

# Globalization and Heterogeneity: Locating the Malaysian Indie Game Production Culture

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines how globalization has enabled the emergence of a heterogeneous game production environment within the nascent Malaysian videogame industry. In this context, heterogeneity refers to the quality or state of a game production environment that allows for dissimilar productions or production routes. To this end, I contrast three high-profile indie games representative of the Malaysian videogame industry, namely Re:Legend (Magnus Games, 2019 [early access]), No Straight Roads (Metronomik, 2020), and Bake 'n Switch (Streamline Games, 2020). Specifically, I juxtapose these three titles—including their production histories, their game designs, and the corporate histories of their developers—to reveal how these factors have shaped their developmental pathways, highly distinctive from each other despite the shared Malaysian root of these games, against the backdrop of an increasingly interconnected globalized videogame workforce.*

**Keywords:** *game production, globalization, heterogeneity, indie games, Malaysia, nation, videogame industry*

While mostly sustained by outsourcing work in the 2000s, the Malaysian videogame industry experienced rapid growth in the 2010s and is now home to numerous up-and-coming indie developers with award-winning games under their belts. Underlying the numerous contributing factors to the flourishing of the Malaysian game production culture—a growing domestic market, expanded governmental support, access to digital distribution platforms, and increased foreign investments—is globalization. This article aims to advance understanding about how globalization has given rise to the heterogeneous production milieu within the emergent Malaysian videogame industry.

Contributing to the ongoing dialogue about the challenges and opportunities faced by game developers in a globalized industrial milieu, I examine the impacts of globalization on

Malaysian game productions from cultural, economic, and political perspectives. Scholars have explored game productions within a global capitalist system, drawing attention to the transnational consolidation of corporate interests and inequities in the global game labor pool.<sup>2</sup> Building on their works, I investigate the production logics of Malaysian games as shaped by international trade policies and governmental support. In this article, I define heterogeneity as the quality or state of a game production environment that allows for the coexistence of dissimilar productions and production routes, as influenced by the pedigree of developers, funding sources, and types of games produced. To this end, I contrast three Malaysian console/PC games released in the late 2010s—their production histories, their game designs, and the corporate histories of their developers—by analyzing reports from various publications, media interviews with the game creators, promotional materials, and the games themselves.

Most popular accounts about Malaysia in terms of videogames are tied to the growing reputation of Southeast Asia as “the world’s fastest-growing mobile games market.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Malaysia is often defined via its ability to generate revenues in gaming discourses, and not much attention has been paid to its varied production cultures, as evidenced by the chosen case studies. The three games I examine—*Re:Legend* (Magnus Games, 2019 [early access]), *No Straight Roads* (Metronomik, 2020), and *Bake ‘n Switch* (Streamline Games, 2020)—represent a contemporary crop of Malaysian games that showcase not only the capabilities of local developers to produce quality titles that appeal to a global market but also the various developmental pathways that they utilize in an increasingly globalized production setting.

These three games are both exemplary of the Malaysian videogame industry and exceptional cases within the broader field of videogame production in Malaysia. Contesting that the term “videogame industry”—often used in reference to limited sites in traditional geographical centers of game production in North America, western Europe, and East Asia—is “a misrepresentative synecdoche for a much larger space of cultural and economic activity,” Brendan Keogh coined the term “videogame field” to open a conceptual space that expands our understanding of videogame production as cultural production emerging from a vast range of contexts.<sup>4</sup> The three games I study are widely viewed as products of the videogame industry, considering the connections between their developers and game publishers in North America, western Europe, and Japan. Furthermore, the degree of success these games attained far exceeds that of their Malaysian contemporaries. Hence, these games are exceptional. But for the same reasons, these games are also exemplary of the Malaysian national videogame industry. Among the first group of videogames developed by Malaysian studios to achieve international success in the console/PC space, these titles are perceived by players and media outlets as representative of the nation’s emerging videogame industry. While the space evoked by “the Malaysian national videogame industry” is necessarily exclusionary, it also exists, having just come into existence recently, at the margin of the global videogame industry. Simultaneously central and marginal in the circuits of videogame industry, these games together form a nuanced study that reveals the heterogeneity belying the homogeneous national façade that they collectively front.

## Videogame Development in Malaysia

The groundwork for the Malaysian videogame industry was laid by the local animation industry. The game and animation industries, which jointly form the backbone of Malaysia's digital creative economy, share a comparable developmental trajectory. While the first Malaysian animation studios were established in the 1980s, long-form animations were not produced in the nation until the 1990s, spurred by the government's initiatives to promote locally animated television series.<sup>5</sup> Mirroring the cross-sectoral skill transfer from the animation industry to the videogame industry in Japan, the training of Malaysian animators would similarly contribute to the emergence of the Malaysian videogame industry in the 2000s.<sup>6</sup> For example, Lemon Sky Studios, one of the biggest Malaysian game studios known for its co-development works, was established in 2001 as a digital animation studio before merging with a game art studio in 2011 to provide game development services.<sup>7</sup>

Game developers in Malaysia have largely clustered around the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur (KL), wherein infrastructure constructed by the government to boost the nation's digital economy has concentrated. The agency leading such efforts is the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), the founding mission of which is to oversee the establishment of the high-tech zone Multimedia Super Corridor south of KL. However, MDEC did not directly participate in growing the local videogame industry until its mandate was broadened by the Digital Malaysia program in 2012.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, even before the government's intervention, Malaysia was already a known destination for game outsourcing by the mid-2000s, boasting about ten small- and medium-sized studios that focused on co-development projects from the United States and Europe.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, the rise of smartphones and digital distribution, which enabled self-publishing of low-cost mobile games, laid the foundation for Malaysian independent developers to work on original intellectual property (IP) in the early 2010s. Paralleling this development was the expansion of co-development studios, exemplified by Lemon Sky Studios and Streamline Studios, which are now among the biggest videogame employers in Malaysia.<sup>10</sup>

Driven by surging government investment and a growing local talent pool, the conditions are ripe for the consolidation of a Malaysian videogame industry fronted by organizations based in KL. A key initiative that accelerated this consolidation was the setting up of an incubator space jointly by MDEC and UOA Holdings at the Bangsar South suburb in KL to provide facilities for the training of local talents.<sup>11</sup> Another important MDEC-led undertaking is the annual industry conference Level Up KL, inaugurated in 2015 with the aim of not only showcasing works by Malaysian developers but also establishing Malaysia as a regional hub in Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, game development courses offered by local higher education institutions are also on the rise, owing much to the efforts of MDEC to expand and improve game education in the nation.<sup>13</sup> The convergence of these happenings led aspiring Malaysian game developers of various backgrounds to congregate in KL. For this reason, while the videogame field in Malaysia is broader than those based in KL, the most successful studios that the government have promoted to represent the Malaysian videogame industry, exemplified by the three that form the case studies of this article, are necessarily headquartered in KL.

## Locating Indie and Malaysia as Positions

To categorize, *Re:Legend*, *No Straight Roads*, and *Bake 'n Switch* are independent or “indie” productions. Noting that the “general understanding was that independent videogames were made by individuals or small companies,” Paolo Ruffino opines that the diversity of production modalities and aesthetic traits among indie games make “seeking a fixed definition of independence . . . a pointless task, as it changed across the various actors involved and their temporary and fluctuating interpretations of their own work.”<sup>14</sup> This situation is compounded by the rise of casual games on smartphones in the late 2000s, identified by Keogh as the essence of what he terms the “intense in/formalization” of the videogame field: “a blurring of formal and informal means of production and distribution, an opportunity for a wider range of producers to make claims to a legitimate presence within the field.” In this context, the utility of the indie label—now a shorthand for all games that are not “triple-A” (or blockbuster)—lies not in its function to categorize but rather *position*: how and why game developers are positioning themselves and their creations as indie. In this article’s context, the indie positioning of the developers studied is inextricable from their location in Malaysia; studios based in the nation lack the infrastructure and resources to lead triple-A productions despite having undertaken co-development work from overseas triple-A studios for long. Nevertheless, indie meant something different to and hence is differently deployed by the three developers I study here.

The information analyzed in this article is primarily sourced from trade reports and journalistic articles published in the 2010s by mostly media outlets based in Southeast Asia. Such outlets confer cultural values to games through the dissemination of information about how games are developed. Focusing on the American magazine *Nintendo Power*, Mia Consalvo considers gaming publications part of the “peripheral industries surrounding games” that “played a significant role in how gameplay is now understood.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Graeme Kirkpatrick sees UK gaming magazines of the 1980s as central to establishing the cultural status of videogames by providing a sphere in which the concept of “gameplay,” which he defines as “the central operative category of game appraisal,” could be innovated and refined.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Consalvo and Kirkpatrick who focus on gameplay within Western contexts, I instead look at how game production is understood in the Malaysian/Southeast Asian context via such publications. While my reliance on these publications restricts the analysis to publicly available information, which is insufficient to uncover the full complexity of industry networks that operate outside of public purview, these resources are nevertheless suitable repository of discourses to discern how the developers I study position themselves as both indie *and* Malaysian within the global videogame industry. That is, I view Malaysian not as an inherent identity but rather a deliberate position, like indie, that a developer chooses to adopt, for a Malaysia-based developer need not present themselves as a *Malaysian* developer to the public.

While studies of globalization as framed by media imperialism often posit the West as the dominant center, I instead put forward Japan as the main reference point for the development of the Malaysian videogame industry.<sup>17</sup> This approach aligns with Kuan-Hsing Chen’s endorsement of shifting the reference points of Asian studies from the US and Europe to

Asia, which he termed “Asia as method,” not simply to “reclaim the territory of Asian studies from US or European experiences, but to define Asian studies in Asia and its potential achievements.”<sup>18</sup> To clarify, I perform this shift not to identify traits that homogenize game productions in Southeast/Asia but rather emphasize the importance of historicizing game studies in local/regional contexts. In this comparative context, this article illustrates that the enduring and dominant influence exerted by the Japanese videogame industry on its Malaysian counterpart is due not only to the cultural and market proximity between the two nations but also the economic ties that Malaysia has actively cultivated with Japan since its independence. The bilateral relations between the two nations were cemented by the “Look East” policy, introduced by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1982 to appoint Japan as Malaysia’s role model. Despite the “Look East” policy’s origin as a product of Mahathir’s “personal political manifesto” that had “neither a blueprint nor a proper economic plan for its implementation,” it laid the foundation for long-term investments from Japanese multinational companies in various Malaysian industries for several decades, including the nascent Malaysian videogame industry in the 2010s.<sup>19</sup>

## Magnus Games and *Re: Legend*

Among the three case studies, Magnus Games is the only one to have been founded by amateur developers without prior connections to the videogame industry. Magnus Games was one of the studios founded by two Malaysian brothers DC Gan and Welson Gan in 2015 in hope of capitalizing on the booming mobile games market. However, the Gan brothers did not find their feet until they decided to give up on mobile games and instead develop a console/PC game, in which their passion lies.<sup>20</sup> The Gan brothers’ initial failure attests to the difficulty of succeeding in the crowded mobile market despite the lower technical barrier for mobile game development. In a media interview, the Gan brothers divulge that they were making mobile games only because of the misguided notion that it is easier to develop and profit from mobile games: they were in the mobile business half-heartedly “to establish a reputation and maybe secure some funding” for their future “dream game.”<sup>21</sup> Unsuccessful in their venture into the mobile market, the Gan brothers decided to make a leap of faith and proceeded to develop their “dream game” for console/PC despite having little funding: *Re:Legend*, a multiplayer simulation role-playing game that focuses on monster raising (Figure 1) and various life-simulation mechanics, such as farming, fishing, and crafting.

The Gan brothers struggled to get the project off the ground until they received help from Square Enix Collective, a provider of publishing services to indie developers. Square Enix Collective, a London-based division of the Japanese game publisher Square Enix, was launched in 2014 as a website with the goal of “helping indie developers build an audience for their games.”<sup>22</sup> The Collective provides a free platform where its community of players can provide feedback and vote on game pitches submitted by indie developers. A game pitch that generates enough support on the Collective’s platform can advance into the crowdfunding stage. *Re:Legend* was pitched by the Gan brothers to and accepted by the Collective in 2016.



**Figure 1.** Re: Legend (2017).

The mentorship Square Enix Collective provided to the Gan brothers in preparation for *Re:Legend's* crowdfunding campaign demonstrates the pivotal role played by multinational conglomerates in cultivating the videogame field in emerging economies. A similar initiative is Google Play's Indie Games Accelerator, a training program geared toward developers

from developing nations and have benefitted numerous Southeast Asian creators since its inception.<sup>23</sup> In addition to training new talents, such initiatives ensure the global expansion of the videogame market through increasing the supply of innovative games. That said, such incubator programs also maintain the status quo in a global videogame industry dominated by multinational conglomerates that tend to reinforce traditional power structures and a gendered workforce. In her ethnography of a participating development team in an incubator, Jennifer Whitson observes that the extensive usage of data-driven design, a condition of acceptance into the incubator, demands “masculinized skillsets . . . [that] further privilege and smooth access for men” who are usually young, educated, and able-bodied.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the Gan brothers belong to this demographic.

Crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter are also a vital means for indie developers from emerging economies to reach players abroad; it is very difficult for Malaysian developers to recoup their investments, much less make a profit, if they only target the small domestic videogame market. This is also why Malaysian developers were previously mostly known for outsourcing work and mobile games, which require relatively low startup costs. Launched in June 2017, the crowdfunding campaign for *Re:Legend* reached its minimum funding goal of S\$70,000 in less than eighteen hours and ultimately raised S\$630,700, making it the most-funded Kickstarter project by a Southeast Asian creator at the time.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, Magnus Games leveraged *Re:Legend*'s success on Kickstarter to secure a publishing agreement with the Italy-based 505 Games in 2018.

Since 2018, however, the development of *Re:Legend* became increasingly opaque due to lack of communication, drawing the ire of many players who backed the project's Kickstarter campaign. The expected release date as listed on the game's initial Kickstarter campaign was June 2018.<sup>26</sup> That did not come to pass. Instead, Magnus Games released an alpha version (in final stages of development but still unfinished) of *Re:Legend* on Steam Early Access, a digital distribution service for PC games, in August 2019. Early access grants players the chance to play a pre-release build of the game, which is in a playable state but could be incomplete feature-wise and contain bugs; feedback from early access players, whose role are akin to playtesters, is invaluable to developers as they prepare for the “final” release. That said, *Re:Legend* was stuck in early access on PC for years with no words on its console versions. A glance at the comments left by the backers of *Re:Legend* on its Kickstarter or Steam Early Access webpages in 2021 indicates that they are increasingly soured by the game's repeated delays and lack of substantial updates. Magnus Games finally launched the 1.0 PC release of *Re:Legend* on Steam on September 5, 2022, but this did not pacify those who backed the console versions.

Among the three case studies, while *Re:Legend* was announced the earliest, it was also released (as a complete version) the last, signaling the difficulties faced by amateur indie developers in developing their first project while still refining their technical skills. Additionally, the crowdfunding model, which conditions backers to expect updates throughout the development cycle in exchange for upfront payments, has necessitated developers to constantly engage in marketing efforts. Heikki Tyni contends that this new production logic “highlights how the core of game development, [especially] for crowdfunded independent games, has shifted away from making the game toward promotion and marketing.”<sup>27</sup> Failure to maintain a high level of player engagement prior to the game's release could cost a studio the goodwill of its fan community, as Magnus Games has shown.

## Metronomik and No Straight Roads

In contrast to the Gan brothers who entered indie development without any industrial experience, Wan Hazmer and Daim Dziauddin, the two co-founders of Metronomik are both industry veterans who previously worked with Japanese conglomerates on famous franchises. Hazmer was the lead designer of *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix, 2016), whereas Dziauddin is an artist known for his concept arts for the *Street Fighter* series (Capcom). The experiences and industrial connections already accumulated by Hazmer and Dziauddin while working for big corporates ensured their smooth transition into indie development. The establishment of Metronomik was received with great fanfare by the Malaysian developer communities because of the pedigree of its two co-founders, who chose to return to Malaysia after having successful above-the-line careers in Japan.

The narratives surrounding the establishment of Metronomik were inflected by an undertone of nationalism, associated with the transnational transfer of skills from Japan to Malaysia initiated by the homecoming of the studio's two co-founders. Hazmer serves as the face of Metronomik, being the figure who attends interviews and promotional events, while Dziauddin largely remains behind the scenes. For this reason, accounts of Hazmer's leaving behind a career at a leading Japanese game company to return to Malaysia, as well as his ideology behind the formation of Metronomik, were highly publicized in Malaysian media outlets. In fact, Hazmer already made a name for himself among the Malaysian gaming communities before his return through his work on *Final Fantasy XV*. News about the appearance of Malaysian food culture in *Final Fantasy XV* (Figure 2), a triple-A mainline title from the world-renowned Japanese role-playing game series, went viral among Malaysian players in 2016: the game features Malaysian staple dish and drink, namely *roti canai* (a type of flatbread) and *teh tarik* (pulled tea).<sup>28</sup> Malaysian players soon found out that Hazmer, who served as one of the game's lead designers, was responsible for the insertion of Malaysian food culture into *Final Fantasy XV*. Subsequently, Hazmer received the nationalist moniker "the man who put Malaysia on the *Final Fantasy XV* map" from the Malaysian media.<sup>29</sup> Hazmer's newfound reputation contributed to the high level of media attention surrounding his departure from Square Enix to establish Metronomik in Malaysia six months later.

Hazmer's nationalist positioning aligns with his agenda to raise the profile of Malaysia in the global videogame industry via the establishment of Metronomik. Hazmer has proclaimed in numerous interviews that the main reason he chose to leave Square Enix despite being on track to rise higher through the ranks after the completion of *Final Fantasy XV* was his desire to share the knowledge he acquired from working with a top Japanese developer with his fellow Malaysian developers: "No one asked me to leave but I felt that the time was right to make my next step and do my part to uplift the Malaysian game industry. . . . Not many people get the chance to work on a triple-A game and I wanted to bring back the Japanese philosophy of making games to Malaysia for a new generation of game developers."<sup>30</sup>

Hazmer's intention resonates with the Malaysian government, which expended significant resources since the 2010s to develop the nation's videogame industry. In a 2018 interview, Hazmer reveals that the support provided by the Malaysian government to local game developers as a significant factor in his decision to establish Metronomik in Malaysia: "When I left





Figure 2. Final Fantasy XV (2016).

for Japan in 2008 [the governmental support] wasn't that strong, but when I visited in 2015 I noticed how strong that support had become."<sup>31</sup> That said, instead of attributing Hazmer's return to the intensified governmental support, it would be more accurate to state that his return was coordinated in conjunction with the government's plan to intensify its support

for the local videogame industry in mid-2010s.<sup>32</sup> Considering that the Malaysian videogame industry had suffered from brain drain in the past due to a lack of opportunities, the return of Hazmer was promoted as a turning point that represents the culmination of the Malaysian government's efforts to nurture a conducive environment for local developers.

Seeing the creation of a successful IP as the first step to proving his studio's worth to the Malaysian videogame industry, Hazmer set out to develop *No Straight Roads* with a core team of fifteen members at Metronomik. *No Straight Roads* (Figure 3) is an action-adventure



Figure 3. *No Straight Roads* (2020).

game in which the players play as either May or Zuke, the duo that make up the indie rock band Bunk Bed Junction, on a journey to free Vinyl City from the dictatorship of an EDM (electronic dance music) empire, the eponymous No Straight Roads corporation. The game is essentially a series of long boss fights in which players engage in a rhythm-based combat system that requires them to time their combat moves based on audio cues.

Hazmer's intention to raise the global profile of the Malaysian videogame industry is reflected in his game design philosophy, which prioritizes the competitiveness of a game in the global market. *No Straight Roads* is a blend of various aesthetic influences, especially American cartoon and Japanese anime. In reference to his colleagues at Metronomik, Hazmer states that "they have this mindset where we have to make it VERY Japanese or we have to make it *God of War*" (a Sony franchise that exemplifies the Western triple-A aesthetic) and hence it was difficult to find a balance at first. The incorporation of these aesthetics into *No Straight Roads* agrees with the trend toward globalization in Southeast Asian game art observed by Peichi Chung: "A notable sense of nationhood has been gradually disappearing and replaced by a new form of localism, in which Southeast Asian media producers are internationalizing their production to accommodate global consumption patterns."<sup>33</sup> That said, Metronomik retains traces of its Malaysian identity by integrating Malaysian cultural elements into the game's blend of global aesthetics.

In contrast to *Re:Legend*, *No Straight Roads* has a relatively straightforward development process, owing to Hazmer's experienced leadership. Hazmer divulges in an interview that Metronomik would only tackle the development of one IP at a time within a fixed period to "help discipline the team from adding too many unnecessary features that could turn their game into a bloated one."<sup>34</sup> Metronomik announced in 2019 its partnership with the London-based Sold Out (rebranded to Fireshine Games in 2022) to publish *No Straight Roads* worldwide. Released across home consoles and PC in August 2020, the game was a moderate success both critically and commercially. It recouped its development costs within a day of its release and hold a weighted score of 70 out of 100 on the review aggregator website Metacritic.<sup>35</sup> Seeing as numerous reviews of *No Straight Roads* have taken care to note that its developer is a Malaysian studio, the game has somewhat achieved its creator's goal to raise the global profile of the Malaysian videogame industry.<sup>36</sup> On the whole, Metronomik stands as the studio that has positioned itself most explicitly as a Malaysian entity among the three case studies.

## Streamline Studios and *Bake 'n Switch*

In contrast with Magnus Games and Metronomik, Streamline Studios is primarily a co-development studio that moved from abroad to Malaysia in 2010. Streamline Studios was founded in the Netherlands as a work-for-hire studio in 2001 and grew rapidly in 2008 after it adopted a co-development model that offers flexible art and content development support to its clients.<sup>37</sup> By this point, the studio was known for assisting with the development of triple-A franchises, including *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* and *Gears of War*. However, the growth of Streamline Studios was halted by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the studio

was forced to shutter its main facility in Amsterdam in 2009 after the loss of numerous contracts.<sup>38</sup> A year later, Streamline Studios announced the launch of its new studio in Malaysia.

Despite being a company founded in the Netherlands and headed by an American CEO, Alexander Fernandez, Streamline Studios adopted the position of a Malaysian developer. The company became an integral part of the Malaysian government's long-term plan to expand the local videogame industry, owing much to its timely relocation from Amsterdam to Malaysia in 2010. Fernandez describes the relocation of Streamline Studios as "a bold move that put [his company] on . . . 'the front lines' of the Malaysian government's multi-decade drive to turn the country into a knowledge economy, with digital industries like games at its center."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the relocation of Streamline Studios coincided with the founding of two other major Malaysian co-development studios, Passion Republic in 2009 and Lemon Sky Studios in 2011. Before the establishments of these studios, there were few chances for individual Malaysian developers to work on triple-A titles. By offering co-development works on famed triple-A franchises with multinational publishers, studios like Streamline become training grounds for local talents and hence are valuable institutions to growing the nation's videogame industry.

Among the triple-A projects that Streamline Studios was involved in, *Final Fantasy XV* and *Street Fighter V* (Capcom, 2016) were notable for having Malaysians in their core development teams, namely Hazmer and Dziauddin respectively. The fact that Streamline Studios were involved in the development of these projects alongside Hazmer and Dziauddin signals not only the ability of Malaysian developers to partake in triple-A developments, but also the interconnectedness of the videogame workforce in a globalized industry. The intricacy of this situation is encapsulated in a 2016 Malaysia preview session of *Final Fantasy XV* facilitated by MDEC and attended by both Hazmer and Fernandez. Hazmer remarked at the occasion: "I can't believe I'm sitting right here as a Malaysian, representing a Japanese company to talk about the collaboration with a Malaysia-based company... Instead of just creating Malaysia-related assets, we decided to go further and tap into the local games industry."<sup>40</sup> Such collaborations should be viewed not as a mere coincidence, but rather the convergence of the efforts by Malaysian developers and the state government to elevate the profile of Malaysia in the global videogame industry.

After the success of *Re:Legend's* Kickstarter campaign and the announcement of *No Straight Roads*, both in 2017, Streamline Studios joined the rush for IP creation by unveiling *Bake 'n Switch* in 2018. Technically, Streamline Studios is not an indie entity, but it has chosen to adopt an indie position when creating its own IPs. Established in Malaysia about half a decade earlier than Magnus Games and Metronomik, Streamline Studios had much more time to grow via co-development works before venturing into IP creation. In March 2018, the company rebranded itself into Streamline Media Group and restructured into four divisions—Streamline Games, All Pixels, Streamline Studios, and Streamframe—to provide better targeted products and services to a wider range of clients.<sup>41</sup> The division of Streamline Games, in addition to providing end-to-end game development services, is also tasked with internal development of new IPs. Despite the company's extensive experience in co-developing triple-A titles, Streamline Games describes itself as "a veteran-led independent game development studio."<sup>42</sup> Such branding makes clear the scale of the company's undertaking from the outset, which also reduces the attendant risks. Subsequently, *Bake 'n Switch* was revealed by Streamline Games at Level Up KL 2018 as the studio's debut project.

While *Bake 'n Switch* was produced on the scale of and marketed as an indie project, like *Re:Legend* and *No Straight Roads*, the deeper pockets and industrial connections accumulated by Streamline Media Group prior to trying its hand at IP creation gave the company an edge over its competitors. *Bake 'n Switch* (Figure 4) is a couch co-op or PvP (player-versus-player)

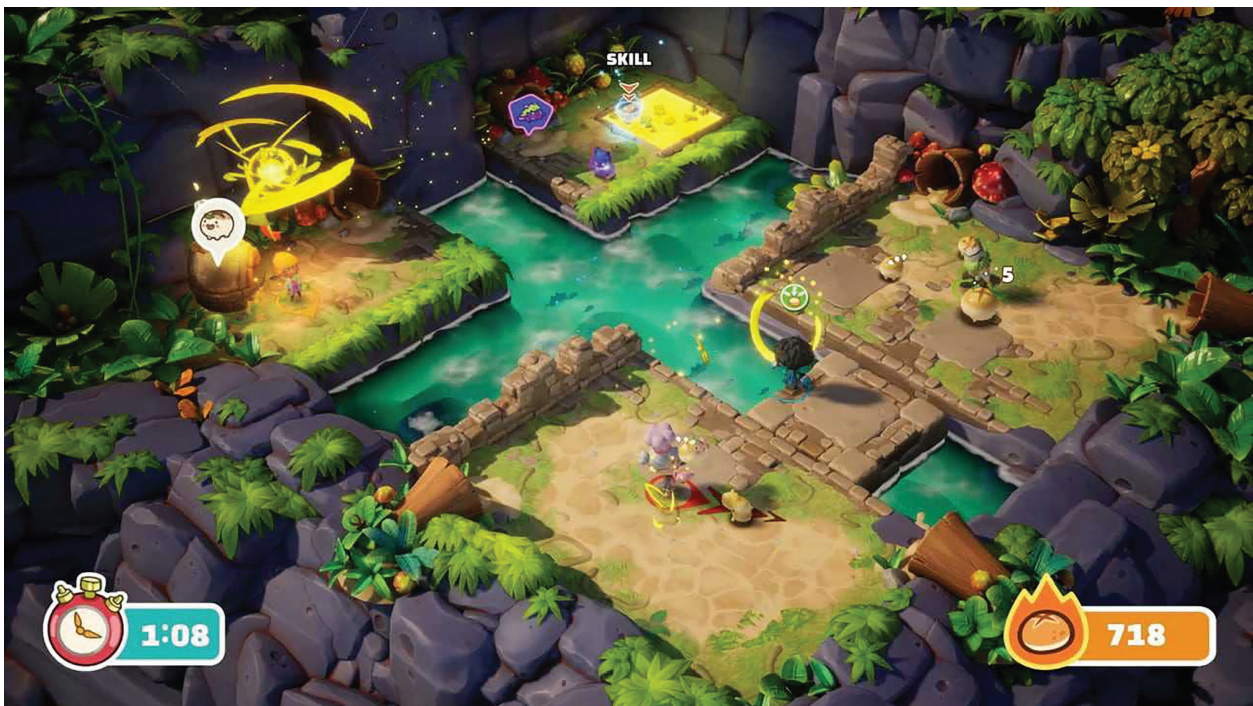


Figure 4. *Bake 'n Switch* (2020).

party brawler with cute baking-themed designs; players battle alongside or against each other in the game to bake bigger buns for winning points. After unveiling the project at Level Up KL, Streamline Games showcased *Bake 'n Switch* at the 2019 Reboot Develop Red, a Canadian boutique game conference. Shortly after, Streamline Games formed a partnership with Nintendo to include *Bake 'n Switch* in the lineup of Nintendo Indie World Showcase, a high-profile online presentation series. The high level of interest garnered by *Bake 'n Switch* subsequently prompted Streamline Games to expand their internal publishing division so that the company is better equipped to self-publish the game globally.<sup>43</sup>

Released to a middling score of 55 on Metacritic, *Bake 'n Switch* turned out to be a solid title that elevated the reputation of Streamline Games even if it was not quite the breakout hit that the company hoped for.<sup>44</sup> Prior to the game's release on PC and Switch in August 2020, Streamline Games also launched *Bake 'n Switch* on Steam Early Access in July 2019 and a Kickstarter campaign to add the online multi-player feature in April 2020. Officially, the game's launch on Early Access was meant to gather player feedback, while its Kickstarter campaign was necessitated by the urgency to add the online feature due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, both the early access and Kickstarter were not as important to Streamline Games as they were to Magnus Games. Streamline Games has its own Quality Assurance team to handle playtesting, which is the main purpose of early access but done by players. Nevertheless, early access could spread information about the game by word of mouth among players, which internal playtesting could not. In addition, it is unlikely for Streamline Games to run out of funds to implement an additional feature a few months before the game's release; the true reason for launching the Kickstarter could be inferred from a statement on the campaign webpage: "We were prepped for a *Bake 'n Switch* world tour to share the game. . . . When COVID-19 hit, it disrupted all best-laid plans."<sup>45</sup> That is, Streamline Games was primarily using Kickstarter not to gather funds but as a substitute for a promotional campaign when the pandemic forced it to cancel all in-person events. These marketing measures demonstrate the ingenuity and flexibility of Streamline Games as a veteran studio.

As of 2024, there are no significant changes to the operation of the three studios studied here. The only one to have announced a follow-up project is Metronomik: *Ondeh Ondeh*, another "audio-centric" game named after a rice-based dessert popular in Malaysia.<sup>46</sup> Magnus Games have since taken on a gig to develop a metaverse platform for the Malaysian government.<sup>47</sup> Streamline Studios, meanwhile, continues to expand its presence beyond Malaysia with the establishment of a Japanese studio.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Magnus Games' *Re:Legend*, Metronomik's *No Straight Roads*, and Streamline Games' *Bake 'n Switch* represent the first cohort of high-profile IP that helped establish Malaysia's reputation in the global videogame industry. Inversely, the globalization of the videogame industry, which accelerated in the 2010s in tandem with the rise of digital distribution, was essential to the formation of these three studios and how they pursue game developments. Magnus

Games could only bring *Re:Legend* to fruition owing to the online mentorship and global crowdfunding it received via Square Enix Collective and Kickstarter respectively; *Metronomik* and *No Straight Roads* were brought about by the transnational transfer of years of expertise that Malaysian developers accumulated while working with Japanese companies; the success of *Bake 'n Switch* was attributable to the skills and industrial connections developed by Streamline Media Group as a co-development studio for leading publishers around the world before venturing into IP creation. However, the successes of these Malaysian developers were facilitated not only by globalization but also by the aspiration of the Malaysian government to be represented in the global game development sector.

When juxtaposed with each other, these three case studies demonstrate that globalization underlies not only the increasingly heterogeneous production routes available within the Malaysian videogame field, but also the unexpected ways through which Malaysian developers are interconnected within the transnational network of game development. Magnus Games received mentorship from Square Enix Collective, the parent company of which was the former employer of Metronomik's Hazmer; Streamline Studios was involved in the development of two different Japanese triple-A games, namely Square Enix's *Final Fantasy XV* and Capcom's *Street Fighter V*, which Metronomik's co-founders Hazmer and Dziauddin had worked on respectively. Notably, the connections between Magnus Games, Metronomik, and Streamline Games are mediated by Japanese companies, chiefly Square Enix. The outsized presence of Japanese corporations in Malaysia's emerging videogame industry is not coincidental but rather a reflection of the close affiliation that Malaysia has maintained with Japan since the introduction of the "Look East" policy in 1982. In fact, the Malaysian government actively pursued partnerships with Japanese entertainment conglomerates in the 2010s to accelerate the growth of the nation's videogame industry, which led to the opening of Malaysian branch studios by Bandai Namco in 2016 and Sony Interactive Entertainment in 2019.<sup>49</sup>

These heterogeneous development routes, however, are not equally accessible to all developers in the Malaysian videogame field. Rather, the heterogeneity of the routes available to Malaysian developers are hugely dictated by the proximity of these developers to KL and their association with government entities. This is due to the profound influence of state investment in shaping the Malaysian videogame industry, the physical infrastructure of which is concentrated in KL. While Keogh describes the videogame field as "the site in which creators take positions and compete to determine whose positions are the most authentic videogame maker positions," the Malaysian videogame field shows how strong state presence can inflect the foundation of the field, conflating authenticity with the nation brand.<sup>50</sup> That is, the accessibility to heterogeneity by Malaysian developers in a national industry heavily shaped by state investment is also determined by how successfully they position themselves as Malaysian within the global videogame industry. Often, success begets success, creating a cycle in which state support is more likely to go to internationally recognized Malaysian studios, making it more difficult for developers at the margin of the Malaysian videogame field to break into the Malaysian videogame industry.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to further evaluate the implication of a heavy state presence in the formation of a videogame field/industry, this article will hopefully inspire more research on this issue. In contrast to studies of game productions in North America,

western Europe, and Japan, often premised on a free-market economy guided by the invisible hand, the Malaysian production culture is patently shaped by governmental intervention within a semi-authoritarian state. As the impact of non-democratic regimes on game production culture is still an underexamined topic, I propose that scholars should approach this topic without equating the lack of democracy as a form of economic regression from a moralizing stance. The significance of such mindset becomes salient when we consider how the developmental paradigm of traditional centers, which are all rooted in democratic regimes and the economic dominance of which is reliant on the stability of a democratic world order, is widely taken as *normative* in game studies. Awareness of one's research positionality and ethics is paramount if we are to commit to understanding developments of game cultures beyond the traditional centers on their own terms instead of resubjecting them to imperialist ideologies.

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