

Who Else Makes Videogames? Considering Informal Development Practices

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Keywords

informal media economies, creative practice, creative industries, Australia, amateur, hobbyist, professional

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, four Melbourne friends with no formal videogame development experience decided they wanted to make a local multiplayer videogame for themselves to play. Under the monicker ‘House House’, they began development in their spare time around their existing jobs and study. The game they decided to create, Push Me Pull You, received some attention from Melbourne’s game scene after House House posted their early work on Tumblr and Twitter, and in early 2014, fellow Melbourne developer Lee Shang Lun took the game on a laptop to San Francisco’s Game Developer’s Conference, showing the game to the international press. The game gained more attention and House House obtained funding from government body Film Victoria to support the game’s development. In mid-2016, the game released on the Steam platform for PC and Mac and, with the help of Melbourne game developer collective League of Geeks, the group ported the game to Sony’s Playstation 4 console, becoming one of only a small handful of Australian games to release on a home console in 2016. As of December 2016 the game has sold over 10,000 copies. Despite its success, the four developers continue to be primarily supported by other forms of employment.

A rich interchange of formal and informal practices and institutions define the House House story of a handful of friends transitioning from hobbyists to ‘professional’ game developers. Social networks, local communities, industry partners, government funding, part-time employment, and corporately sponsored industry events all have a hand in the story to the extent that drawing any clear line between whether House House is a professional or hobbyist outfit is all but impossible—at different times, they were both.

This story is anecdotal, but far from exceptional. Since the Global Financial Crisis saw the withdrawal of overseas corporations from the Australian game industry and the closing of all the ‘triple a’ studios in the country, a rich fabric of commercial and informal actors form the foundations of contemporary videogame development in Australia. To an extent, the same can be said about videogame development across the Western world. The rise of relatively accessible middleware platforms such as Twine, Unity, and GameMaker have removed the need for expert programming skills from videogame development; unregulated digital distribution platforms such as itch.io and Google Play have made it easier than ever before for creators to reach audiences without the help of a publisher or physical storefront.

However, the Australian context provides a distinct and regional example of a contemporary creative culture recreating itself in a vacuum. The Australian videogame industry is one undergoing an era of “creative destruction” (Banks and Cunningham 2016) where the vacuum left by the retreat of international publishers has afforded a

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2017

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kaleidoscope of approaches to videogame development and distribution, to such an extent that even the term ‘videogame industry’ no longer fully encapsulates the vast range of creative practices happening around the videogame form—if indeed it ever did. As Banks and Cunningham observed in their interviews of commercial videogame developers in Australia: “Far from a homogenous Australian industry, we are seeing a diversity of models and approaches and further research is needed to comprehensively map the ecology of games development in Australia” (2016 133).

Lobato and Thomas (2015) explore in depth how every media economy is a mingling of formal and informal economic practices, where the informal is broadly defined as an analytic concept “that refers to a range of activities and processes occurring outside the official and authorized spaces of the economy” (7). Rather than a clear cut and unambiguous line of informal actors on one side and formal on the other, Lobato and Thomas demonstrate how every media economy is an ever-shifting tango of actors that cross between various degrees of formality that mediate and shape the other. The music industry confronting MP3 technology in the late 90s and early 2000s provides a prime example. The formal actors of the music industry were confronted with distribution sites of pirated music such as Napster, and free-to-use media players such as Winamp. Apple’s iTunes, then, formalised these informal practices by not only formalising MP3 use, but by providing a tool for users to manage their massive libraries of informally obtained MP3s. Elsewhere, livestreamers of videogames or other media have transitioned from fringe, informal actors relying on the formal products of videogame and television companies to formal actors in a media industry in their own right, with influential streamers now forming a significant component of a game’s marketing strategy.

Lobato and Thomas stress that a fundamental tension and an interdependency exists between formal and informal media (2015, 3), stressing the importance not simply of accounting for informal practices but of the rich interconnections, intermediations, and symbiosis of both informal and formal zones—even as the formal, on the surface, regularly attempts to suppress (or more accurately subsume) the informal. Crucially, to study the informal is by definition to study “the unmeasurable, the uncertain, and the unsettled; it’s about rapid change, transformation, and things we don’t fully, and may never, know” (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 13). This is not to say that studying informal media is a futile task, but that it is elusive and always shifting away from the lens of study. To account for the informal is, explicitly, to ask what else is happening around a medium that is not captured by traditional forms of inquiry but which is foundational to that medium all the same.

This paper presents preliminary research on the contemporary context of Australian videogame creation to highlight the challenges that adequately accounting for informal videogame creativity poses for game studies. It provides an introduction to contemporary informal videogame creativity in Australia, the technical and cultural affordances that shape their practice, their impact on the formal videogame industry, and proposes ways to account for such emergent informal and regional creativity within game studies.

BIO

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