Creative Clusters as accelerators: unpacking their role in sustaining cultural entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION & THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Creative clusters represent vital ecosystems for cultural entrepreneurship, serving as geographic concentrations where creative talents, cultural institutions, and innovative businesses converge to generate unique economic and social value. These dynamic hubs provide cultural entrepreneurs with crucial advantages and resources (Landry, 2000; Scott, 2006). By fostering proximity between complementary businesses, creative clusters facilitate knowledge spillovers and create environments where innovative ideas can rapidly disseminate, evolve, and find practical applications (Lazzeretti et al., 2013). Such environments naturally encourage collaboration across sectors' boundaries, allowing musicians, designers, filmmakers, and other creative practitioners to combine their diverse expertise into novel products and services that stand out in increasingly saturated markets (Comunian, 2011).

The economic benefits of these clusters are substantial. Cultural entrepreneurs within creative clusters typically enjoy shared infrastructure and resources that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive for individual ventures (Chapain & Comunian, 2010). From specialized equipment and exhibition spaces to co-working environments and performance venues, these shared assets significantly reduce operational costs while expanding creative possibilities. Moreover, clustering facilitates visibility, as concentration of creative businesses attracts visitors, customers, and investors who recognize these areas as cultural destinations. These cultural collective hubs can also extend market reach far beyond what isolated entrepreneurs could achieve independently, particularly benefiting emerging creators (Evans, 2009).

Networks formed within creative clusters represent perhaps the most valuable asset for cultural entrepreneurs (Potts et al., 2008). These dense professional networks accelerate opportunity recognition, facilitate resource acquisition, and provide crucial emotional support during the inherently risky creative enterprise journey. Cultural entrepreneurs who strategically cultivate both strong and weak network ties within creative clusters significantly outperform those with limited networking activity, particularly in accessing crucial first customers and early-stage financing (Konrad, 2013). Successful cultural entrepreneurs typically engage in deliberate network management, investing substantial time in relationship-building activities that blend professional collaboration with informal social interactions. When facing common challenges—whether navigating regulatory hurdles, accessing finance, or adapting to technological disruptions—cultural entrepreneurs within clusters can mobilize collective action more effectively than isolated individuals, giving them stronger advocacy positions and greater resilience against external shocks (De Propris, 2013).

However, significant gaps in our understanding of creative clusters limit their potential impact. Chapain, Emin, and Schieb-Bienfait (2018a) emphasize that cultural entrepreneurship itself remains a complex and emergent research field, situated at the intersection of cultural production and entrepreneurial processes, with creative clusters serving as critical spatial manifestations of this intersection. They identify a fundamental conceptual challenge in this field: the persistent tension

between artistic-cultural values and market-economic imperatives that characterizes cultural entrepreneurship. They argue that creative clusters often embody this tension physically, serving simultaneously as spaces of artistic experimentation and commercial exploitation, with inadequate theoretical frameworks to understand how these competing value systems coexist and interact. Despite their documented benefits, we know surprisingly little about the specific mechanisms driving cluster formation and sustainability across different cultural sectors and geographic contexts (Chapple et al., 2010). Konrad's (2013) research highlights a particularly important gap regarding network quality versus quantity, suggesting that current policies often emphasize increasing networking opportunities without sufficient attention to enhancing their qualitative dimensions. Most research has focused on high-profile success stories in major metropolitan centers, leaving substantial knowledge gaps concerning how creative clusters might function in smaller cities, rural areas, or developing economies with different resource constraints and cultural traditions (Bell & Jayne, 2010). This geographic bias in research restricts our ability to develop appropriate policy frameworks that could nurture creative ecosystems in diverse settings (Lazzeretti, 2013).

Furthermore, creative clusters face inherent tensions that remain inadequately addressed. The gentrification paradox represents a critical challenge, where successful creative clusters often trigger property value increases that eventually displace the very cultural entrepreneurs who generated their appeal. This self-defeating cycle threatens cluster sustainability, yet effective intervention models remain elusive.

Chapain, Emin, and Schieb-Bienfait (2018a) point to the broader institutional context as a critical yet understudied dimension; they highlight how creative clusters operate within complex institutional ecosystems where cultural policies, economic development strategies, and educational systems interact to either facilitate or constrain entrepreneurial action. Their work suggests that effective cluster development requires greater attention to these institutional interdependencies rather than treating clusters as isolated phenomena. Similarly, power dynamics within clusters require deeper investigation, as evidence suggests benefits often accrue unevenly, with established cultural organizations capturing disproportionate value while emerging entrepreneurs struggle to access network advantages (O'Connor & Gu, 2010). Konrad (2013) notes that cultural entrepreneurs from underrepresented backgrounds often face significant barriers to integration within cluster networks, raising important questions about equity and inclusion.

Digital transformation poses additional questions that demand urgent attention. As virtual collaboration platforms increasingly enable creative production without physical proximity, we must reconsider fundamental assumptions about cluster dynamics (Pratt, 2012). Which elements of creative clusters can be effectively replicated in digital environments, and which require physical co-location? How might hybrid models emerge that combine virtual collaboration with strategic in-person interaction? Konrad's (2013) investigation of network formation processes suggests that while certain instrumental networking functions translate effectively to digital environments, the serendipitous encounters and shared experiences that often spark creative collaboration remain difficult to replicate virtually.

Addressing these knowledge gaps calls for more comprehensive investigations of effective strategies to nurture creative clusters and the mechanisms through which such clusters can help cultural entrepreneurs and address their needs while enhancing their contributions to broader economic and

social development (Flew, 2013; Banks, 2018). As Chapain, Emin, and Schieb-Bienfait (2018a) conclude, advancing our understanding of cultural entrepreneurship and its spatial manifestations in creative clusters demands greater theoretical integration across disciplinary boundaries, alongside methodological innovation capable of capturing the sector's distinctive characteristics and hybrid value creation processes.

METHODOLOGY

This proposal aims to improve our understanding of the role of creative clusters for sustaining entrepreneurship in the cultural and creative industries. We do so by focusing on the specific case of the video games sector, which presents several interesting features. Rapid technological evolution drives constant reinvention, as studios must continually adapt to new hardware capabilities, development tools, and distribution platforms. The extreme heterogeneity in creative units (from solo developers to thousand-person studios) leads to diverse entrepreneurial pathways and business models within single geographic clusters. At a resource level, hybrid skillsets are essential, with successful game development requiring combinations of technical programming expertise, artistic vision, narrative design, and business acumen—making talent clustering especially beneficial. Project-based production structures predominate, with teams forming, disbanding, and reforming around specific titles, fostering dynamic knowledge transfer and cross-pollination of ideas between companies within clusters. The video games industry also exhibits certain paradoxes and tensions that can influence the geographies of production. The global vs local tension which stems from the simultaneous pursuit of worldwide markets while often drawing cultural specificity from the development locations, also requires certain adaptation capabilities and can be resource-consuming for studios. In this particular industry, the importance of localization is also linked to the active role of user communities who generally co-create value through modding, streaming, and competitive play, forming vibrant scenes that often physically center around development hubs.

We study the case of Angoulême, which presents some interesting characteristics:

- The first video game companies appeared less than 20 years ago, allowing for a longitudinal study,

- Angoulême is home to some forty video game companies, a significant number given the size of the region.

- These twenty years have been marked by several important milestones, allowing us to note the influence of different factors: the installation of a video game school in 2005, the creation of a collective and then a local association of video game players in 2016, integration into a regional association (SO Games) in 2021, the creation of an incubator dedicated to companies in the cultural and creative industries in 2022. Each of these events has changed the context of the creative cluster.

We adopt a mixed-method approach along with a longitudinal approach. We strived to retrace the institutional history of the creative cluster by identifying its main milestones, based on a documentary study and interviews with the players who played a key role in its institutional construction. When retracing the history of the cluster and identifying the main active actors we focused on how the area's collective resources, how they were created and how they were pooled and managed, since their creation or installation up to the present day.

We adopted a theoretical sampling approach when choosing our interviewees. This required a first mapping of the companies present in the area and the identification of their main characteristics (positioning, date of creation, size). We aim to interview between one-third and one-half of the companies operating in the region. Their identification is based on our mapping and on a snowballing effect. The study is in progress. To date, we have interviewed : 4 institutional players and 3 entrepreneurs.

For our data analysis, we are identifying the local resources that have played a role in the entrepreneurial dynamic. This is enabling us to categorize the different types of resources and link them to the different types of support that the cultural entrepreneurs are getting but also the different types of networks they are developing and sharing.

FIRST RESULTS: THE DISTINCTIVE DYNAMICS OF THE ANGOULEME VIDEO GAME CLUSTER

Our analysis of the Angoulême video game cluster reveals a distinctive ecosystem characterized by pronounced homogeneity in studio structure coupled with rich heterogeneity in creative and cultural industry (CCI) involvement. Unlike its larger regional counterpart in Bordeaux, Angoulême has developed a collaborative ecosystem that fosters deeper inter-organizational cooperation (IOC) among similarly sized studios, while benefiting from cross-pollination with adjacent creative sectors. This section presents key findings regarding the cluster's distinctive features, cooperation mechanisms, enabling factors, and emerging challenges.

Cluster composition and structural characteristics

The Angoulême video game cluster exists within a unique territorial context that significantly shapes its development trajectory. Despite geographical proximity and shared institutional frameworks with nearby Bordeaux, Angoulême's significantly smaller urban scale has facilitated different forms of proximity among stakeholders. While Bordeaux hosts numerous large studios (including Ubisoft, Asobo, and Shiro) that emerged either as spin-offs from historical actors like Kalisto or as subsidiaries of international publishers, Angoulême's ecosystem consists predominantly of smaller, more homogeneous studios operating alongside diverse traditional cultural and creative industries, particularly comic books and animation cinema.

The 2016 regional reorganization that created "So Games" introduced a challenging duality between very large companies and micro-studios, complicating coordination efforts and the identification of shared interests across the broader Nouvelle-Aquitaine region. However, while this heterogeneity limited opportunities for interest alignment in Bordeaux, Angoulême's more uniform studio ecosystem has enabled deeper collaborative practices.

Distinctive patterns of inter-organizational cooperation

A central finding of our research reveals Angoulême's paradoxical position within the industry: widely recognized as an excellent center for production while simultaneously perceived as unsuitable for business development, which typically gravitates toward metropolitan centers like Paris or London. This production-focused identity has fostered unique cooperative behaviors among local studios.

The trust and solidarity characterizing the Angoulême video game community has enabled cooperation on higher-risk initiatives where inter-organizational collaboration is typically less common, particularly co-production projects. Multiple interview participants described "hunting in packs" or employing consortia logic to pursue opportunities collectively. Notably, these cooperative dynamics transcend purely utilitarian motivations, extending to more altruistic behaviors such as redistributing projects between studios based on capacity and specialized needs—a practice that enhances collective resilience while maintaining individual studio sustainability.

Critical enabling factors

Several interconnected factors have catalyzed Angoulême's distinctive collaborative ecosystem. The availability of highly accessible or free office spaces, implemented as part of local re-industrialization strategies, has significantly lowered entry barriers for new studios. Geographical and social proximity—facilitated by the city's compact scale and regular industry events—has created rich formal and informal exchange spaces that accelerate resource and knowledge circulation. The overlapping nature of these spaces has further enabled informal coordination among diverse cluster stakeholders.

The city's relatively lower cost of living has enhanced small studio resilience during industry downturns, including the current market contraction. Additionally, the presence of ENJMIN (École Nationale du Jeu et des Médias Interactifs Numériques)—one of France's earliest public university programs dedicated to video games—serves as a critical talent pipeline and knowledge hub within the ecosystem.

The co-location of multiple creative industries has facilitated talent exchange and knowledge spillovers between sectors, enriching the video game cluster's creative capabilities. Public initiatives and subsidies have played pivotal roles in initiating cooperation, while dedicated governance structures have helped maintain these collaborative dynamics and align stakeholder interests. Complementing traditional approaches, incubation programs have fostered new entrepreneurial initiatives within the cluster.

Contemporary communication technologies, particularly Discord and Slack platforms, have streamlined coordination and information exchange, reducing transaction costs while reinforcing trust and solidarity values across the cluster. Their simplicity, accessibility, and instantaneous interactivity have proven particularly valuable in facilitating ongoing collaborative practices.

Key institutional actors and emerging challenges

Beyond ENJMIN, several local organizations function as vital network hubs, including Magelis (the local image and digital media agency), Eurekatech (the territorial innovation hub), and Mobius (a significant cultural event). These institutions provide infrastructure, coordination mechanisms, and visibility that support the cluster's collaborative dynamics.

Despite these strengths, the Angoulême cluster faces several significant challenges. The regional reorganization with Bordeaux presents ongoing coordination complexities. The ecosystem's reliance on a relatively small group of individuals and interpersonal trust creates potential vulnerability to leadership transitions. Perhaps most critically, recent reductions in public subsidies threaten to undermine the supportive infrastructure that has enabled the cluster's distinctive collaborative practices to flourish.

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