

Locating Videogame Development in Australian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Formal higher education (HE) has become an increasingly common pathway into videogame development careers over the past two decades. Throughout the same period, the quality and worth of videogame development HE programs has been hotly debated by developers, employees, students, educators, and policymakers (Yang 2018, Warner 2018, Wright 2018). An emerging body of scholarly literature has begun to critique these broad anxieties and hopes to develop more nuanced understandings of the social contexts of game development HE. Formal videogame development education, research suggests, at once perpetuates entrenched hegemonic structures of the capitalistic and patriarchal videogame industry, while also providing space for potential resistance and potential alternative pathways and identities into gamemaking (Harvey 2019; Harvey 2022; Ashton 2009; Kerr 2017; Keogh 2023).

In particular, game development HE has been connected to the rise of “creative industries” style programs that rebrand fine arts and cultural studies programs alike “as a way of signalling to prospective students a move from practice that looks inwards to aesthetics and craft skills, to one that looks outwards to applications of creativity outside of the arts” (Flew 2019, 169). Indeed, as Professor of Screen Media Jon Dovey at the University of the West of England proposed to Terry Flew for an investigation into the growth of Creative Industries programs in Australia and the UK:

the development of courses in games had prefigured what would become a creative industries approach, in that they combined technical and creative skills, for graduates who had to be prepared to work collaboratively, to network in a highly informal business ecosystem, and be prepared to mix highly commercial work with activities that aligned with their creative passions and desire to make a difference in the world (Flew 2019, 175).

Game development HE is thus arguably the creative industries agenda *par excellence* in the way it seemingly marries technical and creative skills, professional business and vocational passion, and individualistic entrepreneurship and interdisciplinary collaboration.

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Yet, sitting in the middle of technology and creativity sectors, skills, and identities is at least as often a burden as it is blessing for videogame development. The videogame industry tends to “fall between the policy stools”: “caught between the fact that their global provenance inhibits their qualifying under national cultural policy measures, and their innovations relating to content [excluding] them from technology-based R&D schemes” (Cunningham 2013, 34). For the cultural sector, videogames offer the excitement and tangibility of the tech sector to neoliberal policymakers and investors, but struggle to present traditionally understood modes of cultural expression and aesthetic value. For the tech sector, videogames offer the excitement and coolness of creative work that looks far more appealing than Excel spreadsheets or payroll backends, but struggles to present traditionally valued models of economic growth and innovation as most videogame development teams operate more like music bands than startups (Whitson et al 2021; Keogh 2023). For both the culture and tech sectors videogames are a useful outsider, but an outsider nonetheless.

Thus while videogame development might exemplify the encroachment of the creative industries agenda into HE, just where videogame development resides—or should reside—within HE institutions remains unresolved. To develop videogames requires critical and cultural skills such as storytelling, aesthetic analysis, social analysis, visual design, and rhetoric—all traditionally the territory of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) disciplines. But developing videogames also requires technical skills such as computer programming, software development, trigonometry, network coding, hardware management, and user-interface design—all traditionally the territory of STEM disciplines. Videogame development could be, and indeed is, taught within both HASS and STEM departments with different foci on different skills, different potential job outcomes, and different graduate identities.

While the growing body of research of game development HE has largely focused on the empirical experiences and perspectives of students and educators, little attention has been paid thus far to the varying institutional contexts within which these experiences and perspectives are entrenched. In this paper we draw from a discursive mapping of videogame development across Australian HE institutions to highlight the ambivalent and complex position game development sits in within HE. Drawing from publicly-available information on 119 programs that teach videogame development in some capacity, we show that while game development HE is consistently positioned as a pathway towards employability in the videogame industry through targeting prospective students’ existing consumerist gamer identities, just what skills and capacities programs emphasise as crucial for such employability varies pending on the program’s institutional context as a HASS, STEM, or exclusively Games department.

Across the 119 game development programs was a consistent focus in line with broader trends of HE marketisation on skill training and capacity building of human capital for the labour market. Programs consistently focused on developing job-ready skills, offering industry connections, and the nebulous importance of an entrepreneurial mindsets that will allow students to turn unpredictable futures into self-chosen adventures. However, within this broader commonality were also discrepancies in how skills and career pathways were framed by different institutional contexts. Just as videogames possess a formative tension (rather than a synergy) between the technical and creative spheres in terms of industry structure, government policy, and design epistemologies, so too it seems does their formal education. As videogame development requires the convergence of a broad range of technical and creative skills, different programs housed in different disciplinary contexts provide different emphases that in turn shift how videogame development itself is presented to students—and just what skills and potential graduate identities are presented as desirable and feasible. These varied disciplinary contexts mean that not all game development HE programs

are created equal—not simply in quality but in terms of the ideologies, cultures, skills, and graduate imaginaries that students are recruited into. Ultimately, we argue that rather than marrying STEM and HASS, game development HE instead seems fundamentally torn between different disciplinary cultures, ideologies, and aims.

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