

Games Are the Art Form of Our Time

Why Australia's next National Cultural Policy should treat video games as culture, and why regional Australia, and Tasmania in particular, is where that investment will go furthest.

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SUBMISSION

National Cultural Policy

consultation

24 May 2026

Cultural policy papers almost always open by assuring us that art and culture matter to the fabric of society. It is true, and it is also the easiest sentence in the document to write. The harder and more useful question is which art and culture Australians actually live in from day to day. Increasingly, the honest answer is video games: 82% of us play them, the average player is 35, and women now make up just over half of all players [5]. A cultural policy serious about meeting people where their cultural lives already are cannot keep treating an art form that most of the country plays as a footnote.

Summary

The case. Video games are among the most widely experienced art forms in Australia. In 2025, 82% of Australians played them, and the average player was 35 years old [5].

Games are made by artists, and they draw on most other creative disciplines at the same time. They are also one of the country's strongest cultural exports: the Australian game development sector earned \$608.5 million in the 2025 financial year, and the overwhelming majority of its revenue is earned overseas (93% in 2024) [3,4].

Because a finished game is a digital file sold online, it carries no freight and no distance cost. That makes games well suited to regional Australia, and especially to a state where no location is classified as a major city [11].

What I ask the next policy to do:

1. Fund games as culture, not only as industry, by creating multi-year operational funding for studios that produce new work each year, in the way performing arts companies are already funded, with priority for the regions.
2. Lower or tier the \$500,000 threshold on the Digital Games Tax Offset so that small and regional studios can use it.
3. Add a regional loading to federal arts and games funding to offset the costs of distance.
4. Support individual game makers as artists, through grants, fellowships and fair pay, not only support aimed at companies.

5. Fund the organisations and events that build skills and keep talent in the regions.
6. Commission Australian games in the public interest, preserve the games already made here, and resource First Nations led games practice.

1 Who I am, and who I speak for

I write in several capacities, and they support one another.

I am the President of [Tasmanian Game Makers Inc.](#) [12], the peak body for the state's games community, which supports more than 500 members across Tasmania.

I co-founded [Secret Lab](#) [13], the longest running game studio in the state, now in its eighteenth year. Its work includes the BAFTA Award-winning game *Night in the Woods* and the *ABC Play School* games made for Australia's public broadcaster.

I co-created [Yarn Spinner](#) [13], open-source narrative software written in Tasmania that has become one of the most widely used tools for writing dialogue and story in games, found in thousands of titles worldwide.

I am also a practising artist and technologist. I hold a PhD in computer science, I have written more than twenty technical books for publishers including O'Reilly Media, and I work as a researcher and historian. I help run events that hold technical and creative communities together, including */dev/world*, the longest running Apple technology conference not run by Apple, and *Level Up Tasmania*, the state's games showcase and conference.

I make this submission on behalf of [Tasmanian Game Makers](#) and its members, and I draw on my own work as a developer, artist, educator and historian. I work where games, the arts, education and regional development meet, and that is the position this submission argues from. Games are culture, they are made by artists, and the funding system only half recognises this, especially for people who are not based in a mainland capital.

This submission contains only information suitable for publication.

2 Games are a major art form, artistically and commercially

The evidence at a glance

- In 2025, 82% of Australians played video games, the average player was 35, and women were 51% of players, just ahead of men at 48%. [5]
- Government data ranks digital games development as the fastest-growing of all cultural and creative activities in Australia, growing 15.9% a year and from \$92 million to \$336 million in cultural GDP between 2014-15 and 2023-24. [22]
- Australian game development earned \$608.5 million in the 2025 financial year, and 93% of the sector's revenue came from exports. [3,4]
- Australians spent \$3.8 billion on video games and related hardware in 2024. [23]
- No part of Tasmania is classified as a major city; the whole state is regional, rural or remote. [11]
- In the United Kingdom, an independent evaluation found the national games fund returned between £3.80 and £7.30 of value for every £1 invested. [20]

What games are made from

A single game can require writing, music, sound design, visual art, animation, voice and character performance, interaction and systems design, and software engineering, usually several of these at the same time. This is the artistic case in plain terms: games are one of the few forms where writers, musicians, visual artists and programmers build a single work together.

For many people, games are now where they read stories, hear new music and see new art.

The audience is large and broad. IGEA's *Australia Plays 2025* study, run with Bond University, found that 82% of Australians play video games, that the average player is 35 years old, and that women now make up 51% of players, just ahead of men at 48% [5].

A policy that aims to engage audiences and to reflect a place for every story cannot treat the form most Australians use as a minor concern.

Games also carry place and voice. A game written in Tasmania can hold a recognisably Australian sensibility and still reach an audience of millions overseas, as Australian films, books and music do. When games are funded and described only as products, that cultural value goes unrecognised, and so does their contribution to Australia's reputation abroad.

This cultural value is also growing fast. On the government's own measure, digital games development has been the fastest-growing of all cultural and creative activities in Australia over the past decade, lifting its cultural and creative GDP from \$92 million to \$336 million between 2014-15 and 2023-24 [22].

Games do what we ask of art If your picture of games is *Fortnite*, it is worth knowing the range. Games already do the things we value other art forms for. *Consume Me* examines dieting, disordered eating and body image. *Venba* tells the story of a Tamil immigrant family through food and culture. *That Dragon, Cancer* is about grief and the loss of a child. *Night in the Woods*, part of our work at Secret Lab, deals with depression, anxiety and the slow decline of a small town. These are not curiosities at the edge of the form. They use interaction to explore the same human territory as our best novels, films and theatre.

Games also support learning and wellbeing

Games also do practical work in people's lives. IGEA's *Australia Plays 2025* reports that Australians use games to relax and manage stress, and that players associate games with benefits such as building confidence and emotional resilience [5].

Making games is itself a strong way to learn, because it combines writing, art, music, design and problem solving in one activity. A policy that aims to engage audiences and to support wellbeing has good reason to take seriously the form most Australians already use.

What games earn

Games are an efficient cultural investment. In the 2025 financial year the Australian game development sector reported \$608.5 million in revenue, and many studios planned to keep hiring [3]. (That figure uses an improved revenue method, so it is best read alongside the previous year's measure rather than as pure growth.) Australians themselves spent \$3.8 billion on games and related hardware in 2024 [23].

The clearest single fact about the sector is its reliance on export: 93% of its revenue in the 2024 financial year came from customers outside Australia [4]. Games are made by small teams and sold worldwide.

A specific example: many art forms, made in Tasmania, played worldwide

It helps to look at actual work. *Night in the Woods*, part of Secret Lab's work, combined literary writing, hand drawn visual art, original music and performance, won a BAFTA Award, and reached players around the world. The *ABC Play School* games put trusted Australian children's content into an interactive form for the public broadcaster.

Yarn Spinner, the open-source narrative tool we built in Tasmania, has become a standard way for writers and developers to put dialogue and story into games, and its public showcase lists a wide range of the games built with it.

Work of this kind is already being made in Tasmania. With deliberate support, and not only in the capital cities, there could be much more of it.

Why this matters for the policy. Most Australians already engage with games, and most of what Australian studios earn comes from export [3,4,5]. Supporting games is investment in the country's largest cultural audience and one of its most export reliant creative industries, not assistance for a niche.

3 The weightless export

Tasmania's distance from major markets is usually treated as a problem. Under the Commonwealth's Modified Monash Model, no part of Tasmania is classified as a major city; the whole state is regional, rural or remote [11]. For most exports this matters, because freight, travel and the shelf life of goods all add costs that grow with distance.

Games remove that cost. A finished game is a digital file: it is sold and downloaded online, so there is no freight, no inventory and no spoilage. A studio in Hobart, Launceston or Burnie reaches the same online storefronts, on the same day, as a studio in London or Tokyo.

This is why a game is a weightless export. The main inputs are skilled people and a reliable internet connection, and Tasmania already has the people: more than 500 game makers are organised through Tasmanian Game Makers, alongside a growing creative technology community.

The making of games travels as easily as the selling of them. Distributed and remote teams are now normal in game development. People collaborate across cities, states and countries using shared tools and version control, and a single game can involve contributors who never sit in the same room. Yarn Spinner, for example, is built and improved by contributors around the world. For Tasmania this counts twice. A team can span Hobart, Launceston and Burnie, or work across state borders, without anyone relocating, and a regional studio can bring in the right person wherever they live.

Most regional economies cannot export manufactured goods or live performance at scale, but they can export software. Backing games gives a small state a practical way to sell to the world, and gives skilled young people a reason to stay rather than move to the mainland for work.

This depends on one thing that government controls: connectivity. A weightless export still needs a reliable connection. For a regional studio, affordable and dependable broadband is basic infrastructure, in the way a sealed road is basic infrastructure for a farm. Where it exists, location stops mattering for this kind of work. Where it does not, people leave to find it.

4 Tasmania is ready

The groundwork is already in place, and Tasmanian studios already ship games worldwide.

Secret Lab's work includes *Night in the Woods* and the *ABC Play School* games. Giant Margar-

ita, in Hobart, has released titles including *Party Golf* and the Nintendo Switch game *Squidgies Takeover*, and works with University of Tasmania games students on commercial projects. *Smash Attack Studios* makes games including *ShapeVS* and the science fiction platformer *Nullstar: Solus*. Webbysoft, based in the Derwent Valley, made the narrative adventure *Bilkins' Folly*. These are a few examples among many [17,18].

Tasmanian Game Makers connects more than 500 members across the state, and Level Up Tasmania, our annual showcase and conference, brings developers together with industry and players each year. Secret Lab has made games here for eighteen years, and students across the state are learning to make games.

What is missing is steady, structural support that lets people build careers in Tasmania instead of taking their skills elsewhere. A modest, well designed investment would reach a community that is already organised and able to use it.

5 What Revive got right, and what is still missing

Revive, the National Cultural Policy for 2023 to 2027, was a real step forward. It committed \$286 million over four years, created Creative Australia, and restored funding cut in the previous decade [2]. For games, it re-established dedicated games funding through Screen Australia, and studios can use the Digital Games Tax Offset, a 30% refundable offset on qualifying Australian game development spending [6,7]. These measures work and should continue.

Four problems remain, and the next policy can address them.

1. The tax offset has a floor that excludes small and regional studios. The Digital Games Tax Offset requires at least \$500,000 of qualifying Australian development expenditure on a single game project [6]. A large studio passes that threshold easily; almost no Tasmanian, regional or early stage studio can. The main federal support for the industry is therefore out of reach for the studios that most need help to start.

2. Games are funded as industry, not as culture. Games sit with Screen Australia and the tax system, which treat them as an industry. The multi-year operational funding that keeps theatre companies, orchestras and galleries running year after year has no equivalent for games. We fund performing arts companies to exist and keep making work; we fund games one project, or one tax return, at a time.

3. National programs are concentrated in the mainland capitals. Game development employment is mostly on the east coast and in the major cities. Without a deliberate regional weighting, a national program becomes, in practice, a program for Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

4. This has gone wrong before. The Australian Interactive Games Fund, worth \$20 million and administered by Screen Australia, was created in 2012 and abolished in the 2014 federal Budget, with unspent money redirected. Studios closed, developers moved overseas, and the sector lost momentum it took years to rebuild [8,9]. *Revive* restored the fund, which is welcome. The next policy should make this support permanent and structural, so that a single Budget cannot remove it again.

6 How comparable countries fund games, and what it delivers

Treating games as part of cultural and creative policy is normal in the countries Australia compares itself to, and the results are measurable.

In the United Kingdom, the Video Games Tax Relief, introduced in 2014 to support culturally British games, returned about £1.72 in economic value for every £1 of relief in 2019 [19].

The United Kingdom also runs the UK Games Fund, which gives direct grants to studios, includ-

ing content grants of up to £250,000 [14]. A government evaluation found that the fund returned between £3.80 and £7.30 of value for every £1 invested, with a central estimate of £4.80; that the companies it backed attracted more private money than the fund cost (£18.2 million of private investment against £13 million of public funding); and that 74% of recipients said their game would not have been finished without it [20]. This is the kind of support, scaled from a first game to a growing studio, that Australia lacks below its tax offset threshold.

In France, the same national agency that supports film, the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, runs a selective grant program for video games, the Fonds d'aide au jeu vidéo, which funds writing, pre-production and production [15].

In Canada, Quebec has supported game development since the 1990s through refundable tax credits on eligible labour [16]. The result is one of the world's largest game development clusters: a study for La Guilde du jeu vidéo du Québec reports more than 280 studios and nearly 15,000 jobs in the province, adding about \$1.4 billion to its economy each year [21]. Global studios chose Montreal because the support made it worthwhile.

The pattern is consistent, and so are the returns. Grants reach small and early stage studios, national cultural agencies provide sustained funding, and the public money is repaid many times over. Australia's main federal support, by contrast, begins only at \$500,000 of qualifying spending [6], which sits at the least accessible end of this range.

7 Recommendations

Each recommendation sets out the problem, the proposed fix, and the relevant *Revive* pillar.

R1. Fund game studios for the long term, the way performing arts companies are funded

Pillar: Strong Cultural Infrastructure, and Centrality of the Artist.

Australia already funds whole art forms for the long term.

Terrapin, a puppetry company based in nipaluna (Hobart), receives \$250,000 a year from Arts Tasmania across 2024 to 2027, \$1 million over four years, as part of a National Performing Arts Partnership Framework agreement with Arts Tasmania and the federal arts body, the Australia Council, now Creative Australia [10]. That agreement lets a small company plan ahead and produce new work every year, instead of depending on one project at a time.

The same approach would work for games. I recommend a multi-year operational funding stream for game studios that commit to producing a regular body of work, with priority for studios based in the regions. Funded studios could make several games a year for children and for general audiences, and build a lasting catalogue rather than risking everything on a single release. In return for that public investment, funded studios should give back locally, by prioritising local hiring and mentoring, supporting their regional community, and premiering and showing their work here first.

Australian studios are small: the 141 studios surveyed in the 2025 financial year employed 2,443 people between them, an average of about seventeen each, and many are far smaller [3]. A funded studio of six to twelve people, supported for three years, could produce several small games each year, mentor newer developers, and still earn export income to reinvest. The cost of one such studio is modest next to the multi-year funding already given to performing arts companies [10].

R2. Lower or tier the Digital Games Tax Offset threshold

Pillar: Strong Cultural Infrastructure.

Keep the offset, but fix the gap beneath it. The Digital Games Tax Offset only delivers value at

large scale, on at least \$500,000 of qualifying spending on a single project [6], while the early grants available to new developers are typically much smaller, often \$100,000 or less. Between the two sits a missing middle: studios with a promising game and no way to fund the work that takes them from a prototype to something a publisher or investor will back.

Close that gap. Lower or tier the \$500,000 threshold so smaller amounts of qualifying spending still earn a proportionate offset, and add a mid-tier production funding stream, in the order of \$150,000 to \$500,000, aimed squarely at that stage. A higher offset rate for studios in Modified Monash 2 to 7 areas would recognise the extra cost of operating away from the major cities [11].

The aim is a continuous path from a first commercial game to a sustainable studio, instead of a single step that only large companies can take. The United Kingdom funds this kind of support directly through the UK Games Fund, which a government evaluation found returns several pounds of value for every pound spent [14,20].

R3. Add a regional loading to federal arts and games funding

Pillar: A Place for Every Story, and Strong Cultural Infrastructure.

Apply a regional weighting in funding decisions across Creative Australia and Screen Australia, and fund the travel and market access costs that distance adds. Game development employment is concentrated in the mainland capitals, so a national program without a regional weighting reproduces that concentration. An applicant in a state with no major city starts every national process at a disadvantage, and that disadvantage should be corrected in the design of the program, not left to chance. Practical measures matter here too, such as rolling travel grants so regional studios can attend the international events where deals and investment are made.

R4. Support individual game makers as artists

Pillar: Centrality of the Artist.

Most of the tax offset's value goes to companies, while sole traders and very small studios, which make up much of regional practice, see little of it. Make individual game developers eligible for the grants, fellowships and residencies open to other artists, and address the low and irregular pay common in games work. Recognise games within Creative Australia's support for artists, not only through Screen Australia's industry programs.

R5. Fund the organisations and events that build and keep talent

Pillar: Engaging the Audience, and Strong Cultural Infrastructure.

Community organisations and events are how a scattered group of hobbyists becomes a workforce. Provide multi-year operational funding to community peak bodies such as Tasmanian Game Makers, and to showcase and professional development events such as Level Up Tasmania. These bodies give people training, contacts, and a reason to build a career close to home. Fund regional hubs, incubators and shared spaces as well, because in a small market the value lies as much in proximity, mentors and networks as in the money itself.

R6. Commission Australian games in the public interest

Pillar: A Place for Every Story, and Engaging the Audience.

Public broadcasters and public cultural institutions should commission games as a matter of course. The *ABC Play School* games show what that looks like: trusted Australian children's content, made with the public broadcaster, in the medium children already use. *Bluey* shows the scale of the prize. The ABC children's show, made in Brisbane, is watched around the world, and it now extends into video games as well, carrying recognisably Australian work to players everywhere. Fund this kind of commissioning, and support distinctly Australian and Tasmanian stories, so that more of it happens by design rather than by luck.

R7. Preserve the games Australia has already made

Pillar: A Place for Every Story.

Australia has made games for decades, but much of that work is already lost, because it was never deposited, documented, or kept in a playable form. Australia's collecting institutions preserve film, recorded sound and literature, but no national program does the same for games. Fund a national games preservation program, run with our collecting institutions, so that the record of Australian games survives as the rest of our cultural record does.

R8. Resource First Nations led games practice

Pillar: First Nations First.

Games can carry story and connection to Country. Fund culturally safe pathways into games that are led and governed by First Nations creators. I make this recommendation to support and amplify those creators, not to speak for them.

R9. Coordinate games across the arts and industry portfolios

Pillar: Strong Cultural Infrastructure.

Games sit between culture and industry, across the arts portfolio and the industry and science portfolio. Set up clear coordination so that Creative Australia, Screen Australia, the tax offset, and skills and export programs work together, instead of leaving games to fall into the gap between them.

R10. Treat regional connectivity as cultural infrastructure

Pillar: Strong Cultural Infrastructure, and A Place for Every Story.

A digital export depends on a reliable connection to the rest of the world. Treat affordable, dependable regional broadband as cultural infrastructure, and align cultural investment with connectivity programs, so that regional creators can make and sell work without paying a penalty for where they live.

R11. Build the games education pipeline

Pillar: Centrality of the Artist, and Engaging the Audience.

Support games as a creative subject in schools and across the tertiary sector, and fund clear pathways from study into community organisations, studios and jobs. Making games draws on writing, art, music, design and computer science at once, which makes it a strong teaching tool, and a steady pipeline is the only reliable way to grow and keep a regional workforce. Tasmania already has a foundation to build on, including a games focused degree at the University of Tasmania that local studios help students move into [17].

R12. Protect creative workers as generative AI changes the field

Pillar: Centrality of the Artist.

Generative AI is changing creative work faster than policy has adjusted. Protect creators' rights to consent, credit and payment when their work is used to train or generate content, and make sure public funding supports human authorship rather than replacing it. As someone who builds creative technology, I want Australia to set clear and fair rules for these tools, rather than let them undercut the livelihoods this policy exists to support.

8 Answering the obvious objections

Are games just commercial entertainment rather than art? Films, novels and recorded music are all sold commercially, and all funded as culture. Commercial success does not cancel cultural value. Games are a newer form, but the same logic applies to them.

Is this industry policy rather than cultural policy? It is both, and the lack of coordination between the two is part of the problem. Games are made by artists and used as culture by most

Australians, so they belong in cultural policy as well as in tax law.

Why prioritise the regions when the industry is in the capitals? Because games do not depend on where they are made. Current support sits mostly in the capitals, which reflects where studios happen to have formed, not where games can be made. Investing in the regions builds capacity where there is little now, and slows the loss of trained people to the mainland.

Have games not already been funded through Revive? Yes, and that funding is working, which is the reason to extend it and make it permanent rather than to stop. The closure of the Australian Interactive Games Fund in 2014 showed how quickly one Budget can undo years of progress [8,9].

9 What this could make possible

A funded game studio could become as ordinary in a regional town as a local theatre company. A developer in Burnie or Launceston could build a career making games for a global audience without leaving home. Australian stories could sell overseas as games and return income and reputation to the places that made them.

The facts support this. Games are an art form most Australians take part in [5], one of the country's most export reliant creative industries [3,4], and the rare export that distance does not penalise [11]. Where other governments have funded games this way, independent evaluations have found strong returns, several dollars of value for each dollar invested [19,20].

Cultural policy documents like to say that art and culture are part of the fabric of society. If that is true, the policy should fund the culture that fabric is actually woven from, and for most Australians that increasingly means games.

The next National Cultural Policy can recognise games fully as culture, fund them for the long term, and make sure that support reaches beyond the mainland capitals. Tasmania is ready to show how that works.

I would welcome the chance to discuss any of these recommendations.

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