

# Global Localities of Game Production

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## **Abstract**

*Accounts of digital game production are increasingly at the forefront of how we document and theorize conditions and transformations of how cultural media are produced, regulated, distributed, marketed, and consumed. These accounts have typically examined games as a global industry that coexists with and contributes to the formation of national industries, including publisher and studio formations, geopolitics, tax breaks and credits, regional regulatory frameworks, and cultural sovereignty. This introduction to the special issue “Local Game Production” reasserts the analytical value in using locality as an entry point for the study of digital game production. The special issue offers four articles that confront economic, labour, and technical formations in game production, and expose the encounters of localities with globalization. These articles reveal why considerations of the local are critical in understanding the wider infrastructures, governance frameworks, and economies that shape the production of culture through global games. Each article underscores the inequities in how game production localities leverage power via platforms, nation-states and economic regions, and predominant cultural activities.*

**Keywords:** *Locality, Globalization, Game Production, Game Industry, Game Workers*

Accounts of digital game production are increasingly at the forefront of how we document and theorize conditions and transformations of how cultural media are produced, regulated, distributed, marketed, and consumed. These accounts have typically examined games as a global industry that coexists with and contributes to the formation of national industries, including publisher and studio formations, geopolitics, tax breaks and credits, regional regulatory frameworks, and cultural sovereignty. This special issue adds to this growing area of game production studies by examining contemporary cultural formations of locality, focusing on the relational connections and contextual moments that shape articulations of place beyond physical scale and geographical space. Locality here is defined as the area of space where connections between actors, infrastructures, and governance create contextual moments of community. Localities of game production have primarily developed from the connections between creators and players who use the developer tools and game platforms that formulate production and player communities around the manufactured artifacts of games. These communities express geographical and virtual aspects of locality via these infrastructures, which are shaped by the overarching governance structures of government, industry, and culture.

Structurally, analyses of local game production have typically leaned toward three overlapping areas of investigation. The first is the technological, legal, and distribution centralization of the game platform. Since the North American video game crash of 1983, companies like Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft have developed console platforms to control the production and publication of games, limiting studios and third-party publishers to proprietary development tools and stringent legal frameworks. Despite the increased popularity of PC gaming and mobile platforms initially seeming to offer more options for developers, storefronts such as Steam and the Apple App Store also control access to distribution platforms and development tools and set standards for moderating authorized content in similar ways. Though operating in numerous geographic regions around the globe, these platform companies draw together numerous game production and ancillary services connected by the legal, technical, and financial frameworks of the console. Accounts of these closed circuits of production have examined the specific technical infrastructures used to prevent unlicensed game production and distribution,<sup>2</sup> the proprietary software tools and engines customized for specific game production consoles,<sup>3</sup> the emergence of new business models and online player communities in mobile markets,<sup>4</sup> the localization of games to be sold in multiple geographic markets,<sup>5</sup> the physical geolocking of games to regional hardware and formats,<sup>6</sup> and the tethered game-making tools of online game communities.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the dominance of game platforms developed in a small handful of countries has led to a proliferation of centre-periphery analyses of regional and national game industries. Accounts in this second area have overwhelmingly focused on the influence of Japan,<sup>8</sup> the United States,<sup>9</sup> and the United Kingdom<sup>10</sup> in shaping global circuits of game production. Other accounts have examined the geopolitical governance, infrastructures, and economies of national industries, such as Australia,<sup>11</sup> Canada,<sup>12</sup> China,<sup>13</sup> Iran,<sup>14</sup> Ireland,<sup>15</sup> Poland,<sup>16</sup> and South Korea,<sup>17</sup> to name but a few. Some accounts have also surveyed cross-national industry formations of the European Union,<sup>18</sup> the Nordic region,<sup>19</sup> Latin America,<sup>20</sup> and Western Africa.<sup>21</sup> Many accounts have underscored the importance of regional government supports, such as tax-free credits, to attract and retain large publishers and studios, such as Ubisoft,

Warner Brothers, and Square Enix in Montréal, Quebec.<sup>22</sup> Additional accounts have stressed the significance of preexisting technology and entertainment industries in drawing talented labour pools of developers and services, as evidenced in the Silicon Valley region in Northern California.<sup>23</sup> In each of these regions, accounts have demonstrated the importance of geography, government, and industry in shaping localities of game production.

Third, cultural accounts have revealed the broader informal game production communities, identities, and practices that exist at the periphery of formalized game industries while further underpinning the importance of global networks of platform technologies and regional industries in shaping those communities. These cultural activities include game jams, where hundreds of gamemakers produce dozens of games over a few days;<sup>24</sup> small and large festivals to showcase blockbuster, indie, and artistic games;<sup>25</sup> conferences and industry gatherings;<sup>26</sup> and exhibitions to display locally made games.<sup>27</sup> More broadly, some accounts have examined the wider networks and social gatherings of urban and virtual scenes to underline the range of game production activities tethered to nonprofit organizations, game companies, and platform tools.<sup>28</sup> This area of research reminds us that digital game production is not simply an industry but a *cultural* industry<sup>29</sup> that cannot develop as a global network of companies, tax regulations, and commodity distributions without the localized cultural activities of individuals and communities.

Altogether, these areas represent the connections of localities in the global game industry. This special issue provides fresh accounts of these connections to scrutinize the tensions between platforms, publishers, nation-states, and the wider cultural activities at the periphery as it develops into, and emerges out of, geographic and virtual localities. The first article by Anne Heslinga studies the Dutch game industry to consider the ways in which local game development in the Netherlands has become contingent upon a limited number of US and East Asian platforms. Heslinga finds that Dutch game developers have become increasingly tied to a small number of platforms for distributing games, where they face steep global competition. The second article by Hugh Davies examines the diverse networks of southern Chinese gamemakers and their emergence out of an energetic milieu of game jams, award events, expos, and informal social gatherings. Davies draws out the pivotal role of community-led support networks in the growth of indie game production in the South China region. The third article by K. T. Wong surveys the recent release of games developed in the Malaysian game industry, typified for its below-the-line outsourcing work. Wong reveals how globalization has given rise to an emergent, heterogeneous development milieu of mobile and multiplatform game production in Malaysia. The final article by Scott DeJong and Michael Iantorno analyses the gig economy online work platform Fiverr to investigate users who sell complete game design services to global clients. They found that government training programs focused on digital freelancing, a decrease in local employment during the pandemic, and a global surge in demand for online creative services led to the emergence of complete game design services from freelancers predominantly in Pakistan.

Taken together, these articles confront economic, labour, and technical formations in game production and expose the encounters of localities with globalization. This special issue reasserts the analytical value in using locality as an entry point for the study of digital game production. The contributors to this issue reveal why considerations of the local are critical in

understanding the wider infrastructures, governance frameworks, and economies that shape the production of culture through global games. Each contribution underscores the inequities in how game production localities leverage power via platforms, nation-states and economic regions, and predominant cultural activities. While this special issue features some under-examined localities outside of the global industry's dominant centers, future directions can consider the role of other areas of space where connections between actors, infrastructures, and governance create the contextual moments of community across local game production. One way forward, and perhaps a more inclusive one to undervalued segments of game production, is the examination of cultural activities at the periphery of platforms and formalized industry. Such accounts tend to emphasize the cultural distinctiveness and contribution of localities in shaping wider movements, genres, and industry norms.<sup>30</sup> Following these cultural activities at the periphery can potentially uncover the hidden histories of localities in contributing to our understanding of why specific games are made and played around the globe.

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