Après le deluge – The Brisbane [Briz-lantis]

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By Truna aka J. Turner and Lubi Thomas

Ah, Queensland, as the song goes "**Even ya big city streets that are bringing the heat have got Nothing on a Queensland summer (http://www.evileddie.com/Lyrics.html)** ." I love Queensland, I love living in Brisbane, sometimes called Briz-Vegas, usually just called Brizzie and recently called *Brislantis* or *Brisvenice* in reference to the middle of January 2011 when the Brisbane River burst its banks and inundated vast sections of the modern city. The floods shocked us, everyone knows someone who has lost their home or business, we were taken by surprise even though we all knew we lived in a city built on a flood plain and we all knew how high the previous big flood in 1974 had reached. The flood also brought out an extraordinary spirit, as the whole city turned out in wellies in order to help in the clean up. An overseas colleague commented on the army of volunteers and the enthusiasm for recovery and rebuilding. She reckoned it would not have happened in some other counties and that it said volumes about Aussies. I can't comment on anywhere else but I do agree that the enthusiasm and down right cheer with which everyone mucked in does indeed seem to be a strong Aussie trait. From the folks who came with buckets and mops to spend a gruelling few days knee deep in vile sludge, to the ones who brought round sausage sizzles on the backs of trailers and home made cookies, to the ones who put snorkels and water wings on local statues to make us all laugh.

It struck me that there is a resonance here with the current state of the game industry in Queensland. We all knew we lived on a precarious flood plain but as we watched a couple of our well established and loved games companies fall into the muddy waters of the wider world economy and were eaten away bit by bit; we were shocked and saddened. Actually, as the companies closed, that same extraordinary spirit and community saw hosts of small groups of good friends, usually ex-professionals sometimes from rival**[i] (#_edn1)** companies, turning to the indie scene and starting their own game dev operations, and again, that same camaraderie occurred and a willingness to muck in and help out.

We have had a chapter of the IGDA here in Brizzie since 2004 when Jason Della Rocca wrote to a handful of us to suggest we start one. With our own Matt Ford as Chief Disorganiser we started in true QLD style, a can do attitude, began with a meeting down the Plough Inn in the **Southbank Parklands (http://www.visitsouthbank.com.au/)** on a chill**[ii] (#_edn2)** Brisbane winter evening with cold beers. Right from the beginning the Brisbane IGDA had a particular style, we specialised in socials and LAN parties, and of course BBQs – often with Matt's croquet set. As 2004 drew to a close we joined up with the Straight Out Of Brisbane Festival (AKA SOOB) crew and ran a series of game talks and sessions in the summer heat down in Brizzie's **Fortitude Valley (http://www.ourbrisbane.com/suburbs/fortitude-valley)** , home to music venues, bars, cafes, night clubs and great little Asian restaurants. We liked our basic ingredients: the local game development community and supporting that community and getting the public to appreciate that game community – oh, and having fun in the glorious Queensland sunshine**[iii] (#_edn3)** . In 2005 we continued in the same vein, more socials and BBQs with Matt's croquet set, another LAN party, and a day of master classes at **QANTM (http://brisbane.qantm.com/en-gb/home/)** in the city. I think the response to the master classes really confirmed how we operated. A number of local industry professionals volunteered their time to come and talk about their particular areas of the industry to all comers. We had folks like **John Passfield**

(http://passfieldgames.blogspot.com/) , industry veteran and designer of Halloween Harry giving a workshop on design, and Mick Gordon of **Game Audio Australia (http://www.gameaudioaustralia.com/)** hunkering down with a bunch of keen students to talk about game audio as well as many other volunteers sharing their passion.

Sharing a passion for games, engendering enthusiasm for game making … we are getting a theme here ….

In 2006 we continued developing the model, although the LAN party that year was actually a good old-fashioned MUD session held in the labs at the **Queensland University of Technology (http://www.qut.edu.au/)** . We were also part of a gig at the Brizzie **Supanova Pop Culture Expo (http://www.supanova.com.au/)** , supported by the QLD Gov. in part, and with in-kind support from our local companies. Again with the sharing of passion and camaraderie the local industry gave their time and expertise to put on a great show for **Queensland Games (http://www.queenslandgames.com/home)** . We also started seeing a wide range of different types of folk turning up, our usual suspects but also parents with young kids, teachers, artists …

In 2007 Matt Ford stepped down from his position to start work on his own game and his own company, **Digital Cream (http://www.digitalcream.com.au/blog/about-digital-cream/)** – unusually independent games and views J – and the Brisbane IGDA started a relationship with the **Creative Industries Precincts (http://www.ciprecinct.qut.edu.au/)** and their curator par extraordinaire, **Lubi Thomas (http://davisthomas.com.au/)** , together we set up the Game-On program. Lubi helped us find some money and location, and we set up our monthly program of talks and workshops. John Passfield came to talk design, Mick Gordon talked audio, **Christy Dena (http://www.christydena.com/)** made magic with transmedia, **Leanne Taylor (http://au.linkedin.com/in/leannectaylor)** illuminated the art of writing for games and we had animators and artists coming to show off their particular areas. We even held a **Medieval II (http://www.totalwar.com/medieval2)** challenge courtesy of what was then **Creative Assembly (http://www.queenslandgames.com/developers/sega_creative_assembly.html)** .

The sheer delight of the enthusiasm we discovered from the participants of Game-On led to us running the first **fabulous 48 hour game making challenge (http://making-games.net/48/?page_id=464) [iv] (#_edn4)** , as part of the Next Level Festival. It was astounding. We had four teams which we thought was extraordinary and we locked them into a space donated by the **Kelvin Grove Urban Village (http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/)** . We had really dodgy air conditioning (baking hot or freezing cold), a single cold shower but a really well stocked kitchen**[v] (#_edn5)** and a nice sleeping room with air beds. The teams were made up of students, a couple of them only just starting first year, local indies (Go **Aberrant Entertainment (http://www.aberrant.com.au/)**) and a team that was made up of friends who were just finishing "uni" – our **2007 winners SIF90 (http://team.sif90.com/html2007.html)** . You can still get the winning entry from the 48hr website or the SIF90 site – Sticky Geckos was amazing; we just couldn't believe the passion and, well outrageous bonkers-ness**[vi] (#_edn6)** that the teams evidenced. All for a gold painted plastic joystick, jelly beans and our undying love!

Actually we think the teams were indeed utterly mad. They went on to prove how mad they all were when they returned in 2008 for the second fab 48-hour challenge. We ran the Game-On program throughout that year and saw more and more people coming to share their enthusiasm about games and the games industry. A number of Briz-vegas's other local educational institutions came to play; **Griffith QCA (http://www.griffith.edu.au/visual-creative-arts/queensland-college-art)** , **QANTM (http://www.qantm.com.au/)** , and **ACID (http://www.acid.net.au/)** started supporting and assisting us. The Brizzie games family was growing. Lubi and I started referring to ourselves as the "The Aunties." – Be afraid – and we started tracking and trying to understand a certain something we were seeing in the local game

making and playing community, a beautiful essentially indie passion. In 2008 we saw the **48 hour challenge move to its regular premises at the block CI precincts (http://making-games.net/48/?page_id=425)** – a massive exhibition space with loads of equipment, a slightly bigger kitchen and a sleeping space that was a glass fish bowl of a room and of course we had the single shower facility, it was suppose to be an upgraded hot shower but turned out to be cold after all. There wasn't even a gold painted joystick that year, just our fabulous 48 hour challenge mug – filled with jelly beans. We had 12 teams in the challenge this time around and we were once again astonished by the creativity, mayhem, the intense cheerfulness and larrikin spirit of all involved. We also had a press room and **Australian Gamer (http://www.australiangamer.com/)** not only stayed up with us to cover the event, they made their own game, well sort of. The games made in this second 48-hour challenge were once again of an extraordinary quality, SIF90 won again with **Melonauts (http://team.sif90.com/)** – another 'u beaut' that you can still download and play.

As they say there is no rest for the wicked and the summer of 2008 – 2009 (December – February**[vii] (#_edn7)**) coincided with the Barbican **Game On Exhibition coming to the Queensland State Library (http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibit/past/game-on)** ; A complete festival of playable arcade games and retro heaven. It was brilliant, Grandfathers were showing off skills earned in misspent youth in arcades to keen grandchildren and families were coming and appreciating the actuality of our business. All playing together and having a lot of fun. As part of the fun and games we ran a series of workshops titled The Elements of Games for the exhibition, once again being made possible because we have a group of supportive friends and colleagues in the local game industry who just love to share the joy and who do it so well.

A new sponsor came to play with us for the big exhibition and we obtained funding to run a concurrent game production studio as a kind of living exhibit called Studio Game-On. Thanks to Phil Graham of **The Institute of Creative Industries and Innovation (http://www.ici.qut.edu.au/)** , we were able to set up a team of 14 willing students to make a game in 6 weeks. Heh heh – we put the team in that same glass bowl of a room (the glasshouse), put web cams on them, made them tout for support and ideas via the usual social media channels and put together an industry board for critical review made up of folks from **The 3 Blokes Studio (http://www.3blokesstudios.com/3BlokesStudios/Home.html)** and **Wildfire Studios (http://www.wildfire.com.au/content/standard.asp?)** . The studio was an excellent example of how we can indeed set up a game development educational experience and make it utterly real for the participants, although that's another story for another day. In terms of this tale, it was that same cheerful willingness to engage with anyone interested in making games and that beautiful sense of local community with everyone chipping in that made it possible.

The Game On program and the fabulous 48-hour has gone from strength to strength. Another local tertiary institute came on board (Thanks **Southbank Institute of Technology (http://www.southbank.edu.au/site/)**) and in 2009, we started upping the ante on the nature of the program, it got more evangelical really, a case of "let's make those games" and the 48-hour challenge at the end of the year was opened up to include a professional league competing against each other. In par,t this was because our twice-lauded winners SIF90 all went down to Melbourne to start the **Voxel Agents (http://www.thevoxelagents.com/)** and they told us that while they loved us, they wanted more competition. The other reason we had to set up a professional league was because all of our potential local industry judges started signing up as teams. Hmm, this was indeed a totally bizarre dilemma. As the professionals were insane enough to want to come and spend a whole weekend doing an intense version of their day jobs, we set them up in a special room – the glasshouse – our beloved gold fish bowl, so everyone could watch and learn. We also dumped any idea about providing sleeping space, as it turned out to be completely un-used! The end result was 19 teams with one team travelling up from Wollongong and another whose plans fell apart at the last moment joining us by satellite. For those of you hosting giant Global Game Jams this might not sound so very extraordinary but we still feel

that there is this other aspect in the Australian scene: It's basically irreverent and friendly. So one team (who shall remain nameless but you know who you are) whilst being pretty keen on winning also took the time to work out the kitchen cam phases in order to magically "appear" a noodle tower. It's that same spirit that puts the floaties and snorkels on the Brizzie statues after the flood, it's playful and this playfulness to my mind is something critical to the indie scene.

Another thread to the theme – playfulness and caring …

By the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, the Brizzie IGDA was fast become the "Indie" GDA **[viii] (#_edn8)** . The Game-On program was completely geared to going indie with talks like 'The nuts and bolts of going indie' from our own **Duncan Curtis (http://au.linkedin.com/pub/duncan-curtis/9/556/38a)** , we were responding to the flood of big studio closures by getting people to come and talk about other possibilities, opening the gates on established definitions of what games are.

The list of Brisbane based companies back when we started was rather different to the list by the end of 2010, Auran downsized dramatically, relocating to a very small studio down near the Gold Coast. Our adored Pandemic and its loving ways closed down and in 2010 Brizzie's big indie, Krome Studios also closed most of its doors. But in the wake of this deluge of closures we watched a whole pile of indie companies form and we also watched as some rather interesting, creative and very much alive things started happening to the local games industry landscape. The 2009 48-hour challenge pro-league was won (rather efficiently) by **Curious Bear (http://www.curiousbearproductions.com/)** with their delightful **My Mechanical Romance (http://making-games.net/48/?page_id=1081)** and the indie league was won by a team from Wollongong: Black Wolf Studios, who summed it all up with their game **High Hopes (http://making-games.net/48/?page_id=1081)** . Even though we set the 48-hour to be rather cut throat and highly competitive, teams were forming across rival institutions and people were wandering around just being plain helpful to each other. In true Aussie style, a little bit rascally – a lot of photos unsuitable for loving parents and partners were taken of the sleeping **[ix] (#_edn9)** . In 2010 the winning pro-league team was made up of ex Pandemic people and friends called in from other companies to aid and abet. They gave us **Big Al's Redemption (http://www.cratesmith.com/archives/277)** , a classic involving dinosaurs, revenge and a bar **[x] (#_edn10)** . You gotta love this team, they were working flat out on their own indie production, crunch times and deadlines looming but they still took the weekend off ??? to create this fab, fun, witty game and a real 48-hour classic.

Witty, fun, creative, dedicated, community …. There is another theme happening here.

2010 was also the year we went mob handed to Melbourne's **Freeplay (http://www.freeplay.net.au/)** , a glorious two days at the nexus of indie creativity, conceptual art, industry and even academic research. Now, that was indeed brilliant, there was not one person **[xi] (#_edn11)** who left Freeplay who was not inspired to make an indie game. We all watched as those early landscape changes dug in and by the time we went to the **2010 Games Connect Asia Pacific (http://gdaa.com.au/game-connect-asia-pacific-gcap-2010-2)** down on the Gold Coast the emphasis on indie creativity was palpable. GCAP was themed on Player Experience but in many ways, it was more about the experience of making the player experience. Many of the industry folks there were indies, a great deal of the talk was about "going for it", "making it happen" and there was a lot of sharing about experiences setting up a small fast indie company **[xii] (#_edn12)** . A favourite and telling moment from GCAP is the social event provided by **Halfbrick (http://www.halfbrick.com/)** who bought a poker table for a couple of hours at the casino next door to the conference centre. Fifty odd game industry folk make a joyous rowdy crew and the casino was so pleased to have some life and action in their usually 'serious' **[xiii] (#_edn13)** halls they invited everyone to stay on. I think the word I seek to describe our Aussie games industry is probably 'loveable'.

Underneath all this charm and enthusiasm is another very important layer, a sub structure of active creativity that will help to scaffold our industry into this next decade. This active creativity and irreverent disregard for silos will be a vital aspect in shaping a vibrant industry. It is already having serious ramifications in how the majority of us actually teach about games, game design and game development, as we emphasise independent opportunities, entrepreneurship, creative exploration and tend to finish degrees with capstone projects that are then put out into the wild. Indie practice indeed**[xiv] (#_edn14)** !

Ah, the real theme at last: indie game development is based on the other themes, based on a strong community, passion, enthusiasm, playfulness and active creativity

We have learned so much from all of these fabulous game makers over the last six years: that the way Aussies create their stories**[xv] (#_edn15)** and present their playfulness through their games is something very Aussie indeed. Our Brizzie membership are not only bloody heroes and mad as hatters but also passionately creative in this beautifully witty way and that they will do almost anything for a mug of jelly beans!

With support from Gordon Bellamy and Ryan Arndt our own community is growing and we have also started to reframe ourselves as a more "Antipodean" community, liaising with other IGDA chapters and proto-chapters in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Perth and across the water in New Zealand. The fab 48hr is going travelling down to Melbourne and then who knows where else … looking forward to all of it!

Love,

the aunties, truna & Lubi

truna aka j.turner **(http://pinksofa.making-games.net/)** *is the Brisbane IGDA Chapter* **(http://igdabrisbane.org/)** *auntie, game activist and researcher. She is dead keen on supporting a vibrant Aussie independent game community and has been involved in running a series of outreach programs to foster understanding about the medium (and business) of the game since 2004. Along with a number of partners in crime, truna is also responsible for the fabulous 48-hour game making challenge* **(http://48hrgamecomp.com/)** *– now entering its fifth year. She believes that the game is an extraordinary powerful form of media and that more people should be exploring and extending its potential. truna is into software culture, she writes about the nature of the game interface, its fun, flaws, foibles and [f]antasmagorias … she believes design is power, and game design more so.*

Lubi Thomas **(http://davisthomas.com.au/)** *has been curating from The Block New Media Exhibition Space located at QUT Precincts, Kelvin Grove since 2005, working locally, nationally and internationally on large-scale 'new media' programs, and on a range of diverse creative projects. She is responsible for developing the current and on-going exhibition program for the Creative Industries Precinct, and the extensive public program schedules that scaffold not only the exhibition program, but also engage with the many Creative Industries Precinct¹s communities. Since 2007 Lubi has developed an ever-growing curatorial intern program, working with both under and post graduate students studying at QUT.*

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[i] (#_ednref1) Actually this town is far too small for rivalry, it is the first thing we tell students: make friends with the students from other institutions, you will all be making games together and going to each other's parties. Many of these parties will be down at the Mana Bar.

[ii] (#_ednref2) We think 20° C is cold, I personally think it is freezing and whinge massively

[iii] (#_ednref3) It really is usually gloriously sunny – they call it The Sunshine State .."beautiful one day,

perfect the next" … just every now and then along comes a phenomenon called La Niña and it rains and rains and rains …

[iv] (#_ednref4) Yeah, I know, the 'fabulous' is indeed a tad campy – but then again, why not?

[v] (#_ednref5) Well stocked with mostly noodles of course – if memory serves, chicken was the most popular

[vi] (#_ednref6) Bonkers-ness, not a real word but how else can we describe a bunch of people who will go without sleep and work their socks off for 48 hours on a diet of noodles in order to win a fabulous prize of a gold painted plastic joystick?

[vii] (#_ednref7) Southern hemisphere remember, festive season on the beach

[viii] (#_ednref8) Bugger, will this confession get us thrown out?

[ix] (#_ednref9) Usually under the work desk, sometimes in a small corner of the room, occasionally hugging the computer they were working on. In 2010 we invited a professional photographer in to take pictures in black and white. He remarked that it was like photographing a war zone.

[x] (#_ednref10) Actually of course the three words provided by Yug of Mana Bar fame to start the challenge **http://www.australiangamer.com/news/3408_48_hour_game_making_challenge.html (http://www.australiangamer.com/news/3408_48_hour_game_making_challenge.html)**

[xi] (#_ednref11) Well, I am sure there will have been at least one, there is always at least one grumpiness but the flavour was there

[xii] (#_ednref12) A shout to Simon Joslin of the Voxel Agents who wrote about it all in Gamasutra **http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6153/the_voxel_agents_year_one_.php (http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6153/the_voxel_agents_year_one_.php)**

[xiii] (#_ednref13) You know that shudder Lurch used to make in the classic Adams Family series? 'Nuff said.

[xiv] (#_ednref14) A story to share: back in 2007 we had a student team who were just starting their uni course, the team has been in the fab 48hrs every year since and this year their capstone project, SpAI has won them the indie of the year award over at indieDB: **http://www.indiedb.com/games/spai (http://www.indiedb.com/games/spai)**

[xv] (#_ednref15) Aussie stories – not to be confused with our somewhat typical tourist icons – a must read on this issue is Paul Callaghan's blog: Reframing the Australian Game **http://www.paulcallaghan.net/blog/2010/10/12/reframing-the-australian-game/ (http://www.paulcallaghan.net/blog/2010/10/12/reframing-the-australian-game/)**

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