

# **Narratives of independent production in video game culture**

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## **Abstract**

The term 'independent' gaming automatically presupposes its opposite: a 'dependent', mainstream industry from which it seeks emancipation. The phenomenon is often presented as founded on a technological revolution allegedly oriented towards the democratization of the processes of game development. Also, it appears to be based on the alleged freedom of independent developers, who overcome the restrictions imposed by the mainstream industry in order to express themselves personally. However, this discourse of emancipation does not seem to offer a legitimate definition of 'independent gaming'. Such enthusiastic descriptions can be easily counter-balanced by noting the difficulties and risks of independent game development, in that designers struggle frequently to raise sufficient capital and gain sufficient exposure to produce and promote their work.

The argument I want to put forward is intended to contrast with the view of independent gaming as founded merely on shifts in technological, economic, or managerial practices. I propose that independent gaming should also be understood in terms of the influences it receives and replicates, such as those coming from the creative industries and contemporary forms of immaterial labor. I do not intend to reduce the notion of independent gaming to a mere reflection of practices originating from other media, but rather to look at it from a different perspective, which could possibly support a partial redefinition of this narrative of production. I hope to shift the focus away from the individual as an agent of artistic and cultural innovation, and place more attention instead on the practices of co-operation that might emerge from a more flexible organization in the production of digital games.

## **Author Keywords**

Independent games; video game culture; practices of production; immaterial labor; creative industries

## **Defining independence**

In this paper I will analyze some of the latest iterations of independent gaming. This phenomenon has often been described in revolutionary terms by video game magazines and industry practitioners as representing the democratization of the production process of a video game. A significant network of independent developers has been emerging in the last few years, assisted by a large number of events and institutions in reaching public visibility. The

*Independent Games Festival*, started in 1998, is the most famous event. Other conferences include *Indiecade* and, in Scandinavian countries, the *Nordic Game Jam*, on top of many other events and industry exhibitions which now tend to display at least one independent session or track.

The presence of a growing number of developers, festivals, articles and events concerning this phenomenon, as well as software designed with the purpose of facilitating independent productions, definitely constitutes an original aspect in respect to the developments of the video game industry. This has been accompanied by the emergence of online platforms for selling these games, mostly managed by some of the biggest companies in the industry, such as Microsoft, Nintendo, and Valve. Yet, the conditions of possibility of independent gaming are not entirely new, as similar forms of organization of the production of a video game have appeared in the past. The growing attention to this phenomenon, by critics and practitioners of the game industry, suggests that there is something at stake in the emergence of a narrative of independence in video game culture.

Despite its rapid emergence, independent gaming has not yet found a clear definition. However, the games selected for the aforementioned independent games festivals share certain features in common. None, for example, were produced with the aid of a publisher. Independent video games are usually produced by a small group, if not a single individual, in charge of designing, developing and releasing the game. From pre- to post-production, the entire process is in the hands of one or a few persons who, in return for taking responsibility for the entire production cycle, expect to receive the complete revenues resulting from sales or in-game advertising. However, it is also clear that the phenomenon of independent games cannot be explained solely in terms of a business model. This is because not only are there numerous cases of games with no commercial purpose, but also because independent games are enriched, in the ways they are described and narrated, by other, non-financial values. The idea of independence, as it is currently considered, holds political and moral connotations that do not resemble any other specific situation in video game culture.

Independent video games are often represented by their producers and by specialized journalism as the result of a process of democratization of the tools of game development. However, this revolutionary narrative is undermined by precedent cases of networks of 'home brew' developers and 'bedroom' coders, who worked in similar conditions in terms of the number of people involved and of the low budget. In fact, development teams composed of a small number of people, or even an individual 'factotum', have been common since the early years of the game industry, and survived until the early '90s when the production of major titles started to become too demanding for these groups economically, requiring major investments and larger development teams. These small groups used to be hired by a publisher but also worked, occasionally, in what might resemble a contemporary independent team. However it should be noted that this form of work did not carry with it such strong connotations of emancipation and freedom. 'Homebrew' games by designer hobbyists also have a strong do-it-yourself attitude, whereas many independent games tend to replicate the structures and aesthetic of mainstream titles. Therefore, to what extent can we actually claim some form of uniqueness and novelty for independent games?

Dovey and Kennedy share a similar skepticism when they argue

“[...] the notion of independence needs to be interrogated somewhat if it is to have any purchase. As we have seen in the film and music industries, the "indy" tag may not signify much more than "wannabe". In other words, the power of already established publishers may in fact be strengthened by the creation of an industrial diaspora of hopeful independents looking for commercial sustainability by copying game formats that already exist. If the concept of independence is really to change the nature of existing game cultures it might have to incorporate some understandings of the cultural forces that have shaped what we already have”

Dovey and Kennedy, p. 141 (2006)

They suggest that the 'indy' scene might actually offer a false promise of subversion, which in fact reinforces the positions of established players in the industry. Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter (2009) also argue that we should view the release of development tools for 'wannabe' game developers as ultimately a weapon of the game corporations used to agglomerate and control potential forms of subversion. They describe Microsoft's XNA, a set of development tools for independent developers, in rather pessimistic terms:

“In 2005, Microsoft announced that an integral part of the 360 would be XNA, a set of tools and technologies that would, for a fee and a subscription, enable owners to develop their own games on the console – “Youtube for games”, with Microsoft regulating content and intellectual property rights. Nintendo followed suit with a similar plan for the Wii. An apparent democratization of game development, these schemes were also a way of reducing the ever rising costs of game development for the new platforms and of adding new revenue streams from subscriptions. As the great console corporations slugged out their machine battles, deploying technologies that at once expanded the scope of gaming and integrated gamers ever more deeply into commercial kingdoms, nomad hackers waged a flickering border war along the very frontiers of the commodity form, and game capital furiously tried to capture the very skills that subverted its dominion.”

Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, p. 90 (2009)

Consistently, studies on the emergence of user-generated content in the video game industry are also skeptical about the motives of the major video game companies. Kücklich (2005) suggests that these forms of user engagement could constitute a form of 'playbour', as the activity of the players resembles a form of unpaid work from which the original developer could largely benefit. Sotamaa (2010), in his analysis of the community of players behind Sony's game *Little Big Planet*, suggests that we look beyond the advertising hype of the video game publishers and understand “the technical and economic constraints and affordances the console as a platform uses to position the productive activities of the players.” He argues that the increasing attention paid to user-generated content could influence the design of future video game consoles. He further draws attention to the multiple ways in which a player's agency is negotiated through the design of video game hardware and software. Therefore, an analysis of user-generated content in the video game industry appears to involve a study of hardware and software, but also of the ways in which producers and consumers perform their roles and frame their own agency.

Nieborg and Van der Graaf (2008) also discuss how the design of game engines frames the ways in which the original developer deals with the modding communities. They conclude, “due to mods' dependency on proprietary code, they are non-commons based. As such, mods can be understood better as non-market proprietary extensions” (Nieborg and Van der Graaf, 2008, p. 185). The commercial release and use of modding and user-generated content tends to be orchestrated by the same major companies who advertise and promote these practices as an alleged democratization of the production process of a video game. Nieborg and Van der Graaf also note that teams of modders tend to replicate the organization of a video game company and transform what could be defined as “grassroots cultural production” into “plain hard work” (2008, p. 191). They therefore conclude, “through emulating the first developers' risk-averse, capital-intensive mode of production within a proprietary context, total conversion modding has become a ‘proprietary experience’, as modders anticipate the developers' act of re-appropriation and subsequent commodification” (Nieborg and Van der Graaf, 2008, p. 192). Similarly, I would like to suggest that independent games should be discussed in terms of the relations of power between designers and major publishers, and also for the ways in which the relation between producer and product leads to specific organizations of the production process. This is particularly relevant for those independent producers who are allowed to sell their games on the online portals owned by a few larger companies. How are potential forms of exploitation introduced and enacted, in the case of independent games? How are the concepts of independence, freedom and self-expression re-framed in the process of assimilation of the final product by external companies?

In this article I would like to articulate and elaborate upon these views and propose an understanding of independent gaming in relation to the development of labour in the digital age. I will firstly look at some of the most common and recurring aspects of the discourses concerning independent games. I will do this by looking at some of the articles published in both specialist and mainstream newspapers and magazines, as well as the documentary *Indie Game: the Movie* (2012). In these contexts independent gaming is described and defined, but I also believe that these very descriptions contribute to the emergence of specific forms of labour and frame specific relations between producer and product. I will also argue that these transformations are consistent with broader changes in the understanding of technologies and their relations with new forms of production and individual emancipation, as outlined by Barbrook and Cameron (1995) in their seminal essay on the “Californian ideology”.

I further propose that we look at independent video games as the result of a complex series of influences coming from contemporary forms of labour that tend to put forward similar arguments in favor of individual emancipation. I will discuss some of the potential implications of the introduction of these discourses on immaterial labor into the game industry, and how the concept of independence could work as a discursive justification of these changes in the organization of the production process of a video game. I will also point out that a multitude of different forms of independence co-exist in contemporary video game culture. While this paper looks at some of them, and at a limited number of sources where these are discussed, further research on this topic could highlight different perspectives on the political and ethical implications involved in video game development.

## Beyond mainstream: freedom, new technologies, individualization and intimacy

I will now examine the concept of independence in video game culture as it is presented, more or less explicitly, in particular news articles and articles appearing in specialist magazines. I will look at the presentation of different definitions of independence within these contexts and their various implications. Consider, for example, this quote from an article published in a video game magazine:

“The most interesting offbeat concepts are coming out of the indie sector, right? Wrong. It could be that the most ground-breaking ideas are coming from a cabal of studios specializing in commissioned games.”

*Edge*, p. 77 (March 2011)

For its 225th issue, the famous British video game magazine *Edge* explored the world of commissioned games, i.e. branded games released for free, usually online and in social networks, funded by advertising or for the purposes of political and social change. This article, while describing commissioned games, compares them with independent games, and in doing so provides an interesting glimpse at what they are expected to be. These critiques reveal some of the assumptions behind the concept of independence in video game culture, upon which this article’s argument is based. The same magazine has published, in recent years, an increasing number of articles and reports about independent games. This example is particularly interesting as it attempts to look forward to the future of video games in order to discover the next ‘underground’ phenomenon.

According to this article in *Edge* magazine (2011), even traditional game publishers are noticing the emergence of commissioned/branded game developers, able to infiltrate social networks such as Facebook and Twitter “without ‘doing an EA’ and spending \$275m” (p. 82)<sup>1</sup>. This revolution is possible partly thanks to technology: “part of the reason behind the fact that branded games are becoming more complex is, of course, down to technology. Flash, still the key platform for online titles, continues to evolve” (*Edge*, 2011, p. 82). Independent games, usually acknowledged as the ‘outsiders’ who are, allegedly, the real innovators, are being challenged in this role by branded games. These branded game companies are not only trying to introduce new forms of game design but also have the support of a significant budget. In general discussions, as they appear in events and articles related to independent games, the lack of a commissioner or publisher is precisely what is considered to make it possible for these games to be innovative. However, if the publisher is replaced by an open-minded sponsor—“the likes of the Wellcome Collection, Channel 4, and the Arts Council” (2011, p. 77)--then there should exist an ideal scenario, where designers are free to experiment and invest. This point of view involves several assumptions about independent gaming, about what it is, what it is not, and what it could be.

Firstly, as commissioned games, independent games are assumed to be “beyond mainstream business” (p. 77). This description assumes and establishes a mainstream world of game production that has to be challenged by moving beyond its restrictions and limitations. Against the idea of developing games with the aim of maximizing profitability, there is a world of innovators who experiment with game design techniques, free of the restriction of having to recover the initial outlay through a commercial release. Independent games are therefore in this

very special and undefined place that is established in opposition to mainstream gaming – a previously unrecognized field.

Independent games are also expected to be groundbreaking and creative. This is referenced at the very beginning of the article: “the most interesting offbeat concepts are coming out of the indie sector” (*Edge*, 2011, p. 77). Whatever definition can be given to these qualities (being “groundbreaking” and “creative”), the games that belong to the general category of “independent” are supposed and assumed to be so. At the same time, however, independent games are not necessarily fulfilling this mission, as commissioned games (although “breaking the rules” by having a large budget) are actually achieving these aims more effectively, according to the article published in *Edge*.

To summarize: according to this article, independent games are usually made without the help of a publisher, have a limited budget, are not usually for profit, but are also groundbreaking and beyond what is proposed by the mainstream industry. Such movement is, allegedly, a process of emancipation, of progressive liberation that goes beyond technical, economic, social, and cultural constraints.

### ***Freedom***

This particular idea of a collective movement has a strong political connotation. “Independence”, in fact, is a term that evokes a political struggle. This struggle involves the collective emancipation of video game designers. While fighting to reach an allegedly truer and more authentic freedom, the independents are also defined as a subject precisely by performing this struggle.

Moreover, these claims to freedom involve the independents defining themselves against an equally clearly demarcated “dependent” industry. However, it is difficult to define what the dependent industry is actually dependent upon. What forces limit the freedom of game developers in the mainstream industry? The “dark side” of the industry does not really seem to be dependent on a clearly defined limitation, as it is often described by independent developers. And what would complete independence look like? What features, if any, would it share with the current scene?

Independence involves the inevitable contradiction that the oppressive force also happens to be the same that constitutes the other. Independent gaming poses the question of whom or what constitutes the “dependent” game scene. One definition of the dependent game scene is synonymous with the mainstream game industry, formed by the biggest publishers and development teams. This oppressive force has indeed also the power to constitute a vector of independence, which moves outside of it but, being “independent”, carries within its own definition and constitution a constant and necessary opposition against the former. This movement outside appears to be complex at a closer analysis, and assumes external and hierarchically superior forces that somehow limit the freedom of the actors involved.

Chris Kohler in *Wired* magazine reinforces this stress on the “freedom” (or lack thereof) of workers in the video game industry. In his article “We Don’t Need Game Publishers, Hardware Makers or Retailers” (2012) he comments on how unsustainable the cost of traditional video game production is. In his opinion, game publishers, hardware makers, and those who work in the retail sector are all responsible for the high prices of games. This condition however is

described as a form of slavery, or imprisonment, caused by an unknown entity: “ask anyone in the game industry and they would probably tell you that their hands are largely tied, that external forces prevent them from simply lowering prices” (Kohler, 2012).

In this article from *Wired*, the current condition of the video game industry does not appear to be based on planning. It is instead determined by specific restrictions. The actor responsible for these conditions is, however, unspecified. We could assume that the situation described is the consequence of a series of events and decisions that were, in fact, the result of a general interest in maximizing profits. However, in such a narrative, what matters is that freedom is restrained, and an external actor has to emerge in order to recover a condition of self-determination for the workers of the video game industry. Such a narrative, which pervades the discourses on independent games, usually attributes the capacity to alter this negative situation to technology itself.

### ***New and cheap technologies***

In the same article Chris Kohler explains:

“...something critical has changed. While publishers, retailers, and hardware makers might still be adding value, they are no longer *required*. Using the miracle of the Internet, game creators can make videogames – good ones! – and sell them to game players without any involvement from traditional publishers, retailers or hardware makers.”

Kohler (18<sup>th</sup> April 2012)

Technology, and specifically the Internet, appears to be the determining actor in this process of emancipation. In other statements we can see how these technological advancements are becoming widespread and thus contributing to the democratization of the production process of a video game. For example in this article by Joshua Bearman published in *The New York Times*:

“These game designers, a self-described indie scene, form a tightly knit group with a do-it-yourself culture and a rebellious spirit — something like a 'zine movement for video games. New and cheap technologies have enabled the movement’s rise. New tools for production and distribution — through smartphones, over the Web and via downloadable services on PlayStation, Wii and Xbox consoles — now make it possible for individuals to conceive, develop and publish their own games.”

Bearman (13<sup>th</sup> November 2009)

“New and cheap” technologies are allegedly responsible for widening the possibilities of the medium of the video game. Similar forms of technological determinism are not entirely new in writings about the effects of technologies on society and culture. Barbrook and Cameron (1995) in their article “The Californian Ideology” reconstruct the origins of this understanding of technology. According to Barbrook and Cameron, the main inspiration for this ideology is McLuhan's theory of media, or its interpretation by a specific cultural group. In fact, according to the authors, the origins are to be found in North American culture, and particularly in what used to be the hippie culture of the Californian region. During the early '70s some of those who belonged to this cultural group happened to become a new class of workers. From the

perspective of this new class of workers, technologies had the potential to realize the dream of an inter-connected world, a vision somehow inspired by the concept of a “global village” predicated by Marshall McLuhan.

This new type of worker, according to Barbrook and Cameron, was about to become the virtual class of the cognitive laborers. Similarly to what is now happening in video game culture, Internet and digital technologies were seen as offering workers the opportunity to be independent, not constrained by the limits imposed by bigger companies. Self-management and fixed contracts distinguished this new class. According to the two authors, since their emergence, companies involved in information technology have shared this ideology. The Californian ideology has transformed hippie concepts of freedom into a different kind of liberty, one that works in accordance with market economics.

In this view, freedom to manipulate and tinker with new technologies became the foundation of this new class of workers. The ability to use technologies independently and free from any constraint (not only public regulation but also the limits imposed by mere profit) became the tenet of this class. Computers changed in their social and cultural significance: from signifying man “reduced” to the status of machine, they turned into a tool of liberation, paving the way for the new “cyberculture” (Turner, 2006). As such, information technologies came to be redefined as the key tool in support of a new kind of worker, involved in immaterial production and re-defined in his or her agency, allegedly liberating him or herself, as well the whole of society from the constraints of material production.

I believe the concept of freedom evoked by the practitioners of independent gaming is largely inspired by this same *ethos*. The concept of independence appears, I argue, to be mostly based on a redefinition of the agency of the technologies for production and distribution of video games. However, this does not yet explain the implications of this phenomenon, or why independent gaming constitutes an original process in contemporary video game culture. I believe the connection between the Californian ideology and independent gaming is most interesting in terms of the ways in which it influences the definition of the game developer as a new type of worker.

Just as Barbrook’s and Cameron’s IT workers of the '70s, independent game developers are now claiming a specific kind of freedom. This freedom entails a particular relationship between producer and product. In this view the independent video game is a form of free expression – not limited by the constraints of a major game publisher, or by what market research dictates. Thus, according to this narrative, the developer invests in the product his or her own ‘original’ creative input. In this view, his or her unique vision of game design is brought into the video game, making it a direct expression of personal, individual feelings and thoughts.

This process also happens to be based on the ethos of the do-it-yourself amateur, the hobbyist who takes pleasure in “tinkering”. Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman* (2008) has argued in favor of similar forms of craftsmanship as not only involving an understanding of a production process, but also as a process of knowledge of the self. The practice of engagement required by these forms of work allows the “craftsman” to investigate and learn a “technique” which is not only a procedure to produce something but also the means to conduct a particular way of life. However, in the context of independent gaming, while some examples of game design can be described in these terms, a large number of productions have to match the pace imposed by the



new publishers and by an increased competition. I believe that independent gaming, while basing its emergence on a discursive practice that often evokes ideals of freedom and emotional attachment to the final product, very often tends to organize itself on practices strikingly similar to those of the “dependent” companies.

### ***Intimacy and individualization***

The emergence of an intimate relationship between producer and product in independent gaming is confirmed and further articulated in frequent statements concerning the status of the independent game designer. Consider the argument put forward by independent designer Jonathan Blow, author of the widely acclaimed game *Braid*, when interviewed in the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* by Lisanne Pajot and James Swirsky:

“...part of it is trying not to be professional. A lot of people come into indie games trying to be like a big company. What those game companies do is create highly polished things that serve as large as an audience as possible. The way that you do that is by filing off all the bumps on something. If there is a sharp corner you make sure it is not going to hurt anybody if they bump into it or whatever. That creation of this highly glossy commercial product is the opposite of making something personal.”

*Indie Game: The Movie*, 1:32 – 2:06 (2012)

An independent game, from this perspective, appears as a strictly personal work. This often leads to the independent designer being treated specially, as an “author”, and to the valuing of the final product as intellectually worthwhile. This is not the only period in video game history in which the position of the author has been exalted. The story of the development company Activision began when a small number of game designers left Atari in 1979. They justified their departure by claiming that they wished to be acknowledged as authors. This was reflected in a series of game products where the name of the lead designer was displayed on the front cover of the packaging (Fleming, 2007). Additionally, we frequently see the myth of the game developer as author followed by the idea of video games as works of art. Such narratives are often based on the presence of a single person as producer who expresses him or herself in the artistic work. The concept of artistic innovation as being necessarily based on the authorship of a single or few identifiable authors has been replicated in the video game industry since its early years.

Based on this emergence of the author, we can see how the relationship between producer and product and the alienation of the worker are re-invented in the context of independent gaming. Eran Fisher, in *Media and New Capitalism in the Digital Age* (2006), argues that capitalism, in its post-industrial and contemporary developments, “focuses on [its capacity] to enhance individual emancipation by alleviating alienation” (p. 3). Thus, contemporary forms of capitalism tend to favor the engagement of the worker with the final product rather than the separation between the two, as could have been achieved during earlier forms of capitalism. Capitalism is seen as adapting to humanist critiques and re-inventing itself as a less alienating process, which encourages personal emancipation. Independent gaming could be understood as an example of this overarching process.

This is not to make the reductive argument that independent gaming constitutes merely an old

problem in a new guise. On the contrary, we can claim that it is human activities that tend to organize themselves according to the pace and modalities of changing economic systems. This brings to question the order of causation of these forms of analysis. In terms of the alleged effect of technological change on labor, discussed earlier, Fisher (2006) argues that network technologies play an essential role: “network production makes possible the perfect *fusion* of the needs of personal emancipation with the system’s needs of capitalism” (p. 141). However, whilst acknowledging the influence of network technologies on labor, we would be wrong to put forward a deterministic view of the relationship that credits network technology alone with agency. Following Tiziana Terranova (2003), I would argue for a more nuanced assessment: capitalism does not impose nor dictate structures of work, but provides the field within which cultural flows originate. Terranova, in her study of free labor in the digital economy, argues that

“These types of cultural and technical labor are not produced by capitalism in any direct, cause-and-effect fashion; that is, they have not developed simply as an answer to the economic needs of capital. However, they have developed in relation to the expansion of the cultural industries and are part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect.”

Terranova, p. 4 (2003)

Independent gaming can be defined as a series of discourses in video game culture that changes the understanding of the values attributed to the production of a video game. These values, rather than indicating a radical separation from the practices of the industry, further embed video game culture within capitalist modes of production. The phenomenon of independent gaming could therefore further confirm Kline, Dyer-Witford and De Peuter's (2003) claim that “interactive play [...] appears as a quintessential product of digital capitalism's ‘new economy’” (p. 13). They further argue that interactive games can be seen as artifacts “within which converge a series of the most important production techniques, marketing strategies and cultural practices of an era”, thus making it an ideal commodity of “post-Fordism/postmodern/promotional capitalism” (Kline, Dyer-Witford and De Peuter, 2003, p. 24). The emergence of the concept of independence in the medium of the video game appears to have been strongly influenced, at least in some of its declinations, by this broader economic and cultural process.

I also believe that the intimate relation of the producer with his or her product, strongly echoed by some of the discourses on independent gaming, further confirms this connection. In this specific context, the outcome of labour comes to be presented as something strictly personal, and this therefore blurs the boundaries between the game designer’s work and home lives. It happens, in fact, that independent designers explicitly claim a complete immersion in their work. In *Indie Game: the Movie* the designer of the game *Fez*, Phil Fish, at one point declares:

“The game has become a bit of a reflection of me over time. It certainly wasn't the intention at first. (...) and now we're here. We don't have any money. I'm over-worked and over-stressed. I'm on the line. Me. My name... my career. If this fails, I'm done. I don't think I'll work in games again. And it's not just a game. I'm so closely attached to it. It's me. It's my Ego, my perception of myself. Is at risk. This is my

identity: Fez. I'm the guy making Fez. That's about it. If that doesn't work out then (...) I would kill myself. I would kill myself. That's my incentive to finish it. Because then I get to not kill myself.”

*Indie Game: The Movie*, 37:40 - 40:20 (2012)

***What is left of the concept of independence?***

Faced with these proclamations, what is left of the enthusiasm surrounding independent gaming? There does not seem to be anything intrinsically emancipatory in the practices of production employed or put forward by independent game designers. The freedom claimed by the designers of independent games often turns out to be a freedom to fail – the vast majority of independent games do not succeed. There are more risks in moving from a relatively safe position in the industry to a form of self-employment that does not offer the same economic guarantees. The role played by new technologies is relevant but not decisive, and what hardware and software for game development can currently offer cannot be defined as entirely new (previous technologies did not stop the emergence of similar forms of grassroots and DIY productions or software and hardware manipulation). The concept of independence translates into a peculiar form of intimacy between the producer and the final product. Such emotional proximity is also found in the forms of immaterial labor that emerged in recent decades, where the entire “creative” dimension of the individual is spent in the production process, thus blurring the distinction between life and work.

I would, therefore, like to claim that independence presents itself in the video game industry as a form of discursive justification of a series of changes in the production process of a video game. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue that economic systems need a moral justification:

“...the spirit of capitalism is precisely the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it.”

Boltanski and Chiapello, p. 10 (2007)

The concept of independence does not appear to be the only viable means of accounting for the aforementioned changes in the production process of a video game. However, independence as an explanatory concept is reinforced through the numerous discursive performances occurring in public events and articles. These narratives of emancipation can therefore be described as a justification for a development that, whilst not inevitable, nonetheless can be said to represent an improvement for the collectivity. Thanks to independent games, in this view, producers are now free to express themselves, while consumers can enjoy a variety of games and new forms of game design. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) also note, in fact, that economic systems are justified in terms of the common good.

Independence might become, or probably already is for many, the propitious dream that offers the opportunity for “self-exploitation”. This is, for example, what Angela McRobbie (2002) argued ten years ago in regards to the fashion industry. Similarly enthusiastic comments have been made in favor of the emergence of the individual auteur, as opposed to the highly structured

and hierarchic model of the fashion company. For McRobbie, this enthusiasm is misplaced:

“For the young woman fashion designer working 18 hour days and doing her own sewing to complete and order, “loving” her work but self-exploiting herself, she only has herself to blame if things go wrong. After all she opted for this kind of unstable career choice. [...] Self-blame where social structures are increasingly illegible or opaque, serves the interests of the new capitalism well, ensuring the absence of social critique.”

McRobbie, p. 521 (2002)

This process marks the disappearance of any form of independence and the emergence of “creative sub-contractors” (McRobbie, 2002, p. 519). The immediate effect of this perverse scenario is on the quality of the work produced by the “independents”. In fact, as McRobbie effectively argues elsewhere, “where there is little or no time for thinking, the art-work itself can hardly be thoughtful” (2001, p. 3).

McRobbie (2001) also discusses the effects of this process in the long term. She calls it a process of “cultural individualization” which brings together three elements: the individual, creativity (now extended to mean “having ideas”) and freedom” (p. 2). In the context of independent gaming, the individual worker can easily become fully dependent on the more established publishing companies for whom he or she provides game software. We should not, in fact, be overly influenced by the accounts of the most successful developers (who are also in any case often committing their own lives to the new “gatekeepers”). If we include in our list young graduates from academic programs in video game development, amongst others, then the number of independent workers in this field is in the thousands. For these, a safe environment for experimentation, such as that provided by larger companies, might soon be a distant memory. At the moment independence might still be a deliberate choice for many, but this might also be the beginning of more permanent changes in the ways the practice of production is understood and defined in video game culture.

## Conclusion

In this article I have been attempting to look at one phenomenon of video game culture, not for its specificity and uniqueness, but rather for its resemblance to other phenomena of contemporary culture. Aphra Kerr, similarly, suggests:

“Digital games cannot be understood without attention to the late capitalist economic systems from which they emerge and the changing political, social, and cultural contexts in which they are produced and consumed.”

Kerr, p. 4 (2006)

The discourses performed by the practitioners of independent gaming tend to present this phenomenon in enthusiastic terms. They also often suggest a form of technological determinism,

where technology allegedly provides the foundation for new forms of video game production and distribution. I believe we should go beyond the rhetoric of independence and look at this idea of independence via the multitude of factors that constitute it.

David Hesmondhalgh, in *The Cultural Industries* (2007), also suggests that we look at the development of capitalism, and the ways in which it influences new forms of work (of which the cultural industries are an example), via a multitude of factors. Particularly, we should avoid the technological reductionism that often appears in explanations of these phenomena. Although technology plays an important role, it should be considered next to political and social-cultural changes, as well as new business strategies deployed in these contexts. I have attempted to analyze independent video games using some of these perspectives, understanding them as the result of a complex process involving economic, technological, and cultural factors. Of course, social and cultural issues influence our understanding of the concept of independence. Furthermore, independent gaming, as an organization of the production processes of video games opposing mainstream methods, can be regarded as a business model. I do not wish to reduce analysis to economics alone, but it is necessary to consider the ways in which economic factors interact with entrenched political arguments. Seen from this perspective “independence”, in the context of contemporary video game culture, appears as a concept used to justify the emergence of a new sort of supply chain or production process.

We cannot pretend, however, that such an analysis could satisfy our interest in independent gaming. Enthusiasm for new and original digital game designs and forms of grassroots production should not, in fact, be undermined by the perspective I have put forward here. I do not intend to suggest that the growth of independent gaming can easily be explained, or to claim that there is nothing new or original about it. Independence can, in fact, assume a variety of forms. I believe that the ways in which the arguments surrounding independent games have been framed so far have undermined the emergence of a narrative of co-operation in video game culture. The focus on technology as a determining force underestimates the importance of the human factors involved in these changes. The stress on the individual designer as the sole actor in a game’s production has strengthened the image of the independent designer as a lonely genius. This has been further reinforced by highlighting the liberating effects of the production process of independent games. The conception of freedom emerging from this is a very individual freedom, where the individual emancipates him or herself from previous constraints.

However, we could instead view independent gaming in terms of its many collaborative and co-operative features. Studies of co-operative projects, and platforms for the collaborative development of a video game, would counter-act the current stress on the individual in accounts. Such narratives of co-operation would constitute a different way of conceiving of game design. No more would the game be considered the result of the work of an individual genius who puts his or her “life at risk” in creating a new product, but rather the outcome of a collaborative project, where the necessary skills are learned and shared among participants. This model should not be seen as necessarily a better option. Economic interests, or the desire for individual self-expression, might not be equally satisfied in this scenario. However, the existence of this model might provide support for advocates of open and accessible video game production.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years there have been studies that have taken into account independent gaming’s multifaceted nature. Paolo Pedercini (2012), founding member of the game design group

Molleindustria, has recently argued in a talk at the game convention Indiecade that independence should be seen as utopian – an unreachable goal valuable rather for the direction in which it leads game design. The concept of independence, in his view, can affect the design of video games in different ways. According to Pedercini, not all of the self-proclaimed independent designers can consider themselves autonomous, as the publishing system offered by some of the major companies in fact limits their freedom (as I have also argued in this paper). Pedercini further argues that we need to reconsider how best to pursue independence, and how different forms of independence could (and do) co-exist and should be supported. In his words:

“There are a lot of people these days trying to come up with new definitions of independent development that take into account the various degrees of autonomy from platform owners and hardware manufacturers; the co-optation of styles, keywords and modes that used to be part of the “indie” identity; and the mainstream acceptance and structural expansion of the most successful independent developers.”

Pedercini (2012)

Such variety should not be underestimated when analyzing independent games. This paper has looked only at a specific direction of independent gaming, but further research could be carried out that studies how different forms of independence are performed and proposed by different actors. We could ask not only how but also where, in which specific contexts, these different understandings of the concept of independence are replicated and performed, and what sort of relations of power legitimate some concepts rather than others.

Another aspect that could receive more attention is the gendered nature of much of the discourse regarding independent games. Females are rarely found in independent gaming and, when they appear, they tend to perform a strongly masculine role. Julie Uhrman, founder of OUYA, a new game console which defines itself as oriented to independent productions, gives a perfect example of this while presenting her project: “effectively, we're trying to disrupt an established industry. It takes a lot of guts and courage. If I wasn't a female, I'd say big balls” (Uhrman, 2012). Accordingly, the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* does not feature women, apart from those playing the role of the wife/girlfriend who assists the male artisan/maker. This is an aspect rarely acknowledged by studies on independent gaming, and which links it furthermore to the masculine concept of freedom expressed by the Californian Ideology. Similarly this same gendered approach is often found in remix culture (Murray, 2009) and in those sub/counter-cultures which encourage the research of an allegedly more authentic level of freedom by imagining new and different uses of existing technologies.

As I have argued elsewhere, I believe that the meanings and values associated with video games are to be found not only in the texts themselves, but also in their social understanding and in “the very language used to describe them” (Ruffino, 2012). Thus, these narratives of independent production, while avoiding naïve oppositions or forms of engagement with an alleged mainstream/dependent industry, could offer themselves as parallel practices. Rather than evaluating these practices as more or less independent, democratic or liberating, we could welcome them as different approaches to the production and distribution of a video game. It would already be an interesting development in video game culture if we began to question how the production and distribution of a video game could be different, at the same time as we evaluated the political, economic, cultural, and social implications of such different methods.

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<sup>1</sup> 'EA' stands for Electronic Arts, the major video game publisher at the time when the magazine was published. Electronic Arts became famous for releasing games with high budgets, particularly for sport licenses (brands such as FIFA, NBA, Nascar or NFL appear on Electronic Arts' games every year). Electronic Arts is synonymous, in this context, with video games produced with strong economic efforts and aimed at the top of the selling charts.

<sup>2</sup> On a similar note, Anna Anthropy (2012) suggests that recent trends are transforming video game design into a widespread practice, where design and development tools are easily accessible and the development process is facilitated thanks to the assistance of growing communities of independent producers. In her view this should eventually lead to more varied forms of digital gaming through which minorities and under-represented groups could express themselves.