

# Reset and Replay: Planning Game Industry Events Post-Pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

Place industry events before, during, and after COVID-19 lockdowns. The annual Game Developers Conference (GDC) epitomises the professional networking landscape of the game industry, which historically has been dominated by alcohol-fueled social events and white men aged 18-35 (IGDA 2021). These spaces, often coded as male-centric, present significant barriers to inclusion and exacerbate issues of safety and comfort, particularly for women and minority groups. As the industry moves towards resuming in-person events post-COVID, this research compares two ethnographers' fieldnotes attending in-person, online, and hybrid game industry events to examine how such gatherings can be reimaged to foster inclusivity and safety in the future.

## METHOD AND DATA

This study draws from the ethnographic data gathered during each authors' PhD research (Butt, 2022; Hardwick, 2023), as well as joint fieldwork conducted together as part of a larger research team attending South by Southwest (SXSW) Sydney in October 2023.

Timeline	Researcher(s)	Event Sites	Location	Year(s)
Pre-COVID	First Author (Mahli-Ann)	Beer & Pixels	Sydney (In-Person)	2017-2019

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		Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW)	Melbourne (In-Person)	2017-2019
		Game Developers Conference (GDC)	San Francisco (In-Person)	2018
COVID	Second Author (Taylor)	Freeplay Independent Games Festival (Freeplay)	Melbourne (Online)	2020-2021
		Penny Arcade Expo Online (PAX Online)	Global	2020
		Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW)	Melbourne (Online)	2020
Post-COVID	Both Authors	South by Southwest (SXSW) Sydney	Sydney (In-Person)	2023

**Table 1:** Fieldwork timelines and event site summary.

During First Author’s PhD, she attended: Beer & Pixels, a monthly local game developer networking meetup in Sydney, Australia, organised by local chapter of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) from 2017 to 2019; the annual Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW) in Melbourne, Australia from 2017 to 2019; the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco in 2018. These events all took place in-person with social events primarily taking place at local pubs, bars, and warehouses. Second Author’s PhD research focused on: Freeplay Independent Games Festival in 2020, Penny Arcade Expo Online (PAX Online) in 2020, and MIGW in 2020. These events all took place digitally in 2020 due to ongoing COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in Melbourne. Both authors participated in a ‘team ethnography’ (Erickson & Donald 1998) at SXSW Sydney in October 2023.

## DISCUSSION

The endemic reliance on alcohol at networking events not only reinforces gendered spaces but also cultivates environments where hypervigilance becomes a prerequisite for marginalised groups (Butt 2018; 2022, 191). This research scrutinises the entrenched culture characterising new creative industries which Angela McRobbie describes as “network socialities” which conflates networking with partying, where partying becomes *part of the work*—not separate from the work (2002, 516; 2016; see also, Keogh 2021). The study reveals a stark gender disparity at events like GDC 2018, where women navigate a gauntlet of safety mantras and whisper networks amid a backdrop of sexist discourses and sexual harassment (Butt 2022, 202-208). Meanwhile, the requirements for game developers to display their positive affect and attachment to the creative work (through the partying-as-networking), makes it further difficult for women to rebuff unwanted advances or call out sexual harassment in these work-as-leisure environments (Ibid., 199-208). Women’s participation in industry social events often oscillates between attending at the risk of unwanted

advances or complete non-participation, with both choices steeped in systemic sexism.

Pressures to attend, network, and be sociable, can make it difficult for women to escape or protest uncomfortable interactions, sexism, and sexual harassment at industry social events. While participating in a male-dominated scene, women are often forced to accept sexism and sexist discourses (Palmer 2010, 433). “Rape myths” support the claims that women render themselves “vulnerable” and experience tragedies because they have failed to adequately manage their environments and follow safety precautions (Ward 1995). In this way, if a woman drinks and is sexually harassed or sexually assaulted at a party, she can be blamed for her “vulnerability” and experiences of tragedy (Pinciotti & Orcutt 2020). Problematically displacing accountability from perpetrators, women continue to be burdened with the responsibility to develop more intricate coping strategies (e.g., never leave drinks unattended, travel in groups, carry a phone, don’t wear revealing clothes, downplay femininity, learn self-defence, maintain hypervigilance, and so on, and so on, and so on) to manage their safety and environment (cf. Cote, 2017; Harvey, 2021) because they’ve ‘chosen’ to participate in a male domain of videogames. Here, women’s participation is presented as a binary choice: attend industry parties but expect unwanted advances from drunk men, or don’t attend.

Alternative no-alcohol networking models—such as the “Osama Tradition” (meeting over ice-cream), the “Cozy Alliances Tea Social” meetup, the “Mild Rumpus” chillout area (by the same organisers of the “Wild Rumpus” party), and the “UnParty” during GCD 2018, or the deliberately alcohol-free Freeplay night market curated by Hovergarden in 2019—demonstrate the possibility of inclusive spaces that de-emphasize alcohol. Notably, these models showcase the leadership of women and people of colour in curating spaces that subvert the norms of the dominant party culture. Meanwhile, the dominant party scene tended to be hosted by ‘game developers’ for ‘game developers’, which in turn, assumed the central positioning of white men as the invisible default.

Alcohol is not necessarily viewed as the problem. As above, many women expressed frustration with people “using alcohol to excuse” men’s drunken behaviour and how it works against holding them accountable for their actions. Needless to say, many women also find drinking alcohol enjoyable and a useful tool to help navigate social events (Butt 2022, 207). While women’s drinking practices remain heavily stigmatised, the positive uses and pleasures that many women derive from drinking alcohol complicates those discourses (Ferrer-Best 2018, 4; Riches 2016), as well as displaces an equation between alcohol and male aggression (sexual or otherwise) that returns responsibility to male perpetrators even if they are drunk.

Like alternative no-alcohol events, different curations of drunk spaces can also work to reconfigure the game industry social scene (Butt 2022, 213). Seeking a greater range of participation does not necessarily mean replacing ‘the heavily intoxicated party scene’ with a ‘non-alcohol less party scene’ and/or continuing to carve out more inclusive spaces on the peripheries. Instead, we argue that we must more closely attend to how different drunk spaces are socio-culturally coded and their impact on promoting particular social scenes and reiterations of gendered hostility. As much as non-alcohol or peripheral social events, *alternative curations of drunk spaces* can significantly contribute to challenging and reshaping a more diverse social scene in the games industry.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing lockdown and travel restrictions deployed as a pandemic response across the globe, forced games industry events to rethink normative in-person ideals around event delivery. This moment provided an unprecedented opportunity to engage with event communities to develop digital event infrastructure that was accessible and engaging for attendees (Hardwick 2023). This infrastructure proved invaluable in 2021 when lockdown measures persisted in Melbourne, Australia, and events such as Freeplay, MIGW and PAX Australia once again took to networking platforms, Discord, or the bespoke Freeplay ZONE to connect with their communities. While digital models for events pose different safety and accessibility problems to those at in-person events, they elucidated how digital event spaces widen the potential for women and minority people to attend events more comfortably. Further, digital spaces play an integral role in forming and supporting 'indie' game development communities' formation (Parker & Jenson 2017).

Despite this, when it became apparent in 2022 that lockdown restrictions were unlikely to continue as a public health response to COVID-19, games industry events began to return to solely in-person modes of delivery. Wholly abandoning the digital infrastructure developed during two years of forced online delivery had the knock-on effect of returning to a mode of event engagement significantly less accessible for immunocompromised and disabled people, elderly people, carers, and many others at risk of COVID-19. However, the authors' ethnographic research at SXSW Sydney in 2023 demonstrated that this return to in-person events also returned games industry communities to a time-before, where networking events embodied networked sociality modes of gathering centred around drinking alcohol which are also inaccessible and unsafe to women and other marginalized groups.

We contend that, given the context of both a games industry where networking events are inaccessible or unsafe for marginalised communities and the success of digital events during COVID-19 lockdowns, a reconfiguration of social practices at industry events is essential. This necessitates a socio-cultural shift that challenges traditional networking paradigms and the gendered hostilities inherent in alcohol-driven event spaces such as bars. This research calls for a critical reassessment of games industry networking events, and argues that this 'post'-COVID moment is a rich opportunity to do so. By reimagining these events, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable industry.

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