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by Rupert Allen and Jenny Watt

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Abstract

Despite the involvement of the Canadian government in the video game industry, there is relatively little publicly available information about the types of firms populating this industry. This article provides new statistics on the video game industry across the Canadian provinces from 2013 to 2022, focusing on three main areas of interest. First, it examines changes in firm counts, revenue and jobs across several dimensions: ownership (Canadian- or foreign-owned), activity (design or publishing), size and geographic region. Second, it presents statistics on the percentage of women employees and the percentage of employee compensation paid to women over time. Third, it compares entry and exit rates for video game firms with entry and exit rates for all private employer firms in Canada. The article illuminates several changes to the video game industry over time, including a rapid increase in the number of small Canadian-owned firms, a shift away from video game publishing towards video game design, and an increasing proportion of women employees and employee compensation paid to women.

Keywords: video games, firm dynamics, women employees

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Introduction

The global video game industry is the fastest-growing media industry, representing a significant and increasingly important part of the creation and dissemination of culture (Wesley & Barczak, 2016). In the Canadian context, video games have been treated like other cultural industries, such as film and television, in two ways. First, Canadian governments at various levels have sought to attract and aid video game developers through tax advantages and other measures of public support (Paul, 2005; Wolf, 2015). Second, through the *Investment Canada Act*, the Canadian government reviews foreign acquisitions of Canadian video game companies with the goal of protecting the creation and retention of Canadian intellectual property (Black & Backus, 2024).

Despite the involvement of the Canadian government in the video game industry, there is relatively little publicly available information about the types of firms populating the industry. The major source of information is a biennial report published by the Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC, 2019; ESAC, 2021). This article fills information gaps by providing new statistics on the video game industry across the Canadian provinces from 2013 to 2022, focusing on a few main areas of interest.

The article begins by examining counts, revenues and jobs in the industry to investigate which types of video game firms are contributing to industry growth. Of particular interest are foreign-owned firms, given the governmental reviews of foreign acquisitions. An important disclaimer is that, while there is clearly an interest in supporting Canadian ideas and stories (Black & Backus, 2024), some authors view multinational firms as a positive for local industries, because global interaction allows the development of common infrastructure that can be used to enhance quality (Cohendet et al., 2018).

Another dimension of interest is the size of firms (in terms of the number of employees), as there are a few reasons why video game production may increasingly occur on a smaller scale. First, given that video game development requires relatively little capital, employees of established Canadian firms have often left to form their own studios (Wolf, 2015). Second, smaller studios may have a larger role in the industry as the presence of mobile and downloadable games increases (Goh et al., 2023). Third, barriers to entry have been lowered because of the availability of publicly available game engines, asset packs and drag-and-drop technology, allowing developers with less technical expertise to enter the market (Young, 2018). While these small (“indie”) developers may not generate technical innovations, they play an important part in the industry by innovating in terms of art style, stories and themes, and gameplay (Goh et al., 2023).

After examining industry growth by firm type, the article continues by providing statistics on the percentage of women employees and the percentage of employee compensation (i.e., salaries and wages) paid to women over time. This line of analysis is motivated by the fact that the global video game industry has been observed to be dominated by men (Bulut, 2020).

Finally, the article examines entry and exit rates of firms in the Canadian video game industry relative to all private Canadian employer firms. While it is known that the global video game industry was turbulent in the 1980s and 1990s, with layoffs and closures being commonplace (Zackariasson, 2012), video game firms cannot be identified in firm-level data until the 2010s. However, this article is still able to contribute to information gaps concerning the Canadian video game industry by examining entry and exit rates from 2013 to 2022. By doing so, it can determine whether the video game industry has been volatile in more recent years. The article achieves these aims by using the National Accounts Longitudinal Microdata File within the Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database, a linked dataset based on Canada’s Business Register and the tax filings of firms (Statistics Canada, 2022). For firms to be included in the analysis, they must do at least one of the following: file a T2 Corporation Income Tax Return, issue T4 Statement of Remuneration Paid slips, or remit sales taxes or payroll deductions and contributions. This means that the data include mostly incorporated firms but may include some self-employed individuals

who either have employees or have large enough revenue to be required to remit sales taxes. Video game firms are those with North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes of either 513212 (video game publishers) or 541515 (video game design and development services) (Statistics Canada, 2024b).¹ Both codes were introduced in 2012. Before that year, video game firms would have had to file under another code (such as one related to software), and thus video game firms cannot reliably be located in the data before that point. Instead, the article uses a 10-year study period from 2013 to 2022. The article does not include data from the territories because of their small sample sizes.

The main difference between the reports published by ESAC and the current report is that the ESAC reports use surveys and secondary research (ESAC, 2019; ESAC, 2021), while the current report uses administrative data to capture a greater number of firms. There are also several differences in the variables used and the way that the results are broken down. Notably, the current report provides results by whether the firm is primarily engaged in video game design or whether it is involved in publishing. It also provides new statistics on entry and exit rates and on compensation paid to women employees. Another difference is that the ESAC data are collected every two years, while the administrative data can be used to present statistics for each year.

The number of video game firms in Canada more than doubled over a 10-year period because of an increase in small Canadian-owned firms

From 2013 to 2022, the number of video game firms in the Canadian provinces increased from 775 to 1,628, for a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.7% (Table 1).² This increase was driven by Canadian-owned firms, firms primarily engaged in video game design (as opposed to video game publishing) and small firms with fewer than five employees. In percentage terms, firms primarily engaged in video game design were the fastest-growing type of firm, with a CAGR of 8.9%.

The growth rate of firms dropped in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic,³ 2020 and 2021, but the number of firms did not fall until 2022. Generally, the decrease in the number of firms was spread evenly across regions and firm types. Firms with 20 or more employees were the only exception, with the number of firms increasing from 2021 to 2022.

When compared with the numbers published by ESAC, the numbers from administrative data are much larger. In 2021, for example, ESAC identified 957 firms, whereas the administrative data identified 1,620 (ESAC, 2021). This difference is explained mostly by the number of firms with fewer than five employees. Since ESAC's numbers are based on surveys and secondary research, these small firms may have less of a presence online and on traditional video game platforms and may be more difficult to identify and reach compared with larger studios. Despite this difference, the patterns are similar between the two data sources, with both sources identifying that most firms are small and Canadian-owned and that British Columbia hosts a disproportionate number of firms relative to its population (ESAC, 2019; ESAC, 2021).

1. Video game publishers (NAICS code 513212) are firms "primarily engaged in video game publishing. These establishments carry out operations necessary for producing and distributing computer video game software, such as designing video games, providing documentation, and providing support services to video game purchasers" (Statistics Canada, 2024b). Video game design and development services firms (NAICS code 541515) are "primarily engaged in designing and developing video games through one or more activities without publishing them" (Statistics Canada, 2024b). A firm may engage in multiple activities; the NAICS code indicates the primary activity.

2. The CAGR is calculated as follows:

$$CAGR = \left(\frac{\text{End value}}{\text{Beginning value}} \right)^{\frac{1}{\text{number of years}}} - 1$$

3. The World Health Organization declared the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the end of the global health emergency in May 2023 (Wise, 2023).

Table 1
Counts of video game firms, by characteristic and year

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total	775	915	1,050	1,195	1,329	1,469	1,549	1,620	1,700	1,628
Ownership										
Canadian owned	752	896	1,027	1,170	1,302	1,439	1,519	1,582	1,657	1,586
Foreign owned	23	19	23	25	27	30	30	38	43	42
Primary activity										
Design	625	761	896	1,041	1,177	1,306	1,379	1,445	1,526	1,462
Publishing	150	154	154	154	152	163	170	175	174	166
Size (employment)										
Fewer than 5	600	718	823	963	1,082	1,199	1,260	1,306	1,347	1,261
5 to 19	88	103	139	133	140	156	166	184	214	200
20 or more	87	94	88	99	107	114	123	130	139	167
Geography										
Atlantic provinces	34	43	47	55	59	62	63	66	70	67
Quebec	148	186	220	260	285	307	327	344	355	338
Ontario	296	329	392	453	515	581	616	643	661	638
Prairie provinces	74	87	97	106	123	136	141	149	164	159
British Columbia	223	270	294	321	347	383	402	418	450	426

Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

The revenue of video game firms grew disproportionately to the number of firms—more than tripling from 2013 to 2022—with a CAGR of 13.6% (Table 2). Despite their greater numbers, Canadian-owned firms generated less than foreign-owned firms in most years. However, Canadian-owned firms had a higher CAGR in terms of revenue than foreign-owned firms (15.1% versus 12.7%, respectively). The revenue generated by video game firms in design increased by more than eight times, with a CAGR of 22.7%, while the revenue generated by video game firms in publishing fell (CAGR of -4.5%). Other high-growth groups in terms of revenue were firms with fewer than five employees (20.3%) and firms in Ontario (18.3%).⁴ Revenue increased for most groups during the years coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2022). Video game firms primarily engaged in publishing did not fare well, however, with revenue decreasing sharply in 2021 and remaining low in 2022.

Compared with the ESAC reports, revenue estimates from the administrative data are higher because they capture more firms. The 2021 ESAC report estimated total revenue at \$4.3 billion in 2021 (ESAC, 2021), whereas the administrative data estimated it at \$6.7 billion.

4. For the revenue estimates concerning geography, revenue for incorporated firms is allocated based on T2 Schedule 5, where firms report the revenue generated in each province. If the total revenue reported on the T2 Corporation Income Tax Return exceeds the total reported in the provinces, the leftover revenue is assigned to the operating province of the firm. If a firm does not complete T2 Schedule 5 (for example, if it is not incorporated), then all revenue is attributed to the operating province.

Table 2
Revenue of video game firms, by characteristic and year

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	\$ millions									
Total	1,968.3	2,277.0	2,831.9	3,326.3	3,839.5	4,452.6	5,223.6	5,915.0	6,677.3	7,069.7
Ownership										
Canadian owned	733.8	913.4	1,392.9	1,618.1	2,046.0	2,352.2	2,666.9	2,557.3	2,942.2	2,981.9
Foreign owned	1,234.5	1,363.6	1,439.1	1,708.2	1,793.5	2,100.4	2,556.7	3,357.7	3,735.1	4,087.8
Primary activity										
Design	676.9	878.7	1,106.6	1,327.0	2,068.3	2,411.8	2,901.3	3,492.6	5,345.8	5,833.4
Publishing	1,291.4	1,398.3	1,725.4	1,999.3	1,771.2	2,040.9	2,322.3	2,422.4	1,331.5	1,236.3
Size (employment)										
Fewer than 5	72.9	106.4	153.3	185.2	273.7	281.8	401.5	502.1	684.1	462.6
5 to 19	110.6	121.8	397.8	155.2	158.6	201.0	293.1	375.1	453.4	454.0
20 or more	1,784.8	2,048.7	2,280.8	2,985.8	3,407.2	3,969.8	4,529.0	5,037.8	5,539.8	6,153.2
Geography										
Atlantic provinces	44.9	44.5	39.3	36.7	35.1	40.8	54.4	72.6	77.2	51.4
Quebec	877.4	1,041.5	1,143.1	1,366.5	1,485.4	1,586.5	1,735.7	2,146.0	2,386.8	2,606.6
Ontario	258.2	342.5	681.0	877.1	1,146.8	1,426.0	1,556.8	1,380.6	1,902.7	1,384.7
Prairie provinces	78.4	77.0	82.2	94.1	98.2	108.5	131.4	140.8	143.6	155.5
British Columbia	709.4	771.5	886.3	951.9	1,074.0	1,290.8	1,745.3	2,175.0	2,167.0	2,871.5

Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

The number of jobs is calculated as the total of individual labour units (ILUs), which are calculated as follows: each person issued a T4 slip within a year is assigned an ILU of 1.0. If the person is issued a single T4 slip within the year, the entire ILU of 1.0 is attributed to the firm that issued the T4 slip. If the employee is issued multiple T4 slips, then the ILU is divided between the firms issuing the T4 slips, regardless of the firms being in the video game industry (Statistics Canada, 2024a).⁵ The number of jobs in the video game industry grew less over time than revenue, with a CAGR of 8.0% (Table 3). Like with revenue, high-growth groups were video game firms primarily engaged in design (15.9%), firms in Ontario (11.9%) and firms with fewer than five employees (14.6%).⁶ The total number of jobs continued to grow in 2020 and 2021, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, but fell from 2021 to 2022. This decrease from 2021 to 2022 occurred for all subgroups, excluding firms headquartered in the Prairies (Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan).

The ESAC reports do not provide the number of jobs in terms of ILUs, but rather use full-time equivalents (ESAC, 2019; ESAC, 2021). Nevertheless, both reports find that Quebec has the largest number of jobs. In addition, both reports show an increase in employment from 2019 to 2021, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the surveys used for the ESAC reports are collected every two years, there are no 2022 ESAC estimates for comparison.

5. More specifically, each individual's ILU is divided proportionally to the salaries and wages paid to the individual by each firm (Statistics Canada, 2024a). This contrasts with the head count method, which counts the number of T4 slips issued by each firm and can be misleading in some situations. For example, using the head count method, a firm with five positions and high employee turnover would appear larger than a firm with five positions and low employee turnover. Since T4 slips do not directly reflect the number of hours or the number of months worked, T4 ILUs are used to provide an indirect adjustment for employees who are likely to have worked part time or for part of the year.

6. For job estimates concerning geography, the ILUs attributed to each firm are allocated to regions based on the proportion of wages paid in each region as reported on T2 Schedule 5. If the sum of wages reported on T2 Schedule 5 is less than the total wages reported on T4s issued by an enterprise, the remaining ILUs are attributed to the operating province of the enterprise. If a firm does not complete T2 Schedule 5, then all jobs are attributed to the operating province.

Table 3
Employment in video game firms, by characteristic and year

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	number									
Total	27,612	28,616	36,484	37,189	47,256	50,378	57,378	58,221	58,279	59,689
Ownership										
Canadian owned	12,519	14,286	22,403	22,830	30,709	31,445	31,995	28,020	26,410	26,944
Foreign owned	15,094	14,331	14,081	14,359	16,547	18,932	25,383	30,202	31,869	32,744
Primary activity										
Design	10,902	12,994	15,908	18,509	28,173	29,312	33,499	34,882	44,962	47,716
Publishing	16,711	15,622	20,576	18,680	19,083	21,064	23,879	23,340	13,318	11,973
Size (employment)										
Fewer than 5	1,025	1,458	1,929	2,080	4,188	5,194	3,937	3,361	5,010	4,018
5 to 19	2,300	2,188	7,976	2,645	2,829	3,206	4,164	4,945	5,940	5,123
20 or more	24,287	24,970	26,579	32,464	40,239	41,977	49,277	49,916	47,329	50,547
Geography										
Atlantic provinces	940	757	596	534	482	535	655	683	663	653
Quebec	14,643	14,554	16,066	15,939	20,384	19,670	22,712	24,645	23,591	25,598
Ontario	4,169	4,919	11,231	11,756	15,505	15,686	16,693	13,005	15,396	12,860
Prairie provinces	1,121	869	827	1,141	1,109	1,268	1,450	1,419	1,333	1,499
British Columbia	6,739	7,517	7,764	7,819	9,776	13,219	15,868	18,469	17,296	19,079

Note: Employment is in individual labour units.

Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

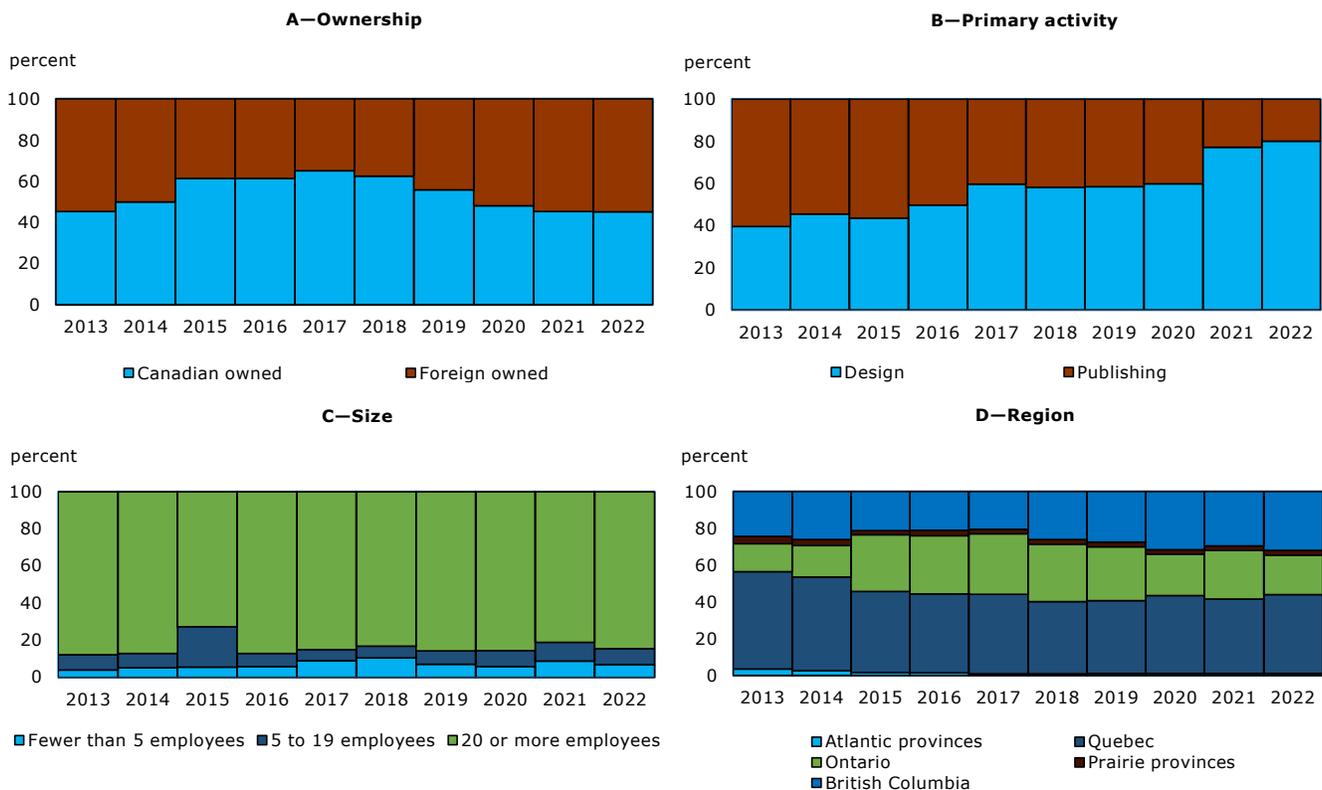
Over the study period, video game designers created an increasing proportion of jobs, relative to video game publishers

In terms of the proportion of jobs attributed to different types of video game firms, patterns seem to have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Canadian-owned firms contributed more jobs than foreign-owned firms from 2014 to 2019, but fewer jobs than foreign-owned firms from 2020 to 2022. Over the total period, video game firms primarily engaged in design represented an increasing proportion of jobs (relative to video game firms primarily engaged in publishing), but this redistribution appears to have accelerated during the pandemic (2020 to 2022).

The proportion of jobs attributed to firms with 20 or more employees decreased temporarily in 2021, even though counts and revenues for this group did not decrease. This finding is consistent with a scenario in which larger firms remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic, but temporarily decreased the number of employees.

Since the ESAC report is biennial and does not produce employment figures in the size categories used in this paper, it is difficult to compare the results. However, the 2021 ESAC report states that firms with fewer than five employees account for 1% of jobs (ESAC, 2021), compared with 9% of jobs in the administrative data. This result is consistent with the fact that the administrative data used in the report capture a greater number of very small firms than the ESAC surveys.

Chart 1
Percentage of industry employment, video game firms, by characteristic and year, 2013 to 2022

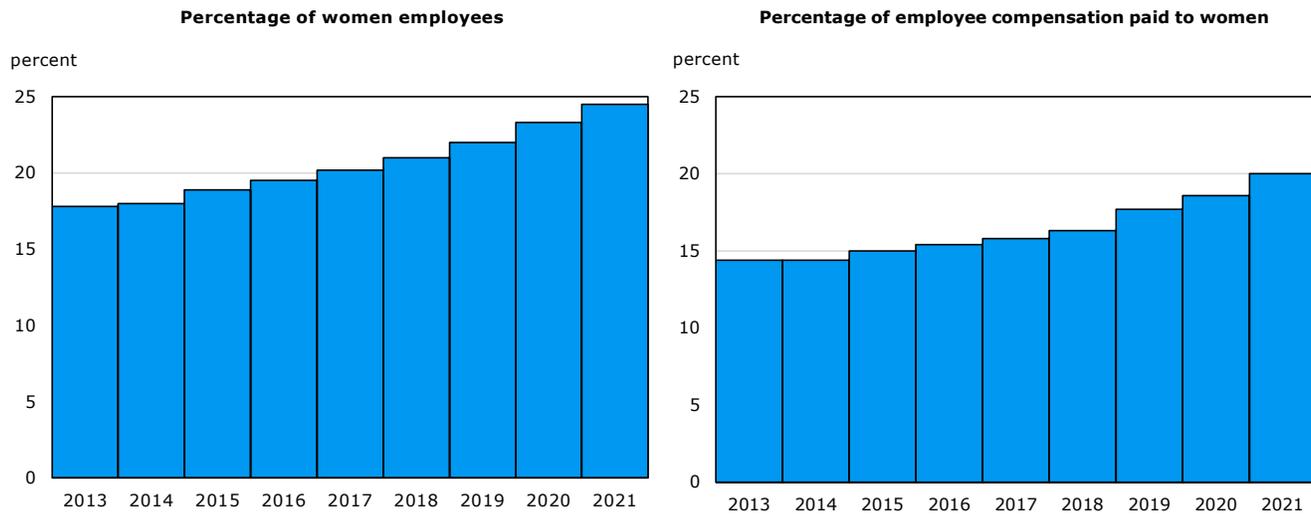


Note: Employment is in individual labour units.
Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

From 2013 to 2022, the percentage of women employees in the industry increased from 17.8% to 24.5%

Previous research in the United States has indicated that employees in the video game industry are overwhelmingly male (Bulut, 2020). Chart 2 shows the percentage of industry employees who are women and the percentage of industry employee compensation paid to women. From 2013 to 2021, the percentage of industry employees who are women increased from 17.8% to 24.5%, and the percentage of industry employee compensation paid to women increased from 14.4% to 20.0%. In other words, women’s employment share grew more rapidly than women’s compensation share. This is an expected result as employees new to an industry would generally occupy entry-level positions with lower salaries. It is therefore possible that women’s compensation share will rise as these new employees move into mid-level and senior-level positions. For this chart, it is important to note that compensation is based on T4 slips and thus captures only employees—not contractors. Additionally, compensation is based on T4 Statement of Remuneration Paid slips and includes salaries and wages, but not other forms of compensation such as stock options. The ESAC reports show a similar pattern for women employees, but the percentage in the administrative data is somewhat higher (24.5% versus 23.0% in 2021; ESAC, 2021). The ESAC reports do not contain statistics on compensation paid to women.

Chart 2
Percentage of women employees and percentage of employee compensation paid to women, video game industry, by year, 2013 to 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

During the study period, Canadian video game firms exited the industry at lower rates, compared with all private Canadian employer firms

The global video game industry experienced a period of financial turmoil in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with the dot-com bubble bursting (Zackariasson, 2012). While this period led to many studio closures, it also resulted in new firms as employees of the failing firms left to form their own studios. In Canada specifically, the acquisition of a large Vancouver studio in 1991 led to several employees leaving and forming spinoffs (Wolf, 2015). Since video game firms can be identified in Canadian data only from 2012 onwards, it is not possible to calculate entry and exit rates for these earlier, reportedly volatile periods. However, the entry and exit rates presented in Table 4 can indicate whether the Canadian video game industry has been stable in recent years.

The entry rate represents the proportion of firms observed in each year that were not observed in the previous year, and the exit rate represents the proportion of firms not observed each year that were observed in the previous year.⁷ Entry rates for video game firms are higher than the entry rates for all private employer firms from 2014 to 2018 and lower from 2019 to 2021 (entry rates are not yet available for all private employer firms for 2022). Exit rates for video game firms are much lower than for all private employer firms from 2014 to 2021, indicating that studio closures in the Canadian video game industry are relatively rare.

7. The denominator is the average number of firms between the current year and the previous year. Since the NAICS code for video game firms was introduced only in 2012, there is concern that some of the entries could be false entries—caused by firms previously labelled as software firms switching to the video game NAICS code. If a firm switches from another NAICS code to a video game code (513212 or 541515) from 2012 to 2022, that firm is assumed to have been a video game firm from 2012 to 2022. Entry and exit rates are therefore computed only from 2014, excluding the first two years after the introduction of the video game NAICS codes.

Table 4
Entry and exit rates in video game firms and all private employer firms, by year

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	rate								
Video game firms									
Entry rate	23.0	17.4	16.0	15.5	14.2	13.2	9.6	8.9	9.4
Exit rate	3.0	4.5	4.6	5.0	4.1	5.0	4.8	4.8	7.2
All private employer firms									
Entry rate	12.7	12.3	12.1	12.7	12.7	14.1	11.5	13.7	13.9
Exit rate	11.5	11.5	12	11.4	11.5	11.8	13.9	12.1	10.8

Sources: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations, and Table 33-10-0164-01 (Statistics Canada, 2024c).

In conclusion, the Canadian video game industry grew rapidly from 2013 to 2022 in terms of counts, revenue and jobs. Small, Canadian-owned firms working in video game design (as opposed to video game publishing) drove the growth in terms of the number of firms, but both Canadian-owned and foreign-owned firms were important for growth in industry revenue and jobs.

Overall, the industry fared well during the COVID-19 pandemic, excluding firms primarily engaged in video game publishing, which had reductions in counts, revenue and jobs. Employment attributed to firms with 20 or more employees temporarily decreased in 2021, indicating that some firms may have temporarily reduced their workforce. Even so, the video game industry was relatively stable, with much lower exit rates than all private employer firms, including from 2020 to 2022. The percentage of women employees and the percentage of compensation (i.e., salaries and wages) paid to women increased slightly each year, indicating a sustained and gradual change in the composition of the workforce in the video game industry.

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