

The Independent Production of Culture: A Digital Games Case Study

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Throughout the community of game players, developers, and journalists, the term “independent” is used in a number of ways to describe a type of development next to, or juxtaposed with, the mainstream process of creating, marketing, distributing, and playing digital games. Yet, this “independence” is something quite different from what the literature on independent, alternative, oppositional, radical, or otherwise nonmainstream media tends to suggest or advocate. The contemporary context of game design and development practices throughout the industry forces us to rethink assumptions about independence and autonomy in creative labor, about the communicative practices between media companies across the entire business spectrum of the global media industry, and about diversity or homogeneity in the production of culture. In this article, we aim to articulate more precisely what it means to create, work in, and give meaning to independent computer and video game production.

Keywords: *production of culture; media work; media production; labor; game industry*

In October 2007, the game development studio Bungie took full control of their own company by buying out a majority share of their stock from their controlling corporate ownership. This would have sounded like any other day in the games industry, where studios are bought and released regularly and teams of developers are constantly shuffled and remixed. However, Bungie is the creator of Halo, a global critical and cultural phenomenon that is the quintessential blockbuster of the video game medium; and their controlling corporate interest was Microsoft, the electronics superconglomerate, whose Xbox line of game consoles has been predominantly carried by the exclusivity of the Bungie product to their systems. In a New York Times interview, each side professed the advantages the new arrangement would bring.¹ Bungie pointed out that self-ownership would bring about “an emotionally creative point of view” with Microsoft adding that given the history of both companies it

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would “be in our best interest to allow Bungie to return to their independent roots.” As both parties invoke the concept of independence, the meaning of the word carries connotations of both creativity and business. Where Bungie accentuates the freedom of creative development, Microsoft hints at the market potential of creative products. Where Microsoft maintains a temporary control of new or forthcoming Bungie games, the developers consider advantages of new publishing conditions. How does ownership of the license of Halo, an intellectual property (IP) that seems more popular than ever, help to define this new relationship? These are some of the key variables that come into play when one tries to articulate what exactly it means to be an independent producer of culture in the contemporary media ecosystem.

Throughout the community of game players, developers, and journalists, the term “independent” is used in a number of ways to describe a type of development next to, or juxtaposed with, the mainstream process of creating, marketing, distributing, and playing digital games. There exists a thriving “indie” game scene, with its own literature (Michael, 2003), dedicated festivals such as the Independent Games Festival (<http://www.igf.com>) and Indiecade (<http://indiecade.com>); online communities such as Kongregate (<http://www.kongregate.com>), the Independent Source (<http://www.tig-source.com>), and Great Games Experiment (<http://www.greatgamesexperiment.com>), magazines, and of course: games. In the young but extremely successful global digital games industry, this can be considered to be an encouraging development: despite dominant market positions of a few international publishers (Electronic Arts, Ubisoft) and console manufacturers (Microsoft, Sony, Nintendo), independent production seems to be thriving. Yet, this “independence” is something quite different from what the literature on independent, alternative, oppositional, radical, or otherwise nonmainstream media tends to suggest or advocate. In a move similar to film studios and the music industry, digital games publishers are increasingly outsourcing the production (of parts of games) to so-called second and third party studios—that more often than not are the very “indies” operating outside the corporate system (Deuze, 2007). The Bungie/Microsoft example is a perfect illustration of this situation—a context forcing us to rethink assumptions about independence and autonomy in creative labor, about the communicative practices between media companies across the entire business spectrum of the global media industry, and about diversity or homogeneity in the production of culture. In this article, we aim to articulate more precisely what it means to create, work in, and give meaning to independent computer and video game production.

The Digital Games Industry

The digital interactive entertainment industry today is controlled by a small number of global corporate developers, publishers, and distributors (Consalvo, 2006; Johns, 2006; Kerr, 2006; Williams, 2002). Despite a wide-ranging discourse of what independent actually means, a single unifying thread that is recognized throughout

the industry is that an indie game cannot be created under the creative or financial control of one of these external entities. In this idealized notion of independence, the connection between producer and consumer is allowed to exist “naturally” outside the influence of commercial sponsorship and market orientation. Accompanying this is the notion that independent games exist somewhere outside the mainstream cultural domain of digital games, whereas indie game production is at the same time assumed to embody a process of creative innovation that will deliver the next great cultural (and financial) leap forward in the computer and video game market. As the duo of developers from Metanet Software, creators of a free browser-based game titled *N*, stated at the Independent Games Festival of 2006:

“If you have a team made up of people who’re being paid as employees, it’s simply different in attitude and intent from a team where each member is also a cofounder or owner of the company. I don’t think that it’s a very hard distinction to make, it’s obvious most of the time: when id made doom, they were a small team and everyone was contributing something special.”²

Metanet Software (2005)

Thus, their argument as to the essence of independent development is articulated with reference toward the early days of game development in an effort to separate the mechanics and machinations of game development in the independent venue from production processes that occur within the greater games industry. This articulation must be considered in the context of the short history of the industry. Especially in North America and Western Europe, the earliest commercial use of the medium came from hobbyist communities, where artists sold their product to like-minded audience (Kent, 2001). In less than a generation, the games industry today has burst from such grassroots and small-scale development processes that preceded it into a corporate-controlled, hit-driven market that successfully engages in competition and cooperation with the cultural industries as a whole. With the scope and budget of games swelling, the amount of labor that is required to produce a game increases exponentially into intricate hierarchies controlled by a select few mega corporations who regulate the majority of funding for new projects (Kerr, 2006).

However, the distinctions between independent game development and corporate game development are not as pronounced as industry rhetoric depicts them. Independent game development is an intricate part of the changing landscape, that is, the greater games industry. This landscape is determined by an increasingly global, digitally networked, and rapidly diversifying (producer and consumer) market (Johns, 2006). These markets require flexible, adaptive, and innovative methods of production. Platforms such as mobile phones, browser-based Internet sites, digital distribution networks on the major game consoles, and the market for handheld games all provide new opportunities for low-risk entry into game development. At the same time, the multiplication of avenues for (digital) game distribution lend themselves toward much

smaller scale (or even individual), artist-driven type of authorship that resonates with the beginnings of game development, where production was dominated by hobbyist, fan, artist, and amateur mentalities. At the same time, all this potential for more or less independent or creatively autonomous game development must be considered in the context of the ways it gets drawn into a global commercial multibillion dollar market.

Methods

To understand what it means to produce independent (or: “indie”) games, we explore the theme from two distinct perspectives. The first is to analyze the discourse among gamer communities (where players and producers interact) in terms of the concepts deployed to articulate a more or less indie professional identity in game-work. We structure these discourses according to the production of culture perspective, where “culture” refers to the relationships between the culture creation organized, and what kind of contents and experiences get produced (Peterson & Anand, 2004). The production of culture perspective is valuable in detailing the roles that social relationships among producers play in influencing the nature of their content. By looking at the independent games industry from the vantages of its technology, laws and regulations, industry structure, organizational structures, occupational careers, and markets, we aim to specifically identify how the structure of the greater games industry shapes the meaning of the concept of independence and how that construction influences the culture of independent production both as an occupation and as a contribution to the greater games culture.

Information about the independent production of video games comes from gathering articles, posts, and quotes from the most prominent online journals, web publications, trade publications, and blogs catering to the industry.³ In selecting data, we focused specifically on primary materials such as developer stories gathered from published interviews, published “postmortem” accounts of game development projects, and real-time online development journals kept by video game developers working for a variety of studios. Although independent game development takes place on a global scale, and our argument concerns the construction of being “independent” in the production of culture as a general category, it is beyond the scope of this article to detail the varying political, market, and cultural specifics of each of the three core game development regions in the world (following Johns, 2006: North America, Europe, and Asia Pacific). Therefore, we chose to limit our analyses primarily to independent development taking place in the United States.⁴

The Independent Production of Culture

Indie game development is in various ways part of the larger system of cultural production in the media. To articulate the specifics of these complex relationships,

we deploy the production of culture framework for our analysis (Deuze, Martin, & Allen, 2007). “The production of culture perspective focuses on how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved” (Peterson & Anand, 2004, p. 311). Within these systems, this analytical perspective considers the various ways in which the professionals of cultural/creative industries use, develop, and give meaning to five key domains of their work: (a) technology, (b) laws and regulation, (c) industrial and organizational structure, (d) occupational careers, and (e) markets. The production of culture perspective is leveraged here to outline the greater games industry as a framework within which indie development takes place. From there, we identify areas where indie development has flourished, forming what can be seen as an emerging independent culture as a segment of the greater games culture. Because of the short yet tumultuous nature of the game industry’s history, it is necessary to not just study the articulations of the system with the lifeworlds of its participants (gamers and developers) but also the ways in which developers themselves actively shape and give meaning to their own role within a system that is still very much under development. We thus depart of a premise as outlined in Negus’ claim that “industry produces culture and culture produces an industry” (1998, p. 359). The structure and organization of production in the games industry set the parameters within which professional identities and meaning-making discourses develop, whereas the various ways in which people engage with the creation, modification, marketing, and distribution of content within the wider game industry in turn codetermine what it means to be independent, corporate, alternative, or mainstream. This approach underscores the argument that the social process among people (both within and outside the system and its institutions), through which cultural goods and services are produced, influences their content. For the study at hand, this means that in our analysis we focused on tensions, conflicts, and critical debates occurring within each of the five domains of gamework, articulating what Zizek (2006) would call a “parallax view” between the structuring aspects of the game industry system as a whole and the construction of a professional identity of indie game development in particular.

Technology. One of the most important aspects of technology in independent game development is the role that network technologies and digital distribution have in allowing for a diversity of content to reach the market. For independent developers, the internet allows direct access to consumers without the investment required for a physical distribution channel (such as retail space). Digital distribution has a significant influence in shaping the structure and identity of indie game development. As digital distribution primarily caters to niche markets, the file sizes of games must be reduced to maintain accessibility when downloading the game. This, for example, has implications for the level of realistic graphics in a game—a dominant frame in how developers and gamers interpret technological advances in hardware and software (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). With smaller file sizes many of the assets

used to promote realism, such as graphics and audio, are devalued, as they are generally the largest types of files in the product. In turn, independent game developers more often must rely on abstractions over realism in their art assets, and game mechanics are more often prioritized because of the play sessions of the games generally being shorter. This has cultivated an identity of independent games as a standards bearer in the argument of games as art.

“If you talk to most developers, or even gamers who have played for a long time, they will go back and talk about some of the early game play mechanics that were so good—because you really had to focus on gameplay [. . .]. Again, that comes back to what the nature of Xbox Live Arcade is. It’s never going to be a service where you can download a full retail game, nor do we expect it to be.”⁵

Chris Early, Xbox Live Arcade and Microsoft Casual Games (2007)

Although some digital distribution channels allow for full-sized games with the same amount of information as their physical copy counterparts, the portals that control much of the corporate download bottleneck, such as Xbox Live Arcade, prefer smaller packages. Taking advantage of limitations presented by downloads, these aggregates thrive on products that can be consumed quickly and in shorter installments. Developers creating middleware or software that enables a studio or team to create an game product without having to start from scratch, fuel the increasing number of channels for distribution that are constantly in need of new content. With full engine development being a substantial part of game production budgets, an increasing number of smaller developers with smaller budgets look to middleware options as a solution to get their idea to market. Those who choose to create their own engine have the opportunity to license that technology out in the future. Either way, distribution portals that provide access to a wide variety of downloads related to digital games are in demand and to some extent serve to structure the field.

A new type of authorship can be considered when the tools of production are commoditized for the purposes of a new individual type of creative expression. Developers that create products that synthesize the tools of production (such as a SDK for a game engine) empower their audience to create their own games. Furthermore, the (generally volunteer driven) support communities for these tools that exist online provide a natural congregation of developers and gamers alike, potentially positioning these tools as the nodes for a network of otherwise disconnected publics. Where a development company may create a piece of software that encourages an open access of voices in the realm of game production, the synthesized tools of production are also a valuable financial asset that is managed like any other source of capital. These tools are the property of a company that has the power to regulate what game authors can do commercially with the results of their work, paradoxically inhibiting the possibilities of independent development that they also embody.

Laws and regulations. In the digital interactive entertainment industry, the publishers of a game product, who dictate the terms of ownership over IP, control the majority of the value of a game product. When a developer works for a company and creates assets for a game, the development company legally inherits the product of the work under work-for-hire agreements. When a developer is contracted for freelance work, experienced development companies regularly include clauses that transfer control of the IP to the contracting development company.

“The IP is really the thing of value that exists . . . From my perspective it’s extremely important from a creative perspective of having the incentive to invest our life and your energy into an idea. From a business perspective, [it’s] ultimately the most important thing in the world because it’s the one tangible thing of value.”⁶

Alex Seropian, Wideload Games (2007)

Shumacher (2006) finds the control over IP representative of the distinctions of below-the-line and above-the-line labor in new media companies, particularly in the field of digital games. According to Shumacher, games funded by a third party cannot be truly regarded as independent as their IP is controlled by the sponsoring partner—not by the game creators. The trouble with financing that Shumacher points out is that the control of the IP of a product after it has been created gives the financing party an advantage considering future development of the property (sequels, franchising, add-ons, and so on). Game developers at the lower ranks of project hierarchies are left with little control over their work after it has been created and integrated into the project, as evidenced by the importance placed on crediting standards in the 2004 *Quality of Life White Paper* of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA).⁷ At the same time, there are numerous instances where IP transfer and management has empowered developers for further independent game creation. Often, independent games that are financed by their developers, which are created as what might be considered amateur projects, are signed by publishers in an effort to expand or control distribution of that product.

“There’s no way we could’ve gotten a console deal without digital distribution. We graduated at a unique time, when all the new consoles were coming out. Digital distribution offered a different model to the traditional big-budget, huge team games. We didn’t have to go for angel investors or VCs.”⁸

Kellee Santiago, Thatgamecompany (2007)

The signing of development contracts with studios, and with it the transfer of IP, brings a kind of professionalization to independent game development. *Flow*, a game that originated as an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) project by student developers, is an example of the possibility that digital distribution provides in empowering independent developers when addressing more exclusive markets. *Flow* benefited from a

community of players that were drawn to the game as a form of art and its developers were able to leverage this community buzz into a favorable publishing deal when Sony was looking to exclusive content for the launch of their download service available on the Playstation 3 console. This anecdote suggests how developers both large and small enjoy variable bargaining power in the industry; a power contingent on the lifecycle of the controlling console platforms and major publishers. The free access to audience made possible through digital distribution may have the same equalizing effect for developers who are willing and able to internalize the initial risk of development.

“We had a prototype up on NewGrounds which was getting a ton of traffic, and it really made us believe that even though people really aren’t playing 2D side scrollers anymore, there still might be a market for it I knew that no one would fund the game and so we knew that we would have to find the funding ourselves and if we found the funding, we could pitch a pretty much finished product. Really, that’s what publishers look for. How could they lower their risk?”⁹

John Baez, *The Behemoth* (2007)

Under circumstances where the publisher picks up an existing and successful title, the independent developer takes much of the development risks. In some ways, for each title that recoups that risk as an independent success, we have to take into account that there are a hundred titles that are not similarly recognized. In light of this imbalance, the large corporate publishers still maintain control over means of production as they simply have more investment power. This imbalance caused by these disproportionate levels of sustainability is such that part of the grand prize for this year’s Independent Games Festival is legal advice for IP management from a seasoned game attorney.

Industry structure. The greater games industry is structured in a manner that to some extent strictly prohibits independent game development. The titles that draw the most revenue, such as licensed sports games (*Madden NFL*) and big budget first-person shooters (*Halo*), require a level of technical development that makes the independent funding and development of such ambitious titles based off on an original idea practically impossible. With the overall market for games expected to take in over \$30 billion worldwide this year, the dominance of large-scale corporate-driven development is a stark departure from the industry’s history as a bastion for individual authorship. For these publishers, the cost effectiveness of being able to compound on previous successes reprioritizes the production of goods by emphasizing titles that can be franchised and licensed. Through the efforts of large-scale developers and publishers to exert their dominance across all markets, Johns (2006) notes the tendency for smaller firms to have limited access to means of finance and access to distribution channels.

“Up until very recently, the only money coming into this industry was through the big publishers. Now you’re beginning to see companies like Foundation 9, us, Brash and some others, that aren’t on the radar yet, that are bringing some big serious money in without being a public company, [being a public company] comes with artificial pressures, and we all know what sorts of decisions that leads to.”¹⁰

Gamecock Executive (2007)

What this leads to is an industry structure that is constantly preying on itself. The games industry, like any creative industry, thrives on new titles to become the next franchises or hits. Yet, simultaneously they are choking off their supply of new games available by favoring investments in “proven” titles. However, various markets in the industry allow for varying degrees of diversity, with platforms such as PC games, web-based browser games, and mobile phone games able to support a fair number of independent developers who fulfill a void that has not been adequately addressed by the mainstream development companies (Williams, 2002). These platforms have not only served as bastions for independent development but have also provided fertile space for the cultivation of innovative game ideas that have then been propagated across multiple platforms and markets (often through the help of an interested publisher providing investment capital further down the pipeline).

Although the worldwide expansion of these markets is enticing corporate development entities into realms that have traditionally been occupied by independent game development, there is reason to suspect that the methods of development that have allowed the large-scale developers to control the industry will be redeployed into these relatively new arenas. There is a tendency among analog media companies to move into new digital domains by only viewing the potential that the new medium can provide as a market, without weighing the creative advantages of retooling production and audience appeal to the particulars of the new medium (Bustamante, 2004, p. 812). Likewise, the entrance of corporate developers and publishers into the realm of casual games—much more of a garden for independent development—may signal a corresponding entrance of stifling regulatory practices regarding content and markets. The association that independent games have with amateur development lends themselves toward a looser distribution of their product. At the same time, the smaller investments needed by the smaller teams mean that there is a lower expected rate of return, which also lends itself to new media platforms.

“Selling hundreds of thousands of copies might have been enough to keep a scrappy independent developer, but for a division of Capcom, they were a stinging disappointment. By contrast, *Dead Rising* for the Xbox 360 racked up a million sales by the end of 2006. In January of this year, *Lost Planet*, another Capcom title, racked up 329,000 sales in North America alone. In one month, and one market, *Lost Planet* beat the entire lifetime sales of one of Clover’s titles. Ironically, the studios with the financial wherewithal to roll the dice on an artistic title can’t afford the low sales figures those games bring in.”¹¹

Shannon Drake, the Escapist Magazine (2007)

The above quote is one illustration of an attempt of a corporate game development company, Capcom, to diversify their brand by setting up an independent studio, Clover Studios. The games Clover made were critical successes and are widely used as an example of the art of games, boosting Capcom's overall company reputation. Despite this success, Clover was closed after it failed to reach returns expected by the studio's controlling body. This example seems to embody the challenges facing media conglomerates hoping to enter the new media markets and highlights the advantages of independent development. The *Long Tail* theory by Anderson advocates that in markets with infinite storage and equal access of producers to consumers, a small number of big hits with mass appeal will make the same amount of money as an almost infinite number of amount of small successes if the costs for distribution and access are minimal to zero (Anderson, 2006). Although this does suggest more opportunities for the financial success of a greater amount of titles, it also implies that for each of those smaller titles, success may need to be redefined to lessened expectations that are more attuned to the goals of smaller scale or even independent, rather than corporate entities (where growth and return on investments are generally governed by the expectations of the stock market).

Organizational structure. Organizational structures of the various companies involved in independent game development are widely varied. Where it can be established that casual games created for the Internet or mobile console markets may allow one or two developers to create the entirety of a game, the possibilities for such intimate development structures are becoming increasingly more implausible.

“After working in the games industry for 15 years, I’d become tired of the treadmill, the corporate environment, the clichés, the licenses, and indeed, the apathy and blandness that seemed to pervade most corners of the industry at the time. Looking for new avenues and fresh pastures, in 2004 I formed a new company, Scary Fish Ltd. . . . I would have complete control over every aspect of the project, and the ability to dictate exactly when the project should be released.”¹²

Andy Roberts, Scary Fish Ltd. (2007)

Kerr (2006) has outlined the hierarchical methodologies of creation that generally determine the development of large-scale console and PC-based games. Within such project structures, tasks are broken up into distinct divisions of skillsets that inhibit all but those at the top of the organization from having a view and thus influence across the various sectors of development. In the process of submitting their work into the greater whole, the individual worker forfeits individual claims to the independent status of the studio or the product through the chain of approval that is necessary in hierarchical production methods. Each developer is responsible for the quality of a single asset. Each is beholden to distinct bureaucracies of their specific department. Each is subject to the fact that as the game gets bigger, their individual

work becomes a smaller and smaller part in the overall project. In this way, there is a very visible path, where the independent work of the individual becomes subjugated into the greater product vision.

However, for this depiction to be entirely true, a hierarchy must function as a very static concept. This conception neglects the history of interactions of the individuals that enact these hierarchies and carry out the bureaucracy that governs this method of production. Hallett and Ventresca (2006, p. 215) describe how understanding organizational structures can benefit from seeing them as inhabited institutions as “they are populated with people whose social interactions suffuse institutions with local force and significance.” When studying game postmortems one gets the distinct feeling that the idea of what a hierarchy of development exactly entails is as dynamic as the relationships between the individuals that function within such an organization of work.

“Our culture here is very in attuned to working with outside partners. [...] at Wideload, we’re completely the opposite [referring to a previous company]—we’re consummate delegators. We’re always looking for people that are better at something than we are. Over the years we’ve met some really talented people that are very well managed and work well with us, personality wise, as well as process wise and talent wise.”¹³

Alexander Seropian, Wideload Games (2007)

The above quote comes from Alexander Seropian of Wideload Games, whose studio makes AAA titles for the Xbox and Xbox360. Wideload has around 25 full-time employees who act as a core team in their game development. The majority of the assets created for their games are outsourced to individuals and specialized companies, who are located all around the globe and work with Wideload primarily via Internet. Where the outsourcing of assets for their games allows Wideload to maintain a budgetary scale necessary to be more innovative in their design, these practices paradoxically feed off a system of subcontracted labor that resembles the critical vision of below-the-line “immaterial Fordism” by Shumacher (2006), especially when considering the legal status of the work and IP that gets outsourced. In this way, it becomes evident that there are symbiotic intersections between the independent and the not independent. The Wideload approach is an example of how companies attuned to the flexible and adaptive culture of the new media market rely on compartmentalized and standardized modes of work that can be assembled, reorganized, and dismantled to provide quick solutions to new problems (Grabher, 2004). In some sense, Wideload constantly becomes a “new” company based on the nature of the individuals that receive subcontracted work. It cannot be said that outsourcing completely allows for independent development as the exploitative side must be considered as closely as its empowering potential.

Occupational careers. Large game companies, especially those tied to the major publishers through exclusive deals, often structure their product development in a hierarchical, routinized, standardized, and otherwise systematic manner to encourage ease of transition and workflow from employee-to-employee or from department-to-department. In the literature, such a form of media management tends to be regarded as the opposite of more creative, flexible, innovative, and diverse modes of work.

“Long story. I totally lost faith in the way big retail companies did things at that point. There were a lot of promises made during the last year I was there relating to promotions, future positions, bonuses etc., all to ensure I stayed on and helped get The Movies out the door. Once the game was finished it was clear none of this was going to happen, we argued, and I left.”¹⁴

Cliff Harris, Kudos Game Production (2006)

Stories of transition from amateur creation to professional developer or from developer at a major to becoming an independent developer are described in terms of organizations of production and labor. The desire for more authentic and autonomous creation, the feeling of an impossibility of upward mobility (within the company’s hierarchical organization of work), and a discontent regarding accreditation and top-down management are common complaints found in the reasons developers give for leaving their (relatively) more stable jobs for indie game production.

There are two predominant ways of coming into professional indie game development. One method is as an amateur. Having no experience in the games industry, someone will start a game or a game company if they have the idea and inspiration and will create and produce their game individually or among a small team of varying degrees of professionalism. The second is through experience working in some degree in the greater games industry and then choosing to form an independent studio out of dissatisfaction with the current company culture or industry content. In their study of cross-sectoral skill transfers in the regions of game development in the United States, Japan, and Great Britain, Izushi and Aoyama (2006) found that the existence and predominance of highly skilled industries (such as software and film development in the United States, comic book production in Japan, and hobbyist programmers and coders in Great Britain) uniquely benefited each country for certain stages of the evolution of the game industry. Their argument is that skills and practices can translate from one industry to another. According to this logic, it would seem reasonable that attitudes toward production methods would translate as well.

“Independent developers have certain powers that larger, more risk-averse companies don’t have. They have the power to create things that are meaningful to them personally, rather than designed-by-committee. They have the power to enter into a project knowing that, even if it succeeds, it may not make very much money. These things are

important to counterbalance the overly conservative behavior of the rest of the industry . . . ”¹⁵

Jonathon Blow, developer of the game *Braid* (2007)

Shumacher’s earlier reference to game labor as “immaterial Fordism” invokes a type of dual association. Where Shumacher’s intent is to describe a disconnect between workers and an autonomous or legal authority over their work, his metaphor also accentuates the everyday nature of work in games. As the quote above illustrates, immaterial skills such as being “progressive”, taking risks, or having a deeply personal investment in cultural production are all associated with indie gamework. As team sizes in mainstream corporate industries swell, increasing organizational levels of hierarchy also seem to become more predominant by sheer necessity. Within these hierarchies are specializations of crafts where the production of a product is broken down into specific roles for workers—thus invoking the image of a Ford factory assembly line. A career in indie games seems to resemble the Toyota model much more, where games are made that fit a particular need at that time (whether that “need” is based on market research or springs from the minds of the artists involved).

When considering the independent ideal of development occurring among smaller, more intimate organizations, the independent developer can be viewed as somewhat indebted to all aspects of production. Yet, on the other hand, the identity of the autonomous artist or “auteur” comes into play when discussing the career path of an indie developer as someone who is content perfecting their craft. The balance of this may be determined by the relationships of individuals and the role that bureaucracy performs in mediating those relationships.

Market. The quote below illustrates a disconnect between the somewhat Utopian market place for smaller scale independent work of Chris Anderson’s *Long Tail* economy, and a reality where many of the most successful independent games are easily recognizable duplicates of existing titles.

“This is a great time for indies to really innovate and do well. In practice, not many of us are trying. If I see another match-3 game I’ll cry. It’s sad to see so many small developers behave exactly like the big companies we have supposedly escaped from.”¹⁶

Cliff Harris, Kudos Game Production (2006)

To this effect, the nature of independence is contingent on an audience’s perception of indie authenticity. Jones, Anand, and Alvarez (2005) outline two specific strategies for media entities to claim authenticity. Either an artist can shape one’s own voice within the canonic frame of the industry or they can offer a distinctive approach that is uniquely theirs. In either instance, the independent game products are constantly being judged against the state and slate of the industry at that time.

The discourse of indie game developers is riddled with authenticity claims, particularly referring to the (need for the) second frame.

“He he he, I’ve been out of school for two years. I’m quitting my job as a visiting assistant math professor (like a baby professor) to write video games, DF [Dwarf Fortress] in particular. Ideally, I’ll be supported by the DF community. Realistically, who knows? Right now I can pay for food, utilities, and a slice of rent on donations, and I’ve saved enough money to make an honest effort for some months after I leave my job mid-May. I’m hopeful that when I finally have my time freed up I can push things forward to the point where the project generates enough interest that I’ll be able to pay my bills and maybe even get health insurance or something. Whether or not that’s optimistic remains to be seen, but I think it’s worth a try.”¹⁷

Tarn Adams, Bay 12 Games (2007)

At times such claims and expectations lead to a very visible synthesis that occurs between producers and consumers at the outermost fringes of long-tail markets. Through digital distribution, the distance between producers, content, and consumers is greatly reduced, bringing developers into a common space with their audience, making the distinctions between creator and gamer less relevant, if not nonexistent. Where it can be said that tiny markets put audience directly in the roles of financiers, the blending of producers and consumers in independent games has also thrived on the activities of “mod” (short for “modification”) communities. In these virtual communities, fans of a particular game are able to collaborate and develop new levels and scenarios for games by using tools released by the original developers. This technique of leveraging fan commitment has been found to extend the overall product value for game companies, who make concerted efforts to harness this energy (Jeppesen & Molin, 2003). If independent game development exists along a smaller margin of profit than corporate game development, any actions of consumers that directly extend the value of a product are exponentially amplified simply under the margins of scale.

In a condemnation of the alternative press for using their ideology to deflect responsibility for sustainable production, the Comedia group stated that alternative media can provide a particular audience to advertisers due to the specific market that they address (Comedia, 1984). Atton (2002) counters this claim by stating that the smaller markets for alternative media instead provided a less desirable audience not only because of their limited size but also due to a counter-cultural disposition that made them more skeptical of the nature of advertising. This debate on small-scale markets and more or less independent cultural production is somewhat paralleled in indie games as the download services that empower independent game development tend to fail in converting a majority of the audience, who preview a game into downloading (and thus paying) customers. By catering more specifically to their community’s specific interests, independent game developers would be at a better

position to sell their product. However, the same technologies that enable ease of access and foster a particular community of interest have an inherent flaw that makes the overall monetization of a product more difficult. If the flood of content that deluges accessible distribution channels allows, the audience must be won over before monetization occurs. As part of this audience power, the culture of consumption in these channels expects to obtain their information free and easily with only the most directly involved (and often cocreating) audience supporting development.

Discussion

In a recent study comparing independent game development with independent film, Jahn-Sudmann (2008, pp. 9–10) concludes: “independent games may from time to time bear up against products of the dominant game industry when it comes to being innovative or creative and they may sometimes differ distinctly from the outward appearance of mainstream games—but this difference does not include an oppositional logic that is explicitly recognizable as negation or challenge of mainstream game forms.” Indeed, our study also finds that a logic of opposition between mainstream and alternative in gamework is slightly deceptive. However, the logic of distinctions advocated by Jahn-Sudmann also leaves something to be desired—in particular, an awareness of the recombinant relationships in the production of games between gamers, developers, studios, publishers, distribution platforms, and technological affordances.

As the vast majority of game development flows through the financial and creative control of four or five large-scale corporations (EA, Activision, THQ, and Ubisoft), productions that take place outside of these interests are first and foremost notable for their sovereignty from these institutions (Williams, 2002). Under this, the predominant notion of what makes something an independent development process seems to be that it cannot be the property of an external party outside the direct developer/producer/consumer relationship. In this sense, the definition of indie game production comes closest to ideal–typical conceptualizations of alternative media as put forward by Atton (2002). Atton suggests that alternative media “emphasize the organization of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production, and dissemination that is impossible in the mass media” (2002, p. 22). The role of independent game development as an alternative sphere takes on somewhat a dual nature. On one hand, digital distribution and a proliferation of cheap or free middleware allows for a greater diversity of voices in the production of culture. However, in an industry that is already rapidly rearranging itself to address expanding markets and broadening audience demographics, as is the case with Nintendo’s “Blue Ocean” Wii strategy, the so-called indie alternative model has also become a playground of fairly typical and mainstream values and practices across studios large and small (Kline, Dyer-Witford, & de Peuter, 2003). In these instances, the meaning of

independent is veiled in irreverence but is more often part of a deeper history. Experienced developers, who have become exhausted with the Fordist organizational models and grueling scheduling demands of publisher-controlled development houses, are finding ample space to reimagine development on their own terms, often with much more personal motivations at stake. This intense “gamerism” is evident from the celebration of all things 8-bit or in continued reverence of maverick lone developers, which tends to get expressed in reference to game classics and the earliest days of game production.

Under these pretenses, independent games form a structure not dissimilar to the citizen’s media model put forth by Rodriguez (2001), where the empowerment of audience’s voices as codevelopers is seen as central. Indeed, with an increasing prevalence of digital distribution of free SDKs, the design of games with built-in level editors and other customization tools, and social networks becoming incorporated into games and game production itself, it is difficult to draw effective lines between what is production or consumption in gamework. What is specifically interesting here is the way that indie games serve their audience, not just as providers of entertainment experiences but also as call to engagement with (and a professed loyalty to) a specific cultural identity. Rodriguez’s argument transforms media experiences from mere consumption to an active and communal construction of culture (2001, p. 21). In this way, the act of playing independent games is not just a matter of distancing oneself of the mainstream but is a contribution to the betterment of independent community as a whole. In doing so, it suggests that the definitions of independent games set forth by these discourses is too narrow and that there is a set of variables that determine indie game development that contribute to the formation of an interactive relationship between developers, between developers and the greater games industry, and between developers and their audience (who at times, as modders, level editors, critics, and participants in user forums, must also be seen as developers).

In light of the structure of the global games industry and in response to these conceptions of alternative media, it may be more valuable to reframe the question of “what is indie?” to “how indie is it?” (as it was put by the editors of TIGSource, an online community for independent game players: “No one is Indier than John Madden”) or even: “what aspects are indie?”

As the games industry has been routinely characterized by the dominance of a select few hardware manufacturers and software publishers, the foremost issue in what it means to be considered “indie” has to do with a studio’s financing structure. Although many independent studios exist as a subsidiary of a larger publisher, the studio commits to a “bootstrap” production strategy that can be seen as more independent. However, such binary distinctions are rare and, in an industry as volatile as digital games, generally temporary. Specialty publishers are also finding their place in the market by marketing themselves to independent developers as being able to provide the money and means necessary to create their product, while allowing them

to maintain IP rights and more *laissez-faire* management practices. Although this complicates the notion that financing alone determines independence, it accentuates the underpinning tensions that exist with regard to the level of creative freedom a developer experiences with the amount of financial control that the developer has. Finally, the relationship between the developer and the market must be considered as well, as often independent games are created not-for-profit. In such a context, the quality of the relationship between producer, product, and audience is prioritized.

Conclusion

From a traditional Marxist viewpoint, we can argue that in the ways the global games industry has structured itself to have developers produce for their corporate backers with little or no role in the production process after “going gold” has increased the distance and indeed alienation between producer, product, and consumer. However, we can view the rise of indie development in part as the very product of an increasingly globally differentiated market, fueled by the rise and availability of cheap and easy-to-use development and distribution technologies. As indie games have moved to take advantage of these spaces, they are in turn proving the financial viability of these markets, in turn contributing to the formation of the global cultural system within which gamework takes place. For developers, the financial, personal, or audience validation that they seek in their development, the independent games industry may provide a flexible enough structure such that they are able to redefine their own terms of success. For independent companies attempting to navigate the markets of the games industry, that compromise of defining success is certainly more complex and has more at stake with the fortunes of its employees being tied to its success. For these companies, harvesting the creative autonomy of the individuals working for them entails what has been described as a delicate balancing act between two opposing imperatives in the creative industries:

“Is it the individual who is the pivotal element in the value chain, or is it the system as a whole that produces the critical ingredients of successful cultural products? The debate has important repercussions. If the individual is the pivotal element in the creation of value, then the key to success is finding or developing these individuals. If on the other hand it is the system, then less emphasis should be put on individuals, and more on developing structures, processes, and cultures that produce successful cultural products.” (Lampel, Lant, & Shamsie, 2000, p. 267)

It is here in the discussion where the importance of independent media is amplified for both individual producers and corporations. In a new media market, where the work of an individual amateur can share the same avenues of distribution as that of multimillion-dollar corporate projects, how does the role of independent

development determine the way that media projects are produced and consumed? For independent developers, this means finding a compromise between each of these factors that is suitable for the scope of each individual project. For corporations, this means maintaining a flexibility that allows for the passions of individuals to be cultivated toward the greater goals of the project. Somewhere between ownership and self-funding, between individual development and leveraged teams powered by specialization, and between the collaborative work with user communities and the vision of each individual as trying to tell their own unique stories lies a cultural production model for the future.

Notes

1. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/06/technology/06game.html?_r=1&ex=1192334400&en=3965b3716d4d2a02&ei=5070&emc=eta1&oref=slogin.
2. <http://www.gamedev.net/columns/interviews/metanet.asp>.
3. See list of URLs at the end of this article.
4. On a side note, we would like to add that this study serves as a precursor to a series of case studies with specific indie game studios, and is part of a larger project on the independent production of culture— additionally covering cases in the music and recording industry, motion picture production, and journalism.
5. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1496/xbox_lives_early_rising_chris_php.
6. <http://www.armchairempire.com/Interviews/alex-seropian-wideload-games.htm>.
7. <http://www.igda.org/qol/whitepaper.php>.
8. http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=14495.
9. http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=11692.
10. <http://www.joystiq.com/2007/06/12/joystiq-interviews-gamecock-about-eieio-and-e3-funeral/>.
11. <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/issue/96/21>.
12. http://gamasutra.com/features/20060919/roberts_01.shtml.
13. <http://www.armchairempire.com/Interviews/alex-seropian-wideload-games.htm>.
14. <http://www.gameproducer.net/2006/07/10/interview-with-positech-games-owner-cliff-harris-kudos-game-production/>.
15. <http://www.gamedev.net/reference/business/features/jblow/jblow.asp>.
16. <http://www.gameproducer.net/2006/07/10/interview-with-positech-games-owner-cliff-harris-kudos-game-production/>.
17. http://www.bay12games.com/cgi-local/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=10&t=000001&p=26.

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