

1 From Videogame Industry to Videogame Fields

In Sydney, on Australia's east coast, four young friends in their early twenties started a games studio called Chaos Theory Games. Their dream since childhood, as for many young people who wish to make a career in video-game production, was to create sprawling role-playing games for home consoles—videogames just like the ones they had grown up playing themselves. However, they quickly came to realize that for such a small team with a shoestring budget, their first game would have to be much smaller and would be unlikely to generate the revenue required to produce large-scale entertainment products. Instead, after releasing a small mobile game, Chaos Theory pivoted toward making videogames for clients in other sectors: advertising games, educational games, training simulations, or sometimes other digital products that aren't videogames at all but that use similar skillsets, such as websites. Now, as told to me by Nico King, the studio's 24-year-old creative director, the focus is on sustaining the company, not expanding it. Instead of sprawling console games, the team is "starting to realize it would just be better to create small, more impactful experiences." Now, instead of a studio of hundreds making massive games like the ones he grew up with, King explains how he wouldn't want Chaos Theory to grow any larger than 20 employees because "I would very much like to be involved in the creative direction of our projects and know everybody on our team." Eventually, Chaos Theory wants to move away from client work and focus on their own games. This would be more financially risky but also more creatively fulfilling. It sounds like a poor business strategy, but as managing director James Lockrey, also 24, noted, "If we were more in it for doing work for money, we would probably not have picked games as an industry in the first place."

I left Chaos Theory's two-room office and took a train to the suburb of Chatswood, where I met with 39-year-old Meghann O'Neill. O'Neill is a

music teacher and freelance journalist, and has worked on a range of game projects both in Australia and overseas (remotely) as both a writer and a composer. “With the game development stuff” O’Neill has been “contributing to projects for the last four or five years.” Like most of the gamemakers I interviewed in notoriously expensive Sydney, O’Neill doesn’t have a studio or office external to her home, and so we met in a food court above Chatswood train station. O’Neill works primarily from her laptop, finding brief moments between her responsibilities as a parent: “I’ve taught myself to work when [the kids] are at gymnastics, for example. They do a three-hour block of gymnastics several times a week, so I just tune out the noise and work.” O’Neill doesn’t describe herself as having a job in gamemaking so much as having a range of gamemaking activities she undertakes, some of which are paid and many of which are not. “I’ve done a lot of music for free, and a lot on a kind of informal amateur kind of basis [but also] a mix of profit share and upfront payments.” Such work can be unpredictable and unreliable, and O’Neill muses that “I don’t know how a person without a partner with a full-time job would be able to do this at all.”

Several months later, in the southern city of Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia, I met with 25-year-old Samantha Schaffer in a local theater collective’s workspace—effectively an old shop space above a shopping arcade. A software developer by training, Schaffer was unemployed at the time we spoke, living on their savings from a previous software job while they focused on their creative practice of photography, poetry, and making videogames. Schaffer enjoys working from the theater collective’s space because “They’re very non-techy. . . . You meet lots of cool people who aren’t in the tech or games space, which I really like.” Schaffer has been producing small narrative games with the free software tool Bitsy and uploading them to their profile on itch.io (an unregulated distribution site for independent and amateur games) where they can be played for free. While Schaffer isn’t currently getting paid for their gamemaking work, they are not too fussed about this. Rather, they appreciate “the low level of investment in [making small, free games] because the industry can be quite hostile towards femme people and queer people. I didn’t want to go all in on an industry that might get mad at me.” Schaffer’s ideal goal for the near future is to be working part-time in software “to fund the stuff I do on my off time, because I find that software can pay well enough that if you just work part-time you make a modest living that’s plenty to make art.” For

Schaffer, this isn't a defeatist acceptance that a full-time job making videogames is too hard to obtain. It's a conscious decision to live within their means and avoid what they perceive as the poor labor conditions and toxic culture of formal videogame employment, while continuing to produce videogames and be part of a creative community nonetheless.

The diverse range of creative and commercial experiences and ambitions of Chaos Theory, O'Neill, and Schaffer are not exceptional. For videogame makers in Australia, and indeed in most of the world, there are no campus-sized studios owned by multinational corporations looking to regularly hire dozens or hundreds of juniors into full-time jobs. In a stark contrast to popular imaginings of the lucrative videogame industry, most of the game-makers I spoke to were barely getting by on their gamemaking activity. Like O'Neill, reliance on a partner's more stable income was a constant refrain. Some rented studio spaces for their small teams, others took advantage of local coworking spaces, but many either worked from home or public spaces such as cafés or libraries. Their employment status was rarely stable or ongoing; instead they stitched together piecemeal and fixed-term contracts without benefits such as paid holiday or maternity leave. Many ostensibly worked in formally registered "companies," but often for purely legal or practical reasons such as opening a bank account, accessing a government funding program, or filling out necessary fields when submitting builds to distribution platforms. Few could straightforwardly answer the question "What is your job title?" For most videogame makers, making videogames is not simply a job one is employed to do but a liminal and precarious cultural activity that is sometimes commodified but often undertaken as unpaid hobby or artistic craft.

This is not how gamemaking is typically imagined, but it aligns with how we understand cultural production activity to occur in the cultural industries more broadly. While the work of gamemakers is now regularly described by both researchers and policymakers as occurring within a cultural or creative industry¹—and while gamemakers, players, and critics regularly insist on the cultural and creative significance of the videogame medium—the actual experiences, identities, and conditions of gamemakers have not received sustained and nuanced attention as cultural producers, especially in the ways in which gamemakers take on high levels of personal risk as they strive to balance both creative and commercial ambitions. Musicians, artists, actors, writers, and painters are well understood to hustle from

project to project, cobbling together a precarious existence through personal networks and unpaid (but fulfilling) work—remember that the broader phenomenon of the “gig economy” is effectively named after the gigs that a musician depends on in lieu of steady employment. If one looks closely enough, the experiences of videogame makers are no less diverse, and no less precarious.

This first chapter develops the concept of the videogame field, drawing from Pierre Bourdieu’s work on fields of cultural production, to account for these gamemaking experiences more holistically. Field theory provides a framework that takes seriously both the economic necessities of contemporary cultural work as well as the underpinning noneconomic drivers such as creative fulfillment, self-expression, and peer recognition. Indeed, through Bourdieu, we can examine how the commercial and noncommercial ambitions articulated by gamemakers are deeply intertwined and symbiotic. The first section introduces the key terms and concepts of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural fields that will be deployed throughout the rest of the book. The second section turns to the contemporary state of videogame production that, over the last decade, has undergone radical changes with the rise of more accessible production and distribution tools. Videogame production, I show here, was once *aggressively formalized*, making it difficult to conceive of videogame production occurring beyond formal companies, but is now *intensely in/formalized*, where just who is or isn’t producing videogames in a formal or professional manner is now difficult to distinguish. It’s this in/formalization, this ambiguity of who is “in” and who is “out,” that makes Bourdieu’s field theory particularly valuable for understanding contemporary videogame production since a cultural field is, ultimately, “the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of [cultural producer] and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the [cultural producer]” (Bourdieu 1993, 42). Finally, to show how this intense in/formalization and the formative tensions of the field are playing out for videogame makers themselves, the final section of this chapter turns to my participants and their complex responses to two seemingly straightforward questions: “Are you a professional videogame developer?” and “Are you part of a videogame industry?” Answers to these questions were multifaceted and provide initial insights into the sites of struggle, and the stakes at play, in the contemporary field of videogame production.

The Field of Videogame Production

Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production is developed over a series of essays written between 1968 and 1987 (compiled together in *The Field of Cultural Production* [1993], which I reference throughout this book), and forms a foundational component of his broader investigations into the production and perpetuation of class distinction through taste, culture, and education. Underpinning Bourdieu's work is the notion that a wide range of capitals are unevenly distributed among societal classes and, through them, social mobility is more or less feasible. Where *economic capital* is well understood through Marxist economic theory to be money that is turned into more money through the buying and selling of commodities (including, and most importantly, the labor-power of workers), Bourdieu (1986, 242) sees economic exchange as but "a particular case of exchange in all its forms." To economic capital, Bourdieu adds the concepts of *cultural capital* and *social capital*—which he sometimes collectively refers to as *symbolic capitals*—as qualitative, nonmonetary forms of value that can be, in the long run, converted into economic capital. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Bourdieu's body of work is a more sociologically robust articulation of how the dominant classes reproduce their own dominance not simply through the concentration of economic wealth but through the ability to define broader social and cultural practices and tastes in such a way that they also grow their own concentration of cultural and social wealth, while suppressing such wealth in the dominated classes.

For cultural production theorists, Bourdieu's theory allows us to go beyond, without ignoring, economic markers of value when working to articulate the contexts and drivers of cultural activities and labor. This has seen Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital adopted and adapted across a wide range of fields and case studies. Yet the concept remains nebulous and vague across Bourdieu's work—perhaps an inevitability when describing something that is itself intrinsic and often intangible. In one passage of his essay "The Forms of Capital" (1986, 243; original emphasis), Bourdieu does provide a general explanation of the three main forms of capital:

Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form

of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility.

As a simple example, we can think of the hypothetical situation of two different students attending an elite, exclusive university: one from an upper-class family that has attended equally exclusive private schools for generations, and one from a working-class background, who attended public schools, and who was awarded a scholarship to attend the university. While both students have the same access to the university’s material resources of teachers, social clubs, and alumni networks despite their varied economic capital, the student from the upper-class background would likely possess numerous advantages to get the most out of these resources: stronger previous education through which to approach new subjects, familial experiences and general knowledge of the “hidden curriculum” (Margolis 2001) of university life, experience with particular cultural events and traditions, and existing social networks throughout the university community. These constitute the unequal social and cultural capitals that make it easier for the upper-class student to extract even more value from such an education than for the working-class student and, ultimately, even more economic capital in the future.

The unequal distribution of economic and symbolic capitals, and the power to impose laws and norms most favorable to the reproduction of these capitals among those already most rich in them, forms the foundations of Bourdieu’s theory of *fields*. A field is the structured space of social relationships where differently positioned agents compete for access to the accruement of the different forms of capital (or, simply, for power). Just as in its everyday usage, to speak of a field in the Bourdieusian sense is to denote an ambiguous, contested, yet shared arena of common principles and agreed-upon markers of success. For Bourdieu, the most all-encompassing field is the *field of class relations* in which all members of a society are constituents. Within the field of class relations are countless subfields: the education field, the biology field, the literary field, the political field, the stamp collecting field, the videogame field. Cyclically, a field becomes more or less recognizable as a field as those that strive to be part of the field come to agree on the forms of cultural and social capital (such as awards, publishers, exhibitions, endorsements) that determine success within the field. That is, a field becomes a field as it develops a limited *autonomy* from the broader

field of class relations, where success and capital within that field may be measured by different metrics than that of economic value or political power. Fields are thus *homologous* to the field of class relations in that they inherit a similar structure between dominant and dominated positions, and a similar logic based on the exchange of symbolic values, but the specific structures and recognized forms of capital themselves differ. For instance, we can consider how in academia a relatively younger area of study (such as that of videogames) transitions over time from being considered solely as a topic within existing fields (such as media studies, narratology, or computer science) to instead being autonomous *as an academic field* (such as game studies) with its own recognized journals, conferences, pioneers, awards, publishers, concepts, and debates.

A *field of cultural production*, then, is a semiautonomous space of relationships between creators that compete to accrue the forms of cultural capital recognized within the field as legitimate. A cultural field becomes autonomous as a field as it more successfully “consecrates” (Bourdieu 1993, 38) its own markers of legitimacy and value (such as awards, review scores, recognition by other producers in the field) separate from those external markers of economic and political profit (such as sale figures, popularity, sponsorship deals). But then, just which markers of legitimacy the field consecrates is constantly contested within the field as different cultural producers strive to have their own positions legitimized. Each producer within a cultural field strives for their own work to be considered more legitimate, and, consequentially, for others’ work to be considered less legitimate. Here we can think of common, perpetual struggles in various cultural fields over authenticity, such as the debates of the early 2010s, with the rise of new communities and tools, as to just what constitutes a “real” videogame (Harvey 2014; Consalvo and Paul 2019), or debates in popular music scenes as to who is an authentic member of a particular subculture and who is a sellout (Thornton 1995). Importantly, a field of cultural production is not a predetermined or static space with uniform or pre-given markers of quality or success but a continuous struggle to define the field—a struggle played out between those already recognized as existing within the field (who have a stake in ensuring the current shape of the field persists) and those striving to be recognized as existing within the field (who have a stake in upending the current shape of the field). Thus, we could say the videogame field is the site in which creators take positions and compete to determine whose

positions are the most authentic videogame maker positions (i.e., generative of the most symbolic capital recognized within the field, and most able to be exchanged for economic capital in the future) and, perhaps as importantly, whose positions are the least authentic (generative of the least symbolic capital).

Here, Bourdieu's concepts of *position*, *disposition*, and *position-taking* are crucial. Firstly, *positions* are, most simply, where within a field a cultural producer sits in relation to the positions of all other cultural producers within the field. Positions are relative and “every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field” (Bourdieu 1993, 30). When a cultural producer takes a position in a field, they do so in relation to all the existing positions. This could include alliances of closely related positions with similar interests and values that set themselves apart from other positions in the field. Positions that define themselves as “alternative” or “indie” or “post-” are explicit examples of such relative positions. When mapping a field, a position can be at either the dominant or the dominated pole along axes of different forms of capital. One could thus be in a position that is highly generative of economic capital but weak in generating the forms of cultural capital recognized within the field, such as a commercial blockbuster film that makes millions of dollars but has no chance of winning an Oscar or being shown at Cannes. Alternatively, a position in a cultural field could be weak in generating economic capital but highly generative of cultural capital, such as a critically acclaimed poet who might win awards and prestige but is unlikely to sell many copies.

Not all positions in the field have equal power, and not all positions are equally available to everyone. Rather, the field presents itself to potential constituents as “a *space of possibles* which is defined in the relationship between the structure of average chances of access to the different positions” (Bourdieu 1993, 64; original emphasis). Each constituent forms “a subjective basis of the perception and appreciation” of these objective chances through their ability or inability to access different forms of capital, and this subjective basis is the constituent's *disposition*. One's disposition entails a vast range of social, economic, and culture pretexts—such as access to education and resources, the diversity or lack thereof of the field—that all inform the actor's consideration of which positions in the field it is possible to hold and which positions it is not possible to hold. Here we can think of

how videogame production is often presented by schools and job ads as a technological, rather than artistic, endeavor, which requires a lifetime passion of playing videogames. This perpetuates the gender disparity in most videogame production companies by making the positions within seem less possible to those who haven't played blockbuster videogames their entire life. Alternatively, we can consider a hypothetical Indian film actor who is much more likely (but in no way certain) to end up, within the cinema field, positioned in Bollywood rather than Hollywood, due to the opportunities more directly available to them in terms of proximity, resources, language, and racial bias.

But one's disposition does not determine one's position straightforwardly. Women still can—and of course do—come to be employed in large video-game production companies despite the heterosexist and masculinist legacies that ensure such spaces remain dominated by male gamemakers. The Indian actor, despite the objective chances of success, can still accrue the savings, language proficiency, and visa to move to California and strive to make it in Hollywood. One ultimately takes a position in the field through an act of *position-taking* (*prises de position* in Bourdieu's original French) that is itself a "taking a stance" in relation to the space of possibles available to one's disposition. One's position-taking receives its value "from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it" (Bourdieu 1993, 30). That is, by choosing to take a position, the cultural producer chooses to not take all the other available positions, and in so doing changes the "universe of options" that exist in the field and, ultimately, the meaning of all other position-takings. Thus, an agent's position-taking can change over time even as their position stays the same, due to its changing relationship to other positions. Here we can think of the daring, new, avant-garde artist who, decades later, has become the incumbent, established classic that newcomers to the field position themselves in contrast to. Or we could think of the scholar who was forward-thinking and field-defining for their time but now gets critiqued as conservative and outdated as a rite of passage by each new postgraduate student in the field.

Dispositions and position-takings matter because cultural fields always exist within the broader field of class relations. Regardless of how autonomous a cultural field becomes, one's ability to take a position in the field is always determined, in part, by factors external to the field, such as access

to funding, access to education, access to the right social networks, and so on. Thus, a field of cultural production never fully achieves the autonomy it perpetually strives for. Here, we come to the fundamental contradiction at the heart of all cultural production: the tension every cultural producer faces between creating “art for art’s sake” that is recognized as such only by a small circle of peers, and “selling out” to focus on what is recognizable as art by a much broader audience and so more likely to be exchangeable for economic return. As Bourdieu (1993, 39) puts it, “Whatever its degree of independence, [a field of cultural production] continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit.” And so any field of cultural production is driven by parallel but contradictory principles of hierarchization: the autonomous principle and the heteronomous principle. The *autonomous principle of hierarchization* is the “degree of recognition accorded by those who recognize no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize” (Bourdieu 1993, 38). That is, for a cultural producer to achieve success through the autonomous principle they would have to be recognized by their peers within the field as a legitimate cultural producer. Whereas the *heteronomous principle of hierarchization* “is success as measured by indices such as book sales, number of theatrical performances, etc. or honours, appointments, etc.” (Bourdieu 1993, 38; original emphasis). That is, for a cultural producer to achieve success through the heteronomous principle they would have to be recognized by those external to the field such as general audiences, marketers, and investors. If the autonomous principle reigned unchallenged, “the field of production [would] achieve total autonomy with respect to the laws of the market” (Bourdieu 1993, 38). If the heteronomous principle reigned unchallenged, “losing all autonomy, the . . . field [would] disappear as such (so that writers and artists became subject to the ordinary laws prevailing in the field of power, and more generally to the economic field)” (Bourdieu 1993, 38). All cultural producers find themselves negotiating the two principles through their position-taking: even the most autonomous poet still needs to obtain food and pay rent, and even the most commercial musician needs to adhere somewhat to the autonomous principles recognized by the music field if they are to be recognized as a musician at all. Thus, a field of cultural production “is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchizations” (Bourdieu 1993, 40). How videogame producers navigate the constant push-and-pull of autonomous

and heteronomous principles of hierarchization will be a recurring theme in the following chapters.

Most importantly, and worth repeating, is that the structure of a cultural field is never static. With each new position-taking of a newcomer to the field, the meaning of every other position-taking changes, as too does the distribution of the available capital—both economic and symbolic. And so what is at stake in the constant struggle that is the field of cultural production is the boundary of the field itself—that is, the shared understanding as to just which positions are, at any given time, legitimately within or without the field. Bourdieu stresses that, due to this dynamism of the field, it is not the researcher's task to draw a hard and fast dividing line between those who are and those who aren't in the field. To do so would simply impose the researcher's own biases through their own position. Instead, the researcher of a field should aspire to “describe a *state* (long-lasting or temporary) of these struggles and therefore of the frontier delimiting the territory held by the competing agents” (Bourdieu 1993, 43; original emphasis). If a researcher chooses to only focus on those cultural producer positions perceived as already the most legitimate within the field, they are “blindly arbitrating on debates which are inscribed in reality itself . . . as to who is legitimately entitled to designate legitimate [cultural producers]” (Bourdieu 1993, 41). Instead, by examining how producers strive for autonomy (internal success) and how they strive for heteronomy (external success), we make the struggle between the two principles itself—the struggle that *is* the cultural field—the focus of our inquiry. This is why the chapters that follow do not simply define or outline the videogame field in terms of which positions are within it and which are without it. Rather, following Bourdieu's warning, I seek to examine the videogame field's *frontiers* at the time of writing—the sites that are most contested and perceived by some to be within the field and by others to be without it.

By focusing on the contested boundaries of the field of videogame production we can expose a wider range of differently positioned gamemakers with varying degrees of power within the field that are deploying economic and symbolic capital—or feel hindered by their lack thereof—in either pursuit or disavowal of more capital. Considering the field as the full holistic site of videogame production, rather than just those activities and identities that are formalized industrially in a narrow sense, allows us to better identify, appreciate, and examine the noneconomic values that influence

and shape videogame production while, at the same time, neither romanticizing nor downplaying the equally important influence of the uneven distribution of economic capital both within the videogame field and in the broader field of class relations. In other words, looking at videogame production as occurring within a cultural field striving for autonomy, but always still constrained by heteronomy, allows us to consider how “necessity [becomes] internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-given perceptions” (Bourdieu 1984, 17). Put simply, it allows us to consider more holistically who makes videogames, with what resources, and toward what ends.

The In/formalization of Videogame Production

To adapt Bourdieu’s words (1993, 42), the field of videogame production is a site of struggle where what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of videogame maker and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the legitimate videogame maker. The videogame field is today in a paradoxical position where the cultural relevancy of its texts is now more or less given, but where conceptualizations of the production of these texts as itself a cultural practice remains limited. If one were to draw the field of videogame production on a piece of paper as a network of positions related through their competition over different forms of capital and thus through their struggle for legitimization, what is traditionally referred to as “the videogame industry” would itself form a much smaller subset of this broader network. This dominant subset, to achieve its dominance, obscures and delegitimizes the rest of the field that it is fundamentally and continuously shaped by. While a legitimate “musician” or “writer” is not necessarily someone who works full time in the music industry or the writing industry, it remains difficult to image a “videogame developer” who exists external to the “videogame industry” due to the success of the field’s dominant positions in limiting what products and practices are understood as legitimate within the field.

Such a limited understanding of who legitimately makes videogames is increasingly unsustainable. Chaos Theory’s cofounders, while determined to build a commercial company, began making their own games in high school and now primarily work for private clients, making websites or other forms of software just as often as they make games. Schaffer has little

interest in ever making videogames as a full-time job, yet they have undertaken short-term work with commercial game studios in Adelaide and regularly attend and organize meetup events that are themselves vital for local studios and gamemakers to network and collaborate. O'Neill is sometimes a hobbyist, sometimes a journalist, sometimes a paid contract worker, but always primarily a musician and music teacher. Each of these gamemakers are sort of part of a videogame industry and sort of not. How might we then articulate the videogame field's current dynamics where more and more legitimate gamemaking positions are visible beyond the dominant positions of commercial videogame companies?

Where once a clear distinction could arguably be made between the professional studios that employed hundreds of people and the bedroom amateur tinkering in their spare time, the 2010s saw a drastic reconfiguration of the videogame field that has disrupted and blurred categories and practices. *Minecraft*, one of the most successful videogames of all time, began life as a side-project of a single programmer working around a day job. *Untitled Goose Game*, one of the biggest releases of 2019, was produced by four friends who gradually, over a number of years, transitioned from a hobbyist group to a formal development studio. In a time of indie start-ups, viral hobbyist successes, and artistic interventions, just which gamemakers are "professional" and which are not is harder to define than ever before.

I find the concepts of *formal* and *informal* cultural activity valuable to articulate this broader gamemaking field and the increasingly fuzzy lack of distinction between professional and amateur modes of videogame production. I take these concepts from Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas's *The Informal Media Economy* (2015, 7), which conceptualizes informal media economies broadly as "a range of activities and processes occurring outside the official, authorized space of the economy." Crucially, informal media is not detached from the regulated practices of formal media and software organizations. Rather, the activities of different individuals and organizations, the affordances of different technologies and policies, and cultivated tastes and behaviors of audiences of different cultural moments continuously *formalize* and *informalize* media economies and, more important for this book, cultural industries.

Lobato and Thomas demonstrate this with the example of the recorded music distribution industry that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, was dramatically reshaped by the rise of software that made it easy to rip CDs

into digital MP3 files that could then be shared directly between networked computers. Services like Napster and LimeWire dramatically informalized music distribution, allowing peer-to-peer distribution of music without the formal mediations of record stores and publishing labels. Companies like Apple in turn reformed these informalizing practices, regulating the management, distribution, and use of MP3 files through iTunes and the iPod once the concept of keeping a digital library of song files had become normalized. The music industry did not simply suppress these informal practices but formalized them, subsuming them into its regulated economic practices to reinsert dominant commercial positions back into the flow of capital. The story of media economies—and indeed cultural production—is a Möbius strip of informal practices circumventing or emerging beyond the regulations of the formal economy, and the formal media economies adapting to, co-opting, and incorporating informal practices in turn.

The pendulum of formality and informality has swung particularly far in each direction during the history of videogame production. As numerous historical accounts have shown (Swalwell 2021; Nooney 2020; Nicoll 2019; Švelch 2018; Jørgensen, Sandqvist, and Sotamaa 2017; Rocca 2013), videogame production was born from the informal activity of hobbyists, hackers, artists, and students, and it was only later formalized through the capture and commodification of this informal activity through companies such as Atari, Taito, Activision, Nintendo, and Sega. Technologies and business models such as the coin-operated arcade machine and the home television game console formalized and commodified videogame production. But through the 1970s and 1980s, videogames also continued to be created and distributed through informal capacities. With the growing availability of the microcomputer, users were able (and often required) to write their own game programs, leading to the formation of ecosystems that would create, share, duplicate, remix, and reshare a number of “homebrew” games (Swalwell 2021).

This balance of formal and informal videogame production in the field shifted dramatically through the 1980s. Much like the music industry several decades later, videogame companies struggled to adapt to the ease with which digital media could be duplicated and redistributed. That is, the formal industry at the time struggled to find means through which to adequately regulate prolific informal practices such as homebrew development and copyright infringement. This eventually led to the infamous

North American videogame industry crash of the early 1980s. From 1981 to 1984, the coin-operated videogame industry almost halved from just under US \$5 million to US \$2.5 million thanks to the rise in popularity of home console machines (Donovan 2010, 98). At the same time, the sheer number of low-quality videogames available for home consoles such as the Atari VCS saw consumer trust plummet, retailers lowering prices to clear unsold stock, companies going under, and liquidators flooding the market with drastically underpriced titles (Donovan 2010, 99). Importantly, a wide range of factors contributed to this crash such as a nationwide recession in the United States and an increased public anxiety about the effects of videogames on children. Further, the financial impact of this crash beyond North America is often overstated in popular retellings. Nonetheless, a flood of unregulated, cheap, low-quality titles and subsequent plummeting consumer trust would be perceived by videogame companies and players as the leading reasons for the crash.

When Nintendo entered the post-crash American market with the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES; Famicom in Japan) in 1985, they established a business strategy that defined the videogame field for the following decades. As O'Donnell's (2014) analysis of the NES details, Nintendo worked to reassure American consumers (both children and parents) as to the quality and appropriateness of their products through technological, legal, and discursive strategies. To make games for the NES at all, gamemakers required a software development kit (SDK) that Nintendo would only provide if one abided strict editorial guidelines. Any attempt to circumvent the need for an SDK was suppressed by Nintendo through patent law. Public facing, the Nintendo "Seal of Approval" that stamped first-party Nintendo games was an explicit reassurance to customers that these professionally made videogames were more trustworthy than the amateur offerings that bloated the Atari VCS shelves. Meanwhile, the Nintendo-run magazine-slash-marketing-brochure *Nintendo Power* provided a discursive basis—echoed throughout the nascent videogame press—that fostered a transition of videogame playing culture from family-oriented computer use to an edgier, juvenile, technophilic, male-dominated consumer culture (Kirkpatrick 2015; Arsenault 2017; Nicoll 2019; Shaw 2014). A hegemonic force took form to constitute what Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015), also drawing from Bourdieu, calls the gaming field, where the markers of internal legitimacy that first consecrated videogame play as an autonomous field (as opposed

to just one aspect of computing) emerged side by side with the industrialization and professionalization of videogame production, and the deliberate and gendered stabilizing of videogame target audiences. Nintendo, followed by the likes of Sega, Sony, and Microsoft, successfully framed the formal videogame industry as *the* place where legitimate videogames were made, to the exclusion of a range of alternative, noncommercial potential videogame-making positions.

As console manufacturers competed to convince consumers to commit to their platform over the competition, increases in computational power and graphical fidelity became a significant selling point of the “console wars”—most significantly in the transitions from 2D to 3D environments in the mid-1990s. Every few years, a new “generation” of home consoles would emerge with supposedly greater technological affordances—the Super NES replacing the NES, the PlayStation 3 replacing the PlayStation 2—and, consequentially, the resources required to produce videogames for each new platform constantly rose to meet these heightened expectations. Budgets and development team sizes grew exponentially, as did the financial burden of accessing console manufacturers’ SDKs. Meanwhile, through marketing and critical discourses, players were taught to evaluate a videogame’s quality through technologically determinate markers of “technobabble” (Arsenault 2017, 77). Discussions of aesthetics or style became subservient to considerations of polygon counts, framerate, and hardware memory capacities. PC developers were spared the need to access SDKs or appease console manufacturers but were still confronted with the need to increase the scale of their products to meet the technological expectations of consumers increasingly interested in the field’s dominant values of gameplay, content, and graphics if they were to take a position recognized as legitimately existing within the videogame field at all (Kirkpatrick 2015; Arsenault 2017).

This period from the mid-1980s until the late 2000s can be understood as the time in which the field of videogame production was *aggressively formalized*. The dominant commercial positions within the field in this time successfully narrowed the range of positions considered legitimate to their own. Commercial videogame production became increasingly dependent on contracts with large publishers and console manufacturers that could provide the financial resources, technological infrastructure, and global distribution networks required to produce and distribute commercially feasible (that

is, legitimate) videogames. The rise of the studio-publisher model effectively priced out smaller independent teams and hobbyist creators from the dominant development and distribution platforms. Without the visibility of alternative forms of videogame production, this period of aggressive formalization normalized a cultural imagination of the videogame as consumer software driven by innovations in processing power and graphical fidelity, an ever-increasing amount of content and scale, and limited to a finite number of action-centric genres. While it remained possible to create and distribute smaller videogames on personal computers through software such as *ZZT* (see Anthropy 2014) or Flash (see Salter and Murray 2014), videogames made with such software could not compete with the commercial offerings of the large development studios financially backed by console manufacturers and third-party publishers in terms of technological spectacle and, hence, legitimacy. Ultimately, the dominant positions within the videogame field successfully determined how videogames would be evaluated in such a way that only the dominant positions would have the resources and ability to develop and distribute videogames that would be evaluated as being of commercial quality.²

The aggressively formalized videogame field greatly narrowed the ability of researchers, the public, policymakers, and gamemakers themselves to imagine a broader field of videogame production beyond its most commodified and commercial positions. In the mid-2000s, however, the structure of the videogame field again began to shift drastically in ways that have directly challenged these established understandings of where videogame production occurs and who undertakes it. High-speed Internet and the rise of digital distribution platforms weakened the distribution bottlenecks imposed by the large console manufacturers between videogame developers and potential players. The rise and eventual ubiquity of smartphone devices, such as the Apple iPhone, opened up new audiences and demographics, and created new opportunities and business models for videogame producers (Leaver and Willson 2016; Nieborg 2020). The emergence and ubiquity of financially and technologically accessible software such as the Game-Maker, Unity, and Unreal game engines converged the skillset and resources of professional and amateur gamemakers alike (Foxman 2019; Nicoll and Keogh 2019). On the margins of formal videogame production, new subcultures and communities of creators beyond the dominant demographics of young, white, cisgender, heterosexual, university-trained men began

making *different* kinds of videogames for different audiences with different tools. Tools such as Twine and later Bitsy were picked up by marginal gamemakers and truly revolutionized understandings of what videogames are allowed to be (Harvey 2014; kopas 2015; Ruberg 2020b; Reed 2020). As Anna Anthropy noted in 2012, “We have one foot in an era when creative people will no longer need publishers to distribute their games” (2012, 19). While the years since have not necessarily produced the utopia of democratized game creation Anthropy alludes to (see chapter 3), she was correct in her sense that the field was transforming.

Writing particularly of the queer, transgender, and otherwise marginal creators of the Twine scene, Alison Harvey (2014, 104) notes that as these marginal gamemakers become increasingly visible within the videogame field, researchers “need to address what constitutes our dominant construction of game designer and challenge those rubrics in order to understand the subversive and radical contributions of those who do not align with the normative constitution.” Just as “the established definition of the writer may be radically transformed by an enlargement of the set of people who have a legitimate voice in literary matters” (Bourdieu 1993, 42), the explosion of more accessible tools for videogame production and unregulated platforms for videogame distribution has given rise to “videogame zinesters” (Anthropy 2012) and “everyday gamemakers” (Young 2018) that point toward new lines of tension in the struggles for legitimization within the field. As in any field of cultural production, the arrival of what Bourdieu would call “newcomers” to the videogame field challenges dominant understandings of just what practices constitute the field at all and shifts the values associated with existing position-takings.

These tensions have played out explicitly in videogame discourse over the past decade with extensive debates across blogs, reviews, message boards, social media, conference talks, and academic publications as to just what might even be considered a “real” videogame in the first place, and just who might be considered a “real” videogame maker (Consalvo and Paul 2019). While indie games had already claimed to split from the mainstream industry in the mid-2000s (a claim critiqued in chapters 2 and 3), the diverse range of independent gamemakers that emerged in the early 2010s, particularly in queer and transgender gamemaking subcultures

consciously and deliberately rejects indie’s failed split from the mainstream and its poorly-concealed capitalist underpinnings, and instead upholds personal expression

as the highest ideal, the only goal that matters. And in order to do that successfully, they must break off completely [from the videogame industry], not at a branch somewhere on the tree but at the very root of the established order. (Burns 2013)

Here, we have a classic case of newcomers to a field of cultural production making a claim of legitimacy through the principles of autonomous hierarchization and a complete disavowal of heteronomous hierarchization. Yet, it is worth stressing that these “newcomers” to the videogame field in the early 2010s (women, queer folk, transgender folk, poor folk, artists, etc.) of course always existed at the peripheries of the videogame field. They were newcomers to the field only insofar as the positions they held have become newly legitimized within the field as videogame production and distribution, and so their activities have come more in focus under the lens of videogame production researchers, including myself.

The accepted borders of the videogame field are shifting so that a vast range of informal hobbyist, amateur, and enthusiast creator positions are now legibly within the field. As the following chapters will detail, the traditionally understood formal videogame industry and the informal activities of the broader field are now deeply codependent. The evidence of this is in the shifting discourses around the developer and consumer cultures that have taken place in recent years as a wider range of creator demographics find their labor increasingly validated and visible around what has historically been a stubbornly hegemonic industry. As Christopher Young highlights: “[As everyday gamemakers] increasingly contribute to the economic development of the video game industry, the industry has simultaneously enabled these gamemakers to contribute to the cultural discourse surrounding working conditions, information practices, and definitions of games” (2018, 12). A wider range of gamemakers with different values and ambitions (that is, gamemakers who are taking a wider range of positions in the field) now have a louder voice in the videogame field and an increased say in the autonomous principles that underpin and motivate it. They are interviewed and reviewed by game journalism outlets, winning awards at legitimized (and legitimizing) festivals and conferences, followed by players and other gamemakers on social media, and selling their videogames on legitimized (and legitimizing) platforms such as Steam and the App Store. Consequentially, new sites of tension are emerging where these new positions clash with those values and ambitions established by the dominant positions that aggressively formalized the field in previous decades.

The videogame field is thus no longer aggressively formalized as a small handful of console manufacturers no longer have the sole power to determine who is a legitimate videogame maker. But neither has the field returned to a period of informalization, such as existed in the 1960s and 1970s. The legacy of aggressive formalization persists, and the largest companies continue to hold the most power even as a wider range of positions are legitimized and challenging the state of the field. Whereas informalization would suggest a weakening of the dominant formal positions in the field, as Lobato and Thomas trace in the music industry, the videogame field has now entered a period of what I call *intense in/formalization*, defined by a blurring of relationships and positions that gamemakers now occupy between the formal and informal—between the need to strive for autonomous (cultural) and heteronomous (economic) modes of success. Today, once clear distinctions between triple-A and indie, professional and amateur, player and developer have broken down. Previously stable dominant positions in the field have lost their ability to present themselves as the entire field, while marginal positions in the field have successfully gained legitimacy. Crucially, the legacy of aggressive formalization and the values it instilled in videogame production and consumption discourses persists. Intense in/formalization thus points to the specific, transitional historical moment of the videogame field in the late 2010s and early 2020s where access to (but not necessarily ownership over) the means of production and distribution of videogame works has greatly outpaced public, industrial, government, and academic conceptualizations of what is understood as legitimate and successful videogame production.

In its intensely in/formal phase, the videogame field now operates more explicitly like every other cultural field that has achieved some degree of autonomy: a lot of people make videogames in a lot of different contexts, and some of those people make money doing so. Yet, the legacy of aggressive formalization persists and still strongly influences perceptions of just what videogame creation is among researchers, policymakers, students, and videogame makers themselves. Empirically researching the lived experiences of those who make videogames in different geographic contexts helps to address this. While the videogame industry still risks being imagined as globally homogenous, Aphra Kerr's unparalleled political economic analysis of global videogame production makes clear that the videogame field is defined by its variability rather than its uniformity, and thus "the

industry and culture of digital games" must be placed "firmly within local and regional economies and societies" (2017, 30). To decenter the most formalized and dominant positions of the videogame field, the global videogame industry needs to be reconceptualized as emerging from the multitude of local videogame making cultures that exist—have always existed—in specific regions, countries, cities, towns, and suburbs.

This makes the specific cultural, social, and economic contexts in which videogames are produced particularly important if we are to adequately understand the in/formalized videogame field. Gamemakers I spoke to consistently referred to issues of space and place that mediated their gamemaking activities: the cost of local rent (both commercial and domestic); the value (or lack thereof) of coworking spaces; the vibrancy (or lack thereof) of the local scene; the difficulties and flexibilities of remote work (even before the COVID-19 pandemic); the presence or absence of local government funding programs; the presence or absence of large videogame companies or university programs; the cost and length of flights to North American or Asian conferences and exhibitions; the crunch-inducing external deadlines of consumer expos and industry conventions; the quality of local Internet infrastructure; the presence or absence of social safety nets such as health care and social welfare income. *Where* videogames are made underlines *what* videogames are made, *who* makes them, and *how* they go about making them.

It is historical accounts of videogame production's formalization in specific local contexts that have best exposed the ways in which aggressive formalization narrowed how we imagine the field by showing how videogame production has always been "a multiplicity that has no monolithic center, no representative feature, especially not once we formulate on planetwide scales" (Nooney 2020, 142). Examples include Jaroslav Švelch's (2018) account of how Czech hobbyist gamemakers built a grassroots local industry in the 1980s; Melanie Swalwell and Michael Davidson's (2016) account of New Zealand videogame production between local identity and global imitation through the case study of *Malzak*; Laine Nooney's (2020) examination of the professional women involved in the operation and success of Sierra Online; and Benjamin Nicoll's (2019) account of the early days of South Korea's videogame field (today one of the largest and most lucrative national game industries in the world) as that of deliberate, opportunistic, and patriotic poaching and reappropriating of Japanese technology and intellectual property. These various case studies, as Kristine Jørgensen, Ulf

Sandqvist, and Olli Sotamaa (2017, 458) note in their own history of Nordic videogame production, demonstrate that “the major industries [of the United States and Japan] supported by large home markets provide a very particular and somewhat limited perspectives on the origins of the global game industry.”

To Jørgensen, Sandqvist, and Sotamaa’s claim I would add, however, that it is not just perspectives on the “origins” of the global game industry that are sorely limited, but our ongoing understanding of how videogame production is still continually formed and contested by those who are neither necessarily absorbed into nor replaced by the formalizing and industrializing of the videogame field. Local videogame production communities do not simply exist beyond a videogame industry but are the broader field of informal, creative, affective, and social activity through which formal videogame production sometimes emerges to be understood *as* a videogame industry. Examining the cultural field of videogame production in this transitional moment of intense in/formalization provides an opportunity to take seriously the diverse, often contradictory positions that have *always* been taken by gamemakers in the struggle between autonomy and heteronomy, between different markers of success and legitimization, between different forms and distributions of capital. The current moment allows us to move beyond the reductively economic markers of success that persist from the period of aggressive formalization to instead better account for the full range of contexts in which videogames are produced—have always been produced—and the full range of people who produce them.

Who Is a Videogame Developer in the Videogame Industry?

In 2019, I received an email inviting me to participate in the Game Developers Conference’s (GDC) annual “State of the Industry” survey. At this point, I had been making my own videogames in what I feel most comfortable calling a hobbyist capacity for four years.³ I was directly invited to participate in the survey as a previous attendee and speaker at GDC, and thus I was clearly someone whose experience the survey designers hoped to capture. However, the questions of the survey immediately made me doubt just how appropriate it would be for me to submit my answers. Questions asked about my game development salary (\$100 over the previous year,

solely from voluntary donations), the number of videogames I've worked on (over 50, but few took more than a week to create), my workplace (on the couch in front of the television), and attitudes toward my employer (myself). I did not feel explicitly unwelcomed by the survey, but I worried that by truthfully contributing my own experiences I would poison the well of the survey data, preventing it from adequately representing "real" videogame makers who "actually" work in the industry.

This personal experience of doubting the legitimacy of my own position within the field of videogame production echoes the curiosity that inspired this research project: just which positions within the intensely in/formal videogame field are captured and presented *as* the videogame field, at the exclusion of which other positions? Yet again, Bourdieu (1993, 42) preempts this concern when he warns that "every survey aimed at establishing the hierarchy of [cultural producers] predetermines the hierarchy by determining the population deemed worthy of helping to establish it." This curiosity led me to end both my interviews and survey with two questions directly influenced by Adrienne Shaw's (2012) research on which videogame players do or don't identify as gamers: (1) Are you a professional videogame developer? (2) Are you part of the videogame industry? Having so far in this chapter outlined how a field of cultural production is the struggle to determine the legitimate positions within the field, and how this is particularly complicated in the contemporary videogame field, here I want to explore the responses to these two questions specifically to consider how this foundational tension of the videogame field plays out through the perceptions, embodiments, and understandings of those that strive to take positions within it.

Are You a Professional Videogame Developer?

When I initially designed this project, I suspected it would be "professional" game developers who were more likely to fill out trade association surveys, while "amateur" game developers would not. And so I thought it made sense to determine which gamemakers consider themselves to be professionals. However, when I began asking gamemakers "Are you a professional videogame developer?" I was surprised that all three words in the label were contested by different gamemakers. *Professional* raised questions about *how* the participant went about their work, with what kind of commitment, and toward what kind of success. *Game* raised questions as to what sort of work or products

participants spent their time producing. And *developer* raised questions as to their personal position within the videogame production process, at times differentiated from roles such as designer or artist or producer.

One student survey respondent succinctly exposed the problem with my simplistic categorization of professional videogame developer as meaning “those who are paid to make videogames” when they answered, “Well, I’ve made \$2 from [my games], so I guess? But also, I’ve made \$2 from [my games], so I guess no.” Even if professionalism could be reduced to being paid, the question of just how much one needs to be paid before they become a professional demonstrates that it remains a nonetheless subjective label deeply informed by the field’s dominant formations. An ambiguous relationship with professionalism is a common quandary for cultural producers since many who see their primary occupation as cultural production support this work through “a secondary occupation which provides their main income” (Bourdieu 1993, 43). For some gamemakers, professionalism had less to do with how much money they were making and more to do with how they approached their gamemaking practice. John Kane, a 33-year-old gamemaker in Sydney, made his income primarily from a day job in web development. This meant he did not feel that he was part of the videogame industry, but nonetheless he did consider himself a professional videogame developer because “[gamemaking] is something I do on a regular basis and take seriously.” In contrast, an anonymous gamemaker from South Australia felt they could not consider themselves to be a “pro dev” until “I am earning a solid, stable salary from just developing videogames” but nonetheless insisted that they “have a professional work ethic and treat development in a professional manner.”

Many did consider professionalism narrowly as tied to a financial income, as I first had. Scott Purcival, a 32-year-old programmer who worked remotely into a small team from his home in a small town in regional Queensland, mused that he would “class myself as a professional when I have something that I start showing to people and say ‘give me money to make more of this.’” Curiously, perceiving professionalism as tied to income was also a reason why some gamemakers felt ambivalent about professionalism. Riad Djemili, 39, in Berlin, was cofounder of the videogame collective Saftladen. The collective takes its name from their first coworking space, which was situated in an old juice factory, a *saftpresserei* in German. *Saftladen* (meaning juice shop) softens *saftpresserei*, according to Djemili, to connote

a “particularly nonprofessional business”: “So I consider myself a professional but I really also like the idea of being an amateur artist and being able to combine this commercial need to sustain myself with this naïve thing of just doing things I like and saying stuff about the world.” Here, for Djemili, professionalism’s affiliation with financial income puts it at odds with his desires as an autonomy-driven artist.

Game developer was more overwhelmingly agreed upon as an identity that participants shared, professional or otherwise. However, despite the sheer ubiquity of the term in all forms of discourse around videogame production, ownership of the title was still far from unanimous among game-makers. Casey O’Donnell (2012) highlights how the title of game developer emerges from, and is often equated with, that of the software developer. While this might have made sense in the early days of videogame production, today *“game developer* is often assumed to be synonymous with ‘game programmer,’ with many designers, artists and audio producers responding to such carelessness with ‘we live here too, you know’” (O’Donnell 2012, 21; original emphasis). Indeed, those involved in videogame production in nontechnical roles, such as community managers, producers, and writers, expressed a sense of uncertainty as to whether or not they were a developer. Lee May was a 34-year-old narrative designer at a studio in Brisbane, having recently shifted into the role after previously being the studio’s community manager. For May, this shift in role changed his relationship to the claim of game developer:

[When I was a community manager] I felt like there should be a distinction between what I was doing and what the people who were legitimately working on the game were doing. And I struggled, particularly when I was at shows and conventions, showing the game off and people were like “Oh are you one of the devs?” and I was like “Uhhhh.” But then once I actually started getting into the editor and writing for the game, that’s when that went away because clearly I am developing the game now.

Similarly, Georgia Symons in Melbourne, a writer on *Wayward Strand* who primarily works as a theater playwright, took issue with the title of developer due to which aspects of the production process she was involved with:

I think the only word that sticks for me is “developer” because I think I associate that with the people who write the code or whatever. . . . But I would say I am a “videogame professional” because I’m getting paid to make a videogame, which is

kind of like the textbook definition of that term. . . . If someone was like “you’re a professional videogame maker” I’d be like, yep, I guess that’s factually accurate. . . . I have not looked at the game in Unity [the game engine] once. I have no idea what that looks like! I just write the script and I also direct the voiceover, and then they take it from there.

For both May and Symons, *game developer* is articulated as having connotations of being aligned with specific aspects of the videogame production process most directly involved in the manipulation of code and assets, and not with other aspects of the process such as scriptwriting, quality assurance, or community management—a finding echoed in Nooney’s (2020) research on the uncredited women working for game studio Sierra in the 1980s in typically unrecognized business and administrative roles.

Those in part-time contract positions, such as freelance artists working simultaneously on multiple projects across different media formats, also felt less of an identity as a game developer as videogames was only one of the many formats they work in. Tania Walker, 31, is a contract illustrator in Hobart who has worked on a range of projects, including videogames, board games, and websites. She reflected:

I put so much concentration into building my business as an illustrator, and often solo my own comic projects, that games almost become like a “nice to have” venue. So I don’t consider myself a professional videogame developer in that clear-cut way of “I am always working on and producing assets for commercially viable games.”

For Walker, the lack of resonance with game developer was less about her particular skillset as an illustrator and more the infrequency with which she directed these skills toward the production of videogames as opposed to other products. This is not a rare position to be in, as the examples of both Chaos Theory and O’Neill in this chapter’s introduction demonstrate. For my own part, as a full-time academic who makes videogames in my spare time, I feel highly uncomfortable calling myself a game developer and instead call myself a gamemaker.

Are You Part of the Videogame Industry?

Participants had, broadly, two diametrically opposed perspectives on the term *videogame industry*. The first was that the videogame industry referred to a global or local *community* of videogame makers. The second was that the videogame industry referred to a distinct and hegemonic subset of a broader

game development community that the participant either could not or did not wish to participate in. The former speaks to how the dominant positions of the field are imagined as the full extent of the legitimate positions that can be held in the field (and so the community and the industry become synonymous); the latter speaks to how those beyond these dominant positions feel very much marginalized by such an imagining.

For those working in commercial game studios or with ambitions for eventual commercial sustainability from their videogame work, when asked if they were a part of the videogame industry, both yes and no answers conceptualized the industry as something more than a simple sector of employment, instead seeing it more like a professional community in which involvement also required socializing, information sharing, and networking:

I mean yes and no. Like, yes, I do [consider myself part of the videogame industry], because I'm working at a company. But at the same time, no, because I don't actively engage that much with the community and I feel that's an important part of it. (Anthony Massingham, 33, Brisbane)

[No, I'm not part of the videogame industry because] we're a two man team that's released a relatively successful Android title that was developed apart from the local community. (Anonymous survey respondent, Western Australia)

In these framings, employment at a videogame company is not sufficient in itself to be "part of the industry."

Others, though, saw the videogame industry similarly to how I conceptualize it in this book as a particularly dominant subset of videogame production. This played out in a number of ways. First, commercial game-makers working in small teams or by themselves felt that when the videogame industry was invoked, it was not independent developers that people had in mind but the larger industrial mode of production more commonly associated with triple-A. Henry Smith, a 39-year-old solo developer in Montreal, mused that

usually when we talk about the industry we're talking about non-indie companies. At least when I'm talking with friends and colleagues I talk about the industry as big companies like EA and Bioware and Ubisoft and Warner Brothers. There are a lot of big companies just in Montreal, and indie is a counterpoint to that. When I talk about my history I say "I spent ten years in the industry" and so I guess I don't consider myself as part of the industry anymore. It's not particularly industrial what I'm doing. It's more grassroots, and it's not really business like. It's on that verge of hobby game development because I'm doing it mostly because

I have a drive to build games and I've found ways to support myself, and they're often non-traditional means. But because of that it's not a normal business and so I see myself on the fringes of the industry, I guess. I'm doing what they do, selling games to people, but I like to think of myself as outside the industry as well to distinguish myself from the machine.

In Utrecht, 21-year-old game designer Ruben Naus works in the four-person collective Sokpop and likewise did not consider himself part of the video-game industry. Naus had an “aversion to the word industry” as, for him, “it’s more like an art scene. . . . Like, I don’t know a lot of people that work at studios. I only know people who either have perhaps like a really small collective or like a team of two or three people or who make games on their own.” In Melbourne, 28-year-old Jake Strasser works as part of the four-person team House House. Strasser said the team “think of ourselves as being part of a videogames community rather than an industry. It feels like a big network of people supporting one another rather than some kind of industrial machine.” At the time of our interview, House House was working on *Untitled Goose Game*, which would go on to become one of the best-selling games globally of 2019. This is an important reminder that who is and is not in the videogame industry cannot be reduced to simply who is and is not creating commercially viable videogames.

The videogame industry as the defining site of gamemakers’ activity was also rejected by gamemakers making videogames in informal communities centered around local scenes or particular tools. Such gamemakers had a strong sense they were not part of the videogame industry specifically because of either *how* they were making games:

No, I don’t think [I am part of the game industry]. But I couldn’t say whether that’s because I don’t like the games industry as a being or whether it is because I don’t consider my products to be—well I don’t like the word products for a start—for my works to be associated with the kinds of things that are made by the capital-G games industry or whether it’s because I don’t really adhere to that business model. I suspect it is a combination of these things. (Zachariah Chandler, 21, Melbourne)

Or *who* they were, as someone not perceived as welcome within the video-game industry:

[No, I am not part of the videogame industry] because I don’t make videogames in a commercial capacity. I also don’t feel represented by the “industry,” at least groups like IGDA [International Game Developers Association] whose interests in the medium seem to have little to no overlap with mine. Also, I hear too many

horror stories from people—mostly marginalized folk—who **are** in the industry (or were before they were chased out by shitheads). (Anonymous survey respondent, New South Wales)

[No, I am not part of the videogame industry because] my local games chapter is bad for minorities. The heads seem very complacent or like they can't do much for issues surrounding minorities in the community. The local meetup is set up in a location every time with a mural of a lady pulling a sexy pout speaking in a speech bubble “Eat, Sleep, Game . . . Repeat” (this is placed in a games co-working space) which is problematic in both the overworking practices facing the industry and the more general trends of sexism within the games industry. . . . I have also been treated different from my male colleagues by clients in obvious ways (I am a person of color and haven't told anyone I'm nonbinary and am seen as female). I am treated differently by peers in the community due to the same reasons. It's great to see the diversity in the national game developers community but I rarely see women or nonbinary people of darker skin being invited to speak or be recognized or thrive here so colorism is an issue that hasn't been addressed. Mostly it's sexism and racism. (Anonymous survey respondent, Canberra)

Importantly, these participants express not only feeling unwelcome in or unable to take positions in the part of the field known as the videogame industry, but also not necessarily *wanting* to take such positions due to the industry's notorious poor working conditions and rampant discrimination. This goes beyond a simple desire to not sell out to instead, politically and personally, not wanting to be associated with those toxic and impersonal sites of videogame production responsible for poor and unequitable working conditions that workers and researchers alike have been identifying for decades (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Legault and Weststar 2017; Cote and Harris 2020).

As the videogame field has become intensely in/formalized, with distinctions between professionals and amateurs blurring and overlapping on digital platforms and in local communities, simple questions of how gamemakers identify themselves and their position—as professional or not, as videogame developers or not, as in the videogame industry or not—highlight all sorts of struggles and ambivalences between commercial workplaces and creative communities, between artistic practice and employed profession. These struggles exist and have long existed in all fields of cultural production. Musicians and writers similarly muse as to when they become professional and whether they are part of a music or writing industry. Until recently, however, the fact that these struggles *are* struggles has been largely hidden from view in the videogame field due to the aggressive formalization of the dominant positions

obscuring the rest of the field. The intense in/formalization brought about by the rise of digital platforms but no concurrent rise in stable employment opportunities exposes the struggles that continuously define and redefine the field of videogame production. We need to expand how we consider the videogame field, who we consider to be a part of it, which works and markers of success we measure it by, and, consequentially, what this means for our attempts to conceptualize the experiences of videogame makers in terms of labor, culture, politics, identity, and practice.

In my interviews, 85 percent of gamemakers said they would consider themselves to be videogame developers, but only 66 percent considered themselves to be *professional* game developers. Further, only 78 percent considered themselves to be part of the videogame industry.⁴ Of the survey respondents who were asked to categorize what sort of gamemaker they are, we see a clear distinction between gamemakers formally employed at a company and others in terms of how they relate to the label of professional videogame developer, despite all respondents having explicitly opted into the survey as someone involved in the making of videogames (see Table 1.1).

Ultimately, while *videogame developer* is used broadly in popular, industry, and scholarly discourses to refer to videogame makers, the ambivalent responses of my participants suggest a need for us to reflect on how such a title might connote and perpetuate selective understandings of which skillsets and roles of videogame production are, as May put it above, considered to be legitimately working on the game. Such a reflection would not be dissimilar

Table 1.1

Percentage of gamemaker participants who responded affirmatively to “Are you a videogame developer?” and “Are you part of the videogame industry?”

	Identify as a professional videogame developer	Identify as part of the videogame industry
Survey respondents (282)		
Employed at or run a company (81)	85%	94%
Self-employed gamemaker (49)	44%	54%
Hobbyist, amateur, enthusiast, or student (112)	7%	63%
Contract/Freelance worker (40)	26%	41%
Interviewees (160)		
	66%	78%

to how recent years have seen a reconsideration as to just who is included or excluded when researchers use the “gamer” label to refer to videogame players (Shaw 2012). It’s for this reason that throughout this book I use the terms *videogame maker* or *gamemaker* to refer to those involved in the production (not just development) of videogames.⁵

Conclusion

The videogame industry as it is typically imagined by researchers, players, and policymakers as a collection of formal videogame companies employing videogame developers fails to account for the full field of videogame production. A diverse range of people make videogames in different contexts for different reasons with different skillsets. The videogame industry is no longer, indeed if it ever was, an adequate conceptual frame to define the space they work in. Nor is the common moniker of videogame developer, with its technological connotations, always an adequate label through which to capture the type of work this diverse range of people undertake. Many are taking alternative positions in the videogame field.

The ways in which the videogame field was aggressively formalized through the 1990s and 2000s has led to a popular imagining of videogame production as first and foremost a commercial enterprise, and only abstractly as a creative and cultural practice. While videogames are now broadly understood to be a cultural form—to be art by certain broad definitions—we are yet to adequately consider what it means to account for videogame producers as themselves cultural producers—as artists by certain broad definitions—working within a cultural field.

It’s the goal of the following chapters to rectify this, to show the much broader, more complex, and often contradictory ambitions, identities, and cultures that underpin videogame production. In this initial chapter, I’ve introduced the concept of the field of videogame production as an alternative concept through which videogame production can be understood in its multiplicity, in the contradicting struggles of differently positioned game-makers striving to accrue different forms of both economic and symbolic capital. These struggles are formative of the videogame field, and the field is ultimately nothing but the struggle of videogame makers striving to have their own position legitimized as existing within the field. I’ve detailed how the context of these struggles in videogame production has shifted

drastically since the early 2010s, with the rise of digital distribution and more accessible development tools underpinning the field's intense in/formalization giving a much wider range of creators and audiences a say in how the videogame field should be structured: what approaches should be valued, what achievements count as success, and which skills count as gamemaking skills.

This period of intense in/formalization, mirroring broader shifts in a range of digital and creative sectors toward precarity and a blurring of personal and professional identities, all but demands a Bourdieusian analysis of videogame production, of videogame production as happening within and as a field of cultural production. Bourdieu warns that the social scientist's job is not to delimit which positions are or are not within a cultural field but to describe how the cultural producers at the frontier of the field are struggling to be included or excluded. As such, the rest of the book turns to those videogame makers most on the periphery of videogame production that least fit within traditional understandings of the videogame industry: independent videogame makers, hobbyists, students, contract workers, and communities. Doing so will, I hope, both broaden and demystify the contexts and drivers of videogame production as no more or less complex than the contexts and drivers that underpin all fields of cultural production: the desire, as Nicole Williams put it, to get better and make cool stuff.

The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist

Why We Should Think Beyond Commercial Game Production

By: Brendan Keogh

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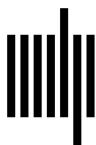
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