

# Digital Games and the Category of Auteur: A Re-Evaluation and Perspectives

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Digital games are mainly collective works (Schreier 2017). Still, there have been attempts at applying the ‘auteur’ theory, borrowed from art and film studies, to digital games (Aarseth 2004; Demirbas 2008; Staszenko 2015). Admittedly, the ‘auteur’ theory, tracing the personal interference in multiple (audio)visual works, was criticized for its conservative or even far-right roots (Grosoli 2014), as well as for legitimizing the toxic industrial culture and abuse of minor employees for the sake of making art (Oliva 2021, 144–45). Film theory, focused on the fetishistic treatment of directors instead of screenwriters (Sarris 1962/2004; Kael 1971), also influenced the understanding of digital games auteurism; directors were replaced by great design personalities like Peter Molyneux, Sid Meier, and Will Wright, regardless of their actual involvement in the production process. The usual discourse around their games produces ‘auteurs’ from the ‘upper-middle-class, white, male, straight, able-bodied, cisgender, Western’ communities (Oliva 2021, 145).

This speech aims to challenge the traditional understanding of the ludic ‘auteur’ theory without dismantling it entirely. The paper’s author defines an ‘auteur’ contextually:

1. The ‘auteur’ category could be applied both to individual game creators and small groups of constantly cooperating persons (like Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn’s *Tale of Tales*).
2. The ‘auteur’ category could encompass developers who occupied diverse posts (designers, programmers, directors) during game development if their output is relatively coherent in design, graphic style, or implied message. This distinction postulates resigning from searching for only one author of a particular work and reducing ‘auteurism’ to one unbridgeable post.
3. An authorial signature, or placing the authors themselves in their works (Bordwell 2007, 211), could be another factor that underlines their attachment to co-created work.

As a case study that would indicate the perspectives of the ‘auteur’ theory, the output of Meg Jayanth was chosen. Jayanth, as an Indian-British female coming outside the European cultural circle, escapes the traditional understanding of the game ‘auteurs’. Besides her purely authorial yet still unfinished post-colonial text game *Samsara* (Failbetter Games, 2010), Jayanth commissioned scripts for various works directed by

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other persons, e.g. *80 Days* (Inkle Ltd., 2014), *Sunless Sea* (Failbetter Games, 2015), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), *Sunless Skies* (Failbetter Games, 2019), *Falcon Age* (Outerloop Games, 2019), and *Sable* (Raw Fury, 2021). Nonetheless, Jayanth's output can be distinguished due to her attempts to criticize patriarchal values (*Horizon Zero Dawn*) and Western colonialism (*80 Days*, *Sunless Skies*), as well as to embrace the nomadic lifestyle (*Sunless Sea*, *Sable*). Furthermore, some games co-written by Jayanth implement the social-constructionist re-writing of colonial history to incorporate more fictional characters of diverse skin colours, nationality, and gender (*80 Days*, *Falcon Age*). Jayanth also put her avatars – authorial signatures – in some co-created games (*80 Days*, *Sunless Skies*). Therefore, although Jayanth was by no means the main author of the games mentioned here, her output is consistent in motives and creative workshop and allows us to consider her an 'auteur' (or 'autrice').

The research results allow for using the 'auteur' theory for the broader circle of developers than game journalists have promoted. While the 'auteur' theory's foundations may sound problematic, the category itself can be re-taken to signify the presence of underprivileged developers.

## KEYWORDS

auteur theory, digital games, game design, Meg Jayanth, game developers

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