Articulating the Field of Videogame Production

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INTRODUCTION
Videogame development is commonly imagined as happening in large, multinational corporations with campus-sized studios producing Hollywood-quality blockbusters for home consoles. But today there are just as many gamemakers working in teams smaller than five people as there are working in teams larger than 250 (GDC 2022). The majority of gamemakers now use pre-existing technological frameworks and software tools, such as the Unity and Unreal game engines, and produce much smaller videogames for digital platforms, such as Apple's App Store or Valve's Steam marketplace (Nicoll and Keogh 2019; Poell et al 2022). Instead of relying on resources supplied by a publisher in exchange for copyright ownership, more and more gamemakers fund their work with their own savings. Just like most musicians, most actors, most writers, and most painters, most gamemakers won't make much money from their gamemaking activity, if they make anything at all.

A disconnect exists between the diverse range of lived experiences, identities, ambitions, work conditions, communities, and skills of videogame makers, and the ways in which videogame development is typically understood and depicted by researchers, journalists, policymakers, education institutions, and gamemakers themselves as narrowly happening within the domain of a lucrative and centralised *videogame industry*. While the last decade has seen a fruitful research focus on the practices and works of gamemakers peripheral to the mainstream industry (Anthropy 2012; Harvey 2014; Young 2018; Švelch 2018; Reed 2020), this paper goes a step further to argue that the 'videogame industry' itself is an insufficient concept that only accounts for a small, hegemonic, particularly lucrative aspect of gamemaking activity—overwhelmingly located in particular cities in North America, Western Europe, and East Asia—while failing to account for a much broader and complex range of gamemaking identities, cultures, and sites that underpin it.

This did not happen by accident. After the first videogames were created by hobbyists, students, and tinkerers in the late 1960s, commercial firms and entrepreneurs emerged through the 1970s to "privatize the cultures of games and play" (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 8; see also Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 10). What we call the videogame industry has "convinced its employees"—and to this we could add students, researchers and policymakers—"that [the industry is] the only gateway to videogame creation" (Anthropy 2012, 18). This paper undermines this conviction by paying close attention to other sites of videogame development, to other ways of being a videogame maker. While the ways in which videogame production is industrialised have been well articulated, the ways in which videogame development is *cultural production*, demands more scrutiny. Casey O'Donnell (2012, 21) made a similar point, in 2012, when he

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argued against videogame development being understood—as it still pervasively is—as a software industry, arguing instead that "video game production viewed as an art world, rather than 'industry' constructs a much more critical and nuanced perspective" of videogame production.

Just as a Hollywood blockbuster, an avant-garde arthouse 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 adver-game, and an experimental art-game be so contextualised within what this paper articulates as *the field of videogame production*. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) work on fields of cultural production, this paper theorises, holistically but not homogeneously, the field of videogame production—or more simply *the videogame field*—as a space in which cultural, social *and* economic values flow between differently-positioned producers. The videogame field is the broader space of activity from which videogame *industries* emerges in specific local contexts. Just as one could not hope to understand the global music industry without first situating it within the broader music field—accounting for Taylor Swift, the countless anonymous Sunday pub cover bands, punk subcultures, and everything in between—this paper seriously considers the ramifications of truly considering videogames as a field of cultural production constituted by a vast range of competing positions—just like any other cultural field.

Just as other researchers have used Bourdieu's field theory to understand gameplaying cultures (e.g., Consalvo 2007; Kirkpatrick 2015), articulating videogame development as occurring within and as a field of cultural production expands our conceptual frame to consider cultural and social forms of capital (prestige, awards, acclaim, scenes, etc.), and a broader range of positions occupied by competing agents. The paper draws from semi-structured interviews and qualitative surveys of over 400 gamemakers in Australia, Europe, North America, and South-East Asia to reveal how a broader range of sites, struggles, and subjectivities continuously construct videogame production as a cultural, social, *and* economic activity. This fieldwork reveals constitutional struggles between creativity and commerce, between professional and amateur, between client dependence and creative independence, between precarity and entrepreneurship, between career and side-hustle, between co-located scenes that in turn 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.

Ultimately, this paper agues that 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, music, or any other field of cultural production. To truly account for videogames as an industrialised cultural form is to account for the full breadth of commercial and noncommercial, formal and informal, professional and amateur ways in which videogames are made across the full field of videogame production.

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