Indie Game Studies Year Eleven

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ABSTRACT
As independent or "indie" games become more visible and prominent in the digital game industry and in gaming culture, the idea of independence becomes increasingly difficult to pin down. This short paper provides a starting point for scholars interested in studying indie games. Beginning with a mission statement that addresses some of the challenges and opportunities of indie game studies, the paper surveys eleven years of research on the history, theory, political economy, and socio-cultural aspects of indie games and highlights tensions or gaps. The paper concludes by identifying productive avenues for future inquiry, arguing that indie games should be more fully integrated into game studies as a field.

Keywords
indie games, independent games, amateur games, alternative games, game studies

INTRODUCTION: A MISSION STATEMENT
On January 1st, 2013 Loading... Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association *published a special issue,* Indie, Eh?*, collecting articles and essays on the topic of indie games and gaming. Editor Bart Simon frames the special issue as an overture to more sustained academic engagement with indie games (2013, 1). This is intended to be a response and rejoinder to Simon's call, and as a companion to the indie game studies workshop held at DiGRA 2013.*

Although it is a relatively new concept in the history of digital games, "indie" is now a ubiquitous designator for certain kinds of digital games and developers, alongside equally ambiguous buzzwords like "AAA," "hardcore," and "casual". Game studies has been slow to address this emergent and shifting entity, but in recent years there has been a surge of academic interest. How did indie come to be positioned this way? Where did indie games come from? As in other forms of independent cultural production, the categorization is not clear-cut ("independent" movies, for example, run the gamut from multi-million-dollar blockbusters to avant-garde experiments). Indie games is not a fixed or stable idea, and means different things depending on where you are and how it is deployed: "Are we talking about a social movement, an art movement, a cultural scene, a fad, an ethics, a value orientation, a social identity, an assertion of authority, a cultural politics, an accident, a new form of capitalism...?" (Simon 2013, 1). Accordingly, academic studies of indie games address a wide range of questions and problems on different scales, and in different ways from diverse critical perspectives, but share an emphasis on the importance of provenance and context in their discussions and findings (Simon 2013, 3).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies.

The discourses and practices of indie games are changing rapidly and getting away from scholars and keeping up with these indie communities requires a concentrated, collaborative research effort (Simon 2013, 6). In addition, there are numerous pitfalls to avoid in this process, such as resisting the inclination to reduce "indie" to small-scale commercial development. Indie games of this kind are habitually identified as a driving force of innovation and creativity in the medium, a kind of farm team for the majors out of which the most talented (white, male, straight) designers are "discovered," their hard work and innovation rewarded with fame and fortune (although this may involve a Faustian bargain with The Industry). This notion of indie games has been reinforced and reproduced by critics and the popular press, and in works like *Indie Game: The Movie* (2011).

The mainstreaming of a particular, narrow vision of indie games demands more in-depth analyses that highlight the complexities of indie gaming — non-commercial, not-for-profit, activist, and amateur games, for example, are all written out of this narrative. This tension over the right to define what "counts" as an indie game has manifested in a kind of localized culture war. Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012b), for example, locates true independence in highly personal, amateur game design that is modeled on print zines and independent comics. Similarly, the recent controversy regarding the formal status of the new wave of "zinester" games as "games" (in particular small, personal games produced by women, queer and trans* people, often using accessible software like Game Maker, Stencyl, and Twine) demonstrates the instability of this dominant conception of indie, not to mention the contours of its ideology (see Ligman 2013 for a summary of this debate).

Rather than homogenizing these competing discourses and practices, they must be situated in relation to one another. By the same token, game scholars should avoid mythologizing oppositional relationships between various forms of indie game development and the hegemonic, mainstream industry — the mainstream itself is not a fixed or singular entity, and there is a much more complicated and entangled range of relationships between indie and industry than the popular discourse might suggest. Indie game developer and critic Paolo Pedercini, AKA Molleindustria (2012) conceptualizes indie as "not a status but a tension and a direction to pursue" in relation to the status quo, and it is in this spirit that indie game studies might proceed. Only by attending to the specifics of production, distribution, and reception can game studies begin to tease out the complexity of indie gaming in its contexts. To paraphrase philosopher of art Nelson Goodman (1977), the question for indie game studies is not "what are indie games?" but "when (and where) are indie games?" As such, this paper deliberately does not attempt to define or delineate the boundaries of indie games, and instead "follows the actors" (Latour 2005, 12) who make use of the concept in order to present the broadest possible account.

SURVEY OF INDIE GAME STUDIES

The remainder of this short paper provides a brief survey of existing academic work in English on indie games. Much of this work is from the last year, but as the cheeky title of this paper suggests, indie game studies is now in its second decade. As early as 2002, Eric Zimmerman was writing about "the unsolved problem of independent games," and critically evaluating the challenges and opportunities of independent and alternative game production (129). Outside of the academy, there is a thriving discourse on indie games and the politics of independence, in the form of reviews, criticism, designer statements, postmortems, manifestos, and so on, but in the interest of mapping out how the concept

of "indie games" has been mobilized in game studies specifically, the present survey is limited to published scholarly writing. Although several indie games have received extensive attention in game studies (such as *Passage* [Jason Rohrer 2007], *Minecraft* [Mojang 2011], and *Journey* [Thatgamecompany 2012]), to keep the focus on the broader concepts of indie and independent cultural production, close readings and textual analyses of specific indie games have also been omitted.

Four broad tendencies can be identified in indie game studies so far: 1) theoretical accounts of indie games and attempts to conceptualize independence; 2) historical research on independent games and their development; 3) the political economy of indie games; and 4) studies of indie games in their socio-cultural contexts. Theory, history, politics, society, and culture are, of course, closely interrelated, and not clear-cut categories — virtually all the research cited here examines all four aspects. Nevertheless, the particular questions, disciplinary frameworks, and research methodologies employed by different scholars emphasize certain aspects over others.

History

The current popular conception of indie games has only gained widespread recognition in the last ten years, in the wake of the exponential economic growth of the mainstream game industry through the 1990s and 2000s, and with the rise of digital distribution. In the early days of digital games, all games were independent, in the sense that there was no established industry or economic framework to be dependent on, and much game development took place in relative isolation. However, over time, as digital games become commercially viable, and an identifiable mainstream industry emerges, it becomes possible to situate different forms of gaming as dominant and others as marginal. Before there were "indie games," independent or alternative game development went by other names: amateur, enthusiast, hobbyist, fan, shareware, demoware, freeware, and so on. In some cases, the games produced in these contexts were for-profit, but in many cases they were not. This history is the least developed area of indie game studies.

Many of these historical communities of practice were geographically localized (especially when limited by language) and organized around specific game-making tools, programming languages, or genres. Ito's (2007) study of amateur game development in Japan focuses on one such community, which arose in the early 2000s around the program *RPG Tkool*, and emphasizes the important links between game content and context. Swalwell (2007; 2008) has done extensive historical research on early amateur and independent game production and reception in Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s, and on the contemporary framing of this period. Della Rocca (2013) and Lessard (2013) both examine the early history of independent game development in Québec. Della Rocca aims to rewrite the "official" historical narrative that credits the arrival of large multinational game corporations (specifically Ubisoft) with establishing Montréal as a hub for game development. On the contrary, he argues that there was a "robust ecosystem" of small commercial studios, which likely drew Ubisoft's attention to the city in the first place. Lessard maintains a database of early Québécois indie games, culled from BBSs in the late 1990s, in which he identifies important precedents for more recent developments in indie games, in terms of economics, aesthetics, and ethos.

Theory

Definitions, or the impossibility thereof, are a seemingly inescapable part of any discussion of independent cultural production. In general, however, game scholars, have steered away from imposing rigid definitions of indie games, and instead have addressed

broader questions. How should indie games be conceptualized? What does it mean to be independent in contemporary gaming culture? Wilson (2005) offers an entry point, tracing the historical trajectories of indie game development, and mapping a diverse variety of positions that indie games occupy in relation to the mainstream. Similarly, Martin and Deuze (2009) examine the range of different uses of the term "indie game" in relation the organization of media industries in the era of convergence. Ultimately they argue that, unlike in some other cultural fields, independence in games is about marketing, style, and appeals to authenticity, rather than the actual status of indie games in relation to the mainstream.

Lipkin (2013) expands on Martin and Deuze's observations, arguing that an "indie style" emerges from the particular political and economic conditions of mid-2000s. With its markers of difference established (pixelated aesthetics, novel gameplay mechanics, etc.), this style has been easily coopted and commercialized into a highly marketable genre for the game industry, in a trajectory analogous to American independent film-making in the 1990s, in the wake of Sundance and Miramax. In the same spirit, McCrea (2012) charts the increasing separation between amateur game development and indie games. He demonstrates that wildly successful indie games like *Minecraft* and others represent a commercialization of not-for-profit amateur indie games like *Infiniminer* (Zachtronics 2009) and *Dwarf Fortress* (Bay 12 Games 2006), cult favourites within the indie game design communities from which *Minecraft* emerged, which established its necessary preconditions.

Westecott (2013) similarly teases out the tensions between different conceptions of indie, and suggests applying a more holistic conceptual model — that of craft — as a productive feminist/communitarian intervention, and a way out of narratives of cooption and commercialization. Likewise, Ruffino (2013) is somewhat skeptical of emancipatory narratives that pervade popular and critical discourse on indie games and frame independence around creative freedom and (r)evolution or innovation in game development. In particular, both Westecott and Ruffino trouble this emphasis on the *individual* as the locus of independence, pointing instead to the networks of cooperation (and, indeed, dependence) that support and sustain indie game development as an area of analysis and intervention. Wilson's (2011) discussion of the trend towards hybrid physical/digital indie games that use "broken" rule systems to encourage emergent social interaction shows that indie game development takes place in a tradition and a community of practice. Joseph (2013) and Parker (2013) develop this point, drawing on assemblage theory and the sociology of art to conceptualize indie game authorship, production, distribution, and reception as historically specific and contingent configurations of diverse human and non-human actors, as well as material and discursive processes.

Political economy

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that "independent" is often used to describe a particular orientation towards the culture industries, a significant thread in indie game studies has been the critical political economy of independent game production, focusing on the conditions of production and distribution, and the movement of capital and commodities. Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter's Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games (2009) is an influential text in this area While the authors are cautiously optimistic about the possibilities for independent and alternative gaming they frame indie development as precarious and all-to-easily absorbed into the hegemonic capitalist structure of the mainstream games industry. This sentiment is found also in Pedericini (2012), who

argues that "indie" should be always shifting in relation to the "matrix of capital," engaging in "constant tactical engagement with the status quo." Martin and Deuze (2009) and Jahn-Sudmann (2008) suggest that unlike some other kinds of indie cultural production the current dominant conception of indie games fits very neatly within established economic structures, occupying a place alongside rather than in opposition to other commercial titles. McCrea (2013) points to the key role domestic indie development has played in the restructuring and revitalization of the Australian game industry after its near-total collapse, another example of the less-than-antagonistic relationship between indie games and the mainstream industry. Joseph's (2011) assemblage approach is also grounded in political economic methods, and focuses on Toronto's burgeoning indie scene, and the complex of material and symbolic factors that enable it, including technology, cultural policy, and urban geography.

Labour is another area of indie games that has received some scholarly attention. Whitson (2013) outlines the the decline of console development, and what this means for independent commercial developers, whose labour is seen as a small and replaceable component in the larger industry (as evidenced by the romanticizing of "crunch" as a form of suffering for one's art). Lipkin (2013), like Whitson, discusses the problematic erasure of production context and labour that comes along with the commodification of indie games as a market category, but both remain optimistic, pointing to alternative distribution networks and funding models (such as Kickstarter) that may allow indie developers to escape the dominance of big publishers. Whitson is quick to point out, however, that this does not necessarily result in economic stability for developers. Guevara-Villalobos (2011) argues that this precarity is an important impetus for the establishment of "communities of production" around indie game development, providing tools and support of various kinds to participants. Immaterial labour is also an area of concern: Latowska (2012) praises *Minecraft* for encouraging player creativity but critiques restrictive intellectual property legislation, while Harvey and Fisher (2013) work towards conceptualizing feminized, affective labour in indie gaming communities, and its framing by different interests, actors and stake-holders in context of game entrepreneurship.

Socio-cultural

Guevara-Villalobos' (2011) emphasis on the communities of developers, players, and other participants that arise (often out of necessity) around indie game development is shared by numerous other scholars. Ito (2007) demonstrates the importance of specific tools and modes of production as points of convergence for these communities, although as Joseph (2013) and Fisher and Harvey (2013) demonstrate in their work on the Toronto scene, newer indie game communities reflect a more ecumenical approach that embraces a wider range of game development tools and languages. The local scenes in major cities like Toronto and Boston (Merenkov 2012) are also emblematic in that they involves a great deal of face-to-face social interaction at game jams, festivals, showcases, and other events run by community organizations such as Toronto's Hand-Eye Society and The Boston Indies. This reconfiguration of indie gaming beyond decentralized, online, international communities made of up of relatively isolated individual participants to include geographically localized (but still highly networked) scenes is a significant development for indie game studies (although, as noted above, there are historical precedents).

This proliferation of local organizing brings with it attention to the social dynamics and internal politics of these communities, from both community participants and critics. On

the tail of 2012, of a banner year for visible sexism and misogyny in gaming culture and the industry (Consalvo 2013), Fisher and Harvey (2013), echoed by Westecott (2013), demonstrate that indie communities are by no means free from prejudice and oppression along gendered lines. Charting the challenges and opportunities of game design "incubators" aimed at bringing more women-identified people into Toronto's indie game community and challenging the male-dominated status quo, Fisher and Harvey demonstrate that the deeply-ingrained structural violence of patriarchy is both insidious and resilient, but nevertheless they offer productive suggestions for feminist interventions. Westecott, as noted above, returns to the traditionally feminine concept of craft-work in order to stitch together a more collaborative and inclusive vision of indie game development.

As this research on gender politics suggests, alternative movements or communities (of any kind) are always bound up in the production of social distinction, group identity and cultural status for its participants, in relation to one another and to those on the "outside" (Martin and Deuze, 2009). For Stein (2013) and Wilson (2012), local indie game scenes in cities like New York are constituted around performative social play and community engagement, encouraged by sports-inspired competitive games like *Johann Sebastian Joust* [Die Gut Fabrik 2013] and *Hokra* [Ramiro Corbetta 2011]. Jahn-Sudmann (2008) argues that indie gaming constitutes what Gans (1974) calls a "taste public," which distinguishes itself primarily according to indie games' (perceived) design innovation and ability to explore possibilities closed off by the mainstream industry (such as procedural generation). Complementing the mainstream in this way, as noted above, allows some indie games to achieve a high degree of cultural status and to occupy a niche in the market. Parker (2013) expands on this argument, demonstrating the ways in which indie games participate in the digital games' convoluted process of cultural and artistic legitimation, with a focus on independent "artgames" like *Passage*.

Parker also highlights the importance of cultural gatekeepers like game critics and curators, as well as institutions like *Kokoromi*, *The Independent Games Festival*, and *IndieCade* in establishing and sustaining indie game communities by providing material support and canonizing certain games and designers. Joseph (2013) likewise argues that the institutional support provided by government agencies like the Ontario Media Development Corporation plays a definitive economic and expressive role in indie game development. Universities and colleges, and game studies itself, also play a role here. Many of the formative figures in game studies (Janet Murray, Gonzalo Frasca, Jesper Juul, and Ian Bogost, to name a few) have been involved in independent game production in various ways, and scholars continue to intervene and participate in indie game development and community-building (Whitson 2013). Gouglas and Rockwell (2013) provide a useful set of prescriptions for academics and universities hoping to foster these relationships, encouraging flexibility, openness, and realistic expectations (Fisher and Harvey's participant action research is an instructive example of this approach).

AVENUES FOR FUTURE INQUIRY

Thus far, indie game studies has been loosely organized around a particular set of questions and concerns, leaving several areas unexamined, or that require further, more sustained investigation. The feminist research cited here offers a good starting point, but there is a pressing need for more research and interventionist work on the politics of sex, gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability in all their intersectionality, especially as these issues are addressed *within* gaming communities, both in discourse and as subject matter for indie game designers (*Dys4ia* [Anna Anthropy 2012a] and *Cart Life* [Richard

Hofmeier 2011], for example). The recent rise to prominence of a queer indie game "scene" (for an in-depth journalistic account, see Keogh 2013) has already resulted in a wealth of writing, much of it from the designers themselves, which blurs the boundaries between criticism and scholarship (for example, Anthropy 2012b; Allen 2013; porpentine & Kopas 2013;). This discourse provides a framework and entry point, as the "queer renaissance in video games" (Kunzelman 2013) becomes an area of increasing interest for indie game studies – see Friedhoff's platform study of Twine, in this volume (2013).

Another area that has not received extensive attention is indie game consumption and reception — development cultures have been well-documented, but player cultures less so. How do people approach and interpret indie games, and the idea of independence? How are indie games distributed, purchased, and consumed, and how does this relate to game consumption habits more generally? These questions are of particular interest as indie gaming culture becomes increasingly less distinguishable from gaming culture in general. Closely related to consumption and reception is the role of institutions and organizations in indie gaming networks. Further analysis of indie game criticism, festivals, government funding, local community organizations, and professional associations like the International Game Developers Association will help to shed light on the changing status of indie games. Legal and intellectual property perspectives may also make a contribution to the study of indie games, as controversy around political games like *Phone Story* (Molleindustria 2011, see Brown 2011) and *Pipe Trouble* (Pop Sandbox 2013, see Kaszor 2013) and unsanctioned "cloning" of popular indie games makes headlines (see Priestman 2012).

Game studies also needs a more detailed and global history of independent and amateur development, in its many different forms, before the 2000s. Likewise, there is a need for a more nuanced and detailed genealogy of the current, institutionalized conception of indie games and the various independent and alternative forms that exist outside, on the margins, or in opposition to this conception (amateur games, political "serious games," and interactive fiction, for example). Jenkins' (2006) series of interviews with several important figures in the emerging "independent games movement" is a useful overview of the state and stakes of indie games at that time, but broader structural analyses will help frame future work in the area.

Outside of North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia, further away from the structuring influence of the game industry, "indie" becomes even more ambiguous. One of the stated goals of Aslinger and Huntemann's edited collection *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place* (2013) is to problematize some of the simplistic binaries that prevail in game studies — including indie/major. Aslinger's (2010) research on the Zeebo console, a low-cost, plug-and-play gaming machine launched in Brazil that explicitly targets emerging capitalist economies. In addition to constructing new audiences for games from major publishers, the Zeebo is also intended to spur local indie development, and Aslinger calls on game scholars to become more attuned to the increasingly global economics of gaming. If indie gaming is a global phenomenon, how is independence configured in different national, regional, and local contexts?

More generally, the relationships between indie games and other forms of independent cultural production remain largely unexplored. Indie games inherit the rhetoric and aesthetics of other fields, especially indie comics, indie music, and indie film, but re-purpose and revise the concept of independence in particular ways. Indie game studies can draw upon and engage with a growing range of scholarship from other fields — to

name a few, Newman (2011) in American independent film, Beaty (2007; 2012) on European and American indie and alternative comics, and Hesmondhalgh (1999) and Hibbett (2005) on indie music. These conceptual links become especially important as direct alliances and convergences are established between indie comics, visual art, music, and games at events like New York's *Babycastles* and San Fransisco's *ArtXGame*.

CONCLUSION

The "problem" of indie games invoked by Zimmerman over a decade ago remains unsolved — if anything, the problem has multiplied and gained new facets in the intervening years. As Pedericini (2012) contends, "There's no absolute independence because you'll always be constrained by technological platforms, protocols, hardware or infrastructures. Beyond gaming, you'll be entwined in a web of power, privilege, exploitation, and dependency, as long as the current modes of production persist." It is the task of indie game studies to untangle and reassemble this web in all its complexity, and to situate specific objects and practices within it. This is not a call for a separate sub-field of game studies that deals exclusively with indie games — on the contrary, the present survey demonstrates that indie games are being incorporated into many different kinds of research, in pursuit of a fuller account of games and gaming in all their diversity. Consider this paper a new spawn point for scholars who wish to continue the work of indie game studies. Zimmerman's provocative last sentence remains apt: "if you don't, who will?" (2002).

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