Talk creative cultures and you may think high-end and low-end, the starving artist and the toast of Manhattan. But what about video game makers? Where do they fit in?

The very idea of an independent video game breaks with the most popular narrative of what video games are: things for young men and boys, made by ultra-rich corporations.

Going by this version, video games are big, bad, ultra-violent and frequently misogynistic.

They are Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, a video game that made US$310 million in 24 hours for parent company Activision, who later gloated that it was the “biggest launch in history across all forms of entertainment.”

They are Grand Theft Auto IV, a video game that sold 15 million copies globally but was distasteful enough to be edited in order to satisfy the Australian classification system.

An “independent game” is therefore something of a misnomer to those who know video games only from a distance.

Freeplay

The annual Freeplay Independent Games Festival, which finished last weekend at Victoria’s State Library, champions independent games and brings together independent creators, critics and culture in a lively festival format.

The result is a fascinating collection of dialogues that rarely find full voice in the mainstream, centered on the idea of video games as craft and as culture.

Craft meets graft

Independent gaming is a vibrant, exciting form of culture in contemporary Australia. The theme at this year’s Freeplay was “Handmade”, and in many ways it is these ideas of craft and artistry that define independent games culture.

Independent video games are usually made by individuals or small teams, often with little financial support but with a passion and independence of spirit that can push the projects in interesting and vital new directions.

Alexander Bruce is a Melbourne-based independent game developer who has displayed his sole commercial game, Antichamber, at the last two Freeplay festivals.

He is, for the most part, a one-man band, and has been creating code, artwork and design for Antichamber, by himself, for the last few years. His usual response to when the game will be released (“when it’s done”) belies a perfectionist streak – a streak enabled by the singular vision he has been able to build into the game because of his independence.

Antichamber in its previous incarnation, Hazard: The Journey Of Life.

Bruce is an engaging speaker on almost any topic, and has an obsessive magnetism that has translated into interest in his game not just at Freeplay, but at other festivals around the globe.
Bruce’s game is routinely described as “Escher-like”, which is to say it largely consists of spaces and corridors that impossibly bend back around onto themselves, leaving the player with a three-dimensional, 21st century digital hedge maze that surely would never have made it through the board meetings of a large, risk-averse corporation.

Instead of pitching the game to confused executives, Bruce travels the globe, drifting from festival to festival, like an indie film auteur building buzz for the latest art film.

**Spirit of independence**

Independent video game culture can be traced back much earlier than the emergence of festivals such as Freepay. Indeed, large segments of the video game industry today were forged on a genuine independence of spirit.

When, in 1975, programmer Will Crowther and his wife divorced, he responded to the challenge of connecting with his two daughters by creating the first text adventure game, *Adventure* (also known as Colossal Cave Adventure), in his spare time on his workplace computer.

Later, in the 1980s, there was an explosion of absurdist game design in Britain, as the availability of cheap and easy-to-program computers such as the *Commodore 64* and the *ZX Spectrum* became available.

Independent-minded designers such as Jeff Minter began making video games that had more to do with Monty Python than *Pong*, such as 1984’s *Revenge of the Mutant Camels*, which humorously skewered expectations of what a video game in the 80s should be.

But it wasn’t until the advent of the internet, and the accessible and popular distribution channels that came with it, that independent video games were able to come to the fore.

Today, platforms enabling users to buy video games for download on computer, console, or mobile device, or to play them for free and generate ad revenue for their creators, make independent design a genuine possibility.

It isn’t always easy, or successful, and is still usually done for passion rather than dollars.

**Braid**

Independent gaming’s biggest triumph is likely *Braid*, by Jonathon Blow (who incidentally keynoted Freepay in 2007).

*Braid* is a platform video game that might at first remind players of the *Super Mario series*, but cleverly plays with the conventions and expectations of the genre by distorting the role of time.

Like the French New Wave films of the 1960s, *Braid* frustrates and satisfies players in equal measure, with the game’s meaning left deliberately vague and open to interpretation.

It might equally be about the A-Bomb as about a juvenile sort of love, for example. Despite widespread critical success, Blow reportedly put US$200,000 of his own money into the game, which could have just as easily meant personal financial ruin as the success it eventually garnered.

**Show us the money**

Inevitably, money is one of the points that discussions of independent games often come down to. This year, Freepay was forced to raise its ticket prices because, according to festival co-director Paul Callaghan, “funding decisions” did not turn in the festival’s favour.

Despite the difficulties that come with funding festivals in general (think of *This Is Not Art’s recent troubles*), one cannot help but imagine that if the creative culture of independent video games was more widely acknowledged then funding might come more readily.
As Callaghan told Crikey earlier this month: “It’s quite a hard event to sell to arts funders … Arts agencies do have an interest in games, but I think it’s just how does it fit in with a common conversation?”

Yet often, at Freeplay and in video game culture in general, common conversations are seemingly all that are had.

From discussions of critical culture to those of independence and corporate influence, to discourses of gender, aesthetics, and funding, it is perhaps clearer than it has ever been that video games are part of the broader creative landscape and share many of the same concerns.

Perhaps, then, it is time to look towards other creative cultures and industries and ask how video games fit in with them, rather than the other way around.

Would you like to see more articles on video games and gaming culture? What would you like to see covered? Contact the science and technology editor.