously failed to understand or take seriously as part of the economy.” Advocates for a creative industries approach nonetheless argue that tracking creative work instead of cultural industries more accurately represents and measures the experiences and value of the majority of creative workers. As Greg Hearn et al. (2014, 1) argue in the introduction of a collection focused specifically on *Creative Work Beyond the Creative Industries*, “Creative occupations exist across the entire economy. The creative worker’s habitus cannot be discovered by looking only in film studios, games companies or artists’ garrets.” Here, Hearn et al. are insisting that researchers of creative workers must look past the most autonomous and legitimized positions of the field—indeed, look past the field entirely—to account for the much broader range of creative jobs and skills “embedded” (Cunningham 2014) throughout the economic field. This suggests that a

cultural industry's focus on the precarity and (self)-exploitation of those striving to build autonomous careers within fields of cultural production is in fact a selective, pessimistic, nonrepresentative, and perhaps even privileged depiction of the experiences of cultural workers, and consequentially overplays the precarity of (largely middle-class) creative workers compared to those of other sectors (Cunningham 2011, 38). Instead, as Cunningham argues, "a great many creatives, we must assume, have managed precarity by working outside the creative industries." Essentially, a cultural industries approach broadly emphasizes the value and difficulty of striving for autonomy within a cultural field, and the threats to and exploitation of this autonomy. Meanwhile, a creative industries approach draws more attention to those cultural producers most driven by the heteronomous principle and the need to make a stable living, and the innovations and contributions they make to a broader range of economic sectors. To truly describe the state of a cultural field's frontier and its formative tensions of autonomy and heteronomy, aspects of each approach are necessary.

In the creative industries approach, the movements and impact of creative workers beyond their own narrowly defined cultural industries become easier to trace. But at the same time, the "imaginative, dynamic, transformative, and glamorous aspects of culture [are] pressed into the service of an innovation machine. Questions of value other than innovation and other economic impacts [are] dropped" (Oakley and O'Connor 2015, 2–3). When people talk about the "creative industries," few are talking about literature or theater. Susan Luckman (2015), for instance, has been critical of creative industries research for not paying adequate attention to arts and crafts and other analogue cultural forms, as a focus on innovation and economic growth sees it instead fixated on the lucrative digital industries of urban centers. Kate Oakley and Justin O'Connor similarly critique the inclusion of "software, computer games, and electronic publishing" (2015, 3; see also Kerr 2017, 6) in early definitions of the creative industries, ensuring a large number of technical roles greatly inflated the employment numbers and economic contribution estimates of the creative sector. Oakley and O'Connor (2015, 5–6) are particularly critical that the shift in focus from "culture" as collective output to "creativity" as individualized input obscures just what skills and identities are being evaluated: "'Creativity' when used outside of the cultural practices to which it has traditionally referred, can be applied to any professional activity that requires situated skills and intelligent judgment."



Similar critiques have been made by Mark Banks (2007), Angela McRobbie (2016), and Olli Mould (2018) as to how “creativity” becomes a catch-all to justify unclear hours, ambiguous responsibilities, and self-driven overwork in an ever-widening range of sectors. Essentially, that creative industries researchers and policymakers have identified a greater number of creative workers beyond the cultural industries than within them might not necessarily mean more *cultural producers* work beyond the cultural industries than within them—it could just mean the category of roles that can be counted as creative has expanded. Yet, while a consequence of the conceptual shift from culture to creativity might be that “lines drawn between a ‘creative sector’ . . . and other highly skilled sectors can only be arbitrary” (Oakley and O’Connor 2015, 6), creative industries advocates might argue that dismantling such arbitrary lines is entirely the point.

Responding to such critiques, researchers at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation developed the creative trident framework (see Table 5.1) to provide a rubric through which to map creative and noncreative occupations to creative and noncreative industries. This distinguishes between specialist creatives employed in creative industries, support workers (noncreatives) employed within creative industries, and creative workers embedded in noncreative industries. While the creative trident doesn’t assist necessarily in helping us determine just which jobs or industries are creative or noncreative, it does nonetheless allow a conceptual differentiation between creative occupations (in and out of the creative industries) and creative industries (including both creative and noncreative occupations). Combined, three spikes of the trident provide the total

**Table 5.1**  
The creative trident framework (Higgs, Cunningham, and Pagan 2007)

Category of employees	Employment within creative industries	Employment within other industries	Total employment
Employment in creative occupations	Specialist creatives	Embedded creatives	Total employment in creative occupations
Employment in other occupations	Support workers		
	Total employment in creative industries		Total creative workforce

level of employment in “the creative workforce” (Higgs, Cunningham, and Pagan 2007).

This framework helps us to better situate gamemaking teams like Chaos Theory, Secret Lab, Opaque Media, and Bondi Labs. These teams best fit in the rightmost spike of the trident as workers in a creative occupation embedded in noncreative industries. As such, I primarily refer to these gamemakers as *embedded gamemakers*. However, it’s not quite that simple as these gamemakers are typically *not* employed in the industries in which they work so much as they provide services for clients in these industries. Where the companies that employ these gamemakers, such as Chaos Theory or Secret Lab, fit between creative and noncreative industries remains contested. Indeed, at the time of my interviews, several videogame companies and trade associations were trying to popularize the term *applied games* to replace the term *serious games*, to better define their activity not as producing videogames with a serious intent but as *applying* videogame development skills *from* a position in the videogame field *to* noncreative sectors. Nevertheless, as the work these gamemakers do primarily contributes to and is financially supported by noncreative sectors, even if their employment is technically external to those sectors, this model remains useful for thinking of such gamemakers as embedded gamemakers that provide a creative service to a range of industries that are themselves not necessarily creative.

The ongoing tensions and debates between cultural industries and creative industries approaches to examining and analyzing cultural work are particularly useful to help us situate embedded gamemakers within the videogame field. It is insufficient to say embedded gamemakers take a position beyond the boundary of the field, as to claim that they cross the boundary presupposes where the boundary even is and, in doing so, makes assumptions that can only reproduce the field’s dominant structure. Instead, we must render the struggle to define the field—the struggle which *is* the field—visible by accounting for how embedded gamemakers navigate the principles of autonomy and heteronomy in their own position-taking within (or without) the videogame field.

### Doing What You Love, Strategically

A common trend for embedded gamemakers I spoke to was how they articulated their work in the client space as a compromise that allowed some

balance of both heteronomous values (a reliable income, a broader social impact) and autonomous values (creative fulfillment, peer recognition). Secret Lab, in Hobart, is exemplary. Cofounders Paris Buttfield-Addison, 32, and Jonathan Manning, 31 (along with a third cofounder who has since moved on) began Secret Lab in 2008. Manning described the venture as emerging from that “‘Hey, cool, let’s make videogames’ kind of rush of enthusiasm that you get immediately after graduating and all the options are open to you and you have just enough funding to be able to support doing that.” After launching a game in the early days of Apple’s App Store, the team was contracted by an American start-up to undertake iOS development and software support. As Manning tells it, this was a “much, much better and more lucrative offer” and so “videogames kind of became the second tier to that.” Nevertheless, “we’d always seen Secret Lab as a primarily game-focused thing, even when that didn’t really necessarily end up being what we made.” When the team moved back to Australia around 2011–2012, they strived to return to game development, which, as Manning explains:

kind of ended up happening in bits and pieces. We worked on little bits and pieces for somebody else’s games; we made products that had game-like elements; we made gamification systems for existing products. . . . We never really considered ourselves to be actively in the process of making videogames, we just made software that was games. That kind of felt different in our minds.

Then, in 2015 the team got “an in into the games scene” through a collaboration with American independent development team Infinite Wall to support development of *Night in the Woods*. This work ultimately saw Manning on the main stage of the prestigious Independent Game Festival (IGF) awards in 2018 when *Night in the Woods* won the Seumas McNally Grand Prize.

At the time of our interview in 2018, Secret Lab had funding for original intellectual property through the state funding body Screen Tasmania. They continued to provide support and develop features for other independent gamemakers both in Australia and overseas. They undertook contract programming and consulting for iOS software development. They even wrote technical manuals and ran software developer conferences. Instead of committing all their resources (that is, money and time) to producing enough of an independent project to maybe attract the interest of a publisher or investor, client work is typically more reliable for Secret Lab. It provides a well-defined list of deliverables, a concrete timeline, and a known income. This compensates for the financial unreliability of videogame production

and ensures, according to Manning, that Secret Lab is still able to spend at least some of their time undertaking videogame production:

When you're making a videogame, especially if you're making your own videogame, then the question of whether you're going to be able to make enough money to make another game or to continue operating as a business is much more up in the air. Whereas client work is more reliable. You are told what to do within a certain set of parameters and you can get that done and move on to the next job. And at the same time, you can develop skills. Most of my Unity skills come from doing just random indie jobs or solving certain things. In fact, we made a game for [an airline] which was designed to keep children occupied on long flights and so we did that in Unity and developed skills in that area. And of course, the downside is [client work] is a lot less creatively fulfilling, but it does keep the lights on. So yes, it's almost entirely a financial decision.

For Buttfeld-Addison, Secret Lab chose to work in this capacity because they know how precarious videogame production can be: "We're very aware of the way we think the [videogame] industry works, and we apply our interests and skills very strategically to get what we want." But, he stressed, the solution for Secret Lab isn't simply about prioritizing commerce over creativity but rather to be "very strategic about doing what we love." If the team did just want to make a lot of money, then, as qualified software developers, Buttfeld-Addison was confident they could each "go over to Google or whatever":

It's always going to be there if we want it, realistically, just because the skillset we have is so in demand outside of games. . . . We could make actual money if we weren't staying with games, and we know that. It's kind of always in the back of our head, but it doesn't drive us. But it's also kind of like a safety net, or this idea of a safety net, that in the future we can move to that, but it hasn't come up yet.

But money is "not really the primary motivator" for Secret Lab, Buttfeld-Addison stressed. Instead, by simultaneously working between consulting, tech, and videogame production Secret Lab strives for a balance of both financial and creative autonomy.

In Melbourne, Alexander Perrin and Joshua Tatangelo, both 26, cofounded the studio 2pt Interactive after graduating university. 2pt worked on a range of "games and interactive digital playthings" according to their website, some independently and some for commercial clients.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Secret Lab was happy with the middle ground between artistic and commercial projects, for 2pt client work was only ever a way of (as Bourdieu would say) accruing the economic capital necessary to become disinterested in accruing economic capital. Perrin explained:

Initially we set out to do client work just so we could actually have some money. We both knew we wanted to [work together] but none of the game projects we really wanted to do for ourselves would be quick enough to put together where we could actually live in the interim. So like we never had enough time to make something that we would want to make so we decided to go the other route and try to get some capital.

As Manning said for Secret Lab, Tatangelo articulated 2pt's client work as a conscious sacrifice in creative autonomy:

When client work aligns with our kind of vision or allows us a chance to forge some of our direction into it, I find that stuff really satisfying. Sometimes client work is quite dry and there's no room for that. It's just people have seen one thing and they want that again and it's not the most satisfying thing. . . . It can very quickly become something we just try to get done. But we're very aware we could be in a far worse situation, so we try not to let that get us down too much if the job isn't 100 percent creatively fulfilling. We just try to take it like, okay, that's rent money and once that's over we'll get back to [our own work]. It's this balancing act but it's kind of nice because it means when we do get time to do our own stuff it feels like more of a luxury. I feel like we appreciate that time a bit more.

In the stories of both Secret Lab and 2pt, embedded gamemakers aren't simply choosing between creative *or* economic pursuits. Rather, in order to find a sustainable way to take a position in the videogame field, they constantly negotiate the demands of autonomy (accruing symbolic capital only recognized by others within the field) with the demands of heteronomy (accruing economic and political capital only recognized by those external to the field).

With some client work, the desire for autonomy would be redirected away from creative fulfillment toward a sense of making a social contribution. While Chaos Theory Games in Sydney also pivoted to client work specifically because of the lack of financial feasibility in purely autonomous creative work, each member of the team insisted their work was still driven primarily by noncommercial motivations such as the ability to work on projects that might lead to social change. Technical director Will Bagley, 24, explained:

It's often hard to see a branding project that's supporting a brand that you don't necessarily agree with and go out there and sort of help them sell their product. We don't go, "Yes, [soft drink brand] managed to up their sale by 5 percent because of our game!" But if we made something and it's like, "Hey, the Great Barrier Reef Foundation made \$50 million because people started getting excited about it because of this game that we made for them" then that would be really exciting.

Here, the passion to be creative is shifted to being socially responsible, and this in turn connects to broader rhetorical and strategic moves of the serious games industry to have videogames popularly reimagined as a social good, as opposed to a social ill. While Chaos Theory still made creative sacrifices in order to run a more economically feasible business, they also, like Secret Lab, felt like they were willing to make economic compromises in order to maintain some level of intrinsic fulfillment in their work. The principles of autonomy—the pursuit of noneconomic capital intrinsic to the field—are not entirely absent in their work. Instead, as Buttfeld-Addison puts it above, each of these teams of embedded gamemakers is attempting to take a position in the videogame field that allows them to be strategic about doing what they love.

Many embedded gamemakers were emphatic that, one day, they would like to leave client work behind and focus exclusively on original videogame production. The path back to original content is a difficult and intimidating one, however, for the very reasons they began client work in the first place: committing the upfront investment of time and money, with no reassurance of ever breaking even, is difficult to justify. Emre Deniz, the 31-year-old CEO of Opaque Space within the larger Opaque Media Group, was explicit about this tension:

Three months of dev work for us with the defense sector generally averages [hundreds of thousands of dollars] worth of contracting. That eclipses what a lot of the indie dev teams [in Melbourne] have to work with for even a twelve-month period. . . . Everyone in that row of people [pointing through glass wall] wants to be working on games for a consumer audience but, you know, we don't have the war chest right now to be able to facilitate that.

The metaphor of building up a war chest of savings before venturing forward on the unpredictable and arduous path of developing original intellectual property was a common refrain. It speaks directly to the acute awareness of these gamemakers of the high levels of risk and precarity in independent videogame production as outlined in chapter 3. These companies and individuals would prefer to be creating their “own” games autonomously, but they are unwilling to make the excessive financial sacrifices required to undertake such a venture. Instead, they first want to be in a position where their savings can offset the risks of working on original IP, ensuring everyone still gets paid and the company doesn't collapse.

However, even if an embedded team accrues the funds to commit to original work for a period of time, other complications emerge. Clients are gained through the slow building and retaining of relationships. Committing to an original project requires saying no to potential clients for a time and potentially losing future jobs from that client as well. Buttfeld-Addison explains this predicament thus:

We're hoping to spend some time in the next six months working on our own game. It's really important to us. . . . But things keep coming up which are very valuable or interesting to us so we just keep deferring our own games to do them. . . . We could sit down and spend [tens of thousands of] dollars on finishing this small game of our own, but then the local power company might offer us [hundreds and thousands of] dollars for an educational game for kids. And if we don't pick that, because Tasmania [is a very small state], we might completely burn our bridges as far as any opportunity in that direction in the future. So we go, "Okay, we'll put our game on hold and we'll do this thing for some external company for a reasonable amount of money that will keep us going for another couple of years." It's really hard to juggle that . . . the lowest thing on the rungs is making our own games because it doesn't directly result in money.

Common across these interviews was a sense that while autonomy-driven original work was both desired and preferable, it was a financial and professional risk embedded gamemakers were rarely willing to make. They hoped to undertake it one day, but the war chest never filled up sufficiently to offset the extreme levels of risk and self-exploitation common among the more autonomous gamemakers we heard from in chapter 3. Of all the teams in this chapter, at the time of writing in 2022, 2pt is the only team to have transitioned into full-time original videogame production.

This is a point that is sometimes obfuscated by the creative industries literature's emphasis on communicating the value of creative workers and industries to the broader economy. While Cunningham's (2014, 43) observation that cultural workers often "manage precarity over a career life cycle by moving outside the Creative Industries" is reaffirmed by the experiences and decisions of these gamemakers, there's more to the story. Embedded gamemakers have not simply chosen to leave videogame production for greener economic pastures but are constantly negotiating the art-commerce nexus, trying to figure out how to obtain creative autonomy without giving up economic stability. The political struggle of art and commerce—of autonomy and heteronomy, of economic interest and economic disinterest—that

the cultural worker embodies cannot be simply reduced to whether or not the cultural worker has been able to find dependable employment. We must also consider what *sort* of employment the cultural worker is ultimately pursuing. An exaggerated emphasis on how economic capital is gained and circulated obscures the equally important ways in which cultural and social capital are gained and circulated across the field. Indeed, just as Bourdieu (1993, 38) notes that if the heteronomous principle of hierarchization were to reign unchallenged the field would disappear, if any of these embedded gamemakers were to entirely deny principles of autonomy in their work, they themselves would disappear as gamemakers. The point here is not simply that embedded gamemakers still *want* to be doing creative work but that their everyday experiences as embedded creative workers, their business and career decisions, are defined by how they continuously navigate the art-commerce struggle, the principals of autonomy and heteronomy, in ongoing ways. The experiences of embedded gamemakers don't simply provide a solution to the precarity of independent videogame production but rather further demonstrate how all producers within the cultural field of videogame production navigate autonomous, creative disinterest with the economic demands of survival as they strive to take positions recognized, still, as existing within the field at all.

### Transferable Game Development Skills?

We have now seen how some gamemakers address the precarity of gamework by deploying their gamemaking skills for means other than the autonomous production of videogames. The accounts of the gamemakers detailed above seem to confirm the promises made by education institutions and trade associations as to the transferability of gamemaking skills and the value they add to the broader economy. But this fact alone brings us no closer to understanding what even *are* the gamemaking skills that gamemakers seemingly transfer from autonomous videogame production within the videogame field outward to other sectors. Does videogame production foster the growth of unique skills that can't be obtained anywhere else but which can then be transferred beyond the field? Or does it foster more generalizable skills that *can* be learned and applied to videogame production but which can also be learned and applied elsewhere? When gamemaking skills are claimed to be transferable, is this advocating for a



unique value of videogame production that deserves external support? Or is it simply acknowledging the ability of cultural workers to “make do” between autonomous and heteronomous motivators?

Most straightforwardly, the technical skills of using software environments and coding languages were understood by gamemakers as being particularly transferable. Game engines such as Unity and Unreal are now used for interactive 3D simulation in a wide range of sectors (and, tellingly, no longer refer to themselves as game engines on their websites but as real-time 3D creation tools), yet gamemakers are nevertheless those most trained and experienced in their use. At the same time, game programmers use programming languages such as C#, C++, Java, and Python, all of which are used extensively in software development more generally. Similarly, artists and audio engineers use the same graphic design, modeling, animation, and composition software as those in other sectors. When individual gamemakers were asked about future alternative career paths, just like the students we heard from in the last chapter, those gamemakers in more technical and programming roles were the ones who could most easily imagine jobs they could do beyond gamemaking. For the generalist game designers, however, imagining sectors in which their more nebulous skillsets would be in demand was a much more difficult task.

Perhaps this is because “skills” as a concept does not adequately capture the critical capacities and knowledges more typically associated with cultural production. As we saw in the previous chapter, a language of skills has encroached education and employment discourse since at least the early 1990s, alongside and as part of the broader shift in universities toward graduate employability. Uncertainty over just what skills were being transferred to their clients was common for the embedded gamemakers spoken to throughout this chapter. Embedded gamemakers saw their work as still inherently a creative endeavor, even in its more heteronomous form. They believed gamemaking required periods of ideation and iteration that couldn’t be predetermined, and the quality of the final products couldn’t be measured in purely quantified metrics. This often clashed with clients’ ideas of videogame production as a straightforward and technical process. As Lockrey at Chaos Theory explained:

We do work for a lot of agencies who I think see us as a primarily technical resource to solve a problem in an amount of time: “You are an expert, and you know how long it’s going to take with a little bit of margin for error, and you get

it done by that time” kind of thing. There are some other clients who are maybe a bit more familiar with the creative process and thinking in a more iterative way of not getting it right the first time and that’s where I think game design really comes into it: thinking about those problems and solving them creatively. It’s sometimes hard to communicate that value and it’s especially hard to quantify how long is it going to take to design a good game because when it comes down to client work you really do end up having to present them with a budget and a timeline. . . . Something that’s particularly challenging in games to put into a production schedule is how long it’s going to take to make this fun, how long is it going to take to make this art style look good and fit? It could end up being way under; it could end up being way over. Usually, it’s one or the other.

For some clients, the skills offered by embedded gamemakers are purely technical, such as the American company that saw Secret Lab’s iPhone games as evidence of skills in iOS software development. For others, there was something specific about videogame design that was worth paying for. This speaks to a pervasive challenge in the videogame field, one referred to numerous times throughout this book: the tension between videogame production as a cultural enterprise, and videogame production as a technological enterprise.

Ultimately, there was little consistency as to just what specific, discrete skills embedded gamemakers transferred into their clients’ sectors. Instead, what was consistent was how they framed their overall capacities differently depending on what a prospective client was looking for. While, as we saw above, many of these studios don’t call themselves game development studios, when talking to potential clients they make strategic choices as to whether or not to present their services as inflected by game development skills, experiences, or knowledge. As Deniz explained when I asked how Opaque Media presents themselves to prospective clients:

I specifically use [game development] as a point of differentiation. . . . We say we employ game design because we want them to see us as game developers that are doing very valuable and interesting things that they’re interested in specifically. So, when their outcomes align with us, presenting ourselves as game developers tends to breed a new perception of how they view game development and how it can benefit their organizations or agencies. . . . We don’t shy away from being game devs.

For Bondi Labs, however, Hall explains that the decision to present themselves as a game development company or not is made on a case-by-case basis, informing decisions such as where they first meet with a potential client. Bondi Labs are based in The Arcade, Melbourne’s videogame production

coworking space. For a “certain level of customers or clients or executives,” Bondi Labs will organize formal business meeting room space in the CBD, in spaces available through the Victorian government. But for other clients:

Like if I’m talking to learning development coordinators, they actually love coming to places like [The Arcade]. Because this is where all the cool shit happens, right? They come and play games and it just blows their mind, really. So depending on who it is, we’ll pick and choose how we craft that day.

Essentially, whether embedded gamemakers frame their skills *as* gamemaking skills (as opposed to technical skills or creative skills or something else) comes down to their perception of just what sort of skills the client is after. As Hall says, “We try and manage conversation so that we don’t start with games, but if we feel it’s appropriate we’ll definitely use the game angle, it does add a lot of value.”

Critiquing the increasing push toward transferrable skills framings of education in the 1990s, David Bridges (1993, 51) suggests that what are called transferable skills (or core skills, or key skills) are less “an atomistic list of competencies” and instead “look more like the kind of competence, capability, or ability which lies at the heart of the sensitive, responsive, and adaptable exercise of professionalism in any sphere.” Similarly, albeit more bluntly Len Holmes (1998) argues that transferable skills simply don’t exist. When educators talk about developing transferable skills in graduates, Holmes argues, they are in fact talking about developing in the student a particular graduate identity that allows one to negotiate the “outcome of the individual’s claim on the right to the desired social position and the evaluations made by the gatekeepers to such a position.” That is, to articulate oneself as having transferable skills is to take a position on the field’s frontier that is legible to those external to the field as a position that is internal to the field. Transferable skills, Holmes claims, are thus nothing more than a skill of “early-impression-making”: less a concrete transferring of skills from one context to another, and more the ability to convince a potential employer (or client) that one’s previous experiences provide relevant competencies. Gamemakers, when selling their services beyond the videogame field, present their skills as transferred from gamemaking only when it would be advantageous to do so. Just as for humanities and social science (HASS) education programs and graduates, for these gamemakers transferability itself becomes a selling point that selectively communicates to clients the creative and critical capacities required for (but perhaps not unique to) gamemaking.

The questions of what game development skills are, how transferable they are, and the value they add to the broader economy are ultimately the wrong questions. Skills are not simply transferred from videogames to other fields. Instead, embedded gamemakers strategically, selectively, and contextually present their skills, knowledge, and competencies as either having arisen from the field of videogame production or not when it is attractive to clients to do so. Some gamemakers, some students, some educators take *a position of transferability*, with one foot in an autonomous field of production being recognized by their more-autonomous peers, and one foot external to the field, recognizable as having value to external clients in the broader field of power. The very language of skill transferability speaks to what practices are legitimized as within the field, and what practices are illegitimized as without it.

## Conclusion

By this stage of the book, it is hopefully clear that the provocation that the videogame industry doesn't exist isn't simply about replacing the word *industry* with *field* in a semantic shift that resolves or reveals nothing. The videogame field instead exposes a larger, more complex picture of numerous, diffuse sites of videogame production that are obscured when we only consider those positions that fit neatly within "the videogame industry": the numerous positions taken by videogame producers, informed by the perpetual tensions between autonomy (art for art's sake) and heteronomy (economic survival). Embedded gamemakers' refusal (or inability) to be disinterested in economic interests highlights the contested borders of the videogame field, where its autonomous values and modes of production blur with the broader field of class relations driven by the hegemony of economics and politics.

Ultimately this chapter and the previous one have been concerned with where lines are drawn around the field, or perhaps more accurately the act of line-drawing itself. By considering how embedded gamemakers take liminal positions in the videogame field, we can complicate existing creative industries literature that, in trying to communicate the economic value of cultural production, too easily reduces cultural production to its economic values. Whereas a creative industries approach might note how embedded gamemakers have successfully found ways in which to survive financially beyond the risks and precarity associated with the production of original IP,

this doesn't account for the broader entanglement and negotiation of cultural, social, and economic values at play for both individual gamemakers and entire companies. Embedded gamemakers are rarely driven by purely commercial means, and few see client work as a long-term business model, even when it ends up being so. Embedding, it seems, is precarious in its own ways, with short-term contracts and perpetually looking for the next client always trumping any ability to make long-term plans. At the same time, embedded gamemakers complicate cultural industries literature that insists on the unique, special nature of cultural production in its limited autonomy from the economic field. Hearn et al. (2014, 1) are indeed right that "The creative worker's habitus cannot be discovered by looking only in film studios, games companies or artists' garrets." If, to understand fields of cultural production, we only focus on those producers that have successfully taken the most autonomous positions, we fail to account for the always-present heteronomous principles of hierarchization that provide a counterweight, always pulling the field in the opposite direction.

In this chapter, I have focused solely on independent videogame studios supported, at least in part, by working for clients beyond the videogame field. This has allowed me to critique the rhetoric of skill transferability as less a straightforward or linear transfer of specific skills from one sector to another and more holistically as the open-ended ways in which all gamemakers navigate the competing demands for autonomy and heteronomy as their own disposition demands. Skill transferability, as we can see through how embedded gamemakers position themselves differently when talking to different prospective clients, doesn't describe a process so much as demonstrate how the videogame field has successfully obtained such a level of autonomy that those outside it perceive it as a location from which value can be obtained. This, in turn, produces opportunities for gamemakers to translate the symbolic capital they have accrued within the field to economic capital beyond the field.

Embedded gamemakers are not the only gamemakers navigating such complexities. Samantha Schaffer in Adelaide and others I have not quoted directly undertook hobbyist videogame production in their own time, while working in (or striving to work in) day jobs that were not videogame production but which used the same skills and software, such as web design, computer programming, or architecture. Overseas, I encountered independent studios in Utrecht and Berlin, cities that similarly house only a small

number of larger videogame studios, that also undertake client work like those Australian groups detailed above. In Seattle and Montreal, where larger studios are much more prevalent, independent teams still often balanced their time between independent and client work, but the client work was in these instances more likely to be provided by larger commercial videogame studios in the same city looking to outsource specific aspects of the production process. Few were able to talk about such arrangements openly, considering the strictly secretive nature of triple-A videogame production. Ultimately, embedded gamemakers are not a unique outlier in the videogame field but are exemplary of the struggles and position-taking of all gamemakers between autonomy and heteronomy; through their heteronomous work, they reinforce and elucidate the autonomous aspects of the field of videogame production. There is no autonomy of the field without heteronomy, and there is no heteronomy without a counterbalance of autonomy. It's the irresolvable struggle between them that delimits the field.

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**

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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>