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Do mainstream games exist? Reflections on independent games culture

As distinguished from the field of film and music, where the term "independent" is established not least as a commercial label, independent games, so far, are a rarity on the market and hardly known outside the gaming community.

Nevertheless, the cultural visibility of independent games has improved significantly recently. At least, there is no lack of games that are classified as "independent" in one way or another. A short glance at blogs and web sites like www.indiegames.com or www.tigsource.com, which prominently display independent games like *Crayon Physics* (2007), *Narbacular Drop* (2005) or *World of Goo* (2008), delivers ample proof.

Annually, particularly innovative and creative independent games are awarded prizes at the San Francisco Independent Games Festival (IGF) that had its 11th installment this year.

When it comes to the question of what independent games are and on the basis of which criteria they can be analyzed, researchers usually orient themselves on the (American) independent film model, which is the historically prevalent audiovisual practice that essentially shapes our ideas of cultural independence, and which is especially relevant as a conceptual framework in two respects.

First, the (contemporary) American independent film represents the idea of an alternative (niche) culture that is potentially successful both commercially and artistically.

Second, independent films emphatically stand for cultural products and practices that distinguish themselves from and oppose the mainstream.

The ratio between these two poles is obvious and especially shows itself when the crisis or the buyout of independents is bemoaned. Taking a look at the history and presence of independent films, this crisis discourse must be seen as romantic insofar as there has never been a clear demarcation between independent and mainstream films since Hollywood emerged as the dominant film industry. What has changed since the 1990s is the ways in which Hollywood is increasingly investing in the term "indies" as a commercial label in order to exploit the successful economical potential of alternative culture.[1]

However, the constitutive terminological vagueness and inconsistency of independent film does not damage the cultural practice but rather serves as a – more or less – productive friction surface for the practices and discourses of film makers, audiences, and researchers.

This, no doubt, also applies to independent games. In the field of games, too, there is a certain uneasiness toward the mainstream game industry, which is imagined as monotonous and lacking innovativeness. Thus, there is a demand for alternative forms of expression and practices. However, the question remains whether the independent concept as known from the fields of film and music can be transferred to games without further ado.

Unlike with films, the discussions in the independent games scene are hardly about the question of whether one is pocketed by the mainstream industry or whether buyout is looming on the horizon. One is rather wondering how to improve market potentials and widen commercial exploitation. One option here is using commercial download platforms like Steam or the Xbox Live Arcade, which shows how hard it is to emancipate oneself economically from the structures of the big industry. The second major question would be whether this is what independent game developers really want.

Basically, as with films, producing independent games is an attractive possibility to call the mainstream's attention to one's talent. And like the Sundance Film Festival for independent film producers and makers, the Independent Games Festival opens a chance for game developers to address someone who can successfully promote the product on the market. This is problematic for independent filmmakers and all the more for game developers. Against this background, independent games developers are compelled to distinguish themselves from the mainstream via innovative and creative ideas if only because of economic reasons – and some are actually successful.

One famous *example* is the Flash based independent casual game *FlOw* (2006) developed by Jenova Chen, a USC School of Cinematic Arts graduate, as his qualifying work. Since its release, *FlOw* has been downloaded more than three million times.

FlOw's narration is structured plainly: with a mouse cursor, the player can navigate a floating/swimming organism through a monochrome blue biosphere and incorporate other creatures, which makes the player's creature grow. On each level, one meets new organisms that challenge the player to varying degrees. The basic characteristic of *FlOw* is that the player automatically modulates and controls the degree of difficulty via her activity, e.g. by avoiding dangerous creatures and by being able to switch between levels any time and thus (unconsciously) creating a balance between game challenges and individual abilities. This system of gamer-oriented, "Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment" (DDA) in connection with a plot that is revealed intuitively aims at setting the player as effectively and lastingly as possible in a condition that is called "flow" in psychology and game studies, and which defines the (almost) complete immersion into a (here playful) activity.

Due to its stringent focus *FlOw* is an innovative alternative to many mainstream games that for their part aim at generating a flow-effect but often trigger a converse effect, be it by over or under challenging the player with a too demanding or to easy game play, be it by the inevitable interruption of the game flow by so called cut scenes.

But are there, among the (industrially) independent games or the more complex, elaborate download or web games, games whose product-specific characteristics distinguish them clearly as alternative games. This would entail that the artifact shows an articulate will to be distinct, that it displays an explicitly tangible anti-conventionality, the momentum of an aesthetic resistance as it is ideally to be expected from independent films by, say, Harmony Korine, David Lynch, or John Waters?

With independent films, aesthetic anti-conventionality is often associated with their deviating from "familiar conventions of the classical Hollywood variety."[2] Since a comparable, empirically founded analysis of computer games does not exist as yet, the foremost task would be to find out which dominant genre-spanning conventions as quasi negative references of an alternative aesthetics of digital games come into consideration and to what extent such a concept is comparable to the classical Hollywood paradigm at all.

Pre-theoretical critique of mainstream games, as they are formulated not least independent game developers, in most cases focus on their imitation and reproduction of other successful mainstreams games or their fixation on visual-graphical spectacles. Obviously, this critique resembles that which blames Hollywood mainstream films for their standardised, schematic narrative patterns as well as for their privileging of superficial effects at the cost of narrative complexity and other story values. But feature films and digital games are only comparable to some extent. It would hardly be appropriate to expect that the slowly emerging independent games movement has to take the aesthetics of independent films as a role model in order to constitute and distinguish itself as an alternative practice. Digital games, indeed, aesthetically and narratively link to films; they include elements from cinematic narration and aesthetics, just as films integrate digital game elements. Bolter and Grusin regard this as a quasi-natural process in the relation of "new" and "previous" media and call this remediation.[3] At the same time, digital games feature configurational structures that prompt users to actively manipulate their components. This formal characteristic must be considered when reflecting on aesthetic strategies of distinction in digital games. It is not enough to analyse games with regard to their mimetic, representational elements (plot/story, characters, etc.), which are most likely fit to demonstrate similarities and equivalents between independent films and games. Besides, for a number of independent game designers,

this is a matter of course: games like *FlOw* pointedly work on alternative concepts on the configurational level.

But despite its experimental character, *FlOw* demonstrates that even aesthetically ambitious games that are developed in a decidedly artistic, non-commercial context apart from their technically conditioned reduced aesthetics lack of forms of expression that visibly run against a popular logic and conventional aesthetics.

That such an aesthetic in which the oppositional logic is embedded visibly does not exist yet or only marginally may have various reasons beyond the obvious and doubtlessly fundamental problem that the aesthetic conventions of popular games still are too vague and have been internalized only insignificantly by producers and game users to allow for a dynamics of distinction in terms of a much-cited "indie spirit". Perhaps, digital games must be understood as an aesthetic practice that not only should be but also is decidedly accessible (popular) and not resistant or difficult. Perhaps the discomfort with cultural mainstream forms is not so pronounced that it presses developers of independent games forward to create explicitly visible or tangible counter-culture aesthetics. Perhaps this is so because indie games quite simply have no mainstream to oppose.

While independent films have distinguished themselves from the cultural mainstream by constantly displaying controversial, provocative images and topics, in computer games there already are numerous blockbuster products that represent these very attributes of an alternative practice.

Think of a game like *GTA San Andreas* (2004), which comes with a mixture of self-irony, coolness, violence, and political incorrectness that is reminiscent of films like *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or *Menace II Society* (1993). [4]

Not least due to the lasting controversial image of commercial computer games, independent games find decidedly less starting points to individuate as an alternative cultural artifact via provocative "subversive" games. At any rate, excessive violence as an articulation of distinction drops out.

In 2002, Eric Zimmerman published an article headlined: "Do independent games exist?" Now and then, the more basic question: "Do mainstream games exist?" would be appropriate.[5]

Not coincidentally, a form of independent games has developed that tries to distinguish itself from mainstream games by doing without (or remodelling) violence: Christian games like *Timothy and Titus* (2006). Instead of fighting against virtual enemies or waging wars, players earn points for love, faith, and hope,[6] and work along the lines of: "Pray don't pop! Mission not massacre!" While these Christian games are, no doubt, a distinction-conscious form of game culture, it is difficult to

accredit them with a kind of aesthetics solely on the basis of an "anti-violence philosophy".

Christian religious games can be classed among a variant of independent games for which a number of bracket terms is circulated in the cultural field: "Games with an Agenda", "Serious Games", "Persuasive Games", or "Social Change Games". Although these concepts encompass varying game forms, their common characteristic is that the game and/or the ludic action is associated with a function that exceeds the conventional perception of games made for gaming. Accordingly, computer games no longer only allow mere gaming pleasure but promote values.

Other serious games are politically motivated and explicitly arranged as a critical, interceding practice in order to call attention to social problems in "the real world". Let's take *Escape from Woomera* (2004) as an example. This is a game that was developed with the aim of highlighting the precarious situation in Australian refugee camps, and it challenges the player to flee legally or illegally from such a camp.

While, particularly since the 1960s, American independent cinema's intervening oppositional practices have always been characterized by combining a cinematic critique of social conditions with formal aesthetic radicalism, independent games, not least those with an agenda, seem to be content with using games as a popular tool instead of designing a critically aesthetic and configurative practice also as a critique of aesthetics. Perhaps independent games' equivalent to independent films' critique of film aesthetics can most likely be found in their critique of the exclusively entertaining appearance of mainstream games.

Additionally, *Escape from Woomera* is not a new or autonomous game in the strict sense of the word but a modification of the popular first person shooter *Half-Life* (1998). Such visibly artistic and/or political misappropriations of shooter games are no new phenomenon – quite the opposite is the case. They have long constituted their own and very heterogeneous subgenre.[7] And they are undeniably a particular form of articulation of independent games that claim to maintain an oppositional attitude. Nonetheless, mod games present a special case in alternative game culture insofar as their oppositional gesture is substantially displayed in the act of the modifying appropriation of existing cultural products rather than in the inscription of oppositional concepts into genuinely self-produced games.

Alexander Galloway, at least, sees a development in mods that he describes as "countergaming" [8] - analogous to Peter Wollen's term "counter cinema" [9]. Following the characteristics of counter cinema he discusses some features of countergaming and suggests six distinguishing characteristics against mainstream games: [10]

1. "Foregrounding" in making the apparatus visible, for instance via presenting computed data columns, can be distinguished from mainstream games'

transparency principle in which the technological apparatus of hard and software is invisible.

2. Highlighting aesthetics which allows for formal experiments with the medium as opposed to consistent gameplay.

3. While mainstream games are often up for realism and game worlds and character models are designed as visual representations countergaming uses visual artefacts and "unrealistic" objects as means of style.

4. Galloway juxtaposes the simulation of physics in mainstream games in opposition to the possibility of creating artificial physics that might extend the gaming situation via inconsistent laws and unexpected effects.

5. A form of interactivity in which input units, preferably immediately and intuitively learnable, control the gaming situation are confronted with barriers and a non-equivalency of input and effect.

6. While the first five of these items have already been implemented in various independent games there is hardly any innovation on the game play level. So far, countergaming is mainly progressive in terms of its visual form but not on the actional form. Artistic and innovative experiments with the medium too often obstruct proper gameplaying instead of expanding it. Accordingly, Galloway calls for a new form of gameplay: "We need radical gameplay, not just radical graphics"[11].

Apart from the outlier mods there are hardly any independent games that come close to or comply with individual or more criteria of countergaming according to Galloway. [12]

For instance, *You Have To Burn the Rope* (2008) is mocking the run and jump genre insofar as everything within a very limited playing period is predetermined. However, this anti-game logic – is not recognizable at a first glance – and that is precisely the point. Initially, it looks like a rather nerdy retro jump and run game before the game's punch line shows itself. But such a "game parody" does not precisely correspond to the idea of indie aesthetics as shaped by movies. In the end the game is too restricted to the simple gag level

Another indie game, *Retro/Grade* (2009) literally inverts the genre conventions of first person shooter games by mailing the player collect shots instead of firing them off. It is, however, apparent that such a simple act of reversing genre conventions is nowhere near to being read as aesthetic resistance.

Finally, there are some games of a very experimental character that literally test the boundaries of games. *The Graveyard* (2008) is a very short but visually decidedly advanced computer game that has been developed by Auriea Harvey and Michaël

Samyn who describe it as an "explorable painting" or "storytelling without words" rather than a game. The user is navigating an old woman who is visiting a graveyard, sits down on a bench and is listening to a song. The full version even allows the woman to die. That's it. However, *The Graveyard* can hardly be seen as a game that explicitly uses aesthetic strategies of self-suspension (as a game) or visibly aims at deranging conventional perceptions of digital games.

Many games that have been produced outside the mainstream industry, however, are neither oppositional nor original. Countless independent (casual) games only differ from the mainstream due to their not being able to economically-technically compete with the visual sensations of the "big games" and thus are, on the representational level, forced to limit themselves to a minimum aesthetics somewhere between comic and retro style that tends to suggest that the prime aim was to keep alive the charms of the home computer or PC era. Also, many of these games fit into the usual game genres (action, strategy, simulation) or are remakes of old classics like *Tetris*. And in many cases, they pursue, more consequently than mainstream products, the popular core logic to design cultural artefacts as accessibly as possible.

To summarize: compared to independent films, independent games are even less to be understood as the "radical other" in the face of an (imagined) mainstream culture, despite the heterogeneity and the hybridity of practices that the label "independent" incorporates in game culture. (Ambitious) independent games may from time to time challenge the products of the dominant game industry when it comes to being innovative or creative, and they may sometimes differ distinctly from the outward appearance of mainstream games, but those differences do not include an oppositional logic that is *explicitly* recognizable as negation or challenge of mainstream games.

[1] See for example: Holmlund, Christ/ Wyatt, Justin: Contemporary American Independent Film. London, New York: Routledge, 2005.

[2] King, Geoff: *American Independent Cinema*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. 59.

[3] Bolter, Jay David / Grusin, Richard: *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.

[4] Cf. Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas/ Stockmann, Ralf: Anti-PC-Games: Exploring Articulations of the Politically Incorrect in GTA San Andreas. In: Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas/ Stockmann, Ralf (eds.): *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon. Games Without Frontiers - War Without Tears*. Basingstoke, UK, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 150-161.

[5] Zimmerman, Eric: Do Independent Games Exist?. In: King, Lucien (Hg.): The History and Culture of Videogames. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002, pp. 120-129.

[6] However, not all Christian games dispense with violence, for example *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (2006).

[7] Engeli, Maia: Strip - Shift - Impose - Recycle - Overload - Spill - Breakout - Abuse. Artists' (Mis-)Appropriations of Shooter Games. In: Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas/ Stockmann, Ralf (eds.): *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon*, pp. 162-172.

[8] Galloway, Alexander R.: *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis/ London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006, pp. 107.

[9] Wollen, Peter: Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d'Est, 1972. In: Braudy, Leo/ Cohen, Marshall (eds.): *Film theory and criticism: Introductory readings*. New York et. al.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999, pp. 499-508.

[10] Galloway, *Gaming,* pp. 114-126.

[11] Galloway: *Gaming,* p. 126.

[12] Cf. Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas/ Schröder, Arne: Ästhetik des Alternativen? Ludische und narrative Formen von Independent-Spielen. In: Sorg, Jürgen/ Venus, Jochen (eds.): Erzählformen im Computerspiel. Zur Medienmorphologie digitaler Spiele. Bielfeld: transcript, 2009 (forthcoming).