

6 Scenes and Communities

In Melbourne, I met 29-year-old art director and freelance artist Marigold Bartlett in a downtown café, a couple of blocks from the small, single-room office her independent team had rented within a small coworking space. The group Bartlett was working with was Ghost Pattern, developers of *Wayward Strand*, whose cofounder Jason Bakker we heard from in chapter 3. Bartlett is responsible for the game’s iconic, hand-drawn style. Beyond Ghost Pattern, Bartlett is highly active in the Melbourne gamemaking community, working on several parallel projects and contributing to numerous groups such as the Freeplay Independent Games Festival. However, when we talked, she expressed a frustration and exhaustion at all the “social stuff” associated with the hustle of her work:

You have to be the best one; you have to be the one that people want to hire; you have to be the one that people think of when they need an artist. And as that market, as the industry, is expanding and flooding out—which is wonderful in so many ways because I’m all for everyone having opportunities—it’s making it increasingly difficult to not have to consider all sorts of shit that isn’t my work, or that I didn’t think would be my work. The hustle. The Twitter presence and personality management. Like where you are at the right time. Who you’re hanging out with. Who likes you and doesn’t like you. It’s terrible.

For Bartlett, the blurring of personal relationships and friendships with the more “hard-nosed networking” (McRobbie 2002, 520) required for finding short-term work in the precarious indie ecosystem makes the local video-game field in Melbourne sometimes feel “toxic” despite its vibrancy: “I love my friends, you know, and I’m open to new people, but you can smell it a mile away when someone . . . has an alternative motive.”

While conducting my interviews in Melbourne, and through my own personal experience with the local field, I was conscious of a vague sense

among local gamemakers that there were two different sides of videogame production in the city. Remembering from chapters 2 and 3 that “indie” fails to meaningfully distinguish between different modes of videogame production in the field’s intensely in/formalized context, these different sides might instead reductively get gestured at as the “arty” and “commercial” sides of Melbourne videogame production. I wanted to know which side of Melbourne’s videogame field Bartlett associated with these people whose alternative motives instrumentalized friendships. Was it a problem with the “industry” side of Melbourne or was it (and here I paused briefly to try to think of the best words to capture the sites of production I wanted to gesture toward) the “broader scene”?

Bartlett did not give a straightforward answer to the question but instead took issue with the question’s very formulation. To introduce the central problematic of this chapter, Bartlett’s articulation of how the structure of local videogame production is much more complicated than a straightforward binary of commercial gamemakers on the one hand and artistic game-makers on the other is worth quoting at length:

I’ve found that before the industry and the scene—I don’t like using that word, scene, but it’s convenient—decided to be friends, the arts people were really happy hanging out making cool shit, talking about cool shit, pushing really hard for gender diversity. We were all around Melbourne doing our thing and having a good time. And then only in the last year or so the industry has sort of opened up to us, and I think the scene has kind of opened up to the industry. Places like Bar SK [game bar and media art gallery] opening up, people having drinks together; me getting jobs at The Arcade [coworking space]; me getting jobs at established companies rather than for mates who were trying to make something cool and little. . . . The wants of that scene were to make good art and to make stuff that was very ethically considerate, inclusive, genre-defining, medium-pushing shit. When that stuff started to become commercially viable, which it has in the last two years, we found people with money and people with studios coming and saying, “Oh shit, this is cool. This has an audience. This is hip. We want to make this stuff. We’re going to hire you, you, not you, not you, you, you, not you, and you.” [They broke up] that scene with their money and their opportunities. I feel like that’s when it’s become political, and that’s when it’s become ugly, and that’s when it’s become really difficult to enjoy it. When it wasn’t surrounded by money but we were all still able to get by, it was a delight.

What Bartlett describes here is not simply two distinct videogame production communities that each exist in Melbourne but instead how the two ends of the field—what Bourdieu might call the subfield of restricted production

and the subfield of mass production—have come to be defined in relation to the other. The commercial and the noncommercial, art-for-art's-sake and the art-for-a-consumer—positions which Bartlett saw as previously having been quite discrete even within the same geographical site of Melbourne—now overlapped considerably as aesthetics and tastes previously seen as fringe were now seen, by commercial studios and publishers as well as government funding agencies, as sites of potential value generation. Within an increasingly autonomous field of videogame production, differently positioned videogame makers now vie for the same forms of capital, and each is anxious that the other's growing legitimacy might delegitimize their own position-taking.

Melbourne's field of videogame production has its own dynamics, which we'll hear more about below, but similar local tensions were articulated by gamemakers in every city I visited. In the South Australian capital of Adelaide, a long-running grassroots collective of hobbyists and artists expressed feeling either sidelined by or wanting to distinguish themselves from a rapidly growing local cluster of companies that primarily developed commercial mobile games for children. In Montreal, home to 10,000 employed videogame makers and some of the largest commercial studios in the world, smaller teams and individuals expressed frustration at an inability to make local governments enthusiastic about independent work, as the government was instead focused on the large employment and revenue generators of the city's massive, foreign-owned studios. In Utrecht, the once-fringe Dutch Game Garden coworking space and incubator was now seen by an emerging, younger generation of independent gamemakers as itself the commercially focused institutional core of the Dutch videogame industry, and alternative sites and collectives were beginning to position themselves as explicitly *not* the Dutch Game Garden. My single Singaporean participant describes their local field as consisting of “a few camps” that they distinguish as the “established companies” and the “hustlers.”

A field of cultural production is, fundamentally, the perpetual struggle to determine which positions taken by producers are legitimately within the field. Or, more accurately, it is the perpetual struggle to determine the field itself in such a way that one's own position is considered legitimately within it, and in such a way that one's own accrued symbolic capital is recognized as legitimate, exchangeable tender within the field, and as exchangeable for economic capital beyond the field's borders. A field is temporal, as relationships and struggles and markers of success shift over time, but it is also spatial,

and one's disposition within the broader field of class relations influences, in part, just what positions within a local field of cultural production one is more likely to inhabit, just which processes of position-taking are more or less attractive, or indeed feasible. Numerous factors determine not just who is able to be involved in a local field of cultural production, but *how* they are able to be involved: proximity of employment opportunities (of both quantity and type), access to education, modes of government support, the cost of living, social welfare, nightlife, public infrastructure such as transport and Internet. To trace the contours of the videogame field is to place videogame production in its local geographic and socioeconomic contexts. Just as importantly, and the point of this chapter, is to also treat these local contexts as having the same complexity, the same struggles and variety of positions, the same dynamism, as the global videogame field.

The importance of the local context has been an underlying theme throughout this book, and it is one of growing interest in videogame production and history research more broadly (e.g., Joseph 2013; Chung 2016; Kerr 2017; Švelch 2018; Jiang and Fung 2019; Swalwell 2021). There is no singular global experience of being a videogame maker; there is only a constellation of interrelated local videogame production contexts. Despite the high concentration of revenue in a small number of North American, western European, and East Asian companies, it's inaccurate to say a single global videogame industry reaches out from its few dominant sites and spreads across the world. Rather, videogame production emerges, haphazardly, in different shapes and sizes from different locales around the world, and these local sites of production themselves intersect and relate, asymmetrically, to form a complex network or tapestry which is too simply referred to as a singular global games industry. Crucially, the same top-down, economy-first simplification risks being played out at the local scale where competing, contradictory, complex local understandings and formations of videogame production culture themselves intersect and relate asymmetrically—taking different positions in the ongoing struggle to determine, to *be*, the field of videogame production. Local videogame production anywhere in the world is no more homogenous than global videogame production.

To complicate and pluralize the local, I find the notion of scenes as it has been developed by popular music theorists particularly valuable. While I introduced the word in my interview with Bartlett, other interviewees throughout my fieldwork sites regularly used scene themselves to designate,

as Will Straw (2004, 412) says, “particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them.” Gamemakers spoke of scenes affiliated with geographic locations (the Australian scene, the Melbourne scene, the Montreal scene); affiliated with particular companies, groups, or coworking spaces (The Arcade scene, the Sokpop scene); affiliated with particular software tools (the Unity scene, the Bitsy scene, the Twine scene); affiliated with particular identities or movements (the queer scene, the indie scene, the hobbyist scene); or the entire videogame field as a whole (the games scene). While the word *scene* was used inconsistently (and, when it was used, often with a reluctance and discomfort, as if it was perhaps pretentious even as it felt the most fitting), it productively speaks to fractured, heterogenous, but nonetheless intricately connected sites of localized videogame production in ways that feel less homogenizing than alternative terms such as industry, community, or perhaps even field.

In this chapter, I want to unpack the tensions of videogame production in its local contexts by considering how multiple local scenes overlap and compete to produce local fields. My goal here is less to exhaustively detail the sociopolitical, historical, or geographic situation of any one city but instead to further dehomogenize how we think about videogame production and draw attention to how videogame fields are always sites of struggle between differently positioned producers, quite literally, in the competition for space, employees and collaborators, recognition, investment, funding, attention, awards, and festival speaking slots.

The first section considers how to situate videogame production between global and local frames of reference. While a top-down consideration of the global provides important insights into the extraction and concentration of capital by the field’s dominant sites, a bottom-up consideration of the local articulates the complexity of those sites from which this capital is extracted. The next section provides case studies of two Australian cities, Melbourne and Adelaide, to highlight the different tensions inherent within each and to trace a preliminary picture of how a field is constituted locally and constituted by localities. Through a lens of scene theory, adapted from popular music studies, we will see unique conditions and challenges that influence the positions taken by gamemakers in each locale, but also common struggles between gamemakers differently concerned with autonomy and heteronomy as they work to ensure the field is understood in such a way that their own position is legitimized as existing within it.

The final section considers another complicating factor for comprehending the local: the dominance of social media networks for gamemakers' understanding of the field. For many gamemakers, the peers they most commonly communicate and collaborate with do not necessarily share the same local geographic space. This does not demand a return to global frames of reference, however, but instead to *trans*-local considerations of how different local fields and positions intersect and overlap.

Videogame Production between the Global and Local

Studies of media industries and cultural production are always split between global and local lenses. On the one hand, the intensity of globalization, the internationally dispersed labor forces of massive media conglomerates, and the pervasive cultural imperialism of Western stories and genres across the world all demand a global scrutiny of asymmetrical power relations between distributed workforces and audiences, and centralized distributors, investors, and platforms (Jin 2015; Curtin and Sanson 2016; Nieborg, Young, and Joseph 2020). On the other hand, local cultures, traditions, histories, geographies, stories, and styles have long been shown by cultural studies researchers to mediate, remix, co-opt, and influence the products of global media industries in complex and nonlinear ways (Appadurai 1996; Darling-Wolf 2015). To consider the local is to consider, as Arjun Appadurai (1996, 178) says, "the relational and the contextual." Locality is "a complex phenomenological quality constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts [that expresses itself] in certain kinds of agency, sociality, and reproducibility".

To complicate things further, a sense of the global itself has become quotidian in localized ways through our mundane "interaction with globalized cultural forms" (Darling-Wolf 2015, 143). Now, terms like *translocal* (Ma 2002; Bennett and Peterson 2004) and *glocal* (Robertson 1995; Tay 2009) highlight how media texts, their creators, and their audiences interact in complex hybrid ways between local and global conditions, never easily reduced to one or the other. Ultimately, albeit crudely, a global focus tells us more about the flows, extractions, impositions, and concentrations of capital by the most powerful conglomerations in a media industry, while a local focus tells us more about the formation and negotiation of the cultures of production and consumption from which this capital is extracted.

Local videogame production is shaped, in part, by global factors: the power and regulations of specific digital platforms, the uneven concentration of potential investors, the locations of large studios, the distribution or concentration of crucial consumer markets. David Nieborg, Christopher Young, and Daniel Joseph (2020), for instance, extensively analyzed financial data from Canada's iPhone App Store to demonstrate the difficulty Canadian-made or Canadian-owned mobile games face when competing with those produced by incumbent, primarily American studios. Their findings suggest a general ineffectiveness of Canadian cultural policy in preventing US-owned digital platforms from increasing "the unidirectional flow of global capital" (2020, 9). Elsewhere, Dal Yong Jin develops the fruitful concept of "platform imperialism" to articulate how digital platforms—overwhelmingly owned by US companies—both expand and concentrate value extraction from global labor and reinforce imperialist dominance. Jin (2015, 39) goes so far as to say that "The U.S., which had previously controlled non-Western countries with its military power, capital, and later cultural products, now dominates the world with platforms." The reliance of videogame developers around the world on the platforms of Valve, Apple, Google, Microsoft, and Epic reinforces this point. Local videogame fields are constituted, in part, by companies that are globally distributed but with roots firmly grounded in (and with revenue overwhelmingly flowing back to) North America, western Europe, or East Asia.

When we talk of global actors in the cultural industries, often we are referring to those most powerful "large corporations operating transnationally but incorporated in the most powerful nations" (Darling-Wolf 2015, 143–144). While the videogame field has historically been considered a quintessentially global media industry due to the dominance of a small handful of multinational companies, the concentration of these companies in North America and Japan (and, more recently, in western Europe and China) risks analysis concerned primarily with the political economy of videogame production focusing on the extractive power of the most powerful at the obfuscation of the multitude of gamemakers around the world these powerful companies extract their capital from. Such analyses are crucial for understanding the dominance and strategies of these companies. However, as Aphra Kerr's (2017, 30) detailed analysis of global videogame production makes clear, when one takes a truly global look to see what gamemaking cultures look like in different places, videogame production becomes defined by its

variability rather than its uniformity, and thus “the industry and culture of digital games” must be placed “firmly within local and regional economies and societies.”

Empirical studies with local videogame-making communities have already shown how the videogame field emerges *from* the multitude of local videogame-making cultures that exist in specific regions, countries, cities, towns, and neighborhoods. For instance, Daniel Joseph, in a foundational 2013 article, looks at how the Toronto indie community, much like those in Australian cities, developed in specific ways due to—and in spite of—the absence of the large foreign-owned companies present in other Canadian cities like Vancouver and Montreal. Through the lens of assemblage theory, Joseph (2013, 95) articulates how indie games are “enmeshed and entangled with a variety of objects at different scales—from the flows and pressures of the global videogames industry all the way down to the affective relationship between an artist and their artwork.” Joseph (103) traces the indie darling *Sword & Sworcery EP* through its creators’ relationships within Toronto’s indie games and music scenes, demonstrating how “this is a game created outside of the major production houses, but still just as much a part of the global marketplace” whose makeup is “intertwined with the motives and reasons” of its creators. Joseph (101–102) argues that Toronto indie developers are not so much independent as they are interdependent: “tied up, entangled with the urban geography of Toronto itself. . . . There is no ‘independent’ community here without a city-sized assemblage capable of fostering close ties between organizations and persons.”

Elsewhere, Kristine Jørgensen, Ulf Sandqvist, and Olli Sotamaa (2017, 459) take an oral history approach to look at how Nordic videogame production cultures have long been shaped by “both geographic features and socio-economic context[s],” such as how Swedish videogame production’s emergence from a vibrant 1990s demoscene directly influences the focus of contemporary Swedish studios on PC development, and how Finland’s current strength in mobile development aligns with the previous dominance of Finnish mobile company Nokia. In these cases, formalized national videogame industries emerged almost by accident from the collaborations of gamemakers for whom, at first, “creating games with their friends was a lifestyle. They just happened to get paid for doing their hobby” (466). Jørgensen et al.’s specific case studies and oral history approach well evidence

the claim they make at the start of their article that similarly motivates this book: “The major industries [of the United States and Japan] supported by large home markets provide a very particular and somewhat limited perspective on the origins of the global game industry” (458). Local videogame production communities do not simply exist beyond formalized videogame companies but are the broader field of creative, affective, and social activity through which formal videogame production sometimes emerges to be understood *as* a videogame industry.

It is, however, not videogame production researchers but videogame historians who have most extensively examined local production cultures in ways that convincingly challenge top-down and homogenous presumptions as to where and through whose activity the global videogame field emerges. Videogame historians have long challenged the dominant marketing and fan narratives that tend to focus on a small number of American (Atari, Activision, Microsoft) and Japanese (Nintendo, Sega, Sony) companies, exposing a much wider range of moments of “difference and discontinuity in videogame history” (Nicoll 2019, 13). Examples include Jaroslav Švelch’s (2018) account of how Czechoslovak hobbyist gamemakers in the 1980s built a grassroots informal industry in the shadow of the Soviet Union; Melanie Swalwell and Michael Davidson’s (2016) account of how New Zealand videogame producers in the 1980s navigated local identity and global imitation through the case study of *Malzak*; Laine Nooney’s (2020) examination of the uncredited professional women involved in the operation and success of Sierra Online in Simi Valley, California; and Benjamin Nicoll’s (2019) account of the early days of South Korea’s videogame field (today one of the largest and most lucrative national game industries in the world) as that of deliberate, opportunistic, and patriotic poaching of Japanese technology and intellectual property (IP). In each of these case studies, happenstance, local culture, regulation and funding policies, and both state and personal relationships and antagonisms all influence the structure of local videogame fields no less so than the actions of global companies and platforms. Across these accounts documented by videogame historians, we see how videogame production always emerges from somewhere. A field of videogame production doesn’t just appear in a local community due to imposed global factors. It also, as these historical accounts show, *emerges from* formative local conditions, communities, and conflicts.

Two Tales of Two Scenes

The concept of scenes provides one way to account for this plurality of local cultures. While different communities or networks of people participating in a cultural activity are commonly referred to loosely as a scene, the term remains notoriously difficult to pin down for both those within a scene as well as for academics researching them. Scenes have primarily been theorized through sociological research of music subcultures. For Will Straw (1991, 373), a music scene “is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.” For Holly Kruse (2010, 625), scenes describe “both the geographical sites of local music practice and the economic and social networks in which participants are involved.” But scenes are also always in flux, never stable, deriving “their effervescence from the sense that the ‘information’ produced within them is forever in excess of the productive ends to which it might be put” (Straw 2004, 412). Further, and perhaps most crucially for our current consideration of the videogame field, Straw (2004, 412) suggests that a scene emerges “from the excesses of sociability that surround the pursuit of interests, or which fuel ongoing innovation and experimentation within the cultural life of cities.” Straw provides a number of examples where cultural scenes—such as the Montreal disco scene of the 1970s or the Beat Generation of poets after World War II—emerged in part as an overproduction of culture unable to be fully captured by the commodifying forces of formal cultural industries. Instead, the work of these scenes is mobilized as other forms of capital (social, cultural) that solidify into shared stylistic traits of locally specific scenes.

Considering a scene as “overproductive”—as extending beyond the commercial activity of formalized companies to pervade social spaces and draw new actors and aesthetics into its jurisdiction—goes some way toward explaining why those cities with a history of cultural production but with relatively few formal videogame production employment opportunities are also those cities whose videogame activity is most readily referred to as a scene (such as Berlin, Austin, New York, Toronto, Melbourne). As the barriers of entry to both videogame production and distribution have lowered over the past decade, there is in one sense in cities such as these an overproduction of videogame-making activity insofar as the number of people able

and eager to create videogames has outgrown the needs of local employers and instead manifests as informal networks and communities of practice: shared spaces, friend groups, meetups, festivals, parties, resource sharing, game jams. Such a framing, however, risks centering formal videogame production companies as the core that all other gamemaking activity is oriented toward; it potentially implies these scenes are the leftovers of a global videogame industry after that industry has taken its fill. Rather than over-productive, then, scenes are perhaps better thought of as underindustrialized. In either formulation, they consist of a much broader range of actors and events than the small fraction that is more directly assimilated into the flow of economic capital. In the latter formulation, however, the broader range of actors and events is understood as coming before the industry, not as a result of the industry's presence. Local game scenes are not what is left over by a sated global game industry in a top-down sense. They are the broader field of informal creative, affective, and social activity that a local formalized industry sometimes emerges *from*. To consider local videogame communities as scenes is to capture the broader, often contradictory, social, affective, political, and cultural reasons that people produce videogames.

Few have applied the theoretical lens of scenes to local videogame production, with Christopher Young's (2018) study of the Toronto game development scene being a notable exception. Through a prolonged period of participation and observation in the scene, as well as interviews with scene participants, Young traces the numerous collectives, groups, and companies that play formative roles in shaping videogame production in Toronto. Young (2018, 69) works toward an understand of scenes as palimpsests: "a cultural activity that has been written upon several times by various stakeholders through the inscription of their cultural norms and practices, often with remnants of the erased inscriptions still visible across the platforms of the scene." In Young's detailed description of the Toronto game development scene, a number of organizations and stakeholders offer different spaces and activities for different parts of the city's videogame production community, such as social and networking events held by Dames Making Games and the Hand Eye Society, the annual TOJam game jam event, and semiformal networking and education events organized by global companies such as Unity and Unreal to help foster the take-up of their software platforms within the local community.

Young, in the Toronto context, follows the cultural activity of gamemaking, rather than any one specific locale or organization to constructively

consider this wide spectrum of actors constituting *the* Toronto game development scene. In the following analysis of Melbourne and Adelaide, however, I find it conducive to consider these citywide palimpsest scenes as themselves constituted by a number of interlocking, overlapping, and competing local scenes. This is in no small part because of how these scenes and communities were often articulated by my own participants. If a scene is revealed by following the cultural activity rather than the place (Young 2018, 76), in the following examples we will see how competing local videogame scenes can disagree on what the cultural activity of videogame production even is. Just as a single city might not simply have a music scene but a jazz scene, a rock scene, a punk scene, and a rap scene, a single city might also have multiple competing videogame scenes.

To demonstrate how the shape of a local videogame field is structured by the interactions and struggles between local scenes, I will detail the local videogame fields of two Australian cities in detail. Melbourne and Adelaide offer two stories of Australian videogame production that, while sharing many parallels, are far from identical. In each story, we will see, as detailed by Bartlett in this chapter's introduction, and as witnessed by Young (2018) in Toronto, competing evaluations of the different position-takings within the local field, and competing understandings of what is and is not considered legitimate videogame production. In each example, different scenes will make themselves known as they emerge through different sites of activity, different forms and perceptions of cultural capital, and a more general and broad tension between those videogame makers striving for creative autonomy and those striving for economic sustainability.

As an important caveat, the following analyses are limited by both space and methodology. I do not provide exhaustive histories, political economic analyses, or cultural geographies of either site. A more expansive analysis of local videogame production would consider broader socioeconomic and geographic factors, infrastructure, cultural histories, and government policies. Here I am limited to what my interviewees told me and my own firsthand or secondhand knowledge from my own participation in these communities. As such, the following analyses should not be read as complete or objective evaluations of why videogame production is shaped the way it is in each of these cities. Rather, my sole objective here is to demonstrate how videogame makers themselves perceive and articulate their local videogame production contexts as neither homogenous nor stable, but as contested and dynamic.

Melbourne

Melbourne is the state capital of Victoria and Australia's second-most populous city after Sydney. It is commonly regarded as Australia's culture capital, home to many of Australia's most successful musicians, artists, sportspeople, literary figures, films, and television shows. Melbourne is home to Australia's oldest art museum (the National Gallery of Victoria, established in 1861) and a range of nationally and internationally significant cultural institutions, including the State Library of Victoria, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), and the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Each year the city houses cultural events such as Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the Australian Open (tennis), and, since 2016, Melbourne International Games Week. Beyond the big institutional names, Melbourne is known for its more nebulous music scenes, café culture, and street art.

Melbourne has long been the primary videogame production hub in Australia and was arguably in a better position to adapt to the drastic changes brought about by the early 2010s than any other Australian city. As we saw in chapter 2, countercultural and fringe videogame makers were present within Melbourne's broader, robust cultural field long before the collapse of Australia's commercial, foreign publisher-dependent videogame studios. The Freeplay Independent Games Festival emerged out of the Next Wave arts festival in 2004. Around the same time, Melbourne-based gamemakers were collaborating with artists and journalists on political games such as *Escape from Woomera* (see Swalwell 2007). Further, also in the early 2000s, government-funded agencies and institutions, such as ACMI and Film Victoria, were already showing some interest in and support for alternative modes of videogame production, such as Helen Stuckey's curatorial role at ACMI's Game Lab.

As the nation's videogame makers found themselves forced into indie business models and mindsets following the closure of nearly every large studio in the country, Melbourne fostered this transition relatively successfully through a number of cultural and political advantages. First, in addition to those studios focused on obtaining contracts with foreign publishers to ensure financial stability, Melbourne was already home to a number of independent videogame makers more interested in creative autonomy through generating new IP. Second, Melbourne gamemakers were already self-organized into broader communities of practice such as those around the Freeplay Independent Games Festival and the local International Game Developers Association (IGDA) chapter. Third, its state government

screen-funding body, Film Victoria, was more proactive than their interstate counterparts in terms of providing levels of funding and support relevant to independent videogame producers, such as small pools of direct funding with assessment criteria not directly tied to commercial outcomes.

All of this ensured that, by the end of the 2010s, Melbourne was the undisputed capital of Australian videogame production, housing over 50 percent of all commercial Australian gamemakers (Interactive Games and Entertainment Association 2020). In part, this was due to the growth of Melbourne's field, but more so due to its resilience as the field contracted elsewhere in the country. Indeed, the two are closely related, as many videogame makers around the country found themselves with few local opportunities and moved to Melbourne to take advantage of the favorable funding opportunities and to participate in the vibrant local community. In 2012, I myself moved to Melbourne to commence my PhD, as it seemed like the logical, perhaps only, place in Australia where one could undertake a game studies PhD at the time.

The Melbourne videogame field today is a vibrant ecosystem of large corporate studios, entrepreneurial coworking spaces, artist collectives, student cohorts, bedroom coders, government funding bodies, fringe cultural festivals, and slick international consumer expos. Videogame production in Melbourne happens at a range of scales, in a variety of contexts, across networks of people whose direct relationship with each other might be positive, antagonistic, or nonexistent. At the time of writing in 2022, massive North American publishers EA and Activision each have studios in the city (EA's from the purchase and merger of independent studios Firemint and Iron Monkeys; Activision through the recent establishment of a branch of its Sledgehammer studio). Midsized independent companies such as League of Geeks (*Armello*) and Hipster Whale (*Crossy Road*) have grown out of grassroots beginnings to provide established, steady employment for 15 to 50 people each, typically focused on more commercial titles in the games-as-a-service and free-to-play spaces. Around these are a large number of smaller studios working on a wide range of premium and free-to-play titles, including Samurai Punk (*The American Dream; Feather*), the Voxel Agents (*The Gardens Between*), Mighty Games (*Shooty Skies*), Paper House (*Paperbark; Wood and Weather*), Mountains (*Florence*), and House House (*Push Me Pull You; Untitled Goose Game*). Around these are extensive communities of students, hobbyist gamemakers, interdisciplinary dabblers, academics, and hangers-on. From these communities

emerge various collectives and collaborations that last anywhere from a few weeks to a number of years, sometimes disappearing after a single party, sometimes organically evolving into long-term commercial projects.

Within this nebulous and dispersed field, relationships and collaborations reach out beyond discrete teams and projects. As people move between projects, workgroups, parties, sharehouses, or romantic relationships, they inevitably develop and maintain networks with those working on other projects. Interteam community comes to replace the discrete community of the single workplace, short-circuiting the culture of secrecy that dominates cultures of videogame production in larger studios (O'Donnell 2014). This broader community consolidated with the founding of the games-centric coworking space, The Arcade, in 2013. Subsidized in its early years by the Victorian State Government and run by the Game Developers Association of Australia (GDAA), The Arcade provides (relatively) affordable office space for small videogame production teams and allowed teams and individuals to pull together and share resources and knowledge.¹

For instance, Ben Kerslake, 39, had recently returned to Melbourne after a decade of working for both videogame and software companies in Shanghai. Kerslake now works on an independent project with a collaborator based overseas. Rather than work alone at home, Kerslake regularly sets up shop at the hot desks available in The Arcade. Kerslake explained that this was because, as a solo developer,

Without the community, it makes everything very difficult. Because you can't externalize problems. You can't get help. That's just a hugely isolating problem. . . . For me [The Arcade offers] a lot of the positives of being in an office space and none of the negatives. A chance for me to meet with people and make new connections. . . . It's helped me prepare for the Film Victoria [funding process], because . . . I feel like half the people I meet here have been involved in that process either as an applicant or on the selection committee.

Other residents in The Arcade likewise highlighted the significance of cross-team collaboration and support that the space afforded as vital to their operations. Nicholas McDonnell, the 25-year-old managing director of Samurai Punk, saw the collaborations fostered by the shared physical space of The Arcade as foundational to the running of their studio:

That's part of the reason we don't want to leave . . . because of the quality of these relationships. We helped another studio to grow and other studios here have helped us grow. So much of our existence now is tied to the people here, and so

much of our social culture is tied to the people here. It feels like if we ever left, we'd be taking part of our studio away.

Here, even formal companies feel connected to a broader community due to a shared openness, collaboration, and pooling of resources.²

The Arcade consolidated and made visible an otherwise nebulous and loosely affiliated network of small teams and individuals scattered around Melbourne, providing a professionalized space that advocates could point publishers, investors, and government officials toward as *the* Victorian videogame industry—or where researchers, such as myself, immediately turn to in order to locate research participants. However, this also came with its drawbacks for the broader Melbourne community not occupying The Arcade. As Tony Reed, 47, the founder of The Arcade and (at the time of our interview) CEO of the GDA, explained: “The thing I didn’t see coming was The Arcade becoming a clique. People in The Arcade felt they were special because they were in The Arcade, and people outside of The Arcade felt they weren’t part of things because they weren’t part of The Arcade. That really bothered me.” The Arcade’s success, for a time, effectively positioned it as the center of Melbourne’s videogame field, as the physical site within which Melbourne’s most legitimized videogame production was occurring.

That those who operated outside of The Arcade felt they “were not part of things” was especially true for those younger and more peripheral teams not interested in producing videogames in the commercially feasible genres that would be necessary to justify paying rent for an office or desk in a coworking space.³ One gamemaker who worked in a small team external to The Arcade expressed that despite their own team’s commercial and critical successes, they felt generally ignored by “that world.” “[It] always seemed too inward looking and also just distastefully commercial. . . . I think because we never kissed the ring, we’ve never been acknowledged by them.” Thus, also in the early 2010s, parallel gamemaking communities emerged in Melbourne, buoyed by the proliferation of informal and hobbyist modes of videogame production and the growing number of students emerging from dedicated university programs in videogame design and development from universities such as RMIT and Swinburne. Loose organizations and affiliations such as Glitchmark and Hovergarden, alternative coworking environments such as All Day Breakfast and Share House, the computer labs and student spaces of RMIT University’s downtown campus, and the long-running Freeplay Independent

Games Festival became crucial hubs for these alternative collectives and communities who did not necessarily feel catered to by organizations such as IGDA Melbourne or The Arcade.

These alternative communities were explicitly countercultural and considered their own position-taking as very much against those position-takings of the field's more central actors. Lee Shang Lun, 25, was a cofounder of the group Glitchmark, which met regularly to discuss and share knowledge about game design skills and theory. Lee described the constitution of Glitchmark thus:

The people that would go to something like [Glitchmark] were hungry for a community and for that kind of vocabulary and development of a scene or of a discipline. And so those people continue to create networks and communities that are interested in those same things, and you can see the effects of those individuals and those communities have had in fragmenting, fracturing in a very positive way in my opinion, the Melbourne independent game scene.

This sense of a fragmenting or fracturing of the Melbourne scene where different organizations direct their energies in different directions toward different ends, rather than inward toward a single space or goal, was similarly articulated by other Melbourne-based gamemakers. Another anonymous gamemaker, who had moved to Melbourne a couple of years before our interview, was "realizing increasingly that I have this particular view on what Melbourne is." They realized that rather than simply a Melbourne videogame maker, they were "part of a particular scene" and that they "don't know at least half the people in The Arcade." The previous anonymous gamemaker who said they had refused to "kiss the ring" of the organizations more central to the Melbourne field articulated their own understanding of the two sides of Melbourne's videogame field as instantiated through different physical locations: "In my mind there's two Melbourne game worlds. There's The Arcade and what I think of as Bar SK." Bar SK was (until its closure in 2020) a bar located in the trendy inner-city suburb of Collingwood. Founder Louie Roots had previously been part of a gamemaking collective in Perth, Western Australia, focusing on exhibition and party videogames. Both a local, public-facing bar and an exhibition space for "trash videogames and media art," Bar SK served as a physical location for subcultural Melbourne gamemakers, providing an alternative space and visibility that, for a time, countered the dominant visibility of The Arcade and larger studios.

While this subcultural side of videogame production in Melbourne is still overproducing in Straw's sense that much of its activity is not formalized into commercial videogame products, its increased visibility, acclaim, and authority inevitably had a direct impact on the shape and value of Melbourne's formal videogame production. Primarily, this occurs through the creative, experimental energy of the fringe creators contributing to a broader perception that Melbourne is a cool, vibrant site of videogame production, which in turn works to attract increased interest from employers, investors, and government. Ken Wong, the 36-year-old creative director and founder of small studio Mountains, had spent much of his career working in videogame studios overseas. Despite originally being from Adelaide, when Wong moved back to Australia he moved to Melbourne with the explicit intent of founding his own independent studio. Wong chose Melbourne in large part because of the access to talent: "There is a scene here, there's universities here" and, further, because "There's support here like The Arcade, that is a huge reason."

More than just providing the skills base and culture required for growing formal videogame production, some gamemakers felt the success and vibrancy of Melbourne's countercultural videogame scenes was shifting the kinds of projects the better-resourced studios undertook. As one game-maker put it:

Film Vic[toria] does come into it. There's only so much grant money. Both parties want the grant money. There's part of me that wants to be really healthy and say, "Yeah, we can all get along." But I think you see people being almost tokenistic about the games they're wanting to make now. So Film Vic have got a tricky thing on their hands because they might be unaware of or they might not look deep enough or they might just blindly say, "Yeah, that sounds perfect. I'll fund it," even if that person's last game might have been a really exploitative clicker, you know?

While ambitions and intentions are almost certainly more complex than this interviewee suggests, the sense of a clashing and overlapping of cultures and values in funding and employment opportunities was felt keenly by those gamemakers richer in symbolic capital but poorer in economic capital.

The growing legitimacy and cultural capital of Melbourne's countercultural creators was also a source of anxiety for gamemakers working in commercial independent studios. The autonomous positions taken by the countercultural gamemakers shifted the position-taking of the commercial gamemakers' own positions that strived to balance creative expression with the financial

sustainability of their companies. A gamemaker in their mid-40s working at a studio dedicated to free-to-play mobile games was defensive about their studio holding such an ambivalent position:

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

For this gamemaker, the fact the countercultural gamemakers could afford to be disinterested in economic return as they strove for and gave further power to the autonomous principles of hierarchization in the local field, was a sign of societal privilege. In particular, this gamemaker was suggesting that such gamemakers were economically well-off—possessing the economic capital that allows one to be disinterested in accruing economic capital. Indeed, the countercultural gamemakers I interviewed were, as this gamemaker himself suggests, often young with few external expenses other than rent and sustenance. This hardly makes them rich, but it does suggest, if nothing else, an advantage of (some) youth to disavow, or at least defer, economic interest, while such a choice no longer exists for older gamemakers with mortgages, families, and increasing health and life expenses.

One gamemaker at a larger independent studio residing within The Arcade similarly articulated the local field between those gamemakers most interested in making a financial profit (heteronomous principles) and those more interested in disavowing such profit for artistic goals ends (autonomous principles):

There are studios that make mobile games that are hugely profitable, but I think their value is less on creating meaningful experiences and more so about maximizing profit. And there's also another side of games in Melbourne which is like "Games should just be an expression of yourself" and money is far less valuable than the statement.

While this gamemaker was quick to stress that "I'm not trying to say one way is better than the other," they also felt that the studio they worked at was "the greedy studio that wants it all"—a sentiment surely shared by

most Melbourne videogame producers as they strive to legitimate their own position in relation to the numerous other position-taking individuals and communities that constitute Melbourne's videogame field. A rich tapestry of activity and constituents across Melbourne are all part of the Melbourne videogame field. They reflect a vast range of values, identities, and groupings that often intersect and sometimes overlap—either collaboratively or antagonistically or indirectly—but which are just as often conceptualized by their constituents as distinct worlds. To say that Melbourne has an indie game scene would be to homogenize complex, overlapping communities among Melbourne gamemakers in terms of differing perceptions of the resources, values, ambitions, and opportunities available to differently positioned gamemakers.

Adelaide

Approximately eight hours drive northwest of Melbourne is Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia. Adelaide is a much smaller city than Melbourne; it covers only 3,200 square kilometers compared to Melbourne's 10,000, and houses only 1.3 million people compared to Melbourne's 5 million. Nonetheless, the cities share a lot in common in terms of climate, culture, and football codes. Their videogame fields, too, differ greatly in scale but share much in terms of the relationship between their most dominant and fringe gamemaking positions. The struggles and tensions that have evolved gradually over the past decade in Melbourne have made themselves much more abruptly known in the Adelaide field, with several corporate actors setting up shop on top of a small-scale, grassroots community to reveal sudden and sharp distinctions.

Through the 1990s, Adelaide was home to Ratbag Games, founded in 1993 and producer of the successful 1998 PC racing title *Powerslide*. Ratbag came to an undignified end when American publisher Midway bought the studio in August 2005, before shutting the studio down entirely in December of the same year. Brisbane-headquartered Krome also ran an Adelaide studio for a short period, established in large part by workers let go by Midway, and then closed in 2010 as part of broader job cuts across the company. Since 2004, animation and game development studio Monkeystack has sustained itself on a combination of audiovisual and interactive, client and original work, not dissimilar to the studios detailed in the previous chapter, and today employs approximately 40 people according to CEO Justin Wight. Elsewhere, Mighty Kingdom has grown steadily since 2010, working on games for

popular toy licenses such as Shopkins and Lego and, as we will see below, has taken a particularly central role in Adelaide's videogame field. Around these companies is a rich community of hobbyists and independents coming together around a loose collection of events, organizations, and groups such as ARGGG (Adelaide's Really Good Gathering of Game Developers), Adelaide Game Dev Breakfast, Adelaide Game Dev Talks, the Indie Games Room at the annual Anime and Video Games Festival AVCon, Adelaide Global Game Jam, and SA Women in Games.⁴ Today, the best-known videogames out of Adelaide are from small, independent teams such as three-person studio Team Cherry's *Hollow Knight*, and single-person studio Team Fractal Alligator's *Hacknet*.

When I visited Adelaide in July 2018, the local field was in a state of flux. Games education institute Academy of Interactive Entertainment (AIE) had recently opened a campus in the city, along with an AIE-run coworking space, Game Plus. An established albeit small community of hobbyists and artists was finding their city suddenly full of highly visible newcomers strong in economic capital, as well as a whole new class of gamer-identifying students interested in a mode of videogame production very different from that favored by themselves. Unlike in Melbourne, I have very little firsthand experience of Adelaide's videogame field, and so I regularly asked my Adelaide interviewees if they could describe the local community—if indeed they felt there was one—in their own words. Damon Reece, a 23-year-old freelance narrative designer, gave an extensive and detailed answer that maps the different positions of Adelaide's field, with relationships and tensions that clearly parallel Bartlett's description of Melbourne:

There is a community. It's—there's some weird things going on in the past year or so. So you've got your hobbyist indie-dev community who've been here for over a decade. It's good at passing the torch and having events, and people come and hang out, talk to each other, make friends. You've got groups like the IGDA who until recently were running Global Game Jam and Ludum Dare and stuff like that. A lot of stuff comes from the university clubs which I've never really been involved with, but you still see their effects, and that's sort of been like this low-key community centered around a gathering called ARGGG and the indie games room at AVCon. That's been here for ages. Then in the past couple of years AIE has come in and they've got all these game students who, you know, are straight out of high school and who aren't interested in participating in a pre-existing community. So they've got their own sort of weird clique full of gamer bros, and since AIE has the capital and AIE has the ear of, well, *had* the ear of the

government,⁵ and the coworking space [Game Plus] and all that, things are sort of weirdly shifting toward that and it doesn't seem like they're interested in bringing the communities together. I feel like they're trying to selectively pick from the preexisting community. It's frustrating because it doesn't feel anywhere near as inclusive or diverse or friendly.

There is a lot to unpack here, but in Reece's detailed overview of the Adelaide field are the various positions competing for legitimacy—for recognition *as* Adelaide's videogame field—that would reappear throughout my Adelaide interviews: small-scale artists and hobbyists, an influx of “gamer bro” students, and growing commercial actors positioning themselves *as* the field of videogame production in Adelaide.

The joint arrival of AIE and Game Plus was regularly brought up by Adelaide gamemakers as being a major disruption in the local field. AIE, as discussed in chapter 4, is a specialist school for game development education, set up from the start as a deliberate pipeline of skills to be tapped by Australian videogame companies. Game Plus, a not-for-profit initiative of AIE, runs coworking spaces in Sydney, Canberra, and Adelaide that provide similar benefits for local commercial gamemakers as The Arcade does for Melbourne gamemakers (relatively affordable rent, visibility, community). The coworking space operates as a value-add for AIE to its prospective students, with AIE students and graduates having access to Game Plus spaces, events, and tenants. While The Arcade in Melbourne was often mentioned by gamemakers around Australia as evidence of Melbourne's strong gamemaking culture and community, Adelaide gamemakers were more ambivalent about the influence of Game Plus on their own local field. Game Plus is one block from AIE's campus in downtown Adelaide. In one corner of the coworking space, between the large hot-desking main room and the corridors to the individual studio offices, are several large computer labs used by AIE students for classes and assessment work. Students can access Game Plus at any time of day or night, just like the professional gamemakers, giving them the opportunity to network with the broader local community and role-play at working in a “real” studio. In addition to computer labs, AIE graduates have discount access to Game Plus spaces through incubator programs, keeping them tied to an ecosystem in which AIE is a central actor even after their graduation.

As an explicit and dedicated space for videogame production, Game Plus has increasingly become home to many of the city's videogame production events, despite technically being a members-only space. For some Adelaide gamemakers, that a space densely populated by the dominant type of

gamer-student detailed in chapter 4 has become so formative to the local field has a negative impact on the city's broader videogame production culture, giving it a feeling of being more masculine, nerdy, and commercial and less artistic, experimental, or inclusive. For instance, Chris Johnson, 30, worked as a software developer at a small tech company residing in Game Plus. Johnson has been deeply involved in Adelaide's videogame production community for over a decade. He noted that the involvement of AIE in Game Plus meant that as a worker in the space "it feels a little bit like we're the product here. The students want connections to industry and, hey, industry is here in the same spot." Johnson felt the direct pathway from AIE student to aspiring developer all under the one roof of Game Plus shaped the overall culture of the space:

It just creates this monoculture that spreads out, and it frustrates me. . . . Like, it's ten o'clock [in the morning] and this kid in the corner, must be like twenty or something, just came out of AIE, works for this game studio that's pretty much just a monetization studio, there's a can of Coke on his desk. Then I come past at lunch time and see another can of Coke. I come past again at three o'clock: third can of Coke. And it's just terrible. . . . [Another developer came into the coworking space at 2am because he was managing a sale in a US time zone] and some other dude is just playing *Overwatch* all night. So, in some ways, I feel like a bit of an outsider [here].

While on the surface it might seem petty to complain about an individual's caffeinated drink of choice, what Johnson is reaching for is an articulation of a clash between different gamemaker position-takings, where a "gamer bro" consumer identity clashes with fringe, autonomy-driven videogame production identities.

Samantha Schaffer, a 25-year-old hobbyist developer who worked external to Game Plus, expressed similar concerns about the space. They articulated how they try to keep their own personal networks at an arm's length from Game Plus:

I definitely feel a bit wary about bringing people not in games into those kinds of spaces. . . . It is still very heavily skewed male so . . . I don't want to bring my cool [artist] friends to [Game Plus] and then someone says something sexist that they don't even realize is sexist, and then I feel bad for subjecting [my friend] to this.

Much like The Arcade in Melbourne, Game Plus provides some Adelaide gamemakers with community, resources, and visibility. But for others, it reduces the varied positions of the Adelaide videogame field to one particularly dominant and commercial mode of videogame production. Coworking

offices, as physical instantiations of the field, seem fated to become central sites over the struggle to determine who is most legitimate within local fields of videogame production.

Also brought up frequently by Adelaide gamemakers as a significant factor in the drastic changes facing the local field was studio Mighty Kingdom. Mighty Kingdom's founders and directors have been highly vocal in the Adelaide videogame field, often lobbying the state government for industry support, and talking up the city in the press as an ideal location for both national and international studios to set up shop. Together, Mighty Kingdom and AIE successfully lobbied the South Australian government to invest in the establishment of Adelaide's Game Plus campus, and Mighty Kingdom became, according to Mighty Kingdom's general manager, Dan Thorsland, the coworking space's "anchor tenant," committing to a "fairly long-term lease which gave [Game Plus] the confidence to come and open up here." As Thorsland tells it, and as is reinforced by a cursory search for mentions of the studio in the press or at local gamemaker conferences, Mighty Kingdom is unapologetic about their attempts to formalize and grow the economic value and sustainability of Adelaide's videogame field. In 2021, after rapidly expanding to over 100 employees, the studio became Australia's largest independent videogame studio.

As Thorsland tells it, growing the company and striving to be profitable is itself crucial for supporting the local gamemaking community as it provides employment opportunities and stability for other local gamemakers. Thorsland is frustrated by those small local independent studios and individuals—what he calls "boutique game developers"—with no interest in growing beyond their current size, regardless of whether or not they are commercially successful:

If you're a boutique game developer and you have a great passion for what you've done, great. . . . But if all you want to do is just benefit yourself and then cash it out and get rich . . . I have no time for folks like that. What you need to do is you need to support the industry around you and keep that door open for other professionals. . . . Get out of your bedroom, get out of your safe little Arcade, get off your government drip feed. Seed funding is good but get it in the fucking market. . . . Be ambitious and grow as big as you can, at your own expense at times.

For Thorsland, being a responsible member of the local videogame field means striving to grow businesses that can offer employment opportunities to others. It's a striking counterperspective to those "boutique game

developers” themselves who, for the most part, would see growing a company larger, hiring other people to work for them, and striving to make a larger profit the more intrinsically selfish position. But at the same time, the precarity and unreliability of independent start-ups such as those detailed in chapter 3 does give credibility to the idea that producing stable employment opportunities benefits and stabilizes a local field, giving newcomers to the field an alternative to forced independence.⁶

Rather than make any sort of definitive moral judgement over who is right or wrong in terms of what is best for Adelaide’s videogame field, what is more interesting here is the different ways in which the field as a space of possibles, between artistic and economic motivations, is perceived by differently positioned videogame makers in Adelaide. Just like in Melbourne, not all Adelaide videogame producers share the same motivations or principles as to how the local videogame field should be grown, or which positions within that field should be considered the most legitimate. But as can be seen through the contradicting perspectives on the increasingly difficult to avoid Game Plus, all of Adelaide’s gamemakers are, one way or another, mediated by the entire network of related positions that is the Adelaide videogame field.

Videogame Making between the Local and the Translocal

In the above overviews, I deliberately omitted considerations of online networks and interactions to focus discretely on the physical spaces and networks of Melbourne’s and Adelaide’s local fields. But Australian videogame makers are also highly active across a number of social media platforms within local, national, and international communities of videogame producers—mainly Twitter, but also Facebook, Discord, and others. Just like their geographically centered communities, these online communities are not homogenous but dispersed across a wide range of clusters and groupings that are, at once, local and global. Social media ensures Australian videogame makers remain in regular contact with gamemakers in other Australian cities, as well as with gamemakers across the world (though primarily in North America and western Europe). The complexity of local videogame fields is made more complex still by the online networks and relations shared by geographically dispersed but nonetheless closely connected gamemakers.

As both Holly Kruse (2010) and Christopher Young (2018) demonstrate in their own analyses, online spaces and communities fundamentally

augment—but never straightforwardly replace—physical spaces and relationships. In his own analysis of the Toronto game development scene, Young (2018, 83) examines how through Twitter in particular “the overlap between geographical and online documentations of the local offers an interesting view into the activities of the scene and how not only my participants and people I meet gain value from the scene, but also how others who I am less familiar with or have never met engage with the scene.” Similarly, in their work with independent Canadian videogame makers, Felan Parker and Jennifer Jenson note that their participants consider themselves to be part of an “imagined ‘global’ indie game community” due to a general understanding that indie videogames originate as a primarily online phenomenon through online forums such as The Independent Gaming Source (TIGSource), IndieGames.com, and Game Jolt: “Everyday online engagement is for many developers a fundamental part of being indie” (Parker and Jenson 2017, 872; see also Browne 2015). Consequentially, among Canadian independent videogame makers, Parker and Jenson (2017, 881) find that “identification with local communities and the generalized, ‘global’ ideals of indie-ness” trump any sense of national identity as a Canadian videogame developer. As such, Parker and Jenson consider videogame production less as global or local but as *translocal* in the way that physical local community “provides grounding and encouragement” while online community “provides a greater sense of imagined community and helps to position different individuals and scenes in relation to one another and the wider game industry” (2017, 886).

For Australian videogame makers, there *was* a sense of being an Australian videogame developer, perhaps due to the shared national experiences of geographical remoteness and sector-wide collapse. That Australian gamemakers operate in starkly different time zones from most other English-speaking gamemakers on social media might also lead to a more discrete feeling of being part of a national community, even online. Nonetheless, the situation of Australian gamemakers is certainly similar to that of Canadian gamemakers. Participants often brought up stories of friends and communities in other cities central to their own networks and practice, sometimes directly collaborating in remote teams of independents distributed across the country or even the world. Persistent social media connections can also have a downside, however, for those Australian gamemakers living beyond the central hub of Melbourne. Alisha Stone, 26, is the creative director of a four-person

studio (and also a web developer at a separate day job) in Hobart on the remote island state of Tasmania. Stone comments, “Twitter has that weird effect of sort of connecting you but also making you realize you’re not connected. . . . All these people going to conventions [that] you can’t go to all the time, which sucks. But at the same time, it also helps you focus and make you realize what is the important thing that’s worth working on.” On the one hand, gamemakers around Australia are able to develop everyday connections to gamemakers around the country and overseas in order to access crucial, distributed networks of collaboration and promotion in lieu of possessing adequate resources at a single workplace; on the other hand, this connection makes Australian gamemakers acutely aware of what is happening offline, in physical spaces, in the local communities that they are removed from.

Online connectivity augments the scenes a gamemaker is able to feel associated with, and thus alters that gamemaker’s position within the videogame field both locally and globally. Some gamemakers I interviewed felt more connected to communities overseas than in their own physical locale. Sometimes these relationships were fostered entirely in online communities that came together around the use of a particular software tool or around a particular genre or aesthetic (see Reed 2020; Grimes 2015 for online game-making scenes).⁷ Jake Strasser in Melbourne, for instance, explained that while their studio, House House, “definitely like to be involved and want to try to help foster things and be involved in some ways” in Melbourne, they also “find we’ve got absolutely stronger relationships internationally, particularly the Wild Rumpus people from London. That feels like the most important kind of creative little bubble that we have.” For Strasser, this was in part because Wild Rumpus, a group that organizes public videogame events, was the first group to become interested in and champion House House’s first game, *Push Me Pull You*, after encountering it online. And so, exemplary of the translocality that Parker and Jenson describe, a British collective first showed an Australian game to the press and public at a party in San Francisco. Here, the translocal relations between Melbourne and London for House House don’t completely override their local relationships (the team, after all, was a group of friends in Melbourne before forming their studio) but augment them, highlighting even more ways in which both relationships within a local field and *between* geographically dispersed local fields are complex, dynamic, and multifaceted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have detailed how local videogame fields are no less complex and contested than are the national or global videogame fields they constitute (and through which they are constituted). Videogames are produced through complex relationships between the global, the local, and the translocal. They rely on international networks and distribution chains controlled primarily by giant North American, Japanese, and (increasingly) Chinese media companies. The economic capital of the global videogame field is disproportionately concentrated in a very small number of countries and companies, but that capital is generated by and extracted from the activities of gamemakers all over the world. It is generated within local scenes and communities whose loose and ambiguous networks of members are taking positions in local fields, national fields, and global fields of videogame production simultaneously. In each of these fields or subfields, gamemakers' same positions have different value as position-takings that, in turn, differently impact their ability to generate either the symbolic or economic capital required for their ongoing participation in the field locally, nationally, or globally. In considering videogame production between global and local forces, we must ensure we don't homogenize the local—the *locals*—that any individual gamemaker finds themselves caught between as they choose which events to attend, which friendships to foster, which gamemakers to collaborate with, and which online communities to participate in.

It is worth stressing again, however, how superficial this analysis has been. By focusing solely on the fact that tensions and struggles exist between different positions in local fields I have not paid much attention to the conditions that have led these local fields to being structured in that particular way: socioeconomic conditions, infrastructure, Internet access, education access, funding access, employment opportunities, and other variables would all need to be better accounted for to provide a more thorough account of Melbourne or Adelaide gamemaking. Yet, despite this, the point remains clear in the articulations of the Melbourne and Adelaide gamemakers heard from here that in neither of these cities—nor in any other city I visited in Australia or elsewhere—was there a consensus as to what the local field was, or who was active within it.

When considering the local context of videogame production, these constitutive internal tensions and contradictions must be embraced, not

resolved. In this chapter, I've found the concept of scenes to be one valuable way to capture without resolving this ambiguity of relationships that produces local videogame production. If the territorial ambiguities and revolving roster of participants of a scene means that a scene centers first and foremost on the cultural activity itself rather than the place (Young 2018, 76), then the numerous conflicting interpretations of differently positioned gamemakers as to just what constitutes the cultural activity of gamemaking gives rise to numerous conflicting and overlapping scenes. One could argue that the contradictions and tensions outlined above are merely constitutive of *the* singular Melbourne or Adelaide game scene. But to do so would be to flatten the wide range of competing understandings that exist within each of these cities of what gamemaking even is. These competing understandings of different local scenes, their perpetually unresolvedness, interact with the externally imposed global conditions of audiences, platforms, policy, and socioeconomic conditions to give shape to a local videogame field.

What has been most vivid across the Melbourne and Adelaide case studies here is a sense that a videogame production culture existed in each city before commercial videogame companies exploited that culture for its skills, energy, and reputation in order to industrialize and formalize into commercial studios. The final chapter of this book, then, will turn to how the dominant positions of the field that we think of as the videogame industry have always actually emerged from and relied on the broader field of positions which their dominance obscures.

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