

As independent as possible or as necessary? The different contexts of being a German indie game developer

Jeffrey Wimmer, Antonia Wurm & Tomas Novy

Jeffrey Wimmer (Corresponding Author)

University of Augsburg Universitätsstr. 10

86135 Augsburg

0049 821 598-5576

jeffrey.wimmer@phil.uni-augsburg.de

Keywords

Game development, German indie games, professional identity, qualitative research, sphere model,

ABSTRACT

We're living in an era, where the budget and developer team behind a video game even outnumber Hollywood productions at times. However, video games with tight resources and small developer teams, so-called indie games, were often celebrated for outstanding storytelling or innovative game-design in recent years. Keogh describes the world of indie games as “game making between self-exploitation and self-emancipation” (2021: 29) referring to indie games as an opportunity to develop new ideas apart from AAA standards. On the other hand, this self-emancipation usually comes with the risk of creative and physical exploitation to fulfill a certain vision. Indie games have been extensively researched in the past in regards of their design, inclusivity and development process (Kerr 2020, King et al. 2021). To this day there's no clear definition of independent game development, which can be contributed to the fact that “indie games often involve hybridizations and ambiguities between the alternative and the mainstream” (Pérez-Latorre2016: 15). Hence, the focus lays on a contextual use of the term indie games, which emphasizes the importance of a differentiated framework. Garda and Grabarczyk for example tried to conceptualize this ambiguity by distinguishing between financial, creative and publishing independence (2016). Nevertheless, there's still a lack of research with a multi-layered approach on indie game developers and their introspective view on their work in Germany. For this paper we decided to not only define the meaning of being an indie game developer through the examination of professional identity or game design, but rather to differentiate between different contexts that were perceived as influential for

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

indie game development. Our research questions were how indie game developers defined their work, in what ways these definitions were shaped by external circumstances and how these contexts might be systematically differentiated. To answer these questions, we relied on a multi layered model by Esser (1998), which was originally used to contextualize influential factors that shaped the national and cultural identity of journalists in Germany. Each layer represents an action- and identity-shaping context. With a so-called “subject sphere” (Esser 1998: 458) as the center of the model, Esser emphasizes the importance of individual intentions and processes of socialization, which are ultimately shaped by external circumstance like the structures of a media system and historical backgrounds. Similar to journalists, the creative vision of a game developer (as the core of the model) is shaped by the external environment, which gave us the chance to research its influence on personal motivations and vice versa.

During the empirical field phase of the study eighteen interviews were conducted with German indie game developers. To gather data that promises the most extensive insights into the research-subject, a theoretical sample was chosen. The professionalization of the participants ranged from developer teams on the brink to Double A standards to non-profit one-person developers. The interviews were conducted via zoom or phone, later transcribed and coded using the logic of Grounded Theory (Strauss 1987). The results show that many indie game developers perceive the emotional involvement as a key for their motivation to work in indie game development. This emotional involvement is attributed to the possibility to shape a game according to a personal vision, independently from current AAA trends. However, indie games aren't perceived as opponents to triple A gaming companies, but rather to be a driving force for the mainstream. Most interviewees hesitate to set on a specific definition of indie gaming, as they saw the intangible character of the genre as one of their greatest strengths; as one of our interviewees summarizes “If indie games are one thing, it's diversity”. When asked about working processes, the flat hierarchy within teams is emphasized as well as participative structures that give everyone the opportunity to bring in feedback. The current popularity of indie games is perceived as a blessing and a challenge simultaneously. Interviewees commend the increasingly lower barriers to start game making, but also mention the hurdles to gain attention by the playing audience. Also, the economic and financial aspects is described as a crucial context for indie game development, influencing all stages of production.

To illustrate these findings, the model (see figure 1) distinguishes between three layers of game development, of media structures, and of economics. The subject sphere, which represents normative values, intentions and professional identity is located as a core in the center of the model. The sphere of game development encompasses all aspects related to specific working conditions but also creative processes of game making. The sphere of media structure represents the superior structural contexts of indie gaming. The economic sphere was chosen as the outermost sphere, because of the crucial status of material resources.

Our layered model shows the tension between fulfilling a certain creative vision at the core sphere and the economic sphere as outmost layer. The order of the layers represents the perceived degree of influence and manageability in the everyday world of our interviewees, meaning their workplace and their personal values are felt more immediate and controllable compared to economics and trends on the video game market. Most developers are working in a constant negotiation process of how to stay true to their ideas but remain financially viable.

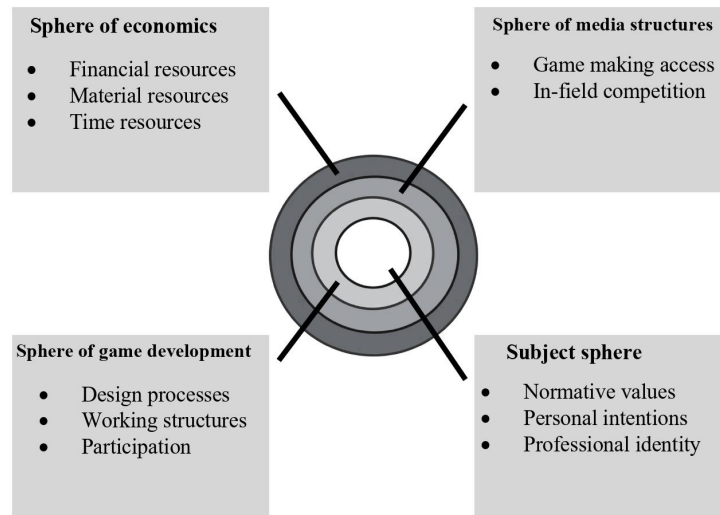


Figure 1: Spheres of indie game development

However, this negotiation process was also perceived as an important driver for their creative outcome. So far, the model depicts specific dimensions that led to these statements, though it lacks a representation of contextual factors “outside the bubble” like gender-, race- and class-based inequities within indie game development (de Peuter & Young 2019: 4, Harvey & Fisher 2014). Therefore an expansion of the model for further analysis is necessary, which could also offer further insight into comparisons between different national cultures of indie game development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- de Peuter, G., & C. J. Young. (2019). Contested Formations of Digital Game Labor. *Television & New Media*, 20 (8), 747-755. DOI: 10.1177/1527476419851089
- Esser, F. 1998. *Die Kräfte hinter den Schlagzeilen. Englischer und deutscher Journalismus im Vergleich* [The Powers Behind the Headlines: British and German Journalism Compared]. Freiburg, Deutschland: Alber Verlag.
- Garda, M. B., & Grabarczyk, P. 2016. Is Every Indie Game Independent? Towards the concept of Independent Game. *Game Studies*, 16 (1), 1-26.
- Harvey, A., & Fisher, S. (2015). “Everyone Can Make Games!”: The Post-Feminist Context of Women in Digital Game Production. *Feminist Media Studies*, 15 (4), 576-592.
- Keogh, B. (2021). Hobbyist Game Making between Self-Exploitation and Self-Emancipation. In O. Sotamaa, J. Svelch (eds.), *Game Production Studies*, 29-46. Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press.
- Kerr, A. (2020). Decoding and Recoding Game Jams and Independent Game Making Spaces for Inclusion”. In P. Ruffino (ed.), *Independent Videogames: Cultures, Networks, Techniques and Politics*, 29-42. London, GB: Routledge.
- King, M., Marsh, T., & Akcay, Z. (2021). A Review of Indie Games for Serious Mental Health Game Design. In *Serious Games: Joint International Conference, JCSG 2021, Virtual Event, January 12–13, 2022, Proceedings 7*, 138-152. Springer International Publishing.
- Pérez Latorre, Ó. 2016. Indie or Mainstream? Tensions and Nuances between the Alternative and the Mainstream in Indie Games. *Anàlisi. Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura*, 54, 15-30.

Strauss, Anselm L. 1987. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.