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Indie or Mainstream?
Tensions and Nuances between the Alternative and the Mainstream in Indie Games

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Abstract

The commercial emergence of "indie games" since 2008 represents a fundamental challenge for contemporary game studies. As we still do not have a clear definition of the indie game, its popularity and commercial success have made the conceptualization of this type of game even more complex. Far from being a pure videogame model, completely separated from the mainstream sphere, indie games often involve hybridizations and ambiguities between the alternative and the mainstream.

Thus this article aims to problematize the neat conceptualizations of indie games as an opposing "genre" to mainstream games by exploring the many tensions and nuances between the alternative and mainstream dimensions that can be identified within indie game production, culture and design.

The first part of the article focuses on the production and distribution issues, as well as on the cultural construction and artistic legitimation of indie games. The article then posits a design-centered analytical approach to indie games inspired by Kellner (1995) and based on "procedural rhetorics" (Bogost, 2006; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014). This approach is used to look at commercially successful indie games, which we consider to be an especially suitable object of study for exploring and understanding contemporary culture through the frictions between hegemonic culture and counter-culture, progressivism and conservatism, capitalism and anti-capitalism, as well as the way we conceive these notions.

Keywords: indie game, design, culture, ideology, mainstream.

Resumen. *¿Indie o mainstream?*
Tensiones y matices entre lo alternativo y lo mainstream *en los* indie games

La emergencia de los *indie games* como producto comercial desde el año 2008 supone un reto fundamental para los estudios contemporáneos del videojuego. Cuando todavía carecemos de una clara definición del *indie game*, su popularidad y comercialidad hacen que la conceptualización de este tipo de videojuego resulte más compleja si cabe. Lejos de constituir un modelo de videojuego «puro», completamente separado de la esfera *mainstream*, los *indie games* a menudo presentan hibridaciones y ambigüedades entre lo alternativo y lo *mainstream*.

En este sentido, este artículo pretende problematizar la conceptualización nítida de los *indie games* como un género opuesto a los videojuegos *mainstream*, a través de una exploración de las múltiples tensiones y matices entre lo alternativo y lo *mainstream* que pueden ser identificadas en los procesos de producción, la cultura y el diseño de los videojuegos *indie*.

La primera parte del artículo se centra en aspectos de producción y distribución, así como en la construcción cultural y la legitimación artística del *indie game*. A continuación, se desarrolla un análisis del diseño de *indie games* inspirado en Kellner (1995) y basado en la retórica procedural (Bogost, 2006; Flanagan y Nissenbaum, 2014). Este análisis se aplica a *indie games* con éxito comercial, considerándolos un objeto de estudio particularmente interesante para explorar y entender la cultura contemporánea a través de las fricciones entre cultura hegemónica y contracultura, progresismo y conservadurismo, capitalismo y anticapitalismo, y el modo en que estas nociones son concebidas.

Palabras clave: *indie game*, diseño, cultura, ideología, *mainstream*.

1. Introduction

The origins of independently produced videogames or "indie games" go back (at least) to the 80s, with young fans powering the British videogame industry by creating videogames in their bedrooms (Donovan, 2010, p. 111-138). But indie games have never been as popular as they are now since 2008, after the international success of games like *Braid* (J. Blow, 2008), *Castle Crashers* (The Behemoth, 2008) and *World of Goo* (2D Boy, 2008). These videogames and many other indie games that followed in their wake (eg Limbo [Playdead, 2010], Minecraft [Mojang, 2011], Journey [Thatgamecompany, 2012], etc.) achieved great sales success and critical acclaim. Online distribution platforms of large companies such as Steam (Valve Corporation) have now on their virtual shelves a specific space for the indie "genre".

As we still do not yet have a clear definition of the indie game, its popularity and commercial success have made the conceptualization of this type of game even more complex.

In this context, this article has two objectives. Firstly, it aims to problematize any neat conceptual distinction between "indie games" and "mainstream games", exploring the many tensions and nuances between the two categories that can be identified within indie game culture.

A reference from film studies that is particularly close to this approach is Indiewood, USA: "where Hollywood meets independent cinema", by Geoff King (2009), which is an exploration of the "area in which Hollywood and

the independent sector merge or overlap" (2009, p. 1). As King explains, with an argument that is also worth applying to "indiewood games": "films produced and distributed in this domain have attracted a mixture of praise and controversy. From one perspective, they offer an attractive blend of creativity and commerce, a source of some of the more innovative and interesting work produced in close proximity to the commercial mainstream. From another, this is an area of duplicity and compromise, in which the 'true' heritage of the independent sector is sold out, betrayed and/or co-opted into an offshoot of Hollywood" (2009, p. 1).

As a complementary objective, this article proposes an analysis of the design characteristics of popular indie games that have had remarkable sales success in recent years, based on the premise that they are an especially suitable object of study for exploring the ideological debates and disputes characteristic of our time, the tensions between mainstream culture and alternative culture, and between conservatism and progressivism (Kellner, 1995; Cassar, 2013).

The next two sections deal with the production and distribution issues, as well as with the cultural construction and artistic legitimation of indie games. The last section focuses on the aforementioned analytical contribution, oriented towards indie game design.

Indie or mainstream? Tensions and nuances in the production/distribution dimension

The rules of the Independent Games Festival (the largest annual gathering of the indie game sector, inspired by the Sundance Film Festival) state that videogames that want to be presented at this festival need to meet two conditions: (a) to have been produced by an independent developer, and (b) to have been created with an "indie spirit" (DeJong, 2013, p. 16).

Neither of these conditions are easy to objectify, as we shall see, but they do show that the indie game phenomenon is multifaceted in nature involving production and distribution processes as well as a cultural dimension and a certain design approach, regarding the so-called "indie spirit".

As for the first aspect, the indie game is partly defined by differentiating it from the hegemonic production and distribution dynamics of the videogame industry. Mainstream commercial videogames are published by major "publishers", eg Electronic Arts or Activision/Blizzard, which are usually associated with a capitalist ethos: the pursuit of economic benefits over artistic or cultural purposes (Lipkin, 2013, p. 9). Commercial videogames are also often developed by large teams with budgets that can reach hundreds of millions of dollars.

Discourses on indie games connect with traits that are quite the opposite of the above: "independent games are (said to be) usually made without the help of a publisher, have a limited budget (...), but are also groundbreaking and beyond what is proposed by the mainstream industry (...)" (Ruffino, 2013, p. 111).

The new online distribution channels play a crucial role here: they provide opportunities to access a wide audience and market games without having a publisher, either through direct ways (eg the author's personal webpage) or through the online distribution platforms of companies such as Microsoft (Xbox Live), Sony (PlayStation Network) and Valve Corporation (Steam).

This "bypassing" of the physical sales outlets makes it possible for low-budget videogames, which are intended to have low market prices, to be profitable for their creators, or at least allow them to cover their investment.

Other features that are usually associated with indie games are the use of low-cost technological tools (Flash, Java, open source software, etc.), and the use of social networks for crowdfunding through platforms like Kickstarter or Indiegogo (Lipkin, 2013, p. 12, 20).

However, some authors have questioned the "indieness" of the production and distribution forms of the most representative games of the indie phenomenon in recent years (Martin and Deuze, 2009; DeJong, 2013).

To begin with, De Jong states that "most of the games that people nowadays think of as indie (…), like *Super Meat Boy, Flower* and *Braid* (…), were distributed via platforms that are owned by major publishers; they only gained such commercial success because they were successfully marketed and branded as indie games on these platforms" (DeJong, 2013, p. 16).

Moreover, a supposed "indie game" like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) was developed by a fairly large team of 14 people and published by Sony Computer Entertainment, with a budget of "multiple millions of dollars" (according to its creative director, Jenova Chen,[1] which puts in question its "indie" condition.

Martin and Deuze (2009) argue that the concept of "independence" is extremely complex to analyze in the contemporary videogame, and that the relationships between the indie and the mainstream, rather than corresponding to a polarized confrontation, present many gray areas, including negotiations and agreements between developers and publishers with very specific factors in each project, and even symbiotic relationships based on common interests.

In this sense, these authors stress the importance of the intellectual property in the power relationships established between creators and publishers (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 282). They also highlight the growing interest of big companies in publishing "indie" games, and even establishing their own publishing brand of indie style titles, for example the case of Capcom's *Clover* (2009, p. 284-285), as well as the appearance of small publishers that specialize in publishing indie projects, such as Nicalis.

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1.   Visit: <https://www.vg247.com/2013/03/13/journey-cost-multiple-millions-of-dollars-no-royalties-for-a-year/>.

Artistic legitimation and ideological tensions in the cultural construction of indie games

Beyond a series of tangible features related to production and distribution processes and economic aspects, the indie game phenomenon is also (and perhaps above all) a cultural construction.

A central issue in this respect is the construction of the cultural identity of the indie game authors (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 280). In fact, the "politique des auteurs" of the French/European cinema, which once was a fundamental hallmark of independent films compared to Hollywood cinema, now resonates with the indie game phenomenon. One manifestation of this is the emphasis placed on the author's name in the paratexts and display screens of indie games— for example, the message "made by Notch" at the beginning of *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011).

Parker (2013, p. 45-47) points out that before the strong artistic legitimacy that many indie games authors now enjoy, a number of preconditions needed to appear in the cultural ecosystem of videogames. The first thing that was necessary was the emergence of a series of "prestigious works" in the mainstream area by authors who were exalted by critics and the public as "artists"; eg cult videogames like *Ico* (Team Ico, 2001) and *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005) by Fumito Ueda. The progressive incorporation of game studies in the academic world was also slowly preparing the ground for the emergence/growth of the indie game phenomenon, with its authors strongly aligned with artistic and aesthetic aspirations, as well as, in many cases, with the idea of videogame creation as a political/ideological act.

Martin and Deuze (2009, p. 278-279) also point out that technological factors, such as the new digital distribution channels and the rise of videogames for mobile devices, were also relevant preconditions for facilitating the emergence of individual authorship, as well as new opportunities for small development teams.

In the favorable context defined by these preconditions, the discourses of the indie games creators and other cultural agents (critics, the media, academia, fans, festivals such as The Indie Games Festival and Indie Cade) have gradually formed a certain sociocultural profile of the indie games author, which has now spread throughout the collective imagination.

This profile is marked from the outset by the aspiration of "creative freedom". The indie authors postulate the creation of videogames as an act of personal expression, where the author should feel emotionally and ideologically very much implicated in the project. Naturally, this contrasts with the vision of the mainstream game as a commercial product orientated towards "superficial" entertainment, as well as with the idea of the working conditions of the large companies in the industry constraining the freedom and creativity of their workers (Lipkin, 2013, p. 11, 14; Westecott, 2013, p. 79-83; DeJong, 2012, p. 20).

This is closely linked to indie authors (and the fans of indie games) having a strong hostility towards the mainstream videogame (DeJong, 2012, p. 22;

Ruffino, 2013, p. 110-111; Parker, 2013, p. 54). A paradigmatic example of this is the following statement by Tommy Refenes, coauthor of *Super Meat Boy*, in the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* (Swirsky and Pajot, 2012).

> "... I'm not going to go work at Electronic Arts or Epic. That sounds horrible, that sounds like Hell to me. So if it comes out and people don't like it, and people hate it, and it has a Metacritic score of like 20, and everyone thinks it's awful... It doesn't really make a difference (...) We tried to make it as fun and as accessible as possible. [However,] if people want to buy *Modern Warfare* or *Halo: Reach* that's fine, because I think those games are shit. If that's what people want, then they don't want my games, because I don't make shit games."

This rejection of mainstream video games is deeply connected with a certain ethic and/or style in the way the creation of video games is understood and carried out by indie game authors. They usually appeal to "do-it-yourself" creative philosophies (Lipkin, 2013, p. 11, 15; Westecott, 2013, p. 80-84, Parker, 2013, p. 46), the idea of "small but good" (Indie Game Magazine, in Lipkin, 2013, p. 14), and the defense of low cost technological tools, combined with an ideal of democratizing access to videogame development (Anthropy, 2012; Westecott, 2013, p. 81).

Behind all this lies a significant ideological component: anti-establishment attitudes, associated with anti-capitalism, criticisms of neoliberalism, the desire to shed light on society's "blind spots" (eg, socially weak groups, stereotyped or under-represented in the mass media and in the videogame market), etc.

Moreover, note that statements such as those made by Tommy Refenes, cited above, are also linked to a certain sense of cultural/artistic superiority of the authors and fans of indie games with respect to mainstream videogames. These discourses often allude to the indie creators and the games themselves being more "authentic", having a higher aesthetic and experiential value beyond videogames as mere entertainment. In this sense, the issues addressed in indie games and the way they are treated are often suggested to be more "mature" or "transcendent" than in the common videogame: indie games often deal with universal and existential themes, such as love or death, focusing on them abstractly and/or with dense symbolisms throughout the game (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 289; Parker, 2013, p. 48).

At the same time, a significant element in the "strategy" of artistic legitimacy of the indie game is a certain cultural appropriation of experimentalism with the "game design". The personal expression of the author through game mechanics and other elements of the game design is regarded as the "essence" of the art of creating videogames (cfr.: "procedural rhetoric", Bogost, 2006), which is opposed to videogame blockbusters, in the sense that their design often relies heavily on cinematic narrative. This leads to the idea that the mainstream or blockbuster videogame has less artistic "purity" than indie games (Parker, 2013, p. 54-55; Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 280-281). In any case, it is interesting to note how, from a contextual limitation (having major film narratives in videogames implies a considerable increase in the budget),

there emerges a legitimizing discourse on the cultural level, which enhances the artistic status of the indie game and its authors (Simon, 2013).

In the end, all of this connects with the social hierarchies of taste (Bourdieu, 1988): indie games are, in a way, a new cultural area through which some videogame fans can obtain a culturally "distinguished" position, separating themselves from the tastes of the majority.

Regarding the cultural vehicles for spreading indie game culture and the construction of the cultural identity of the authors, we need to highlight "The Rise of the Videogame Zinesters", the theory/manifesto by Anna Anthropy (2012)– a cult book among indie game fans that, explicitly or implicitly, deals with many of the arguments legitimizing the indie game reviewed here.

Lipkin (2013, p. 20) underlines the activism of many indie game authors in social networks; for example, the fact that all members of the Mojang team (*Minecraft*) have an active Twitter account, or the popular personal blog of Edmund McMillen, creator of *Super Meat Boy* (2008).

In connection with this, the important role of indie game fan communities, such as Indiegames.com, Indie Statik and TIG Source, for the construction and cultural legitimation of indie games and their creators should not be forgotten. These communities show a remarkable collaborative spirit, with young people who aspire to one day become indie authors becoming involved in peer-to-peer teaching dynamics (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 290; DeJong, 2012, p. 19). Furthermore, these communities are often proactively involved in the development of certain indie projects from the beginning (collaborating in tests, providing reviews and recommendations for authors, etc.), and even sometimes contributing to the financing of these projects through crowdfunding.

Meanwhile, Parker (2013, p. 50-55) stresses the role of the specialized press and game scholars for understanding the rise of indie games and their cultural legitimacy in recent years. As an example, he refers to a short article by the scholar Ian Bogost on the indie game *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 2011), a small videogame without a budget and with very limited graphics. In his blog, Bogost exalted *Passage* as a fundamental example of the expressive possibilities of videogames (focused on the game design, the "procedural rhetoric"), as well as to "talk" about important issues (love, death, loss) and provoking deep thoughts and emotions in the user. Later, other specialized academics and journalists would continue this laudatory discourse. Currently, *Passage* is a cult indie game and Jason Rohrer, who was an amateur when he made the game, has become a professional videogame creator with notable prestige in the indie community.

Finally, it is interesting to conclude this section with a reflection on *Indie Game*: *The Movie*, the documentary that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and which narrates the personal experience of several indie authors (mainly Jonathan Blow - *Braid*, Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes - *Super Meat Boy*, and Phil Fish - *Fez*). The documentary presents these young videogame creators to a large extent as romantic heroes, lone, talented creators facing a giant industry, who sacrifice their personal lives to pursue

a childhood/adolescent dream and an artistic ideal. For its narrative quality and "hook", this documentary has been instrumental in mobilizing affects toward the indie game as a cultural phenomenon and to its heroes, those young videogame creators.

However, there are certain complexities and ideological frictions behind this "heroic" portrayal of indie games creators. Indeed, in a context in which contemporary capitalism has become associated with the ideal of the neoliberal subject, it is certainly complicated to attribute a counter-cultural label to "indie" creators who actually fit the profile of the lone entrepreneur (Ruffino, 2013, p. 116-119).

According to Nikolas Rose (1998, 1999), the concept of the neoliberal subject is based on the idea of autonomous individualism: a subject who is responsible for themselves to find work and which corresponds to the ideal of becoming an "entrepreneur" of themselves. Thus the neoliberal subject is associated with values such as meritocracy, constant appeals to talent and hard work, and the ability to adapt to an increasingly unstable job environment, which requires workers to be constantly updating and reinventing themselves and have a highly competitive attitude. All this, implicitly refers to the figure of a "hero" with great adaptive capacity and autonomy, whose very existence would call into question the necessity for the welfare state and the public administration's strong involvement in the employment and social fields.

It is not difficult to identify many of the key features of the neoliberal subject in the discursive construction of the indie games authors in *Indie Game: The Movie* and in other texts. In this sense, it is inevitable that we ask ourselves whether the "heroes" of the indie game phenomenon really are counter-cultural heroes, or rather a complex and to a great extent contradictory mixture between it and the neoliberal subject, namely the entrepreneurial hero.

Indie or mainstream? A game design analysis

The implicit tensions, ambiguities and contradictions between the alternative and the mainstream in indie games that we identified in the previous sections; both in production/distribution and in the cultural dimension, must also occur at the design level.

In this sense, Sudmann (2012) stated that, contrary to what the indie games author's and fan's hostility towards the mainstream seems to imply, there is not a radical denial or rejection of the forms and design traits of mainstream videogames in indie games (see also: DeJong, 2012, p. 18, 22).

Moreover, the growing consolidation and popularization of a certain "indie style" in the last few years has brought about the phenomenon known as co-optation: the emulation of indie game design style in videogames that have not been developed under real indie production and distribution conditions. For example, Lipkin (2013, p. 16) cites the case of *DeathSpank* (Hothead, 2010), a videogame by the renowned author Ron Gilbert and promoted by

the big publisher Electronic Arts, which the critics, including Indie Games Magazine, adopted as "indie" (see also Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 290).

In the reverse sense, Lipkin (2013, p. 18) points out that "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*, it is becoming harder to evaluate a game's 'indieness' by its appearance".

In fact, sometimes authors deliberately mix indie elements with mainstream elements as a design strategy to make the game more appealing to a wider audience. In this regard, the following statements (which seem to reveal a certain degree of guilty feelings) by Edmund McMillen in the magazine Eurogamer (6-29-2012) are significant:

> "*Super Meat Boy* is the closest thing to selling out that I've ever done, but it's not. But it is safe. It's very, very safe, and I knew it was safe going in, and I was playing it safe because I was risking so much (…) I don't want to risk my whole f***ing career and my future on something that is uncertain (…) I'm not comfortable risking [programming and good friend] Tommy [Refenes'], my future and my wife and everybody else."

In any case, as researchers, instead of "worrying" about the high ideological complexity of the indie game phenomenon and its apparent contradictions and ambiguities, we can take advantage of it, as we suggested at the beginning, by adopting the indie game as a very suitable object of study to explore the ideological debates and disputes which are characteristic of our time, the tensions between mainstream culture and alternative culture, and between conservatism and progressivism.

Along this line, we propose an analysis of the design characteristics of popular indie games in recent years, including their sales and critical success. Indie games that are particularly likely to reflect the tensions between the alternative and the mainstream will be focused on in this article.

The analysis is based on D. Kellner's "double hermeneutics" (1995), which is an analytical approach to media culture texts that, instead of looking for a unique and hypercoherent discourse or "message", focuses on exploring latent ideological tensions between conservatism and progressivism, such as the reinforcement of certain stereotypes and the transgression of others, formal conventions vs. formal innovations, etc. These latent ideological tensions, which the analyst of media culture works must unravel, can be addressed either within a particular, individual text or across a coherent set of several texts (see also Cassar, 2013).

On the formal level, the analysis is informed by game design theory and procedural rhetorics and the theory of game design as an expressive medium (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Adams, 2010; Bogost, 2006; Frasca, 2009; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014).

As a way of presenting the results of the analysis, we define five indie-mainstream tensions that characterize the design of the popular indie game in recent years.

Expressive singularity + popular genres

Many popular indie games are characterized by a dense symbolism of the game design in the representation of characters, worlds and underlying themes, in line with procedural rhetoric theory (Bogost, 2006; Frasca, 2009).

A paradigmatic case in this respect is *Braid* (J. Blow, 2008). As the game goes on, the story of Tim progressively unfolds: he lost his love because of a mistake that is never clearly explained in the game, and now he lives obsessed with the past, tied down by regret. The most interesting point is that in *Braid* the "core mechanic" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 316; see also Sicart, 2008) is deeply linked to these background questions: it is a mechanic of backwards time, a "rewind" at the touch of a finger. Thus, from a metaphorical perspective, the ludic experience of the player becomes interwoven with Tim's mental and emotional state: the experience of living obsessed with the past, not being able to stop thinking about what you would do if you could go back in time…, which the player must do to solve all the puzzles in the game.

As in *Braid*, an interest in exploring the representation and "simulation" of psychological states through the gameplay design can also be found in other indie games, such as *Amnesia: the Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) and *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen and Himsl, 2011):

Amnesia: the Dark Descent, which was inspired by H. P. Lovecraft's stories, portrays the thin line between sanity and madness. The player/character must continuously deal with the dilemma of keeping hidden from monsters by remaining in the shadows but then progressively lose his sanity, or moving through the lit up areas but then be more exposed to monsters. Beyond a simple tactical dilemma that brings more interest to the gameplay, this constant tension between sanity and madness cyclically evokes an essential theme in Lovecraft's literature and it does so in a way that is only possible for the video-ludic medium.

Regarding *The Binding of Isaac*, the vast basement where Isaac goes to try to run away from his evil mother was designed according to the "rogue-like" formula: a random articulation of "dungeons" that generates a new basement for every game. However, in this case the rogue-like system is neither a simple "retro" reference nor just a way to enhance "replayability" (Bogost *et al.*, 2005, p. 63-64): this chaotic form of the gameworld symbolically connects with the theme of madness in the game's narrative, since Isaac is actually a kid suffering from parental maltreatment, victim of an unbalanced mother.

In the end, one of the main characteristics of mainstream indie games is the expressive singularity and coherence of the game design in relation to essential aspects of the content, such as the main character's psychology, their relationship with the represented world and certain underlying themes.

Nevertheless, this artistic ambition, closely related to the notion of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2006) is usually accompanied by a "mainstream" wrapping: on the macro-structural level, many indie games rely openly on

popular commercial genres and gameplay models: for example, the platform genre (*Super Meat Boy* [Team Meat, 2010], *Cave Story+* [Studio Pixel, 2011], *Braid*), the first-person shooter (*Amnesia: the Dark Descent*), or the "hack-and-slash" combined with roleplaying game elements (*Bastion* [Supergiant Games, 2011]), etc.

Thus, probably one of the keys to the success of "mainstream-indie" games relies on their combination of a very expressive ludic design regarding specific aspects with a global playability framework ("wrapping") with popular tinges based on well-known commercial genres.

Essentialism or casual gaming?

Indie games such as *Super Meat Boy*, *Fez* (Polytron, 2012), *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010) and *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) could be associated, in one way or another, to the approach of minimalist game design (Nealen *et al.*, 2011).

Thus, one of the pleasures behind the gameplay experiences in *Super Meat Boy* and *Journey* is just learning to "tame" the avatar, mastering the control of his particular ways of moving: *Meat Boy's* jumps with long suspensions and strange acrobatics and the fascinating "dance" through semi-flight over the dunes by the avatar of *Journey*, seeking impulse points around the ruins.

Besides, *Fez* sets out a slow-paced and contemplative exploration experience, through many island-worlds that hide countless little treasures, hieroglyphs and secret passages, and where meticulous observation and patience (including going back to a certain place at a different time in order to check if something has changed) become fundamental actions in order to understand the game and be able to progress. In the words of the author himself, Phil Fish, *Fez* is a videogame where the player must learn to appreciate the significance of "stop and smell the flowers" (NowGamer, 6-21-2011).

In a similar fashion, *Limbo's* puzzles usually reward the player's sensitivity: a detailed observation, paying attention to a little noise caused by something that fell down behind them, carefully measuring every step in order to get as close as you can to a winged insect without scaring it… Attention to little details, delicacy, patience.

Undoubtedly, the search for essentialism and simplicity in many (but not all) indie games contrasts with the big audiovisual spectacles of blockbuster videogames. Nevertheless, again in this respect we can find an alternative + mainstream "circle squaring": essentiality and simplicity allow them, at the same time, to get closer to the "casual gaming" formula, which is a model of commercial success in recent years (Juul, 2010; Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 284). Significant evidence in this respect is the fact that *Braid* obtained the "Casual Game of the Year" award from the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences in 2009.

Innovation + conventions and commercial trends

Indie games such as *Braid* and *Fez* base their proposal on very particular and innovative game mechanics: the backwards time mechanic with several variations in Blow's game, and the 2D-3D shifting mechanic in *Fez*.

Moreover, the originality and innovation of many indie games frequently come from the omission or transgression of design canons of mainstream videogames.

At first sight, in indie games such as *Journey*, *Limbo* and *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) there is no point system and "economic" management elements such as HUDs (head-up displays) are non-existent, scarce or very subtle. Moreover, in games such as *Minecraft* and *Journey* there is not even a clear objective for the player/character.

Although in Edmund McMillen's games there are usually point systems and clear objectives, other typical aspects of mainstream videogames become subverted, such as the "reward system" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 345-350): what in a blockbuster would usually be a scene where the player/character gets a reward after having completed a level, in McMillen's games that scene has an ironic or anticlimactic tone. In *Super Meat Boy* it's a compilation of all the player's failures in that given level (it shows dozens of Meat Boys crashing against walls, falling into the void, etc., through a visual fusion that invites the player to laugh at their own clumsiness), and in *The Binding of Isaac* it's a short video showing relatives and friends humiliating poor Isaac.

Nevertheless, popular indie games also tend to incorporate classic principles of game design and trends of commercial successes.

Without going any further, in *Journey* there is a subtle "leveling up" system related to the avatar's evolution: by collecting magical clothing it is possible to make the avatar's cape longer, which allows him to perform longer lasting jumps and flights. (However, this is neither necessary nor relevant at all to going forward in the game).

Other prototypic traits of commercial videogames are also present in many indie games, as we have seen previously: for instance, basic elements of platform and puzzle genres, and certain elements of "casual gaming".

Nostalgia and criticism of industry's successes

Nostalgia for the 8- and 16-bit eras of gaming stands out as a particularly relevant trait of indie game design style, according to several researchers (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 291; DeJong, 2012, p. 18; Lipkin, 2013, p. 10, 15-18).

In this vein, *Super Meat Boy* is better understood if it is connected with *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1985) (McMillen made the platforms to be "enemies" instead of "allies"), *The Binding of Isaac* can't be fully appreciated without remembering *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) (it is actually a deconstruction of type-dungeons of *Zelda*, submitted to random permutations),

and *Cave Story+* and *Fez* can't be fully analyzed without relating them to the labyrinthine exploration and the "backtracking" of *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) and *Castlevania* (Konami, 1997).

It is evident that authors such as Edmund McMillen, Phil Fish and Daisuke Amaya ("Pixel") are "fans" of the old classics of Nintendo, Konami, etc., to which they pay tribute in their games. Nevertheless, this nostalgic component is closely interwoven with a strong criticism of the contemporary videogames industry and current big-budget mainstream videogames, as we saw before.

Anti-capitalist fun or cultural distinction?

Indie games may have design traits in tune with consumer society values and capitalism, such as progression understood in quantifiable terms, accumulation of resources, challenges related to great conquests of territory, etc. (eg, *Super Meat Boy*, *Bastion, Cave Story+*).

However, a lot of design traits with an anti-capitalist orientation can also be found among them: many indie games don't allow the "race" to achieve higher and higher levels of the player/character (*Super Meat Boy*, *Limbo*, *Fez*), prevent the player from collecting objects (*Journey*), promote the management of scarce resources (*Amnesia: the Dark Descent*, *FTL* [Subset Games, 2012], and so forth.

Moreover, in some of them all references to the notions of "victory" and "defeat" are eliminated. In certain cases "victory" isn't even possible (*Minecraft*) and in others the concepts of "failure" and "defeat" become diluted: in *Journey* and *Fez* it is practically impossible for the player to "fail" and, in any case, it is not penalized.

In line with this, Jenova Chen has been openly critical of what he calls an excessive leaning towards "task-solving culture" in videogame design (Gamasutra, 5-18-2012): that is, understanding fun as something inherent to efficient problem solving. Therefore, he decided not to give a clear objective to the player in *Journey*, or even intermediate goals or a point system. In this sense, more than either a competitive game or a problem-solving game, *Journey* brings just an aesthetic experience to the player.

In addition, some indie games seem to have a certain "the weak against the system" poetic. Thus, in *Amnesia: the Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) the design of the player/character follows a principle of lack of empowerment: Daniel, the main character, comes up against illusory and supernatural monsters but there are no weapons in the castle where the story takes place, so when they appear the only thing he can do is run away. In this vein, avatars such as Meat Boy and the kid of *Limbo* die at just one touch, they are extremely fragile. These characters do not have a "health bar", which usually allow the strikes to be "cushioned", thus for them every hit, every mistake, becomes a lethal strike, a lethal mistake.

Moreover, in games like *Super Meat Boy*, *Limbo*, *Fez* and *Amnesia* there is no possibility of evolution regarding the character's action abilities: the avatar

begins with only the abilities of walking, running and jumping (not much more) and these remain their only ones for the whole game.

All of these aspects together point to a sort of gameplay design that we could call "counter-fun" or "anti-capitalist fun", an entertainment proposal characterized by depriving the videogame of common videogame design elements potentially linked to capitalist values, consumerism, or to the maximization of efficiency and benefits, as well as by counteracting the fantasies of power common in mainstream videogames.

Nevertheless, from a very different point of view, the notion of "counter-fun" could recall the theory of taste as a cultural distinction by P. Bourdieu. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu suggests that one of the distinction strategies of "high culture" consumers is to show a certain capability of appreciating "pleasure deprived from pleasure" in cultural works and experiences (1988, p. 501), something supposedly suitable only for refined tastes.

> "…In the negation of inferior, coarse, venal, servile -in a word natural-pleasure (…) there lies a claim to superiority on the part of those who are able to content themselves with sublimated, refined, selfless, disinterested, distinguished pleasures forever out of reach of the uninitiated" (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 501)

That is, the "counter-fun" of indie games probably has also a certain element of cultural seduction, as it entails a sort of invitation to feel part of a "high culture" community.

Final considerations

Through this study we have seen that the cultural dynamic behind indie games doesn't follow a monolithic logic of opposition or dissociation from the mainstream videogame, but a much more complex relationship, sometimes including strategic articulations of the alternative and the commercial.

In fact, popular indie games and "mainstream-indie" games are nowadays an indispensable reference for the industry in terms of how innovation, artistic status and commercial success can be integrated. Moreover, as G. King pointed out (regarding "indiewood" cinema), culturally they represent a very controversial area, "an area of duplicity and compromise, in which the 'true' heritage of the independent sector is sold out, betrayed and/or co-opted into an offshoot of Hollywood [the videogame industry]" (2009, p. 1).

As for the original contribution of this paper, we have proposed a design-centered analytical approach to indie games, inspired by Kellner (1995) and Cassar (2013) and mixed with "procedural rhetorics" (Bogost, 2006; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014), whereby indie games (indie game design) can be understood as a cultural phenomenon that reflects ideological tensions of our time, frictions between hegemonic culture and counter-culture, progressivism

and conservatism, capitalism and anti-capitalism, and the way we conceive these notions.

Acknowledgements

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