

# "We'll always go with what's more sustainable": Understanding the Financialised Logics of Game Development

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## INTRODUCTION

Much of the current research on game monetisation focuses on its socially harmful, controversial, or unethical aspects, with examples including loot boxes, microtransactions, and subscriptions (for instance, Brock & Johnson, 2021; Karlsen, 2022; Xiao & Henderson, 2021). Comparatively little work has explored monetisation from a production perspective (see, e.g., van Roessel & Švelch, 2021), particularly how monetisation strategies shape and are shaped by industry norms and conditions. However, understanding monetisation in the context of these industry conditions, particularly in the current climate of precarious labour and financial instability (Bulut, 2020), provides vital insight into the factors underlying monetisation decisions.

To better understand monetisation as it pertains to conditions of production, we draw on game production studies, which “emphasize the cultural, economic, political, and social circumstances in which games are created and the production cultures associated with development” (Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021, 12). While games production studies encompass a range of scales—from macro-level industry dynamics to micro-level studio practices—we are particularly interested in the relationship between monetisation and questions of risk and economic sustainability (Bulut, 2020; Keogh, 2023; Whitson, 2019).

Sustainability has been examined in game production studies in the context of economic viability and labour, particularly regarding independent game developers’ ability to “sustain game development activity without the safety nets possessed by large multinational corporations” (Banks & Keogh, 2021, 160). It is in this context, rather than concerns around ecological impacts, that we situate our discussion around sustainability. This includes examining how monetisation affects the ongoing economic and financial viability of game production businesses. Monetisation approaches ultimately impact how and which games are made, as evidenced by the shift toward “games-as-a-service” models (Dubois & Weststar, 2022) which has resulted in games being approached as ongoing content cycles rather than singular products (Kerr, 2016), iterated and optimised through data-driven analytics (Egliston, 2024).

This paper presents the results of a semi-structured interview study with 20 videogame industry professionals, such as game developers, publishers, funders, as well as industry representative bodies and union leaders. While most game developer

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participants were based in Australia and worked for indie development studios, a broad range of monetisation models were represented, such as premium, free-to-play, and blockchain-based ‘cryptogames’. In these interviews, participants were asked about their approaches to releasing, publishing or funding commercial games, how monetisation shapes the games development or funding process, and their general attitudes toward game monetisation models.

In exploring how game monetisation decisions are made, we argue that monetisation decisions form part of the risk and values frameworks that game studio leads, managers and developers work within as they pursue economic sustainability. Understanding these decisions requires looking beyond monetisation models themselves to the highly precarious and financialised contexts in which games development decisions are made.

Our data suggests that in the present risk-averse climate, game developers' decisions around monetisation are shaped by concerns around economic sustainability rather than by generating profit. However, in our interviews, managers and developers expressed different perspectives and concerns around sustainability and risk and how these impact monetisation decisions. Managers shared concerns about their studio's games making enough money to pay their employees a living wage and funding the production of future games. Game developers who were not in management positions were primarily concerned with retaining stable employment in the games industry. While all interviewees discussed concerns around exploitative or unethical monetisation, particularly free-to-play and games-as-a-service models, these concerns were often secondary to ongoing studio and employment sustainability.

By considering sustainability as a key aspect of how and why monetisation decisions are made, this paper goes beyond ‘ethical’ monetisation (Karlsen, 2022) as the primary consideration informing game monetisation decisions and models. In indie and small-scale development contexts, a sole focus on ethics does not fully capture the challenging decisions game developers make in order to generate revenue with a goal of continuing to employ workers and fund future game development projects. This insight also offers a new point forward for regulators seeking to restrict ‘unethical’ or ‘dark’ (Zagal et al., 2013) monetisation mechanics such as gambling-like features, by arguing that greater financial support for gamemakers would allow for innovative approaches to games development and monetisation that are not primarily underpinned by sustainability concerns. The findings also point to the advantages of co-operative and alternative business ownership models for sustainable games production.

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