



The Hon. Tony Burke MP  
Minister for the Arts

By email only to [culturalpolicy@arts.gov.au](mailto:culturalpolicy@arts.gov.au)

Dear Minister Burke

Freeplay, the world's largest and longest running Independent Games Festival, wanted to congratulate you on your appointment to the Arts portfolio and welcome your reorientation of Creative Australia as the shot in the arm the sector needs right now.

### **Who we are**

Freeplay sits at a unique intersection between games, play and art. We bridge the gulf between the conventional games industry and Victoria's rich local arts ecosystem, focusing on small developers and arts practitioners to celebrate games as cultural - not just commercial - capital.

Freeplay is the first step for many Australian emerging studios into the broader games ecosystem. For twenty years, we have helped platform and shape now world-renowned, award-winning studios like Massive Monster (*Cult of the Lamb*), Witch Beam (*Unpacking*), League of Geeks (*Armello*), House House (*Untitled Goose Game*), 2Pt Interactive (*Heavenly Bodies*) and Worm Club (*Frog Detective*). Many of these games were featured for the first time at Freeplay's Parallels showcase, and their creators were involved at our flagship Festival event.

Between our annual Festival, our popular Parallels showcase at Melbourne International Games Week, the globally significant and influential Freeplay Awards and the countless small events and development activities we do across Melbourne, Australia and the Asia-Pacific, Freeplay is the bleeding heart and bleeding edge of Australia's booming games industry.

### **Creative Australia must recognise games for their cultural - not just commercial - value.**

Games both as an industry and a medium have matured significantly since Freeplay's beginnings in 2004. Australian independent games have had breakout success commercially and internationally, while physical and digital games continue to grow in terms of per capita spend and engagement year on year.

Freeplay invites the renewed Creative Australia to recontextualise games less as an industry and more as a broad medium where engagement and creation happens across a spectrum of interactions.

Much as it would be reductive to conflate all literature with a bestsellers list or all music with the Top 40 charts, it's important to not reduce games and associated media like live play, digital art and experiential and immersive art as merely its most commercially successful forms.

As such, it is important that there are multiple funding streams, support networks, institutions and opportunities for engagement at every point along that spectrum, from students and teachers, independent experimenters, small studios and collectives, major domestic studios and international studios.

Government support for games in Australia has largely been provided to major studios through tax incentives or commercial industry events, but it is smaller artistic and experimental works that are the backbone of the sector, constantly reinvigorating and transforming the medium. The artistic fringes and core keep the sector viable, agile and productive and keep its creative talent in work, in practice and through its fallow periods like the Great Recession that shut most large studios' presences in Australia down..

While Australia's games and screen industries have since recovered and grown, supporting organisations like ours have been neglected by longer term funding, reducing the capacity of the sector to uplift and empower new talent and advocate for arts workers and independent creators.

Were it not for the continued investment and support given by the Victorian Government, us along with many other small arts organisations would have folded much earlier. But as the recent wave of windings-up show, small arts organisations, especially in still emerging artforms like games, can only survive for so long without national coordination and support.

## **Recognising artists as workers, and games-makers as artists**

Speaking to your commitment to the artist as workers, Freeplay asks you to recognise and reverse a tendency to look down on or exclude digital artists and independent screen creators - especially, experimental and artistic gamemakers, filmmakers and artists. These sectors are on the bleeding edge of cultural reproduction, operating within and around the new digital frontiers for creating, curating, criticising and sharing work, but remain subjected to extremes of exploitation, beholden to the whims of digital platforms and multinational corporations. These artists are forced to scrape together an income from multiple short term contracts, casual work, the occasional small grant or government income support. Many still live on the poverty line. Their lived experiences are accelerated visions of the insecurity and desperation facing the whole arts sector.

Moving past our own cultural cringe and perceptions of medium prestige for artistic production and consumption is a critical first step in better organising across all creative workers.

The connection between artist as worker and strong institutions is clear. The lack of solidarity among some sectors of arts workers (either between contractors and freelancers in the same sector competing for smaller and more atomised incomes, or from one medium looking down on another) is exacerbated by the lack of institutionalisation across the entire arts sector.

To quote Autonomy's [The Artist as Worker report](#), "*solidarity is a foundational force for change, and ...offered hope, strength and practical support. The sectoral inequalities inherent in the art*

*world are replicated across other sectors that also rely on short term contracts, and are familiar to such precarious, freelance workers, often on Sheri hour contracts by another name - including academics, journalists, musicians and actors. But in contracts with these other freelance sectors, artists are very poorly represented within trade unions. ...Poor rates of unionisation mean that artists often go without access to advice and support around working rights and conditions and are open to exploitation.”*

The emergence of Game Workers Australia within Professionals Australia is promising and Freeplay is proud to have supported the union in its infancy many years ago. However, these green shoots remain in the shade, paled by the atomisation and alienation experienced by everyone in the sector and the ongoing inability for member-owned democratic organisations, whether that's unions or advocacy organisations, to sustain a growing membership when their potential members struggle to pay their own bills.

### **Support good governance, not just creative output**

Freeplay is one of the few organisations platforming and supporting independent, artful gamemaking, including for titles like Untitled Goose Game that started small, but have gone on to become a part of global culture. But despite video games being talked up for years by state and federal arts strategies, state and federal governments have consistently failed to back those commitments up with demonstrable investment in the sector.

For example, we have never received multi-year funding despite decades of success and a proven track record in nurturing Australia's industry, and being the only national organisation with a focus on artistic, experimental and early-career gamemakers - without whom, there would be no Australian games industry.

Small arts organisations like Freeplay play an important role in building sustainable practice, promoting experimentalism and creativity and curating knowledge bases and opportunities, as well as being an outlet for discussion and debate on the conditions, stresses, risks and failures faced by smaller studios and independent creators. An institutional focus only on large arts organisations and establishment unionism will fail to serve the majority of creators who operate on the fringes of commercial production. Treating small arts organisations as merely means to ensure commissions and events occur rather than investing in core governance and inter-institutional networks will ensure those voices continue to be marginalised.

In terms of concrete actionable, Freeplay invites Creative Australia to consider long-term funding for small arts organisations like ours emphasising good governance, secure jobs and sustaining creative practice. We also invite you to consider what opportunities can be given to creators in direct employment and procurement by governments.

### **National coordination to remove barriers to the flourishing of Australian games**

There is a failure of data and the Government must instruct the Australian Bureau of Statistics to regularly inquire into cultural involvement, consumption, reproduction and employment, with a renewed focus on living and working conditions of arts workers, creators and those on the fringe of culture. We echo the calls in many other submissions for a holistic rethink of our cultural data collection strategy.

Federal, state and local governments also need to work in concert and develop a joined-up national games and play strategy. They also need to look at better governance and red tape reduction for smaller national arts organisations, looking at what rules restrict organisations with a national remit applying for activities and grants outside their incorporated location.

On governance, we invite Creative Australia to consider what can be done to improve diversity both on arts boards and in senior creative leadership. Notably, Creative Australia should investigate whether a Federal agency could directly pay honoraria and provide accredited training to board members from marginalised backgrounds, especially First Nations people. More needs to be done to ensure First Nations people are properly remunerated and recognised for their time and wisdom and that burden cannot be borne by small arts organisations alone.


We also invite the Government more broadly to consider the precarity, poverty and exploitation of artists and creators and to see measures against poverty, whether that is making social security more accessible, equitable and at a rate above the poverty line, increasing access to public housing and making renting fairer and more affordable, or building our cities in a way that create more and more affordable spaces for creativity.

A creative city is an accessible city and a creative nation is a fair nation. Arts policies that do not acknowledge that decisions around housing affordability, social security and urban planning are directly tied to our creative and cultural capacity will further cement the arts as a plaything for the wealthy.

We welcome the Department to both publish our submission and to quote our submission in the final report. We are also available for further consultation, either in person, online or in writing.

Yours sincerely,

**Claire Merquita**

Chairperson  


*on behalf of the board of Freeplay Inc.: Claire Merquita, Georgia Symons, Travis Jordan, Alice Pryor, Dr Helen Stuckey, Dr Dan Golding, Dr Douglas Wilson and Jason Imms*

## About Freeplay

Freeplay is the world's longest-running independent games festival, at home in Melbourne.

Freeplay hosts three of Australia's premier gamemaking events each year: the Festival, the Awards and Parallels at Melbourne International Games Week. Freeplay also works with local and state governments across Australia and partners with other festivals and cultural institutions to make Australia's independent games more accessible. Over the last three years, Freeplay has also partnered with state governments to directly commission new interactive art pieces.

Freeplay draws Australia's independent games community together at its conference, exhibitions, workshops, and awards. We join players, makers, critics, academics, students, and families in a critical celebration of the artistry of independent games and playful culture.

Freeplay has a proud history of uncovering, showcasing, and highlighting local independent games at both its showcases and awards, including *Jolly Rover* (Best Australian Game 2010), *Antichamber* (Best Australian Game 2011), *Tickets* (Best Australian Game 2012), *Framed* (Best Australian Game 2013), *Push Me Pull You* (The Freeplay Award 2015), *The Catacombs of Solaris* (The Freeplay Award 2018), *New Ice York* (The Freeplay Award 2019), *A Hand with Many Fingers* (The Freeplay Award 2020), and *Umurangi Generation* (The Freeplay Award 2021).

Freeplay is also host to the much loved Parallels showcase, featuring short talks and heartfelt games. Parallels has debuted many local favourites, including *Magister Ludi* (Parallels 2014), *Paperbark* (Parallels 2015), *Knuckle Sandwich* (Parallels 2015), *Florence* (Parallels 2017), *Untitled Goose Game* (Parallels 2017), *Novena* (Parallels 2018), *Dead Static Drive* (Parallels 2018), *Heavenly Bodies* (Parallels 2019), *Mutazione* (Parallels 2019), *Way to the Woods* (Parallels 2019), the *Frog Detective Series* (Parallels 2019), *Webbed* (Parallels 2020), and *Cult of the Lamb* (Parallels 2021).

Iconically Melbourne, Freeplay has consistently been part of the city's culture, having partnered with ACMI, State Library of Victoria, Next Wave, The Wheeler Centre, Federation Square, Arts Centre Melbourne, NGV, Testing Grounds, Siteworks, Arts House, City of Melbourne, Creative Victoria, and RMIT over the years.

Freeplay continues to champion creative and artistic exploration and experimentation in games, supporting grassroots artists and game makers in Melbourne, Australia, and its nearest neighbours, and positioning gamemaking as arts practice as games continue to grow and gain cultural significance and legitimacy.

Former Freeplay creative directors include Terry Burdak, Chad Toprak, Dan Golding, Harry Lee, Katie Williams, Paul Callaghan, Eve Penford-Dennis, Katharine Neil and Marcus Westbury.

Freeplay is created on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation and acknowledges they are the Traditional Custodians of the Lands upon which our events take place. We pay respect to their Elders past and present, and to all First Nations people in the wider community and beyond. Sovereignty was never ceded, and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.