

House of Representatives Inquiry into Future Opportunities
for Australia's Film, Special Effects and Electronic Games Industries

Faculty of Informatics and Communication Response

The significance of these industries (Terms of Reference points a—c).

These industries have vast and growing economic potential. Big budget movies made in Australia provide many well-paid jobs. Special effects for such films are typically outsourced to several companies and Australia has world-standard expertise. There is also, of course, potential for Australians to contribute digitally to films made offshore.

Electronic games are now a more important industry than movies. Gaming is becoming a mainstream element of mainstream culture. While the demographics of users are changing, with more women and older males now participating, it is of particular importance to youth and young adults. For these age groups a significant amount of social interaction is supported by information technology, e.g. internet, email, SMS. From a social and cultural point of view, gaming should be seen as a part of this cultural phenomenon. Multiple-user online games support active and creative communities. *They are as much a place where culture is practiced as a "game"*.

One of the advantages of this type of community for the Australian context is the decentralised nature of the gaming communities. While there is a large city/country divide in most forms of popular cultural practice, this is not the case in terms of online gaming, since the virtual spaces where the participants gather are equally accessible to all with a decent internet connection. There are spectacular future opportunities for growth, including through application of advanced technologies, online interactivity and broadband.

The experience of online gaming is, in many senses, more stimulating, rewarding and social than other forms of media. Hence the kinds of cultural policy arguments that are applied to issues such as commercial television and internet access apply at least equally to gaming issues. The increasing sophistication of online gaming is related to bandwidth available to the average consumer. The more affordable broadband internet, the larger the market for the gaming industry. The greater the bandwidth, the more sophisticated and appealing the games. The more sophisticated and appealing the games, the more attractive broadband is to the consumer.

Support for affordable broadband internet could therefore have a positive influence on the development of the industry. In addition, support for universal broadband access enhances the cultural benefit outlined above.

The expertise and technology involved will increasingly find new applications, for instance in education (online interactivity and simulations), tourism ('virtual' tours of places difficult to access or vulnerable to physical damage), museums and

exhibitions. CQU multimedia staff are planning research projects in these areas, notably health education.

The cultural importance and relevance of these industries is evident in the staffing profile of this faculty: half a dozen staff have doctorates in film studies or multimedia and these are popular fields for our honours and research higher degree students. Although it is not currently active, we have had a research group which brought together staff from a number of disciplines (cultural studies to information technology). An application for funding of a project under the ABC Broadbanding Initiative is being prepared.

Although it is relatively new, there is a healthy interest in our Bachelor of Multimedia Studies degree from Australians, including some outside the region who enrol externally, and international students at our Australian or offshore locations.

Skills required and capacity of education system to meet demand (Point e)

As gaming and other forms of multimedia become ever more important to cultural practice the degree to which they need to be covered in the education system increases. At the same time cultural policy makers need to take these industries seriously and recognise their validity. The closure of Fly TV is like to have a more detrimental effect on the industry than education policy when the current demographic of the channel leaves school. Exposure of the youth demographic to “home grown” and culturally relevant multimedia, games, film, SFX, and so on goes hand in hand with education in producing a population that will support a sophisticated industry. It is important to emphasise the need to consider cultural policy alongside educational policy here, particularly as these new media forms are increasingly practiced by consumers instead of just being passively consumed.

There is a challenge for university education in this area to strike a balance between equipping graduates with skills that make them immediately useful to employers and endowing them with the capacity to be adaptable and continue learning as the industries develop. Graduates should also have good insights into the cultural determinants and consequences of new media and their technologies, capacity for teamwork and dealing with clients, and project management skills.

Current employees in these industries are often self-taught or have a technical background. There will be increasing need for persons with other backgrounds and for formal education which provides other skills and insights. For instance designers of games (and related applications of the technology) could benefit from an understanding of, say theories of narrative or audience response, or the principles of pedagogy or psychology.

In meeting the need for education in these fields universities face the challenge of:

- Shortage of qualified staff at all levels (associate lecturer to professor);
- Cost of infrastructure (e.g. providing for students on-campus computers with sufficient memory; studio facilities);
- Cost of course delivery (individual subjects tend to be time-intensive: testing software, complying with copyright provisions, assessing students’ practical work, etc.)

- Staff keeping up to date with developments in software etc.

These are relatively expensive courses to teach; it is not in the nation's interests for universities to have to try to deliver them on the cheap.

Effectiveness of linkages between industry and wider cultural and I.T. sectors
(Point e)

The following comments relate specifically to linkages between industry and education providers.

The somewhat disparate, dispersed and rapidly-evolving nature of the industries make it difficult for universities to communicate with potential employers of their graduates and respect their 'stakeholder' status. Regional institutions are especially handicapped in this regard; it is that much harder to maintain regular contact with businesses based in the metropolitan areas. Facilitation of visiting speakers, artists-in-residence programs, and short-term secondments between academe and industry would be useful.

Maximising opportunities (point g)

The following are seen as important:

- Facilitate broadband access.
- Implement 'gateways' in firewalls. Collaborative gaming is a potentially lucrative industry. Security restrictions, while important, are currently retarding progress in this areas and impeding collaborative research between institutions.
- Revisit policy on digital television.
- Foster collaboration with Japan, Singapore and other overseas countries which have excellent infrastructure. Universities in northern Australia are particularly well-placed for this. It is CQU policy to extend our research activities to regions from which we attract international students.
- Recognise that online industries are relatively independent of geography and do not need heavy infrastructure. Promoting their development in Australia's regional centres is a one way to develop the regions. However deliberate promotion and assistance is necessary since at this stage isolation is still a problem: existing enterprises are centralised and informal personal contacts are more difficult to initiate and sustain.
- Recognise of the potential of Australia's younger and smaller universities for teaching and research in the field. These universities can often adapt more quickly than older and larger ones, for instance in adjusting their discipline mix and bringing different disciplines together. Central Queensland University has a Faculty of Informatics and Communication which assembles in one administrative unit disciplines such as communication, film and cultural studies; multimedia; information systems; information technology and health informatics.

Changes to existing government support programs (point h)

Digital media engagement in the youth demographic (i.e. gaming, movie making, web development) needs to be supported to foster a generation with a pre-existing interest and understanding of these media technologies. This is where projects such as Fly TV are important. A venue for such cultural products fosters a local scene and generates the corpus of work necessary to make a distinctively Australian industry emerge (in the much the same way as we have an Australian. film industry).

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