Indie as Usual: Localising Australian Videogame Development

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian videogame industry has had a tumultuous decade. Traditionally dependent on a 'fee-for-service' model that saw Australian development studios existing primarily as cheap, offshore solutions for North American and European publishers, the Global Financial Crisis and subsequent parity of the US and Australian dollars led to extensive studio closures. From 2007 to 2012, the number of people reportedly employed in the Australian game industry plummeted from 1431 to 581 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013). At the same time, however, the number of studios in Australia increased from 45 to 84. In 2018, a new survey suggests the number of people employed in the Australian videogame industry has risen back to 928, while the number of studios has dropped back to 63 (Interactive Games & Entertainment Association 2018). These statistics point to how, from the ashes of the old fee-for-service industry, a complex web of smaller groups and individual developers is emerging and stabilising. This *videogame development ecology* is increasingly producing and exporting original intellectual property (IP) for digital distribution platforms, rather than relying on North American and European publishers for large console releases.

Banks and Cunningham have previously described this seismic shift in the Australian videogame industry as one of "creative destruction" that indicates "a major restructuring of the core of Australia's videogame development industry" (2016, 130). Meanwhile, globally, the rise of digital distribution platforms, mobile and casual videogame demographics, and cheaper development middleware are greatly expanding the range of existing development and distribution practices into a far more nebulous shape than the traditional configuration of large 'triple-a studio' centralised in North America and Japan creating console and PC games, and smaller developers on the margins making independent and mobile games. An emerging body of literature is showing that

videogame development can no longer be adequately understood as a homogenous global industry, but as a network of videogame *industries* in specific regional and local contexts.

The dramatic transformation of the Australian videogame industry in particular, and the flexibility and innovation demanded of its developers, provides a valuable opportunity to consider these global trends of decentralisation. This paper explores one particular phenomenon to emerge from this new configuration: the fact that over 90% of Australian videogame developers identify as 'independent' or 'indie' developers. While indie videogame development has been extensively researched in recent years—most prominently in a special issue of *Loading* (Simon 2013) that describes and analyses indie practices in a Canadian context—it has been primarily understood in symbiotic (or antagonistic) relation to a 'non-independent' triple-a industry. For this new configuration of videogame development represented by Australia and other regions, however, 'indie' is now business as usual where the traditional centre of triple-a publishers is completely absent. This begs the questions: what does it mean to be an indie developer when indie is the conventional means of doing business? What does it mean to conceptualise or theorise regional videogame development practices in the absence of the large triple-a studios that have typically been considered the industry's backbone, but which are decreasingly representative of many regional videogame development cultures?

By *localising and specifying* various configurations and meanings of indie identification through a close examination of Australian videogame development, informed by interviews with a wide range of Australian developers, this paper unearths a complex ecology of local development practices imbricated with wider cultural scenes and creative identities, and shaped by diverse funding opportunities, labour practices, technological infrastructure, and global consumer cultures.

While indie development has been popularly imagined as a "global" online community, collaborating and distributing primarily through online social media and distribution platforms such as Twitter, GameJolt, itch.io, and Steam, Parker and Jenson have recently shown how *local* development scenes "stabilize and formalize the diverse social/economic networks of actors and activities that encompass indie cultural production in discrete geographical areas" (2017, 872). Focusing on local indie scenes in Canada, Parker and Jenson identify "local communities and the generalized, 'global' ideals of indie-ness" as trumping any sense of "national allegiance" (881). In Australia, like Canada, distinct local scenes with specific challenges and opportunities (such as greatly varied government funding from state to state, and the drastic differences in internet availability in urban and rural Australia) have been identified (Banks and Cunningham 2016; Keogh 2017). However, unlike Canada, among Australian developers is also a collective, national sense of 'doing it rough' which speaks to both a common feeling among Australian creatives of being remotely positioned compared to their European and North American counterparts, as well as the national solidarity felt in the withdrawal of federal government support for the game industry in 2014. This suggests that while the work done on Canadian indie scenes is undeniably valuable, there are regional and local specificities that demand attention, especially in the vast majority of countries where a triple-a culture is entirely absent yet videogame development practices persists nonetheless.

In this new ecology, the 'indie' identity is one that nonetheless continues to refer to US-centric notions of how the videogame industry is popularly imagined; that is, many

Australian developers identify themselves as indie explicitly because of the *absence* of triple-a studios. As such, the traditional triple-a studio continues to hold a special power over regional industries, even in its absence. Through the deployment of 'indie' in the Australian context, we can see how videogame development is *imagined* as an industry—by developers themselves but also by scholars, consumers, and policy makers—is in a reflexive relationship with how localised videogame development ecologies such as we've identified in Australia actually function. Indie is an identity that maintains a stoic pride (look what we managed to do even without any support), but also an aspiration to remain an element of that US- and Japan-centric global industry that sees indie development as satellites to the central large studios.

Other Australian developers, however, reject the indie identity altogether, despite squarely fitting into a conventional consideration of 'indie' practices: small, informal, as driven by artistic considerations as commercial ones. There is a sense among developers interviewed for this paper that as 'indie' becomes business as usual, it may obscure the broader complex of formal and informal development practices that consists of professional developers, amateurs, students, hobbyists, artists, and developers embedded in non-entertainment sectors. We thus argue that game studies needs to develop more comprehensive frameworks for understanding and analysing videogame development practices beyond simple trinaries of triple-a/indie/mobile that only account for narrowly-defined formal practices and business models. Such frameworks may also assist to critique many of the assumed narratives and dominant imaginaries that we often tell ourselves about 'the videogame industry' as a relatively stable and homogenous entity. The local context of Australia in particular points to a more diverse ecology of activities and actors that need to be more comprehensively accounted for if we are to adequately map contemporary videogame development practices.

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