

# **Disruptive Artists: Creative Dissonance and Cultural Value in Videogames Development.**

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This paper draws on qualitative fieldwork data collected from an action research project undertaken in Australia (2012-2014) with artists and videogames developers that explored the potential of artists from backgrounds other than videogames to catalyze innovation in videogames development processes and associated workplace cultures. The research involved an Australia wide call for expressions of interests from artists who were required to send in CVs and respond to tasks designed to reveal their capacities for applying the underlying skills of their 'native' art form to developing videogames. Shortlisted respondents were invited to participate in one-day workshops with developers from the partner videogames developer companies, and the companies then selected artists from the workshop participants to engage in paid residencies.

Six artists were placed with six videogames developer companies situated in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. This paper draws on the findings from our fieldwork observations of the workshops and from 20 semi-structured interviews with the developers and the artists conducted before, during and after the residencies. The residencies varied in duration and nature of the arrangement with some occurring over an intense few weeks and others stretching over a few months. In one case a prototype documentary film of videogames studio culture (Halfbrick Studios) that was developed through the residency became a fully funded and realized documentary project that was recently broadcast on Australia's public broadcaster, ABC (*Play to Win*, broadcast on 6 December 2016).

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Attempts to facilitate innovation through collaborations between the arts and applied, technical and/or commercial fields are not new (Shanken 2005). Other research has also explored the communication challenges associated with collaborating across disciplinary and craft boundaries, including perceived separations between highly specialized knowledge domains (Shanken 2005, 415). This research project found that the participating artists can potentially catalyze innovation and contribute value to videogames development by introducing ideas and processes that disrupt routine thinking about games development. However, the focus of this paper is not so much with these project outcomes as the tensions and incommensurabilities that emerged among the craft and discipline understandings of the participating artists (whose primary skills were from outside videogames development) and the videogames developers. We consider the importance and value of such dissonance in catalyzing or impeding innovation. We also consider how the different regimes of cultural value operating across and between these domains of cultural practice shape how these innovation opportunities are experienced and realized by the creative practitioners and professionals involved, including the academic researchers. At the heart of how the participants (videogames developers, artists and academic researchers) negotiated these relations are questions of professional identity (Banks and Cunningham 2016a, 2016b; O'Donnell 2014).

The artists' residencies with the videogames developers demonstrated the artists' potential to disrupt routine approaches to games development. The mere fact of their presence in the games development studio workplace and the very different disciplinary dispositions they brought concerning craft and ways of working were disruptive. The developers identified the artists' specific disciplinary and craft based understandings of aesthetics as potentially catalyzing innovation. However, the study encountered tensions and incommensurability in the approaches, languages and understandings used by the artists and the videogames developers. For the purpose of this analysis we approach this as an 'aesthetics versus mechanics' opposition, which emerged through our interviews with the participants and through the workshops. We describe and explore how the participants at crucial moments mobilized this opposition themselves. We find that the most interesting aspect of this incommensurability is not so much that it demonstrates a stark opposition of cultural values but that such incommensurabilities can then be operationalized for potentially innovative outcomes. We consider the conditions, including workplace cultures, that both enable and constrain such operationalizing potential.

There is a tension here right at the heart of this project about different and indeed competing understandings of cultural and aesthetic value. Arguments about cultural value are not new or unique to videogames games. There is a long and well known history of art-versus commerce debates. There is also a rich history of efforts to grapple with problems and questions of cultural value in the field of Cultural Studies, which challenge hierarchies of value that oppose and valorize domains of high culture to low or popular culture. For example, in *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (1995) John Frow argues that the cultural field is characterized by multiple centres and domains of value and that they are not reducible to a single scale. Nevertheless, as Frow observes, "To refuse the question of value is not, however, to escape it" (1). This project provides a case of the impossibility of escaping such questions of cultural value and the "generative dilemmas" that emerge as they are asserted by the participants, including the researchers (Frow 2). By following Frow's refusal to adopt "aestheticizing conceptions of value (that is, conceptions of value as an intrinsic property of texts or objects of practices)" and following his assertion that value is "... relational and practical, the outcome of processes

of negotiation and contestation ...” (5) we consider how and in what quite pragmatic and ordinary ways the tensions and indeed conflicts between the artists and videogames developers opened possibilities for movement and relation across their often incommensurate evaluative regimes (Frow 134).

Drawing on David Stark’s (2009) *The Sense of Dissonance: Accounts of Worth in Economic Life*, we consider that tensions between different cultural values can be a potential source of innovation rather than an obstacle to effective collaboration. The dissonance generated by on-going rivalries and disputes including about what counts as value and worth should not necessarily be avoided or shut down (also see Boltanski and Thevenot 2006). Furthermore, in grappling with the tensions that emerged between the participating artists and videogames developers, we identify that uneven capability across the videogame development companies to embrace such dissonance constrained the innovative opportunities that perhaps could have been realized through the artists’ placements. This speaks to wider challenges confronting videogames developers and their workplace studio cultures with their commitment to embracing and harnessing diversity.

## BIO

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