Independent gamework and identity: Problems and subjective nuances

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I suggest to explore industry experiences, ideas and beliefs that motivate game developers to go 'indie' or engage as independent workers in their productive life. Through this analysis, we can observe the politics and cultural features that inform different trajectories and approaches to independent gamework. These subjective configurations become markers that allow us to understand with more detail the contested and varied nature of the independent developers' identity. The identities of independent development are embedded within the economic and cultural structures that harness specific forms to understand and embody their sense of autonomy. Constrained by the demands of their work, developers struggle to make sense or to justify their choices as 'authentically independent', revealing subjective affinities and consent between market, political and artistic ideas.

Keywords
Independent game production, cultural work, cultural industries, gamework, autonomy

INTRODUCTION

The present paper is set to explore the meanings that a diverse group of independent developers inscribe in their work practices, and how they construct their sense of independence through a constant interaction between their work experiences and their belief systems. While doing this I also set out to explore the moral sources that shape their identity as independent developers. Alongside a decade that has witnessed the emergence of small-scale production in the digital games industry, the meaning of 'indie' has become a subject of enquiry within the scholarly literature of the field, expressed in a variety of academic approaches, theoretical angles and emphases (Simon, 2013). This body of research has explored the different dimensions of independent game production, namely its defining features (Bowen & Deuze, 2009), its game aesthetics (Keimpanen, 2009; Juul, 2013), the deceitful ideological currency its process can embody (Lipkin 2013, Ruffino, 2013), alongside cultural and work practices seen within the context of their flexible conditions (Guevara-Villalobos, 2014; Westcott, 2013), and its institutionalisation as an art form (Parker, 2013).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play.

The structure of this paper comprises of three parts. The first section sets up the production of independent games as cultural industry within the global media industry and contemporary capitalism. The second section will explore developers' experiences in game making before their indie ventures. The third section is two-faceted; I will firstly explore the value-laden practices that define their sense of independence, to then move onto exploring the uneasy relationship between art and commerce, and how they inform different work processes. This paper concludes with a reflection about the "indie identity" as dispersed and fragmented sets of contestations within the complex social, technical, economic and political layers entailed within game development. While making partial and individual sense of these issues, they develop patterns that tend to diverge according to their own belief systems.

The information for this paper was collected through a multi-sited ethnographic approach. As I present in table 1, there were a total of 24 developers (22 based in the United Kingdom, 1 in Germany at the time, and 1 from the United States) who participated in this research. I approached them and followed up their cases through interviews, analysis of their participation in 'devblogs' and media presence (Q&A's, interviews, announcements, participation in events). At the same time, between between 2010 and 2012 I explored some of their cultural environments such as developers meet-ups, trade industry conferences, game jams, 'workdays at the pub', formal workplaces, spaces where I engaged with through observation and interviewing techniques. A key portion of the sample came from what is known as the CB2 indies at Cambridge (a self-organised local meet-up), as well as members of studios ascribed at Yorkshire's Game Republic network of developers. Other participants (with exception of three interviewees) were related to these more locally/regionally-bounded groups by business and collaborative history, or as part of the on/off line cultural networks that would interact through game jams and periodical events.

1. AUTONOMY IN THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES.

The concerns of these paper frame digital games and their social performance as a product of market and cultural relations that mediate and set orientations within independent developers' work/play culture. The idea of independence in the study of culture has been informed by the approaches to autonomy in the philosophical and theoretical frameworks developed within the social sciences (Bourdieu, Holt & Lapento, 2010 Banks, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2014).[1] Although complex and varied in the articulation of economic and cultural elements, critical approaches advocate autonomy as a sort of phenomenological social experience that emerge from actors interactions as productive agents, mediated or constricted by existent relations of production they agree to play upon, as well as their cultural-institutional engagements that are shared-by/imposed-on them.

In this regard, work conditions in cultural industries has been long characterised by being flexible and even precarious (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Dyer-Witherford & Peuter; 2009, Lipkin, 2013). As the production of culture becomes globalised, vertically integrated industrial relations experience a "vertical disintegration" (Bilton, 1999), the outsourcing of the risky aspects of media production. In addition, within those who engage with the risk of content production, they follow a trend towards rationalising creative work in order to outsource it to specialised studios.

Furthermore, the incorporation of flexible forms of work (outsourcing/offshoring) has come in parallel with the incorporation of the counter cultural artistic critique of the 1960s to social organisations **(**Boltansky & Chiappelo, 2005; Markoff, 2005; Turner, 2006). As cultural workers in the new economy, independents engage with an industry that combines a strong concentration of intellectual property with high devolution of risk through outsourced work. In the independent game sector, Digital Distribution systems (DD) are some of the social formations embodying the cyber-utopian perspectives that see content creators as "free agents" equally equipped to pursue their own goals. In this context of liberalised work, individual mobilisation and self-motivation becomes the rule (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991) Their flexible condition, as it leaves cultural workers to their own devices, brings forth the thought processes and experiences that inform their reflexiveness towards their work processes and projects. It is in this situation where part-time and freelance job becomes a generalised condition in cultural industries (Wittel, 2001), where speed and risk negate "ethics, community and politics" (MacRobbie, 2002: 523). Nonetheless, this precarious freedom and the dissolution of previous forms of work becomes the condition to bring on their own cultural ethos and forms of sociality in organising their own forms of social work (Banks, 2006).

It is in this context where independent developers strive to find market stability within the confines of their own artistic and economic expectations. As cultural workers, they are not only driven by a sense entrepreneurialism and artistic-driven work (Elmeier, 2003, Ruggill et al., 2004; Banks 2006; 2010), but by their limited knowledge and capital. This suggests seeing gamework as a set of demands inherent within *capitalistic, knowledge* and *aesthetically* driven enterprises in the new economy. In other words, it entails to address the value spheres and social structures behind the production and circulation of game products/assets, knowledge and creative concepts. This focus is useful if we want to bridge the gap between game workers structural position within the process of production and the heteronomic/autonomic tensions that arise in the process of defining the work/play practices within the process of production, promotion, distribution of digital games, and their consequent cultural practices –tensions often related although not reduced to the art-commerce relation. In sum, reflecting on gameworkers from our perspective entails to locate them within the specific contemporary social relations in the New Economy. To see independents as gameworkers entail to see them as compelled to act and reflect upon a universe of limited possibilities, which are provided by the above relationships mediating the production process and the extent of their works' aesthetic reflexivity.

2. THE MATERIAL BARRIERS OF THE RETAL MODEL AND THE "PROMISES" OF DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION.

In this section, I suggest how criticisms that arise from developers' experience of the retail-model industry point towards elements that actually reveal a concrete sociotechnical interaction between the aesthetic conventions and work practices within the industry. As highlighted in the works of Kline et al. (2003), Dyer-Witheford & Peuter (2009), Kerr (2002; 2006), Johns (2006), the vertical integration of the industry has allowed the formation of corporate conglomerates that in many ways have built and directed the ways digital games are produced, promoted and distributed, at the time they exercise strong corporate control over their aesthetic content by betting on well-known mechanics and intellectual property. Furthermore, the process of vertical disintegration, has become ever more common in the industry since the mid-2000s onwards, as sky-

rocketing production costs have led to the global outsourcing not only of creative risks, but also the more technical and rationalised aspects of digital game production. Nonetheless, at the top of these underlying conventions the trend towards the recreation of real-like scenarios or "upgrade culture" stands. This culture follows the motto 'make it real, make it big', as it has been a proven formula for market success (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). The implications of this realism can be varied, being relevant in this context the way it economically fuels a middleware industry that designs game engines and information systems affordable and useful only to organisations with a big, highly specialised and rationalised work force. In other words, the economic, technological and organisational scales that support the aesthetic conventions of the retail sector impede the realisation of small-scale projects.[2] Thus, increasing budgets and their consequent risks has historically developed into practices of intellectual property appropriation by publishers for a chance to develop and release a game project. As one of my interviewees reflected from a practical perspective:

> '…for bigger engines like the Unreal Engine, it is very obviously made for teams of people to work on. You can do stuff by yourself but I mean it is not really easy to shrink that in pipeline and take control of features. You need lots of people… it may be like "I want to add a new monster to my game", ok I would ask the modeller to do a 3-D mesh of the monster, he would pass that 3-D mesh to somebody who was doing textures and normal mapping, and he would pass it to an animator, and then he would pass it to a coder, who will write all the scripts and stuff and pull it in.' (Stephen, Increpere, August 21, 2010)

Nevertheless, the Retail model and its material barriers were not only hinted by interviewees, but the emphasis in their narratives remits to the clash between the 'alleged' perks or promises of the industry and developers professional and creative expectations. Thus, in my interviews, developers indicated situations emphasising the frustrations of big organisations and the excessive compartmentalisation of work practices, rendering "technical" the relation between developers and creative work:

> 'I had quite strong game ideas I wanted to pursue and the games we were working on at Frontier weren't really exciting. I was working on a *Wallace and Grommit* game for a while, and a sort of platform game, and it was the sort of game that I didn't want to work on. So I didn't get on very well at the place.' (Chris, Introversion, August 27, 2010)

> 'I can consider the game in full, and this is actually something almost impossible if you are not entirely independent. If you work with someone, sometimes your input is kind of what you want anyway. Actually you make the decision of having or not having your input.' (Hayden, Starfruit, August 31, 2010)

> 'Creativity was my main reason to leave. Back then, I was just working on racing games and sequels and after a while, you find yourself with the only 'reward' of making the same thing over and over again. Actually, while I was in the company, I wanted to know what would happen if I submitted a whole game idea. I submitted my game idea to the head of designers and basically it didn't even get to the publisher for consideration, because he said they would see it too risky as investment.' (Ben, April 23, 2010)

These quotes indicate that these developers had similar motivations for working in the indie sector. They saw their indie ventures as personal projects or hobbies where to channel the ideas they felt passionate about. The degree of gratification provided by their 'side' projects, together with managerially unsatisfying and sometimes excessive work routines, placed them in a receptive position towards the emergence of new platform

markets. As seen in Ben and Hayden and several other interviewees, they were drawn in by the available access to development tools and encouraged by stories of success in the independent sector.

Furthermore, some micro studios working as third party or outsourcing companies have started a gradual turn towards fully independent game production. Companies such as Four Door Lemon (FDL) and Tuna Technologies started out as technology and art contractors, who also developed ports and licensed products as a third party developer. They transitioned with difficulties towards a hybrid system, combining outsourced work with periods dedicated to game production. They began after considering the possibility of developing games on a smaller scale, given the tools available and the creation of digital distribution channels (DD) for accessing new markets. For independents, the motives behind these willingly transitions are rooted in the possibilities of digital distribution to carry out small scale projects, the creativity-crippling culture amongst publishers, as well as to jump from being another link in the network of game production to actually creating and owning their own intellectual property:

> '…it was about four years ago that we decided we wanted to be more independent. For us that meant moving from the financial support of the big companies, which pays bills, pays wages, but for us it was very frustrating because we couldn't express ourselves, making the kind of games we wanted to make.' (Andrew, Tuna Technologies, February 12, 2011)

> 'For me, obviously, I can run this company or I can work for a large company doing something there, but it just doesn't appeal at all. Instead of that, it just feels right when you see a couple of guys working on their fully owned project. I grew up playing games made by just a couple of people. Somehow, that has influenced my decision to concentrate on developing our own IP (intellectual property), especially now we got digital distribution.' (Simon, FDL, March 3, 2011)

The construction of DD models as spaces for small scale production, did not only allow the venturing of experienced developers in the field, but it actually created a common environment that bridged between hobbyist cybercultures and the diverse production, distribution and publishing actors of the industry. From the diversification of gaming devices, passing to the construction of corporate walled-gardens or DD channels, to the harnessing of the small-scale production as "niche segment" of the middleware and publishing sectors of the industry, it has been sought through the DD model to harness small-scale projects not only as commercially viable products, but as a chance to create and legally own their creative projects. This possibility did not only enabled disgruntled and/or creatively driven ones to explore these new horizons, but it actually found within academic and hobbyist cybercultures the possibility of using their means of cultural production for commercial purposes. Enticed by the possibilities of making a living out of it, many developers harness the cultural resources and practices that then become an expression of their own work/play lifestyles.[3]

With regard to their motivations, these "indie natives" have strong reasons for working as independent developers besides their declared passion for game making. For those without in-depth knowledge about software development and informatics, there is no other way to develop games on their own. This is especially so given the highly specialised labour sought in the games industry. Hence, as Robert says, '[N]o one would employ me [laughs], seriously. I mean I have no […] formal training... The only thing I think they could employ me as is as a sort of tea boy.' (Robert, Bagfull of Wrong, May

18, 2010). In addition, Robert, and other developers such as Charles, David and Ben described themselves as 'going mental' when stuck in an office or being bossed about by other people. This autonomy is perceived as creative and meaningful, given their direct control over the process of development:

> 'I love working for myself and creating games. Being indie lets me make the games I want to make how and when I want to make them. I only work when I am feeling inspired to work on a project and I like being in control of my destiny (as much as one can be anyway).' (David, Hybrid Mind, August 16, 2010)

Although they have not worked within the industry, their affiliation with game communities provides them with first-hand stories about it and this contributes to the construction of an indie identity opposed to the 'mainstream' industry. This indie discourse portrays the larger industry as creatively stifled, over-exploitative, corporate and strongly hierarchised: in sum, an industry that fails to fulfill its own promises of rewarding creative jobs and work as fun, and focuses on strict profit-making instead of making games fun to play. This discourse is deeply rooted within these interviewees, to the extent that it inspires younger developers to try out the independent approach to game making. As stated by Sophie:

> 'I have never worked in the "larger industry" of game development before. It was my intention when going to university to join the "main industry" but the more I worked on my own games and the more I learnt about how things work at games companies I felt I preferred how I was working anyway.' (Sophie, September 16, 2010)

In sum, these biographical experiences are stories that delve more into the conditions that have long been emphasised through different scholarly approaches. These experiences feed off and are thought through the eyes and emotional predispositions often seen in the independent discourse as an extension of individual freedom, flexibility and as pursuing aesthetic interests. As independents, their narratives have found echo in the public cybersphere and cultural events where developers --including the prospective one and/or the student-- are able interact, and hence, legitimise or argue the perspectives through which these stories are mystified. They are regular means through which developers ensure communication and interaction and hence reproduction of ideas and narratives; the concrete experience of industry practitioners, becomes the base for prospective indies to think and organise their worldviews and work routines.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF INDEPENDENCE

What does indie stand for? The problem with the definition depends on the different layers of social experience mediating developers' perception and appropriation of their own autonomy. It is in their processes of differentiation from others and critical/face-valued engagement with their work/life conditions where the notion of independence can set its roots. Within this process individual expressions of autonomy are tailored to the achievement of individualistic flexible lifestyles, economic goals and different forms of aesthetic reflection on their works.

In this section, I aim to sketch out main aspects of developers' sense of independence, as performative principles that can shape not only their work process, but also the aesthetic orientation of their work. It will be followed by the forms they address the notions of art and commerce are framed by them.

a. The spirit of indie labour

Within the accounts of my interviewees, it is possible to identify some uses of their autonomy that defines the scope in which it is framed. Three main interlocked principles give meaning to their work, namely cooperative sociality, freedom and its consequent authorship. Along with other game and software developers, indies describe themselves as passionate about their work, finding the creative dynamics of games and technological systems as fulfilling practices. In contrast to a mechanical job in an office or factory, they perceive their activities as playful (work/play), challenging and entertaining. As such, doing a job that is personally gratifying, in addition to linking that gratification with the creative, playful perception of and challenges posed by both games and the digital medium (as addressed in the previous section), goes some way towards defining indies' passionate behaviour:

> 'if we have enough inspiration to come up with an idea, play with it, [we] actually make some prototype to play with it, we make it, we change it, we make it again, we change it, we make it again, it is amazing' (Andrew, Idem)

> 'Other people are very fascinated with the storytelling prospectus of the medium. Other people like the feel of games; they want to create something that you can interact in a way that feels nice. Some people just make them for fun.' (Terry, Distractionware, August 24, 2010)

> 'I definitely think [being independent] is worth it. The freedom of choice is thrilling to me. Every day is an opportunity for me to make the games I want to play.' (David, Idem)

This commitment to creativity fuels indies' main criticism of the large-scale sector of the games industry, as the aesthetic conventions of the latter rely too much on high fidelity and photorealist visuals, standardised genres, narrative content and themes:

> '…just look at these games normally you find in the market, always the same old FPS and reiterations of old franchises, full of clichés and dumb characters. I mean, you really don't feel engaged by what they present you on an intellectual level…' (Kaworu, Sadmoons, July 31, 2010).

These ideas find correlates in the diverse cultural events organized within the independent game sector. For instance, at the independent development track at the GDC 2010, developers stressed the notion of challenging the aesthetic conventions promoted by the games industry. Of particular importance was the adaptation made by independent Chris DeLeon of a passage from David Thoreau's *Walden*:

> 'We are in great haste to construct a higher fidelity technology; but it may be we have nothing important to communicate that requires higher fidelity… as if the main object were to talk elaborately, and not to talk sensibly. [N]o videogame ever stood the lower in my estimation for having low fidelity graphics, yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety commonly to have fashionable visuals, or at least high definition and 3-D graphics, than to have sound meaning.'

Cooperative sociality arises, as the immediate consequence of developers' identification as independents, in the context of on/off line network relationships. This is an element that exists more generally in the software and games industry, as the hackers' ethic of openness is embedded within the information systems that developers themselves work

with. Nevertheless, indies vindicate this principle, in both its instrumentality and teleology, by forming networks and communities where material assets, labour and knowledge can be shared and support given. These social spaces stand in strong opposition to both the ruling corporate secrecy of the games industry and the traditional use and enforcement of intellectual property rights.

Furthermore, developers' perception of autonomy or freedom informs, to a varied extent, their creative decisions and work style. In essence, this notion of autonomy can be broken down into three basic elements: creative, organisational and economic. The most important aim of indies is located within the creative sphere: an experimental *ethos* where developers realise and materialise their own ideas while devising the technical means to transform them into a playable version, something unlikely to happen were they to work for a first-party or exclusively third-party studio. For the interviewees, this is embodied within their claim about making the games they want to make and play, and the rewarding experience of working and experimenting with their own ideas:

> 'I love working for myself and creating games. Being indie lets me make the games I want to make how and when I want to make them. I only work when I am feeling inspired to work on a project and I like being in control of my destiny (as much as one can be anyway).' (David, Idem)

> 'I have fewer resources than a large company (by far), but more freedom to make unusual or intellectually challenging games. My games are not produced by committee, but are the expression of a single artistic vision.' (Jonas, February 5, 2011)

> 'I really don't think I ever worked that hard on something before, but I was trying to do some sort [of] psychoanalysis simulation. I did a lot of work, coming up with a big database and all these real world demographics of sort of various ways that persons like to get screwed up.' (Stephen, Idem)

Their personal views and game ideas have inspired these developers not only to become independent, but also to criticise the large-scale industry for focusing overly on profits to the extent of applying impersonal creative formulas or 'tweaking' the artistic vision of a project to make it more appealing to mass market.

As they consider themselves to have creative minds, time, place and work logistics are likely to be subject to personal scrutiny or team negotiation. Flexibility to define or switch tasks in a project is likely to happen amongst indies, usually subject to inspiration rather than following the rational and technical division of tasks embodied by the classic scheduling principles of the industry.

> 'I work as an indie developer because it gives me the chance to make the games I want to make. I have no desire to work a 9-to-5 job as a programmer with minimal creative input; besides, I'm a terrible programmer.' (Jonas, Idem)

> 'Question: with Jonas, how are you organising the work?
>
> We are just starting with this, so things might change later. He is basically doing the writing and some of the game programming along with me, and a lot of gameplay ideas, and the art…I'm also focusing quite a lot on the game design part.' (Terry, Idem)

This subjective way of organising work reflects an important feature of indies: they are both artists and entrepreneurs. Some of them expressed the empowering sensation from

either rejecting orders from others or coming up with an object of their own authorship, sometimes even observing the political economic relationship of the worker/employer relationship. As Robert and David tell us about the reasons to work by themselves:

> '… if I were working on Codemasters, if someone tells you "put that wheel at your left", so you cannot say fuck off! You know [being an independent developer], I got no one to answer to at all, but that's something you cannot afford when you are working in the mainstream industry.' (Robert, Idem)

> 'I am not very interested in going back to that type of exploitive relationship (even if the boss is friendly it is still exploitive in principle I believe)… I just feel that a lot of employees make the companies they work for an awful lot of money and the companies never let on how valuable they are or pay them what they should be paid for their time and talent. Employees don't get to reap the rewards as often as the owners of a company.' (David, February 09, 2011)

As we can see, indie developers' accounts of their autonomy can be tightly knitted with artistic and political expressions, while their organisation of work is based on flexibility and individual lifestyle.

Deeply bound to the idea of creative and organisational freedom, the idea of authorship underpins the identity of indie developers. A strong source of satisfaction for independents is their ability to control all the phases of game production - even the non-creative aspects. As we know, the digital games industry fosters multidisciplinary team-based projects, where specialists in art, programming and game design are required for the flow of work. Still, although they are coordinated, these work tasks tend to draw up strong occupational boundaries. Many independent developers prefer to transcend these divisions, as they draw their motivations in the possibilities of the digital game medium to unite their cross-media interests and offer them the creative control needed to script their personal views for a project:

> 'I like having complete control over my projects. I am a bit of a control freak [laughs], I want to do the art, I want to do the music, I want to realise the whole thing from top to bottom.' (Terry, idem)

The notion of authorship is key to understanding the social dynamics of independent developers, as it underpins the dynamics of recognition among colleagues and players, and contributes to the building of the 'audience' that will become potential consumers. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how the early life experiences of some developers in the fields of arts and technology shape their ideas and identification with independent development, as it provides a means to express the different dimensions of their creative vision through the different media enabled by digital games. These experiences show a perception that sciences and arts are more than compatible. Indeed, their separation is considered deceitful:

> Well mainly the frustration I found when I was younger in having to pick between either "being an artist" or "being a scientist" drove me mad. I didn't understand why someone couldn't be interested in both. I decided I just like learning about anything that interests me and it wasn't until the past 2 or 3 years that it finally dawned on me that the only career or passion of mine that could encompass everything I was interested in was actually games.' (David, August 16, 2010)

Indies such as David, Sophie and Terry claimed that they developed a special relationship with technology at a very young age, programming on old computers and making small games for fun. They also conveyed their passion for and knowledge of other media forms, such as music, storytelling and visual arts. In sum, digital games' multi-media features can enable multi-faceted developers to explore the medium through their resourceful artistic skills, resulting in further personal fulfilment. Indeed, this explains why most indie projects tend to be handled by one or two developers; larger teams might dilute their creative vision.

As with the other principles, authorship tends to cause controversies among indies, as those independent studios that are more engaged in more straight forward capitalistic relations pursue more pragmatic and standardised models that tend to reproduce the technical/creative division of labour. Furthermore, a tension between authorship as legal ownership and cooperative sociality offers a point of distance from business-driven independents and aesthetically/socially-driven ones. The latter tend to promote sharing principles, opening their work to others, using alternatives to copyright law to commercialise their projects and appeal to a closer and open relation to their players.[4] These differences lead us to think about the ways developers interpret their position within the market, whether and how they sense of market constraints or not, and how they approach to other independents."

b. Autonomy, art and commerce.

The spirit of independence can be seen in the living principles and set goals independents strive for. They are informed by both an uneven merger between independent movements in other media and a hacker culture common within the technological field. These principles can be harnessed differently in practice, in some cases emphasising the economic rewards of their work, while others seek a more experimental approach to their work, sometimes emphasising a reflexive and critical approach to their creations. Here, the economic pressure experienced by some independents not only reduces the scope of their autonomy but also influences their work organisation and revenue models. It is in the intersection between economic necessity and the freedom present in developers' practices and expectations where independent game development becomes nuanced and controversial.

As it has come to be known, the culture of new capitalism has successfully combined the discourses of bohemia, cyber-utopianism and libertarian entrepreneurialism, drawing a link between capitalism and creativity. These moral sources underpin in some sectors the idea of freedom and flexibility that are actually harnessed by corporate actors (Lipkin, 2013). Among independent developers, these discourses take different forms, many of them overemphasising business ventures, freedom and individual economic wellbeing:

> 'I know we are sort of indie as we are trying to self-fund our projects. But we are not this kind of 'Indie' living in his mother's basement, that's fucking awful. We are actually trying to make business here, we are trying to make money and we just want to make it in our own way.' (Robin, Beatnik Games, July 14, 2010)

> 'For my money, it is the only option :) Creative freedom. Financial freedom. Freedom to try any business opportunity which comes along…. freedom! A lot of "indie" developers are in it for the art. I'm not. If it doesn't make any money then I won't do it, until and

> unless I am in a position where its financial success doesn't matter.' (Lee, Games Faction, April 4, 2011)

For these 'indie entrepreneurs', individual freedom comes with its usual correlate as a business practice; the emphasis is on the excitement of commanding their own enterprise and its economic returns. It also comes down to a realistic approach that sees in a formal to cultural production (studio organisation and responsibilities, deliver fun and entertainment) an indicator of professionalism.

Nonetheless, creative work as an ideological foundation of indie development is not one-dimensional, as some indie entrepreneurs ironically suggest. For developers at FDL and Tuna Technologies, although they share the ideal of pursuing aesthetic goals, they know their companies need to think in market terms, which can be seen in their game catalogues, privileging sports and trivia games as safer projects. They need to work as contractors and incorporate market logic to their projects because the risk of closing down is too high:

> 'we would love to make a game that players love, we are gamers and we want our games to be played, but this is business, and you got to make something that makes money at the end of the day. Like I said, if you are truly independent and you have the money to make your game, and you do something that doesn't sell much, it doesn't really matter. But at the same time, as business, games need to make money, so we need to take decisions based on what would sell more than what we would love to make. It is not a great way of looking at it, but this is business.' (Phil, interview, April 13, 2010)

> 'Differences between Tuna and other indies is that we have been established for a while. We have got commitments about looking after our staff and to make a spin truly indie is a bit tricky for us. We have our own risk we have got to consider. I think that's the difference between being really independent and completely commercial and where Tuna is. We are in a kind of weird place in between both.' (Andrew, idem)

Still, because of their position as independent contractors in the vertically but fragmented game industry, the tasks entailed as capital-less cultural entrepreneurs become the same constraints that could thwart a more experimental approach to games and even the possibilities for game making. The way to tackle the problem of a constant flow of capital has implied severing the work/play development practices that provide subjective meaning to their work. Andrew lamented the way Tuna's managerial work grew as a hybrid studio between 2008-2010. Although in part it was a form to keep alive their star project Cletus Clay[5], a good deal of time was spent in management and looking ahead for suitable contracts and too little in coding and art design. His work would often comprise reach the 10 to up to 15 hours six days per week. However, it is not only a matter of the uneven balance between technical work as specialists and creative work of their projects. It regards also to the balance between play/work or their time for creative exploration and tinkering, and the already limited work/play time, or the more systematic creative work process towards a commercial release. In hindsight, Andrew reflects about it,

> "I mean, I would be nice if one of our games makes it so well that we would become completely self-sufficient, I mean […] you just use the money to experiment new things and you don't have to worry about paying bills or messing up your ideas, or trying something so risky that… you know."

Thus, participants from studios would prefer a straighforward approach to the initial creative stages, avoiding time in conceptual game design and exploration. At the same

time, they use their "indie" and local status to market their specialised services to more successful independent studios or good ideas but lacking technical expertise. FDL harnessed its reputation to develop ports and new content on Hello Games' market hit *Joe Danger*, as Tuna Technologies managed to stay in the market after partnering up in re-edition of Omni Labs' indie hit *Eufloria HD.* At the end, when we discussed the cultural practices other independent developers were engaged with (game jams and meet-ups) they expressed their curiosity and even excitement, but reflected as hard to implement with their schedules and private responsibilities.

In spite of being influenced by the economic context, the 'indies' mentioned by Andrew still pursue a more experimental and artistic relationship with their projects. In contrast with Lee and other independents, who frame themselves as 'newborn entrepreneurs', developers such as Jonas, Kaworu, and Charles instead focus on the importance of finding new ways to express their creative vision and other people who understand and appreciate their work. For this group, economic returns are addressed in terms of 'making a living', and sometimes as a by-product of their creative labour.

> '- Q: What motivates you to make games?
>
> - The same thing that motivates me to write or to make films: the intense need to create. The moment I realized that I could make games, I decided to make them. I never needed to think about it…For me, it's been hard and mostly frustrating, but making art is not something you choose. If the vision is there, you follow it, even if the road is hard. It's like religion, but with fewer wars.' (Jonas, February 5, 2011)
>
> - 'Getting into games for whatever reason means you develop interests in things like graphics, programming, art style, mechanics and all sorts of stuff, but ultimately I still make games for the same reason I started out, I want to make a great world for people to experience stories in.' (Sophie, idem)

Some of these independents tend to have a more romanticist and totalising vision of the game artist, viewing themselves as isolated individuals trying to imprint their personal touch on their creations regardless of mundane concerns about money. Other developers mention their active engagement in participatory game cultures, and how they shape their own identity as indies:[6]

> 'I played Cave Story for the first time, I saw online videos of Jonathan Blow talking about games design, I started to take part in Ludum Dare events and get in touch with indie developers. It was like "hey, I'm already an indie, and this community, this movement is something I can be part of and contribute to" and I felt that, all of a sudden, I really could make the games I wanted to make, unfiltered, and when I wanted to, that there was a real chance I would make enough money to eat from it.' (Sophie, idem)

As stated earlier, independent developers tend to take a critical view of the channels through which projects are conceived, managed and commercialised in the Retail Model. For them, being independent entails the possibility of seeking alternative strategies for the commercialisation of their games. For instance, the more aesthetically driven and engaged within local indie scenes (Guevara-Villalobos, 2014), reacted strongly against the background of the legal initiatives and regulations promoted by entertainment industries, including the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), the Protect IP Act (PIPA), the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) and the use of Digital Rights Management (DRM) mechanisms to impede copying and counterfeiting, many

independents try to find different ways to conciliate their commercial activities with social uses of sharing, and offer different perspectives on the illegal sharing of their games. For this purpose, many of them adopt 'pay as you want' models, release their games free of DRM, use more economically and creative friendly publishing initiatives (Indie Humble Bundle, Indie Fund, 1UP, crowd-funding), market games by appealing to their indie condition and offer special services for those who do buy their games. Other developers, such as Robert (n.d.), have released their graphic and music assets under non-commercial licences to be used by anyone for personal purposes. It targets learning and training needs of would be developers or hobbyists:

> 'Getting started can be a pain in the neck. "I can't draw very well", "I don't know how to make sound effects". I want to take some of that pain away [...] You can go off now and start writing your own SYNSO game. I've dumped out all the graphics and sounds I've used in the SYNSO games to date and they're available […] for you to use right now in your own game. You can even use them in a non SYNSO game, that's alright.'

For independents, the artistic claims of their work are based on their experimentally driven projects as well as subcultural aesthetics, in combination with the individual touch given to a variety of game genres, from platform games to more RPG or 'Sims' styles. For instance, Terry Cavanagh borrows common aesthetics from these genres to combine them with a variety of narratives in both form and nature. For instance, VVVV combines the characteristic "indie" pixel art graphics to re-enact the classic and subcultural space soup opera theme, under a challenging and rarely seen gameplay based on gravity changing mechanics. Moreover, he can borrow the classic 'platformer' aesthetics (bosses, jumping, shooting) to reinterpret the myth of Orpheus and Euridice in *Don't look back*, featuring an interesting side-scrolling technique to experience the delusion of our hero, whose fantastic adventure finished at the same point it had started, in front of the grave of his beloved one. His works explore a range of narratives, with an RPG version of the French folktale Bluebeard, and a parody of both Sims games and the consumerist lifestyle financial brokers, a work done in collaboration with Increpare's Stephen, and Tom Morgan-Jones from the politically active TerrorBull Games.

Developers such as Jonas reveal a more developed artistic claim than other indies whose claims revolve around an abstract fun factor and no thought beyond a smooth gameplay design. His artistic claims seem more in the Dovey & Kennedy's direction on games as spaces of possibilities, as political interventions, and imaginings of better individual and societies choices, in projects such as *The Great Machine* or in his collaboration with co-writing the *Talos Principle*. As an independent, critical engagement with the game medium is key to tell compelling stories, exploring philosophical ideas on war, individual choice, technology, the essence of humanity and social inequality as some the subjects addressed in his portfolio. These claims are even directed towards the self-indulgence in the independent sector where the notion art relates no more to an individual's creative drive; a postmodern notion of art "without teeth", lacking critical engagement with human history, or in fact with the artistic, philosophical and scientific ideas that inform our societies.

The above does not rule out the importance of the fun factor in the game experience, but entails a more critical notion of entertainment as a meaningful connection between a creative concept and the player. This interest to decode the meaning of fun is a precondition for its further elaboration, and a form to negate its constant reference as a tagline, or as a romantically meaningful connection between developers and their

enthusiastic players. Developers, such as Michael and Steve confirm the ludologic interest for their games as the professional commitment of an independent developer,

> 'I would more be interested in thinking why this is fun, why this is interesting, what engages people about this, why everyone likes more this particular form of play and not that one. So it is about the abstract part of the game design other that I am interested in. Sometimes is the feeling, the ways it is presented, sometimes it is the speed in which it becomes difficult.' (Michael, Otterly Games, August 24, 2010)

> 'I am more interested in how things are done. Much of the indie is slightly rubbishy, not much depth or compelling creative concept.' (Steve, Blazing Griffith, March 17, 2012)

In sum, the digital games industry has grown large enough to support small game projects below the 30 or 20 pounds mark, with what it may be a wider facilitation to the DD market by old and new intermediaries. In any case, independents have the chance to carry out their expressive work. Economic conditions of the emerging market have allowed a momentary re-appropriation of their intellectual property, and the proliferation of affordable tools and work/play networks arise as key aspects affording their projects. Still, they face the caveats of financing their work and learning to mobilise within market uncertainties and negotiating market outlets.

Furthermore, developers' personal views shape the scope of their actions as independents. A common tension unfolded in the sector relates to both the entrepreneurial and artistic nature of their work. Some developers stress entrepreneurial freedom and the possibilities of financial success, but also the experience of more meaningful relationships and social conditions at work. Amongst hybrid studios, they even articulate their identity in local terms, as actors that support both the local creative economy and collaborate with game design course programmes at local universities and local network agencies (FDL, Tuna Technologies). Thus, although they possess a more restricted view of autonomy and less space for experimentation, their focus on delivering good entertainment value within a socially responsible and engaging work approach motivates these developers as cultural entrepreneurs. Although the above framings value an active and direct engagement with productive life, the question of their projects as vessels of worldviews and artistic value was hard to address meaningfully.

The above compel us to see a problem underlined by most aesthetically driven independents. It is what Kemppainen (2009) explains as being independent vs. indie-spirited, or how the condition of economic autonomy does not grant aesthetic reflexivity. This is seen as projects that might not be motivated by, or infused with, a conscious effort for originality and critical thinking. In its artistic form it can entail a constant recycling of game mechanics, motifs, as well as the release of sequels or derivative projects.

On the other hand, 'indies' who were more committed to their aesthetic aims see their professional autonomy merely as a necessary step to achieve their artistic ambitions as well as social recognition. They are mostly engaged with the artistic potentialities of game development, a vision strengthened by their participation in independent work/play networks. These indies follow an *auteur* approach to their work, where control of creative and technical labour is emphasised over profit-making, allowing a wider range of people to experiment with the artistic, technical and commercial aspects of production. Thus, as ownership can indicate a tendency towards a compelling design integrated to a conscious artistic and to –lesser extent- social, literary or philosophical reflection, for other

developers it can turn primarily into a precondition for their economic and professional well-being.[7]

***

This paper has attempted to explore the social relations and specifically the spheres of value that inform developers' framings of their own autonomy. Based on either professional or informal activities but also on their occupational backgrounds, they infuse independent work with different meanings. These meanings are played out within the sphere of late capitalist ideas about cultural work and participatory cultures, as semi-autonomous structures enabled by the games industry itself.

Two discourses cohabit problematically amongst developers or within them: one highlights independents as self-made entrepreneurs on a quest to 'take the reins of their destiny' or enjoy a more self-managed work style, whereas a second one builds upon the first towards a personal artistic style of game making and the work/play culture associated with 'free/open' inspired techno-cultures. Often, the second stance articulates a more active anti-corporate or political attitude as well as alternative strategies of promotion and commercialisation. They also relate to lifestyles and ideas that underpin visions towards a more aesthetically and ethically driven capitalism, and sometimes towards more radical approaches (Banks, 2006: 461). In other cases, ideas of autonomy were informed and constrained by developers' organisational contexts and experiences as contractors, and concerns were more to do with finding and providing economic security inside studios than experimental game design. Interestingly, most developers seem pretty receptive to towards the idea of an empathic connection with a community of players they consider meaningful.

Finally, as aesthetically driven developers, independents' tinkering and exploration shows a tendency towards the development of *know-hows*. Still, there is a potential sensibility and conscious efforts to reflect critically on their creative concepts, exploring through mechanics and sequences critical aspects of human society, literature, and philosophical conditions of contemporary world.

Furthermore, the mutual shaping between developers' experiences and their affiliations poses the problem of their unstable performance within the industry. The most common problem is that although developers chase an ideal of independence, they have to deal with the structural problems imposed by the games industry, triggering a sometimes painful and decisive process of adaptation to (labour) market conditions. Thus, regardless of their differences, this process fosters similar working practices among independents, while also hiding the structural inequalities of outsourced work *vs* self-funded workers and status within the field. The outcomes can vary, ranging from studio closedowns, (Red Dot Studios, Otterly Games, Ben's venture, Introversion), extreme personnel reduction (Tuna Technologies), and difficult situations to find an audience or funding for solo developers, to social syntheses that under certain conditions (the same Introversion and Tuna Tech have been kept afloat and with some success after their personnel reduction), enable developers to sustain their enterprises. At the same time, artist-modelled or solo-developers deal with the problems from the multiple skills they need to catch up from their previous backgrounds, piling up a list of situations that add pressure on their commercial projects besides the economic ones, which seems to be generating collaborative works with good prospects. These material constrains will be hopefully explored better in further works.

The issue at stake here is that the artistic and cultural contribution of independent games is challenged by market preferences but also by industry relations that configure developers' tasks and responsibilities, setting up creative restrictions and reducing time for creative exploration.

Although the representativeness of the sample does not provide solid grounds for better generalisations, I consider these subjectivities as a spread worldview could pose problems in regards to the artistic reflexivity of game projects, and the emphasis on critical engagement with game content as a social context. The problem comes when traditional mechanics and narratives are replicated by independents, as part of their 'too personal' approach to game design. There is an extensive tendency amongst them to address an aesthetic approach based on their early game experiences for their own sake, and a more intuitive approach to game mechanics.

It also rises questions of independent games as plastic artefacts, as tools to imagine or contest meaningful aspects of human life, and adding beyond playability, a critical approach to their creative content, nurturing an attitude towards the critical exploration of literary, philosophical, social and political aspects of contemporary societies. These elements were more present in representations of autonomy as artistic and critical endeavours.

For above reasons, it is always important emphasise not only a critical approach to themes and motifs in digital games, but also stress on the conscious exploration of human subjects as sources of meaningful game experiences. It is not only about telling players to do a "job", but also thinking critically on the situations interacting around and with them through a simulated but nonetheless social experience.

In sum, this paper advocates for an active academic engagement with the technical, creative and social obstacles independent developers deal with in their productive life, envisioning a good synergy between social studies on game production, the formulation academic curricula, as well as social policy to include independents' production issues as gameworkers in the media industries.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Within classic sociological literature, the notion of agency is underlined by the processes of economic specialisation and individualization processes –hence development of relatively autonomous cultural spheres- within modern societies.

[2] There still room to systematise the experiences that has led to the construction of this cultural representation of digital games. Although the 1980s provided a good environment for artistic approaches to game development, the corporate take-over during the 1990s underplayed these aspects. As Rushkoff (1997) explains, the essence of games would be redefined around the new hardware, showing a marked trend focused on technological progress. It is suggestive to think that

these sociotechnical processes informed by the economics of aesthetic performance in the market helped towards the naturalisation of aesthetic realism as a convention.

[3] Aspects of the indie game *ethos* and their synergies with the process of commercial production has been explore in the works of Guevara-Villalobos (2014), O'Donnell (2013) and Westecott (2013).

[4] This leads us to ask about the mechanisms to regulate the use of independent labour. Here, the existence of communities of indie developers serves as a legitimate space to negotiate the conditions for sharing, as I will address in the following chapter.

[5] Cletus Clay was basic shooting genre featuring within clay-motion animated environment. After dealing with funding problems and a platform where to launch it, the project was put on hold after Microsoft's publishing arm denied its certification and unilaterally canceled the deal adducing a restructuration of their game portfolio.

[6] Within the collective memory of the independent community, an important discussion is still ongoing between the Belgian developer Michael Samyn (*The Endless Forest* [2005], *The Path* [2009]) and other developers such as Robert and Stephen. Whereas other developers find that the camaraderie, support and diversity of indie communities provides an important space to create original works, Samyn strongly advocates for a one-man creative vision, isolated from external influences. As such, he views indie communities as self-indulgent and regulative. His distinction between the 'true indie artist' and the technician as the toolmaker shows how the coupling between hacker ethics and the artist is not without conflict.

[7] A clear example of the constant clash of these two visions can be seen in Kristiansen's blog post 'Indies are Morons' (2011) and Robert's immediate reply 'I am a Moron' (2011). Whereas Kristiansen criticises developers who dismiss marketing strategies and business plans, Robert tries to show how a family man can still hold to the spirit of independence without committing to work rationalisation.