

Games Production Fund

September 2024 - Trends Report

Prepared by the Screen Australia Games team

Background

The Games Production Fund was conceived to offer flexible support to Australian independent gamemakers. This fund is the successor to the Games: Expansion Pack grant, which required that a project's final milestone be a public-facing release of the game. The Games Production Fund instead allows applicants to self-define a significant milestone of development and submit an application centred around that.

Common milestones include release, Early Access release, vertical slice, and demo. Milestones may be focused on a commercial or a cultural outcome (e.g. festival and/or award submissions).

Data

Screen Australia received 48 eligible applications for the September 2024 round of Games Production Fund, alongside 125 eligible applications for the simultaneous round of the Emerging Gamemakers 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 Games Production Fund rounds, breaking down eligible applications submitted per round, categorised by state.

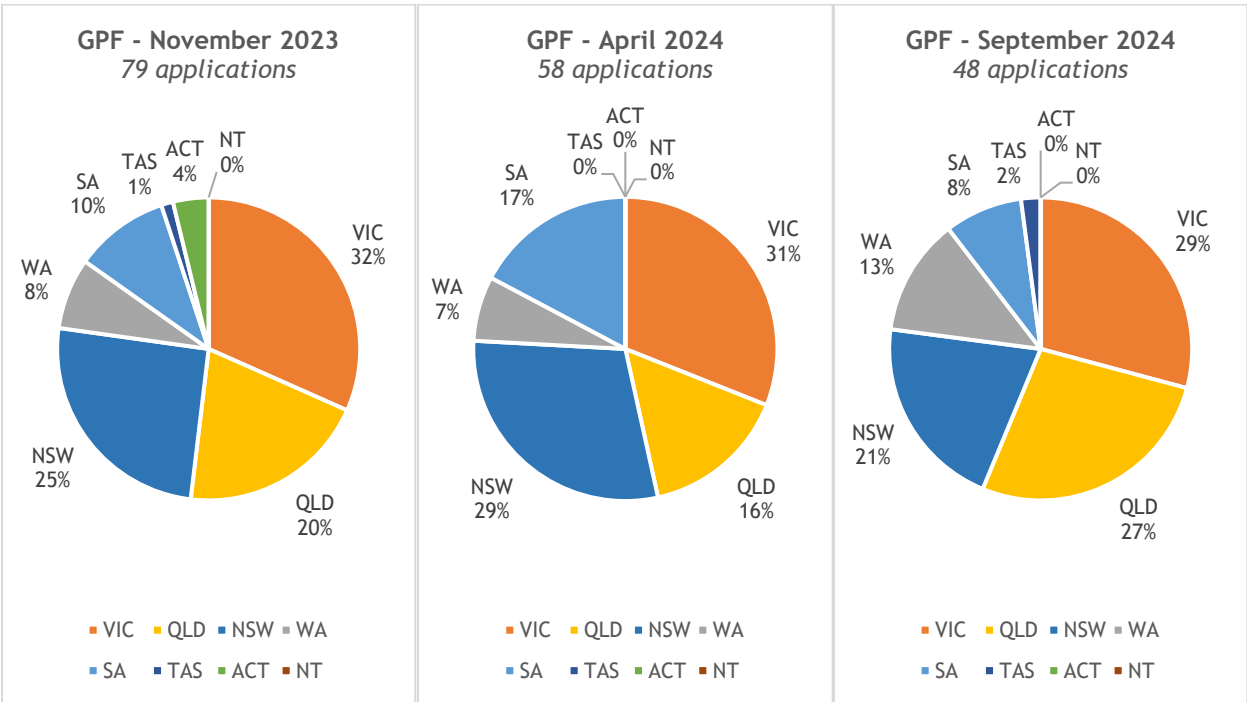


Figure 2. Breakdown of eligible applications submitted by state. November 2023 (left) had 79 applications, April 2024 (middle) had 58 applications, and the latest round, September 2024 (right) had 48 applications.

This round saw a continued minor decrease in number of applications to the Games Production Fund. Despite this, the September 2024 round saw the highest quality level of applications to the fund so far.

Approval rate for this round was on par with the previous round, 21%. This is slightly lower than the average for Games: Expansion Pack, which was 24%.

In short, the fund continues to be competitive and applications need to be exceptional to receive 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 Games Production Fund.

Key observations:

- The quality of applications, game ideas, prototypes, and diversity in teams have all increased this round. The projects being submitted are more resolved and have a clearer sense of identity and positioning.
- This round saw the first batch of projects applying after having received the Emerging Gamemakers Fund. There is a noticeable level of quality across these applications; the impact of the Emerging Gamemakers Fund is tangible.
- 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.
- Bespoke, smaller, well curated and prepared prototypes were more effective than prototypes that were simply the latest work-in-progress build of a game.
- The majority of applications received had premium as their payment model, Steam as their release platform, and single player as the only game mode. Multiplayer games continue to be underrepresented in the application pool, although an uptick in multiplayer games was noted this round.
- Many applications were positioned around vertical slice, demo, or Early Access release as their significant milestone (approximately 2/3 of applications). This seems to continue to validate the change from 'release funding' to 'milestones determined by the applicant' has improved the flexibility and relevance of the grant.
- Some applications to the Games Production Fund may have been better suited to Emerging Gamemakers Fund. These are typically projects that are smaller in scope and/or too early in the production or preproduction phase with a prototype that does not capture the core mechanics, gameplay, or visual identity of the project.
- Many applications continued to 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).

- Many applications indicated accessibility measures that the project would implement but did not substantiate or provide a plan or documentation for this work to be carried out (e.g. in the budget, timeline, and/or production plan).
- Accessibility and inclusivity are priorities for Screen Australia and the application process highlights resources that applicants can use to consider accessibility in their design process. Therefore, it is generally uncompetitive to forego including accessibility planning in an application.
- Some applications had relatively large team sizes (10+) 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 an 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 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.
- The reputation of the applicant alone cannot carry an application. The grant writing quality and the strength of the project and support material must be strong, regardless of an applicant's level of industry experience. Government assessing protocols require detailed, quality information.
- A small number of applications featured language that appeared to be written by generative AI tools. 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 are encouraged to consider that, as assessors see hundreds of applications each round, it is 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.
- A small number of applications had a history of being learning projects whose scope has evolved to an unviable level. It is rare for games that first evolved as learning projects to be viable in other contexts, especially commercial ones. Those who have succeeded are the exception, rather than the rule.
- 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.
- 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 others streams of income indicated in their Finance Plan & Budget spreadsheet. This could be pending or confirmed, cash contribution or in-kind. Where sources of finance were mentioned in the application, they were also reflected in the Finance Plan & Budget spreadsheet.
- 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. Cutting to screenshots or video were also useful to see in 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.

- Had a strong understanding of the importance of marketing, promotion, and discoverability, and could demonstrate a clear marketing plan for the project and/or identify the marketing expertise and experience within the team. These applications indicated a strategy early in the development process, and prioritised building momentum and audience early.
- Had included a marketing plan that covered a competitor analysis, target audience, and/or player psychographic profiles.
- 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.
- Provided realistic milestone dates with adequate buffer time.

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 feature design intentions centred on the single dimension of enjoying and/or wanting to iterate on a perceived problem with the design of an existing released game.
- Spent disproportionate time and effort explaining or focusing on some particular details of the project while ignoring other elements of the application.
- Did not have a strong foundation or premise and could use 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. All the projects in question had prototypes, but were commonly not representative of the game experience, visually or mechanically. The application materials did not provide clarity on what the game would be.

- 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.
- Had budgets where the allocated Screen Australia expenditure did not match the total Screen Australia ask.
- 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.
- Were too ambitious without strong backing of their ambitions, and without a solid plan with contingencies and risk mitigation.
- Did not include or identify all creative team members in their application, or had missing or inconsistent information about the creative team.
- Did not acknowledge outstanding obligations in their application. If you have received Screen Australia funding and have not completed/acquitted your grant, you must indicate this in your application.
- Could not articulate or speak to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion criterion with strength and clarity.
- Did not have a marketing, promotion, and/or discoverability strategy, plan, or expertise to back up their marketing expenditure (e.g. if the application plans to run an advertising campaign and spend \$10,000 on it, it may be appropriate to provide information about the advertising strategy in detail). These elements are particularly important for projects with commercial ambitions.
- 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.