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The future of Australia's video game development industry

Swinburne's contribution to the Senate Standing Committee

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The future of Australia's video game development industry

Introduction

Swinburne University of Technology ("Swinburne") is pleased to make this submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications, in relation to the future of Australia's Video Gaming Industry.

Swinburne is a strong contributor to Victoria's video games industry through the provision of digital media research, games development, skills training and expert knowledge. Over the past decade, digital games have emerged as a major cultural platform with a unique language that integrates aspects of many creative industries, including architecture, music, creative writing, theatre, visual art and design; these broaden the discipline's expressive potential and communications effectiveness, alongside more widely recognised connections such as film and animation.

Globally, the video games industry is a strong contributor to the advancement of STEM education in schools, vocational and higher education and within industry. Importantly, video games can readily combine interdisciplinary knowledge for wide ranging applications to learning. A good example of this is the ACER STEM games, of which Swinburne is a major partner, and where the 2014 winning game won the iAwards for best school project and is now being commercialized (https://www.stemgames.org.au/).

Swinburne's video games student profile is in what is coming to be known as the AA space in game development – original titles produced by small and medium sized teams or businesses and released to a global market. Swinburne is preparing students to work in this space as the direction of the Australian video games industry, particularly the large Melbourne based sector, is growing this area as a long term prospect for the discipline.

Alongside entertainment, Swinburne sees the area of 'serious games development' as a niche market where Australia could emerge to be a major player. We see key components of this market being in the world healthcare arena; for example, developing games-based health education products for both patients, and for health care professional education. Another arena is the corrections and offender space.

a) How can Australia best set regulatory and taxation frameworks that will allow the local video game development industry to grow and fully meet its potential as a substantial employer?

As a creative industry, the video game sector is innately driven by originality and innovation; implicit in this model is economic risk. To mitigate the precarious fiscal security of the market, a supportive Australian regulatory framework is needed, to sustain the industry. This could include tax credits (such as in the United Kingdom and Canada), lenient legislation for the industry concerning start-ups, entrepreneurial endeavours and the possibility of bankruptcy (as in the United States), and finally robust industry investment (e.g. Japan's 'Cool Japan Initiative').

Providing a stable sustainable environment for creativity and innovation to thrive is vital to the growth of the video game industry. It will require government policy that facilitates long term engagement not only with industry, but with those who supply labour, technology and infrastructure.

Recommendation One

That the government ensures a regulatory framework for Australia's video game industry that supports development and growth of the industry, and makes it attractive to international players.

b) How can Australia attract video game companies to set up development operations in Australia and employ local staff?

Swinburne believes that both Australian and international video games companies are drawn to developer communities that offer vibrant and strong networks, access to quality graduates and which operate within a supportive government regulatory framework. Hotspots of creativity activity can readily become innovation ecosystems so it is important to find those hotspots. The federal government can seek these out and nurture their development by providing multilayered support that assists such communities to grow and attract international players.

An alluring Australian video games sector requires a talented workforce. Swinburne believes that growing the employment opportunities for Australian games graduates will increase their employability and potentially provide them with a pipeline to jobs. It also ensures a strong talent pool for international games companies that relocate. Many Australian games graduates do not have the means or drive to form their own creative company and because they are without industry experience, finding gainful employment can be difficult.

Another area that is worthy of development for the Australian video games industry is cross-cultural knowledge sharing through international student exchange, and attendance at international conferences.

Lastly, funding and energy directed at attracting established conferences and conventions to Australia, such as the funding already in place for the tremendously successful PAX Australia, would be invaluable in strengthening ties with industry overseas and showcasing what Australia has to offer the industry.

Recommendation Two

Swinburne proposes a government initiative whereby high level games graduates are paid, via a government scheme, to undertake an internship at an Australian games development company. This would provide graduates with a chance to gain experience and perhaps a job, and the company a paid employee who brings a fresh and current mind to the task. This scheme may also encourage game development companies to hire more graduates and would contribute meaningfully to the general work culture of the industry.

Recommendation Three

Government incentives and schemes to aid Australian developers to attend large overseas video game conferences is a must for cross-cultural encouragement. A way to increase student exchange within the industry would also be appropriate.

Recommendation Four

Work with industry to attract more international video game conferences and lectures.

c) How could export opportunities from Australia's local video game industry be maximised?

Due to stringent classification laws, Australia's relationship with the international video games industry is strained. Australia is not viewed as being supportive of other country's cultural products, due to our many refusals to classify material thought to be offensive by our Classification or Review boards. This has harmed Australia's relationship with the international community. With the advent of an R18+ rating, we should see less issues arising but we cannot guarantee that video game censorship will not remain rife in Australia. Censorship runs deeper than laws and is culturally ingrained.

Recommendation Five

A wider cross-community representation of Australians on both the Classification and Review boards may help to mitigate some of the current censorship issues and therefore aid Australia's reputation in the video game industry internationally.

d) Any other related matters

As the role of games in culture and society expands, it is important to nurture a pluralistic approach to trans-disciplinary collaboration and crossover throughout the creative industries.

With that in mind, the value of cross-cultural research and development ("R&D") should be recognized as equally important to Australia's creative output. While technology-based R&D is needed

to provide new platforms and open up new possibilities, equally important is the application of these technologies and the crafting of new hybrid solutions.

Recommendation Six

The government can support new combinations of unexpected disciplines in cultural R&D projects; the application of game design to new areas; original games that tell stories in new ways; and projects that are not outcome-oriented but pioneer and explore new facets of the creative industries,.

Swinburne thanks the following for their contribution to this paper:

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Sincerely,

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