

Ten Years of Pushing Buttons: The Role of Freeplay in Australian Games Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the historical and contemporary significance of the Freeplay Independent Games Festival. This event focusing on critical issues in game production and culture, and has taken place in Melbourne, Australia over the last decade. Presenting an overview of both the diversity of discourse and recurring concerns over the last ten years of Freeplay Festival events, the paper locates Freeplay as a key organisation in Australian games education, and a central player in the critical conversation around games, and the industry and culture in which they are embedded.

Keywords

Freeplay, Independent, Games, Festival, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Freeplay is Australia's longest-running and largest independent games festival. Since 2004, the event has assembled, almost annually, a unique mix of players, makers, critics, artists, academics, students, and the general public to explore and discuss games and the industries and cultures that surround and influence them. Over the last decade, and like games themselves, Freeplay has developed and grown. Nolonger simply attracting a select few that might associate themselves as independent game makers or players, the event now draws a diverse audience of people with both passing interest and deep appreciation of a wide variety of games and experiences of play. Freeplay seeks to highlight the cultural significance of games exploring all that they are and all that they can be, and in doing so, has no reservations in pointing out the growing pains of the medium.

While Freeplay exists in order to promote and investigate independent game culture through both professional development and engagement with the public, far from simply being a celebration of games, the event has, from the outset, sought to centralise discussions and antagonisms from within the industry and culture from which they appear, issues that are often overlooked in other game discussion spaces. From its first year in 2004, Freeplay has brought attention to the financial, political and cultural aspects of games and has encouraged conversations on the ethics of labour practices, concerns of game distribution, and the fundamental importance of recognising diversity in games, game players and makers. These important and progressive streams of conversation upon

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which the event chooses to focus, are not simply exercised and then left for another year, but become part of a wider international discourse of games that the Freeplay organisation itself gives voice to at higher levels. The most notable examples of this are through Freeplays formal response to both Screen Australia's Interactive Games Fund of 2012, and to the Australian Government's 2013 national cultural policy, Creative Culture. In this way Freeplay is central to the national literacy of games and culture. These response documents bring the concerns of the community to government, but also underscore to the nations leaders that games are no longer a narrow band of practitioners or audiences, but are pervasive cultural artefacts embedded within a global community of discussion, one in which Australia has many confident and independent voices. Freeplay advocates that the government acknowledge and support these voices and practitioners at a variety of levels. It is through Freeplays' continued engagement with the politically difficult and playfully inspiring aspects of games that it aims to champion and advance the cultural significance of this growing medium. Importantly, Freeplay is no one individual, or even a stable community, but a spirit of generosity to create an experience games and advance the culture that surrounds them. This paper reflects on Freeplays history of activity and its role in Australian games education and operates as an invitation for continued activity in the critical discussion and celebration of the medium of games.

BIO

Hugh Davies is a Senior Lecturer at La Trobe University where he is also deputy director for the University's Centre for Creative Arts. Previously, Hugh has held lecturing positions at Monash University, The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and the University of South Australia. Hugh is a PhD candidate at Monash University where he is undertaking research into serious alternate reality games. He has operated as chairman of the board of the Freeplay Independent Games Festival for the last three years.

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