

Towards Creative Autonomy: Tactics for Survival

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Abstract

This paper examines shifts in the global games industry by focusing on the development of the games industry in the Republic of Ireland. Drawing upon surveys, participant observation and action research over the past ten years, it tracks the rise of the indie and both the public and private strategies developed to ‘produce’ a local development industry and the tactics that indie games companies deploy to survive in this context. Situating the games industry within the wider cultural industries, it argues that we are seeing content producers pay a high price for their creative autonomy.

Keywords

digital games; indies/independent companies; cultural industry; production; capital; labour; work

Introduction

The games industry is a core part of the wider cultural and creative industries sector, and its production and consumption networks are increasingly spatialised, internationalised and networked (technically and organizationally) (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, 2008; Kerr, 2013; Mosco, 2009). The industry is also undergoing some fundamental changes that correspond to what Bernard Miège (2011) would call ‘mutations,’ with increasingly closer ties between the games and communication industries more generally (Bouquillion & Combès, 2007; Bouquillion & Matthews, 2009). We have seen the emergence of new platforms, products/services (e.g., social and casual games), new roles (e.g., community managers), and new types of knowledge and skills in the past ten years. A focus on technical changes is insufficient to explain these mutations; as such, this paper examines the growth of independent small startup companies in Ireland from the perspectives of the macro socio-economic context of their development, the strategies being employed by local public and private actors to support them, and their own tactics for survival.

Methods

This paper draws upon three surveys of game companies in the Irish context from 2000, 2009 and 2013. It also integrates findings from participant observation at games industry events and the development and co-ordination of a volunteer-run web service since 2002. Finally, it includes documentary evidence from participation in recent policy initiatives by industry and the state.

Discussion

Surveys of the Irish games industry from 2000, 2009 and 2013 found that the numbers of local start-up companies involved in game development has grown significantly over the period (up to 75), but that the majority of employment is still in service jobs outsourced to Ireland (e.g., community support and localization) by multinational game companies (Kerr, 2002; Kerr & Cawley, 2011; McCormick, 2012). Thus the games industry in Ireland has a small number of very large companies and a large number of very small companies. While jobs in the large companies are relatively stable, attract venture capital or corporate investment, and might conform to emerging definitions of ‘good work,’ the same could not be said for the working conditions or ‘creative autonomy’ of the very small companies, which appear to conform to a loose definition of an indie games company (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

This paper focuses on the recent growth of large numbers of very small ‘kitchen table’ companies that are undercapitalized, reliant on public ‘subsidies’ (funds, office space, travel supports), and employing less than five people (Hazelkorn, 1997). It analyses the strategies by public (state and third level educational institutions) and private (individual companies and trade bodies) entities, which largely attempt to ‘produce’ game companies that conform to general business supports and move from feasibility funding through standard business growth phases rather than addressing the specificities of the games industry. The most recent strategy employed by both public and private actors in this regard is the development of games incubator and accelerator spaces. The public discourse and rhetoric is one of innovation, high-tech, intellectual property, and creativity. By contrast, the individual workers’ discourses and stories are of struggle, passion, and subsistence.

Within this context, ‘indies’ use a number of tactics to exploit local supports and manage their creative autonomy and survival. Some of these tactics confound local, regional, and nationally bounded strategies to develop non-local, transnational and transactional mediated networks and professional communities of practice. Others rely on the gift economy, multiple jobs, discount office space, tolerant parents, and social welfare to survive.

What we seem to be witnessing is the vertical disintegration of production in the mobile and online sectors of the games industry, enabled by network technology combined with the ‘exploitation’ of place and labour by global multinationals. This socio-economic configuration is in turn enabled by competitive incentives aimed towards capital, neo-liberalist ideals, and austerity discipline. The conditions faced by indies results in what Banks (2007) has termed the ‘insitutionalised individualisation’ of cultural labour, which Miège (2011) refers to as worsening conditions for content production. What cannot be denied is the vulnerability of these workers and the necessity for new tactics to bolster their sustainability and improve their working conditions. This paper argues that in the current difficult economic context in Ireland, indies may be able to exploit their symbolic and cultural capital to obtain a degree of creative autonomy but the focus needs to be on generating sufficient income and improving working conditions or this period of creative destruction will be short-lived.

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Does Being Indie Mean Trading Financial Freedom for Creative Freedom?

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Abstract

The language subjects use to talk about the game industry creates a terrain, and 'indie' represents is a tactic aimed at setting oneself apart in a field dominated by AAA structures. This is commonly achieved via the argument that indies create games not for money, but as an creative artistic endeavor. However, as this preliminary study of indie game development shows, this tactic has negative repercussions for indie developers that want to earn a living wage for their work.

Keywords

game development; indie; independent studios; ethnography

Background and Methods

Since November 2012, I have been an embedded ethnographer in a Canadian software incubator whose stated purpose is to "help independent game developers produce games and bring them to market". From January 2013 onwards (when the incubator opened its doors), I spent ten to twenty hours each week within the incubator, observing seven development teams. The data for the preliminary findings detailed below come from a number of sources: observations from the field; applicants' online applications to the incubator, specifically the questions asking about "motivations for becoming an independent developer"; semi-structured interview data from the participants; and, written reflections from the participants in response to my asking "what does it mean to be indie?". My findings are situated within broader industry discourses attempting to define 'indie' from sites such as Gamasutra.com (see Gross, 2013; McNeill, 2013; Yu, 2013), and is supported by a small, yet growing, body of academic work on the indie game scene in Canada and abroad (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Lipkin, 2013; Ruffino, 2013; Westecott, 2013).

Preliminary Findings

For self-defined indie developers, 'indie' is associated with a resistance to mainstream big-budget production, large teams and bureaucratic management. Of course, there is not just one monolithic indie community, but rather multiple communities who may share some traits, but not all. However, in game industry discourses, indie communities are commonly lumped together as one united front - the comments of individuals are taken and used to speak for the whole, or are taken out of their situated specific contexts (see, for example, Gross, 2013).

The attempt to pin down "what is indie" and operationalize the term is not the aim of this paper. I examine how 'indie' is leveraged in specific locations and times, and aimed at specific purposes. Accordingly, I first asked developers how they defined 'indie' and then examined the everyday contexts in which they identify and evoke the term. The following are some initial findings, along with some supporting analysis.

Perhaps the best place to start is with what I did not find: counter to my initial expectations, none of my research participants equated indie with a specific type of game, or aesthetic choice. Nadav Lipkin (2013), in his analysis of the history of indie games provides an explanation. At its inception, the indie movement was united by alternative production and distribution structures, supportive fan subcultures,

and feelings of moral or artistic superiority over the mainstream. In time, a distinct indie style (e.g. chiptunes, puzzle platformers, pixel graphics) rooted in very real production and distribution constraints, was articulated that paralleled indie ethos and beliefs. This style was then emulated by larger, more mainstream studios. It became difficult to tell indie apart from mainstream, and so the style replaced the original ethos in defining what was indie versus what was not. In this process, indie aesthetics were co-opted by the mainstream, while technology improved enough to allow indies to emulate the styles of AAA. Accordingly, developers have now abandoned aesthetics as an indicator of 'indieness'.

While research participants' definitions of indie share some common themes, they exhibit considerable variance. Thus, 'indie' loses power as an analytic category (if it ever had any) because developers and players cannot always tell or agree on who is indie, who is not, and what games deserve the 'indie' label. Despite this, 'indie' is a term that does considerable work and accordingly, its meaning is hotly contested. For example, 'indie' connotes to users that a game is novel or creative. Thus developers assume and affiliate with the indie brand in specific contexts, such as when looking to build an invested fan community, seeking PR coverage, or when applying to grants and funding associated with culture and the arts. In this sense, the indie brand is tied with creative innovation. Many developers 'put on' the indie hat only in specific contexts, and –in contrast– don the hat of a more formal and business-oriented "independent studio" when engaging with investors, middleware providers, and venture capitalists.

Within the games incubator, being indie is most commonly equated to having autonomy over one's project, and developers often couch this autonomy in the language of freedom. Being indie, in this sense prioritizes maintaining developers' creative vision ahead of incentives to make a profitable game. The indie association with a disregard for money and the prioritization of creative vision over financial stability is a common trope in indie cultural narratives (e.g. in *Indie Game: The Movie*).

However, Paolo Ruffino (2013) argues that despite the discourses of freedom and emotional investment linked to creating indie games, indies organize themselves with practices that are very similar to those of 'dependent' (i.e. AAA) companies, and that indie games often reinforce the power structures of those they oppose. For example, every time indies make games for established publishers and platform gatekeepers, they are sustaining the very structures they often profess to hate. Indie, in this sense, is the false promise of subversion, of being against mainstream, while reinforcing the positions of established players in the industry. The prototypical indie developer thus invests their game with years of unpaid work, their emotional labour, and creative vision, but they are paid very little in return.

Implications and Future Directions

There is an unspoken assumption in defining 'indie' that it is okay to make money from a game, but that the game should not be sullied by designing it with the express intent of earning a sustainable living. Accordingly, it is perhaps not surprising that developers within the incubator experience tension related to self-identification. On a day-to-day level, incubator work seems geared at profit-seeking. In the game incubator, developers' identification with 'indie' thus becomes fluid, and something leveraged only in specific contexts. This everyday reality exposes how indie ideals conflict with indie developers' other desires to design games that make money, and thus become self-supporting while yet preserving some form of creative autonomy.

Future research directions for this project include following the development teams as they ship their games and spin out into their own microstudios. Examining how teams leverage their indie status during the different stages of this project, whether their games are branded as 'indie', and whether they are accepted as such by indie communities despite their roots in an entrepreneurial endeavor, are each important areas of future analysis. This project will also link with a larger interview-based study soon to be underway that looks at how developers in the surrounding community define themselves.

While indie ideologies are rooted in emancipatory narratives, this initial study shows how these narratives feed into larger cycles of capital. Ultimately, in examining production structures such as incubators, the goal of this work is to examine how the cultural values of game developers may necessitate different social, technical, and economic support structures than previously assumed. In order to better support independent cultural producers, an understanding of the tensions inherent in balancing creative vs financial freedom are an initial step.

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Indies, Incubators, and Inclusion: Reconfiguring Gendered Participation in Game Design

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Abstract

This paper describes the results of ethnographic research in two video game design initiatives for women, Dames Making Games and Pixelles. Through a comparison of the two groups, situated in their respective contexts of game design in Toronto and Montreal, we discuss tactics for resisting the gendered participation gap in game culture, specifically from the perspective of production. Increasing the engagement of women in the game industry is particularly crucial given recent public discourse around the continued sexism and gender disparity in masculinist video game culture more broadly. We consider the possibilities as well as the limitations these two organizations afford for making interventions in this exclusionary culture through independent game design.

Keywords

gender; inclusion; independent game design; activism

Gender trouble in the game industry

After over a decade of academic and design literature considering the gender gap and resulting stereotypical representations of femininity and masculinity in digital play (Graner Ray, 2004; Kennedy, 2002; Jenson & de Castell, 2008, 2010), 2012 may well have been the year when discussions of sexism and misogyny in the game industry went mainstream. The campaign of online harassment against Anita Sarkeesian prompted by her proposed web series exploring the constructions of women in games and the rallying of not only financial support but also positive popular news media attention is but one visible example (see Chambers, 2012). While such instances of sexism in and around game culture are not necessarily more numerous in the contemporary context, their extensive documentation (see <http://gbitk.net/ii/> for a comprehensive timeline of examples from January-December 2012) indicates that there is an incitement to discourse about civility, harassment, gender, and sexism in game culture, and in many ways, online interaction more generally (see Chemaly, 2013). And, as in Foucault's (1990) theorization of sexuality as discursive, the sentiments of this discourse are not necessarily oriented toward social justice, empowerment, or equity.

Yet, this discourse has been central to a recent push for action to incite real change. In the late fall of 2012, there was tremendous buzz around three linked hashtags on Twitter – #1reasonwhy (discussing why gender disparity in the video game industry persists), #1reasontobe (with posts related to why it's worth working as a game designer, despite the gender disparity and its attendant culture of sexism), and #1reasonmentors (where posters sought and volunteered to take on mentorship of females in the industry). While a great deal of attention had been paid to the representation of women in games themselves, participation in these threads indicated how the context of production often maintains an exclusionary games culture, specifically due to the dearth of diversity therein (Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce, 2007; Jenson & de Castell, 2011). The relatively few statistics on industry demographics indicate that the labour force is dramatically segregated; for example, the International Game Developers Association (2005) has reported only 11.5% female participation, with the majority of women working in human resources, public relations, and sales and the vast majority of production teams comprised of males (95%). Some of the tactics directed at rectifying this disparity include specific scholarships for female applicants to game design programs, special interest groups tailored to "Women in Games," and locally-organized jams, groups, and incubators focusing on female-identified participants. In our paper, we focus on two unique examples of the latter, providing a grounded case

study of how coordinated activism addressing gendered participation in game production has unfolded in two distinctive locales.

Women-only game design incubators: Dames Making Games (2011-2013) and Pixelles (2013)

Specifically, we discuss the relationship between the Toronto-based Dames Making Games (DMG) organization and the Montreal-based Pixelles incubator for first-time female game designers. As researcher-activists and observers working under the mandate of the Feminist in Games group, we consider the similarities, differences, and unique perspectives of each location. In tracing how the experiences of DMG, a feminist game design organization for women and their allies, itself an offshoot of two local incubators hosted in 2011, has informed the subsequent organizing in Montreal, we look closely at how the local contexts of production and research have shaped the two initiatives.

Montreal's video game industry has become a global hub thanks to interventionist policy measures in the late 1990s targeted toward drawing France-based Ubisoft to headquarter its North American operations in the city, chiefly through tax breaks that made it favourable for a significant number of other video game companies, large and small, to follow suit (Livermore, 2013). In this context, setting up an incubator for women to break into game design was met with overwhelming support, from companies who offered to host weekly sessions and the final showcase, to a range of talented mentors and academic advisors, to local community groups that publicized and attended Pixelles events. Even in this rich local game design culture, however, wider industry uncertainty was a constant concern of individual participants – for instance, game company Funcom, host of the Pixelles weekly sessions, announced at the start of the incubator that it would be moving most of its Montreal studio to Raleigh, North Carolina as part of corporate restructuring. Mid-way through the incubator, THQ Montreal – where one of the visiting mentors worked – was purchased by Ubisoft Montreal, which incited the division and piecemeal sale of THQ's assets, including smaller studios. These structural pressures constituted a tenuous backdrop for this group of women wanting to enter the game industry with the help of mentors who themselves had gone through not only the economic but also the gender-related challenges of creative labour.

Uncertainty of another sort plays a key role in the Toronto context. Toronto is home to a lively and well-established independent game design community, one that is by no small measure reliant on the precarious support of provincial grants such as the Ontario Media Development Corporation's Entertainment and Creative Cluster Partnerships Fund, which provided funding for the incubators that led to the formation of Dames Making Games. In the case of DMG, recognition of the challenges of supporting activist work in the independent game design community has led to a rejection of grants-based operations and to the implementation of a membership structure for its participants. In contrast to the Montreal context, the organization of DMG activities has centred on independent production, side-stepping questions of professionalization and getting into the mainstream industry, which has a much smaller presence in Toronto than in Montreal. Instead, DMG's mandate is largely focused on education and community-building, and their initiatives, from socials to talks to incubators to jams, have been well-attended and celebrated. While the future is by no means assured, many of the tactics for resistance employed by DMG, particularly their commitment to integrating allies, provide exciting directions for community growth.

Designing resistance

Through a discussion of the realities of envisioning, organizing, launching, and maintaining game design initiatives as feminist interventions, we consider the challenges and opportunities that arise in resisting cultures of exclusion while still attempting to participate in them. Research on independent game design and incubators has shown that indie culture and gender-oriented activism in digital games is contentious, complex, and wrought with uncertainties and differing tactics regarding feminism, equality, and the state of play and labour (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Harvey & Fisher, forthcoming). We consider these moments of contention and cooperation across these instances of action for change in

order to begin to delineate the productive ways in which divergent perspectives and approaches can collectively reconfigure gendered participation in games production.

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License

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Mixed Messages: Policing the Public/Private Boundaries of Cultural Production on the Nintendo DS

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Abstract

This essay works to situate independent, or "indie," game development in a broader history surrounding hobbyist game development. This essay examines the ambiguous character of videogame console modification chips (MOD chips) as a locus for the ambiguity of production outside the "normal" game industry. The MOD chip, at one time, was a critical technology in this space. MOD chips, while allowing users to pirate software, also enable them to create software and videogames that run on these consoles outside the typical rules and regulations of the videogame industry. Ethnographic work amongst Nintendo DS ("dual screen") MOD communities is examined to illuminate this understudied space of cultural production.

Keywords

Cultural Production; Game Development; MOD Chips; Piracy; Ethnography

Introduction

It would seem that pirate cultures abound, yet not all piracy is created equally. In fact, there is a realm of piracy that often goes unexamined when analysts turn their lenses to user spaces surrounding piracy. Predominant narratives concerning the motivations for pirating have emerged around the high cost of media, transnational disproportions of wealth, taxation rates and numerous others (Quiring et al., 2008). Indeed, there are even critiques of information distribution and the very nature of informational cultural goods occurring in some pirate communities (Caraway, 2012) as well as those that position themselves as downright "subversive" (Kiriya, 2012). For others, pirate communities remain enmeshed in conversations about individual rights in relation to corporate interests and how those intersect with broader political-economic interests (Chew, 2011; Ernkvist and Ström, 2008).

This essay turns to the case of the Nintendo DS and the R4 and DS-TT MOD- cartridges produced for the Nintendo DS, as a critical, technological junction point for these conversations. The R4 and DS-TT have been targeted by Nintendo as devices used solely by pirates of game content. Empirically, the work spans offline worlds of traditional game developers and those of online homebrew game developers. Methodologically, the work begins rooted in the more customary participant observation of an anthropologist working amongst traditional game developers. However, the story of homebrewers shifted from the more conventional fieldsite to the online forums and wikis more heavily relied upon by homebrew game developers.

The essay examines the cultural logics that motivate the homebrew community and their relationship to MOD and hacker communities. Further, it questions how Nintendo has mobilized, with significant success, different countries' legal systems to curtail the distribution of devices that these communities depend on. The essay begins by examining the rise and state of homebrew game developers working with the Nintendo DS. The essay then turns to the productive ambiguity and symbiotic relationship between piracy and unauthorized homebrew game development and the reframing of their activities as "*jailbreaking*".

Analytically, the essay draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, as dialectic of coercion and consent (Gramsci, 1975). To make sense of the role of corporations and The State in this system, I turn to Brown's (1995) work on power and freedom and Smith's (1999) work on how the local is coordinated by the extra-local in ruling relations.

The Rise of DS Homebrew

Homebrew development is game or software development for devices like the Nintendo DS (NDS), Microsoft Xbox 360 (360), Sony Playstation Portable (PSP), Sony Playstation 3 (PS3) or Nintendo Wii (Wii) that falls outside the typical frameworks of game production. These devices have significant numbers of security devices in place to prevent the distribution of unauthorized (or pirate) software and are covered by numerous user end license agreements aimed at structuring the proper use of the devices. The extensive legalese demands that the devices be used in very particular ways and that the user/consumer is not allowed to install unapproved software.

The NDS rose quickly to prominence amongst homebrew developers for several reasons. One is simply the variety of available hardware capabilities of the device; including a 2D and 3D graphics processor, one touch sensitive LCD and another standard LCD. In addition to its touch sensitive screen and standard set of console control buttons, a microphone is also available. Further, the NDS features built-in Wi-Fi for connectivity and virtual surround sound speakers. However, at the same time, its relatively limited amount of internal memory presents a compelling challenge to developers.

The majority of homebrew development focuses on the low level capabilities of the device. Homebrew developers do not have access to the significant number of proprietary software development libraries and utilities that have been developed by Nintendo, which are distributed with the development hardware.

Pirate Cultural Production

For the most part, homebrew game development remains out of the frame of reference for both players of videogames and analysts of videogames or the videogame industry. However, in December of 2008, *Bob's Game* created by Robert Pelloni emerged into the game industry's field of view (Ng, 2008). Pelloni had developed *Bob's Game* using the NDS homebrew tool chain. Pelloni had released YouTube video footage of his game and a trailer, building buzz around the game. Pelloni had previously attempted to establish contact with Nintendo's licensing division, *WarioWorld*, and their lack of response resulted in Pelloni staging a "100 day protest." While his protest ended after 51 days, with none of Pelloni's demands being met, he continued to garner attention from game industry news outlets.

In February of 2009, Pelloni's request was officially rejected by Nintendo's licensing division. While Nintendo's official reasons for denying licensing to Pelloni fall well within their established, and largely undocumented, guidelines, the entire process created newfound awareness amongst gamers of the kind of structures that inhibit broader participation in the videogame industry. Homebrew games, like their more acceptable and mainstream "indie game" counterparts, often push the content envelope further. These games offer gameplay, narratives and imagery outside what is typically seen in the industry. While indie games are often perceived of as innovative, artistic, and pushing the game industry in new directions (Martin and Deuze, 2009), homebrew development does not benefit from this perception.

Ultimately, it is the potential for productive capabilities, or "pirate cultural production," that protects these communities from corporations. While the shift from hardware to software as a means of enforcing copyright protection has been a popular one amongst device manufacturers, it may ultimately be the thing that disables their ability to pursue and incarcerate those that assist others in circumventing those mechanisms. Despite this, most game console manufacturers will still refer to jailbreaking activities as hacking or piracy, despite the clear disconnect.

As has been noted by other scholars, scrutiny of video game culture and cultural production in videogames can provide a productive lens through which to critically examine cultural communities in and around videogames (Shaw, 2009; Shaw, 2010). Taking seriously the videogame production practice within that context is important as well. Especially at the fringes of game development, cultural production becomes more interesting. It is at these borderlands that the greatest sense of

friction occurs, for it is where the coercion and consent of hegemonic process (Gramsci, 1975) are the mostly strongly perceived and experienced.

Perhaps hackers and homebrewers will prove to be speedbumps as cultural practices entangled with technology becomes increasingly legislated and policed (Taylor, 2005). That isn't to say that this space is morally righteous in their activities (Nissenbaum, 2004; Thomas, 2005). Yet, it is the fact that activities in these spaces are ambiguous is what makes them important to understand as complex and not simply legal or illegal.

The homebrew community is not disconnected or secondary to the indie game movement. It is ancillary. Homebrew communities break open new technologies in ways that enable broader participation and use of those devices-. While indie game development has managed to largely hold the world of pirates, emulation, and homebrew at arms length, they remain ideologically linked. Each community is interested in pirate cultural production. Each looks to make use of modern computing technologies in ways to make personal statements and put exciting technologies to new and innovative uses.

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