

# The role of community in the work of alternative Australian gamemakers

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## **ABSTRACT**

Game development has changed drastically with the rise of digital distribution, alternative audiences and more accessible game development software (Anthropy, 2012; Nicol & Keogh, 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Chia et al, 2020; Kerr, 2017). This has enabled the growth of different types of gamemaking at the margins of the videogame industry that are driven more by creative or political, rather than purely commercial, motivations (Harvey, 2014; Reed, 2020; Ruberg, 2019). These alternative creators challenge the entrenched hegemony within the formal games industry — which predominantly values whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality and profitability — through who is creating these games, how they are being made and what is being created (Fron et al, 2007).

This departure from the status quo is frequently a source of challenge for alternative gamemakers. Creators engaging in alternative gamemaking are often from marginalised demographics, potentially due to their exclusion from the mainstream industry, and often have different ideologies, processes and outputs than those of the mainstream (Harvey, 2014; Ruberg, 2019). These differences are “challenging the hegemony of mainstream games production” (Harvey, 2014, 103) by resisting the industry’s dominant, commercial norms (Fron et al, 2007). This resistance to the hegemony leads to tensions, active repression, retaliation, abuse and labour co-option from the mainstream industry and audience, which greatly contribute to the precariousness of alternative gamemaking by threatening the mental health, safety and financial stability of these creators (Keogh, 2019a; Ruberg, 2019; Harvey, 2014; Chess & Shaw, 2015).

These tensions compound the already precarious nature of informal gamemaking. Like many other creative industries, the games industry is precarious with poor labour conditions, reliance on crowdfunding and lack of unionisation (Banks & Cunningham, 2016; Siciliano, 2021). Keogh (2019b, 8) notes that creators “often articulate that as volatile as their current situation is, it is better than being a part of the dominant industry’s larger studios”. While some informal gamemakers seek to actively reject the labour issues found within the formal industry, they often cannot fully break free of the exploitation inherent in modern creative work (Keogh, 2021; Ruberg, 2019). Some factors that promote exploitation, such as project-based work and a self-imposed identity of commitment and perfectionism, are common to all forms of game production, including alternative and informal gamemaking (Cote &

Harris, 2020; McRobbie, 2016). Attempting to address and mitigate these labour issues is difficult when the work is highly individualised.

One way that alternative gamemakers can confront these labour issues is through community. There is a wealth of existing literature that details the histories of various informal gamemaking communities (see: Anthropy, 2012; Ito, 2005; Keogh, 2019a; McCrea, 2012; Reed, 2020; Švelch, 2013). Such communities may be place-based or can form around another commonality such as a software, platform, style, genre, or an event. In opposition to the practice of secrecy found within the formal games industry, these communities, events and spaces are often noted for their creation and sharing of resources and skills that would traditionally be kept private (Harvey, 2014; Ruberg, 2019; Keogh, 2019b). As Kerr (2017, 160) notes “these loosely structured communities bring together like-minded individuals and offer some protection against the pressure to individualise risk taking, entrepreneurship and creativity”. This solidarity may also help to assuage some of the precarity of alternative gamemaking by prioritising sustainability over perfectionism and profitability. *Glorious Trainwrecks*, an experimental gamemaking community, “embraces the underbelly, the junk, and the failures” through encouraging the remixing of existing work through short game jams and accessible resources (Reed, 2020, 114). However, it is unclear whether these community values are merely upheld aesthetically or genuinely result in more sustainable work practices. Research in other cultural industries such as music and fashion has examined the role of community in managing precarity, but it is yet to be thoroughly explored in gamemaking (Campbell, 2021; Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; McRobbie, 2016).

This paper presents preliminary findings from a qualitative project that aims to examine the ways in which alternative gamemakers are engaging with community and the impact of this engagement on their labour and practices. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, my research extends upon the existing knowledge by examining how alternative gamemakers are engaging with community to navigate the precarity and pressures that they face. Preliminary findings from my research suggest that alternative gamemakers often engage in a variety of different communities, thus further complicating the notion that the ethos of a single community may solely influence the work practices of its participants.

## **BIO**

Erika Verkaaik is a Master of Philosophy student at the Queensland University of Technology, under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Nicoll, Dr. Brendan Keogh and Associate Professor John Banks. Their thesis focuses on understanding the impact of community on the work and sustainability of alternative gamemaking.

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