What is it like to be a Danish Game Maker? What the Game Industry in Denmark tells us about Game Production

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ABSTRACT

This presentation provides the first production studies account of Danish game makers, an overlooked but significant regional part of the Western game industries. We focus on three issues: The history of the Danish games industry show that the often-invoked demoscene does not explain the relative success of Nordic game industries; that Danish game makers consider aesthetic independence - creating new kinds of games - more important than being financially independent or making games as cultural statements; and finally, that Danish game developers are ambivalent about growth, often emphasizing merely paying the rent or the importance of a good workplace. The presentation thus provides a key understanding of an under-researched region with emphasis on its history, its cultural status as product and culture, and the self-identification of game makers with broader implications for research on game production studies on 'indies', and commercial game makers.

Keywords

Production studies, regional game studies, Denmark, Danish games industry, business studies, indie games, Nordic games, demoscene, indie

INTRODUCTION

Despite being larger than the Norwegian games industry and producing commercial and critical successes such as *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010), *Subway Surfers* (SYBO & Kiloo, 2012), and the *Hitman* series (IO Interactive, 2000), as well as being the origin of the Unity game engine (Unity Technologies, 2005), the Danish games industry has been neglected in game studies, even in research on Nordic game industries (Jørgensen, Sandqvist, and Sotamaa 2017; Sotamaa, Jørgensen, and Sandqvist 2020). The only major academic study is Sokol's analysis of state intervention in the Danish industry (Sokol 2021). Building on a survey and interview study of Danish game developers (N=42), this paper fills this gap by contrasting its history and economic size to its regional neighbors and identifying the key priorities and self-understandings of its game makers. In this way, this research follows the call for production studies

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(Sotamaa and Švelch 2021) and regional game studies (Liboriussen and Martin 2016; Švelch, 2018), by correcting established narratives about the origins of Nordic game industries, while studying how game companies negotiate what it means to make games along aesthetic, cultural, and financial vectors. The Nordic countries form up a productive object of analysis for production studies in games, due to their Nordic welfare state model of job security, healthcare, childcare, and public funding initiatives, which differ from conventional objects of production study analysis, such as the UK, Canada, and USA.

ECONOMIC AND HISTORICAL CONTRASTS

Country	**Norway**	**Denmark**	**Finland**	**Sweden**
2020 game industry turnover	€45 million	€424 million	€2.4 billion	€3.3 billion
Population	5.5 million	6 million	5.5 million	10.5 million

Table 1: Game industry turnovers in the Nordic Countries[1]

Given the cultural, economic, and political similarities between the Nordic countries, table 1 shows the surprising difference in scale between the game industries of each country. Accounting for population size, the Danish industry is ten times larger than the Norwegian, and the Finnish and Swedish industries are yet five times larger than the Danish industry. What can account for this difference? The 1980s and 1990s *demoscene*, a subculture centered on creating technical audiovisual programs for home computers, is often invoked as a central reason for the relative success of Swedish and Finnish industries (Lankoski and Dymek 2023; Tyni & Sotamaa, 2014). While this often-repeated explanation of Swedish and Finnish success can sound like a plausible origin story, databases of demoscene releases[2] show that Denmark was the per capita most active country on the Commodore 64, whereas Norway was the per-capita most active demoscene country on the Commodore Amiga. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the most active demoscene countries - Norway and Denmark - have the smallest game industries. We see no simple alternative explanation, but it is important to go beyond single-cause origin stories. Additionally, it is important to further investigate the differences in structural policy characteristics between the countries in terms of how national funding incentives for tech research, entrepreneurship, or cultural development contribute to some of these differences (Sotamaa, 2021).

[1] Data gathered from Norsk Filminstitutt & Virke Produsentforeningen (2022) and Producentforeningen (2022).

[2] https://csdb.dk/ for Commodore 64 demos and http://janeway.exotica.org.uk/ for the Commodore Amiga.

STRADDLING AESTHETIC AND CULTURAL INDEPENDENCY AND FINANCIAL DEPENDENCY

Through existing game development networks, we recruited the heads of forty-two both closed and active studios in Denmark, conducting qualitative interviews using a fixed list of questions about each company's self-understanding, structure, and history. Studio heads were interviewed because we were interested in the early history, strategies, and organization of companies. Most in the study described themselves as either "indie" (understood to signal an alternative to a larger industry) or "entrepreneurs" (emphasizing commercial growth). We asked them about their views on independence and analyzed the responses using Juul's (2019) three kinds of independence, *financial* (not beholden to large corporations), *aesthetic* (making new kinds of games), and *cultural* (making cultural or political points). Most described an interest in *aesthetic independence* (making new kinds of games), and less so in being *financially independent* of publishers or investors. These findings holds wider implications for the 'indie' label in an international context: Contrary to existing work on Canada and Australia that analyzed "indie" games as a change from larger productions (Whitson, Simon, and Parker 2018; Keogh 2021), the Danish industry has always consisted of mostly smaller companies, and the "indie" movement thus did not mark a shift in scale, but rather presented a new and positive framing, emphasizing the value and cultural respectability of small- and mid-sized game developers. Furthermore, the study shows an increasing recognition among Danish developers of financial stability as a prerequisite for creativity, which merges the concept of "indie" game development with monetary considerations. Yet, among the interviewed developers, there was widespread skepticism towards the common "freemium" business model of mobile games, a skepticism which undercuts the desire for financial stability.

Similarly, when asked about growth plans, a minority of our respondents wanted to keep their companies small, focusing instead on paying the rent. An equal number of companies described growth as a goal as did companies interested in providing sustainable and good working conditions as main ambition. This modest approach to commercial game making reflects - and possibly leads to - the limited success of the Danish games industry compared to its Nordic counterparts in Sweden and Finland.

In sum, our presentation provides the first account of the under-researched topic of Danish game industry production, facilitating additional considerations on the conditions under which Nordic game industries came to be: First, the historical existence of a demoscene and population sizes are not explanatory factors for why certain Nordic game industries are economically and culturally successful now. Second, many respondents attributed the relative lack of success for the Danish games industry to a lack of investors, a neglectful cultural-political strategy by rotating governments, and poor business professionalization of game makers. Third, our research highlights how Danish game makers prioritize factors of aesthetic independence over cultural and financial independence, where especially matters of economy become central discussion points for an investment-starved Danish industry. This shows that the term 'indie' takes on different meanings depending on the game development context.

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