





SAY G'DAY

The rise of the Australian indie game

BY SARAH THWAITES

Gamescom 2022's Australian Pavilion was the biggest country partnership in the event's history. With 36 studios showcasing games, it was bustling with creatives from all over the country, and in the wake of the Australian Government's plans for a Digital Games Tax Offset, there was much cause for celebration.

Boasting BAFTAs, D.I.C.E Awards, and Golden Joysticks, the creativity pouring out of Australia is undeniable. To understand how the country's indie games have impacted the industry over the past few years, I spoke to several developers, exploring the phenomenon and the factors that made it possible.

Pivot To Video (Games)

Unable to transfer his retail job after moving to New South Wales, James Bendon made a deal with his wife. For one year, he wanted to work on Dinkum, a lifestyle farming sim set in a fantasy land inspired by Australia. A year quickly turned into three – and eventually five. “I just wanted to finish something because I’ve made so many prototypes that I haven’t shown anyone except friends and family,” Bendon says.

While Bendon still considers Dinkum unfinished, it launched into Steam Early Access in July of 2022 and now sports an “Overwhelmingly Positive” rating with almost 10,000 user reviews. “My wish list numbers indicated a reasonable amount of people would buy the game, enough that maybe I would make minimum wage for the five years I worked on it,” says Bendon, who didn’t receive any government support during development.

Where larger studios have been eligible for grants and support, many small-scale studios don’t qualify, leaving some to self-finance their ideas or let them go in favor of stable employment with bigger teams. Bendon believes the support available is extremely valuable, but the government could do more.

Now based in Far North Queensland, he finds it isolating for rural developers. Where booming capital cities boast international events, limited access to those meetups can make finding a sense of community difficult. This isolation can push talent into capital cities, which is a costly option for those just starting.

James Bendon's
Dinkum
↙



In 2010, Nick Pearce began modding Skyrim while working as a “very bored lawyer” in Melbourne, Victoria. Twelve years later, that process would net him a BAFTA nomination.

The Forgotten City is a time-traveling mystery set in an ancient underground city. From 2012 to 2015, Pearce spent 1,700 hours working on that concept in Bethesda’s Creation Kit, a tool used to mod Skyrim. After uploading it to Nexus Mods, it made history as the first mod to receive an Australian Writers Guild Award. The ceremony rewards excellence in writing in more orthodox mediums, like film and TV, so a video game breaking through made waves.

“I realized making story-driven games was all I wanted to do,” Pearce says. “I looked for work, but there were no interesting jobs here in Australia at the time. Necessity being the mother of invention, I quit my job and founded my own studio.”

With some help from the government creative development agency VicScreen and years of professional development, Pearce’s studio, Modern Storyteller, rebuilt the mod into a brand-new beast. The Forgotten City launched in 2021 to both critical and commercial acclaim. *Game Informer* called it “a beautifully penned story loaded with meaningful player choice.”

Currently, Australia doesn’t house many large studios, which is instrumental in fostering a strong community of indie developers. “We have a lot of brave developers out there in the indie wilderness, helping each other thanks to the sense of camaraderie and taking big creative risks because they don’t have corporate overlords telling them what to make,” Pearce says.

Even so, there is a delicate balance at play right now. For small developers, funding and infrastructure is a dream. But with the push for more triple-A studios to build offices and potentially poach independent talent, the scene’s most innovative ideas could be shelved in favor of a different cause.


Pearce is hopeful that “the establishment of some bigger studios and the growth of some successful indies will create a lot of jobs for the juniors here, and train them up, so there are more skilled senior staff too. But that’ll take time.”

In Australia, this access cap disproportionately affects those with limited income. But with open-source tools and free online tutorials, doors are opening slowly, allowing a wider range of people to tell their stories.





Left: Modern Storyteller's The Forgotten City

Bottom: Witch Beam's Unpacking




“Australian video games can be fun, creative works that explore personal topics. They can also aid tourism and interest in Australia, teach lessons about culture, and engage people of all ages,” says Leah Williams, journalist and content lead for Australian games site *GamesHub*.

But despite their positive impact, outdated media coverage regarding violence in video games – paired with years of age rating and classification debates – have left a mark. A long-standing disconnect between video game communities and governing bodies has caused serious friction. It wasn't until 2013 that the Australian Government approved an R 18+ rating, allowing games featuring mature themes to be sold. Yet even with this change, games like 2021's *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut* can still be refused classification due to its depiction of adult themes, like drug use, sex, and violence.

The Stress Of Moving (On)

Sanatana Mishra, Tim Dawson, and Jeff Van Dyke met at SEGA Studios Australia, working on games in the *Total War* series and *Castle of Illusion* starring Mickey Mouse. They were in the early stages of their careers, and the triple-A cycle was making them antsy. “The way we were making games was unhealthy in a lot of ways... people don't get into games to make bad things in unhealthy, physically painful ways,” Mishra says.

Van Dyke left first, followed by Dawson. After Mishra was unsuccessful in looking for a new role, they suggested to Dawson that they try something new. “I said, ‘Why don't we just kind of try our own thing? Because we were young enough, and on that precipice, you know, late 20s, where you can completely fail at life, and then maybe still have another chance,’” Mishra says.

In 2013, with very little money behind them, the duo took the plunge, founding an indie studio called Witch Beam. Quickly finding they didn't possess all the skills necessary to realize their ambitions, old friend Jeff Van Dyke re-entered the picture as Witch Beam's composer and sound designer.

Screen Australia's Interactive Games Fund, a government-led program that's supported Aussie developers like Defiant Developments, makers of the *Hand of Fate* series, provided Witch Beam with a \$50,000 grant. Mishra stresses the importance of this state funding, as local funding was far behind in its understanding of the industry.

“[The Interactive Games Fund] disappeared six months after we got it,” Mishra explains. “We kept our grant, which was good, but for everyone else... it was kind of like a resurgence of game development in Australia, and then a dark age immediately ensued, where only the companies that had gotten significant support were able to flourish for a little while.”

In lighter news, Screen Australia announced in July 2022 that it was funding 31 Aussie-made games as part of its Games: Expansion Pack fund, hopefully making way for another resurgence. And in January 2023, the new Labour government announced it was reviving The Australian Interactive Games Fund. After the dramatic pull in funding by the Liberal Government Mishra describes happening a decade earlier, this new influx of money and support is a positive step that will breathe more life into the flourishing indie scene in Australia.

After a “grueling” five years of development, Witch Beam’s first game, Assault Android Cactus, garnered praise from critics in 2015, but a lack of commercial success pushed the Brisbane-based team toward its next project. Enter Wren Brier, a game artist and narrative designer Mishra describes as “the soul” of Unpacking. Brier worked with Witch Beam to bring this heartwarming zen puzzler – in which you arrange your possessions to fit in a series of pixelated homes – to fruition.

With its impactful underlying story, Unpacking was an overwhelming success, delivering Witch Beam Game of the Year nominations, GDC awards, and even two BAFTAs. Soon after, the team was in several meetings with companies looking to invest, asking for the next game. “It boiled down to us talking internally and going, ‘Even if somebody gave us a bunch of money in an investment, what would we do with it,’” Mishra says. “It was just not for us because we think our games are good because we make them.”

While overseas events have featured scores of Aussie games, the country itself houses two large conventions, often to sold-out

crowds: PAX Aus and Melbourne International Games Week. While Nintendo, PlayStation, and Xbox gave them a miss in 2022 and are generally distancing themselves from having space on consumer convention show floors, this only creates more opportunities to shift the focus inward.

Williams mentions spotting Shuhei Yoshida, Head of PlayStation Indies, at this year’s PAX Aus. “According to reports from local studios, he spent a lot of time in PAX Rising checking out Australian games, and I know his presence and interest was encouraging for a lot of developers.”

“PAX definitely felt like an indie showcase this year,” Mishra says. Instead of funneling consumers towards triple-A booths as in previous years, the indies were situated right near the entrance in 2022. “What we have here now is Australian-owned and operated businesses that are not reliant on somebody sitting in San Francisco doing a mathematical calculation, and that’s awesome.”

Resurgence And Resurrection

Like many great success stories, Massive Monster’s origins lay in the death of an industry. Specifically, Flash, a software system with a famously tragic end that pushed a lot of developers into the greener pastures of games. At least, that’s what happened with Julian Wilton, Jay Armstrong, and James Pearmain.

After finding success with a cheery first game, The Adventure Pals, the team had another brush with death in the form of Never Give Up, a hardcore platformer with a darker tone that turned out to be a massive flop. “Despite its name, we should have given up on it,” Wilton says. “It nearly brought an end to the company.” The trio took the knock and moved forward, working on its next project, Cult of the Lamb.

Left: All Possible Future's The Plucky Squire

Bottom: Witch Beam's Assault Android Cactus



Cult's humble origins lay in a prototype that mixed a rogue-like dungeon crawler with a base-building colony simulator. The team all agreed it had potential. "We tried many ideas, from flying on the back of a giant whale to creating and running your own hell," Wilton says. Ultimately, Wilton's love of horror led the team to focus on the occult.

A heavy focus on Twitch gave Massive Monster an advantage. "Devolver Digital [Cult of the Lamb publisher] knew that the game would translate very well to streamers and their audience due to their relationship," Wilton said. Massive Monster added Twitch integration. Streamers could indoctrinate their viewers live on air, which led to an explosion of views, helping Cult of the Lamb find an audience.

The power of social media has helped Australian developers like Massive Monster spread their creative messages to the world. "There are few opportunities to take your game to the next level in Australia, and once they venture out [overseas], it can be hard for them to get their foot in the door," says Wilton. "We need more platforms and critical players to continue to make their way down here to connect to the industry through Melbourne International Games Week rather than us going to them."

Games industry veterans Jonathan Biddle and James Turner met working at UK developer Blue52 at the turn of the century. Nearly 20 years later, they founded their own indie studio, All Possible Futures. Turner had moved to Japan to conceptualize Pokémon for Game Freak, while Biddle, who recently relocated to Australia, had been designing games like Stealth Bastard and The Swords of Ditto, evocative of their shared inspiration – Nintendo. The duo is currently working on The Plucky Squire, a dimension-crossing adventure that Devolver Digital picked up.

Despite their shared experience, Biddle's relocation to Australia offered a new perspective. "My experience is limited here, but it seems that the challenges are largely the same as in Europe, just a little more acute. Can I make this idea off my own back? Will I find a publisher willing to support me?"

As the former Design Director of publisher Curve Digital, Biddle has observed the rise of indie games throughout their career. But the relative youth of Australia's scene means it's unencumbered by some of the older establishment ways of thinking.



"In those earlier days, the idea of making your own games and making enough money to make more was really kind of a fantasy," they say. "The democratization of game development engines like Unity and Unreal has dramatically changed that. Early on in my career, games were very much made by the same type of people with the same types of ideas. Now the medium is much more open, and anyone is able to express themselves with it."

The Australian game industry has growing pains. Government-backed tax incentives will help, but despite all the awards and attention, there are sizable hurdles to clear. "The newly announced federal Digital Games Tax Offset is only relevant to companies spending a minimum of AU \$500,000 on video game development projects," Williams said. As a result, smaller independent developers may miss out on support from federal programs.

Targeted regional investment and support for underrepresented groups within the space are needed to help fortify a diverse range of stories. More opportunities for prospective developers to train and get industry jobs without living in Australia's major cities are also necessary. Organizations like Indigitek, a non-profit focused on increasing the participation of Indigenous people in the technology sector, will play an important part in the industry's overall success going forward. By amplifying more voices and stories, everyone reaps the benefits.

Difficulties aside, developers in the scene share an overwhelming sense of optimism, whether they're a few games deep or just working on their debut. The watchful eye of the world is welcomed in Australia. In fact, you could say it's invited. ■

Massive Monster's Cult of the Lamb