

A Necessary Evil: Creative and Commercial Tensions in Australian Game Development

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INTRODUCTION

In Australia, the professional video game industry overwhelmingly consists of smaller game developers (Keogh 2021). Games created by developers are frequently released and sold on commercial game platforms such as Steam, allowing for the possibility of generating revenue. When utilizing the Steam platform there is a relatively low barrier of entry into the market, with 34 games per-day released in 2022 (Kontus 2022). Therefore, to stand out in a crowded marketplace and reach an audience, developers must consider Steam's platform specific commercial factors. To do so, they may engage in marketing activities such as promotion through social media (Clinnick 2017; Kerr 2017; Zackariasson & Dymek 2017), and within the Steam platform itself, via developer-facing analytics and other tools including forums and embedded social-media capabilities. Many of these tools allow for consumer engagement and input. One such example are Tags. On Steam, Tags allow developers and consumers to influence how a game may surface on the platform and to whom. However, tags can be manipulated by consumers in bad faith (Muscat 2018, 65), requiring developers to spend additional time and resources monitoring how their games are perceived and engaged within the Steam ecosystem. Despite the high level of involvement required to make a game available on a commercial platform, and pressures to commodify a game so that it meets consumer expectations, many small Australian developers do not see themselves as a business, and largely focus on production (Keogh 2021).

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This raises question as to how small Australian game developers consider the commercial context of their creative work, and what considerations and factors may influence their creative choices and ability to commercialize their work.

To address this question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with small game developers across seven Victorian studios. Studios had between one and ten staff members, and all intended to derive revenue from their games through commercial platforms. Victoria was chosen as it is the most developed and populated game-making location and industry in Australia, home to over 50% of Australia's developers (IGEA 2021). Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and analysed using a human interpretative thematic-analytical approach, and use of NVivo 12 plus software, to better ascertaining meaning and accuracy (Arvidsson & Caliandro 2016). Transcripts were analysed in sequence, moving to the next when no new themes could be identified, or existing themes refined. To refine codes and groupings, transcripts were returned to and re-examined as part of an iterative analysis process (Åkerlind 2012).

All of the small game developers interviewed agreed a commercial context was important to them, and they understood they were making a commercial product that they wanted to be financially successful and sustainable. For example, one developer described how 'survival' was key to sustaining their future development work. However, developers also expressed a tension between their business and creative goals, specifically a creative desire to spend time making the game they had envisioned and the frustration in having the creative process influenced by business considerations. One developer described an uncertainty as to whether their creative direction would be commercially viable and another described business considerations as a 'necessary evil'; something they did not enjoy or feel positive about but that they understood was required to be financially viable and sustainable. Although their willingness to engage with business considerations varied, developers overall actively considered the reputation of their studio and games, the kind of values they wanted to embed, and how they wanted audiences to think about them.

These initial findings suggest a complexity in how developers view their work and creative and commercial practices, indicating a strong creative and artistic desire that was not always commercially oriented or focused, but often commercially grounded. The findings also suggest small developer goals and ambitions are oriented towards personal creativity and experimentation with less emphasis towards business and studio growth, despite commercial engagement (Jones 2022; Williams 2022). These findings also raise further question towards how developers consider the relationship between their creative and commercial practice with regard to short and long-term sustainability.

BIO

Dr Alexander Muscat is Lecturer in Games at University of the Sunshine Coast. His research investigates game-making practices, production processes, design theory, and player experience. Alexander's research includes an experimental, practice-based focus with special interest towards how games challenge sensory perception and compel curiosity. His work has been disseminated at scholarly, arts, and industry venues including CHI Play, DiGRA, A MAZE, and Games Connect Asia Pacific.

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