

INDIE GAMES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

APPROACHES TO DIGITAL GAME STUDIES VOLUME 8



EDITED BY
M.J. CLARKE &
CYNTHIA WANG

B L O O M S B U R Y

INDIE GAMES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Approaches to Digital Game Studies

Volume 8

Series Review Board

Mia Consalvo, Concordia University in Montreal

James Paul Gee, Arizona State University

Helen Kennedy, University of Brighton

Frans Mayra, University of Tampere

Toby Miller, University of California, Riverside

Torill Mortensen, IT University Copenhagen

Lisa Nakamura, University of Illinois

Gareth Schott, University of Waikato

Mark J. P. Wolf, Concordia University

Series Editors

Gerald Voorhees, University of Waterloo

Josh Call, Grand View University

Previous Titles

Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens, edited by Gerald Voorhees,

Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock

Guns, Grenades, and Grunts, edited by Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call,

and Katie Whitlock

Violent Games, by Gareth Schott

Music Video Games, by Michael Austin

The World of Scary Video Games, by Bernard Perron

Alternate Reality Games and the Cusp of Digital Gameplay, edited by

Antero Garcia and Greg Niemeyer

Adventure Games, edited by Aaron Reed, John Murray, and Anastasia Salter

INDIE GAMES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Edited by M. J. Clarke and Cynthia Wang

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks
of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2020
Volume Editor's Part of the Work © M. J. Clarke & Cynthia Wang

Each chapter © of Contributors

Cover design: Eleanor Rose
Cover image © Chris Gorgio / iStock / Getty Images

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system,
without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc does not have any control over, or responsibility for,
any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given
in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The authors and publisher
regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to
exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

TK

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-5645-2
ePDF: 978-1-5013-5643-8
eBook: 978-1-5013-5644-5

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

CONTENTS

Introduction	<i>M. J. Clarke and Cynthia Wang</i>	1
Part I	Indie Game Creators	15
1	Brews, Burgers, and Indie Bombast: The Antiestablishment Neoliberalism of Devolver Digital <i>John Vanderhoef</i>	17
2	Queer Indie Game-Making: An Interview with Mo Cohen <i>Bonnie Ruberg</i>	35
3	Postmortems and Indie Cultural Work <i>M. J. Clarke</i>	48
4	Five Nights at Fan Games: Feminism, Fan Labor, and <i>Five Nights at Freddy's</i> <i>Betsy Brey</i>	73
Part II	Indie Game Tools	97
5	From Tool to Community to Style: The Influence of Software Tools on Game Development Communities and Aesthetics <i>Emilie Reed</i>	99
6	This Is How a Garden Grows: Cultivating Emergent Networks in the Development of <i>Stardew Valley</i> <i>Kevin Rutherford</i>	123
7	The Making of <i>Escape Room in a Box</i> <i>Cynthia Wang</i>	142
Part III	Indie Games Texts	159
8	The Hunt for Queer Spaces: Mainstream Indie Games, Representation, and Limited Worlds <i>Cody Mejeur</i>	161

Contents

9	Indie in the Underground <i>Aaron Trammell</i>	184
10	Paper Code and Digital Goods: The Economic Values of Type-In Market Games <i>Patrick Davison</i>	199
	List of Contributors	221
	Index	224

INTRODUCTION

M. J. Clarke and Cynthia Wang

The digital realm has reconfigured the ways in which production and consumption of games happen. Consider some prominent examples:

- In November 2010, a group of high school friends from Chicago presented a version of their game, *Cards against Humanity*, as a Kickstarter campaign. After surpassing its modest funding goal, the game sold over 500K units in the next three years and enabled its creators to generate a number of politically minded publicity stunts in the wake of Trump presidency.
- In May 2011, self-taught game developer Andrew Spinks released his own world-building game after only five months of production. The game, *Terraria*, now available on all major computing and gaming platforms, has sold over 20.5 million units, but is still only available through Spinks's own publishing firm, Re-Logic.
- In June 2013, student video game developer Toby Fox pitched his own project, *Undertale*, on the financing platform Kickstarter using the free-to-use production tool, GameMaker. After raising over \$50,000 for his game, Fox's *Undertale* sold over 2 million units before being named 2015 Game of the Year by several video game trade journals, including IGN.
- In August 2012, the disillusioned pen-and-paper game developer Monte Cook left his job at the publisher of industry leader, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and pitched his own role-playing system, *Numenera*, directly to fans in a Kickstarter campaign that earned over \$500K. Subsequently, the game has become a brand-franchise spawning a series of spin-offs, novels, and video games.
- In February 2016, two stay-at-home moms and escape room aficionados launched their Kickstarter campaign for a home-based, single-use escape room board game called *Escape Room in a Box*. After they hit their goal of \$19,500 within fourteen hours, and were funded for over \$135,000, they ultimately licensed the game with board game giant Mattel.

Indie Games in the Digital Age

In all these cases, creators have leveraged the ease and availability of online tools and platforms and, as a result, have forged paths to both creative and financial success previously unavailable. Traditional mass media and game publishing models have operated with high barriers to entry and high production costs, reinforcing capitalist power structures, wherein the richest, most privileged, most connected and the most culturally, socially, and artistically normative have had the best chance to have their creative works made and exposed to a wide audience. And because mainstream board game companies like Mattel and Hasbro, as well as traditional video game companies such as Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony have presided over an oligarchical system, independent game-makers historically have had more limited chances to get their work in front of an audience without directly working with one of these gatekeepers.

The concept of “indie” or independent creation outside of traditional channels of cultural production has been a predominant theme in academic and critical press as well as in creator investment around film, music, and other mass media in the last several decades, a tendency that has only expanded along with new digital affordances. Recently, media coverage is replete with celebratory examples. For example, in music, Chance the Rapper’s album, *Coloring Book*, was first self-released on the free digital platform Soundcloud before winning the 2016 Grammy for Best Rap Album of the Year. And in the previous year, Sean Baker produced the award-winning film *Tangerine*—a movie about transgender sex workers shot entirely on an iPhone. Digital tools have also encouraged the indie impulse in other fields of expression, such as the use of social media and blogging to establish and promote underground restaurants (Tran, 2017), as well as in the growth of podcasting as a new vehicle for independent critics, essayists, and historians (Markman and Sawyer, 2015). Among this new wave of independent cultural producers is a growing and vocal group of game-makers, critics, and users using the moniker of indie games.

This collection of chapters explores useful inquiries into the motivations and functions of current indie cultural work, and specifically indie gaming. Indie gaming is not simply an experiment in artistic creation but also one of social and economic experimentation in which its participants actively interrogate their internal cultural and economic motivations, their relations to the larger community of makers and users, the sociocultural function of their texts, and their attitude toward the technological affordances available to them. Each chapter explores, in various contexts, how indie game producers have negotiated their processes of production and distribution of

their creations in ways that challenge traditional models of game-making, while also forcing us to rethink our understanding of late capitalist cultural production and consumption processes. Investigating the products and practices of indie game-makers presents scholars with an opportunity to reconsider the debate over user-generated content and digital labor more broadly. How much does the dissolution of mainstream gaming's production chokeholds on financing, marketing, distribution, and production empower indie game-makers to rethink cultural, economic, and political models? Conversely, how are indie game-makers potentially exploited by new media platforms that siphon off their biopolitical labor, reinforcing and re-interpellating them into traditional models of capitalism and power? Our understanding of indie games lies at the intersection of these debates, which allows us to posit the indie games not simply as a cause or consequence of economic or social forces but also as an active negotiation and balance between art, representation, theme, labor, and reputation. In other words, this book is less about playing indie games and more about "playing indie" in games work.

Like all cultural industries, the business of games and video games is plagued by great risk and uncertainty, a problem only exacerbated by current trends among mainstream publishers. Although the latter's field is immense and growing, tallying nearly \$29 billion annual revenue, these spoils go to a relative few number of incumbent firms; in fact, well over half of this figure was commanded by just five firms (Sony, Microsoft, Activision, Nintendo, and Electronic Arts) in 2017 (Alvarez, 2017). This ballooning overall performance has inflated the importance and risk associated with individual projects as typical production budgets now hover between \$20 and \$50 million, and average production staffs push past one hundred personnel on AAA (major publisher, big budget) releases. In exemplary cases these costs and worker hours surge even higher; Bungie's *Destiny* (2014) reportedly cost the developer \$140 million to produce with a team of approximately 400 staff members and Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) costs almost just as much—\$137 million according to contemporary press—and tasked as many as 1,000 creative workers (Pham, 2012; French, 2013; Lanxon, 2013; Sinclair, 2013). As these inputs increase, the overall success rate of games produced diminishes as, according to several estimates, only between 4 percent and 20 percent of video games manage to return a profit to their makers (Zakariasson and Wilson, 2012). In response, larger publishers have adapted several mechanisms of risk aversion in their work practice as well as in the choice and elaboration of their products. Both AAA publishers

Indie Games in the Digital Age

and the developers that supply their games increasingly rely on the licensing of presold intellectual properties from other media supply game concepts, the reiteration and sequelization of their own game franchises, and the narrowing of products in line with established game genres and gameplay mechanics. Moreover, these same pressures have equally encouraged the forces of so-called rationalization to appear in the industry through stricter fragmentation of labor, the establishment of clearer work hierarchies, and the use of timetables and deadlines, all hallmarks of classical bureaucracy (Tschang, 2007).

In addition to the economic pressures of the gaming business, mainstream console video games, too, are notorious for labor problems and a high rate of creator burnout (Deuze, 2007). Specifically, video game production is typically understood as a dues paying job in which short-term job performance becomes the measure of a worker's ability to be rehired to staff subsequent short-lived development teams and so-called self-organized projects (Grabher, 2002). It is also a profession that requires off-the-clock re-skilling to keep abreast of technological changes in tools and programming languages. And it is a job that often requires long periods of extended work hours—colloquially known as “crunch time”—that may or may not be appropriately remunerated. These factors then are typically papered over with a corporate philosophy of “work as play” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, 2003) that encourages workers to have “fun” on the job in an effort to keep them at the office if not on their terminals.

While trend lines have slightly shifted in the short term, these work demands have tended to overdetermine the typical demographic profile of video game workers. According to the most recent International Game Developer Association survey, the average age of the video game creative is thirty-five (compared to the economy-wide average of forty-two) and that almost half of the game worker labor force have been in the industry for less than six years, evidencing a high degree of aging out (Legault, O'Meara, and Weststar, 2017). Moreover, the same study also demonstrated demographic biases overall as still 79 percent of the workforce is male. And, according to many reports, the gender imbalance has resulted in work environments often hostile or at least unfriendly to women across new media in general, echoing McRobbie's (2016) claim that boundary-less creative careers have enhanced negative effects on already disadvantaged or marginalized workers who have less access to institutional support and often are compelled to “play along” in order to ensure re-hireability. In one recent report about work in Silicon Valley, 66 percent of female workers indicated that they had

been excluded from work events on the basis of their gender (Kolhatkar, 2017). The countervailing presence, relative success, and rising critical legitimacy for indie games then acts as a counterweight attracting both old gaming professionals disaffected by work demands and young aspiring creative workers resistant to the work and life culture perpetuated by larger publishers and developers, bringing along with them stories, ideas, and representations outside the sometimes circumscribed experiences of the typical young, male AAA industry.

Industrial concentration and the artistic conservatism associated with risk aversion in AAA publishers concomitantly have left fruitful gaps, niches, and agendas in the business of games and video games through what organizational theorists call resource partitioning, what economists call creative destruction, or what critical theorists call commoditization. In the first case, resource partitioning theory explains the mutual co-existence of consolidating, large generalist firms and small, emerging, specialist firms in single industries. Simply put, as the former grow, larger firms often seek out the largest market segments with the broadest serving products and texts to take advantage of their scope through economies of scale (Markman and Waldron, 2014). This strategy leaves neglected market segments and other value propositions open to be exploited by properly scaled firms; however, business thinkers have noted that the vitality that these smaller operations—whether they be microbreweries, luxury watches, or indie games—necessitates a cultivation and maintenance of a distinct authenticity or identity to avoid being reabsorbed into the generalist market (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000).¹ Resource partitioning theory suggests that industrial concentration can engender indie growth, while creative destruction suggest that any technological dependent industry harbors the dilemma of outside, upstart innovation. Economist Joseph Schumpeter elaborated the concept of creative destruction to suggest how actors in industries must repeatedly update their methods and products and that “such change, both great and small can be triggered by entrepreneurial effort which disrupts equilibrium, destroys established value, and creates new value” (Cunningham, Flew, and Swift, 2015, p. 104). Like all new media firms, major AAA publishers spend a large amount of time and effort on research and development and on purchasing innovative firms and technologies to stay abreast of the technological churn that has made more cautionary tales than durable successes in the gaming business. For example, current accounting documents for the publisher Electronic Arts mark the firm as spending an amount approximately equal to one quarter of their revenue

Indie Games in the Digital Age

on research and development (Electronic Arts, Inc., 2018). However, the incumbency of these firms and their relative success, attached to the current construction of the industry, leads to a countervailing conservative impulse notably absent in upstart firms. The unceasing nature of technological change may then equally engender an innovative, indie fringe that lacks a definitive investment in the industry and its market as it currently exists and is, thus, more eager for difference in both their production and their texts. Drawn from Marxist notions of the commodity, critical theory poses the rationalization characteristic of profit-seeking creative firms as diminishing and perverting the artistic impulse at their very core into mere ideological reproduction through rote, repetitious, and standardized formulas (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002 [1944]). In most versions of the theory, a text's mode of production ultimately determines, albeit in the last instance and with relative autonomy, or at least delimits its mode of representation (Althusser, 2005 [1969]).

Further, many applications of critical theory then suggest that perhaps alternate modes of production, not subject to the same economic and organizational pressures, may enjoy an enhanced leeway for both artistic and political expression. Despite their radically different evidentiary bases and their respective disciplinary divisions of all these theoretical strands, each suggest a macrological advantage of the relative smallness of actors on an indie field that structurally have either an opportunity, an edge, or even a mandate to innovate in their cultural production.

The gaming business is traditionally organized around a publishing model typical of many cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In this model, smaller, often disconnected firms or individuals—in games, usually termed developers—provide most of the creative or symbol-producing labor, while often larger, managerial firms—in games, typically termed publishers—handle the promotion and circulation of resultant texts. Publishers, through their control of either or all of the following—hardware, marketing, and distribution—hold a tremendous negotiational advantage over creative partners pulled from overpopulated pools of aspiring laborers as well as a gatekeeping function, resulting in high barriers of entry for developers, particularly in traditionally higher costs fields like console video games. In the past, publishers were often the only firms able to convert a set of computer directions and associated graphics or manuscripts of arcane rules along with a set of polyhedral dice into a package that could sell millions of units. The obvious result of this power imbalance was the creation of large pools of creative workers producing materials on speculation. In the case of

video games, these aspiring developers often pursued so-called third-party deals in which they acted as freelanced labor for publishers in deals that inevitably were skewed in favor of the latter in terms of money, ownership, and scheduling, again reflecting the structural imbalance of the industry and developers' reliance on publishers. Moreover, the high cost and expertise associated with technology-dependent creative fields, like video games, often only pushed the barriers of entry and the stakes of publisher deals even higher. However, the ubiquity of newer, low-cost digital technologies as well as Internet-enabled connectivity increasingly have disrupted the staid structural imbalance that characterized most of twentieth-century mass media. In turn, these innovations have enabled experimentation of new production logics, including the recasting of games as ongoing services and the bundling of games on online portals (Kerr, 2017). The latter has been particularly important for indie game-makers as portals offer cultural laborers access to financing, marketing, and distribution as well as more direct relationships with their end users.

Indeed, the availability of these new digital affordances in many cases has complicated traditional barriers of entry and the division of labor in many de-massifying cultural industries. In game work specifically, these new tools and technologies have diminished the exclusivity of most of the linchpins of publishers' control. Gaming systems like Steam for video games and Open Game License in pen-and-paper role-playing games have reduced the bottleneck of hardware and, in console video games, control through the dissemination of Software Development Kits (SDKs). In the same vein, Yochai Benkler (2006) argues that the ubiquity of the Internet eases both physical and economic constraints for individuals to produce and distribute media content. This celebration of the Internet as an equalizing platform for media content belies the long-held hope that decentralized production may increase diversity within society through the use of these new technologies. Meanwhile, the reach and costs of social media marketing have chipped away at the exclusive promotional power of publishers. These affordances, according to Nancy Baym (2010), include the ability for an individual to share messages (and, extendedly, media, creative works, projects, etc.) to a wide audience instantaneously, regardless of location. The ability to share messages and information also comes at a diminished cost, lowering the barriers to publication and distribution and allowing previously marginalized and/or disempowered voices to be more accessible and heard. Crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and Indiegogo have provided alternative avenues to generating the economic means for cultural production. The "long tail"

(Anderson, 2006) effects of online game and app markets, along with the slow decline of brick-and-mortar retailing and its associated wholesaling, have decayed the importance of traditional publishers' logistical and distributional acumen. And the spread of inexpensive and approachable digital authoring tools further have complicated the association of quality game work only with well-connected and funded developers. In short, a suite of effects connected with recent digital affordances have provided a new opportunity for creative work unavailable in stricter applications of the publisher model.

Of course, the association of aesthetic value with perceived artistic independence is a familiar myth as well as a theme of social scientific research (Berger and Peterson, 1975). Romantic notions of struggling artists with singular, uncompromising, and sometimes misunderstood vision posit that the closer a text is to the hands of its creator, the more legitimate it is as a form of expression. And certainly, gaming history is filled with similarly wrought origin stories of monomaniacal, driven creators from *Dungeons & Dragons*' Gary Gygax (Witwer, 2015) to *Adventure*'s Warren Robinett (2006). More recently, celebrations of more artisanal mode of production resonates in Anna Anthropy's deeply influential *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012), a book-length manifesto call for more games to be produced from an individual sensibility.

Despite the appeal of such narratives, most of our analyses of indie game production pose this evolving art world as a social and emergent one across texts, producers, and end users. In this manner, the development of indie games echoes not so much a hagiographic timeline but a complex, interactive system mirroring Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production (1993). In Bourdieu's elaboration of the concept, the sociologist examined the emergence of a distinct tradition of literary novels—a field shaped not simply by a book printer's bottom line but equally determined by the relative reputation of authors, the attitudes of critics, and the formation of artistic tendencies and canons—or, in a word, cultural capital. Self-aware assessment, evaluation, and competition of a set of internal and unique values pushes cultural fields toward Bourdieu's concept of autonomy, away from the lone concerns of economic and political power that had animated literary and visual arts, and culminating asymptotically with an attitude of *l'art pour l'art*. Arguably, games and the scenes growing around them are building a similar field. Gaming texts are both discussed and in subtextual conversation with one another in an effort to refine the budding field's internal values.² As a field grows in autonomy, so too should it grow in legitimacy as a space for

artistic experimentation and critical introspection. This legitimacy, in turn, is vital to the growth and innovation of the field which is then able to attract producers, critics, and users dissatisfied or even alienated from traditional game production or other adjacent fields of cultural production.

Regardless of whether it is informed more by structural changes in the gaming industry, the formation and elaboration of a meso-level cultural field, or the dissatisfaction and alienation of game workers, recent indie games have indeed emerged as a site of textual experimentation that provocatively have mutated and altered typical gaming formats in terms of mechanics, gameplay, visual style, and theme. In *Firewatch* (2016), a user spends a majority of the game moving through and observing nature, artfully subtracting the destructive mechanics typically associated with 3-D gameworlds. Similarly, in *Journey* (2012) gameplay is dominated by discovery and visual novelty. The aforementioned *Undertale* (2015) blends innovative storytelling with the nostalgic pixelated visual style, as does *To the Moon* (2011). And, in games like *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), which takes the player through the highs and lows of cancer treatment, indie games have addressed thematic material largely absent from commercial game production. Similarly, *Depression Quest* (2013) brings socially stigmatized issues like mental health into the foreground.

Previous academics typically have examined indie cultural work and its appellation with measured skepticism. Examining the phenomenon in music and film respectively, Ryan Hibbert (2005) and Michael Z. Newman (2009) cast these tendencies as built around the end users' need to have and accumulate cultural capital that allows connoisseurs to distinguish themselves from consumers of less rarefied forms of popular culture. Alisa Perren (2012) similarly investigated the emergence of indie film, which savvy industry players used a marketing hook to control and corral dispersing consumer choice in an overflowed media landscape. And when video game scholars, Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford (2009) examined independent game work, they characterized it mostly as a site of extra surplus labor to be soaked up by industry-leading firms, creating, in Marxist terminology, an "expropriation of the commons." While we are sympathetic to all these analyses—indeed so-called independence in cultural work can be understood as a manipulation of users' vanity, a sly marketing tactic, or a just a ploy to get free labor—we do not believe that these critiques exhaust the subject matter. In our collection, we instead take a more cultural studies informed approach, examining this tendency from the inside out to plumb the fundamental uncertainty around the concept

Indie Games in the Digital Age

of indie. While indie games are certainly manipulatable by economic and social power, it is also an aware, self-monitoring social unit, informed by unique structural and technological conditions and creating self-conscious and identifiable creative projects.

The political economic question of this new site of cultural work is a complex and unsettled one. Are developers taking advantage of these new opportunities the vanguard of an Internet-savvy neo-artisanal class prepping the world for a de-massified cultural space, or are they simply neoliberal dupes providing biopolitical labor to an increasingly precarious, platform-based gig economy? This debate can be traced back to intermittently optimistic and pessimistic prognoses of digital technology, the Internet and new media more broadly. Famously, Tzivana Terranova (2000) recategorized early Internet use as “free labor” in which user’s enthusiastic activity in producing websites, contributing to forums, and so on was just surplus value to be soaked up by others without remuneration. It is a diagnosis that has only become more convincing with the growth of surveillance economics online coordinated to store, sort, and package more and more of users’ actions and affects as usable and saleable “data.” In a recent example, Cynthia Wang (2012) notes how Apple originally blocked third-party developers from making apps for the iPhone, until hackers did it anyway, and Apple implemented the App Store and their SDK, allowing third-party developers to create and distribute their apps—but on Apple’s terms. Andrew Ross (2004), in his complimentary examination of professional digital cultural work, found new opportunities not for expression but for alienation as workers accommodating themselves to unstable work and the dismantlement of traditional work-life boundaries through the institution of playbor—work that’s fun! However, with the growth of so-called Web 2.0, digital labor was increasingly rebranded as user-generated content, citizen journalism, or convergence culture. And, more recently, McRobbie (2016) has interrogated the attempt by government and higher education to encourage its citizens and students to “be creative.” In this effort, the author found that creativity was accompanied less by the liberatory and expressive functions of art and culture but was transformed into a technique of labor reform, disciplining subjects in the realities of a neoliberal work regime that combines a distaste for routine and institutionalization with an individualized sense of precariousness, competition, risk, and consequent stress. Indie games and the workers associated with them, leveraging the availability of digital tools and Internet-enabled connectivity, are largely the beneficiaries of digital laborers and content creators of the past, yet our

understanding of their work and its processes are equally haunted by the theoretical baggage of this previously unsettled debate. Ultimately, whether indie game work as an emerging site of digital labor looks more like the “full development of productive forces” fantasized by Marx (1971) wherein each would create to their means and desires, or whether the practice simply reproduces preexisting power and hierarchy through what Jodi Dean (2003) calls communicative capital, or whether, more drastically, these activities add up to a form of digital slavery that, Christian Fuchs (2018) argues, late capitalist ideology compels us to forget or ignore has largely do with the analyst’s critical and disciplinary perspective. In other words, the notion of indie games, the work that produces them and the structure that engenders them retains an analytic and theoretical uncertainty. Our current volume plumbs this uncertainty, investigating the production, production cultures, and texts of several indie game creators.

This collection is divided into three sections. The first section will address indie game creators themselves and how they have sought alternate paths of production and distribution. First, John Vanderhoef contributes a critical deep dive into Devolver Digital—an indie game publisher—and how the ethos of the firm seeks to create an image of rupture of hegemonic masculinity, yet may also reinforce it at the same time. Bonnie Ruberg’s piece looks at how queer indie game-makers contribute to the changing cultural landscape of game-making through the trials and tribulations of queer game-maker, Mo Cohen, and their game *Queer Quest*, highlighting the importance of video games in representing queer identities, communities, histories, and experiences. M. J. Clarke examines the self-reflexivity of indie game postmortems and uses these documents as practioner self-theorizations and representations in which game-makers consider what being “indie” means from the perspective of motivation, technology, and business practice. And Betsy Brey explores the shifting relationships between indie game producers and gaming fans through the horror-game franchise, *Five Nights at Freddie’s*, tracking the proliferation of fan-made games based on the original title as a site of negotiation around issues of authority, ownership, and meaning.

The second section explores the various tools and communities that are at indie game-makers’ disposal, thanks to the affordances of digital platforms. Each of the articles in this section investigates the various ways that indie game-makers have deployed new and emerging methods of funding, of creating, of community-building to do their game work. Emilie Reed begins this section by elucidating, through three case studies, how accessible game-making tools influence the aesthetic styles of the games that are created

Indie Games in the Digital Age

as well as rise of communities around these toolkits. Kevin Rutherford's chapter explores how the singular creator of *Stardew Valley* participated in gaming forums and communities, forging a community of fans who informed his narrative, style, and design. And Cynthia Wang follows the journey of the creators of the aforementioned *Escape Room in a Box* game as they leveraged digitally afforded resources, such as crowdsourced funding sites and indie game blogs, in the production, distribution, and publicity of their game.

The last section examines the impact that indie production and creation has had on the texts of games themselves. Cody Mejeur takes up three mainstream queer indie games as sites to consider both the potential and the limitations of queer representation within the framework of normative gaming practices, and the implications of these representations as they are consumed by (mostly) heteronormative audiences. Aaron Trammell compels us to reconsider the term "indie" by thinking about the implication of subcultural fan communities in role-playing games and their interdependence with and influence on mainstream corporate gaming companies. Finally, Patrick Davison takes a historical look economic simulation games distributed in the newsletter, *The People's Computer Company*, and the contradiction between the countercultural ethos of the newsletter and the themes of economic domination reinforced by the games.

Notes

- 1 Colloquially, this would be known as "selling out."
- 2 In fact, this book is a reflexive part of this effort.

Works Cited

- Adorno T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (2002 [1944]). *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (E. Jephcott, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Althusser, L. (2005 [1969]). *For Marx* (B. Brewster, Trans.). London, England: Verso.
- Alvarez, A. (2017). IBISWorld Industry Report NN003: Video Games in the US. IBISWorld.
- Anderson, C. (2006). *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*. New York, NY: Hachette Books.

- Anthropy, A. (2012). *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Baym, N. (2010). *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (R. Johnson, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Carroll, G. R., & Swaminathan, A. (2000). "Why the Microbrewery Movement? Organizational dynamics of resource partitioning in the US brewing industry." *American Journal of Sociology*, 106(3), 715–62.
- Cunningham, S., Flew, T., & Swift, A. (2015). *Media Economics*. London, England: Palgrave.
- Dean, J. (2003). "Why the Net is not a Public Sphere." *Constellations*, 10(1), 95–112.
- Deuze, M. (2007). *Media Work*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Dyer-Witheford N., & De Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Electronic Arts, Inc. (2018). Form 10-K [2017–2018]. Retrieved from <http://investor.ea.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=712515-18-24&CIK=712515>.
- French, M. (2013). "Inside Rockstar North, part 2: The studio." MCV. Retrieved from <https://www.mcvuk.com/development/inside-rockstar-north-part-2-the-studio>.
- Fuchs, C. (2018). "Capitalism, patriarchy, slavery, and racism in the age of digital capitalism and digital labour." *Critical Sociology*, 44(4–5), 677–702.
- Grabher, G. (2002). "Fragile sector, robust practice: Project ecologies in new media." *Environment and Planning A*, 34(11), 1903–2092.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2013). *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Hibbert, R. (2005). "What is indie rock?" *Popular Music and Society*, 28(1), 55–77.
- Kerr, A. (2017). *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era*. London, England: Routledge.
- Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & De Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kolhatkar, S. (2017, November 20). "The disruptors." *The New Yorker*, 52–63.
- Lanxon, N. (2013). "Destiny's destiny: Bungie's decade-long plan to succeed Halo." *Wired*. Retrieved from <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/destinys-destiny>.
- Legault, M., O'Meara, V., & Weststar, J. (2017). "IGDA developer satisfaction survey, 2017: Summary report." Retrieved July 11, 2018 from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.igda.org/resource/resmgr/2017_DSS_!IGDA_DSS_2017_SummaryReport.pdf.
- Markman, G. D., & Waldron, T. L. (2014). "Small entrants and large incumbents: A framework of micro entry." *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 28(2), 179–97.
- Markman, K. M., & Sawyer C. E. (2015). "Why pod? Further explorations of the motivations for independent podcasting." *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 21(1), 20–25.

Indie Games in the Digital Age

- Marx, K. (1971). *The Grundrisse* (D. McClellan, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be Creative*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Newman, M. Z. (2009). "Indie culture: In pursuit of the authentic autonomous alternative." *Cinema Journal*, 48(3), 16–34.
- Perren, A. (2012). *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Peterson, R., & Berger, D. (1975). "Cycles in symbol production: The case of popular music." *American Sociological Review*, 40(2), 158–73.
- Pham, A. (2012). "Bungie-Activision contract." *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved July 11, 2018 from <http://documents.latimes.com/bungie-activision-contract/>.
- Robinett, W. (2006). "Adventure as a video game: *Adventure* for Atari 2600." In K. Salen and E. Zimmerman (Eds.), *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* (pp. 690–713). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ross, A. (2004). *No Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Sinclair, B. (2013). "GTA V cost over \$137 million, says analyst." Gamesindustry.biz. Retrieved from <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2013-02-01-gta-v-dev-costs-over-USD137-million-says-analyst>.
- Terranova, T. (2000). "Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy." *Social Text* 63, 18(2), 33–58.
- Tran, N. (2017). *Adventures in the Starry Kitchen: 88 Asian-Inspired Recipes from America's Most Famous Underground Kitchen*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Tschang, F. T. (2007). "Balancing the tensions between rationalization and creativity in the video games industry." *Organizational Science*, 18(6), 989–1005.
- Wang, C. (2012). "Tinkering with the iPhone: Subversion and re-appropriation of power in Apple's world." *Journal for International Digital Media Arts Association*, 8(2), 31–41.
- Witwer, M. (2015). *Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Zackariasson, P., & Wilson, T. L. (Eds.) (2012). *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future*. London, England: Routledge.

PART I

INDIE GAME CREATORS

CHAPTER 1

BREWS, BURGERS, AND INDIE

BOMBAST: THE ANTIESTABLISHMENT

NEOLIBERALISM OF

DEVOLVER DIGITAL

John Vanderhoef

Introduction

Indie game developers have contributed to profound transformations in the overall video game industry, repositioning indie game development from a niche, exploitable, and subservient part of the business to a central, constitutive pillar in the global industry that actively shapes the structures and strategies of the industry's largest companies. The emergence of ubiquitous indie game development and the ascendancy of digital distribution for video games occurred in tandem in the twenty-first century. With the means to digitally distribute their cultural work across the globe, indie developers no longer depend entirely on platform holders and corporate publishers, while the sheer volume of diverse content they produce makes them attractive to these same large companies.

In the wake of the critical and commercial success of indie games in recent years, publishers interested in partnering with indie developers have emerged in several forms. Console platform holders like Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo have all implemented dedicated indie development outreach teams in order to attract indies to their respective consoles. Meanwhile, a group of small, indie-focused game publishers have emerged to reinvent the relationship between indie developer and digital game publisher. These companies include Devolver Digital, Good Shepherd, Curve Digital, Raw Fury, Serenity Forge, and Playism, among many others. Traditional corporate game publishers sometimes influence design decisions through benchmark choke points where developers have to reach certain milestones in order to maintain publisher support for the project, sacrificing creative freedom in favor of timely delivery of content (Strebeck, 2017). Corporate