

Australian video-game music is an exciting area of cultural activity—and you should be paying attention

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An enthusiastic, sellout crowd arrived at Melbourne's Hamer Hall in September to hear an evening of music from Orchestra Victoria.

The program consisted largely of Australian [music](#) and premiere performances. If the sight of 3,500 filled seats (filled, anecdotally, by those much younger than the typical orchestra audience) did not indicate how deeply this music was loved, then the standing ovation at the end of the night would leave no-one in doubt.

This packed concert, however, wasn't a performance of a symphonic great or even a major film soundtrack. It was an evening of music created for video games.

Video games are now a cultural activity for [the vast majority of Australians](#) and a major platform through which audiences are introduced to new music.

Audiences have personal, even [intimate relationships](#) with the music of video games, given the long hours spent playing in lounge rooms and studies around the nation.

The potential of video-game music is particularly evident in Australia, where several independent video games have obtained both critical and commercial success around the world. This is, in part, thanks to their music, such as [Cult of the Lamb](#) (2022), [Unpacking](#) (2021) and [Hollow Knight](#) (2017).

However, how the game developers actually work with musicians to produce these landmark works has so far been an unanswered question.

Performing on the global stage

Our new [Music and Games 2023 Benchmark](#) aims to establish the scope and scale of Australia's game-music sector.

Our research includes findings about working conditions, rights,

royalties and more. It paints a picture of a sector confidently performing on the global stage alongside far bigger national industries.

Game music work is overwhelmingly being undertaken in Australia as contract-based freelance work and rarely as full-time employment. Despite this, game developers see composers as fundamental creative partners.

Game music workers feel they have meaningful input on the projects they work on. They rarely approach game soundtracks as "just another gig". This is reinforced by our finding the vast majority of game music workers in Australia create original music for game projects, rather than implementing pre-existing works.

Australian game composers are more likely than workers in other soundtrack sectors to retain rights and opportunities.

In film and television, disadvantageous ["buyout" contracts](#), where composers hand over all ownership of their music to studios, have become common. In the Australian game music sector, such arrangements exist in only 13% of projects. This allows most composers to retain ownership of their music and to tap into additional revenue streams like performance royalties.

An astonishing 74% of music workers are able to release their game's soundtrack personally and independently, rather than going through either the game's studio, publisher or a music label.

Different ways of working

There is no "one way" of working for Australian game music workers, with a wide diversity of skills and experiences evident.

Many composers work directly with game development tools or with audio "middleware" such as [Fmod](#) or [Wwise](#) on game projects. Tools like these allow composers to engage with the game's production and implement their music directly into the game, rather than simply handing over audio files to game developers.

Around half, however, prioritize music creation and leave implementation of that music up to the developers. This means technical knowledge of game development is not as integral to creating game music as many may assume.

Creative communication skills are also important for musicians and highly valued by [game developers](#) who may otherwise find music to be a language they do not speak.

Like the game development and music sectors more broadly, unpaid work remains common. Only 53% of game music workers report any income from this work.

However, we found the median annual income for all game music workers is A\$40,000, compared to only [\\$30,576 for musicians generally](#). Among those who make more than the Australian minimum wage (\$45,000) from game music, this jumps to a considerable median income of \$82,500.

Being at the intersection of games and music also means the gender and racial inequalities of the video game and screen composing sectors are entrenched within game music.

Three-quarters of all game music workers identified themselves as male, and 72% as white, Caucasian or European. While Australia has diverse musicians, they currently have unequal ability to move into game music. This needs proactive solutions.

Creative works in their own right

Our benchmarking report reveals an exciting and so far under-appreciated area of cultural activity in Australia.

Australian game soundtracks are not sterile assets produced for a mass medium. They are genuine creative works that are adored in their own right by audiences around the world.

However, growing the sector in Australia requires focused support. Its lack of diversity is a major area of concern.

Even while game music workers are able to retain generous rights to their music, many are frustrated and confused by the lack of clear standards. We also heard several stories of workers being pressured to give up their rights once an international publisher decided to invest in a local game developer.

As [Australia's game industry continues to grow](#), it will be important to watch how Australia's musicians are brought along for the ride.

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