Emerging Gamemakers Fund

February 2025 – Trends Report

Prepared by the Screen Australia Games Department

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 myriad further games investment opportunities, many of which require a prototype for consideration.

Data

Screen Australia received 143 eligible applications for the February 2025 round of Emerging Gamemakers Fund, alongside 61 eligible applications for the simultaneous round of the Games Production Fund, totalling to 204 applications in the February 2025 rounds. This is an increase from 173 in the previous round (September 2024) and almost equals the record high number of applications (206 in November 2023, the first round of both the Emerging Gamemakers Fund and the Games Production Fund).

Below is a chart comparison of the three most recent Emerging Gamemakers Fund rounds, breaking down eligible applications submitted per round, categorised by state.
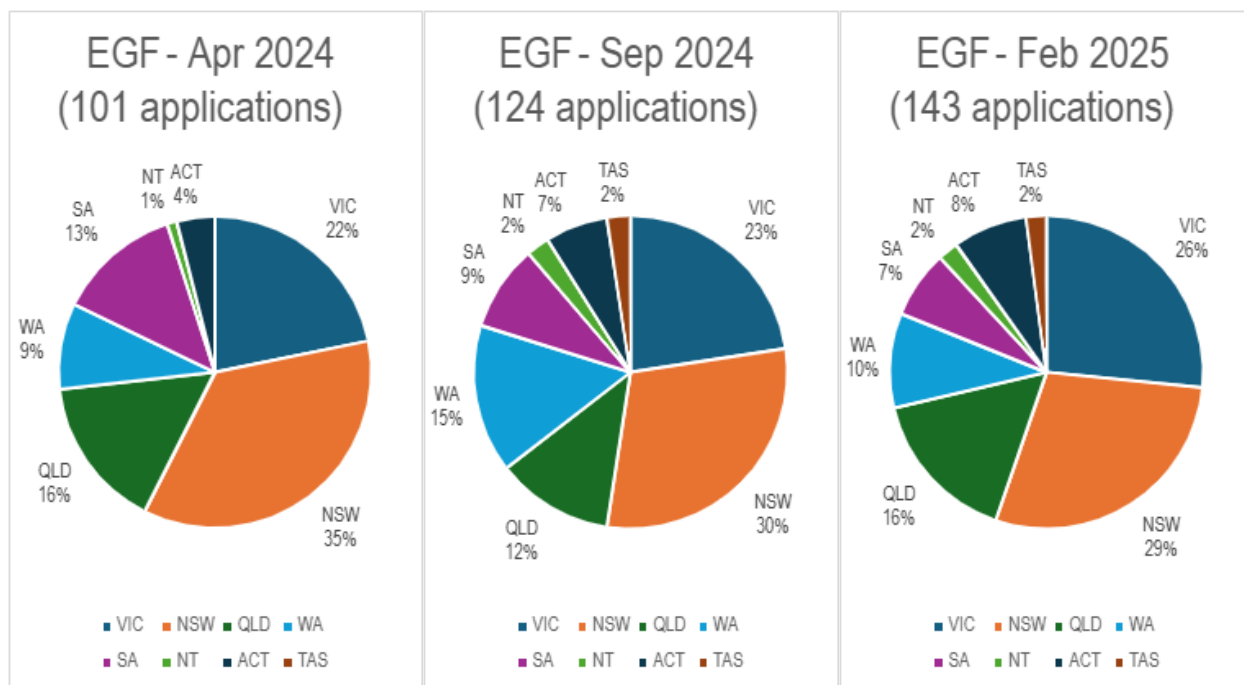
Figure 1. Breakdown of eligible applications submitted by state. April 2024 (left) had 101 applications, September 2024 (middle) had 124 applications, and the latest round, February 2025 (right), had 143 applications.

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 number 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 rate of roughly 10% for the Emerging Gamemakers Fund in the February 2025 round. The previous round's approval rate was 11% and the average of the Games: Expansion Pack's approval rate 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 Department that may be beneficial for future applicants when 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 attracts a diverse slate of projects, 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 remained fairly consistent this round. The exceptions to this were Victoria and Western Australia, which between them accounted for the increased volume of total applications.

- The overwhelming majority of applications identify their project as being at the preproduction stage of development, with the ideation stage being second most common and production being the least represented. For projects at the ideation stage, having strong clarity of vision is required to be competitive. For projects already in production, strong articulation around the impact of the funding towards the target milestone is required to be competitive.

- Approximately 15% of applications applied with the intention of completing a micro-scale game (down from 19% in the previous round). The most competitive of these applications precisely communicate the relevance and value of the project and how it is able to accomplish its goals within scope.

- 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.

- We saw several notable shifts in the self-identified genres across this round. Action, Platformer, and Multiplayer are a smaller percentage of applications when compared to previous rounds, with an increase in applications selecting Exploration, Strategy, and

Visual Novel. The number of games that self-identify as 'experimental' remains relatively high, at around 11% of total applications. The most popular genre tag remains Story-Driven at 38% of all applications (up from 34% the previous round), demonstrating the keen desire for Australian gamemakers to tell authentic Australian stories.

- We continue to see a healthy number of projects that use Australia as a setting. Of these projects, a high proportion use animals (anthropomorphic or otherwise) in lieu of human characters. The most competitive of the projects set in Australia continue to prioritise an authentic sense of lived Australian experience, rather than defaulting to a generic sense of 'Australiana'.

- 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.

- While team sizes vary, 80% of applications have between 1 and 3 team members. Solo gamemakers represent the most common team size, accounting for 44% of all applications—matching the same proportion as the September 2024 round.

- The ongoing general experience of economic recession and job layoffs in the games industry may have impacted the high volume of applications received.

- A significantly higher volume of re-applications was noted this round (around 21%, up from approximately 10% in the previous round). Of these re-applications, the more competitive ones were those that took on feedback from the Trends Reports, 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 by providing stronger, clearer, and more targeted supplementary materials.

- We noted a continued trend of teams moving away from proprietary software towards open-source solutions, presumably due to perceived business and reputational risks of using proprietary software.

- 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, a set of 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 would be preferable for applications to use examples (e.g. screenshots, concept art, etc.) from other released games or media with appropriate citations and context explaining what the art direction and style for the application will be.

- Some applications dealt with sensitive topics that would require subject matter experts either on the team or to be consulted. We encourage future applicants to conduct or have plans for conducting consultations and/or sensitivity reading, and to include these plans within the application. Budgeting both time and money for these consultations— and the implementation of any changes—also makes these applications more competitive.

- 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 current templates provided and responded to the guidelines.

- Articulated a clear 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. Competitive applications stuck to the page number restrictions and provided brief contextualising information to ensure assessors could clearly follow the project proposal.

- Had clear alignment in all elements of the application. For example, ensuring that team members were present in both the application and the budget, or ensuring that the project timeline was consistent throughout all documents.

- 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 practice and the current state of the industry and 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 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 that remove doubt.

- 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 or how it would play, moment-to-moment.

- 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.) without contextualising how these examples are relevant to a smaller project.

- 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. Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility is one of the four assessment criteria and should be an important factor of each application.

- 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.

- 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.