

# Emerging Gamemakers Fund September 2024 - Trends Report

Prepared by the Screen Australia Games team

## Background

The Emerging Gamemakers Fund was conceived to offer flexible support to emerging Australian independent creators and/or established gamemakers who are interested in creative and artistic experimentation. It is open to sole traders, further lowering the barrier to entry for early career applicants who wish to make games. The grant allows applicants to apply to create a prototype or to complete a micro-scale game.

A further aim of the grant is to democratise the early stages of gamemaking, providing an opportunity for those who would otherwise not have the means to create a prototype to do so, therefore unlocking a myriad of further games investment opportunities, many of which require a prototype for consideration.

## Data

Screen Australia received 125 eligible applications for the September 2024 round of Emerging Gamemakers Fund, alongside 48 eligible applications for the simultaneous round of the Games Production Fund, totalling to 173 applications in the September 2024 rounds. This is an increase from 163 in the previous round (April 2024).

Below is a chart comparison of the three Emerging Gamemakers Fund rounds, breaking down eligible applications submitted per round, categorised by state.

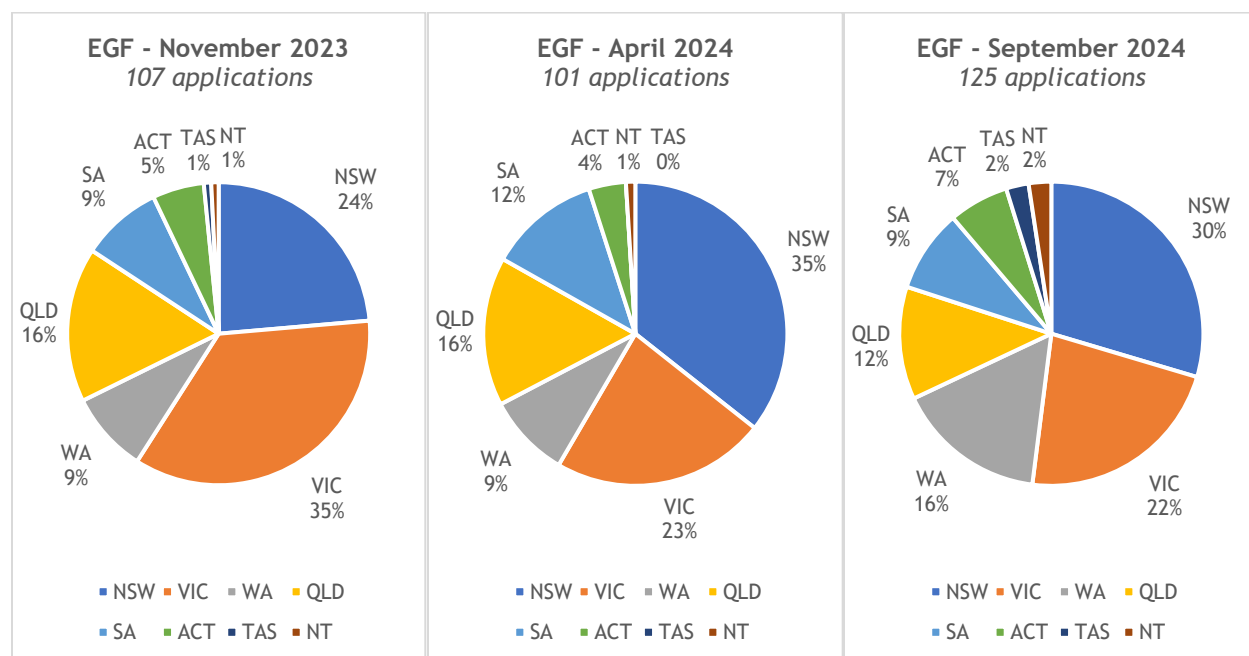


Figure 1. Breakdown of eligible applications submitted by state. November 2023 (left) had 107 applications, April 2024 (middle) had 101 applications, and the latest round, September 2024 (right) had 125 applications.

This round saw the highest number of submissions to the Emerging Gamemakers Fund so far. While it is excellent to see a high level of demand for this fund, this unprecedented level of applications, coupled with budget limitations, increases the quality bar for applications recommended for funding.

With the currently available budget, this allows for an approval rating of roughly 11% for the Emerging Gamemakers Fund in the September 2024 round. The previous round's approval rating was 27% and the average of the Games: Expansion Pack's approval rating was 24%.

In short, the demand for games funding is clearly growing and applications need to be exceptional to be competitive enough for funding.

# Observations & Takeaways

Below are observations and takeaways noted by the Screen Australia games team that may be beneficial for future applicants to be mindful of when writing and preparing their applications for the Emerging Gamemakers Fund.

## Key observations:

- The Emerging Gamemakers Fund continues to receive excellent, high-quality applications and project ideas. The grant attracted a more diverse slate of projects than the Games Expansion Pack or Games Production Fund grants, both in terms of the level of experimentation in the creative material and the diversity of the creative team. Overall, the round was very competitive, which reflects the rich, vibrant landscape of emerging gamemakers across Australia.
- The state spread of applications saw an increase this round. A healthy number of applications outside of Eastern states was noted.
- Similar to the previous round, this round received projects at vastly different stages (from blank slate ideation through to a working polished prototype) and from gamemakers at a diverse range of career stages. Unlike the previous round, this round did see the quality of applications increase on both ends of the spectrum. For projects at the ideation stage, having strong clarity of vision is required to be competitive.
- Approximately 19% of applications applied with the intention of completing a micro-scale game (up from 15% in the previous round). For the remainder 81% delivering a prototype, indicating plans for the next stages of development and production would strengthen their applications.
- Games with authentic and original voice continue to stand out amongst the application pool. A greater portion of projects are grounded in a more authentic sense of lived Australian experience. This is not necessarily 'Australiana', but more a reflection of gamemakers exploring games as a critical and cultural medium for self-expression. This tendency to self-express through games-as-art, reflective of the Australian experience, seems to be becoming more and more normalised.
- With the introduction of two funds to replace the singular games fund (Games: Expansion Pack), some applicants experienced confusion about their suitability for one fund over the other. Some applications to the Emerging Gamemakers Fund may have been better suited for the Games Production Fund, particularly projects that were further developed or with larger scopes.
- Screen Australia continues to receive enquiries from potential applicants who were students or had student team members. As per the Screen Australia Terms of Trade and the grant guidelines, students are not eligible for Screen Australia funding.

- Screen Australia received enquiries from potential applicants who wished to submit a prototype as part of an Emerging Gamemakers Fund application. Due to resourcing limitations, assessing prototypes is not possible for this grant. Future applicants are encouraged to instead include gameplay footage of any prototypes as part of their application.
- The number of games that self-identify as ‘experimental’ is relatively high, and has increased from the previous round (12% of all applications, up from 10%).
- Many applications indicated several languages that the project would be localised to but did not substantiate or provide a plan for this work to be carried out (e.g. in the budget, timeline, and/or production plan). The number of applications has decreased compared to previous rounds.
- Some applications had relatively large team sizes (8+) without providing evidence of fair compensation at industry standards. While acknowledging that sweat equity and in-kind work may be prevalent in the industry, particularly at a more informal stage of development, Screen Australia funding requires that any contractors involved in a project are compensated fairly. See the Screen Australia Terms of Trade for details.
- A common concern regarding the viability assessment criteria was around the high personal risk involved with applicants planning to quit their full-time jobs to pursue the project, relying solely on this \$30,000 grant.
- The ongoing general experience of economic recession and job layoffs in the games industry may have impacted the high volume of applications received.
- A higher volume of re-applications was noted this round. Of these re-applications, the more competitive ones were those that took on feedback from the Trends Reports provided and improved on the necessary areas of their application and/or project, and provided clear evidence of these changes in their application; for example, by providing a changelog detailing the updated areas of their application, or stronger supplementary materials.
- Teams moving away from proprietary software to open-source solutions due to perceived business and reputational risks of using proprietary software was observed.
- A small number of applications featured language that appeared to be written by generative AI. While Screen Australia does not have an explicit policy on the use of generative AI, [guiding principles](#) can now be found on the Screen Australia website. Applicants are encouraged to read and adhere to these principles. Applicants should also consider that, as assessors see hundreds of applications each round, it is often evident when generative AI has been used. Due to generative AI’s inability to conceive original creative thought, it may not be an appropriate tool in crafting a competitive application for cultural funding.

- AI generated art was observed in a small number of applications. This art does not add significant value to the application as it is not representative of the team's abilities. It is preferred to treat these as 'mood board' material.
- Some applications dealt with sensitive topics that would require subject matter experts either on the team or consulted with. We encourage future applicants to conduct or have plans for conducting consultations and/or sensitivity reading, and to have a clear plan of action on how to implement any suggested changes. Budgeting for these consultations also makes these applications more competitive.
- Diversity of thought in applications tended to come from teams where at least some team members had diverse lived experience.
- It is generally very difficult to make a last-minute application competitive. Applicants who gave themselves adequate time to proofread and polish their submissions were generally able to submit a more viable and competitive application.

### **The most competitive applications:**

- Used the templates provided and responded to the guidelines.
- Articulated a clearer sense of the shape of the project, its goals, and how it fits into the applicant's practise.
- Were both concise and comprehensive with the details provided. Rather than providing an overwhelming amount of information, competitive applications stuck to the page number restrictions and provided brief contextualising information and supplementary documents to ensure assessors could understand the project proposal.
- Had clear alignment in all elements of the application: team members were present in the application and the budget; the significant milestone was clear and consistent throughout the Strategic Outcomes document, the Production Plan, and the application form.
- Were able to demonstrate or articulate what makes their game unique, in terms of visuals, design, gameplay, gamefeel, story, and mechanics, even if the game sits within an established genre.
- Had strong and clear visual identity that set it apart from other games in the market. Standing out visually does not exclusively imply photorealism, high fidelity, or polish.
- Had a well-balanced and thought-out video pitch. These videos not only hit all the vital points of a pitch (e.g. who is your team, what is the game, why is your team working on this project, and how will this grant help you), but were also well-planned and prepared, and addressed the assessment criteria. These videos typically spent a minute or less talking about the game itself. The inclusion of game visuals added a lot of value to the video pitches.

- Had a diverse team and their projects reflected this diversity.
- Were able to articulate the importance and timeliness of their project both in terms of their own professional creative practice and the current state of the industry and its marketplace.
- Knew who their audiences were and could demonstrate their ability to reach them. An audience does not have to be big (i.e. '9-to-99-year-olds who play games' is not the best target audience) and can be a niche underserved audience.
- Provided letters of support from peers, clients, and industry leaders.
- Provided letters of confirmation from team members, collaborators, and stakeholders regarding their commitment to the project.
- Provided thorough and detailed risk analysis and mitigation plans.
- Ensured adequate payment to all workers involved in the project, meeting minimum industry rates or higher.
- Provided bespoke, relevant, succinct, and easily navigated support material.

### **The least competitive applications:**

- Deviated significantly from the provided templates and/or did not provide detailed responses to all the questions asked. These applications sometimes seemed to rely on favourable assumptions or interpretations by assessors, rather than providing comprehensive explanations.
- Tend to be highly derivative of existing released games. They commonly featured design intentions centred on the single dimension of enjoying and/or wanting to iterate on a perceived problem with the design of an existing game.
- Spent disproportionate time and effort explaining or focusing on some particular details of the project while ignoring other elements of the application.
- Lacked visual depiction or representation of the game and relied purely on written and spoken elements of the application to convey the concept.
- Did not have a strong foundation or premise and could have used more time to develop the concept and vision for the project. There may be a misunderstanding of expectations around how early it would be appropriate to access funding. The application materials did not provide clarity on what the game would be.
- Were too ambitious for a first-time project without understanding the skills and resourcing needs and requirements for a project of that intended scale (e.g. wanting to make an MMO game or a Pokémon GO alternative).

- Used game examples that are at scales beyond the capacity and scope of the applicant team or remit of the grant (e.g. Fortnite, League of Legends, Pokémon GO, etc.).
- Did not have ambitions to produce unique, original, or novel content. The quality of applications is extremely high, so applicants really need to hone in on the unique qualities of their game idea.
- Did not have all their submission materials in order, (e.g. out of date or wrongly addressed documents), or had missing submission materials and/or broken URLs.
- Did not consider accessibility or diversity at all. A blanket 'no' for an answer for this does not reflect well on the application or applicant.
- Had video pitches that were not well planned, rehearsed, or produced. Uncompetitive pitch videos spent the majority of time speculating about design intentions or possibilities, or specific game mechanics. Some teams submitted gameplay footage as their video pitch with no further context, and failed to address the video pitch brief.
- Did not include or identify all creative team members in their application, or had missing or inconsistent information about the creative team.
- Could not articulate or speak to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion criterion with strength and clarity.
- Included a long list of release platforms without demonstrating experience in releasing for them. While Screen Australia appreciates the ambition behind this intention, unless the applicant is able to demonstrate experience in releasing or porting to these platforms, has a solution in mind to compensate for their lack of knowledge or experience, or notes existing relationships with platform holders, selecting a large number of release platforms works against the applicant in terms of viability.