

Understanding Small Video Game Developer Contexts in Australia and Japan

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INTRODUCTION

Japan is widely considered a dominant force and global leader in the international video game industry, while Australia's national industry is much more marginal (de Pablos, 2024; Jørgensen, 2019; Keogh, 2019). However, despite the Japanese industry's influence and international reputation, the smaller video game developers operating in its national industry have not been explored (Kobayashi and Koyama, 2020). Indeed, research into the diverse local contexts around the world that collectively make up the international video game industry is still fragmented and emerging (Daiiani and Keogh, 2022). Given the disparity in terms of the resources, business structures and experiences of small developers compared to large international developers like Nintendo, there are rich insights to be learned by understanding how a small video game developer located in a dominant industry (such as Japan) might differ compared to a small video game developer in a marginal industry (such as Australia). As such, this research explores and compares smaller, independent video game developers in Australia and Japan to understand their approaches to video game development and contribute understandings regarding the global industry (Kerr, 2017; Sotamaa, 2021). By comparing national industries, rich insights into differences in industry structures and cultures can be revealed (Eklund et al., 2024).

Given the lack of extant research, a qualitative and exploratory approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were utilised as the data collection method as they are an effective method of exploring and understanding small developers (Jørgensen et al., 2017; Jørgensen, 2019). Participants were recruited via the two authors networks. A total of 16 Australian developers from Melbourne, and 12 Japanese developers from Tokyo, the two cities that are the centres of the national industry in Australia and Japan, took part in the study. The interviews with the Australian developers were conducted

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in English by a native English speaker and the interviews with the Japanese developers were conducted in Japanese by a proficient Japanese speaker, who had been living and working in the country for several years. All of the participants were creating video games that they wanted the public to play and were actively developing or had released at least one game. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) was utilised to analyse the interviews. The analysis was conducted manually and was an iterative and continuous process.

The results revealed differences in approach and mindset between the Australian and Japanese developers. The small Australian developers were more commercially minded and focused compared to their Japanese counterparts. The Japanese developers focused more on their personal tastes and interests when deciding what games to create and develop, which could explain this lack of commercial focus.

The small Australian developers were utilising a variety of marketing platforms such as social media including Instagram and Discord, in-person events, websites, Kickstarter and in-person events such as festivals and conventions. This spread of marketing activities and platforms was because all of the Australian developers felt that marketing was important for them and necessary for them to be able to develop a successful video game. In contrast, the small Japanese developers particularly emphasised the importance of attending and showing their games at conventions over other forms of communication, outreach and promotion. Interestingly, despite this difference in mindset, both the Australian and the Japanese developers agreed that they existed in a competitive industry. They found it difficult to breakthrough, gain attention for their games and obtain sales. However, the Australian developers responded to this competition with marketing and communication activities, while the Japanese developers did not. The Japanese developers were active and present at conventions and events but lacked a broader suite of communication channels.

The support available to the small Australian developers in the form of events and government funding and tax relief might make the Australian developers more confident that they can be successful and thus are more commercially focused with an integrated approach to communication. In Australia, if developers want to make and sell video games, they can access support. In Japan, the small developers had little government support. The Japanese national industry focuses very much on large, international developers and publishers with smaller developers feeling marginalised. Given that research into local production contexts is important to produce rich insights into the global video game industry (Daiiani and Keogh, 2022), this study has sought to compare small video game developers from Australia and Japan to shed light on both industries and advance knowledge of local production contexts.

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BIO

Jacqueline Burgess is a senior lecturer in international business and the program coordinator of the Bachelor of Business in the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Her research investigates the marketing and business aspects of video games, and she has collaborated with various practitioners. Her work has been published in multiple peer-reviewed journals including the *European Journal of Marketing*, *Game Studies*, the *International Journal on Media Management*, and the *Creative Industries Journal*. She has also presented at many academic conferences, and been covered by local and international news outlets.

Douglas Schules is an associate professor of media based at Rikkyo University in Japan. His current work focuses on the relationships between media, society, and knowledge. He has written about creative media and fandom, and his recent work focuses on Japanese game ecologies, with a focus on the indie game developer industry in Tokyo. He is also currently building an archive to preserve the work of indie game developers in Japan.