

# Examining Indie's Independence: The Meaning of "Indie" Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Co-optation

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## Abstract

Recent years have seen the meaning of what makes a game "indie" become increasingly difficult to express. This article will examine the shift in meaning that "indie" is undergoing, its causes, and its effects on the indie developer community. Rather than arguing for a single definition of indie, this article examines the ideologies underlying the multiple definitions of the term. Especially significant is how mainstream co-optation of the term affects the ability of developers to protest through the mere production of their work, as "indie" shifts from signifying production and economics to standing in as a style or genre marker. The article concludes that while it may no longer be possible for games to clearly demonstrate politics through production alone, developers still have ways to protest against the mainstream.

## Author Keywords

Co-optation; definition; development; indie; independence; mainstream; politics; production; protest; semantics

## Introduction

Writing on the value of defining ideas, John Dewey states in *How We Think* (1910), "The attaching of a word somehow (just how, it is almost impossible to say) puts limits around the meaning, draws it out from the void, makes it stand out as an entity on its own account" (p. 173). It is odd, then, that what defines "indie" in indie games remains confusing. While locking down a meaning behind the term is a matter of mere categorization and genre definition, the existence of different definitions indicates a crucial ideological struggle at stake within the discourse of independence. Underlying the seemingly non-ideological term are ideologies pitting political-economic dissent against major game publishers. In fact, the very notion that the definition does not matter only strengthens the hegemonic control over the discourse of "indie" gaming by depriving the term and developers that use it of the political potential inherent to claims of "independence." While artistic movements change over time, the depoliticization of indie gaming is occurring partly through the shift in discourse imposed by the exterior and not merely the normal progression of indie movements.

## Core Indie Values

Because of the instability of the definitions of “mainstream” and “indie”, it is important to ground them in the context of this argument. There is significant confusion over what defines “mainstream” or “AAA” game development, though arguably not quite as much as is the case for indie gaming. Often, definitions differ in significant ways. For instance, consultant Harvey Elliot, when pressed on defining “AAA” sidesteps a concrete position: “As a player though I never use the expression AAA – I would just shower the game in superlatives” (Evans-Thirwell, 2012). Here, Elliot intertwines the meaning of “AAA” with “great”. Producer Greg Donovan concludes much the same: “Publishers tend to judge [what is AAA] based on sales or profitability, whereas developers tend to judge by quality” (ibid). This choice of definition, however, largely differs from popular opinion. Writers Ed Stern and Chet Faliszek uncomfortably tie “AAA” to economics and capitalism over quality; Faliszek ponders, “Is it budget? Advertising? Popularity?” while Stern says it is as simple as the difference between trying to tell your parents the difference between “a medium-budget game project” and “a larger-budget game project” (ibid). Confusion over the definition of mainstream is not restricted to members of the industry either. In one forum post (Trapper Zoid, 2008), one comment claims, “IMO is just lingo for a big budget commercial game,” while another claims that “The gaming press tend to use AAA to mean a really high quality game” while marketers use it to speak of a game’s advertising budget, specifically noting that for that definition “the actual quality of the game is irrelevant.”

In some ways, defining “AAA” or “mainstream” depends on the contrast between whatever it is and whatever “indie” is. Dennis Kogel (2012) sees an “independent” company like Zynga not being indie “despite being independent and despite developing cute browser and smartphone games. They are evil, because they bluntly prioritize money over creative vision.” Essentially, mainstream is contrasted and defined specifically against the “honest” and “creative” independent culture, which at best says mainstream is everything that is not independent.

Mainstream, like “indie,” makes little sense to define by decree — Nathan Grayson (2012) sees all such terms as “yokes” that are just words. However, given the dominant economics, development and publishing standards that account for the largest percentages of attention and sales in the contemporary game markets, it is worth providing some stability to the terminology, if only to understand what indie developers present themselves as independent from. Mainstream game development is corporate in nature and capitalist in ethos. While not universally fairly, the mainstream is characterized as emphasizing profit and popularity over creativity and artistry. AAA games are developed by large teams in numerous different companies with multi-million dollar budgets. Games are published by large corporate publishers — the two largest being EA and Blizzard/Activision — often as both physical disks in retail stores and digital downloads through platforms like Xbox Live, PlayStation Network, or Steam.

While the definition of “indie” as in “indie gaming” is historically specific to a contemporary movement in game development, “indie” or “independent” media production movements share a few common traits which permit cross-media comparison that clarifies in some ways some of the inchoate positions amongst indie gaming’s early adopters. The definition at stake here relates less to isolating *the* indie genre, or even asserting the existence of a genre associated with the

term at all. Rather, it is a way to isolate what considerations have helped create and continue to create something that could call itself a movement — and see itself as “indie” — in the first place. How it has changed since that first position is secondary to how it all began. Like any movement, however, the particular attributes it seems to possess are often inconsistent; there is no single indie movement nor indie genre but rather a set of tendencies regarding how it is described by participants and outsiders.

At its simplest, indie media is defined by what is not mainstream. Regarding indie film, Newman (2011) explores key defining principles that often cluster around not only indie film but other media as well: “[I]ndie cinema consists of American feature films of this era that are not mainstream films. They act as a Hegelian antithesis to the mainstream — films of “Hollywood studios and the megaplexes where they screen” (p. 2). Oakes (2009) describes the origins of independent art movements in the fifties and sixties partly based on “making art outside of the mainstream” (p. 12). This produces a notion of indie media that is, by its nature, a protest against status-quo — at least of some kind. Assessments of indie games often say much the same. Jay Margalus (Burke, 2012), for instance, finds opposition to mainstream practices of making games cinematic — almost like the megaplex movies to which Newman refers: “We want to create a game that feels like you’re in a game mechanically and interactively, and have people actually play it. I’m not sure how to explain it — *Meat Boy* feels more like a game than *Call of Duty*, to me.” In *Indie Game: The Movie* (Pajot and Swirsky, 2012), *Super Meat Boy* co-developer Tommy Refenes explains that the games he makes are deliberately not mainstream material: “Whatever, if people want to buy [*Call of Duty*] *Modern Warfare* or *Halo: Reach* that’s fine because I think those games are shit. And if that’s what people want, then they don’t want the games I make, ‘cause I don’t make shit games.”

Contemporary indie games share a particular, albeit oblique, offshoot of this general rebelliousness: nostalgia for the 8- and 16-bit eras of gaming. Edmund McMillan explains the logic of *Super Meat Boy* is “to recreate that frustration you felt when playing old NES games like *Ghosts n Goblins* and *Mega Man*, but making it forgiving enough to continue the hellish game play experience” (Meunier, 2009), and Meunier points out, “There’s a huge nostalgia factor.” For those who feel that way, the logic of nostalgia is greater than aesthetics — it is the result of the political protests against the mainstream in the form of a return to blissful youth through reminding players how much the games of their childhoods meant to them. Davis (2011) explains that nostalgia always depends on dissatisfaction with the present: “[I]t is *always* the adoration of the past that triumphs over lamentations for the present...for to permit present woes to douse the warm glow from the past is to succumb to melancholy or, worse yet, depression” (p. 448). It would be one thing for developers to oppose high polish by dialing back high resolutions in innovative ways — and many like *Limbo* or *Gish* do so without being deliberately reminiscent of games from the ‘80s and ‘90s. Still, the trend to recreate styles and game mechanics of the earlier era, from platformers to beat-em-ups and point and click adventures, speaks to dissatisfaction with gaming and game design practices today that, by implication, the games of the past (if not more accurately, the games of the developers’ youths) did not create. From that sense of loss comes, in part, that defining objection of indie gaming’s core to the status-quo.

Either as a result of working outside of the dominant paradigm of media production in their respective media — the “Big Six” (Azerrad, 2001, p. 5) corporations in music, Hollywood

studios for film, or AAA video game corporate giants — “indie” is linked both with a generic opposition to the mainstream as well as the production and, especially, distribution processes that mainstream structure affords. Azerrad (2001) characterizes the DIY indie rock scene of the 1980s as “a sprawling cooperative of fanzines, underground and college radio stations, local cable access shows, mom-and-pop record stores, independent distributors and record labels, tip sheets, nightclubs and alternative venues, booking agents, bands, and fans” (p. 3). This notably emphasizes that the scene’s independence was intertwined with its reliance on a completely duplicate set of alternative structures designed to circumvent the conveniences and controls of mainstream production and distribution. Rather than top-40 radio-play, advertising, or publicity, Azerrad points to local radio stations unburdened by the commercial pressures of wider-reaching stations. Homemade fanzines serve as substitutes for magazine and newspaper press. Replacing labels and agencies that might exploit artists were locals. Oakes (2009) directly points to this rejection as an “answer to this inherently exploitative scenario” as “their main motivation was control” over their band’s sound, art, and marketing (p. 45). Indie film, likewise, bears similar markings, though with more variation. There may be “fully DIY operations” (Newman, 2011, p. 6) run out of someone’s home, or films made on a few million dollars, both under the indie moniker. While production standards for film seem to vary far more than in the case of indie music of the same time frame, like indie rock, indie film of all kinds share a difference in distribution from mainstream productions. If Hollywood films are for multiplexes, indie film is for the “film festivals and art house theaters” (Newman, 2011, p. 15).

Games, accordingly, follow the same principles. Indie games are in part defined by the reliance on alternative production and distribution structures compared to mainstream game companies. On the production side, there are, as for other media, problems of both unfair working conditions in the mainstream being rejected by working independently, and unequal access to quality tools that follow from that exclusion. Concerns over the working conditions of game developers in mainstream industry are hardly new. Dyer-Witford and de Peuter (2009) detail “EA Spouse’s” descriptions of an EA employee’s workload from 2005: “[S]even day, eighty-five hour weeks, uncompensated either by overtime pay or by time off, became routine,” (p. 35) and a “put up or shut up and leave” (p. 35-36) policy that abused the intellectual labor rights of workers. Leigh Alexander’s (2012) assessment of the collapse of *Homefront* developer Kaos tells a harrowing story of “leads with tons and tons of experience” but poor management and leadership decisions; Alexander quotes one employee explaining that under two of three “Davids” brought in to lead, “it was a tyrannical dictatorship that no person should ever be subjected to.” Brendan Sinclair (2012) compares being an AAA game developer to being a proctologist: “Sure, the pay might be nice, but does it really make all the crap they have to put up with worthwhile? Actually, proctologists have a leg up in this analogy, considering there aren’t legions of fresh-out-of-college kids with a passion for peeping up people’s behinds.” Given the conditions, it seems expected that talented developers and amateurs alike would shun the poor conditions awaiting them in the industry, and the indie community serves as an outlet for people to work closer to their own personal limits and time tables. Even when independent developers do end up in intense crunch times, as in the experiences of both Team Meat and Phil Fish as seen in *Indie Game: the Movie*, the crunch is inherently self-imposed in a way that is different from industry practice. It may be advantageous to work extreme hours at the end of development, but an indie developer’s job does not hinge on having to work under those conditions.

While choices over working conditions are part of decisions to operate under different production standards in terms of work hours and demands, there is also a systematic pressure on indie developers to work with “lesser” development tools than would be made available for mainstream products. Coding in Java, Flash, and open-source software like Flixel have become commonplace because they do not cost anything to use, but they come with disadvantages in regards to 3D graphics and efficiency. Many development engines AAA developers prefer come with outstanding costs to smaller teams with smaller budgets. The Unity engine pro version costs \$1500, putting it way out of league for no-budget developers, even if it is a minimal cost for a commercial release. The Unreal Development Kit, on the other hand, costs nothing for non-commercial production or products that profit less than \$50,000—giving small developers who either do not intend to distribute or significantly profit a pro-level tool at no real cost. However, cost rises drastically after that cut off, costing twenty five percent of revenue beyond \$50,000, leading one critic to conclude, “for the hefty licence requiring 25% of all revenue exceeding \$50,000, I can’t recommend it for Indie purposes.” (Mikedemus, 2011; errors original). What is significant about game engine availability in indie game production is that while the production costs for small teams never reach the costs of “small” productions in film or music (at least before the rise of inexpensive digital distribution for film and music), there exists the same systematic pressure to produce with lesser tools because of expense exclusively.

The emphasis of indie developers on digital distribution plays more into a matter of need than want, thus making it a central feature of the movement. The tools of the mainstream, while expensive, fall far short of the costs of retail distribution used for mainstream productions. Chris Swain (Irwin, 2008) explains that digital distribution cuts out a tremendous pressure: games purchased from a retailer retain only 17% of the price for the publisher, along with the complete lack of profit from used game resale. Digital distribution, he claims, would retain 85% of the retail price, along with removing limits of selling the long tail back-catalogue of previously published titles that a brick-and-mortar store cannot stock. These two particular advantages are a significant factor, according to Swain, in indie development’s success. Still, there are other advantages that make this necessary and not merely attractive: being able to retain more of the price enables developers to lower initial prices — similarly dignifying the often shorter and more experimental kinds of games they might want to produce. No one, for instance, would pay full retail price for *Dear Esther*. Digital distribution also benefits indie developers by liberating them from industry controls and standards over distribution channels. Developers are not forced to conform to Microsoft’s standard number of achievements if they choose to self-publish or use alternative digital portals. Unbound by length or maturity, developers can produce a game like *QWOP*, *Super Press Space to Win*, or *Don’t Shit Your Pants* on Kongregate or Newgrounds. Digital distribution also allows for a gradual development cycle like *Minecraft*’s, in which the game is released in alpha or beta with small additions over time rather than a defined release and periodic large expansions.

It is impossible to provide a single motivation for the indie scene’s dependence on alternative production and distribution structures. On the one hand, it may be the explicit rejection of hegemony, an outlet of radical anti-authoritarianism — rejection that Hebdige (2002) sees as a way of incorporating objection into a style and carving out space for a subculture (p. 3) — and on the other hand, reliance on these alternatives could simply be the result of necessity in the absence of better tools. Marcus “Notch” Persson (2012), on the more anti-authoritarian end,

responded to a software patent lawsuit filed against his company tweeting, “If needed, I will throw piles of money at making sure they don’t get a cent.” Even if the logical approach to being sued is limiting the cost of litigation, Persson so ideologically opposes the idea of software patents that he would willingly “waste” money in order to punish someone who relies on exploiting those patents. The decision, therefore, to make Persson’s game *Minecraft* in Java — a free non-proprietary code — clearly carries the ideological politics emphasized in his comments. Some indie developers wear those anti-authoritarian precepts on their sleeves: Dan Marshall (2012a) tweeted, for instance, “As an indie, it’s really hard to balance the desire to make a personal, intricate game against the constant desire to fuck off to the [publisher].” *Super Meat Boy* developers McMillan and Refenes found their way to do so, Tom Goldman (2010) reports, opposing Xbox Live Arcade’s DLC policy, requiring all DLC after the first to cost money, with a “loophole of awesome” by providing a way of introducing all future new content through the initial DLC. Team Meat explained, “It is nice to have the power to totally say ‘fuck you’ to that system and go our own way” (Goldman, 2010).

While much of what defines indie games depends on ideology and economics, Indie media is more than that. It is equally defined by the existence of a subculture that seeks and supports that media — certainly at the early stages of development, if not later in the movement. In some ways, the subculture of fans is a structural necessity to the existence of such a movement; Azerrad’s reference to indie rock being based on actual structures, such as college radio stations, cable access shows, and small record stores includes the crucial human element: students working at the stations, store owners willing to stock the music — to say nothing of the fans that see the shows, pay for tickets and records, and, occasionally, offer a place to sleep (Azerrad, 2001, p. 27). Without any of those things, there would exist no alternatives to hegemonic production — no independent record labels, places to sleep, or venues to play or be heard. Significantly, this is not simply a matter of coincidence: many artists define independence in explicit connection to the fan subculture. Azerrad’s decision, for instance, to ignore writing about “indie” bands that signed under major labels in *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, such as R.E.M, is framed in those terms: “Virtually every band did their best and most influential work during their indie years; and once they went to a major label, an important connection to the underground community was invariably lost” (p. 5). Developer Mojang has similarly followed that ideal. Christian Nutt (2012) reported Mojang CEO’s claim: “They say we’re the first company in history to crowdsource a defense in court.” The article specifically notes the company is “known for its tight relationship with its community.” Mojang lived up to that connection when it hired community mod developers Bukkit as part of the official Mojang staff (see Walton, 2012). One might consider the rise in crowdsourced funding through websites such as Indiegogo and Kickstarter as an outcropping of this same relationship between artists on the one hand and an active supporting fan community on the other (see Kain, 2012). Just as bands gain popularity “one set of ears at a time” (Oakes, 2009, p. 59), indie games too depend heavily on word of mouth to stand out from each other as well as publicized mainstream titles.

Intermingling with the structural elements that construct an indie media movement is a strong sense of morality contrasted explicitly with profiteering. Newman (2011) describes how the indie film movement sees itself as a contrast to mainstream film “which is more popular and commercially significant, but less culturally legitimate” (p. 2). The indie rock scene of the ‘80s likewise “hinged on purism and authenticity” (Azerrad, 2001, p. 8) as a rejection of Reagan era

“selfishness, greed and arrogance” (p. 6), making their music not just a style or sound but part of a way of life that was “a downright moral imperative” (p. 6). Azerrad describes how the band Fugazi “staked out the indie scene as the moral high ground of the music industry...indie wasn’t just do-it-yourself, it was Do the Right Thing” (p. 377). This same moral component echoes the sentiments of many indie developers. Kogel (2012) points to a defining “indie ethos” characteristic of the movement that “their game follows an uncompromised artistic vision” and “some disregard for money, unless they are bordering on homelessness.” He contrasts this ethos to Zynga, which despite releasing games similar to those of “real” indie developers is “evil:” “They are evil,” Kogel states, “because they bluntly prioritize money over creative vision. If money comes first, neither the format nor the price can change that a developer is not seen as indie.” *Indie Game Magazine* (About IGM, 2012) defines “indie” itself on its site as “Independent. Small. Good.” Nathan Grayson (2012) simultaneously indicates indie, at one time, “stood for freedom of expression and unbridled experimental spirit,” though at the same time “pretentious.”

### **Indie Style and Mainstream Opportunity**

Perhaps Grayson’s ambivalence towards the term indie — its representation of smart experimentalism with pretentiousness and ego — emphasizes the most crucial aspect of indie movements or any artistic movement; they change. However, the goal of this article is not to attend to the internal difficulties movements face on their own. Indie gaming today undoubtedly faces those same problems as indie music or film of the past, but not all problems are self-imposed. Indie gaming’s success and popularity have created the fertile grounds for co-optation from mainstream publishers — a threat in itself, to be sure. Beyond the immediate problems imposed, like when developers are bought out, comes a more subtle but equally significant force: semantic confusion. “Indie” as a moniker subsequently loses its clarity, leaving developers and fans alike unable to easily distinguish indie games in their original ideological, as opposed to stylistic, sense from those that are not. This in itself would be relatively unimportant if the games were all there was. However, many developers on the ground floor of indie game development see indie as representative of much more — as previously detailed, a conscious alternative to the status-quo and a moral, artistic high-ground. To lose the clarity of the meaning of “indie” and to lose the ability to easily distinguish the politics behind the games effectively deprives developers who want their games to present those kinds of anti-authoritarian views of the means to do so through their work.

The primary issue at stake is that indie movements change by definition as they become popular. Accounts of indie movements across media point to similarities in the context of that media at the movements’ inceptions: alternative production and distribution structures, supportive fan subcultures, and feelings of moral or artistic superiority over the mainstream. Eventually, however, the meanings of the products themselves can develop into something separate: an indie style parallel to that indie ideological substance. Representatives of indie movements dispute this notion, especially early in the movement; Azerrad (2001) indicates, “The underground’s musical diversity meant there was no stylistic bandwagon for the media to latch on to, so the record-buying public had to find things there on a band-by-band basis, rather than buying into a bunch of talk about a ‘new sound’” (p. 10). For indie gaming, most positive definitions of indie gaming sidestep style entirely, speaking about “passion,” games “designed from the trenches” by a single

person or small group (Rosen, 2009). These secondary qualities are those previously identified as the core of indie in the purist state, but it does not remain so clearly defined for everyone.

Eventually, movements develop an aesthetic of some kind. The DIY mentality of '80s indie rock bands created something of a set of tendencies towards lo-fi sounds. For indie games, the same birth of a distinct style has also emerged. There are elements of gameplay, such as a focus on "mechanics, abstract concepts, and unique angles" (Burke, 2012) on the one hand. There are also content motifs: "puzzle platformers, chiptunes and chunky pixels, simple game mechanics with complex outcomes" (Kogel, 2012). These stylistic practices can quickly become the basis for ridicule; Grayson (2012) addresses the criticisms of pretention: "If you're an indie developer, you must cry ones and zeroes and bleed chunky red pixels. Every action performed in your game... has to be some form of symbolism." Oakes' (2009) quote from a student speaks to a problem that goes beyond the music her class was addressing specifically: "Indie's really just hipsters in skinny jeans. That's all it is anymore" (p. 194).

It is important to understand that this development of style appears to occur irrespective of corporate involvement and intrusion, and it carries considerable baggage to those who are seen as belonging to it. A style emerges, in part, because of those limiting economics and beliefs that its members consider defining features of the movement. If a number of bands, for example, are inexperienced at recording their music, all of the recordings will emerge with a lo-fi quality. The same is the case for indie video games subject to the production and distribution structures that define the movement internally. Because 2D is cheaper to produce than 3D, indie games trend towards the 2D. Pixels are easier to program than circles or spheres, hence the voxel craze. Indie gaming today is frequently charged with being stylistically nostalgic, chronically recreating the 8- and 16-bit games of the creators' youths, but that nostalgia can only come from the implicit rejection of the present. This is all to say that the existence of an "indie style" for games (and other media) is the natural result of the very political and economic conditions from which the indie movement defined itself early on, and while this style may open the movement to criticisms on the basis of lacking originality or losing its innovative edge, as Grayson does, the clarity of purpose remains. Games that have the indie style have it specifically because of the conditions that created it; thus, its politics of production remain apparent.

The danger of the emergence of an indie style is not the style itself; rather, it is only with the emergence of a style to co-opt that mainstream industry can intrude and create the semantic confusion that undermines the politics of production and distribution from outside. The issue at stake does not concern developers who begin as independent and accept their place in hegemony after their game becomes profitable and publically lauded. Rather, what happens to the developers who are either never offered the opportunity to join a major developer, or who deliberately refuse to join one? What control do they lose that they themselves did not intentionally sacrifice?

Once an indie style emerges from the collective group of artists collaborating and producing games under the same economic conditions — based, again, on similar kinds of politics of anti-authoritarianism — the ground is laid for profiteering. What is significant about co-optation is that some indie movements never experience it. The prominent indie rock of the '80s did not explode into the mainstream, while grunge of the '90s was entirely exploited. The essential

missing component is popularity and potential popularity outside of the movement's subculture. Many indie rock bands, though well lauded later on, were barely profitable, or had little staying power at the times when they were most influential. Azerrad (2001) points out that "Mission of Burma's only sin was bad timing – the support system that would spring up for underground bands later in the decade largely didn't exist yet" (p. 95). One might likewise apply this logic for indie film, where the absence of videotape prevented small productions from finding larger publics outside of the small theaters in which they could be shown (see Museum of Art and Design, 2012). This same logic helps understand why indie games prior to the wide spread of digital distribution platforms never received the kind of mainstream attention contemporary games acquired. Thousands of games by hobbyists and small teams cluttered early internet, yet today they are almost entirely forgotten; no history of video games should be complete without them, yet no history of video games has ever documented them. Is this to say that these games were "bad" or unimportant? It is more likely that the lack of distribution capacity prior to high speed internet and the absence of a commodification platform for these products left such games little chance of popularity, dwarfed as they were by high quality products in arcades, home consoles, and PC.

Still, some movements gain that traction, as contemporary indie games have. Once a style emerges and displays profit potential, mainstream forces use their resources to emulate the style of indie media production artificially, rather than letting the style emerge naturally from the economics and politics of production at the movement's core. In the case of the co-optation of indie film, one might look to the Miramax era, where films that would have been completely independent of any major studio's grasp might be discovered at Sundance and be published through a "mini-major" subsidiary company owned and controlled by a major Hollywood studio. Able to overcome limitations of distribution native to other independent films, Miramax was able to take a style and make it visible; Perren (2012) describes how Miramax "was the most consistent in acquiring and releasing films that expanded beyond a core art-house crowd to attract a wider audience" (p. 3). For indie video games, the process has been much the same. Consider *DeathSpank*; stylistically, it bears the hallmarks of indie games. When *Monkey Island* developer Ron Gilbert joined Hothead Games to create *DeathSpank*, the description reeked of the nostalgia to which McMillan alluded to in the development of *Super Meat Boy*: "Monkey Island meets Diablo" (Fahey, 2008) is how the press release describes it. Bayes (2011) of *Indie Game Magazine* primarily praises the game for its humor and play style "that made Lucasarts a company worth talking about twenty years ago." He also explains, "The graphics aren't anything to write home about, but this isn't an AAA release." Yet, in some ways, it may be. The press release announcing Gilbert's joining of Hothead demonstrates that Electronic Arts likely had a part to play in the game's development, despite the developers themselves being described as "a bunch of guys making games that people will actually have fun playing" (Bayes, 2011). For instance, Gilbert says, "I've spent over four years trying to find the right publisher for this strange little game" (Fahey, 2008). Indie game development, the way more orthodox developers have described it, would not have seen this as problematic, as part of the ideology itself calls for developers to shun publication through major corporations like EA in the first place.

What is significant about cases like this and other games published by major studios is that their indie-ness is often unquestioned. Reviews for *DeathSpank* (see Nelson, 2010; McShea, 2010; Steimer, 2010) make no mention about whether it is indie or not while *Indie Game Magazine's*

review, on the other hand, takes the game's indie-ness for granted, paying no particular mention to its connections to EA. This is the demonstration of co-optation—that it is possible to create a game that passes for indie without bearing the background markings that define the movement according to its early adherents. With increasing co-optation, games become labeled “indie,” especially in mainstream press outlets, that would otherwise puzzle members of the community—a practice that is uncommon at the moment but will unquestioningly grow in practice as “indie” dilutes over time.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of games being labeled indie at odds with the movement's own tenets came in late February 2012 when G4 television's *Attack of the Show* program reviewed *The Simpsons Arcade Game* and *Gotham City Imposters*, declaring what they have in common is that they are indie games (Kingsley and Malis, 2012). These two games counter the economic basis of independent game development from both ends. In the case of the *Simpsons Arcade Game* (originally *The Simpsons Arcade*), this was a game released famously as an arcade cabinet game as well as on PC in 1991, developed by Novatrade Software and published by Konami (*The Simpsons Arcade*, 1991). Coming in the golden age of arcade beat-em-ups like *Final Fight* or *X-men Arcade*, one would hardly classify the original game as being independent in either spirit or execution; its graphics were comparable to those of the time, and while it is looked back upon with nostalgia, it is not nostalgic itself in the way of, say *Super Meat Boy* — the *Simpsons* television show had only been on the air since 1989, after all. Why, then, when the game was rereleased for Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network would a previously mainstream game be dubbed “indie?” Perhaps the matter of *Gotham City Imposters* is even more outlandish. This multiplatform digital release was developed by Monolith Productions and published by Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment. Reviewer Allistair Pinsof (2011) calls the game “an interesting twist” that “feels like a carbon-copy” of mainstream first person shooter *Call of Duty*. It seems odd that this game should then be considered “indie”, especially given that some claim “Shooters are not indie” (Kogel, 2012).

In reality, there is only one thread that ties the indie core ideals, *The Simpsons Arcade Game*, and *Gotham City Imposters* together: digital distribution. As mainstream publishers shift attention to the growing digital marketplaces for mobile devices and consoles, an important signifier attributed to indie game development increasingly encompasses mainstream alternatives. It is not merely that the games under production resemble popular stylistic trends in indie games, such as nostalgia and voxels, but the places where the games would be found such as Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network, and Steam's indie tag as well include more and more games that lack the independence from major publishers central to the intentions of a number of people who consider themselves indie developers. Publishers have managed to essentially infiltrate both the style characteristic of the movement and the places where the products would be sought. By enunciating — using the term “indie” — mainstream developers, publishers, advertisers, and journalists presuppose, according to de Certeau (2004), “*appropriation* of language by the speaker who uses it” (p. 1250). Meanwhile, despite having origin in the fan and underground community, de Certeau asserts that “*power relationships* define the networks in which they are inscribed and delimit the circumstances from which they can profit” (p. 1250). By virtue of superior influence, reach, visibility, and existing credibility — qualities that upstart-indie-folk generally lack in comparison — even equal numbers of games created by fully independent developers and mainstream publishers of “indie” structurally favor the mainstream.

The effects of this infiltration, of course, include the natural spread of the wealth being spent on downloadable games — both classically indie and mainstream published titles. However, the effects on the meaning of “indie” and the values of existing indie titles are significant besides this. Most significantly, the combined marketplaces and media outlets for indie games — the collection of games that were unquestionably indie before and those that now operate by the name regardless of political economics — render it impossible to separate differences that existed before between indie and mainstream titles. Insiders and developers distinguished themselves as indie by presenting games that featured chiptunes, more simple graphics, retro game designs and heaps of nostalgia for earlier titles. The increasing number of mainstream published digital titles based on these kinds of features as well as rereleases of classic games for modern systems deprives those features of their symbolic properties connecting them from the game to the independent developer and the indie community. This, combined with the increasing technical and graphic improvements of games that are being independently developed and produced, such as *Legends of Grimrock* or *Amnesia: the Dark Descent*, makes it harder to evaluate a game’s “indie-ness” by its appearance. The increasing similarities in appearances and market spaces force a player to invest extra effort in determining whether a downloadable title is indie or it is not, or change what indie means to accommodate them all under a single umbrella term.

Still, there is more than a glut of mainstream downloadable titles engorging the “indie” term. Increased attention brought about by media spotlights has further expanded the meaning of the term. Digital and print magazines, such as *PC Gamer*, *Indie Game Magazine*, and *Game Informer* bring increasing attention to indie games amongst mainstream products, along with popular gaming blogs, such as *Kotaku* and *Rock-Paper-Shotgun*. The result of this attention is visibility and hype around titles that would never have been known outside of small subcultural spaces. If indie gaming’s core was, in part, niche appreciation for a product that one needed to seek deliberately, popularity deprives the games of their insider status. Coupled with the fact that spaces in blogs and magazines devoted to indie games (or at least downloadable titles) cover both traditionally independent titles and mainstream downloadable fare further blurs the distinctions between what an indie game is and what it is not, as well as opens the space for interpreting that difference for the mainstream game buying public. If G4 can call both *Terraria* and *The Simpsons Arcade* “indie”, who will challenge them in front of their television audience?

In the process of dismissing signifiers of independence from the apparent qualities of games and the markets for those games, as well as opening their presence to the larger gaming community, the co-optation and scrutiny of indie and downloadable games has created a gradation of indie games, rather than a single, or at least more easily comprehensive, categorization. As blog posts attempt to define indie and attach indie games to the core political and economic values once at the center (see Rosen, 2009 and Kogel, 2012), others, including large numbers of commenters in forums, are expanding the terminology — or declaring “indie” obsolete — rather than attempting to frustratingly categorize games at the margins of “indie-ness.” Grayson (2012) points out, “To be a developer of independent games and to be ‘indie’ are now two entirely different things.” He claims that terms like it “hold an incredibly small amount of water. I mean, what’s *Reset*? Is it indie? Triple-A? It’s also first-person, but certainly not a shooter... So then, what could we possibly call it?” One forum post on the subject of defining “indie” finds the poster struggling to

pin it down in a similar way: “It's one of those terms where it might be hard to hash out a specific definition, but it's fairly easy to identify games that most people would agree are ‘indie.’ Sort of an ‘I'll know it when I see it’ situation” (Sones, 2010). The debate raged considerably around the release of EA's indie bundle (see Grayson, 2012; Winchester, 2012; Rose, 2012), which commentators indicated most transparently collided with what indie could mean, but even then, the bundle had its defenders. Ryan Langley of Halfbrick countered, “I mean, would you be pissed if Microsoft made an XBLA Indie Bundle with *Braid*, *Fez*, *Castle Crashers*, *Toy Soldiers & Limbo*? All Microsoft published” (Rose, 2012).

This confusion is far more than a simple inconvenience or irritation to the indie gaming community, as it sees itself taken over from the outside. Rather, indie developers are inevitably becoming confused with that mainstream community and becoming part of it. When mainstream publishers involved themselves in the indie and digital gaming marketplaces, the games that had been tightly connected with their developers and communities became fetishized, and the discourse of indie could no longer maintain the political-economic function it once had. Markers of difference that indie games use to indicate separation from the mainstream — blockier graphics, innovating game design, digital sounds, and nostalgic properties that subtly object to the status-quo — are reduced to appearance alone because they no longer explicitly belong to a subset of games produced independently of that status-quo.

Marx's (1915) explanation of commodity fetishism brings striking clarity to this separation of the politics of production from the product itself, even when the product is unchanged. In the particular case, Marx refers to the fetishized product as a result of abstracted labourers: “The equalization of the most different kinds of labour can be the result only of an abstraction from their inequalities, or of reducing them to their common denominator, viz., expenditure of human labour power or human labour in the abstract” (p. 84). When commodities, be they boots or video games, enter a market in which they are compared to each other, the means of production are likewise abstracted or reduced. Only when games entered the independent game market without being created like other indie games did the meaning of indie become obscured: the common denominator for those games had once included political economy and an independent spirit, aside from the similarities between the games themselves that resulted from these things. When the political economics of the products changed as a group, the common denominator between all games being called “indie” turned into mere appearance, rendering production invisible.

With the product fetishized from its production, the politics of producers can no longer reach players through the games, leading both to the reproduction of ideologies that favor the mainstream as well as the confusion of the ideology being encouraged by independent developers. Most directly, the fetishization of indie games serves to neutralize the protests against mainstream development and publication practices many indie developers oppose. Andy Schatz explains, “Big-budget games are boring... Good indie games are never built for a demographic: they are built with the passion of the developer. In the best cases, that passion is infused into the game in such a way that it rubs off on the gamer” (Parker, 2011). Marcus Persson was even more direct: “Indies are saving gaming. EA is methodically destroying it” (Rosen, 2012). For such developers, the decision to be independent is not strictly out of need, that they are too unskilled to be hired; Persson's company specifically rejected an attempt by EA

CEO John Riccitiello to buy them out (see French, 2011). Being indie both implicitly and explicitly opposes mainstream practices by choosing to deviate. All of this becomes void when the ability to separate games that are indie without publisher support and those that are disappears. Both are just indie games because the production practices are rendered opaque.

Adorno and Horkheimer's (2004) critique of the culture industry speaks to the ambitions of this kind of aesthetic imitation: "In the culture industry this imitation finally becomes absolute. Having ceased to be anything but a style, it reveals the latter's secret: obedience to the social hierarchy" (p. 1245). By reinventing indie games to allow their own entrance, mainstream industry demonstrates its power by exercising its ideological practices — ideological domination in the form of simple capitalist profit seeking. It cannot be said that the involvement of the mainstream in indie development and publishing is non-ideological or incidental; Althusser (2004) indicates, "There is no practice except by and in an ideology" (p. 697), while Foucault (1990) further asserts that "there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives" (p. 95). The power relations at stake may be complex, but they are not entirely undirected and thereby free of accusation. Though ultimately one may determine that the mainstream is simply operating according to the parameters of capitalist enterprise, it only indicates the real ideological stakes as capitalism confronts a popular alternative ideology and apparatus.

### **What the Man Can't Take Away from Us**

As damaging as mainstream intrusion and complication of "indie" and indie games has been, steps are being taken to ensure that the spirit of independence remains central to a core group of developers and fans — whatever name they may be (Dan Marshall, 2012b, explained, "We're simply going to have to come up with a NEW term for 'indie.' One that's clearly-defined and THE MAN can't take away from us"). Reminiscent of Warren Robinett's secret inclusion of his digital signature in a hidden room in *Adventure* to oppose Atari taking full credit for a game he programmed entirely himself (see Montfort and Bogost, 2009), some indie developers mark their games with their names to indicate the personal nature of the project. *Minecraft* may open with a Mojang title card, but occasionally, the starting screen will tell the player, "Made by Notch." *Lone Survivor* likewise is subtitled, "A game by Jasper Byrne," and the same of *Sword and Sorcery EP* being attributed to the Superbrothers and song/sound creator Jim Guthrie. Developers have also diverged from typical mainstream corporate practices in community involvement and cultivation by personally engaging with players through social media. Every member of Mojang has a twitter account and members of the team working on *Minecraft* comment and answer questions on the game's subcategory on Reddit. Edmund McMillen's blog (McMillen, 2012) is cluttered with fan art as well as a link for people to provide questions for a Q&A session. Young unknowns and upstarts join together through the same networks that already existed for indie development, such as Tigsources.com.

Perhaps the most promising form of opposition is the rise in popularity of crowdsourced funding platforms, such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo. Rather than forcing developers to develop projects on the side or push unfinished goods to market and finish them over time, platforms like Kickstarter enable money to come in up front — a luxury previously reserved for large established developers and those under patronage of major publishers. Because funding a game

through a site like Kickstarter directly emphasizes the production process, it reconnects games to production politics through a space that, at least thus far, is impervious to mainstream co-optation; no one would give Activision money to fund a game given its outstanding resources, but independence's primary problem serves here as an advantage. Edwards (2012) explains, "For players: they get to influence what games get made, and support their favourite developers directly." This turns out to be a windfall to successful developers with a huge potential (Kain, 2012) to compete with existing power structures.

## Conclusion

It would appear, perhaps, that the possibility of indie developers clearly presenting anti-establishment perspectives by their mere existence is ending, as indie gaming comes to look more and more like the indie film sector post-Sundance and Miramax. While this is a loss to many, it is hardly insurmountable. Developers and fans alike have space to protest and seek those opportunities, from railing on Twitter to complaining on online forums. Perhaps developers who want to maintain their objections against the mainstream will need to look for ways of incorporating those critiques directly into content. For those that do not, it does not need to be a loss. In a way, the mainstream co-optation of indie games and the indie label is a victory for the game design principles they champion. The gaming landscape may still largely feature grey and brown military shooters, but something dramatic has taken place for a company like EA to seek and support the production of games that, while not necessarily as radical and anti-status-quo as some self-published games, certainly shift the landscape in favor of smarter, more innovative, and more personal titles that enrich the community, rather than merely providing distractions to them. It is, in that way, a reason to celebrate. It may not be time to consider the project of independent development over — it cannot really end as long as there is a mainstream. Still, the lasting impact of this movement has yet to appear, and deserves serious attention.

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