

All Talk, Some Action: The Complicated Trajectory of DE&I in Games

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INTRODUCTION

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) programs in the game development industry are cyclical, with resources being invested in DE&I during moments of scrutiny and then redistributed once external demands or requirements subside (Ahmed, 2012; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Reactive initiatives are implemented in response to controversies concerning harassment and discrimination (Consalvo, 2012), political movements advocating for social justice (Gray, 2020), or shifting expectations from investors and consumers (Kerr, 2017; Harvey & Fisher, 2015). While this reactivity produces moments of visibility and investment in DE&I outcomes, it also tends to result in tokenistic efforts rather than structural change (Ahmed, 2012).

The United States has been central in driving whether DE&I is considered a priority in game development globally. As the dominant market for videogames, US shareholder expectations shape how multinational studios form their values and articulate their priorities to consumers (Kerr, 2017). Approaches to DE&I in the US—and, by extension, in markets closely tied to US shareholder and consumer expectations, such as Australia—changes in response to cycles of public attention, political backlash, and reputational pressures. DE&I is prioritised during periods of political contestation, such as the increased visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 (Gray, 2020; Nakamura, 2020) or the public reporting of gender discrimination at Activision Blizzard in 2021 (Paul, 2021; Lanier, 2021). In contrast, the current US administration and the subsequent backlash against DE&I in both corporate and political discourse (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) is already causing some studios to shift resources and visibility away from inclusion efforts. While some other national contexts may not follow these fluctuations as closely, the volatility of US-led discourse remains particularly significant given the global influence of the American market.

RESEARCH METHODS

To interrogate the rise and fall of DE&I programs within game studios—as well as the effectiveness of these programs when they are implemented—this research draws on a

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mixed methods approach, combining: discourse analysis of shareholder reports, company websites, and archived communication over several years; semi-structured interviews with DE&I practitioners, consultants, and volunteers; and autoethnographic insights informed by professional experience within the game industry. This research approach is designed to provide reflexive depth on how programs are conceived, enacted, communicated, and undermined. This research is underpinned by exploratory questions that focus on when DE&I is emphasised, how effective programs are in practice, and where rhetoric and experience diverge.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

There is a tension between the original conception of DE&I programs and the expectations now placed upon them. Many initiatives—both inside and outside the game industry—were established as compliance mechanisms or reputational strategies, often in response to civil rights legislation and corporate accountability frameworks in the United States (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). This legacy continues to shape how programs are funded, staffed, and evaluated, with DE&I practitioners often holding symbolic roles rather than structural ones (Ahmed, 2012).

Interviews and autoethnographic insights indicate that this history produces frustration for workers. While game studio employees increasingly expect DE&I initiatives to deliver cultural transformation, DE&I practitioners, volunteers, and consultants are granted limited authority and resources. However, findings also suggest that there are strategies that can improve DE&I outcomes when implemented consistently. For example, programs can achieve greater impact when inclusive practices are integrated holistically across departments. Furthermore, initiatives that build collective capacity are more likely to secure the trust and participation of leadership. By contrast, poorly designed interventions risk reinforcing scepticism, especially if training is ineffective or leadership fails to act on employee feedback (Gray, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The volatility of DE&I's public visibility intersects with deeper structural questions about program design and purpose within the game industry. As explicit references to DE&I diminish in shareholder reports and corporate communications, studios with siloed or symbolic initiatives are particularly vulnerable; such programs can be excised quickly when political or market conditions change. By contrast, DE&I outcomes are more resilient in organisations that have embedded inclusive practices across their workflows, as inclusion becomes part of everyday operations rather than a separate, expendable function (Bulut, 2020).

The future of DE&I in the game industry depends less on the visibility of programs during moments of controversy and more on their ability to deliver tangible results and build trust within studios. Recognising the historical origins of DE&I as compliance-driven (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) while addressing current expectations for systemic change is crucial if studios are to move beyond tokenistic gestures and towards sustainable cultural transformation. The challenge for both scholars and practitioners is to identify and support practices that integrate inclusion into the structures, cultures, and expectations of game development itself, rather than leaving DE&I to shift in parallel with political cycles.

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BIO

Dr Alayna Cole is a game studies lecturer and researcher, and has over a decade of industry experience across numerous roles. She has published many academic, journalistic, and creative works, which—though varied—are connected by her research interest in the intersections between marginalised identities and game development. Alayna was previously the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Manager at Sledgehammer Games, where she led initiatives that prioritised equitable labour practices and authentic game content for the *Call of Duty* franchise. Alayna has spoken about her work globally, including at a United Nations summit on gender-based violence and at several DiGRA and DiGRAA conferences.