CAMEo
**CUTS #7**

# Independent Games and the Remaking of the 'Fringe'

## Mark Gibson

# CAMEo Cuts

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# Independent Games and the Remaking of the 'Fringe'

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This issue of CAMEo Cuts offers a new take on the enduring idea of the cultural 'fringe'. The status of the fringe – as an edgy, heterodox and counter-cultural alternative to the mainstream – has long been seen as a source of new, avant-garde ideas, as well as political and social critique. For some critics, however, the now assumed absorption of independent and alternative culture into the mainstream, and the rapidity with which commercial organisations can seemingly commodify any kind of new rebellion or otherness, has rendered the possibility of a the fringe or an 'outside' a romantic illusion. But is this really so? Taking the example of independent computer gaming, and based on research undertaken in Melbourne, Mark Gibson argues for the vital and enduring role played by creative computer games producers working at the margins, and the open-ended possibilities that still remain for making and remaking diverse and differentiated fringe cultures.

## About the author

Mark Gibson is Associate Professor of Communications and Media Studies at Monash University. He has interests in media and cultural industries, social contexts of cultural production and cultural exchange across lines of class and geographic location. His recent projects have included 'Creative Suburbia', looking at creative practices in the suburbs and 'Fringe to Famous', on the crossover between 'fringe' and 'mainstream' cultural production in Australia since the 1970s. He is author of *Culture and Power – A History of Cultural Studies* and was, for thirteen years, editor of *Continuum – Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*.

# Independent Games and the Remaking of the 'Fringe'

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At a 2017 conference on screen cultures in Melbourne, veteran film scholar Lesley Stern (2017) looked out at a greying audience and wondered aloud 'where the young people are today'. The question emerged in discussion following a paper in which Stern had offered a rich history of the film culture that emerged in Melbourne in the 1970s and 1980s, a history in which she herself had played an important part. It is a culture that included the newly-developing field of film criticism in universities (particularly, at that time, at La Trobe); a broader public involvement through institutions such as the Melbourne University Film Society, later Cinémathèque; and a community of film and video makers. The period was one of the 'renaissance' in Australian film, drawing on nationalist currents but also a sophisticated appreciation of international cinema – helped along, it should be said, by generous tax concessions to investment in the local industry.

A key factor in the vibrancy of Melbourne's film culture of the 1970s and 1980s was its enrichment from the 'fringe' – a field of diverse groups and actors relatively independent of established mainstream institutions. It was a field that included passionate fan subcultures, political activists, media-makers, aesthetes and cineastes with an interest in obscure foreign language titles. It was often identified with youth. One of the more dramatic moments in Stern's account was the challenge by the 'young Turks' – Adrian Martin and Philip Brophy – to the school of film criticism that had developed at

La Trobe. While the latter had been concerned with establishing its academic credentials, developing theoretical claims and arguing for the recognition of film as 'art', Martin and Brophy came out of a community of non-academically-affiliated musicians, artists and Super-8 film-makers; they were more interested in the pleasures of film, in popular as well as high art forms and in voracious consumption from an eclectic catalogue of titles (Martin 2014, 208). The question of where the 'young people' are today was therefore also a question about where such a fringe can now be found, where the culture is to find its sources of renewal.

There has been considerable scepticism about 'fringes' over the past twenty years. Since the postmodern moment of the 1980s and 1990s, a formidable set of arguments has been ranged against claims to 'independence'. It has become almost a reflex among the theoretically informed to suspect such claims of being driven by promotional discourses (Peterson 1995; Perren 2001), staged or performed (Rose 1994, Krims 2000) or subverted by processes of recycling, cultural quotation and 'pastiche' (Kaplan 1987). A further significant development has been the weakening of polarities between commercial and non-commercial forms of cultural production. Since the emergence of creative industries policy paradigms in the 1990s, small independent cultural practices have increasingly been conceived as proto-commercial, always already inscribed within an economic agenda of job creation and

economic growth. They no longer qualify, in the way they once did, as a genuine 'outside'.

While there are certainly some who have continued to advocate for the idea of independent cultural production, they have often been driven to adopt a defensive tone. In a recent book chapter on independent music, for example, David Hesmondhalgh and Leslie Meier (2015, 96) push back against 'sniffy theorists' who dismiss the idea of independence as 'romantic'. Many versions of the idea, they argue, 'hint at real contradictions and struggles over culture in societies where capitalism provides the main way economic life is conducted'. The affirmation, however, is heavily qualified. Hesmondhalgh and Meier are compelled to admit that the idea of independence is 'often naïve or ill thought out'. The charge of 'romanticism' is also one they largely accept. In the case of music, the idea of independence can be traced to post-Enlightenment aesthetic thought which has attributed 'special links to subjectivity, often felt to be manifest in the power to express, arouse or instil emotions' (96). Even as it is being resisted, the perspective of the 'sniffy theorists' appears to be conceded.

In some work I have recently been developing, I suggest that this perspective can itself be historically contextualised. Its motivation, initially, was more than a petty policing of theoretical purity. It emerged from a program of the 1980s and 1990s of tempering perceived excesses of the counterculture and the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the academy, this program might be described as broadly 'Foucauldian' (after the work of Michel Foucault), seeking to stabilise and contain the theoretical legacies of 1968. But it also had a counterpart in broader left politics, in the form of a pragmatism and

wariness of political radicalism that found its fullest expression in the turn-of-the-century social democratic formula of the 'third way'.

My point in pursuing this argument is not to add further to debates about whether the program was important or necessary; it is rather to ask simply whether it remains relevant today – a historical juncture, surely, when the energies of the counterculture have finally been spent. The value of historicising critical reflexes against the idea of the fringe in this way is to allow the idea, in its current manifestations, to 'breathe'. It is to consider it not in terms of its supposed metaphysical claims – ones that can be critiqued and disposed of for all time – but as something that is continually being remade.

In what follows, however, I would like to present the argument in a more concrete way, drawing on examples from a research project, 'Fringe to Famous', I have been engaged with over the past four years with Tony Moore, Chris McAuliffe and Maura Edmond. The project has focused on the crossover in Australia since the 1970s between fringe, *avant garde* and independent cultural production and the 'mainstream'. It has involved some eighty in-depth interviews with creative practitioners in a range of fields, including music, comedy, short film and graphic design. I will restrict myself here, however, to the fifth of these fields, computer games, which I will consider through the prism of the Melbourne-based independent games festival Freeplay.

Freeplay immediately suggests an answer to Stern's question of where the young people are today. They are in games. The festival occupies many of the same spaces as the film culture of the 1970s and 1980s. It has taken form in similar interstices between the universities, a broader-based public culture

and (in this case) the games industry. It regularly partners with Film Victoria and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, two of the major institutional legacies of the earlier moment. And there are traceable genealogies of people and networks that connect Freeplay to Melbourne's film culture. But Freeplay is also young. Speakers, exhibitors and audience members are mostly in their twenties or thirties, as indeed are many of the organisers. This is not to suggest that more senior figures have not played an important role. They have been particularly significant on the board, which has ensured a certain stability and continuity. A director of the 2012 festival, Harry Lee (2015), characterises the role of the board as ensuring that Freeplay 'doesn't crash and burn'. But many of the directors themselves have been young – and interested, as Lee admits, in 'crashing and burning everything'. Lee, himself, and co-director Katie Williams, were barely in their twenties when they took on the role.

Freeplay also offers a contemporary idea of the 'fringe'. A key part of the identity of the festival has always been its status as 'independent' and it has consistently sought to pursue ideas and themes irrespective of whether they are likely to gain mainstream recognition or to align with the priorities of the AAA industry. One of the qualities of independent or fringe cultures has always been eclecticism, disjuncture and surprise. Freeplay 2018 included sessions on the possible inspiration for games development in Zen Buddhism, interactions between games and civic art installations, Gothic spatial design, escape rooms, games development in South East Asia, sexual expression in games and the category of the 'playful arts' (Freeplay 2018). There was also a consistent thread of progressive politics, including engagements with Australian indigenous cultures, activism around mental illness, queer identities, feminism, labour conditions in games development and the case for unionism.

One might still ask what all this adds up to. To draw comparisons here with the 'film' moment of the 1970s and 1980s appears at first unflattering. While the latter was similarly eclectic, it was also associated with a broad-based program of political and cultural change. It developed in the wake of the election in 1972 of the Gough Whitlam

Labor government which brought an end to twenty-three years of conservative rule. Many of the ideas that were discussed in film circles – feminism, indigeneity, multiculturalism and a cultural opening to Asia – were also gaining traction in government policy. The culture was connected in significant ways with international political developments – the antiwar movement, decolonisation and an emerging environmentalism. As the British film scholar and visitor to Australia at the time Edward Buscombe puts it, many of the people involved were saying 'look, the reason we're interested in film theory is not just that we like movies, but because it's got a cutting edge politically … It's basically part of a left-wing project to transform the nature of cultural studies … and indirectly and in the long term, society itself' (Buscombe 2001, 119).

The independent games culture around Freeplay does not appear to be connected in this way with a broad-based political program. The mood of the festival is quirky, cheerful, playful – or, in its more critical moments, resigned to black humour. It lacks the intellectual and political gravity that characterised much of the earlier film culture. While it touches on serious subjects, it generally does so lightly, moving on to relieve the atmosphere in some way. A confession of having suffered mental illness is rendered visually through a crazy black squiggle above the head of a comic avatar. A session on challenges faced by queer games developers is held on a stage in the busy public atrium of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and could almost double as stand-up comedy. A Filipina developer, when asked about conditions for independent games development under the Duterte government, smiles, covers her mouth and dissolves: 'it's so sad, I now laugh about it'. Dialogue and empathy stand in place of a formed agenda.

But it is also possible to turn the contrast around. While the intellectual and political weight of Melbourne's film culture has been a major strength, it has not been also without its liabilities. Because the stakes have been higher, the lines of argument and organisation have been more tightly drawn, carrying with it risks of stasis or paralysis. This has become particularly evident since the 1990s, as the energies of the 1970s and 1980s have receded and the political and cultural program with which they were associated has suffered significant reversals. It is in contexts such as this that the question of 'romanticism' has emerged. It is tempting, when the prospects for a movement sour, to look back to a golden moment of possibility. Yet there are also clear dangers in this – even, or perhaps rather especially, for those for whom the moment in question was most important. The past becomes idealised, no longer offering any practical guide to the present. At the same time, actions in the present are condemned to live always in the shadows, held to standards that are impossible to meet.

Games culture has been relatively unburdened by these problems. As a more recent phenomenon, it has a particular value in thinking about the contemporary possibilities of the fringe. There will always be questions for more established cultural forms of whether current examples can measure up against past greats: in the case of contemporary music, of whether they can match the urgency and generational definition of folk or punk; in the case of film, of whether they can reach the artistic heights of the New Wave; in the case of the visual arts, of whether they can challenge or provoke in the way of the post-war *avant gardes*. These are questions from which games are relatively immune. It would be a mistake, of course, to suggest that

games do not have a history, but it is a history that does not weigh on the present in quite the same way. This is particularly significant in relation to claims to 'independence'. In games, such claims do not invoke a supposed glorious past; they are more clearly rooted in the proximate contexts in which they have been made.

What then have these contexts been in the case of Freeplay? The festival was first staged in 2004 as a joint creation of games developer Katharine Neil and independent arts organiser and festival genius Marcus Westbury. Neil, who first suggested the idea, was best known at the time as the creative force behind *Escape from Woomera*, an adventure game in which the player assumed the identity of Mustafa, an Iranian asylum seeker, attempting to break out of the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, a facility in the north-west of Australia and an early site for government attempts to deter refugee boat arrivals through policies of mandatory detention in remote, inhospitable locations. *Escape from Woomera* gained attention after it was revealed that it had received a development grant of $25,000 from arts funding body the Australia Council. Then Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, took up the case as part of a wider campaign against alleged irresponsible uses of public money in the arts and cultural sector, and it became for a while an object of national controversy (Nicholls 2003).

But more significant for Freeplay was Neil's activism on other fronts. While working as a commercial games developer for Atari in Melbourne, she was also waging a low-level guerrilla campaign against the culture and organisation of the industry – particularly as represented by the Games Development Association of Australia:

*we had an industry conference at the time – the Australian Game Developers' Conference – which was incredibly alienating. Like, you'd just watch your boss get up there – some fucking bean counter – and give another boss some industry award. It was super sponsored; there were booth babes everywhere – I and other people just felt that it was super alienating. Big, commercial, crass.* (Neil 2014)

It was against this background that Freeplay was initially defined. Its founding aspiration was to stake out a different kind of space, a space in which conversations could be developed not about games as a business, but about their aesthetic, political and social dimensions – their status as cultural forms.

The first event was held in a converted karate dojo in Swanston St in Melbourne and was bound by a strong 'alternative' ethos. Neil describes it as having been a 'kind of boss free zone'. Word got around that there was 'some kind of rebellion going on' and one boss – from the development company Blue Tongue – did manage to get in. Neil confronted him:

*'you know, the only people getting in for free are people who are actually working on the conference. So we have some boxes over there – can you shift those boxes?' And … he thought it was a joke. You know, they have their stupid conference … so I don't see why. They know as much about culture as my arse.* (Neil 2014)

Freeplay also drew for inspiration on ideas circulating at the time about ways of shaking up the games industry. Neil had been influenced by the Scratchware Manifesto (Anon, 2000), attributed to Greg Costikyan and other independent games designers in New York in the early 2000s, laying out a kind of punk program for games, suggesting a low-

budget DIY approach, emphasising originality of concept over production-values, in strong distinction to the glossy corporate model.

It has been significant to the identity of Freeplay that it was marked at the beginning by rupture and confrontation. It gave strong definition, from the outset, to the principle of independence. Sceptics about the idea of independence often represent activist political confrontation as a relic of the 1970s – if not a throwback to an unreconstructed Marxism or nineteenth-century German romanticism. Radical opposition has been cast, in this context, as assuming a heroic 'outside' from which one can act or speak, an idea that can be questioned for its metaphysical premises and dismissed as mistaken or naïve. But it is difficult to see how Neil's positions would be vulnerable to such a critique. She was responding quite directly to immediate problems – the decidedly *post*-1970s hardening of governments in their response to refugees and asylum seekers, the cynicism and sexism of the management culture of the studio-based games industry of the early 2000s. She did not assume an outside from which such problems might be held to account; she *created* one from within through calculated forms of rhetoric and action.

This is not to say that the idea of independence must always be fixed in oppositional mode. In the case of Freeplay, there have been changes in context that have made such a mode difficult, in any case, to sustain. Much of Neil's animus in 2004 was directed against the management culture of the commercial game development studios. What she could not have known at the time was that the studios were, in fact, living on borrowed time. Already struggling from the high Australian dollar of the early 2000s, they were decimated following the Global Financial Crisis, which precipitated a major international restructuring of the games industry. By the early 2010s, the shape of games development in Australia had changed completely (Cunningham & Banks 2016). The industry is now composed entirely of small development companies with no proprietary links to the major publishers.

With the collapse of the studios, industry development in games has turned to the independent sector and the Games Development Association of Australia has become quite a different organisation from what it had been in the early 2000s. It is now located in the Arcade, a shared workspace for small developers in South Melbourne and sees its mission as supporting and advocating for independents and entrepreneurial start-ups. The Arcade is almost textbook creative industries – brightly coloured hair, body piercings and bicycles mixed in with spreadsheets and business plans. The creative as suit, the suit as creative: independent and mainstream collapsed and combined.

Freeplay has responded to these shifts, moving some distance from the kind of 'pure' independent identity staked out by Neil. The festival has made alliances with Melbourne's arts and cultural institutions and has shifted location from the karate dojo (only ever a one-off solution) to more formal institutional spaces. It has also made concessions to industry logics of promotion and career development. Freeplay gives awards for emerging work in games, which can then have value in business development. A Freeplay award for an early creative concept was part of the career capital, for example, of young Melbourne developer Alex Bruce in gaining support for his non-Euclidian spatial navigation game *Antichamber* – a game that went on to become a hit and establish an international reputation.

A significant figure in negotiating these shifts was director from 2009-2012 Paul Callaghan, who worked to develop Freeplay's relations with institutions such as the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Victorian State Library, securing its place within what he calls the 'cultural infrastructure' of Melbourne and Victoria. Callaghan also toned down the antagonism of Freeplay to the games industry, a move that put him somewhat at odds with Neil. Neil was annoyed, for example, upon hearing that Callaghan had decided to scratch a session on the collapse of employment in games on the grounds that Tony Reed, CEO of the Games Developers Association, thought it 'might be bad for the industry':

> And I was, like, 'this is bad?' For me, that's not independence. You can't have someone on speed dial from the AAA industry telling you what to put in your so-called independent conference … For me, that crossed a line. (Neil 2014)

It would be a mistake, however, to overstate the differences here. It is clear in talking to Callaghan that the idea of independence remained an ongoing commitment of Freeplay and a continual subject of ethical reflection among board-members and directors. During his period as director, he sought to adapt the idea to changing circumstances. One of the pressing realities here was the urgency for young games developers of finding ways to make a living. In a world where a stable income with a major studio is simply no longer an option, it is a reality that cannot be ignored. But Callaghan was also respectful of Neil and her original vision. A certain accommodation with the industry did not mean that the aspirations associated with the idea of independence were abandoned.

The core of those aspirations, for Callaghan, was not opposition to business as such, but to the idea that everything must be reduced to business priorities. The interpretation taken of 'independent' during his time with Freeplay, he says, 'was really about *agency*':

> If people wanted to get a job in a studio, that was totally valid. That's them asserting their independence. And if people wanted to make weird glitch-art games, that's fine as well. And if people wanted to find a middle ground between those two possible career paths, that was fine. So it was about the individual asserting control over their destiny. (Callaghan 2014)

The distinction Callaghan makes here between antagonism towards business and *independence* from business is a crucial one. In debates around creative industries over the last twenty years, it is one that has often been elided. While the idea of the creative industries took form first within left-of-centre political thinking, it is one that has also been defined in opposition to a spectre, most identified with the 1970s, of a fundamental hostility to capitalism. The result has too often been an implicit ultimatum: choose to stick with outdated and discredited 1970s paradigms or learn to internalise current business priorities. The opposition is a false one and is destructive of the very idea of independence.

In our project 'Fringe to Famous', we have argued the benefits of crossovers between 'fringe' and 'mainstream' cultural production in Australia since the 1970s. We believe the evidence is overwhelming, at least from the cases we have considered, that these benefits have been significant, both in the cultural and economic domains. Fringe and independent cultures can be thought of generators of alternative ideas of value, offering important

resources for renewal. It is undoubtedly the case that many of the ideas that circulate within the fringe will never be assimilated within the mainstream. The fringe is a space of experimentation and therefore, inherently, not only of success but also of failure. But the friction and creative tension between the fringe and the mainstream has also been central to processes of cultural and economic regeneration, from rock bands and graphic art movements with roots in working class or surf subcultures to television comedy emerging from student *avant garde* theatre.

It should be clear from this that our position in 'Fringe to Famous' is far from purist in the sense of wanting to see the fringe as the *sole* repository of value, or to preserve it from 'contamination' from outside. We argue, indeed, that cultural production originating within the fringe can often be improved or enhanced by crossing into the mainstream, benefiting from the attention of editors, access to resources and feedback from wider audiences. But for crossover between fringe and mainstream to occur, there must *be* a fringe – and a fringe that is more than a simple extension of the mainstream. The *possibility* of independence must first be established and defended. It is in this context that Freeplay offers a valuable model. I am certainly not wanting to suggest here that Freeplay is unique: there are many independent games festivals and conferences internationally that share similar qualities and many examples can be found in other areas of cultural production. The perspective I have outlined here needs to be expanded and built upon. But the question is often one of belief – of whether the *principle* of independence is sustainable today. I hope here to have contributed something to that belief, offering at least one example of how the idea of the fringe is being remade.

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