

Canadian Indie Games Between the Global and the Local

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ABSTRACT

Background Independent or “indie” games play a significant role in the contemporary game industry, and Canada is home to several prominent hubs of indie gaming activity.

Analysis Drawing on 34 interviews with developers and community organizers across the country, this article examines how Canadian indie game developers construct their identities and communities on three levels: global, national, and local.

Conclusions and Implications While online and local indie gaming communities provide a variety of material and symbolic benefits to participation, national identification is conspicuously absent, except in certain contexts tied to cultural policy and government support. This article argues that the intersection of the global and the local is the primary site of indie identity and community and considers the implications for Canadian cultural industries more generally.

Keywords New media; Globalization; Cultural industries policy; Arts policy; Production/co-production

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte De nos jours, les jeux en ligne indépendants occupent une place significative dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo, et il y a plusieurs centres de jeux indépendants au Canada.

Analyse Cet article se fonde sur 34 entrevues avec des créateurs et des organisateurs communautaires partout au pays afin d'examiner comment les créateurs de jeux vidéo indépendants au Canada construisent leurs identités et leurs communautés à trois niveaux : mondial, national et local.

Conclusions et implications Au niveau local, les communautés de jeux indépendants en ligne ont beau offrir un éventail de bénéfices matériels et symboliques aux participants, l'identification nationale brille par son absence, sauf dans quelques contextes établis grâce à certaines politiques culturelles et à un appui de la part du gouvernement. Cet article soutient que l'intersection du mondial et du local est le site primaire de l'identité et de la communauté indépendantes et il considère plus généralement les implications des jeux indépendants pour les industries culturelles canadiennes.

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Mots clés Nouveaux médias; Mondialisation; Politiques sur les industries culturelles; Politiques sur les arts; Production/coproduction

Introduction

Independently produced or “indie” games are an increasingly visible and central part of the industry and culture of digital games, and the creative industries more generally. The slippery term “indie games” encompasses a wide variety of game-making and playing practices, from polished commercial offerings to more experimental and amateur pursuits, but generally refers to games made by small to mid-size teams on low budgets (compared to mainstream blockbuster titles) that are distributed digitally, often without the support of traditional publishers. As in other forms of independent cultural production, “indie” is alternately a mode of production and/or distribution, a genre designation, a market category, a social identity, and a taste culture (Newman, 2017). Some indie games have achieved widespread critical acclaim and breakout commercial success, including *Braid* (Number None, 2009), *World of Goo* (2D Boy, 2008), and Canadian developer Polytron’s *Fez* (2012). The most prominent example is the wildly popular and now-ubiquitous exploration and building game, *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), which was purchased for a headline-grabbing 2.5 billion dollars by Microsoft in 2014 (Bass, 2014). Given these high-profile success stories, it is unsurprising that indie game production has been identified as a key part of Canada’s economic and cultural landscape by academic and government institutions (Gouglas, Della Rocca, Jensen, Kee, Rockwell, Schaeffer, & Wakkary, 2010; Joseph, 2013), as well as the mainstream media (Nowak, 2013; Rook, 2010), even as most small developers struggle to make ends meet (Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005). Indie game development is typical of work in contemporary cultural industries: creative, entrepreneurial, flexible, and precarious (Ruffino, 2013; Whitson, 2014).

Canadian indie games have been the subject of some academic discussion. In the introduction to the “Indie, Eh?” special issue of the Canadian game studies journal *Loading ...*, editor Bart Simon (2013) notes that his original goal was to highlight critical scholarly work on indie games in Canadian contexts, but most contributors (including the first author of this article) instead framed indie games more broadly as an international phenomenon. While “Indie, Eh?” continues to be a touchstone for studies of indie games, it leaves largely unanswered the question of how Canada’s geographic, economic, and sociocultural specificity affect the position, status, relationships, and identities of people involved in indie gaming. Can we speak meaningfully of a distinct Canadian indie gaming industry or community? Given the inescapable influence of our powerful neighbour to the south, these kinds of questions haunt Canadian media and culture (Dorland, 1996; Druick, 2012). “Canadian” is at least as slippery a term as “indie” (Nimijean, 2005). The subsuming of all cultural and creative production into economic logics under globalization and neoliberalism (Druick, 2012), and the far-reaching impacts of digital technologies on the production, distribution, and consumption of culture (Wagman & Urqhart, 2012), have further destabilized the long-standing Canadian paradigm of “twinning culture with the formation of national identity” (Druick & Deveau, 2015, p. 157) as a way of demarcating and protecting Canadian cul-

ture from the dominant United States. Emerging in this context, games have been less directly shaped by culturally nationalist policies than older industries, such as film, television, music, and publishing. As Zoë Druick and Danielle Deveau argue, this demands “significant shifts in the ways we frame studies of Canadian culture” (2015, p. 157).

This article examines indie game development across Canada as a site of “negotiation between individuals and organizations conditioned by material structures and policy frameworks” (Druick & Deveau, 2015, p. 157), based on a qualitative study focusing on discourses of identity and community. In doing so it builds on other studies of indie gaming communities. Orlando Guevara-Villalobos has done foundational work in this area, focused on the U.K., and argues that:

communities of independent developers are inter-embedded networks, each one providing a space (virtual and/or physical) where they construct shared meaning and trust, but they also negotiate the construction, distribution and transference of hard and soft assets (skills, knowledge, code, work practices), led by their passion for game design. (2011, p. 3)

As Guevara-Villalobos demonstrates, people involved in these cultures of production identify very strongly with them, which leads to several questions: How do Canadian indies situate themselves, their work, and their relationships in the larger ecosystems of indie games and the game industry? What symbolic and material resources are afforded by the different identifications and positions they adopt? Following Stuart Hall, identification is a multiple and fluid process, not singular and fixed, “constructed within, not outside, discourse” and therefore “produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (1996, p. 4). Our approach is also informed by studies of media production and cultural industries, especially those dealing specifically with the Canadian context (Dorland, 1996; Druick & Deveau, 2015; Sutherland, 2015; Wagman & Urqhart, 2012) and digital games (Kerr, 2016; O’Donnell, 2014). This article analyzes three vectors of identity and community among Canadian indie game developers: global/transnational, local, and national. These three levels are used to tease out the functions of (and tensions between) different forms of identification and engagement in a range of specific contexts across the country with a special focus on “which speakers are using which terms for what ends” (Druick, 2012, p. 144) and who benefits.

Data for this article was collected during the “Critically Mapping Indie Games in Canada” study. This project, conducted between September 2014 and August 2015, examined the geographic distribution of indie gaming in Canada, the activities, interactions, and relationships that make it up, and how it is situated in North American and global gaming culture. It attempted to move beyond the common focus on well-known hubs of activity and macro-level political economic studies to examine specific contexts, including more marginal locations (see Figure 1). This resulted in 34 semi-structured in-person and online interviews with indie game developers across the country—mostly from smaller teams (one to six members), including professionals (full-time or part-time, commercial or artistic), aspiring professionals, amateurs, and hobbyists—focusing on personal background, attitudes, and experiences in the field. Many of the interviewees are involved in indie gaming in ways that go beyond game-

Figure 1: Map of Canada with the locations of “Critically Mapping Indie Games in Canada” study respondents marked.



making, as indie community and event organizers, game design students, game critics, curators, or promoters, which offered a diverse range of perspectives. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, and interviews were transcribed and coded manually according to theme and content. Interviews were supplemented with critical discourse analysis of developer and organization websites, institutional websites and documents, and relevant journalistic coverage of Canadian indie games. We also attended indie gaming events in Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, and Miramichi, New Brunswick, which was useful for observing local scenes in action and making connections with interviewees that we may not otherwise have been aware of, in particular in the Maritimes. This approach made it possible to broadly map the geographic and socio-cultural terrain of Canadian indie gaming, from vibrant and much-publicized hubs in Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver to tiny pockets of activity in isolated locations such as Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and Pangnirtung, Nunavut.

The article begins with a brief overview of the game industry and indie game development in Canada to provide context for the study, followed by examinations of the three vectors of identity and community noted above. The first section considers the dispersed online networks that make up the “global” or transnational indie community, which is made temporarily material at major gaming conferences. The second section highlights the importance of local and regional “scenes” centred on face-to-face gatherings, interactions, collaborations, and support networks, which interact and overlap with the “global.” Finally, the third section discusses the near-absence of appeals to national identity in the interviews, and it attempts to explain why the idea of “Canadian indie games” is deployed only in very specific contexts and is usually framed in economic rather than cultural terms. The article concludes by arguing that indie identities and communities are primarily constructed in tension between the global and the local, and reflects on the wider implications of these findings.

Digital games in Canada

Several different scholars have traced the historical and political-economic contours of the game industry in Canada. The full history will not be rehearsed here (see Hussey, 2015, and Trudel, 2015, for more comprehensive accounts), but suffice it to say that Canada has emerged as one of the most prominent game-producing nations in the world, ranking third behind the United States and Japan (Consalvo, 2013). Game development has generally clustered around major cities with strong media and cultural industries, in particular film/television production, animation and special effects, and software development, which have overlapping knowledge and skill sets; the game industry has thus reproduced the familiar hub/margin dynamic of Canadian economic and cultural history, with Vancouver, Montréal, Toronto, and to a lesser extent, Edmonton, emerging as key sites in the global game industry (Dyer-Witthford & Sharman, 2005).

Richard Sutherland (2015) notes that globalization of cultural industries “offers us an expanded set of actors alongside nations, operating across their borders, and at times competing with them for power” (p. 300). Municipal and provincial governments have welcomed the arrival of studios affiliated with major multinational gaming corporations, such as Electronic Arts (EA) from America and Ubisoft from France, which in turn benefit from concentrations of skilled workers, a favourable exchange rate, and most importantly substantial tax incentives (Dyer-Witthford & Sharman, 2005). Different parts of the country have different degrees of support and funding for games (Consalvo, 2013; Joseph, 2013), but in parallel to the Canadian music industry (Sutherland, 2015) they are generally weighted toward medium-to-large companies and multinationals. EA, Ubisoft, and others have spurred substantial growth in the sector, much as American film and television production in Canada has helped foster and sustain domestic production infrastructure (Urqhart, 2012), but these major corporations also buy up successful Canadian game studios, leaving the domestic industry “vulnerable to the mobility of multinational anchors,” (Dyer-Witthford & Sharman, 2005, p. 197) who may relocate if better circumstances arise elsewhere (see Sciretta, 2017). Ubisoft’s recent appeals to the federal government to help combat rival Vivendi’s attempted hostile takeover are an interesting example of this dynamic, with Ubisoft using the potential risk of lost Canadian jobs as leverage (Chalk, 2016). Although there were once a number of domestically owned studios producing top-tier or “AAA” titles, the majority have been acquired by multinationals. Edmonton’s Bioware, until 2005 the largest and most successful Canadian game company, is now owned by Electronic Arts, and other studios have been similarly subsumed (de Peuter, 2012).

Despite its apparent size and prominence, a small number of mostly foreign corporations control the game industry in Canada, and most of its revenues (de Peuter, 2012). Thanks to free trade agreements, compatible communications infrastructure, and the rise of digital distribution (Druick, 2012), there is virtually no distinction between the Canadian and American markets for cultural products (Druick & Deveau, 2015). The relative lack of content and distribution regulations for digital games compared to other Canadian cultural industries, such as music (Sutherland, 2015) and film/television (Urqhart, 2012), makes this transnational market integration especially

palpable for games (Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005). Canadian citizens work on some of the biggest and most popular game franchises in the world, but these blockbuster titles are rarely if ever understood to be “Canadian games” domestically or abroad (de Peuter, 2012).

In the shadow of industry colossi, independent game development has also proliferated, originally driven by exiles from major studios and professionals from other media industries, and now increasingly by student, aspiring, amateur, and other “everyday” or “informal” game-making practices (Keogh, 2017; Young, 2017). Prior to around 2008–2009, indie games made by Canadian developers (even popular hits such as the *N* series of ninja-themed puzzle platformers by Toronto’s Metanet Software [2004–2015]) were not strongly associated with their city or country of origin. The reconfiguration of indie gaming beyond decentralized, online communities to include geographically localized scenes is therefore a significant development, and has had a subtle but tangible impact on the game industry more generally (Keogh, 2017; Young, 2017). Industry hubs such as Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver have gained international recognition and acclaim as hotbeds of indie activity, and other locales have followed suit with varying degrees of success. As Guevara-Villalobos (2011) argues, indie games are not an individual pursuit, but rather “the collective result of the complex interaction among developers, other industry actors within the chain of value, and communities (both players and developers)” (p. 10). While online networks may provide some access to community, knowledge, resources, and transnational markets, local scenes stabilize and formalize the diverse social/economic networks of actors and activities that encompass indie cultural production in discrete geographical areas (Kruse, 2010). As will be demonstrated, relative geographic position and the presence or absence of a local scene are key factors in indies’ sense of identity and community.

The imagined “global” indie game community

Study respondents almost all have a strong sense of identification with other indie developers around the world. Pierson Browne (2015) refers to the popular notion of a transnational network of indie game makers and players as an “imagined indie community” (p. 84), drawing on Benedict Anderson’s (2016) ubiquitous theorization of nationality. To identify as indie is to align oneself with this imagined community through shared ideals and practices. Because indie gaming as it is now understood originates as a primarily online phenomenon, distributed across blogs and web forums such as IndieGamer, the Independent Gaming Source (TIGSource), and IndieGames.com, gaming portals such as Newgrounds (Browne, 2015) and Game Jolt, and more recently Twitter, Tumblr, and other social media platforms, everyday online engagement is for many developers a fundamental part of “being indie.” One developer respondent from Halifax, Nova Scotia, refers to online interactions as “establishing this vague fog of ‘you are in community’ even if you’re not physically located with people,” regardless of geographic location. In addition to a sense of belonging, observing and/or participating in online indie communities provides moral support, access to shared knowledge and resources, and potential collaborations or connections. Social media is a common entry point for aspiring indies, who can tap into these networks by following influential figures, new

releases, and discussions, either “lurking” passively and absorbing information or becoming active participants.

Indie developers are prone to describing the imagined indie community as “global,” but inter- or transnational would be more accurate since, as globetrotting Dutch developer and “indie evangelist” Rami Ismail has noted, game development is concentrated in certain parts of the world (Takahashi, 2016), and Western Anglophone conceptions of indie may not be compatible with other cultures of independent game production (Priestman, 2016). Uneven access to high-speed internet further compounds this divide (Kruse, 2010). Moreover, as Chris J. Young (2017) points out, these online communities are increasingly circumscribed by corporately-owned social media platforms. Nevertheless, the indie game community (and gaming culture more generally) is habitually perceived to be global and open to anyone from anywhere to participate, consistent with the supposedly inclusive, DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos of indie. Throughout the study’s interviews, respondents define themselves in terms of this imagined “global” community and their relationships to other indies around the world.

A commonly referenced benefit of alignment with and participation in transnational indie game communities is moral support. Indie game development, despite the romantic image of “doing what you love,” can be challenging and even gruelling at times, made more so by economic uncertainty and precarity, as noted above. Paolo Ruffino (2013) goes so far as to describe it as a form of self-exploitation. Tapping into the distributed online networks of developers around the world is therefore a much-needed source of inspiration, encouragement, and commiseration. The Halifax developer quoted above elaborates on the value of having a far-reaching Twitter feed, as a way of staving off burnout:

[Indie game development] is really facilitated by having something like Twitter and like a tiny part of your computer that’s dedicated to filling your brain full of the knowledge that there are other people out there.

An indie event organizer in Toronto echoes this sentiment: “It’s super important that everyone knows what each other’s up to and be able to support and cheer-lead each others’ works.” This atmosphere of mutual support and cooperation is key to the ethos and mythology of indie, positioned against the perceived cutthroat competition of the mainstream industry. A developer from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, defines his indie identity beyond regional and national borders:

I relate to other indie studios more [than mainstream developers]. The geography, where you’re from, it really doesn’t change anything. ... If some guy is trying to make a game, I understand what that person is going through. That’s what I relate to.

Emphasizing shared interests, values, and experiences regardless of location shows that the sense of involvement in a wider “global” indie community is important, especially for respondents from marginal areas and those who eschew local scenes due to lack of time or self-identified social awkwardness. Beyond the “vague fog” of belonging, however, there are also more practical benefits to participation.

Access to game development knowledge and resources through online indie communities is a paramount concern for many study respondents. This may take the form of general game design advice—suggestions for what events and showcases to apply to, technical troubleshooting for specific tools or platforms, or public relations and business development tips (which for many indies is a blind spot)—and takes place on a diverse range of channels and venues, from social media to tool-specific forums to private mailing lists. A developer from Ottawa talks about the value of learning from the collective mistakes of others and feeding back into the community:

you can hear every single thing that someone's done wrong with respect to marketing, and pricing, and development, and all those things. ... I guess we'll be able to be there, giving all the mistakes that we made to people in the future.

Social media platforms offer a unique form of public access to community knowledge (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011), as this Montréal game critic notes: "Twitter is this large very messy but also very open discussion hub, and ideas travel." Private venues such as mailing lists create a complementary space for frank, focused behind-the-scenes discussion, as a Montréal developer indicates:

I'm on a few mailing lists that also are very, very nice. ... Nobody is really allowed to be very public with their sales numbers because of the partner secrecy. So it's kind of a nice back channel for independent developers to talk to each other on a mailing list like that.

Again, here, the emphasis is on mutual support rather than competition, with the assumption that developers will pay their knowledge and resources forward rather than guarding them jealously, ultimately benefiting the whole community. For some, this leads to direct collaboration on projects.

Given the nature of immaterial, project-based work (Terranova, 2000), many indie developers collaborate via the internet. Participation in transnational indie communities grants access to networks of potential collaborators with complementary skill sets and resources, regardless of location. A part-time developer from Ottawa mentions collaborators from Toronto, Texas, and Spain, and says that he does most of his work online:

With the way that indie gaming works, sort of across boundaries on the internet, it's hard to sort of even know where people are from. ... I'm not really a Canadian indie gamer I guess. I'm an Internet indie developer.

Other respondents who work with collaborators in the United States and overseas, such as a Manitoba-based producer of marketing materials for indies, make similar statements. This extends beyond game development itself and also includes game criticism, organizing events, and other coordinating activities. The judging for international indie game festivals such as Indiecade or the Independent Game Festival (IGF), for example, is conducted by distributed pseudo-communities interacting anonymously through online portals, and indie gaming blogs and zines are usually the product of international online collaborations. Similarly, the Global Game Jam (GGJ), which takes place simultaneously in locations across the world, is cited by a number of respondents as reinforcing the sense of a "global" indie community. One developer says

that participating in Toronto's massive GGJ event made him feel like part of something bigger happening "over multiple places on the globe," even though he has never travelled to gaming events outside the local scene. In other contexts, however, these immaterial online networks become material.

Indie developers from around the world allocate time and resources to converge at major game industry events, such as the Game Developers Conference (GDC) and PAX, and at indie-focused festivals such as Indiecade. These events constitute temporary hubs of intensified connection and interaction, reinforcing the idea of a wider indie community coming together. Respondents describe the convergence of developers at these events as a big, happy family reunion, in which local and national origins supposedly fade into the background and are replaced by an in-person manifestation of the "global" online networks where indies connect day-to-day. One Montréal developer suggests that reconnecting with faraway friends is the primary motivation for many attendees, quite apart from exhibiting their games or conducting business. This is particularly evident in stories about the notorious "Indie Hostel" at GDC in San Francisco, an affordable hostel near the conference venue that is taken over by indies each year and becomes a hub of social activity. An Ottawa developer describes the Indie Hostel scene effusively:

It's a big mishmash of everyone. It's always a party. It's like Canadians, Americans, dudes from Europe as well also stay there. You all hang out in the common room, everyone's making games, everyone's talking about games. ... You know who half these people are due to the Internet anyways. ... When you're online, it's just another name on a screen."

Opportunities to connect with online acquaintances and network with influential figures in the indie community are particularly valuable for developers based in marginal areas. A Sudbury, Ontario, developer describes his first GDC as a kind of indie pilgrimage, a way for a complete novice in the field to dive into the deep end and become part of the community.

The perception of being part of a generalized "global" indie community is thus a key part of most Canadian indie developers' identities. It is understood to be an open, inclusive community that encourages identification with the ideals and ethos of indie regardless of geographic location. As one developer from Calgary puts it, "It's not like once you've crossed the border to the north somehow things change drastically. It's still people who are motivated by the same things, who are interested by the same things. It's kind of a cross-border thing." A developer from Montréal similarly suggests that indie gaming culture "feels more globalized than it does local or even national." Other developers, however, lament the lack of local indie communities where they live (or their own lack of engagement with those communities), even as they express gratefulness for the imagined global community. As is demonstrated in the next section, the local is of equal importance and serves an overlapping but distinct set of functions.

Local indie game scenes

As theorized in the foundational work of Will Straw (2002), scenes are those "highly local clusters of activity" (p. 248) that make up geographically specific instances of

wider cultural phenomena, usually in urban settings. Holly Kruse (2010) writes of local indie music scenes, “[s]ubjectivities and identities [are] formed, changed, and maintained within localities that [are] constituted by geographical boundaries, by networks of social relationships, by a sense of local history, and in opposition to other localities” (p. 628). In other words, a scene stages the encounter between the local and the global through the “cartography of the city’s social regions and their interconnection,” (Straw, 2002, p. 250, 253), producing in the process norms, conventions, and a sense of identity and community (Straw, 1991).

Even as network technologies have transformed cultural production, distribution, and reception, the local still has a place, literally, in the digital world (Sutherland, 2015). Although it is often overlooked in studies of digital media such as games, attending to the specificities and peculiarities of the local is revealing, as Melanie Swalwell (2007; 2009) has demonstrated in her research and preservation work on historical gaming cultures in Australia and New Zealand. Similarly, Skot Deeming, contends that the local is “the foundation of the emerging global indie game scene” (forthcoming, n.p.) in both popular discourse and actual practice, noting that the local materializes the decentralized networks of online interaction that gave birth to the idea of indie. While online indie gaming communities are accessible, or at least observable, for anyone with an internet connection (which already precludes certain parts of the world and Canada), the volume of local indie gaming activity varies widely from place to place. In large and mid-size Canadian cities, cultural scenes made up of developers and enthusiasts, community and professional associations, government and institutional actors, multinational corporations, festivals and showcases, and social events, as well as the games themselves, make up densely interconnected and interdependent assemblages, as demonstrated in Daniel Joseph’s political economy (2013) and Young’s ethnography (2017) of game-making cultures in Toronto. Indie developer and scholar Robert Yang (2017) argues that notions of “one huge monolithic internet game culture” are inherently limited compared to local organizations. Indeed, where they are present, these scenes play a definitive role in participants’ identity formation; where they are absent, developers seek out other avenues of identification and community, usually appealing to transnational networks instead.

Toronto’s Hand Eye Society, founded in 2009, promotes itself as the first local “videogame arts” (Hand Eye Society, n.d.) organization in the world. Whether or not this is true internationally, it does predate similar groups in the United States. This may have to do with the physical vastness of Canada and the hub/margin dynamics discussed above, which helped create critical masses of people interested in games. Internationally celebrated indie music scenes in Toronto and Montréal in the 2000s (Battle, 2009; Sutherland 2015) may also have helped establish the parameters for local gaming communities. Another factor is that Toronto, unlike Montréal and Vancouver, did not have a centralized major industry presence until relatively recently (Ubisoft Toronto only opened its doors in 2009), making it fertile ground for smaller-scale development (Joseph, 2013). Deeming notes that this was a gradual process, beginning in “informal localized networks and collectives” that over time “formalized into a series of organizations, institutions and events, centered on the promotion of

indie games culture, at home and across the world” (forthcoming, n.p.). The Hand Eye model of indie community organization, built around social gatherings and gaming parties, show-and-tell events, game jams, and game-making workshops was soon adopted and adapted by Montréal’s Mount Royal Game Society/La Société Ludique du Mont Royal (MRGS), Vancouver’s Full Indie, Ottawa’s Dirty Rectangles, and Winnipeg’s Bit Collective, all of which were founded in mid-2010 (along with similar organizations in American cities), in some cases with direct input and encouragement from the Hand Eye organizers.

All of these organizations were formed partially in response to perceived failings of existing game development communities. Previously, local branches of the International Game Developers’ Association (IGDA) were the primary venues for developers to meet and socialize, but their focus on commercial game development, from AAA all the way down, clashed with the emerging indie ethos. Respondents such as these community organizers from Ottawa and Halifax contrast the more formal, professionalization-oriented IGDA with the new indie groups:

we [didn’t] like the one-person-at-the-front and lecture style that a lot of IGDA events have. They tended to be more business-focused, which certainly was not our thing.

I personally have not seen a lot of positive results out of like IGDA when it comes to independent games. I’ve never felt like they were batting for us.

Although many indies still participate in their local IGDA branches and acknowledge the value of their activities, by making a distinct space for smaller, less business-minded game makers to congregate, commiserate, and celebrate creativity, these local organizations and physical co-working spaces quickly became fertile sites of indie community, much as Guevara-Villalobos (2011) observes in the UK.

In hub cities, complementary and sometimes competing groups have proliferated, expanding and diversifying major scenes. Toronto, for example, now plays host to a wide range of groups, venues, and events dedicated to indie gaming, including the Hand Eye Society, Dames Making Games, Gamma Space (formerly Bento Miso), BitBazaar, Vector Game+ Art Festival, TOJam, Gamercamp, and various university/college groups to name only a few. Journalists now report on indie gaming activity in specific hub cities for a general, non-gaming audience (Leijon, 2015; Rook, 2010) and the most critically and commercially successful Canadian indie games have originated in these scenes. A second wave of local scenes in cities such as Calgary, Halifax, Edmonton, Quebec City, and Victoria, alongside Winnipeg and Ottawa, are burgeoning, but are still considered peripheral in relation to the broader networks of indie gaming, likely in part due to the comparative lack of major industry presence in these places.

Canadian local indie game scenes tend to focus on community-building and mutual encouragement, showcasing and promoting local work, resource and knowledge sharing, facilitating collaboration, and (perhaps most importantly) fostering a palpable sense of identity and belonging for indies in the immediate area. For some respondents, living in a hub city with a strong local scene is considered an economic and creative necessity, but others choose to live and work in comparatively isolated, marginal re-

gions with a minimal or non-existent community infrastructure or game industry. Respondents in medium-size and small cities such as Ottawa and Sudbury strive for the critical mass and resources necessary to sustain a scene, but also appreciate some aspects of being outside the hubs. The advantages and disadvantages of different locations thus depend greatly on individual needs and preferences.

Cost and quality of life and work were major concerns in the interviews. While respondents in Toronto and Vancouver must hustle hard or work day jobs to make rent, respondents outside of the main hubs, in places such as Winnipeg, Halifax, and Yarmouth, cite a low cost of living as an enabling factor for being full-time indie developers. Montréal has uncharacteristically low rent for a major city, for a variety of complex historical socioeconomic reasons (Andrew-Gee, 2016), which makes it a particularly desirable location for aspiring indies (although in Quebec, language can be an issue for Anglophones). This emphasis on making ends meet reflects the precarity of indie game development, which is fraught with economic risk and uncertainty. Developers must weigh the benefits of being part of a hub community against practical necessities and lifestyle preferences.

Unsurprisingly, developers in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montréal point to the size and diversity of their cities as a major advantage. Respondents describe hub scenes as being generally supportive and having “plenty of room” for many different identities and perspectives, although in some cases tensions between individuals or groups can sour this communitarian attitude (see below). Local expertise is valuable in cultural production, since it can speak specifically to local concerns (Sutherland, 2015), such as opportunities for municipal or provincial government support, and a concentration of game developers (indie and otherwise) means that there is a broad knowledge base to draw upon. These cosmopolitan, multicultural hubs are also home to a wide variety of other kinds of artists and cultural producers outside of games, so that “inspiration-wise, you always have brilliant ideas and super great people to work with” as one Montréal developer enthuses. A developer and community organizer from Toronto similarly says that he benefits both creatively and economically from working at the intersection of several different media, which is made much easier in a major city (see also Joseph, 2013).

Developers in locations with smaller or non-existent scenes point to a distinct set of challenges and opportunities. The community in Ottawa is small enough, according to one developer/organizer, that “everyone knows everybody” and is very supportive of one another. For a two-person team based in the small, recessed fishing town of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, “the biggest disadvantage is being disconnected,” and they make a point of attending big gaming events such as GDC to network and stay in the loop of indie games more broadly: “Meeting someone face-to-face is so much more powerful than an email. Almost all of my industry friends, I have I actually met in real life, and I can meet more people through those friends.” On the other hand, they suggest that the relative isolation can also be a boon from a creative standpoint:

it's like you're more pure. Even though being connected to the industry can be a beneficial thing, depending on your own character, you could potentially see somebody successful doing something and then try to emu-

late them. Which, when you're following, you're probably not going to be successful. I think what you should do is your own thing, whatever you feel is your own thing, and learn your own path.

Similarly, one of the organizers of Sudbury's nascent indie scene felt good about building something from scratch, "as opposed to just going in and subsuming into something that already exists." In a sense, these comments reflect the bootstrapping tech start-up mentality that permeates much of indie game development, but it is also filtered through a sort of rugged artistic individualism tied to their marginal geographic locations. Much as indie-ness is defined against the nebulous centre of the "mainstream," these developers gesture toward a kind of counter-urban regionalism (Deeming, forthcoming).

Access to and the allocation of symbolic and material resources is cited by several respondents as a factor in larger urban scenes. One formerly Toronto-based developer and organizer explains this tension in the local community, and its impact on her decision to take a non-gaming job in the United States:

There's a lot of competition for scarce resources, like funding opportunities, media recognition, and so on. I've seen a lot of conflicts arise from questions about which people or groups get to take credit for successful projects, and I've been on both sides of those conflicts myself. Sometimes it seems like in a community that runs so much on unpaid or under-paid labour, the 'soft' rewards like credit, support, and recognition get hugely magnified in importance.

Because Toronto is large enough to support a host of different developers and organizations, competition, uneven rewards, and interpersonal conflict are inevitable, and can have a destabilizing effect on the scene (Harvey & Fisher, 2013), a concern echoed by respondents from Montréal and Vancouver. Outside of the hubs, competition is less of a problem. The Sudbury respondent notes that Northern Ontario is in a separate pool for arts council grants from the rest of the province, meaning that applicants do not need to compete with Toronto for project and organizational funding. Although Nova Scotia has comparatively limited funding for games, respondents there also suggest that they benefit from better or more direct government support due to the relative lack of competition. By contrast, a veteran developer from Edmonton expresses frustration at Alberta's lack of provincial funding and incentives for games, which he attributes to the entrenchment of the "old" film and television industries and a parochial resistance to "new" media.

Community organizers interviewed for the study often raised the challenges of building and maintaining a scene, especially outside of the hubs. Developers in more marginal areas often feel compelled to permanently relocate to take advantage of a better support and resources. This "brain drain" makes it difficult to sustain a sense of community and continuity in cities such as Ottawa and Calgary, which are physically close to larger major cities. In juxtaposition to his comment about the appeal of building something new, the Sudbury respondent confessed, "I fight the urge to move to Toronto every two or three months," and indeed he did move the following year. This circulation of people can have a profound impact on local scenes. As noted above,

there is considerable labour involved in maintaining a local scene (see Crogan, 2015; Woo, 2012), and this work is often spearheaded by an individual or small group. If these key “maintainers” leave, the community may scatter or collapse without sufficient social infrastructure and momentum. The Winnipeg scene, which was once internationally celebrated for its creative vitality (Deeming, forthcoming; Gartner, 2010), all but evaporated in the wake of several prominent Bit Collective members relocating to Vancouver. On the other hand, with sufficient “future-proofing,” organizers can ensure that their communities are self-sufficient even after they leave. The primary community organizer in Ottawa moved away from the city for personal reasons after our initial interview, but in a follow-up said he was confident that others in the scene he had worked closely with were ready to “step up,” and the Dirty Rectangles group is still going strong. An organizer of game development workshops in towns across the Arctic territory of Nunavut (where there is no game industry or development community to speak of) takes a similar approach to ensure continuity, by training local mentors to run the workshops on an ongoing basis.

Local indie scenes provide many of the same kinds of symbolic and material resources as the global indie community—moral support, knowledge sharing, collaboration—but respondents stress the value of face-to-face interactions in enhancing these activities. One Vancouver developer and community organizer puts it bluntly:

You can talk about, man, the internet is doing all these good things. We have Skype, and I can talk to you over a super long distance. That's great, but you still can't replace face-to-face talking. I feel like if I were to move away from the city, I would lose a lot of intangible stuff that matters a lot in the end.

Even respondents that do not engage regularly with local scenes affirm their importance, such as this developer from Ottawa who sheepishly explained that he does not attend local events:

I should be more involved in the local scene [laughs]. I really should because it's important. But I'm not. ... it's easier to get people involved when you actually sit down and talk to them face-to-face. Local is, I think, more important.

A handful of developers voiced similar expressions of regret or guilt, and it is telling that even a self-described “antisocial nerd” feels a sense of investment in the local scene and an obligation to participate and give back to the community. Guevara-Villalobos (2011) argues that in-person community engagement fulfills for indies an “emotional need to communicate and make contact beyond virtual means” (p. 11). The “intangible stuff” of identification with a local community thus counterbalances and reinforces the “vague fog” of imagined “global” community. National identification, however, is notable mostly by its absence.

National indie games?

Globalization, by nature, “challenges accounts of the nation-state as a discrete entity, the natural container of economic, social, and cultural processes” (Sutherland, 2015, p. 299), and the game industry is emblematic of this shift in spatial logic (Kerr, 2016).

Unlike other forms of Canadian cultural production, which have historically been mythologized as embodying a distinctively national, independent, and “inherently superior” (Druick, 2012, p. 139) alternative to American media industry dominance, indie games and developers are seldom designated Canadian or even “not-American.” Instead, their independence is defined more generally against a monolithic, globalized “mainstream game industry” and its perceived failings. The mere fact that a cultural producer is integrated into transnational networks does not preclude national identification (Sutherland, 2015), but most respondents, when asked if they consider themselves part of a Canadian indie game scene or community, were hesitant to express any strong sense of identification. Identification with local communities and the generalized, “global” ideals of indie-ness trump national allegiance for most of the respondents. In some cases, they refuse the premise outright, but puzzlement and uncertainty is the most common response. This Montréal developer, for example, wrestles with the question:

I couldn't tell you who's Canadian specifically. ... Like, I talk to you on the Internet. Are you a Canadian or ... yeah. ... Oh wow. I'm just thinking, I have no idea who's Canadian or not outside of the people who I work with often.

Whatever personal sense of national identity indie developers have, it does not necessarily extend to their involvement in indie games. To bastardize Anderson (2016), Canadian indie games are an imagined community that very few people have bothered to imagine. Given the similarities between games and other forms of cultural production, it is somewhat surprising that we do not find an analogue to the national identification habitually attached to Canadian music, film, literature, and art, nor any equivalent to the heated, long-standing debates and existential crises around what exactly constitutes Canadian-ness in these fields (Edwardson, 2008; Higson, 2000; Sutherland, 2015; Urqhart, 2012). As we argue below, this can be attributed to the peculiarities of the Canadian game industry, as well as broader shifts in Canadian cultural policy.

Straw notes that the “effervescence” (2002, p. 256) and diversity of urban cultural scenes and their ability to synthesize the local and the global can undercut attempts to foster cultural nationalism. Indeed, as discussed in the previous sections, local and online indie game communities provide a wealth of opportunities for identification, community, knowledge and resource sharing, and collaboration, which for some makes the idea of national culture irrelevant. Many respondents place the local above the national in terms of identification, such as this Montréal developer/organizer:

I can't say there's a super strong Canadian identity. ... Generally speaking, it's pretty local. ... I wouldn't approach someone and say that, “yeah, I'm a Canadian game developer.” I'm definitely a Montreal game developer first and foremost. That happens to make me Canadian as well, obviously. It's not something that I necessarily identify with.

Other respondents point to larger, undifferentiated transnational networks in lieu of the national. The Yarmouth developer states: “I never really thought about the Canadian part at all, honestly. ... I'd say I consider myself to be part of the North American indie game community. Not necessarily Canadian.” Some respondents, such as this Vancouver community organizer, indicate they have stronger ties with indie

game scenes in nearby American cities than on the other side of the country: “It’s not like once you’ve crossed the border to the north somehow things change drastically. It’s still people who are motivated by the same things, who are interested by the same things. It’s kind of a cross-border thing.” National boundaries fade in the face of local or regional connections and decentralized online communities.

In a few cases, respondents bent over backward trying to figure out how to frame their work as Canadian, with little success. These respondents feel like they *should* feel connected to some kind of national community or pride, but they do not. At times, it becomes almost aspirational, as if they *want* a Canadian indie scene to exist, or feel that it *must* exist, but if it does they do not know anything about it. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Zena Sharman (2005) observe a similar dynamic in the mainstream game industry, insofar as games are not framed as “Canadian” (p. 195) even if they are made by Canadian teams. Some respondents point out well-known, critically and commercially successful indie games made in whole or in part by Canadian developers, including *Aquaria* (Bit Blot, 2007), *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* (Capy, 2011), *Fez* (Polytron, 2012), and *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017), suggesting a generalized national reputation for quality work and perhaps some pride in the output of fellow Canadian indie game developers. This is a form of what Grieg de Peuter (2012) calls “talent nationalism” (pp. 91–92) in which cultural products are a source of national pride based entirely on their provenance, regardless of content, target market, or reception. Although independent Canadian cultural producers have traditionally relied heavily on sales within Canada (Sutherland, 2015), the increasingly undifferentiated North American market has made distributing a Canadian-made game in the United States or vice versa in some cases as simple as uploading it to a digital storefront. Indie games are also unaffected by the persistent stigma against supposedly low-quality Canadian film and television, not necessarily because they are of higher quality, but because they are not marked as specifically Canadian (Druick & Deveau, 2015; Urqhart, 2012). The vague gestures to nationalism in the interviews are largely incidental or secondary, and are bookended by denials and hesitation as described above.

When and where, then, do respondents position themselves and their work in indie games as Canadian? Based on the interviews, national identification primarily occurs at the level of institutions and individuals’ interactions with them, and the most influential of these institutions understand games primarily in economic, rather than cultural, terms (Joseph, 2013). As noted above, there is substantial support for domestic and foreign game development in Canada, but many of these funds, loans, subsidies, and trade initiatives are focused on technological innovation, job creation, and business development, in keeping with Canada’s history of “technological nationalism” (Charland, 1986, p. 196). de Peuter is critical of federal and provincial policies regarding games, arguing that:

state support for game capital in Canada is illustrative of the economization of cultural policy, a process whereby public contribution to cultural production is governed by market criteria of investment, return, and, especially, job creation ... the tax credits for which industry has lobbied mostly apply to labour budgets. (2012, pp. 84–85)

The game industry is thus emblematic of a broader shift away from nationalist protectionism—the emphasis on “Canadian content” that has historically characterized Canadian cultural policy (Edwardson, 2008)—toward forms of support geared toward increasingly global, export-oriented cultural industries (Druick & Deveau, 2015). For government institutions and initiatives, the idea of a distinct Canadian game industry is a tool to promote transnational business and trade, and thus for indie developers and other cultural producers, Canadian identity is a strategic position tied to specific economic opportunities. When respondents do talk about indie games as Canadian, it is almost always in these terms.

Michael Dorland (1996) identifies a gap between the ambitious rhetoric of national cultural policy and the material resources actually available to most cultural producers. Business-oriented sources of support, such as the Canada Media Fund, are of limited practical value for smaller indie developers, and this is especially true for those engaged in artistic, activist, and other less market-friendly creative practices (de Peuter, 2012). More arts-oriented organizations, such as the National Film Board and the Canada Council for the Arts (as well as various local and provincial arts councils), have begun to extend their media arts programs to games, but these require applicants to frame themselves and their works using art-world rhetoric that may not be familiar to indie game makers, and some juries may still question the artistic legitimacy of games. Canadian indie developers must work hard to tailor their creative and business plans to appeal to different institutions, or in many cases simply ignore them and find other ways to make ends meet.

A number of developers interviewed had received federal support, and some suggest that it helps foster a sense of imagined community. The organizer of the Nunavut workshops, who also develops commercial games in Ontario and British Columbia, says that he is happy to be a “flag-waver” given the provincial and federal support his companies have received, espousing “kind of an identification with the country’s policies,” as he puts it. A Montréal respondent similarly muses that “I do feel a little bit connected to [developers across Canada] due to the Canada Media Fund ... seeing other indie studios from Canada on that list, makes me feel more affiliated and more connected to them.” But she is quick to point out that this is a secondary factor, and direct connections to local and regional communities are more tangible and valuable. The existing frameworks for subsidizing and supporting Canadian game production, it seems, do not foster a distinct cultural identity, and finding common ground with other developers based on a shared source of funding evidently does not inspire patriotic fervour.

In addition to direct funding and subsidies, state involvement in the Canadian game industry also extends to more hands-on support. Various Canadian government agencies and trade organizations have a presence at GDC and other major international game industry events described above, where they host trade missions, showcases, networking events, and parties intended to promote the Canadian game industry. These include the Game Nation Canada Business Lounge organized by the Canadian Trade Commission Service, Export Development Canada, and the Canadian Interactive Alliance, and annual delegations from the Ontario Media Development Corporation

and New Media Manitoba. Richard Sutherland (2015) observes that the Canadian music industry has similarly placed ever more institutional emphasis on delegations to international trade shows and industry showcases, in keeping with the general shift toward export in Canadian cultural industries and policy. To encourage game industry growth, these organizations make broad appeals to national pride to advertise made-in-Canada games; perform “match-making” services to connect Canadian developers with foreign publishers, platform-holders, investors, and contracts; and promote the country itself as a potential home for foreign corporations and investors (McConnell, 2017). Playful clichés about Canadian culture abound in institutional discourses and marketing materials, including stylized polygonal icebergs and maple leaves (CIAC, 2015), and jokes about Canadian developers writing code to keep themselves warm in the frigid winters.

In light of this, international industry events would seem to be the kind of context in which more pronounced national identification would occur, as is the case at film festivals (Newman, 2011). However, most respondents say they do not feel any greater sense of Canadian identity or community than they do in their everyday work. Much more emphasis is placed on the exciting opportunity to meet other developers from around the world in the flesh in a big international reunion. When asked if they seek out other Canadians to spend time with, or if there is an identifiable Canadian contingent at major industry events, the answer is almost always “not really,” as this developer/organizer from Montréal indicates:

One doesn't go to these events to say specifically, “I'm going to meet other Canadian developers.” It's just like, “I'm going to meet other developers from around the world that I know from Twitter and then get to hang out again and reconnect in person.”

A respondent from Winnipeg is outright disdainful of institutional attempts to create a sense of Canadian community:

there's the “Canada Party” at GDC every year and it's just fucking awkward, it's like nobody wants to go. ... And there's a Manitoba thing too ... they have the Manitoba party and it's even worse because they're people that you just don't want to see, like I see you guys as rarely as I can already.

The thinly veiled hostility in this remark is telling. This particular developer does not rely on any of the government support detailed above, and makes a comfortable living doing contract work for an extensive international network of indie developers. When there is no material reason to identify strongly as Canadian, the notion is easily dismissed. If, as Melissa Aronczyk (2009) argues, contemporary national identities are defined according to their “usefulness,” and Canadian identity is of little use to most indies.

There are, however, some exceptions. Interestingly, two less experienced respondents from more marginal locations did describe a feeling of Canadian community and identification at big events such as the GDC:

there's kind of this Canadian development community that we've gotten to know. It was funny, in San Francisco this year for GDC, we—every single

night—went to Canadian parties [laughs]. The first night was Canada as a whole, then Ontario, and then BC, and then Nova Scotia, and so on. You can go to these places and never have to meet new people. ... The Canadian scene is really neat, and everyone's really, really supportive. It's been neat being able to grow part of that.

One thing I noticed [at GDC] was that the Canadians stuck together a lot. People from Vancouver and Toronto and Halifax, Montréal all seemed to gravitate towards each other, and that felt really great. That's sort of where that [sense of national connection] comes from.

How do we understand these comments in relation to the numerous claims to the contrary from other respondents? They could be interpreted as simply a reflection of the many different sub-communities that emerge within a large-scale industry conference, or the naïveté of relative newcomers to the indie gaming scene, hoping to integrate into an imagined community that does not really exist. On the other hand, a newcomer's perspective might reveal patterns that are so deeply ingrained that they are invisible to other respondents, and this could be a self-conscious strategy for making sense of a sprawling, intimidating conference by seeking out fellow Canadians—making the national useful in a different way.

Nationhood traditionally fulfills what Andrew Higson (2000) describes as “a felt need for a rooted, whole, and authentic identity,” (p. 65) but as he argues, the “continent communities” (p. 73) that emerge around cinema and other cultural forms are just as likely to be local or transnational. Based on the research presented here, the intersection of local and global is the primary site of indie identification, community, and imagination. These overlapping social-material assemblages provide sufficient belonging, resources, and support for study respondents to sustain their emotional and practical need for identity, and in most cases they navigate between them without giving much thought to the national imaginary outside of institutional contexts. As Druick and Deveau (2015) point out, the way that Canadian content is conceived is changing, and the federal government recently announced a far-reaching review of cultural policy (LeBlanc, 2016). It remains to be seen how these changes will affect nationalist discourses in and around games.

Between the local and the global

Running counter to the popular notion that network technologies produce only de-territorialization and globalization, local spaces and identities remain crucial in the digital era. In fact, this is part and parcel with the process of globalization, as anxiety about cultural imperialism produces a renewed emphasis on local and regional identities and cultures and their specific articulations of “global” phenomena (Christie, 2013; Waisbord, 1998). As Kruse (2010) observes, local indie music scenes are going strong even as most communication, distribution, promotion, and some production has moved online. Moreover, these online connections reinforce and intensify local connections and identification, “providing the necessary infrastructure still required for music scenes to survive” (pp. 631, 637). Indie games follow a similar but reversed pattern, in which predominantly online interactions are over time complemented by

face-to-face gatherings and communities—indeed, without the established online networks that preceded them, it is unlikely local indie gaming scenes would have emerged (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011). As in music scenes, these two vectors of identification are inextricably linked and mutually reinforced, in productive tension (Young, 2017). The local provides grounding and encouragement, counteracting “the experiences of isolation, anxiety and lack of motivation commonly found within the creative industries,” (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011, p. 14) as well as helping sift through the noise of the larger transnational community. “Global” identification provides a greater sense of imagined community and helps to position different individuals and scenes in relation to one another and the wider game industry.

The many and varied “translocal” connections between local communities around the world, including distributed teams, collaborative projects, multi-city game jams, creative or organizational cross-pollination, and couch-crashing, show that local scenes can never really be understood in isolation (Kruse, 2011). A number of examples from this study’s interviews and other studies illustrate this dynamic in play. As the Toronto scene has expanded, the Hand Eye Society increasingly does international outreach, “signal-boosting” Toronto developers and initiatives to the wider global community and encouraging transnational collaborations. Similarly, Execution Labs, an incubator/accelerator for promising indies seeking business development support, relocates developers from around the world to Montréal for its intensive programs, and in doing so builds transnational connections (see Whitson, 2014). Another example is the proliferation of DIY arcade cabinets, physical gaming platforms designed to resemble traditional arcade machines, complete with colourful facades, and pre-loaded with an assortment of indie games from local developers, such as the Winnitron (Winnipeg), the Torontron (Toronto), and the Arcade Royale (Montréal). Deeming’s (forthcoming) historical account positions these hybrid objects as emblematic of the productive global/local tension at the heart of indie identity, re-inscribing locality, regionalism, and site-specificity while simultaneously travelling the world, inspiring many imitators. The parallel resurgence of “local multiplayer” and party games (which can be played by multiple co-located players simultaneously) as a major trend in indie game design similarly reflects these dynamics and demonstrates, as Jesper Juul (2014) argues, that the social-material organization of indie communities affects the kinds of games being made and played in those communities.

To identify as part of a local scene is to position oneself within a whole constellation of other localities, irrespective of nationality. Deeming evocatively suggests that local and regional gaming cultures are positioned “simultaneously as centre and margin” (forthcoming, n.p.) and thus must be understood as in tension between the two. An Ottawa developer’s comment highlights this between-ness:

after you get outside of that local indie developer scene, you generally sort of become part of the global indie developer scene. ... It tends to not matter at that point. You kind of hang out with anyone who’s doing game development globally.

Local identity both matters profoundly and does not matter at all. Some respondents lean more heavily in one direction or the other; developers in isolated locations sustain

themselves entirely with online communities, and some in central hubs may find everything they need locally. But in general, Canadian indie game folks put down roots in their local communities, and extend their branches directly into larger transnational networks.

Conclusion

In their guest editorial for the *Canadian Journal of Communication* on cultural industries in Canada, Druick and Deveau call for critical studies that engage directly with cultural producers and “complicate the stories we tell about cultural production in Canada, giving insight to the lived experiences of what are often perceived as naturalized infrastructural conditions” (2015, p. 162).

Taking up this call, this research on Canadian game developers, community organizers, and others involved in indie games suggests that contemporary cultural producers locate their identities and communities at the intersection of the global and the local, with only occasional recourse to the national, usually in highly specific, often pragmatic contexts. As art critics Amy Zion and Cora Fisher (2016) argue, analyses of local and regional cultural movements are limited by binaries such as centre/periphery, hub/margin, and local/global, to which should be added online/offline and indie/mainstream. This study reveals how blurry the boundaries between seemingly discrete categories can become in practice, as well as the material and symbolic functions they serve for individual actors trying to make sense of their role in the larger world of game production, distribution, and consumption. If the construction of identities and communities is fundamentally about “the marking of difference and exclusion” (Hall, 1996, p. 4), the discursive and material processes by which these blurry boundaries are constructed, maintained, and contested speak volumes about the contemporary realities of independent cultural production, in Canada and around the world.

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