Indie Game: The Movie: The Paper – Documentary Films and the Subfield of Independent Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines documentary films about independent games and game developers, focusing on their rhetorical and ideological potential with regards to the subfield of independent digital games and the figures and works operating therein. I employ the conceptual framework developed by Bourdieu and analyze the documentary films using critical discourse analysis method of Fairclough, moving from micro-level descriptions of stylistic elements of the documentary films towards their macro-level discursive and sociocultural contextualizations. While all the films analyzed as part of the corpus exhibit stylistic similarities and predominantly positively highlight the practice of independent game development, they also feature stylistic, ideological and rhetorical differences which could be explained by taking into account the different primary focus of each of the films, the contrasting socio-cultural factors related to their chosen subject matter, as well as the time of their release and the state of the corresponding independent games scene at the time.

Keywords

Documentary films, Independent games, Bourdieu, Field, Subfield

INTRODUCTION

Though the creation and distribution of digital games by individuals and small teams are by no means new phenomena (see Camper, 2008, p. 197), the period of mid-to-late 2000s saw a rise in discourse surrounding the notions of *independent* and *indie games*, spurred on in part by the critical and commercial popularity of a handful of titles such as *Braid* (Number None, 2008) and *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010), though ultimately the result of a number of complex external and internal factors which contributed to the cultural and artistic legitimacy of this type of games [1]. As a recently notable, but often ill-defined subset of games (Garda & Grabarczyk, 2016), independent/indie games have been analyzed both in the gaming press (see e.g. Thomsen, 2011; Gnade, 2010; Dutton, 2012) and by academics (see e.g. Martin & Deuze, 2009; Simon, 2012). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the recent influx of short- and feature-length documentary films which present independent game developers, their development and publishing efforts, and the products of their work. This paper represents an attempt to address this situation by examining several documentary films, analyzing their stylistic, ideological, and rhetorical elements to understand how they contribute to the construction and demarcation of independent games as a socio-cultural subfield of digital games.

In the first section of the paper, I present a brief overview of the debate surrounding the definitions of independent and indie games and game production, while forwarding arguments for the importance of analyzing documentary films focusing on these topics as prominent channels for rhetorical promotion and ideological formation

of the independent games subfield. In the following section, I present the corpus and the methodological approach behind the paper, based on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical notions of *field* and *symbolic capital* and the critical discourse analysis method of Norman Fairclough. Owing to its use of Bourdieu's conceptual framework, the paper is meant to represent a contribution to the Bourdieusian strand of socio-cultural analyses centered on games, along the lines of the work done by Mia Consalvo (2007), Randy Nichols (2013), and Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015), among others. In the following two sections, I analyze the style, content and ideological positions of the documentary films in the corpus, followed by a summary comparison and socio-temporal contextualization. The paper concludes with an overview of the results of the overall analysis, as well as brief considerations for further socio-cultural research into the role of documentary films in the discourse surrounding the subfield of independent games.

DEMARCATING INDEPENDENT GAMES

In everyday, journalistic, and academic parlances regarding games alike, the notion of *independent game* seems to be as difficult to define as that of the broader category of which it is a member. Nevertheless, attempts at a descriptive definition are not lacking. In popular discourse of recent years, independent games, as well as the people behind them, have frequently been described positively in relation to what is perceived as their binary opposite: the equally ill-defined *triple-A* titles, developed, marketed and published by large-scale international game design companies. The design, development, and production culture surrounding independent games has been praised for "its fierce creative spirit and contempt for corporate meddling" (Dutton, 2012), as well as its experimental tendencies and artistic aspirations (Gnade, 2010). In the mid-to-late 2000s, with the rise of digital publishing platforms such as Microsoft's Xbox Live Arcade and Valve's Steam, the term *indie game* began to be used concurrently, and often interchangeably, with the term *independent game*, as a prestige signifier of sorts for games developed in small teams with limited or non-existing corporate backing and often released to great critical and commercial success. Nevertheless, the idea of romanticizing independent games as standing in creative contrast to those developed by major studios is not without its detractors, who have disputed the notion of *indie game* as ill-defined, outdated, and often pretentious (Thomsen, 2011; Grayson, 2012).

The confusion regarding the concept and artistic and cultural value of independent games is very much present in academic discourse, as well. Similarly to their depiction in popular discourse, in academic texts, independent game developers are frequently framed as *auteurs* who explore new grounds in game design "by working to their technological and personal limitations," utilizing an approach that is "borne equally from technical constraints, gaming nostalgia and independent artistic vision" (Camper, 2008, p. 199). Such a conceptualization of the developer, positioned in contrast to the monolithic international tech companies from which they are supposedly independent, invites parallels with the figure of the benevolent hacker, an artistic, visionary risk-taker unencumbered by established practices and using their technological skills towards revolutionary ends (Levy, 2010). Moving away from the figure of the developer, independent games themselves have, in recent years, become a popular topic of discussion due to the perceived breaks with the traditional, established modes of game development and publishing. According to Bart Simon, independent games have the ability to focus our attention on "the mode of production of the games we play and study" (2012, p. 3), acting as an entryway of sorts towards discussions about developer cultures, media ecology, and cultural and ideological value of games. Building on Simon's call for further research in the area of independent games, Felan Parker offers four different avenues or contexts for talking about independent games (historical, theoretical, politico-economical, and socio-

cultural), and in doing so highlights the complexities of talking about independent game production and reception, both in isolation and in context with other, more established production practices and modes of reception (Parker, 2013b). Along similar lines, Chase Martin and Mark Deuze discuss the phenomenon of independent game development from the perspective of labor and economy, seeking to discover "what it means to create, work in, and give meaning to independent computer and video game production" (2009, p. 277). Martin and Deuze see the contemporary influx of independently-developed and published games as at least partly fueled by "an increasingly globally differentiated market" (2009, p. 292), and dismiss the simplistic binary distinctions between independent and triple-A games, arguing instead for a systematized and contextualized examination of different aspects of a particular game or developer which may be considered independent (2009, p. 291). This latter position of deconstructing independence is taken a step further by authors such as Paolo Ruffino, who advocates for moving past "the rhetoric of independence" altogether, suggesting that we should instead look at "the multitude of factors that constitute it" (2012, p. 118).

The dissatisfaction with the notion of games and game development as independent is by no means a new trend: as early as 2006, there have been calls for investigating independency in order to more productively talk about game and game development cultures (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 141). With that in mind, it is notable that most of the authors quoted so far use the term *indie* interchangeably with *independent*, and do not concern themselves with delineating the two notions. Recently, however, there have been attempts to explicate both notions and systematize the academic discourse on game independence, most prominently by Maria Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk. In their paper, Garda and Grabarczyk identify three main types of independence in relation to game production – *financial*, *creative*, and *publishing* – arguing that, for a game to be considered independent, it has to belong to at least one of the three subsets (2016). The authors additionally make a claim for a distinction between the terms *independent* and *indie*, seeing the latter as "a label for a specific kind of independent games that emerged around the mid-2000s", characterized by a certain set of contingent properties including being experimental in nature, digitally distributed, made on a small budget and in a retro style, and developed by a small team (Garda & Grabarczyk, 2016) [2].

While most of the work done by academics in relation to independent games has so far focused on the design, production, and marketing practices behind these games, there has been little work whose primary target has been popular discourse on independent games or game production. A particularly fruitful avenue of exploration with regards to that topic are documentary films about independent game developers, which have seen a proliferation in recent years, starting with the release of the crowd-funded (and, in writings on independent games, oft-quoted) documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* (Pajot & Swirsky, 2012). Far more than just due to their increasing presence in popular discourse about independent games, the documentaries in question are analytically interesting because of the presuppositions attached to the documentary format, in particular regarding its rhetorical potential. As Bill Nichols puts it, "documentary films and videos speak about the historical world in ways designed to move or persuade us" (2010, p. 118); his position is echoed by Michael Renov, who remarks that "the persuasive or promotional modality is intrinsic to all documentary forms" (Renov, 1993). The rhetorical potential of documentary films and the cinematic tools that are utilized in their construction are important elements for their ideological operation and the promotion of particular viewpoints, opinions, and values in general. As Elspeth Kydd points out, documentary films are never free from bias due to the "very nature of cinematic language and apparatus" that are inherent in their production; their "assumed relationship to reality and to objectivity"

forms a part of their ideological functioning and needs to be taken into account when analyzing these films (2011, p. 63). Seeing as they both chronicle (by charting the development of particular games) *and* comment (by including interviews with the developers of said games) on independent game development practices and methods, documentaries about independent games can be regarded as an important rhetorical tool for the demarcation and standardization of the subfield of independent digital games. As such, they arguably represent a worthy object of analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this paper is on documentary films which chronicle the development of a number of independent game titles and comment on the issues of design, development and publication faced by the developers of said titles. The corpus consists of two feature-length documentaries (*Indie Game: The Movie* by Pajot and Swirsky, focusing on Western developers, and *Branching Paths* (Ferrero, 2016) by Anne Ferrero, focusing on the independent game scene in Japan) as well as two short-form crowd-funded documentary films published on the YouTube channel Noclip (*Frog Fractions 101* (Noclip, 2017) and *Spelunky* (Noclip, 2017)). The documentary material was chosen with the aim of having a varied and inclusive corpus, both in terms of represented material (showcased subjects, developer scenes and games), as well as distribution channels and target audiences. Another important factor in selecting the titles in the corpus has been the time of release of the titles, with the aim of having a temporally broad selection of material. The chosen documentaries were released within a timespan of five years (2012-2017), which enables a diachronic dimension to the analysis of their style, content, and rhetorical and ideological tendencies. It should be noted that the approach taken in this analysis, as well as its scope, have invariably limited the number of analyzed titles. Owing to this, the analysis is best read as an early exploration of some of the different approaches in constructing and presenting, in documentary format, the subfield of independent games, rather than as a definitive statement on the role of documentaries with regards to games, independent or otherwise.

The theoretical ground for the examination of the corpus are the concepts of *field* and *symbolic capital* developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu defines a field as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97) which orients the behavior and strategies of agents (individuals, groups and institutions) vying for validation, prestige, and ultimately dominance. A particular field can be conceived of as an autonomous, dynamic, structured space "with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force independent of those of politics and the economy" (Johnson, 1993, p. 6), though it can be influenced by other fields and is ultimately subsumed under a more broadly defined field of power. Furthermore, a single field can also be subdivided into smaller, more specified *subfields*, with Bourdieu for example citing a subfield of "the producers of discourse about art" (1993, p. 36) as part of a larger field of art. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the subfield of independent digital games, part of a larger field of digital games.

Bourdieu often compares the concept of the field with that of a combat arena or a game, highlighting an essential element of struggle or competition. In the case of fields, this competition revolves around capital, which, for Bourdieu, can be not only economic, but also *cultural* (one's amount of cultural knowledge, one's competences and dispositions with regards to cultural artifacts) and *symbolic* (the degree of recognition and prestige one possesses in relation to other agents in the field). According to Bourdieu, the structure of a field is "nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits […] which are at stake in the field"

(Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30). Crucially, the way in which a field is structured (the arrangement and relation of its agents' positions, and the perceived value of their work(s)) changes with the passage of time, with the introduction of new agents and works whose appearance in the field in question forces a recontextualization of power relations and values (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 32).

To analyze the documentaries in the corpus in light of Bourdieu's concepts and see in which way they present the subfield of independent games, I employ a modified version of the *critical discourse analysis* (CDA) framework forwarded by Norman Fairclough. Fairclough conceptualizes discourses as having three distinct facets: *text, discourse practice* and *sociocultural practice* (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97-98). His method for analyzing these facets is similarly threefold and includes "linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and *explanation* of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97, italics original). For Fairclough, the discourse practices of text production and interpretation are influenced by socio-cultural practices (i.e. social, cultural and historical factors), and an analysis of a particular text should take all of the aforementioned facets, as well as points of connection and rupture between them, into account.

Owing to the medial specificity of the corpus at the center of this paper (documentary films), the analysis of the level of text in Fairclough's CDA framework necessitates particular attention and a detailed approach. For this reason, I examine the documentaries in the corpus in light of four categories of questions, roughly following the model forwarded by Elspeth Kydd (2011, p. 65):

1) *Structural and compositional elements* (How is the film presented and arranged? In what style is it constructed? What kind of material is on offer in the film?);

2) *Modes of address* (How is the audience addressed (directly or indirectly?), and by whom (narrator, documentary participants, filmmakers)?);

3) *Participants* (Who is featured in the documentary? How are they presented to the audience?);

4) *Ideological cues* [3] (What viewpoints are presented in the documentary? How are they illustrated and supported? What is the rhetorical goal of the film as a whole?).

The first three categories of questions help to account for the formal and structural properties of the documentaries in the corpus, which need to be presented before the texts can be analyzed in relation to discursive and sociocultural practices. The fourth category of questions helps me to do precisely that: to connect the films to the historical conceptualization of the subfield of independent games, the value of works created therein (independent games), and the symbolic capital possessed by agents behind those works (independent game developers). Therefore, the analysis of each of the titles in the corpus proceeds from micro-level stylistic descriptions and categorizations towards macro-level discursive and sociocultural contextualizations, with the aim of uncovering the relationship between these documentary films and the subfield of independent games that they, on different levels, depict as their subject.

ANALYSIS

Indie Game: The Movie

Directed by Canadian filmmakers James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot, released in 2012, and funded with the help of two Kickstarter campaigns, *Indie Game: The Movie* is described as "the first feature documentary film about making video games" (About - Indie Game: The Movie, 2012). It focuses on four North American game developers and three of their games: Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes, the team behind *Super Meat Boy*, Phil Fish, creator of *Fez* (Polytron, 2012), and Jonathan Blow, creator of *Braid*. The film consists of a combination of "talking heads" interviews with the developers, as well as several other industry figures (journalists, publishers, other game developers), and observational, concept art and gameplay footage. It features no narration, and utilizes both the indirect (interviews, observational footage) and direct (title cards with factual information) modes of address. Two main narrative threads can be identified in the film: the first follows the end-stage development and release of McMillen and Refenes's *Super Meat Boy*, while the second focuses on the legal and artistic struggles of Phil Fish. The material related to *Braid* primarily serves as a contextualizing commentary on the process of development, release and reception of an independent game, with Jonathan Blow presented as an authority figure, owing to the immense and unexpected popularity of his game.

Interviews with figures from the games industry at the beginning of the film position independent games as a growing subfield of digital games, citing large sales figures of titles such as *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010) and *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) and attributing their rise in popularity to the existence of digital distribution platforms such as Microsoft's Xbox Live Arcade and Valve's Steam. Furthermore, the games themselves are openly set apart from titles developed by established, large-scale development teams. In contrast to big-budget gaming titles, often referenced derogatorily in the film, independent games are described as highly personal, purposefully unpolished products of artistic and communicative experimentation in digital game form, influenced in terms of design by the childhood gaming experiences of the handful of people behind them (for example, at one point, McMillen mentions that his and Refenes' goal when developing *Super Meat Boy* was to "make a game that our thirteen-year-old selves would be super huge fan boys over" (*Indie Game: The Movie*, 2012)). This unprofessional, imperfect nature of independent games is explicitly touted as a positive characteristic, in comparison to the perceived lack of personality and focus on gloss in triple-A games, during the interview segments with Jonathan Blow which bookend the film.

Despite ostensibly being about independent games, as its title would indicate, *Indie Game: The Movie* focuses more on the developmental and personal struggles of the people behind the games than it does on the games themselves. The development of both *Super Meat Boy* and *Fez* is depicted as protracted and pressured both by the designers' aspirations and audience demands, with the developers shown as consequently suffering from stress, depression, and anxiety. On more than a single occasion, the developers are portrayed as being highly invested in their games and motivated to work towards their success by fear of failure to deliver on their vision, to the point of it affecting their personal lives and relationships. Even Jonathan Blow, shown as a figure possessing a significant amount of symbolic capital in the subfield of independent games due to the success of *Braid*, comments on feelings of depression as a result of the public's misperception of him and his game. The validation of their work by the gaming public is also depicted as being important. Though both Fish and Refenes initially claim that they are making games as means of artistic expression, as opposed to as a profitable venture, both are eventually shown to be quite concerned with the commercial and critical success of their games.

Indie Game: The Movie constructs the figure of the independent game developer as something akin to the stereotypical conception of the struggling artist: the developers are shown to be highly motivated, creative, nostalgic and perfectionist, working under precarious conditions and constrained by demands and practices of an industry that favors established modes and methods of production and distribution over artistic freedom and individual creativity. While Fish, McMillen and Refenes are shown in cluttered offices and portrayed as financially and artistically struggling, Blow is depicted in a more idealized manner, as a successful, collected, organized, and somewhat mysterious figure, whose game was instrumental in paving the way for similar creations by other independent developers and development teams. All four of the developers the film focuses on are depicted as being defined by games in general and, crucially, their own games in particular, investing the totality of their money, time, and work into their production. At one point, Phil Fish even describes his game *Fez* as representing his own ego and identity, claiming he would end his own life if he were unable to complete it. This metaphorical link between the developers and their games is concretely realized using cinematic editing techniques and the linking of observational footage with that from the games being talked about (Figures 1 and 2).
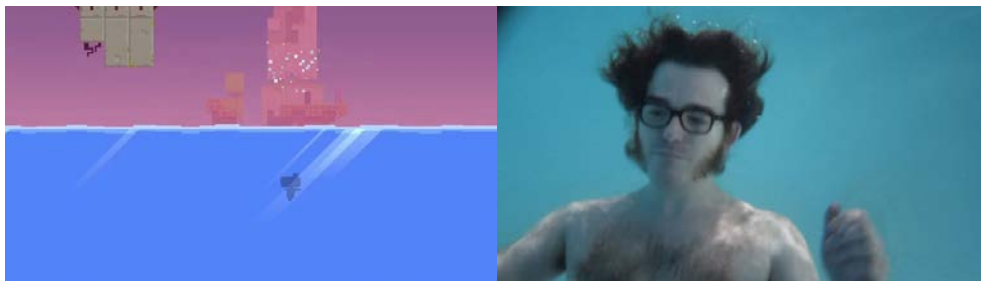

Figure 1: Footage from *Fez*, immediately followed by a shot of its developer Phil Fish submerged in water (*Indie Game: The Movie*, 2012).
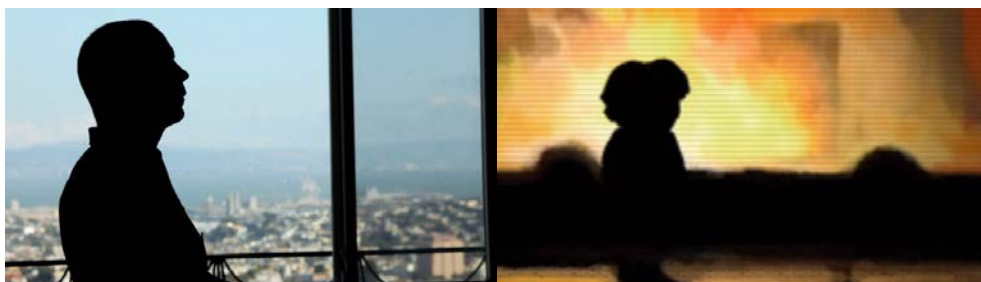

Figure 2: Silhouette of Jonathan Blow, immediately followed by a shot from the beginning of his game, *Braid* (*Indie Game: The Movie*, 2012).

Indie Game: The Movie therefore forwards the understanding of independent game developers as passionate, romanticized *auteurs*, bearing the developmental burdens of games that are, by extension, more personal and intellectually and emotionally richer experiences than those developed and offered by large-scale production studios. In doing so, the film can be said to positively contribute to the symbolic capital of the developers on which it focuses, as well as to the delimitation of independent games as

a subfield of digital games characterized by works with potentially heightened artistic value.

Branching Paths

Directed by French filmmaker Anne Ferrero, *Branching Paths* is a 2016 documentary film originally distributed on Steam and the Japan-based gaming platform Playism (Estrada, 2016) which chronicles a two-year period in the development of the independent gaming scene in Japan, bookended by two Tokyo Game Shows in 2013 and 2015. Much like *Indie Game: The Movie, Branching Paths* combines interview footage with that centered on concept art and gameplay, as well as with observational footage focusing on game development and game conventions/expositions. What sets the film apart from the approach taken in *Indie Game: The Movie* is the lack of narrative focus on specific developers: instead, *Branching Paths* showcases a large number of developers, artists, producers, teachers and even major studio headhunters, not all Japanese in origin but all working on games in Japan and at various stages in their careers. As such, the film is characterized by a mosaic-like structure and a plurality of voices, with no clear focus on a handful of individuals or teams, and certainly lives up to its subtitle, which labels it "a journey through Japan's indie game scene" (Branching Paths, 2017). *Branching Paths* is also narrated by Ferrero herself, who provides the audience with factual information about the interviewees and the independent gaming scene in Japan. In addition to a direct narrative voice and factual title cards, the film also features indirect modes of addressing the audience in the form of the aforementioned observational footage and interviews with figures working on games in Japan.

Branching Paths conveys the specific nature of Japan's independent games scene very early on, with Ferrero and her interviewees making a distinction between independent games (which, though made by individuals or small teams, are still labeled as commercial in nature) and so-called *doujin games*, belonging to a general subcategory of works created by passionate hobbyists in their spare time. Nevertheless, throughout the rest of the film, the boundaries between the different understandings of doujin and independent games are presented as being flexible enough to talk about both categories of games under the same heading. The independent game scene in Japan is shown to be constrained by several different factors, among others a lack of space and presence in standard marketing venues, general lack of domestic visibility and popularity compared to games by major development studios, funding issues, and the absence of a consolidated developer network. Throughout the period covered in the film, the situation is shown to be improving – for example, at the Tokyo Game Show in 2014, independent developers are offered floor space to present their games, and certain independent games, such as *Downwell* (Moppin, 2015), are released to domestic and overseas acclaim, netting some international recognition to their developers. However, interviewees at the end of the film still stress the need for greater consolidation of local developers and increased presence of their games on international markets as paramount for true success of Japan's independent game scene. The fact that the film ends on this note positions its rhetoric as promotional not just of specific developers or games in Japan, but of the national independent scene *as a whole*.

When it comes to the construction of the figure of the independent game developer based in Japan, several parallels with its North American counterpart can be noted. Independent developers in Japan are shown as very passionate, diligent, disillusioned with major studios, and wanting to keep creative control of their works, a portrayal that falls very much in line with that of the developers in *Indie Game: The Movie*. According to the interviewed developers, the games they make are primarily intended to evoke emotional reactions in their audience, and even though most of the

developers lament their difficult financial conditions, the sheer enjoyment of making games gives them incentive enough to continue working on them. Unlike the independent developers interviewed in *Indie Game: The Movie*, those working in Japan are rarely shown to be under tremendous amounts of stress due to their work, but they do remark on cultural constraints, namely the societal pressure for young developers to get office jobs and quit following their dreams of independent game development. Aesthetic influences from Japanese culture are very clearly evident in the games showcased in the film, especially those developed by non-Japanese developers; what is more, the film shows a tendency among developers in Japan to create not just games as such, but also game development tools and engines, and also to experiment with hardware. The need to succeed in the field is also stressed by several developers throughout the film, with some even remarking that it is what separates independent developers from hobbyists who work on doujin games. Domestic success is, however, shown to be very difficult to reach, in the form of both financial and symbolic capital, unless one has experience working in a major studio and connections with Western markets which can help facilitate crowd-funding practices and the use of platforms such as Kickstarter. Interestingly, many independent developers in Japan first experience success in overseas markets, which then enables them to continue working with games – for example, the developers of *La-Mulana* (GR3 Project/Nigoro, 2012 [2005]) are able to fund the sequel to their game thanks in no small part to its popularity in the West. Interpreted from a Bourdieusian perspective, this fact seems to point to the dominance and influence of the Western markets in the subfield of independent games at the time. With that in mind, the aesthetic idiosyncrasies and the greater openness towards creative experimentation by the developers in Japan, as showcased in the film, can be understood as an attempt to positively demarcate Japan-based developers and their games from their Western counterparts.

Ultimately, those working as part of the independent game scene in Japan single out having control of one's own personal vision for a game (what Garda and Grabarczyk would identify as creative independence (2016)) as the core element of being an independent developer. Working in big, established game companies is not as negatively portrayed as in *Indie Game: The Movie*, with many interviewees claiming that it is a good way for young developers to gain practical working experience. However, there is still a predominantly positive tone attached to the growing numbers of small teams and individuals with creative independence in comparison to established game design studios. Much like *Indie Game: The Movie*, *Branching Paths* also positions the subfield of independent games as creatively vital and expanding, to the point of positively influencing the main field of digital games, with independent games and their developers described both by journalists and big studio talent hunters as vital for the ongoing success of digital gaming in general in Japan.

Noclip Documentaries

Noclip is a YouTube documentary channel, founded in 2016 by former games journalist Danny O'Dwyer and financially supported by a Patreon crowd-funding campaign. Noclip's mission, according to O'Dwyer, is to "tell authentic stories about how games got made" (Cook, 2017), and apart from multi-part documentaries covering individual titles, such as *Rocket League* (Psyonix, 2015) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), the channel offers short interviews with designers and artists working in the digital games industry.

The two documentaries analyzed for the purposes of this paper are part of the *Rediscovering Mystery* series, and focus on two titles: *Spelunky* (Mossmouth, LLC, 2012 [2008]), created by Derek Yu, and *Frog Fractions* (Twinbeard Studios, 2012), created by Jim Crawford. Both short films, much like the rest of documentaries

produced by Noclip, combine direct and indirect modes of address: they feature extended interviews with developers and artists contributing to the game, in combination with extensive and illustrative gameplay footage and narrative commentary by O'Dwyer himself. Unlike the two feature-length documentaries previously analyzed in the paper, the Noclip documentaries focus more on the discussions about the design and gameplay of specific titles, in addition to the personal histories and game development experiences of the developers of said titles. The *Spelunky* documentary centers on interviews with Yu, game programmer Andy Hull and composer Eirik Suhrke, while the sole interviewee in the *Frog Fractions* documentary is the game's designer Jim Crawford.

The Noclip documentaries are characterized by a much more casual style of discussion, showcasing the developers' early experiences with games and presenting in-depth analyses of their respective titles to the audience. Yu and Crawford both explain that they have been involved in game development since childhood, with Crawford learning to program on the Commodore 128 and Yu making games using the *Klik & Play* game programming package. In the documentary on *Spelunky*, Yu credits the rising popularity in independent games in the late 2000s as giving him the incentive to continue making games after quitting game development in his college years. Along similar lines, Crawford, in the *Frog Fractions* documentary, cites personal dissatisfaction with traditional game development practices in large studios as a reason for not pursuing a traditional career path in the industry, choosing instead to focus on creating games as a hobby and for friends. Both Yu and Crawford are shown as valuing creative independence and aesthetic and gameplay experimentation in their approaches to game design, with the latter openly proclaiming that his games are purposefully unoptimized and made with the intention of mocking mainstream game mechanics and design practices. Both also embrace the principle of iterative development based on feedback from their players, either as part of online communities or at specialized events such as game jams. Interestingly, both developers cite not only classic games, but also other independent titles such as *La-Mulana* and *Dear Esther* (Thechineseroom, 2012), as sources of design inspiration.

Both documentaries showcase the importance of support from the established community around independent games for the success of the games themselves, highlighting in the process the increased and ongoing legitimization of the independent games subfield in North America. By the time the development on the remastered version of *Spelunky* had started, Yu was already a well-known figure on the independent scene, having won the Seumas McNally Grand Prize at the Independent Games Festival in 2007. In combination with the success of the original version of *Spelunky*, released as freeware in 2008 and quickly proving popular among other, by then already established independent developers such as Jonathan Blow and Edmund McMillen, this netted Yu substantial symbolic capital and enabled him to publish the remastered game on Xbox Live Arcade with the help of Jonathan Blow's industry connections. Similarly, the viral popularity of *Frog Fractions*, in large part due to Twitter and journalist outlets which covered the game upon release, enabled Crawford to start a Kickstarted campaign and quickly amass funds for the game's sequel, which in turn relied for promotion on an alternate reality game prominently featuring several other independent games in development at the time (D'Anastasio, 2016). For both Yu and Crawford, the critical acclaim and financial gains of their earlier independent game titles and the by-then-established popular interest in independent games proved crucial for the success of their works and for the increase in their status as independent developers.

The relaxed conversational interview style in the two Noclip documentaries and the focus on games themselves stand in contrast to the portrayal of independent game

development in *Indie Game: The Movie* as hectic, precarious, constantly pressured, and personal to the point of subsuming all other aspects of the developer's life. The developers in the Noclip documentaries still stress creative independence as a major factor of their work (in the case of Crawford it openly being stated as the reason he is an independent developer), but the way in which they are presented in the documentaries does not contribute to a romanticized notion of the struggling developer constantly suffering for their work and pressured by the gaming public. For example, though both Yu and Crawford willingly discuss difficulties in the development process and critical comments they got from those who played their games, they are shown to be willing to take criticism professionally, using it in a constructive manner to further improve their games while trying not to compromise their creative visions. The Noclip documentaries therefore do not notably contribute to the mythicization of the process of independent game development, nor the people involved in it, instead offering a more level-headed portrayal of the coming-into-being of specific games.

DISCUSSION

When comparing the four documentary films in the corpus, certain stylistic and ideological similarities become clearly evident. On the level of composition and structure, all four films prominently feature "talking-heads" interview footage in combination with gameplay and/or observational footage. Factual information is conveyed either via narration (in *Branching Paths* and the Noclip documentaries) or via title cards (in all four documentaries). All of the four films construct a sympathetic image of independent developers as talented, hard-working, highly passionate individuals invested in games, who value their creative independence above all else. In doing so, the films positively contribute to the symbolic capital of the individual developers that are featured in them, as well as to the increase in artistic value of the independent games subfield as a whole. Importantly, the desire of independent developers to preserve creative freedom is presented as incompatible with the design and production practices in major and established games studios, which are consequently portrayed in a predominantly negative light across all four documentary films, further positively demarcating the subfield of independent games.

The obvious similarities seem to end there, as each of the films takes a different approach to the treatment of other aspects of independent game development. *Indie Game: The Movie*, notably the first of these films to be produced, thematically focuses on the struggles of its developers, employing a visual style which seeks to romantically highlight the messy, deeply personal relationship they have with their games, and is structured around two clear narrative threads. *Branching Paths*, in contrast, represents a kaleidoscope of voices, games and design approaches, centered on the unifying topic of the independent game scene in Japan as opposed to a handful of developers. Finally, the Noclip documentaries, the latest to be released of the films in the corpus, feature extended developer interviews in a casual setting and showcase not only the personalities and design approaches of the developers, but predominantly in-depth discussions of the design of their games.

The stylistic and rhetorical differences in the four documentary films enable them to be examined as unique ideological lenses or perspectives in relation to the subfield of independent games. In order to do so, however, the temporal and socio-cultural context of their production needs to be taken into account. *Indie Game: The Movie* was produced in the wake of big financial successes of independent digital games released on consoles in North America, and therefore of increased interest in independent games in general. With that in mind, it does not seem peculiar that the film notably promotes both said financial successes and the people behind them (most prominently, Jonathan Blow), as well as the new generation of independent game

developers, who are collectively framed as edgy artistic mavericks seeking to produce different games to those offered by mainstream studios. In contrast, the Noclip documentaries are not as concerned with promoting a particular image of independent developers, as much as with analyzing the (design) history of their games. The five-year gap between *Indie Game: The Movie* and the Noclip films can perhaps account for this difference in approach, indicating that the subfield of independent games, in North America at least, has in the meantime become more firmly established as a legitimate part of the field of digital games, and is no longer in need of explicit discursive validation and promotion. Finally, the mosaic nature of the *Branching Paths* documentary can be interpreted as a way of promoting not just individual developers or their design ethos, but rather the entire, specific scene of independent games in Japan. The repeated stressing of the importance of international markets for the success of independent games made in Japan and the portrayal of the Japanese scene as creatively idiosyncratic, vibrant and growing, seem aimed at inciting not only specifically cultural, but also commercial interest in the film's audience [4]. Unlike the independent games subfield in North America, that in Japan is shown as still being in the process of consolidation and in need of international promotion in the period covered in the film (early-to-mid 2010s), which perhaps makes the rhetorical goals and strategies of the film itself not that surprising.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the contribution of selected documentary films to the popular discourse on independent games and game development. The analysis of the style and content of the documentary films has noted a predominantly positive portrayal of independent games and development practices in relation to their counterparts in major game production studios, which are frequently presented in a negative light. The ideological, rhetorical, and stylistic differences between the documentary films in the corpus can be explained by taking into account the different primary focus of each of the films (several up-and-coming developers; the entire independent scene; specific popular game titles), the contrasting socio-cultural factors related to their chosen subject matter (North American scene; Japan scene), as well as the time of their release and the state of the corresponding independent games scene at the time (2012; 2016; 2017).

The analysis on offer in this paper is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but merely illustrative of the differences in approaches to documenting and presenting of the subfield of independent games. Further research in this area could include an expanded corpus of more documentary films by various producers and dealing with different aspects of the subfield, take into account the production and distribution specificities of the films themselves (crowd-funding, online distribution on gaming platforms such as Steam and GOG), and/or more comprehensively employ Bourdieu's framework to illustrate the ties between the subfield and the main field of digital games. With that in mind, this paper should be seen as an initial, necessarily limited foray into an underexplored section of popular discourse on games, and, by extension, as an invitation for further work in the area along the same or similar analytical lines.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more detailed examination of the factors involved in this process, see (Parker, 2013a).

2. The terminological difference in question is not particularly stressed beyond this point in the paper, owing to the fact that both terms, *independent* and *indie*, are used indiscriminately in the analyzed documentaries. For purposes of inclusivity, I predominantly use the broader term *independent* throughout the paper.

3. Here, I digress from Kydd, but only in terminology; for her, the fourth category is *evidence*, broadly understood as "all the visual and aural components that filmmakers use to support the opinions expressed in their documentary" (2011, p. 75).

4. Further supporting this claim is the fact that the film's release was accompanied by a cross-promotion and sale, on both Playism and Steam, of many of the games showcased in the film (Cheru, 2016a; Cheru, 2016b).

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