
Introduction

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Australia often doesn't appear as a topic in digital gaming circles, and when it does two topics are inevitably mentioned. First, a surprisingly large number of well-known titles have been made in Australia, both by internationally-owned and local studios. *La Noire* (2011) was developed by Sydney-based Team Bondi, *Fruit Ninja* (2010) is developed by Brisbane-based Halfbrick Studios, and *The Sims Freeplay* (2011) is developed by Melbourne-based Firemonkeys Studios. Further, Australian-based development teams are frequently core contributors to larger projects, such as *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007) and *Medieval II: Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2006). Second, for many years Australia had a bizarre digital game classification system, which was as arbitrary as it was draconian. This meant many games released elsewhere in the world were not released in Australia (e.g. *Postal 2* (Running With Scissors, 2005)), only released after having specific content removed (e.g., *Saints Row IV* (Volition, 2013) and *South Park: The Stick of Truth* (Obsidian

Entertainment, 2013)) or else were permanently withdrawn from sale (e.g., *Manhunt* (Rockstar North, 2003)). The most noteworthy example being the global delay that it caused for the international release of Bethesda Game Studios' *Fallout 3* (2008). The "realistic" portrayal of drug use meant that it was refused classification in Australia, and Bethesda decided to change that particular element of the game for its global release.

Navigating between such competing historical conditions, the articles that we have collected here represent approaches by contemporary Australian scholars in the study of digital games. They responded to the provocation 'What is Game Studies in Australia?' the topic of the inaugural conference of the Digital Games Research Association Australia (DiGRAA). This event, held on 17th of June 2014, was a meeting of academic researchers, critics, designers, developers, and artists focused on developing a discussion of what game studies 'is' in Australia. The conference focused special attentiveness both to diversity and any particular regional issues that delegates chose to address. These articles illustrate the breadth and variety of approaches which were discussed.

The inaugural DiGRAA conference built on previous research conducted in Australia, something that has largely been publicly defined by the Australian governments strong interest in the social impact of gaming, though has also fomented growing research trajectories in the country. In 1999 the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) published the lengthy report "Computer Games and Australians Today" (Durkin and Aisbett 1999). Commissioned in 1995, the report responded to the growing significance of video games in Australian life, and at the time it was "one of the largest projects ever conducted into the nature of computer game play" (1999, ix). While the focus of the report was on how aggressive content was "experienced and perceived", it also raises other issues, such as: "time use, implications for social interaction, gender differences in play and attitudes, and consumers' uses of the classification system for computer games" (1999, ix).

Since then, the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association, a local industry lobby group has commissioned a series of reports on the Australian video game market. With six issues published roughly every two years from 2005 to 2015, these reports are based on large-scale random-sample interviews with Australian households, and present a useful macro-analysis of local patterns of video game use and consumption. The most recent report presents the finding that since 2012 more than 9 in 10 households in Australia own a “device for gameplay” (Brand & Todhunter, 2015, 1). The consistent rate of these research reports has also allowed trends to be identified; the latest report notes that between 2005 and 2015, the proportion of women who have identified as video game players has increased from 38% to 47%, which leads the authors to suggest that “female representation equal to males among gamers is imminent” (Brand, Borchard, & Holmes, 2012, 9). Equally, these reports have tracked the average age of video game players in Australia from 24 in 2005, to 33 in 2015.

Alongside research by government and industry, Australian and Australian-based scholars have been involved in researching games for decades. The growing importance of the video game was signaled by the—now expatriate—Newcastle-born scholar McKenzie Wark in a 1994 article “The video game as an emergent media form.” Australian-based scholars working in a number of fields have made important contributions to the study of digital games, particularly John Bank’s (2013) work on the relationship between game developers and players, Catherine Beavis’s (Beavis, O’Mara & McNiece 2012) research on the connections between gaming and literacies, Bernadette Flynn’s (2003; 2004) work on the virtual spaces of games and how gaming reconfigures domestic space, Sal Humphrey’s (2008) work on community governance in MMOs, Sue Morris’s (2003) analysis of the “gaming apparatus”, Angela Ndalianis’s (2004; 2012) analysis of game aesthetics, Melanie Swalwell’s (2003) ethnographic work on LAN gaming, and her more recent work on game histories and archiving (Swalwell, 2012), not to mention Larissa Hjorth’s (2010) work on mobile games, and her collaborations with Ingrid Richardson (Hjorth and Richardson 2014)

and Dean Chan (Hjorth and Chan 2009). Australian-based on-line journal *M/C – Media & Culture* published pioneering special issues on video games in 1998 (edited by Paul McCormack) and 2000 (edited by P. David Marshall and Sue Morris). The relevance of game studies in Australia was cemented in 2004 with special issues of *Media International Australia* (edited by Chris Chesher and Bridgid Costello) and *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture* (edited by Patrick Crogan and John Potts) dedicated to video games.

The five articles in this special issue illustrate the great diversity and innovation taking place in Australian game studies today, and cuts across from leading figures in the field, to early career researchers and PhD scholars.

The first article, by Helen Stuckey, Melanie Swalwell, Angela Ndalianis and Denise de Vries, ‘Remembering and Exhibiting Games Past: The Popular Memory Archive,’ discusses the online collaborative research portal ‘The Popular Memory Archive’. This portal acts as a repository for collecting and exhibiting the production and reception histories of Australian and New Zealand micro-computer games of the 1980s. The project was developed by the authors as a means to collect and share the memories of those who lived and played their way through this period. The article examines the activity on the site, to date and evaluates the significance of existing contributions, in order to consider the discursive, inclusive, and questioning practices of the community that regularly uses the portal.

The second article, ‘Conceptualising Inspiration Networks in Game Design,’ by Xavier Ho, Martin Tomitsch and Tomasz Bednarz examines the concept of inspiration and proposes a design process for inspiration networks using post-survey data from Global Game Jam. They argue that ‘inspiration networks’ offer a novel way to discover emergent game genres, that have nevertheless displayed a large influence. From their findings, the researchers offer three key design implications: a need for designer to appreciate “thinking with networks,” the importance of identifying emerging game genres, and

support for an intuitive, visual approach to browsing for concepts and ideas.

The third article, ‘“Blackout!”: Unpacking the Black Box of the Game Event,’ by Steven Conway and Andrew Trevillian proposes a new ontology for games. The authors develop the SOC (Social/Operative/Character) model for analysts and designers by synthesising phenomenology, Latourian Actor-Network Theory and Goffmanian frame analysis. The model demonstrates the network of objects within the ‘Black Box’ of any game, illuminating how each object (from player to memory card to sunlight) may move between three levels of the Game Event: Social World, Operative World and Character World.

The fourth paper in the special issue, ‘*Tokimeki Memorial Girl’s Side*: Enacting femininity to avoid dying alone,’ by Tina Richards, critically examines a Japanese dating simulator video game with a female protagonist. Through analyzing the game mechanics, Richards argues that the game assumes and reinforces a range of cultural norms and social expectations in relations to gender performativity, heteronormative courting and dating, relationships and intimacy.

The final article in the special issue, ‘Affect, Responsibility, and How Modes of Engagement Shape the Experience of Videogames,’ by Kevin Veale examines how the mode of engagement in videogames shapes the player’s experience of the fiction. He argues that it is particularly difficult to separate the experience of playing a videogame from the textual element of the fiction. What sets the experience of videogames apart from other forms of mediated storytelling is that the player can come to feel responsible for events and characters within the fictional world of the videogame.

These collected articles mark a moment in Australian Game Studies where scholars and practitioners from around Australia reflected on the diversity within Australian games scholarship and creative work. This work constantly responds to, and is reinvigorated by,

engagement with global scholarship yet is shaped by local conditions and experiences.

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