

# Who is a videogame developer? The politics of videogame maker identities

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## INTRODUCTION

The term ‘videogame developer’ is widely used to refer to people involved in the creation of videogames. However, despite its ubiquity, just who is and isn’t encompassed by this identity remains contested and political. While game designers and programmers fit under the ‘developer’ moniker quite neatly, others such as producers, community managers, and music composers have more difficulty classifying their work as ‘development’. Beyond commercial game studios, the applicability of the term becomes even more contested. Is a modder or a player creating user-generated content a videogame developer? What of student, hobbyist, and amateur game makers?

Inspired by the methods and insights of Adrienne Shaw’s 2012 survey of videogame players’ relationship to the identity of ‘gamer’, this paper draws from semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of videogame makers in Australia, Canada, and The Netherlands in order to consider just which videogame makers self-identify as videogame developers, and which do not. As part of a longer set of questions focused on topics of skill attainment, identity, and labour, participants were asked “Do you consider yourself a videogame developer?” and “Do you consider yourself part of a videogame industry?”. These seemingly straightforward questions received a vast range of responses, with the terms ‘developer’ and ‘industry’ each being interpreted in a number of ways in relation to different participants’ own craft and context. Some participants considered themselves developers, but not part of a videogame industry; others considered themselves part of an industry, but not developers. Participants working in formal game studios articulated that a number of roles exist that make a significant contribution to a studio’s output while not being directly involved in manipulating code or assets within a game engine, thus complicating just what ‘development’ means. The broadness with which such terms are used by scholars, journalists, governments, and makers themselves requires a critical reassessment.

In studying the diversity of videogame players, Shaw argues that it is not adequate to optimistically claim that all videogame players are gamers, but instead we must critically assess how ‘gamer’ is socially constructed and mobilised in ways that naturalise the inclusion and exclusion of particular demographics (2012, 29). Similarly, in this paper, I am interested in how terms such as ‘videogame developer’ are deployed to sustain a particular shape to *the videogame field*. I use ‘field’ in the Bourdieu sense of the distribution of various forms of capital which govern the various types of success and profit that are at stake around a cultural form (1983, 312). As such, I am interested less in idealistic proclamations that ‘everyone can be a videogame developer’ and more in assessing how ‘developer’ as an identity is

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mobilised by the videogame industry to sustain particular power dynamics within the videogame field that centre commercial videogame production and marginalise non-commercial videogame production.

The terms used to describe the agents within a cultural field determine how that field is imagined and constituted. To paraphrase Bourdieu (1983, 323), the field of videogame production is the site of struggle in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the videogame developer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define videogame development. Whereas terms used by other cultural fields more generally define that field's base craft activity (a writer writes; a painter paints; an actor acts) with little connotation as to the context of that activity, the act of 'developing' does not adequately describe the craft of many people involved in the making of videogames. Instead, 'developing' has roots in the role of 'software developer' belying the videogame medium's origins and swift industrialisation among computing professionals and enthusiasts. As the videogame field becomes a more "intensely in/formal" ordeal that blends commercial, hobbyist, and artistic practices (Keogh 2018), a wider range of agents and environments are becoming involved in the production and circulation of game works than 'developers' in a 'games industry'.

There are concrete ramifications for the terms used to define game makers and the game making field for industry, policy, and scholarship. For instance, many Australian game makers spoken to for this research who did not identify as a game developer also did not participate in industry surveys. This sort of self-omission is particularly worrying when one considers that the roles (producer, community manager, HR) and spaces (artist collectives, indie scenes, hobbyist circles) least likely to associate with the term 'developer' are also those most likely to be occupied by more gender-diverse game makers (Anthropy 2012). By using the term developer in scholarship and everyday vernacular, a dominant notion of videogames as a subset of the technology and software sector persists, privileging particular conceptualisations (and thus demographics) of game-making while marginalising others.

This paper will firstly detail the emergence of the term 'videogame developer' and the consequences of its technological connotations for how the videogame field is conceptualised. It will then present examples from the interview data to demonstrate the complex range of feelings game makers feel towards the 'developer' identity, and will highlight commonalities among those most and least likely to associate with the title. Finally, drawing from this data, the paper will conclude with a discussion of alternative terms that game makers are identifying with to avoid the connotations of 'developer'. This abstract, for instance, has used the arguably more neutral but imperfect 'maker'. Elsewhere, the term 'gameworker' has been recently popularised as a more encompassing term by the Game Workers Unite unionisation movement. Elsewhere, research undertaken by the British Council uses the compound term 'artist-game maker' to refer to a particular subset of game makers that self-identified as artists (Callaghan 2018) while creating "a very explicit distinction between the socio-commercial practice that's identified as indie" (Callaghan, interview). Ultimately, this paper hopes to make an intervention in the language used to discuss game makers and their activities so as to ensure the videogame field's full range of game making activities is accounted for.

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