

Conclusion: Centering the Field of Videogame Production

The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), located in downtown Melbourne's Federation Square, positions itself as Australia's national museum of screen culture. It collects and exhibits a wide range of texts and material related to media art, film, television, and videogames. Since the early 2000s, ACMI has supported Australia's videogame field with residencies, dedicated exhibitions, and a commissioned interactive game installation, *AcmiPark* (2003; see Stuckey 2005). Few, if any, formal cultural institutions in Australia have shown as much interest in or provided as much support for the videogame field as ACMI.

In 2018, I conducted a group interview with ACMI's chief experience officer Seb Chan, producer for public programs Arieh Offman, and director of exhibitions Paul Bowers to learn how videogames fit within ACMI's remit. Despite the institution's ongoing support and enthusiasm, ACMI faces several challenges when it comes to being a national museum of videogames. For instance, at the time of our interview ACMI had no dedicated employee focused on videogames. Instead, as Chan explained, "We have a bunch of us who are in different roles who program and advocate for videogames, who support and design things for these experiences, but we don't have a [programmer], a specific role."¹ Like a similar story at a number of cultural institutions and government agencies, there was a general sense that videogames mattered and should be included in the remit of ACMI. But where videogames actually fit within the institution's organizational structure remained ambiguous (see McMaster 2023 for a similar example).

Further, like all cultural institutions concerned with videogames, ACMI faces struggles in terms of shaping audience expectations for how to confront videogames in the gallery space in ways that are both engaging and educational. Offman explains: "I think the challenging thing is that audiences

have over time built up an understanding of how to approach a film within a museum or within a gallery context. How to approach a painting within a gallery context. Whereas . . . there isn't that understanding and that literacy in the audiences [for approaching videogames in a gallery context]." Bowers added, "Also, when I go to an art gallery, an art gallery is where I experience art, you know what I mean? Whereas the place I experience videogames is in my living room. So I'm not in the frame of mind to see it [in the gallery] because that's when I sit on my sofa." When audiences perceive videogames first and foremost as entertainment commodities rather than as cultural works, integrating them into a gallery space in a way that is meaningful to audiences becomes extra challenging.

The trio also noted how both institutional and audience perceptions and expectations of videogames compared to other media forms raised questions about artistic freedoms and cultural significance. As a point of comparison, Bowers draws attention to *Terror Nullius*, a film work by collective Soda_Jerk that mashes together clips of Australian film performances and public figures to provide a scathing (and controversial) commentary of contemporary Australian culture.² In part, *Terror Nullius* uses footage from graphic R-rated films such as *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*. At the time of our interview, *Terror Nullius* was playing in ACMI's theater, which general members of the public could enter at any time with no barrier or proof-of-ID check. While *Terror Nullius* "is probably unsuitable for a 10-year-old," Bowers notes that ACMI is "okay with that because it is art." However, he reflects, "We're not okay with presenting [videogames such as] *We Happy Few* or *The Last of Us* in that frame, but we probably should be."

Bowers's point here is that while both ACMI as an institution and the general public were able to distinguish the artistic merit of, and thus justify the exhibition of, a film-based artwork not appropriate for children, they would struggle to do the same for a videogame-based work. What struck me, however, were the videogames presented as analogous to *Terror Nullius*: the blockbuster zombie shooter *The Last of Us*—developed by large American studio Naughty Dog and published by Sony—and relatively large-scale commercial independent title *We Happy Few*—developed by 40-person Montreal studio Compulsion Games and published by Gearbox software. I noted that these were both commercial videogames and that the videogame equivalent to *Terror Nullius*—in terms of controversiality, artistic merit, and production context—would perhaps be something more akin to Robert Yang's

Cobra Club (an experimental and explicit game about taking and sending dick pics, exploring themes of data privacy and surveillance culture) or dreamfeel's *Curtain* (a short narrative-driven first-person game about being trapped in an abusive relationship). I pointed this out to my interviewees, noting that ACMI probably wouldn't show a commercial R-rated film such as the *South Park* movie in the same theater as *Terror Nullius* is exhibited in. The production context (where in the field the work and its creators are positioned) surely matters relatively, more so than how appropriate or offensive a given film is in an absolute sense. Bowers justified the comparison thus:

We're the only place where you're going to be able to see a new Tarkovsky print, for example. That's not going to come to your Hoyts [commercial cinema], and it's something we chose to reflect upon. We wouldn't exclude that to show *Black Panther*. For videogames I don't know if there is yet that obvious distinction between [mainstream and art house] which comes about from a very long canon.

While the distinction is never clear or straightforward, a sense exists among curators and audiences alike that most cultural forms contain both more commercial and more artistic works that require different frames of reference and different modes of evaluation and engagement. Videogames, however, lack any distinction between mainstream and art house. When all videogames are perceived first and foremost as commercial entertainment products, regardless of their production context within the field, institutions such as ACMI become limited in what videogames they can present and how they can present them.

My point with this final anecdote is not to single out or critique ACMI's considerable and ongoing efforts to recognize the cultural significance of videogame production—that they are facing and reflecting on such challenges at all speaks highly of their efforts to overcome them. Rather, the challenges faced by ACMI and other cultural institutions in terms of not just how to collect and exhibit videogames but *which* videogames to collect and exhibit exemplify the challenges exposed throughout this book of how a dominant subset of commercially feasible videogame producers and products has obscured and disavowed a much broader field of cultural production. Processes of aggressive formalization over decades have allowed the positions which are, together, perceived as “the videogame industry” to remain so dominant in the videogame field that they are able to position themselves *as* the videogame field in scholarship, in policy, in curation, in

the public imaginary. They are so dominant that any distinction between the subfield of restricted production and the subfield of mass production, any distinction between autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchization, any distinction between symbolic and economic values, any distinction between mainstream and art house videogames remains difficult to parse.

Bourdieu (1993, 38) warns that if the heteronomous principle of hierarchization reigns unchallenged, then “losing all autonomy, the [cultural] field [would] disappear as such.” Through decades of aggressive formalization, the videogame field did all but disappear as a cultural field. Consequentially, as the field transitioned to what I have called its period of intense in/formalization since the late 2000s, with new positions at the field’s frontier advancing the autonomous principles of hierarchization in newly visible ways, it remains difficult for publics, for cultural institutions, for funders, for researchers, and for gamemakers themselves to understand and articulate the cultural contexts, the position-takings, of videogame production as occurring within a cultural field at all. If the videogame field lacks a “long canon” as Bowers puts it, despite videogames having been produced for close to 60 years now, it’s because the commercial positions in the field have for too long successfully limited the legitimate positions of the field to their own products and practices. The difficulty faced by cultural institutions, policymakers, researchers, and the public in fully articulating videogames as a cultural form is itself a direct outcome of commercial videogame companies’ historic disavowal of the broader field’s legitimacy. The dominant positions that we call the videogame industry have instrumentalized an economically redundant notion of cultural significance. This collapses ambiguous but nonetheless useful differentiations such as “mainstream” and “art house” to those of “legitimate videogames” and “not actually videogames at all” so that *The Last of Us* becomes analogous to *Terror Nullius* when one tries to imagine a legitimate R-rated videogame with artistic merit that belongs in a public gallery space.

This is the predicament that this book has strived to address by recontextualizing commercial videogame companies as exiting within, and emerging from, a broader cultural field of videogame production. If videogames are truly art, as the medium’s advocates, producers, consumers, and scholars have long insisted, then that means going further than simply accepting or demanding that every videogame is provided some arbitrary recognition of artistic merit or cultural significance. It instead means accounting for

the complex ways in which cultural value itself operates and is constituted within and through the field. As Paul Callaghan, a creative producer in Melbourne who has worked with cultural institutions and festivals in both Australia and the UK, put it to me:

A person making art might not want to start a business . . . people play piano without becoming concert pianists. People engage in creative practice without commercializing it, and it's fine. . . . If games talk about being this cultural force . . . what "cultural" is is someone writing a poem for their wife, like, or making a game for their wife, or learning to play guitar, or learning to dance so they can dance at their wedding. Culture . . . is a thing that someone does in their life day-to-day [and that's] just totally absent from the conversation [of videogames as culture]. If someone made a game for their wife and never showed it to anyone, that's what being cultural is. Someone having the skills to do that. . . . [Games] are important because people care about them. Ultimately that's it.

Videogame companies generate well over \$100 billion of revenue every year. This is impressive, important, and demands attention. But it is not why videogames are *culturally* significant. Instead, they're culturally significant because people care about them and because people use them to communicate with each other, to express ideas, and to understand their world.

Research on the economic conditions of global videogame production remains crucial, especially in regard to the consolidation of power over the means of videogame production and circulation by a smaller and smaller number of technology companies and platform holders. But such economic analyses also need to be contextualized within videogame production's broader, contested field as only one aspect of how, and why, people care about and generate value with videogames. The symbolic capitals of the videogame field that accrue, circulate, are sought after, and are inconsistently converted into economic capital must also be accounted for. Starting with the label of "videogame industry" and stretching it across the entire field presupposes an economist, homogenous, commodified set of values that only benefits a few dominant positions. Instead we need to begin from a position that understands how a videogame industry can only exist as an extraction of capital from, a concentration of value beyond, and a disavowal of legitimacy of a broader, contested field of videogame production.

With the rise in visibility and circumscribed legitimacy of a wider range of positions—hobbyists, artists, students, contractors, indies, outsource studios—the videogame field is more autonomous than ever before, and can no longer, if indeed it ever could, be reduced to a singular industry

of commercial positions. Such commercial positions never truly existed without the broader, informal, unmeasurable, intrinsically valuable work of a field of positions. Just as a Hollywood blockbuster, an avant-garde art house film, or a TikTok video recorded on a phone can be readily distinguished for where they are positioned within the filmmaking field, so too should a triple-A videogame, a commercial independent project, a student project, a personal project only shown to a few close friends, a contracted advergaming, and an experimental art-game be so contextualized within the field of videogame production. The struggles in the videogame field outlined in this book—between creativity and commerce, between professional and amateur, between client dependence and creative independence, between precarity and entrepreneurship, between career and side-hustle, between colocated scenes—point to a cultural bottleneck where the ability for a wider range of gamemakers to create and distribute a wider range of works now clashes with entrenched and limited commercial expectations and imaginations of what videogames can and should be.

My goal with this book, ultimately, has been to address this cultural bottleneck by accounting for different gamemaking positions as all vying to be situated within, and in turn constituting, a field of videogame production. Leena van Deventer, in Melbourne, captured both the need and the urgency of this task with an analogy that has stuck with me throughout this project:

Look at the market on a Sunday morning, right? You look at all the jewelry stores. Some of the people make everything from scratch themselves, by hand. And then some of them buy it all from overseas and sell it on. They're both making jewelry; they're both in the jewelry making business; they're both in the jewelry selling business; they have the same kind of market that they're pushing towards. . . . And I think people understand very clearly the difference between the handmade bespoke thing and the mass-produced thing. In games we don't really have any way to differentiate the support that is available to each one . . . Like there's room for each. . . . I think if we look at analogies like the jewelry thing, that's a more productive place to have a conversation than bringing values into it, by associating like a profit motivation as being inherently bad. It's not. . . . *It's just a matter of finding a new way to discuss things and having that space.*

Just as one can understand and appreciate both the differences and similarities of the bespoke and mass-produced jewelry sellers, we need ways to understand the different positions and dispositions of videogame makers as all sharing—all constituting—a cultural field of videogame production.

To stress, what I am calling for here is not simply a distinction between “arty” videogames and “commercial” videogames. Such a clear distinction is impossible in today’s intensely in/formalized field with the required hustle of forced entrepreneurship and the expanded reach of digital platforms. Instead, I am calling for a more nuanced appreciation of the contexts of videogame production and a dehomogenizing of the measures against which all videogames are evaluated. Just as ACMI can clearly differentiate between *Black Panther* and *Terror Nullius*, cultural institutions, policymakers, educators, researchers, labor organizers, and gamemakers themselves need to be able to differentiate between the varied contexts and positions of videogame production. Looking at and taking seriously the lived experiences of videogame makers within a videogame field across economic, cultural, and social axes provides an opportunity to consider the full range of positions held by videogame makers within a videogame field and to ask what a cultural field of videogame production might look like beyond the extractive and top-heavy paradigms of the videogame industry as it has been traditionally imagined since at least the mid-1980s.

Cultural industries don’t come from nowhere. They come from cultural fields. The videogame industry, as the exclusive site of legitimate videogame production, does not exist—at least not in the manner that we are used to imagining it. It is instead entangled with and dependent on the skills, communities, and innovations of a broader field of cultural production. Before there were videogame companies, people made videogames. Beyond the limits of videogame companies, people make videogames. Beneath and holding up the foundations of global videogame production, a vast range of people in a vast range of contexts make videogames. I hope I have shown that this is more than a simple semantic replacement of one word with another. I hope that by looking at the current frontiers of the field such as entrepreneurial and precarious indies, client contractors, students, scenes, and nascent labor movements that I’ve instead shown the limitations of the videogame industry as a conceptual frame and the need for more expansive framings that capture the full extent of labor, of identity, of experimentation, of exploitation, and of radical potential.

Accounting for the entire field of videogame production means accounting for how social and cultural capital are generated by and circulate within a semiautonomous field in complex, dynamic relationships with economic

capital. This is important for researchers of game production and industrialized cultural production more broadly so that the greater diversity of production contexts can adequately be accounted for and critiqued without being reduced to purely economic considerations. But it's also vital for those policymakers, curators, and educators that wish to support videogame production. At present, most models of public games funding both in Australia and around the world speak the neoliberal language of jobs growth and innovation, requiring elaborate business strategies, commercial feasibility studies, and a proven ability to make a financial return. This makes sense for the support models, such as Australia's recent tax offset, targeting the field's largest companies and employers. But as should be typical for arts funding more generally, tax offsets for large companies should be complemented by more modest but less stringent direct funding programs that encourage experimentation, creative expression, and diversity with no commercial requirements. It's this mode of support that grows the field in such a way that it is then able to support the growth of a local industry.³

Funding that aims to grow an industry without growing the field, exhibitions that legitimize the artistry of videogame companies while ignoring the work of fringe gamemaker artists, curricula that strive to make students "industry-ready" without focusing on fostering a student's own craft as an amateur gamemaker: all reinforce the dominance of the global field's most dominant positions. Alternatively, developing sustainable local videogame industries requires fostering the full videogame field by supporting the autonomy of local videogame producers and their ability to generate the required social and cultural capital to be recognized as legitimate videogame makers. There can be no videogame industry without a videogame field. The field must come first.

There's more to be done and this book is far from exhaustive in its examination of how the videogame field operates. I have largely ignored the logics and business models of the largest and most lucrative videogame companies that dominate the field and which others have examined in detail (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009; O'Donnell 2014; Kerr 2017; Legault and Weststar 2017; Bulut 2020; Cote and Harris 2020; Weststar and Dubois 2022). Instead, following Bourdieu's warning, I have focused on describing the formative tensions of the field's frontiers, where the legitimacy of various positions is most highly contested. I've also largely ignored the role of what Bourdieu (1993, 41) calls "cultural intermediaries," who are responsible

for translating the productions and values of an autonomous field to “the logic of the economy.” Publishers, curators, critics, journalists, livestreamers, investors, and event organizers all have crucial and complex roles to play in the field that have not been considered here (see Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017; Vanderhoef 2020; Parker 2021; Nieborg and Foxman 2022). Further, while my primary focus on Australian videogame producers has allowed me to detail the entrepreneurial and self-driven activities of those gamemakers in positions lacking access to the major publishers and studios of North America, western Europe, and East Asia, Australia is nonetheless a Western, developed, English-speaking country with relatively strong (albeit deteriorating) social welfare support. Other case studies of videogame production (not just consumption) in locations such as Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia would reveal drastically different configurations of dispositions, positions, and position-takings within the videogame field. Researchers from these locations are already producing such analyses (Chung 2016; Fung 2018; Ozimek 2018; Fiadotau 2019; Garda and Grabarczyk 2021; Guevara-Villalobos 2021; Anonymous 2022; Daiiani and Keogh 2022). I hope to see more such research in the future, in particular ones that consider local videogame production as a field in its own right, not simply as an appendage of an expanding global industry.

Another area deserving more attention that I’ve deliberately avoided in this book is the blurring of videogame play and production. In a sense, as the research around mods, user-generated content, and fan communities has made clear for decades, playing and making videogames have always had an ambiguous and overlapping relationship (Kücklich 2005; Banks and Humphreys 2008; Boluk and LeMieux 2017; Chia 2019; Swalwell 2021). In this book, I deliberately distinguished videogame production from videogame consumption to articulate concerns aligned with production and producers specifically. But now, players are increasingly recruited as creators in the platform logics of ecologies such as *Roblox*, using production tools in ways that are almost indistinguishable from play. As this book goes to print, videogame publishers drawn to the carbon-intensive wild west of cryptocurrencies and blockchain are speaking of dystopian “play-to-earn” business models that vividly literalize Arvidsson’s (2005) proposition that audiences are immaterial laborers for brands. The intensifying overlap of what I call the videogame field (of production) and what Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015) calls the gaming field (of consumption) requires closer examination. A renewed

consideration of playbour within the context of an intensely in/formalized field of videogame production could consider how players themselves are positioned as either legitimized or disavowed creators within the field of videogame production.

What I hope this book has instilled is not a reductive privileging of gamemakers' creative or cultural drivers over economic ones but a more holistic conceptual shift in how to examine videogames and their creators. Gamemakers' commercial ambitions and concerns must be situated within the cultural, social, and aesthetic ambitions and concerns that—individually and collectively—motivate and exploit them in equal measure. As I said in the introduction of this book, we have long understood how videogames operate as an industry but not how they operate as a *cultural* industry, with all the contradictions and juxtapositions that term implies. This book has been an attempt to address this.

Not all videogames are made by companies. Those that are made by companies might be made by a thousand employees, five contractors, or one teenager with a registered business name. The vast majority of videogame makers will never generate an economic profit from their gamemaking activity. Some videogames are made for billions of players, others for the creator alone. The contexts in which videogames are made, the reasons for which they are made, the resources with which they are made, and the audiences for whom they are made are no less diverse than they are for films, paintings, or music. To truly account for videogames as an industrialized cultural form is to account for the full breadth of commercial and non-commercial, formal and informal, professional and amateur ways in which videogames are made across the full field of videogame production. The videogame industry doesn't exist—at least not without an entire cultural field of videogame production to support it.

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Why We Should Think Beyond Commercial Game Production

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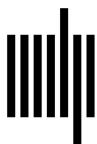
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