

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

My name is Zhia Zariko (she/her), and I am a media cultures academic, video games tertiary educator, and the founder and lead of a video game studio here in Australia.

Video games are unarguably one of the most prominent and powerful forms of media in the contemporary age. Numerous research has emerged on their impact in cultural spheres and social circles, and this direction has largely been driven by amoral, capitalist, and patriarchal structures that put profit over people.

Independent games development has been fraught with financial barriers that these larger corporations do not need to struggle against. There is a direct link between organised online hate groups that condense around games and the current rise in neo-fascist and neo-Nazi movements globally, which has in turn propelled the rise of the 'manosphere'.

This is not the fault of games, but rather the result of games being dismissed for the impactful cultural explorations that they are.

More funding is needed to experiment, explore, and create in games in a way that meaningfully combats this significant impact. This needs to go beyond feminist games, queer-coded games, and games that are overt in their discursive resistance, and also include games intended for mainstream commercial success that challenge established harmful narratives and ideologies.

Australia's government funding has been significant in its support of independent developers finding success, assisting with titles such as Cult of the Lamb, Unpacking, Untitled Goose Game, Hollow Knight, and more. But games continues to be dismissed as immature forms of entertainment designed for youth, rather than the significantly meaningful form of psychosocial engagement.

The largest and most significant issue within the games industry is finances. At this stage, finances are largely controlled by the massive profit companies, which hoard the wealth accumulated by games. Studios close despite successful titles, and the venture capitalist wealth grows. Every year games makes more money than the year previously, yet constantly we have closures of studios due to this greed.

Games needs to not be treated like a gig culture in which passionate developers are exploited by those financially invulnerable, but as a stable source of income that can provide meaningful forms of self-exploration for countless people. It can counter the 'manosphere', it can support the development of intelligence and critical thinking, it can engage in empathy.

It is important that we don't treat games as a subsidy of the software and technical industries, but as the forefront of cultural development. We can either choose to steer the ship, or meet the iceberg.