

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public

Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

Shaun Bartlett, independent tabletop game designer, [REDACTED] WA

I am submitting in a personal capacity as an independent tabletop game designer based in [REDACTED], with a portfolio of games designed for free print-and-play distribution. I design games that model real-world systems so players can develop systems literacy through play. One example:

I designed Winter Den because my daughter didn't understand why fairness and equality aren't the same thing. Explaining it wasn't working. So I built a game where five animals share an underground den across seven days, each with different needs, skills, and vulnerabilities. Some forage food faster. Some build warmth better. Some can shelter others. And when resources run short, the strongest claim first. She played it. She got it. No explanation required.

This submission focuses on Pillar 5 (Engaging the Audience), with supporting comment on Pillar 3.

PILLAR 5: ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

Tabletop games are uniquely effective at producing systems literacy. Unlike film, television or most digital games, tabletop play replaces hidden logic with a physical, social laboratory. Players make decisions, the system pushes back, and they see why outcomes happen. The insight is owned, not delivered.

Winter Den is one example. Others in my portfolio model the pressure of solo emergency department management, climate economics under shifting incentives, and how truth mutates when rewritten for engagement. None of these games tells the player what to think. They produce the experience and trust the player to make meaning from it.

This is a cultural capability distinct from narrative media, with direct application in Australian schools, libraries, aged care settings, therapy practices, and community programs. My twenty-year goal is for systems literacy games to accompany standard education curriculum across disciplines. The lever the next National Cultural Policy can pull is recognition: a clear statement that tabletop design is a legitimate creative practice, and that integration into education, health and community programs is supported.

PILLAR 3: CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST

I publish for free because the alternative is not viable. Royalty rates of 5-8 percent of wholesale, three to four years between design and first payment, and 20,000 to 100,000 dollars in upfront capital for self-publishing put commercial pathways out of reach for most independent designers. Free print-and-play distribution removes that gate. Games can reach players, classrooms, and communities at no cost. The trade-off is that the work is sustained entirely on personal time and unpaid labour.

This is not a complaint. It is a description of what working as a tabletop designer in Australia currently looks like, without any federal arts or cultural funding pathway. Designers like me are not asking the policy to fund the work directly. We are asking the policy to recognise the work exists.

Recognition first. Stability, funding and growth follow. The cultural, educational and community potential of Australian tabletop design is significant and largely untapped. What the next National Cultural Policy can do is make it visible in the framework that decides which creative practices Australia supports, so that potential can be reached.