

# The Lands Before-During-After Times: Reimagining Game Industry Events ‘Post’- COVID-19

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## INTRODUCTION

This comparative ethnography (Abramson & Gong 2020) examines the shifts in professional game industry events before, during, and after COVID-19 lockdowns. The annual Game Developers Conference (GDC) epitomises the professional networking landscape of the game industry, which historically has been dominated by white men aged 18-35 (IGDA 2021) and alcohol-fueled social events. These spaces, often coded as male-centric, present significant barriers to inclusion and exacerbate issues of safety and comfort, particularly for women and minority groups. As the industry moves towards resuming in-person events post-COVID, this research compares two ethnographers’ fieldnotes attending in-person, online, and hybrid game industry events to examine how such gatherings can be reimagined to foster inclusivity and safety in the future.

## METHOD AND DATA

This study draws from the ethnographic data gathered during each author’s PhD research (Butt, 2022; Hardwick, 2023), as well as joint fieldwork conducted together as part of a larger research team attending South by Southwest (SXSW) Sydney in October 2023. The events the ethnographic research draws on are outlined in table 1.

Timeline	Researcher(s)	Event Sites	Location	Year(s)
Pre-COVID (in-person)	Mahli-Ann	Beer & Pixels	Sydney (In-person)	2017-2019
		Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW)	Melbourne (In-person)	2017-2019
		Game Developers Conference (GDC)	San Francisco (In-person)	2018
COVID (online)	Taylor	Freeplay Independent Games Festival (Freeplay)	Melbourne (Online)	2020-2021
		Penny Arcade Expo Online (PAX Online)	Global (Online)	2020

		Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW)	Melbourne (Online)	2020
Post-COVID (in-person)	Both	South by Southwest (SXSW)	Sydney (In-person)	2023

Table 1. Fieldwork timelines and event sites summary.

## DISCUSSION

The endemic reliance on alcohol at networking events not only reinforces gendered spaces but also cultivates environments where hypervigilance becomes a prerequisite for marginalised groups (Butt 2018; 2022, 191). This research scrutinises the entrenched culture characterising new creative industries which Angela McRobbie describes as “network socialities” which conflates networking with partying, where partying becomes *part of the work*—not separate from the work (2002, 516; 2016; see also, Keogh 2021). The study reveals a stark gender disparity at events like GDC 2018, where women navigate a gauntlet of safety mantras and whisper networks amid a backdrop of sexist discourses and sexual harassment (Butt 2022, 202-208). Meanwhile, the requirements for game developers to display their positive affect and attachment to the creative work (through the partying-as-networking), makes it further difficult for women to rebuff unwanted advances or call out sexual harassment in these work-as-leisure environments (Ibid., 199-208). Women’s participation in industry social events often oscillates between attending at the risk of unwanted advances or complete non-participation, with both choices steeped in systemic sexism.

Alternative no-alcohol networking models—such as the “Osama Tradition” (meeting over ice-cream), the “Cozy Alliances Tea Social” meetup, the “Mild Rumpus” chillout area (by the same organisers of the “Wild Rumpus” party), and the “UnParty” during GCD 2018, or the deliberately alcohol-free Freeplay night market curated by Hovergarden in 2019—demonstrate the possibility of inclusive spaces that de-emphasize alcohol. Notably, these models showcase the leadership of women and people of colour in curating spaces that subvert the norms of the dominant party culture. Meanwhile, the dominant party scene tended to be hosted by ‘game developers’ for ‘game developers’, which in turn, assumed the central positioning of white men as the invisible default.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing lockdown and travel restrictions deployed as a pandemic response across the globe, forced games industry events to rethink normative in-person ideals around event delivery. This moment provided an unprecedented opportunity to engage with event communities to develop accessible and engaging digital event infrastructure (Hardwick 2023). This infrastructure proved invaluable in 2021 when lockdowns measures persisted in Melbourne, Australia, and events like Freeplay, MIGW and PAX Australia once again took to networking platforms, Discord, or the bespoke virtual spaces such as the Freeplay ZONE to connect with their communities. While digital models for events pose different safety and accessibility problems to those at in-person events, they elucidated how digital event spaces widen the potential for women and minority people to attend events more comfortably. Further, digital spaces play an integral role in forming and supporting ‘indie’ game development communities’ formation (Parker & Jenson 2017).

Despite this, when it became apparent in 2022 that lockdown restrictions were unlikely to continue as a public health response to COVID-19, games industry events began to return to solely in-person modes of delivery. Wholly abandoning the digital infrastructure developed during two years of forced online delivery had the knock-on effect of returning to a mode of event engagement significantly less accessible for immunocompromised and disabled people, elderly people, carers, and many others at risk of COVID-19 (Hardwick 2023). However, the authors’ ethnographic research at SXSW Sydney in 2023 demonstrated that this return to in-person events also returned games industry communities to a time-before, where networking events embodied networked sociality modes of gathering centred around drinking alcohol which are also inaccessible and unsafe to women and other marginalised groups.

We contend that, given the context of both a games industry where networking events are inaccessible or unsafe for marginalised communities and the success of digital events during COVID-19 lockdowns, a reconfiguration of social practices at industry events is essential. This necessitates a socio-cultural shift that challenges traditional networking paradigms and the gendered hostilities inherent in alcohol-driven event spaces such as bars. This research calls for a critical reassessment of games industry networking events, and argues that this ‘post’-COVID moment is a rich opportunity to do so. By reimagining these events, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable industry.

## BIO

(Impending) Dr Taylor Hardwick is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research focuses on safety and inclusivity at online games events particularly during COVID-19 lockdowns, digital platforms, and games communities and industries.

Dr Mahli-Ann Butt is a Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. She broadly researches questions of ‘diversity’ in the cultures and industries of games, situated in ‘the post-gamer turn’.

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